

An event in Kolkata

Noam Chomsky's four-day visit to the West Bengal capital, as a State guest, was marked by intellectual engagement. The honours he was conferred and the enthusiastic popular response he received reflected the respect for his intellectual calibre and positions on issues.

SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY
KALYAN CHAUDHURI
in Kolkata

AFTER more than five years since his last visit to Kolkata in January 1996, Professor Noam Chomsky was in the city again, as a State guest of the Government of West Bengal. The celebrated linguist, social thinker and political analyst has always had a special place in the hearts of the scholars and socially aware citizens of Kolkata, and the turnout at his lectures and the appreciation of what he said were ample proof that their affection and respect for him remain deep. West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee captured the sentiment when he said: "Professor Chomsky, you must know that you are, and will remain, a very dear and

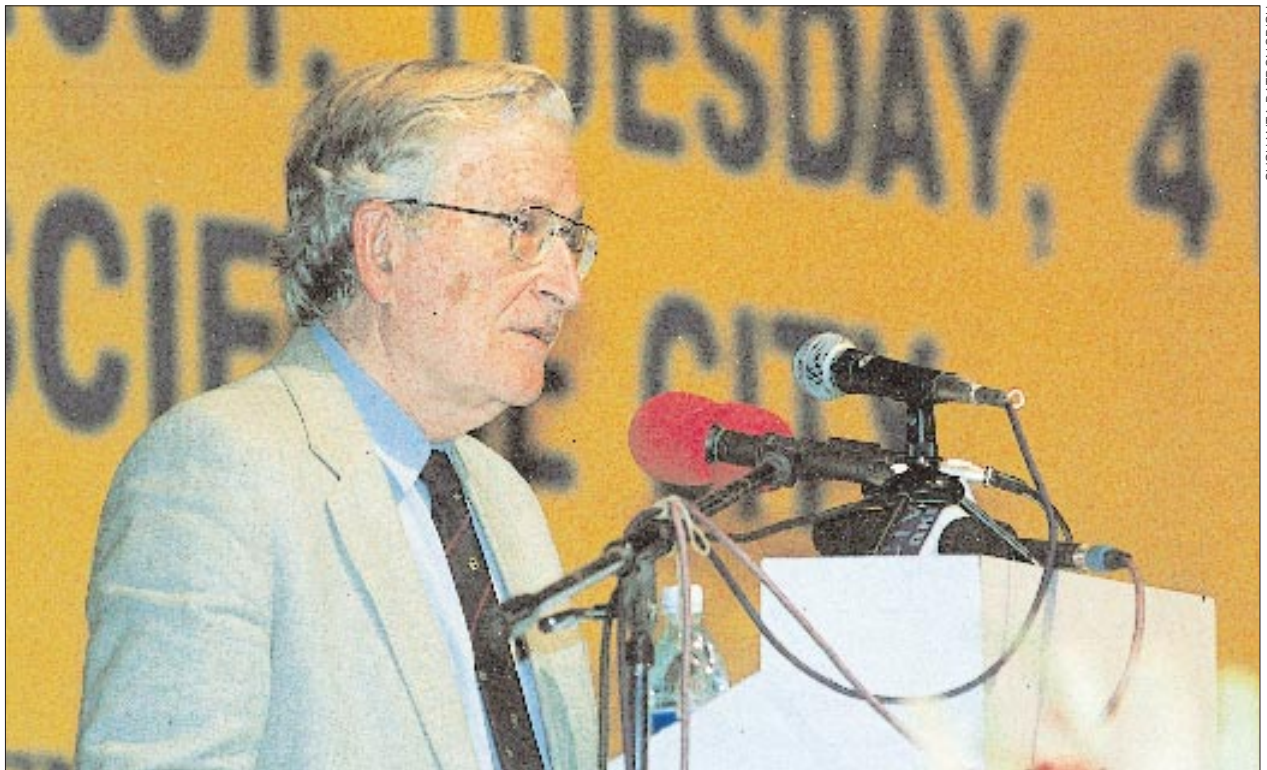
respected person for us."

Chomsky, accompanied by wife Carol Chomsky, herself a renowned linguist, was in Kolkata for four days. In his short but eventful stay in the city, Chomsky visited historical sights, took a boat ride on the Hooghly and met many people. However, for the people of Kolkata, Chomsky's lecture – "September 11 and its Aftermath: Where is the World Heading?" – delivered at the Science City auditorium on November 20, was the high point of his tour. That his appeal is not restricted to the scholarly few was evident from the diverse nature of the crowd that flocked to the auditorium. One could see academics, ordinary people, students in T-shirts and jeans with satchels slung across their shoulders, all impatiently waiting outside the auditorium for the

gates to open.

In his long lecture, Chomsky, whom the Chief Minister called the "conscience of America and the friend of the oppressed all over the world", came down heavily on the United States and accused it of perpetrating terrorism throughout the world. He argued that terrorist acts are actually carried out by the powerful upon the weak rather than the other way round. "It is a very serious analytical error to say that terrorism is the weapon of the weak. Like other means of violence, it is primarily the weapon of the strong, overwhelmingly. It is a weapon of those against 'us', whoever 'us' happens to be," he said.

He said the new millennium saw two major crimes – the attack on the World Trade Centre (WTC) and the U.S.' inhuman response to it in Afghanistan. He said



SUSHANTA PATRONOBEISH

Noam Chomsky delivering his lecture at the Science City auditorium in Kolkata.

Understanding human language

The text of the address by Professor Noam Chomsky at the Special Convocation of the University of Calcutta held on November 22, 2001 to award him the degree of D. Litt Honoris Causa.

I WOULD like to express my gratitude at being welcomed into this distinguished intellectual community, with its vibrant and rich tradition. It is particularly gratifying to receive this honour in India. My professional field, as I am sure you know, was in large part created in India, 2,500 years ago. The first “generative grammar” in something like the modern sense is Panini’s grammar of Sanskrit. Nothing was known about these similarities at the origins of the modern versions 50 years ago. It was only after the modern field had taken shape that earlier traditions, long forgotten, began to be explored and reinterpreted in the light of recent insights. Many treasures were discovered, among them Panini’s classic – though crucial issues of interpretation remain obscure, and there are surely research topics that could prove highly rewarding.

Meanwhile contemporary inquiries proceeded along their own distinctive course. Characteristically, they view language in a biological setting, adopting what is sometimes called a “biolinguistic approach”. From this point of view, the human faculty of language is regarded basically as an organ of the body, mostly the brain, more or less on a par with the visual system or the system of motor organisation.

The language faculty is a “species property” in a dual sense. First, it is close to uniform for the species; second, it is apparently unique to humans in essentials.

The first of these properties is less surprising than it seemed a few years ago. Recent studies indicate that there is remarkably little genetic variation within the human species, so little that it is now commonly assumed that contemporary humans are all descendants of a very small breeding group, perhaps about 100,000 years ago, a conclusion that has broad implications. With regard to language, apart from the margins, variation in the capacity to acquire a rich and highly articulated knowledge of language is so slight as to be virtually undetectable, at least by present means.

The uniqueness property is more surprising. There are no known analogues to human language elsewhere in the animal world. The closest analogies, and these are very weak, are remote: perhaps in some species of insects. Human language does not even find a place in standard taxonomies of animal communication systems; and in fact, there is no strong reason to think of it as primarily a system of communication, contrary to common belief.

Language is like other biological systems, however, in that its basic character is genetically determined. Each person, of course, undergoes a specific course of development, shaped by individual experience, but in highly limited ways. The outcomes are largely a result of shared initial endowment. The human languages, existing or possible, are pretty much cast to the same mould. A rational Martian scientist, studying humans the way we study other animals, could reasonably conclude that there really is only one language, with only minor variations. The variations are very important for our lives; the far deeper uniformities we simply take for granted, without awareness. Similarly, traditional and pedagogical grammars and dictionaries are concerned with the unpredictable and somewhat accidental variation, rightly for their special purposes. The interests of the scientific study of language are virtually complementary: the invariant principles of sound, meaning, and structure that are rooted in our mental nature and that determine the fundamental nature of the languages that each person comes to acquire under normal circumstances.

One basic problem, then, is to discover the invariant principles of the language faculty and the limited options of variation, and then to show that the possible human languages are determined by selecting among the options: one choice yields Tamil (more exactly, a specific variety of Tamil), another yields Swahili, etc. Putting it differently, the task is to show that with a specific choice of options, by adhering to the fixed principles one can literally deduce the infinite array of expressions of the language: their sound, their meaning, the ways in which they can be used to express thoughts, to request information, to tell stories, and numerous others. The task is immensely challenging and difficult. It will doubtless occupy the

efforts and energies of many generations of researchers. Nevertheless, there has been quite encouraging progress. In the past 20 years particularly, there has been a flood of discoveries about languages of virtually every known typological variety. Like the well-studied languages, these have been investigated in far greater depth than ever before, revealing many entirely unexpected properties. New questions have arisen that had never been envisioned before. In many cases there have also been plausible answers, sometimes opening new directions for inquiry.

One novel question that has come to the fore in recent years, and that happens to be of particular interest to me, is the question of “optimal design”: To what extent is human language an optimal solution to externally-imposed conditions that language must satisfy to be usable at all (for example, accessibility to sensorimotor systems). Equivalently, we may ask to what extent language satisfies the Galilean intuition that “nature is perfect” and it is the task of the scientist to prove it, a guiding intuition for the modern sciences.

There are some answers to such questions for very simple organisms: for example, an explanation of the fact that the shells of viruses are polyhedral. Current work suggests that something similar may be true for human language, a biological system that has emerged in the last moment of evolutionary time, in the most complex organism known, and is surely at the core of our nature and life. Such conclusions, which by now have considerable substance, raise many questions about biological evolution and development generally, and about the human species in particular. These research efforts have also provided new and often surprising solutions to long-standing problems of language, its acquisition and use, and its place in the biological world.

There should be very exciting years ahead in the study of language and other higher mental faculties. There is no better place to pursue these questions than in the land that was the original home of some of the major strands of inquiry that are now being woven into a most intriguing fabric. Speaking personally, I look forward with much eagerness and anticipation to observing, and participating in, these very promising developments. ■



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that the war in Afghanistan, precipitated by the U.S., was a greater terrorist act than the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, as the consequences of the former have been far more grave, affecting hundreds and thousands of innocent lives. “No doubt Washington could have attained authorisation of the Security Council and have gone about the whole thing in a different manner, rather than taking matters into its own hands,” Chomsky said. He did not spare U.S.’ allies in the war and said that England and France shared an imperial legacy “that legitimises the attack on a weaker force”.

He said the situation in Afghanistan looked very grim. “People in Afghanistan have for long been surviving on international aid. At the moment there are over 7.5 million Afghans facing starvation in the country and this war will only make matters worse.” He said next year would be even harder for the poor in Afghanistan as the U.S. bombings have affected over 80 per cent of the grain supply in the country. Blaming the media for not exposing the extreme suffering and the real tragedy of the war victims in Afghanistan, he said: “The major atrocities have not been reported, and will not be either; one can be sure about that.” The media are too busy projecting the war as



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(Above, and left) Carol and Noam Chomsky being shown around the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata.

America’s campaign against terrorism. He said that eradicating the forces of terrorism is a “noble enterprise, and nothing new”. He referred to the Reagan Administration’s condemnation of terrorism – “the depraved opponents of civilisation” – and reminded the audience of the U.S.-sponsored terrorism that was in full flow during the Reagan years, including steps taken to oust the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. He added that this once again proved how world politics was ruled by force.

Chomsky criticised the reasoning behind the claim that the U.S. attack was an act of defence. He said that the U.S.’ policy of complete “dominance of space” was to ensure that even “poor man’s weapons” will not be available to any of its adversaries. He said that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world had heightened U.S. hegemony.

Chomsky said that globalisation had taken on a much narrower meaning over the last 20 years than it had earlier. “It is designed for the concentration of power in select hands.” According to him, the



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Noam Chomsky at the Asiatic Society after receiving the Rabindranath Tagore Birth Centenary plaque.

need for total dominance of space will increase as the expansion of globalisation and the neo-liberal economic policies further the gap between the haves and the have-nots. "As this gap increases, there will be unrest among the have-nots, and the U.S. plans to control that unrest." He said that the term "neo-liberal policies" was a misnomer. "They are neither new nor are they liberal", and liberalisation itself is being shaped into an instrument of power. "Liberalisation is actually eating into the core of democracy," he said.

Chomsky said that the claim of the U.S. that globalisation had brought about an economic boom in the 1990s was fallacious as it had failed in Mexico and other Latin American countries and even in the U.S. Chomsky said that in order to counter this, the U.S., through the might of arms, was trying to gain a position of control, and hence it had to continue with its satellite-based ballistic nuclear-missile programme. With the aid of its policies of globalisation, U.S. hegemony has reached a point where "it is now a threat to human survival". "Even the environment, which preserves human lives, is getting destroyed," he said.

Chomsky said that there was a trend among the less-developed countries to arm themselves to the teeth, as is evident from China's resumption of nuclear tests. He strongly criticised China's sale of war-

heads to Pakistan. "I am afraid that the continuing war plans would prompt India and Pakistan to procure weapons."

Chomsky observed that the economic system in the U.S. was meant to protect the interests of the opulent at the cost of the poor. The "permanent interest" of the country is defined as the interest of the rich. Chomsky pointed out that because the policies catered more to the rich, the poor were generally victims of deprivation and unfairness.

However, Chomsky said, there were some positive developments the world over. A recognition of human rights is growing among people the world over and there are growing movements against free-trade regimes, deprivation and injustice. Only if such movements spread can a positive change in the world order be brought about.

DURING his previous visit to West Bengal, Chomsky had visited villages in Medinipur district to interact with the office-bearers and members of various panchayats. In an interesting comment on the experience, he said that what he saw was "an example of democratic participation that is not easy to find" (*Frontline*, February 23, 1996). This time, he saw the city of Kolkata. On November 21, Chomsky and his wife visited the Victoria Memorial and took an extensive tour of

the art galleries inside. He also took a two-hour boat ride on the Hooghly – one of the symbols of the city and a source of sustenance for many people – and saw life on the banks of the river, including the Chhat Puja celebrations on that particular day. Although pursued by the press throughout, he politely made it clear that the Chomskys' day of tourism was a private one. He even managed to give the press the slip and walk around unnoticed in New Market, a marketplace that is more than 100 years old and still thriving and teeming with life.

On November 22, Calcutta University, the oldest university in India, conferred the degree of Doctor of Literature on Chomsky for his outstanding contributions in the fields of linguistics and social sciences. Receiving the degree from Vice-Chancellor Asis Kumar Banerjee, Chomsky said he was happy to receive the honour in the land where his subject had its origin. "The first generative

grammar in the modern sense was Panini's grammar," he said. In a 10-minute speech of masterly conciseness, Chomsky presented an overview of the present state of knowledge in the field of linguistics and modern discoveries made in the field.

The same day, the Asiatic Society of India presented him with the Rabindranath Tagore Birth Centenary Plaque. Past recipients of the award, instituted in 1961, include Bertrand Russell, C.V. Raman, Satyendranath Bose, Satyajit Ray, Neils Bohr and S. Chandrasekhar. Receiving the plaque, Chomsky said: "It is a rare and unexpected honour and one that I shall always treasure."

Later, he visited the manuscripts section of the Asiatic Society. The section consists of a collection of 45,000 rare manuscripts in 21 languages and 42 scripts. Among the inscriptions in the section, the most fascinating is an Asokan edict written in Brahmi. Chomsky was particularly impressed with an 18th century palm-leaf manuscript containing commentaries on Panini's grammar. In the guest book, he wrote: "A remarkable collection." He encouraged the Society to "go ahead with your academic programme based on these rare source materials on Indian civilisation".

In his interactive session with intel-

The response in Pakistan

Noam Chomsky's lecture tour in Pakistan evokes an overwhelming response.

B. MURALIDHAR REDDY

in Islamabad

lectuals in the city, he spoke extensively on various social, political and philosophical issues. Presiding over the interactive session was the eminent economist Amiya Kumar Bagchi, who referred to Chomsky as one of the most amazing minds in the world today. "He is a beacon for lesser people who are also intellectuals. The only person in my time, I think, who can be compared with him is perhaps Bertrand Russell," Bagchi said.

In reply to a question, Chomsky said that no solution was possible to the present crisis in Kashmir without democratic participation being assured to the people of Kashmir. He observed that India would not stand to gain much from the series of diplomatic exchanges between Washington and Delhi after the September 11 incidents. "The U.S. was all praise for India in August and dismissed Pakistan as a rogue state. But it quickly changed its stand and now with the war in Afghanistan Pakistan has become one of its closest friends." He said that the U.S. was known for continuously shifting its stand to suit its own interest. Saddam Hussain of Iraq was once considered a 'good guy' by the U.S.; but now he is considered a rogue. He said the war on terrorism was not a clash between civilisations as the U.S. was fighting its own creation.

Chomsky strongly condemned any form of religious fundamentalism. At the same time, he observed that the "root of all radical versions of religious extremism lies in the fact that these extremists have been consistently denied participation in social and political affairs in their respective countries. The way to put an end to this menace is to provide education to develop an altogether different culture".

On a question relating to his theories of anarchism, he said the word 'anarchism' had long been misinterpreted. "I believe any hierarchical structure has to justify its existence. If it can not do so, it should be dismantled to increase the scope of human freedom. If my four-year-old granddaughter should rush out into a busy street, I will use both authority and physical coercion to stop her from doing so. But I will be able to justify my act," Chomsky said. Asked about the role of force, he replied that the "use of force requires enormous justification. But if it can be justified, it should be used".

When asked what suggestions he would give to individuals who are trying to raise questions and challenge conventional doctrines, Chomsky said: "It's the same advice you'd give to a young scientist. Be honest, be thoughtful, be creative." ■

PROFESSOR Noam Chomsky is a recognised multiple genius. Linguistics, mathematics, philosophy, literature, politics and other disciplines and, above all, the capability to synergise them all, place his work far above that of most of his contemporaries. He presents a reality that often bites. Chomsky was in Pakistan in the last week of November to deliver two lectures, in Lahore and Islamabad. The response was overwhelming, yet it raised several basic questions and left them unanswered as well.

His themes, in Lahore as well as Islamabad, largely covered the same issues he touched during his tour of India. Yet his visit to Pakistan had its own importance, especially with the United States being at war with the poorest country – Afghanistan. The huge response Chomsky drew to his two lectures from a broad spectrum of Pakistani society and the wide coverage in the media were perhaps a reflection of the prevailing anti-American sentiment in the country.

At least a section of the media in Pakistan attempted to raise some fundamental questions about the visit of a man who is regarded as one of the eminent intellectuals of the current era. This section made a passionate plea to the people to ponder seriously over the issues raised by Chomsky and even wondered whether his visit would have triggered the same level of interest but for the war in the neighbourhood.

The first lecture, in Lahore, was sponsored by *The Friday Times* (TFT), a left-of-centre weekly. After TFT advertised the Chomsky lecture – as it had come to be called – the publication was inundated with requests from all kinds of people who wished to attend. It received requests from over 3,000 people who wanted to hear Chomsky speak. Everyone in the city wanted to be at the 'Chomsky lecture'. "What is going on? Is it an event where some people want to see and be seen?" The response had inspired a piece, 'Why are we

flocking to hear Chomsky?', by TFT News Editor Ejaz Haider, wherein he asked whether people were "not doing the right thing for the wrong reasons".

Haider compared Chomsky with the Pakistani intellectual Dr. Eqbal Ahmed, a great friend of Chomsky, and asked why the so-called Pakistani 'thinking class' was flocking to the lectures when Dr. Eq, as he was popularly called, was shunned and marginalised for his brand of native 'Chomskyism'. "Most of all, Chomsky is the conscience that troubles everyone. And we, as a people, are not terribly famous for putting up with anyone among us who would, Chomsky-like, tell us who we are."

Yet, on November 24, the hall at the Avari Hotel in Lahore witnessed a spontaneous overflow of intellectualism. People sat in the aisles and the lecture was, on popular demand, video-conferenced live with Karachi, the commercial capital that was not on Chomsky's itinerary. Several people walked in without invitations and squatted on the floor to listen to the enlightening lecture on the character of the war launched by the U.S. on Afghanistan.

IT was no different when Chomsky visited the national capital on an invitation from the *Dawn* media group. The auditorium at the Islamabad Convention Centre was jam-packed with representatives of the media, academicians, students and other sections of the elite; many more people were left annoyed at the limited number of invitations issued. Chomsky was given the *Dawn* award, 'The Ensign of the Rising Sun of Mehgarh', as he delivered the lecture and took queries. The insights that he shared with the audience that evening was reported for days in all the leading newspapers in Islamabad.

In a way it was ironic. Chomsky, a Jewish person, was making waves in the ideological state of Pakistan where all people of Jewish descent are considered essentially Zionist. If his lectures and his ideas were celebrated, the unexpectedly huge response they generated was also analysed. An Indian diplomat even remarked that the religious zealots of Pakistan would have dubbed the event as a Hindu-Jewish con-

spiracy if they knew his antecedents.

“So why should we want to listen to Chomsky? Just because he is a famous intellectual or because he is likely to give us the ammunition to take potshots at the United States, the U.S. that we love to hate? Or are we really prepared to listen to what he has to tell us about us?” Haider wrote. The timing of the lecture, along with the new equations the Pakistani establishment was working out with the U.S. in the wake of the war in Afghanistan, perhaps augmented the mass appeal of his ideas in the country. It was evident that his ideas provided ‘ammunition’ to the anti-U.S. lobbies and helped put the ‘placate-U.S. policies’ of the military government under the magnifying glass. However, what was not clear was if it really succeeded in presenting a looking glass to the thinking elites in order to awaken them to the ‘tell us about us’ part of Chomsky’s effort.

The bitter criticism that Chomsky had offered to the Indian polity while he was in India during the first leg of his tour of the subcontinent, though not extensively reported in the Pakistani media, contributed to increasing his acceptance in the country. “What he said there widely challenged our long-held and cherished stereotype of the Jewish-Hindu conspiracy against Muslims in general and Pakistan in particular. But since we love anyone who is able to tell the Indians where to get off, we are prepared to ignore his Jewishness and love him for his anti-Indianness,” Haider wrote.

Or was it essentially the ‘rebel’ who has thrived in the ‘not-so-democratic’ Pakistan who was bewitched by the Chomsky-ian charm? After all, Chomsky “is best when debunking linguistic subterfuge. His best put-downs are when he talks of key words as ‘national interest’ and ‘free trade,’” wrote Khaled Ahmed, Executive Editor, TFT, in another article, ‘Chomsky: Rebel without a pause’. In Pakistan, where ‘national interest’ is a word used too often by the establishment in order to justify most policies as well as their reversals, Chomsky’s interpretations and analyses offered an interesting counter-view. Moreover, it is fashionable to be a U.S.-hater and a rebel. Perhaps going to the lecture was like ‘rolling up the sleeve’ a la T.S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock.

However, Ahmed takes the interest generated by Chomsky in Pakistan a step further:

“Chomsky has been called ‘essential ammunition’ by America haters... But one wonders if Chomsky would be completely satisfied with this manner of use of his work. The real insight is that this indicter of the U.S. lives in the U.S. and is able to publish there.

“He actually prompts us to look at ourselves critically with the same honesty and depth of knowledge as he looks at America. Do the Pakistani media come up to the standards he has set?

“Do we have a Noam Chomsky of our own? Would we allow him to survive if he were to appear in our midst? We will be more just in ‘using’ him against the West if we are prepared to accept his kind as an institution in Pakistan.

“Chomsky, in his publications and in his talks, appears virtually to be a prophet.

His job – to unleash the truth. He answers questions and raises many more. Leaves many to us to ponder and find answers to. He invariably holds a mirror not just to America or to Pakistan but to any people and nation he visits or who choose to read him.

“And in the wake of his truth, he gathers his ever-increasing flocks and universalises many contentious contemporary issues even as he himself remains marginalised from the mainstream process. As

Rainer Maria Rilke says in Letters to a Young Poet – ‘Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into answers.’”

The visit of the ‘rebel without a pause’ brought out some passionate write-ups in the Urdu press as well. The Editor of the well-known Urdu daily *Ausaf*, Hamid Mir, known for his pro-Taliban sentiments, bemoaned Chomsky’s visit on another count. In his column, Mir said that while Muslims around the world were facing repression, there was no voice in the entire Muslim world that could effectively counter the repression. He said that it was left to an American intellectual, Chomsky, to take up the job. “His courage is a matter of satisfaction for those whose own intellectuals, politicians and rulers have become puppets in the hands of imperialism. Noam Chomsky’s populari-

ty in Pakistan is evidence of our own ideological bankruptcy. We can only wish to have such a poet, writer and intellectual who could play his role in the country.”

Someone in the audience in Islamabad asked Chomsky the following question: The U.S. Envoy in Pakistan has praised Musharraf a lot; was the U.S. serious about restoration of democracy in the country? Chomsky answered that there was a time when the U.S. praised Saddam Hussain for being its ally in the war against Iran. But what happened later? It showered bombs on Iraq. It played Suharto against Sukarno in Indonesia in the same manner and later humiliated the military dictator.

At least two Federal Ministers, Dr. Ataur Rehman and Abbas Sarfaraz, came to listen to Chomsky in Islamabad. But they appeared uncomfortable in the face of Chomsky’s plain-talk. When Chomsky asserted that the U.S. President was a bigger terrorist than Osama bin Laden, as the former had no proof against Osama while the killing of innocent people in Afghanistan was the proof against President Bush, people in the hall clapped.

“But the two Ministers were looking at each other, as this clapping could cause damage to that ‘national interest’ for which we, along with the U.S., have brought the Northern Alliance to power in Afghanistan,” Mir wrote.

“Last night I hailed Chomsky at a reception for his courageous stand. He laughed and replied that he said nothing new. According to him, he was saying the same that the people of Pakistan had in their hearts and minds. The only difference, he said, is that if you compare Musharraf with Saddam and Suharto, you would have to face charges of rebellion. But when I say, he continued, the people would appreciate and clap, as I have an American passport. In fact, some Pakistani intellectuals deserved the praise that you are giving to me, he added. I am receiving all praise because nobody in your country has the courage. Noam Chomsky has embarrassed us,” wrote the editor of *Ausaf*.

That Chomsky had hit his country where it hurts most was evident from the reaction of the U.S. coalition spokesperson, Ambassador Kenton W. Keith, to the lecture tour of Chomsky. When a reporter wanted him to answer some of the questions raised by Chomsky on the war in Afghanistan, Ambassador Keith paused and said: “I have stopped commenting on Chomsky since 1963. He is a boring lecturer.” He said this amid giggles from the American Information Centre staff in Islamabad. ■