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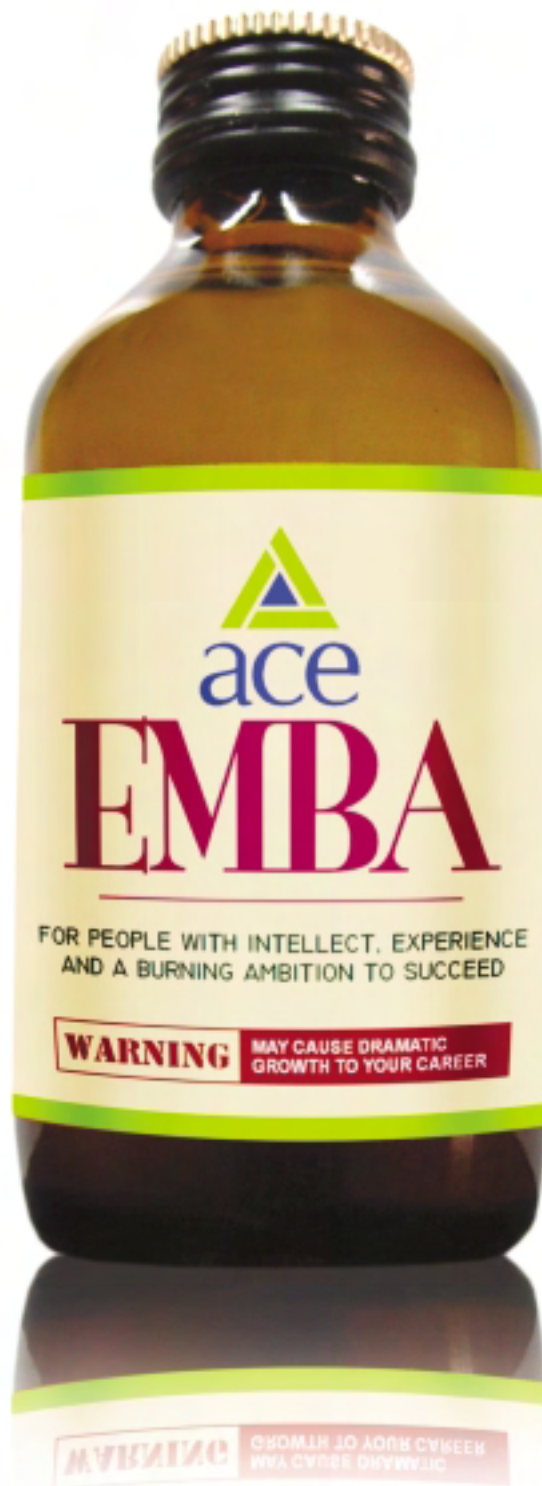
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COVER STORY

## 20 Go, Go Condo

By John Narayan Parajuli

The housing crunch in Katmandu has driven up home prices. But builders have responded with new options.

**INTERVIEWS:** **Prabindra Basnet**, project manager, Grace Apartments and **Surya Bhakta Sanganchhe**, deputy director general of Urban Development Board

COLUMNS

### 11 Much Ado About Nothing

By Jogendra Ghimire

‘Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities’

### 30 The Curse Of The Blue Sea

By Swarnim Wagle

The study of the causes of the wealth and poverty of nations

### 38 Talking Conscious Purchasing

By Ujol Sherchan

In a market, consumers cast rupee-votes

### 40 Crowning Glory

By Kunal Lama

A new beauty queen emerges, tearful but triumphant, at the end of a gruellingly-stultifying-question-&-answer-round-and-embarrassingly-clumsy-song-&-dance-routine session

PROFILE

### 42 The Book Seller

By Satish Jung Shahi

Twenty-five-year-old Nabaraj Bajagain’s story is the stuff movies are made of

LIFESTYLE

### 47 Decline In Reading? Not Quite

By Ajit Baral

The habit of reading is actually growing in Nepal, but much better promotion and marketing strategies are necessary to keep up with demand

SPORTS

### 50 Saved By The Bell

By Sudesh Shrestha

Athlete and fans got a break last week when Rana and Singh factions patched up their dispute

### 18 A Historic Shift

By Suman Pradhan

For the first time since its inception in 1948, the Nepali Congress has taken the initial tentative steps towards potentially de-linking itself from the monarchy

### 26 Peace Or Polls

By Satish Jung Shahi

CPN-UML fears the Deuba government’s rightward tilt but just can’t decide where to go

### 28 Who’s On Top

By John Narayan Parajuli

Mountaineering’s traditions of integrity and trust among elite climbers are threatened by the all-too-personal disputes over who is the fastest Everest summiteer

BUSINESS

### 32 Insuring Health

By Indra Adhikari

Only 5 percent of Nepalis have health insurance. Why?

ARTS & SOCIETY

### 34 Home Away From Home

By Yashas Vaidya

For Nepalis in the U.S., summer is the best time to come see their friends and families in Nepal. It’s time to leave now.

DEPARTMENTS

- 6 LETTERS
- 10 PICTURE OF THE WEEK
- 14 CAPSULES
- 16 BIZ BUZZ
- 44 CITY PAGE
- 52 SNAPSHOTS
- 56 KHULA MANCH: GANGA RAM KHADGI
- 57 BOOKS: “AGAINST THE CURRENT”
- 58 LAST WORD

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## Letters



## “Nepal will do well to learn from Bhutan”

HARI SHANKAR ADHIKARI

### The expat story

JOHN N. PARAJULI UNNECESSARILY puts the expats in a flattering light (“Home Is Where Heart Is,” Cover Story, August 1). For me, his article is memorable for what was left unsaid.

Let us not forget that the increase in expats is also a reflection of failures of the government and our over-dependence on foreign aid. That they have come to help Nepal rings hollow. Who helps whom is debatable. This is not to say that there are no sincere expats, but how to separate them from the “honey eaters,” as Kunal Lama puts it and to discourage the latter is a challenge. Overstays should be granted as per Nepal’s assessed “critical” needs, not general perceived needs.

Moreover, Nepal will do well to learn from Bhutan. As Bhutan invested early on in “targeted” human resource development, it today has enough homegrown teachers to meet its domestic needs. How it has been able to make English compulsory in all schools, private or public, starting from Grade One, for instance, without letting in the Peace Corps, Youth Ambassadors or even Jesuit teachers is a success story worth emulating. It has also instituted a cap on the number of expats. Nepal should likewise invest in “targeted” human resource development and gradually phase out the Peace Corps, Youth Ambassadors and foreign Jesuit teachers, and put a cap on the number of expats.

Much often, development critics decry Nepal’s over-dependence on foreign aid. Well, we tend to think expats come straight from outside riding on foreign aid. Not true; many come from inside Nepal. They first come on tourist visas, stay in volunteer jobs and later compete for development jobs with Nepalis and stay

back. Thus, the Nepalis are increasingly crowded out of the development sector.

There is an old native Indian saying from South America: “When they [Europeans] first came we had all the land, and they had all the Bibles. Today, we have all the Bibles, and they have all the land.” Expats are not allowed to buy land in Nepal, but that doesn’t mean that this saying doesn’t offer a cautionary tale.

HARI SHANKAR ADHIKARI  
BALKHU

### In defense of Dor Bahadur

IN REFERENCE TO HIMALI THAPA’S letter to my article, most foreigners do consider Dor Bahadur Bista’s mix of sociology and history very useful (“Ke Garne?” Cover Story, Opinion, August 1). It seems to explain to us a lot of things that are puzzling when we first come here. If she thinks Bista is wrong or an old hat, that would be an interesting story because of the influence the book has in *bideshi/INGO* circles. If she thinks Bista is being misused to the detriment of Nepal (“prop up their reasons for Nepal’s failure”), that could be a great story.

JOHN CHILD  
SANEPA

### Ignoring the Indians?

KUNAL LAMA’S ARTICLE WAS A FUN read (“Take Your Pick,” Cover Story, Opinion, August 1). Certainly, Kathmandu’s expats defy classification. They come in all hues and colors. Funny, though, that you never thought of writing about Indian expats? There are quite a few around.

SUPRABASH PRADHAN  
VIA EMAIL

## Policing traffic

ON THE ROAD AS A MOTORCYCLIST for six months, I've come to realize how chaotic the traffic in Kathmandu is and that even following traffic rules word-by-word is no guarantee to one's safety ("Policing Traffic," A Little Word, by Deepak Thapa, July 25). The Valley's traffic police themselves aren't sure that their effort can improve the daily "traffic riot." That becomes evident from the manner they go about their business. They let pedestrians walk in the middle of the road, motorcyclists are frequently on the pavement, and the motorists form three lines in a two-lane road. And if one bothers to spend some time observing the traffic police at a busy intersection, you will see that they are having a party out there. A taxi driver is fined for "illegal parking," another gets away for a similar offence, and yet another happily gets into an animated conversation with the police himself. The other day I saw a policeman trying to get on top of an extremely fancy bike (probably of a harassed biker) at the Thapathali crossroads. While the traffic was in a complete mess all around him, Mr. Policeman was busy admiring the bike. Perhaps the most apt nickname given to them is one I heard from a taxi driver, who calls them "Ullu (owl) Saab"—one, who in the broad daylight, sees nothing.

PARAS ADHIKARI  
KATHMANDU

## The tightrope walk

B. L. NARAYAN'S "WALKING THE Tight Rope" bears the stamp of a professional hand, who bases his appraisal of the budget on the twin tools of comparison and analysis (Budget 2004-05, July 25). His criticism seems to be well-rounded, frank and fair. However, he does not appear to have succeeded in hiding his disapproval of the budget despite paying handsome eulogy to Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari, who presented a please-all budget, which is bereft of vision, priorities and purpose.

Two former finance ministers, namely Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat and Dr. Prakash Chandra Lohani, have already gone on record to dismiss the budget as lacking in focus and direction. They certainly

know better because they have, many times and during different stints, prepared similar budgets with the same intent of not attempting to "rock the boat" and that for pretty much the same pressing reasons. Narayan's criticism of the government's aid management record however does not seem to have stuck because, as is well-known, the donors in Nepal generally have the onus to do everything right from the stage of the feasibility study of a development project to its implementation, monitoring and evaluation. These days they are, in some cases, believed to have started giving additional allowance to government employees who work on the their projects leaving their colleagues crestfallen and demoralized. It is also understood that they themselves oversee the programs they fund. The government role has been reduced to just that of a witness. It's true that government bureaucracy is oversized, inefficient and ineffective. A decade or so ago a report suggested downsizing the bureaucracy by about 25 percent and reducing the number of ministries to roughly 22. The Administrative Reforms Commission, which was headed by no less a person than the prime minister himself, recommended several measures for enhancing the management skills of the employees and it was approved by the Cabinet. But when the time for implementing them came, the government backed down and instead raised their numbers. Narayan's suggestion that in order to further improve aid absorption, the local elected bodies at the district and village levels be sufficiently empowered is to the point. Every government since 1956 has indeed done just the opposite. Presently there are no elected bodies at any levels of the government, and there is no prospect of having them in the near future. They all have been nominated and are not accountable to the people. As for the political parties, which are responsible for underdevelopment, they say one thing while in office and quite the contrary when out of office. Calling this budget a "peace budget" would be a mockery of peace itself.

K SINGH THARU  
TORONTO, CANADA

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only of use there that it may

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pass on and come to

its flower and fruit in manners

in the highest forms of interaction

between people and

their beliefs

For the

— in religion, literature,

colleges and schools —

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and private life.”

*Walt Whitman*

By the



People



People



People



THE NOTION OF NATIONHOOD.

EVERY MONDAY



**THE GRADUATE:** Chief of Army Staff Pyar Jung Thapa at the graduating ceremony of the first all-women batch of the Royal Nepal Army



# Much Ado About Nothing

*Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.*

Voltaire (1694-1778)

## BY JOGENDRA GHIMIRE

This past week and the week before, a group of self-appointed defenders of our cultural ethos and Nepali women's *ashmita* tried to undermine the intelligence of the Nepali population. They were opposed to the idea of the Miss Nepal contest, a beauty pageant that selected its tenth batch of winners on Saturday. The annual event took place amid protests from women's organizations and a forum established recently with a sole objective of opposing beauty pageants.

You need not be an ardent supporter of beauty pageants to see the absurdities in the arguments of those who opposed the event. I will try to list below some of the arguments offered by those opposing the pageant: Former Miss Nepals have not done anything for the society, physical appearance can not be a measure of one's beauty, inner beauty or creativity is what counts, the participants of the contest are not representative of a Nepali woman who lives a difficult life in the hills, the participants can neither speak good English nor utter a full sentence in Nepali. Then, for a full year after their crowning, the winners become nothing but an object of advertisement for the corporation that sponsors the event; they even give up their liberty by agreeing to not get married for a year.

Without questioning the intentions of the opponents, it needs to be stressed that their principal opposition—of using women as a commodity to sell goods for a multinational corporation—is hugely patronizing. It seems to be guided by the assumption that since the 18+ year-olds who participate in the pageant are all naïve and foolish, they don't realize that they are degrading themselves and their sex by presenting themselves as the objects of advertisement. The problem with this line of reasoning is obvious. Eighteen-year-olds are legally competent to enter into contracts; they can own or dispose property; they have a right to vote in an election. They should, therefore, be presumed to be able to decide whether or not they should be a part of the pageantry and whether or not it is degrading to model for a corporation. The opponents of the pageant, in my view, should rest assured that the participants do not need their patronage. So then the argument about becoming a poster girl for a multinational's advertising campaign for the next 12 months seems to come more from the dislike of the idea of globalization and the free flow of ideas, capital and individual, than from a genuine concern for an 18-year-old girl.

The argument that beauty cannot be judged from the physical appearance alone is well-taken, but we would be lying to ourselves if we

did not equate beauty first and foremost with physical beauty most of the time. Inner beauty is probably more important than physical appearance, but surely beauty pageants are not about the kind of inner beauty that the opponents are talking about or anything as abstract. It is mostly about physical appearance coupled with poise, presence of mind (wit and humor, if you will) and the way a participant conducts herself on the stage. There is no reason why the current and former winners of Miss Nepal contests should be defensive about what the pageants are not. If the opponents of beauty pageants feel so strongly about inner beauty and want to have the element as the deciding vote in a pageant, they should consider organizing an "inner" beauty pageant. They have my vote for such a venture.

The argument that the participants are not the true representatives of the hill women or Tarai women is equally frivolous. What kind of culture, language or dress code do the opponents of the pageant think represents all of Nepal? For a country as diverse as ours, there can't be one rigid standard that can be applied to every young woman to judge her Nepali-ness or representative character? What a set of standards do the opponents think should be adhered to, to prove one's Nepali character?

Above all, there is an element of persecution in everything that the opponents say. By arguing that the participants have sold themselves to the corporation, they are equating the modeling contract between the

aspiring model and the company to slavery, prompting the young participants to be unnecessarily defensive about themselves. That need not be the case. The young women who participate in beauty pageants do so with a belief that if nothing else, the experience will at least make them more confident to face the tough world in the days ahead. Based on the way many of the participants of past pageants have fared, there is every reason to believe that their experiences with the pageants have stood them in good stead.



EYING FOR THE CROWN

Surely, the organizers have, like organizers of any other high-profile event now, hyped the pageant as more than what it is. And there seems to be a feeling among some participants that winning or losing the Miss Nepal contest is the end of the world in itself. There needs to be some moderation on those heightened expectations. Put simply, neither the participants nor the society at large should take this yearly event for more than what it actually is: Young ladies want to see for themselves how they fare in the real-life situations.

But when a self-appointed group of do-gooders and protectors of our cultural values starts infringing upon our 18-year-olds' right to choice, it becomes a serious issue. The next time the opponents of the beauty pageants think about opposing the pageant for all the wrong reasons, I ask them to imagine the prospect of a model or an undeserving columnist lecturing them on how immoral or socially useless their profession is. ■



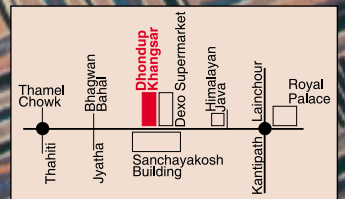
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**BACKHOME:** PM Deuba being received at the airport after returning from the BIMSTEC conference in Bangkok

## No movements

Following a confrontation between local residents and refugees, the Jhapa district administration restricted movement of refugees outside the camps in Beldangi. The decision was taken by a joint meeting of refugee organizations, local residents and government officials. The refugees will now have to get permission from camp authorities while moving in and out of the camps. In another development, the European Union announced an aid assistance of \$2.4 million for the refugees. This will go into purchasing food for some 3,400 vulnerable babies, malnourished infants, nursing mothers and the elderly.

## Women at work

The Royal Nepal Army (RNA) inducted 197 women into its service, the first all-women contingent to do so after 22 weeks of training at Chhauni. RNA plans to recruit 251 more women in the second batch in the near future. RNA earlier this year announced that it would increase the number of women in its ranks to five percent of the total strength. Currently, there are about 500 women soldiers in the technical sector of the RNA.

## Stay order

The Supreme Court issued an interim order asking the Ministry of Labor and Transport Management not to enforce a lottery system to select laborers for South Korea. The government earlier had ordered Lumbini

Overseas to select laborers through a lottery system. The agency had filed a writ against the decision. The CIAA, however, has decided to continue its investigation of alleged irregularities against the Lumbini Overseas, which follows complaints filed by Deep Bahadur Rana and Tulsi Sapkota, both of whom have applied for employment in Korea.

## Mayor's death

The Maoists killed Rajendra Sriwastav, former mayor of Guleriya Municipality in Bardiya. The Maoists attacked him with a *khukuri* while he was attending a funeral of his relative. Earlier, the Maoists took Sriwastav and a policeman, Ratna Singh Tharu, in their custody before ordering everybody else present in the funeral to leave. After killing him, the Maoists threw the mayor's

corpse in the funeral pyre. Meanwhile two Nepali Maoists, who were arrested by the Indian police in the town of Baharaich, were handed over to Nepali authorities in Bardiya. The two, identified as Narendra Kurmi and Om Prakash Loda, were said to be involved in the murder of Rajendra Prasad Sriwastav. Police say the two were running an extortion racket from India.

## New NOC

After mediation by the Ministry of Education and Sports, two parallel Nepal Olympic Committees agreed to form a unified NOC under the leadership of Rukma Shumsher Rana and seek endorsement from the International Olympic Committee. The two separate Olympic bodies were led by Nepal Sports Council's Member-Secretary Kishor Bahadur Singh and Rana. The new committee has 37 members in which Singh has been appointed as the general secretary.

## Power shutdown

Construction in the Middle Marsyangdi Hydroelectric Project has come to standstill for more than two weeks due to the workers' strike. They have put forward a 22-point demand. The strike began after the contractors, Dywidag, banned the labor union. The company had threatened to relieve laborers from their

job if the union was not dissolved. Over 1,200 laborers are working on the Middle Marsyangdi project.

## Labor loss

Nearly 15,000 Nepali workers bound for Iraq were stranded in Mumbai. Many of them had run out of their savings and were being forced to live in the streets of Mumbai. Nepali workers are mostly hired by construction companies or as security guards in Iraq. Another 5,000 Nepalis were reportedly stranded in Jordan.

## Schools fees

The government has put a cap on school fees for private and boarding schools. Schools will now charge Rs. 500 for primary level and Rs. 700 for secondary level every month and additional 50 percent for extra facilities. PABSON has expressed dissatisfaction over the decision.

## Foul play

The Kathmandu District Court held Puskar Lal Shrestha, editor of Nepal Samacharpatra guilty of defaming Anikendranath Sen, managing director of Asia Pacific Communication Associates Nepal. The court imposed a fine of Rs. 500, a compensation of Rs. 5,000 and court expenses amounting to Rs.300 on Shrestha.

## Taxi row

The row between the taxi drivers and the government was finally settled with the government agreeing to fulfill most of the demands of Nepal Drivers' Union. According to the agreement, traffic police would now stop harassing the drivers and that the renewal of the route permits,

test passes and pollution test would be conducted every six months. Traffic police have been randomly conducting these tests and harass-

ing the drivers with hefty fines, the drivers said. The drivers had staged a weeklong protest rally to press their demands.



## Militia training

The Maoists have forced over 500 youths, including school students, into militia training in an undisclosed location in Dadeldhura. A student who managed to escape from Maoist captivity reported that the youngsters and students of above grade six were forcibly taken away from Jogbudha. Reports said the rebels are training them to handle arms, plant landmines and manufacture socket bombs. The rebels picked the students who were home during their summer vacation, news reports said.

## Security guards

The Malaysian government has decided to lift the ban placed on recruitment of Nepali security guards. Last month during an official visit to Nepal, the Malaysian Home Minister Dato Ajmi Bin Khalid had said he would ease the restrictions placed on Nepalis workers. He also said women will get preference for employment and the visa process for Nepalis will be simplified. This is a special provision for Nepal, according to a Nepal Embassy official in Kuala Lumpur.

## Drug haul

Police at the Hong Kong airport have arrested a Nepali with 1kg of hashish. He was reportedly hiding the contraband valued at around \$25,000 inside his shoes. The man, whose identity was not immediately disclosed, faces a life imprisonment with a fine of \$600,000.

## Vehicle holdup

A group of armed robbers looted Rs. 5,000 each from ten buses and trucks at the Kalakate-Chisapani section of the Mahendra highway in the Midwest. In a separate incident, Maoists commandeered a passenger bus from Bainsha at Dhanauri in Dang. The Maoists

asked the passengers to get out of the bus before hijacking it. The bus was last seen at Hapure in Purnadhara VDC of Dang. This is the site that hosted the last round of the peace talks held last August.

## Flight disruptions

A number of international and domestic flights were disrupted at the Tribhuvan International Airport after an RNAC Twin Otter created a shallow trench on the runway while landing. Kathmandu-bound flights of Gulf Airways and Qatar Airways were diverted to the Zia International Airport in Dhaka. A Thai Airways flight to Bangkok and an RNAC flight to Hong Kong were delayed.

## Aid appeal

Red Cross Nepal has appealed for an immediate relief aid amounting to Rs. 150 million to provide rescue, relief and rehabilitation to flood victims in the country. The general secretary of the Nepal Red Cross Society, Dev Ratna Dhakhwa, said the plight of flood victims in Nepal has been overshadowed by the

massive floods in neighboring states of India and Bangladesh. Dhakhwa said they have already received promises of support amounting to Rs. 75 million to help Nepali flood victims. Around 200 people have died and nearly 100,000 families have been affected. Twenty-five districts in the country have been affected by the floods.

## Local bodies

The government has handed over the responsibility of running the local bodies to civil servants effective from August 5. The Cabinet took the decision. This is the third time local institutions are being run by civil servants. The village development committees will be run by secretaries, municipalities by executive officers and district development committees by local development officers, Local Development Minister Yubaraj Gyawali said.

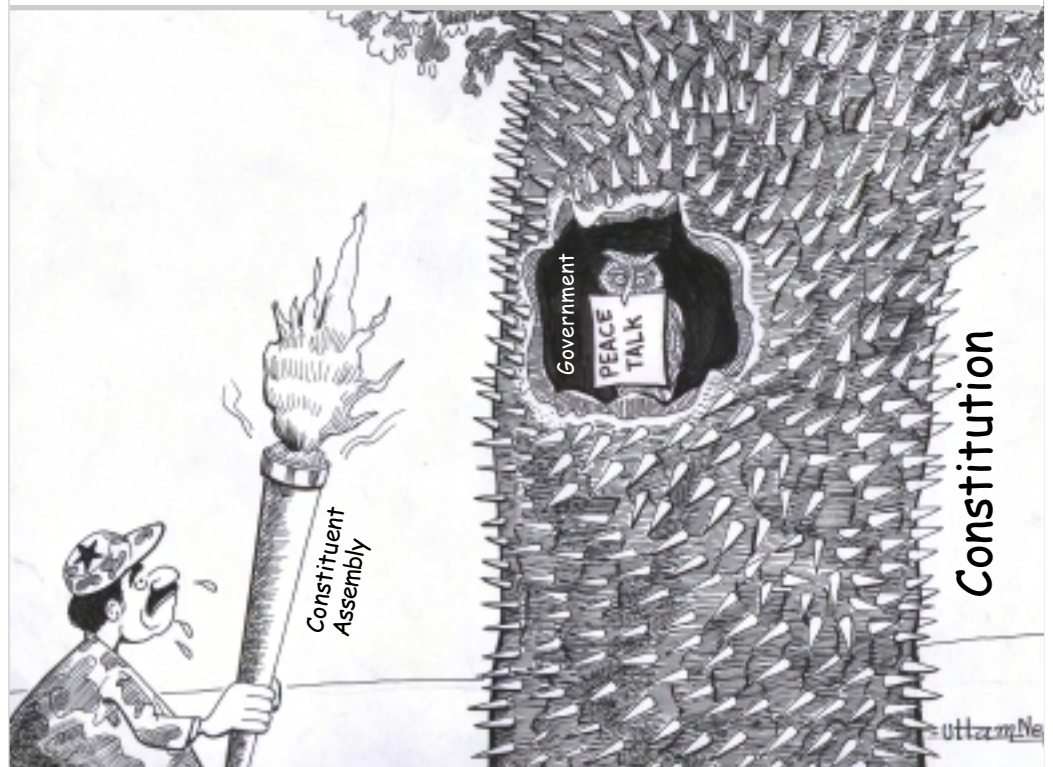
## Aid Bangladesh

Nepal has offered an assistance of \$1,000,000 to the flood victims in Bangladesh. At least 700 people have died due to mon-

soon floods. After a high point that saw nearly two-thirds of the country under water, floods continue to recede in much of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi government's health directorate reported more than 9,000 people ill with waterborne diseases. Such illnesses have caused more than 60 deaths since June, it said. According to the government, the flooding has left about 20 million people or one-seventh of the population in need of food for the next five months. It estimates a loss of \$7 billion due to damages to agriculture and industrial infrastructure and private property, CBS News reported.

## Herb ban

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project management committee has enforced a ban on Yarsagumba (*Cordyceps sinensis*) collection in Mustang. This, the committee said, will check large-scale smuggling. The committee will impose a fine of Rs. 1,600 on those found collecting Yarsagumba illegally. The committee has so far recovered 787 Yarsagumba plants with the help of local police.



**AIR SAHARA TO OPERATE FROM SEPTEMBER**

Air Sahara will commence daily flights on the Delhi-to-Kathmandu route from September 1. The flight will depart from Delhi at 1:10 p.m. and arrive in Kathmandu at 2:55 p.m. Departure from Kathmandu will be at 4 p.m. and arrival in Delhi at 5:10 p.m. daily. Air Sahara, formerly known as Sahara Airlines, is one of the leading private airlines in India, flying to 23 destinations. Its fleet includes new generation Boeing 737-700, 737-800, 737-400 and 737-300 and CRJ jet aircrafts.

**ECOTOURISM AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION TRAINING BEGINS**

A 15-day training session on Ecotourism and Biodiversity Conservation began on July 27. The training was organized to develop skilled manpower in issues related to ecotourism and conservation. The training is conducted by Tourism for Rural and Poverty Alleviation Programme's Programme Management Office through the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC).

There are 19 participants in the training including officers and rangers from the DNPWC, national parks and senior trainers from Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management. The Multidisciplinary Consulting Organization is facilitating the training.

**"ACTION ASIA" FEATURES EVEREST REGION AND MARATHON**

The internationally reputed adventure magazine based in Hong Kong, "Action Asia," has published an eight-page photo-feature on the Khumbu region in its July issue. The magazine has also devoted one full page for a report and photos on the Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon organized on May 29 from Everest base camp to Namche Bazaar. The Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon was promoted by the Nepal Tourism Board and organized by Himalaya Expeditions to promote adventure sports tourism in Nepal. The photos by award winning British photographer, Charles Partwee, based in Japan, reflect the true face of the Himalayas and the lifestyles of people living in the region.

**SME TOOLKIT FOR NEPAL**

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed recently in Dhaka, Bangladesh between South Asia Enterprises Development Facility and Elite Networks and Communications to implement the SME Toolkit product in Nepal. The South Asia SME Toolkit is a project of the Small and Medium Enterprises Department of the World

Bank Group and South Asia Enterprise Development Facility. It was initiated to promote local small business growth in developing nations by creating a powerful synergy and underscoring a strategic commitment in upcoming lives by creating opportunities in small business. Elite networks will be localizing the content of the SME Toolkit to suit Nepalese context, culture, trends, rules and regulations. It will also be conducting a number of promotional workshops in Nepal.

**MARGINAL GROWTH IN TOURIST ARRIVALS IN JULY**

Even though non-Indian visitor arrivals grew by 18 percent, a 16 percent decrease in Indian market meant that the number of visitors coming to Nepal by air in July 2004 showed an increment of only one percent compared to the same period last year, according to figures released by Department of Immigration. Among the non-Indian visitors to Nepal during the month, the major performers continued to be North Americans and Europeans followed by Japanese and Chinese visitors. The figures are 24 percent lower than the same period in 1999, the country's best year for tourism.

**International Visitor Arrivals during July:**

- UK:** up 17 percent to 1,123 visitors
- GERMANY:** up 15 percent to 468 visitors
- JAPAN:** up six percent to 863 visitors
- FRANCE:** up 21 percent to 802 visitors
- CHINA:** up 57 percent to 332 visitors
- INDIA:** down 16 percent to 7,186 visitors

**CREATE BATH CELEBRATES FIRST ANNIVERSARY**

Create Bath, a shop dealing in bathroom fittings and fixtures and tiles from China, cel-

ebrated its first anniversary on August 1. The Create Bath showroom is at Teku. The products include shower cabins, Jacuzzis, steam rooms, toilets and cisterns, basins, mixture and tiles from companies like Meinasi, Yinibao, Isabelle, Giessford and more. According to the manager, Create Bath hopes to open new branches at other locations in the near future.

**FAIREVER MANTRA LAUNCHED IN NEPAL**

Cavin Kare India has launched its latest product, Fairever Mantra in Nepal. The fairness cream is a blend of Himalayan natural herbs and takes its inspiration from Ayurvedic tradition. The blending ideas for Fairever Mantra are derived from ancient Greek medication and years of research and development. The product is available in 25g and 50g tube packages.

**SAJHA TO OPERATE BUS SERVICE TO TIBET**

Sajha Yatayat, the state owned transport service, has decided to operate direct bus services from Kathmandu to Lhasa in the Tibet autonomous region of China from September with a view to promoting tourism, states RSS. According to the agreement, Nepal and China have signed a deal to start bus service to connect the two countries through land route. It takes two days to reach Lhasa from Kathmandu. According to the executive director of the corporation, Mukund Satyal, "In the beginning, Sajha Yatayat will start three to four buses a week and later increase the number of vehicles." Satyal also said that Sajha Yatayat is making preparations to expand its services to India shortly.



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# A HISTORIC SHIFT

For the first time since its inception in 1948, the Nepali Congress has taken the initial tentative steps towards potentially de-linking itself from the monarchy

BY SUMAN PRADHAN

**ONE OF THE LAST** MAJOR HURDLES on the constituent assembly question came tumbling down last week when the Nepali Congress adopted the constituent assembly as one of three options to resolve the Maoist conflict and strengthen democracy.

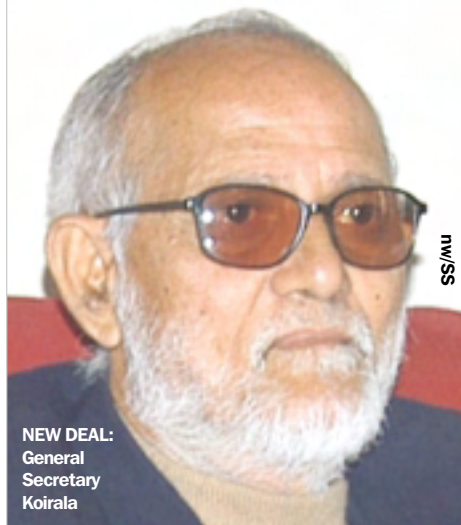
The three options presented by the party's Central Working Committee (CWC) are: 1) Re-instatement of the dissolved parliament, amendments to the present Constitution and then elections; 2) referendum to re-write the Constitution and 3) to form a constituent assembly by using the present Constitution.

While the party has always called for the first option since October 2002 when King Gyanendra sacked an elected government, options two and three present a historic shift in the Congress' thinking. Even after all other major parties shifted gradually to supporting a constituent assembly to write a new constitution, the Congress had stuck around with the present Constitution, always arguing that a referendum or a constituent assembly may not be the answer to the political troubles Nepal now faces.

But last week, after three days of discussion on and debate over a political proposal by General Secretary Sushil Koirala, the CWC changed its stand. The proposal passed almost unanimously, with only one CWC member, Shailaja Acharya, opposing it formally.

"The three options presented by the party are reasonable and balanced, and it is a compromise between the various views expressed," says CWC member Ram Sharan Mahat. "This means we as a party are ready to discuss all issues openly."

With those options, the party is clearly sending a message to both the



NEW DEAL:  
General  
Secretary  
Koirala

nm/ss

monarchy and the Maoists. As Mahat puts it, "though we have made the constituent assembly one of the options, that option will only be exercised if the Maoists guarantee adherence to peace and commitment to multi-party democracy." As for the monarchy, it is a signal that the King should remain within constitutional bounds lest the party change its position on the monarchy when, and if, it chooses to exercise the constituent assembly option.

This is a turnaround once thought impossible in the Congress. Credit it to the young students of the Nepal Students' Union (NSU), a Congress-aff-



filiated body and the majority of the party's district committees and reformers within the party leadership such as Narhari Acharya, Chakra Bastola, Ram Chandra Paudel and others. The NSU and Acharya, in particular, have been at the forefront of the movement calling for change. The students, led by former NSU President Guru Ghimire and General Secretary Gagan Thapa, created enough pressure from the streets to make the party stand up and take notice. Narhari Acharya has been extremely vocal in calling for the adoption of the constituent assembly option even though most Congress stalwarts actively opposed it.

But in an irony of sorts, the very people who made the constituent assembly such a big issue within the party have been thrown out by the party leadership. The Congress leadership, citing minor squabbles between Ghimire and Thapa, took the extreme step of dissolving the entire

NSU central committee last month, creating further turmoil. The NSU dissolution was supposed to be one of the issues in the CWC but that has to wait until the body meets again this week.



The CWC's three options are historic in the sense that it not only opens the way to change the present Constitution (a document the Congress fought hardest to write and implement), but also paves the way for the party to formally re-think its position on the monarchy. The Congress' relationship with the monarchy has been troubled at the best of times and outright hostile at the worst of times. Post-October 2002, the relationship between the two has hit a nadir. This is reflected in the three options.

For the first time since its inception in 1948, the Nepali Congress has taken the initial tentative steps towards potentially de-linking itself from the monarchy, an institution it has always defended, even at its own cost. If the party does decide to go only for a constituent assembly, then there is a possibility that it could choose to do away with the institution for good.

This is what some Congress leaders actually want. "We don't have to abolish the monarchy right now. But at least the party should form a long-term view on the monarchy. There should be a general statement of policy goals to achieve in the future," says CWC member Narhari Acharya.

Such sentiments are still in the minority in the party. Many party stalwarts point out that just because the Congress opts for a constituent assembly does not mean the party will abolish the monarchy and choose republicanism. A new constitution could still keep the institution of monarchy but bind it so tightly that it would remain within the confines of constitutional monarchy. Indeed, this is the hope of many Congress leaders.

And in any case, exercising the third option comes with several riders. First and foremost is that deciding to go for a constituent assembly can only be done by using the present Constitution. What this translates to is: Revive parliament, and let parliament decide whether it wants to go for a constituent assembly. **N**



# GO, GO CONDO



The housing crunch in Kathmandu has driven up home prices; builders have responded with new options

BY JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

**T**HE WORSE THINGS GET in the rest of the country, the brighter the real estate market gets in Kathmandu. Insurgency and the attendant economic decline have sent a flood of people from the countryside to the capi-

tal. The rising population has caused a giant leap in demand for housing. Despite depression in other sectors of the economy, the housing industry is literally booming.

More than a dozen companies have sprung up in the last four years to offer quality housing, sometimes in new forms. The reason is obvious: The market is lucrative since there is a growing



**CHANGING FACE:** One of three housing sites in the Valley developed by Ansal Chaudhary Developers

nm/Sagar Sinestha

demand in the relatively safe Valley. “I feel secure here,” says Sabita Lama, a resident at Civil Homes in Bhainsepatti, Lalitpur, who shifted to her present dwelling two months ago. Lama, whose son is currently serving in the British Army, lives with her mother. “It is fantastic to be here,” she adds with a smile. She is more than happy about the amenities: an in-house departmental

store, security guards, power backup and more.

The Lama family sold the land in Nakkhu that they had bought to build a home when they decided that community living was more comfortable and less expensive than building an individual house and living there. “I don’t have to worry about water and electricity anymore,” Lama says.

Like Lama, a growing number of people are opting for community living. Building individual houses is time-consuming. Condos are relatively cheaper and they come with a range of built-in services. The costs of community houses and apartments developed by private companies range between Rs. 700,000 to Rs. 7 million. Even though condos seem wise alternatives, many still can’t give up the idea of building their own homes.

# Community Living Is Safer

**P**rabindra Basnet, project manager of Grace Apartments, perhaps the city's most ambitious housing project, tells us why the housing industry is booming, despite an economic downturn.

## Why is the housing industry

## booming during these bad economic times?

Lack of security is driving people away from the outlying districts and into the Kathmandu Valley. Even though there is a depression in the other sectors of the economy, there is a growing demand for houses, which is natural. People can afford

to either build houses or buy existing ones. The need for *gaas*, *baas* and *kapaas* (food, shelter and clothing) never decreases. It grows geometrically with the rising population. More and more people now want independent houses. In the past, a single house was shared by a large joint family. But with urbanization, the concept of nuclear families is taking root.

## As someone involved in development of community housing complexes, what do you see as

## the advantage of community living?

The idea behind community living is to provide facilities that are not available in individual houses. Security is of paramount importance. Individual houses are comparatively less safe. Anyone can break into your house and put a gun to your head. In condos or community living complexes, there are security guards and fences surrounding the whole complex. In our own case, we plan to install surveillance cameras and other security paraphernalia to ensure the safety of the community living inside.

Lama still longs for her "own house," which she wants to build in the future. Her feelings resonate with many other Nepalis. Buying a home just isn't the same thing.

But that is changing. Even people who already own a house in Kathmandu are booking colony apartments, as housing companies have started to introduce innovative constructions. A range of

amazing offers wait for prospective buyers in a city where people are getting increasingly caught up in their professional lives. "People now don't have the time and patience to build a house," says engineer Rajendra Kumar Shrestha. "It's difficult to build a house of your own these days, especially if you are working," agrees Kalpana Shrestha (no relation with engineer Shrestha), a resident

at Kusunti Housing. "You can't do justice to both."

Building a house, alongside the attendant cost of land, in Kathmandu is also very expensive, several million rupees at the minimum. Many young professionals like Ms. Shrestha don't have the expertise and the energy to shop first for the land and then oversee a long period of construction that lasts for several

**CONCRETE JUNGLE:**  
Kathmandu's jagged skyline



months, if not years. There are too many hassles: Hiring a consultant and finding the right contractor is a tough job for naïve homebuilders.

“This is where the experts come in,” says engineer Shrestha, referring to the housing companies. Ms. Shrestha, who hails from Biratnagar, points to an important benefit of community living. She doesn’t, for example, need to worry about burglars breaking into her house when the whole family is away in her native Biratnagar during Dashain and Tihar.

The 12 companies in the Kathmandu market offer a variety of community housing apartments, duplexes and independent, stand-alone homes. Typically the homes can be financed through banks after a down payment of 20-25 percent. The price tag for these homes and apartments is tailored to suit the pockets of the middle-class. Rates start from Rs. 700,000, and a nice two-bedroom flat could cost about Rs. 2 million. The most expensive houses cost about Rs. 7 million.

Home loan schemes from several banks have fueled the boom. Getting the

PROJECT	SITE	TYPE
Kathmandu Residency	Bagdole	Apartments
Mount View Residency I	Harisiddhi Apartments,	Duplexes
Mount View Residency II	Hattiban	Apartments
Comfort Housing	Sitapaila	Standalone houses
Sunrise Homes	Balkumari Apartments,	Duplexes
Civil Homes	Bhainsepatti	Standalone houses
Subha Avas	Naya Naikap	Duplexes
Oriental Colony	Kuleshwore	Apartments
Shangrila Villa	Gangabu	Apartments, Duplexes
Grace Apartments	Naxal	Apartments
Kusunti Housing	Kusunti	Duplexes

loan has now become as easy as getting a bike or car loan. “If you have a stable income, financing through banks is not a problem,” says Dilip Neupane, senior marketing manager at Sunrise Homes in Balkumari, Lalitpur. There is a little more to it than that.

Not everyone gets a home loan, even with a stable income. “One must have at least Rs. 40,000 monthly income to get a loan from the banks,” says an employee at Civil Homes. Many of the new projects in Kathmandu do seem to be designed for people with an upscale-income. “We target four groups,” says Sun-

rise Homes’ Neupane. “Professionals, higher middle-class businessmen, senior civil servants, NGO/INGO employees and those working abroad.”

Then there are also homes and apartments being built for people who already have one. Grace Apartments in Naxal is designed to cater to the “upper-end” of the market. “Most of our clients are people who already have a home in Kathmandu,” says Prabindra Basnet, project manager at Grace Apartments. Fitted with surveillance cameras, videophones and other security paraphernalia, Grace Apartments is one of

# Buyers Must Be Careful

**S**urya Bhakta Sanganchhe, deputy director general of Urban Development Board, explains why Kathmandu has turned into a concrete jungle.

## How do you plan to regulate unorganized construction and urban sprawl in and around Kathmandu?

We have developed building codes to ensure the safety of the houses that are being built. We monitor the houses to check if the codes have been complied with. We are also asking local institutions like municipalities to discourage random constructions. It’s basically up to the local institutions to enforce such guide-

lines. We can only work with them. Municipalities and local institutions must act responsibly.

## Why is Kathmandu turning into a concrete mess?

Kathmandu is littered with random constructions. The main reason behind it is the lack of urban infrastructure. People tend to think first in terms of land and houses, and only when all the housing constructions are completed do they start to think about community amenities. Nothing much can be done with houses that have already been built, but if the owners want to dismantle and rebuild or at least modify their houses, our office will certainly cooperate with them.

## What can be done in areas like Ason, where there is barely space for modification?

Nothing much can be done at this stage. We can inform the residents of the attendant dangers of living in such an enclosed space in times of calamity. It is too hard now to attempt any reorganization of the existing structures.

## How do you see the emergence of private housing companies? Have they helped in any way in urban development?

Every resident has a role to play in keeping the city from turning into a mess. But prospective buyers must be careful that they don’t buy the right homes from the wrong companies. It would be wise to ascertain first that the companies have been duly registered before buying the homes.

## What are you doing to make sure housing companies comply with your building codes?

We monitor from time to time to make sure that the companies have acted in accordance with the housing plan approved to them. We don’t do it alone. We work with the municipalities. We, however, have the authority to enforce the building codes.

## Private housing companies say the Board is not very cooperative with them.

We will cooperate with them in every way we can, but the condition is that they must duly fulfill the requirements stipulated in the building code.

## What is the Board doing of its own to promote organized housing?

We are developing 13 residential areas inside Kathmandu covering 500 ropanis (37.6 hectares) of land. We are also mindful that our projects will have enough open space for children to play. Kathmandu is running out of open spaces, which is very unfortunate.

# TECHMEDIA HOUSE

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# Flip Side

■ Though community living is being marketed in Kathmandu as a success story, there are downsides. Some occupants have complained about leaking roofs within days of taking over the keys to the houses from the builders. Engineers involved in development of community housing point out the reason. “Unlike flat roofs, the sloping roofs designed in such houses often leak. If proper water-proof

treatment is done on the roof, there won’t be any problem,” says engineer Rajendra Kumar Shrestha. But you can’t give a 100 percent guarantee, he insists.

■ People with upscale income maybe living an upscale life inside these fenced colonies, critics say such projects are unnecessarily dividing communities between haves and have-nots.

■ Residents living adjacent to community housing have complained of noise pollution and disturbances. “They have installed a generator just next to my house. The noise from the generator keeps us awake all night,” says

Shridhar Upadhayay, who lives adjacent to the Comfort Housing colony in Sitapaila. “Moreover they seem to have parties through the whole of the night; the noise of music is unbearable.”

■ There are still ambiguities about the legal status and ownership of some of these condos. Many are nervous about how the infant housing industry would deliver. Officials at the Urban Development Board say legal complications may arise for buyers who have bought houses without ascertaining whether or not the housing companies have been duly registered.

**UNDER CONSTRUCTION:**  
Grace Apartments, Naxal,  
perhaps the Valley’s most  
ambitious housing project



nw/DB

the most ambitious housing projects (under construction) Kathmandu has ever seen. There will be an in-house restaurant, a laundry, a health club, a party hall and more. Company officials admit they are running an overtly upscale project. “We want to set a standard in the housing industry in Nepal,” says Basnet. “This is our flagship project.”

If the concept of community living becomes popular, Kathmandu’s ugly sprawl of new homes could grow more slowly. That’s a benefit of the condo life we would all appreciate. **N**

sw/SS

**A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES:** The Sunrise Homes complex at Balkumari, Lalitpur



# PEACE OR POLLS?

CPN-UML fears the Deuba government's rightward tilt but just can't decide where to go

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI

**T**HE ELECTION COMMISSION has been on the hot seat since King Gyanendra sacked Sher Bahadur Deuba as prime minister in October 2002. Deuba's failure: inability to hold elections. Bahadur Bhawan in Kantipath, home of the Election Commission, is again seeing a flurry of activity. This comes with the reinstatement of Deuba, who has been asked again to do what he failed to do two years ago: to hold elections.

The prime minister has one huge balancing act to perform. His key coalition partner CPN-UML has said in no uncertain terms that it came to the government to first broker a peace with the Maoists and only then hold elections with the Maoists on board.

UML leaders are not mincing words as to where their priorities lie: "We want to proceed with the peace talks and include the Maoists in the elections," says

Raghubir Mahashet, who heads the UML's election department. "But," adds Mahashet, "there is no ground for us to concretely say that elections will be held within *Ekshatthi Saal* (by the end of the Nepali year, April 2005)."

Last week, he represented the UML at an all-party meeting at the Election Commission, called to listen to the parties' views on the prospects of elections. Questions regarding election prospects seemed tricky even to Chief Election Commissioner Kesavraj Rajbhandari. On August 5, Rajbhandari invited eight political parties to his office for a "familiarization" meeting. He was meeting the party leaders for the first time in his official capacity, which came eight months after his appointment.

"Can the elections take place without the voter list?" he responded rhetorically when reporters asked him whether the commission's district offices were able to gather and update the voter lists. When asked if polls were at

all possible, he dodged the question, as would be expected of any election commissioner at this difficult juncture. He merely said, "The updated voter list for 2061 *Saal* will be published by the end of Shrawan (August 17)."

What followed was far less of a fudge: "The parties have to work with a sense of solidarity with the Election Commission, and it is also the responsibility of the government to announce the elections," he said. "We are also meeting with other parties, including the security forces." Clearly, the Election Commission is preparing itself for polls, come what may. It's not for the commission to speculate whether polls can be held or not: That is a political question that has to be answered by the government in office.

More than Prime Minister Deuba, it is now the UML that stands on a shaky ground. General Secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal is on record issuing threats of a pullout from the government if differences with the prime minister con-



**SHAKY SOLIDARITY:**  
Prime Minister Deuba  
(right) and Deputy  
Prime Minister Adhikari



**THOSE WERE THE DAYS:** Is the bonhomie being replaced by suspicions?

nw/ss

tinue. The PM certainly gives the impression that he is more interested in polls than peace.

UML readers are miffed by the statements made by the government spokesman and Minister of Information and Communications Mohammad Mohsin, who said last month that the peace talks, if and when they take place, will have non-negotiable qualifiers: multiparty democracy and monarchy. This, UML leaders told *Nation Weekly*, is a breach of trust. When the four parties who are currently in the government signed the Common Minimum Program, they made it an open-ended document. The implicit idea, the leaders say, was to approach the negotiations with the Maoists without conditions and gradually narrow down the agenda through mutual agreements over time.

A UML Standing Committee member says that at the committee meeting last month, the UML ministers were accused of limiting themselves to “passing files” rather than abiding by the mandate provided by the party and the Common Minimum Program. They are apparently accused of having fallen well short of preparing grounds for a lasting peace.

Sources within the party say a powerful UML faction wants the party to

consider withdrawing from the government. The rationale: The party will completely lose its good will if the ceasefire becomes a distant dream and the government continues to get dragged rightward. “Our top priority has always remained a fruitful peace process,” says the UML’s central committee member Subash Nembang. “The all-party government hasn’t moved in the direction and with the speed the party had expected.”

Analysts say the discontent in the UML rank has deepened with the government’s reluctance to declare a unilateral ceasefire. The UML is insisting on an immediate ceasefire, but Prime Minister Deuba maintains that a unilateral ceasefire could mean a huge gain for the Maoists and that such a ceasefire will collapse over time since the Maoists will not be tied up to any commitment. “It would be much like the first ceasefire (in 2001) when Deuba was the prime minister,” says a Deuba aide.

UML leaders are getting frustrated over the fact that their party colleagues in the cabinet don’t seem to be making much headway. “The ministers weren’t sent to ride sleek cars and wave flags to fulfill their own self interests, like the previous Chand and Thapa governments,” says

Sahana Pradhan, a standing committee member of the UML. “We drew up the Common Minimum Program so that we could move forward on a track, but the parties in government look as if four horses of a single carriage are trying to move in different directions.”

But the prime minister’s colleagues have a different take on the story. “The UML is one party that always takes two different sides, divides itself into two factions and ultimately comes out united on issues that are more popular,” says the Deuba aide. Like the aide, many others shrug off the current conflict in the UML as nothing but cleverly orchestrated pressure, more due to populist pressures than principled positions.

Still, there is no mistaking the anger within the UML. “Though it is common to wait for the government to complete its 100-day honeymoon period,” says UML Standing Committee member Pradhan, “this government has so far failed to provide even a vision of where it wants to go. The government has no moral standing.”

The problem is that if the Deuba government lacks vision, it’s most important coalition partner makes up for the lack by having two. Is it then polls or peace? **N**

Mountaineering's traditions of integrity and trust among elite climbers are threatened by the all-too-personal dispute over who is the fastest Everest summiteer

BY JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

**F**OR MOST PEOPLE CLIMBING Everest is an impossible dream. Even seasoned mountaineers dance with death when they attempt it. The issue of who has done it fastest has turned two top climbers, once friends, into bitter foes. Pemba Dorjee Sherpa and Lakpa Gyelu Sherpa both claim the record, but allegations of deceit have seriously tarnished the title itself.

The controversy has also rocked the small community of top climbers. Mountaineers have traditionally operated on trust and honesty and have been proud of that moral high ground. In the wake of the feud there are calls for more stringent verification mechanisms for record attempts to avoid further trouble. Ang Karma Sherpa, general secretary of Nepal Mountaineering Federation and a member of the probe committee investigating the dispute, says that verification of Everest ascents, or of any other high mountains for that matter, is difficult and even more so for speed climbing. When two top speed climbers are in the fray to claim the same laurel for the same feat, it becomes doubly difficult.

On May 21 Pemba Dorjee Sherpa stunned everyone by climbing to the top of the world in a record-breaking eight hours and 10 minutes, beating the previous record, held by Lakpa Gyelu Sherpa, by more than two and a half hours. The climb from the 5,300-meter base camp to the 8,852-meter summit usually takes about four days. Some climbers take weeks. There were some raised eyebrows at the time, but officials certified the remarkable achievement for the record books. Pemba barely had a chance to celebrate before Lakpa filed an application with the Ministry of Tourism questioning Pemba's word.

# WHO'S ON TOP?

RACE FOR THE SUMMIT

"Show us the proof," demands Lakpa. "Someone who must have seen him atop Everest." He has a point: there seems to be only Pemba's word to back up his claim.

"I have all the proof and I have given it to the Ministry [of Tourism]," says Pemba. "I have brought flags from Everest." But Lakpa is simply not willing to accept that. "You can buy such flags in Boudhanath," he retorts. Although Pemba claimed that he saw a team climbing from the northern side, others say no one was climbing from the Tibetan side on May 21. Even that issue remains to be settled.

The seven-member committee charged with looking into the controversy has two mandates: settle the dispute and develop guidelines to avoid future controversies. There is no fixed standard for verification. Photographic evidence, human witnesses, footprints, mementos, flags and other items that have been brought from the top are taken into consideration. "If Pemba had brought the

brass flag that I fixed last time [during his record-breaking ascent in 2003], I would have demanded no more proof," says Lakpa.

The rivalry between the two ace climbers surfaced last year during the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first ascent of Mount Everest. Pemba had just set a new record with a 12-hour-and-45-minute ascent. That was broken within three days when Lakpa scaled the peak in just 10 hours 56 minutes. Pemba then complained to the Ministry of Tourism, asking them to invalidate Lakpa's claim and argued that Lakpa had taken longer than he stated. The Ministry intervened but eventually decided in favor of Lakpa after veteran mountaineer Appa Sherpa testified.

Lakpa's current claim against Pemba looks like tit-for-tat, but Lakpa denies that there is anything personal. "I am not competing with Pemba," says Lakpa. "All I am trying to do is to ensure that no one misleads us."



other countries norms have been developed to ensure that there are witnesses. Even then there may be no way to verify the testimony.

In a bid to verify Pemba's claim, the probe committee recently wrote to leaders of 13 foreign climbing teams. In the letter Ang Karma Sherpa said that the committee had interviewed Nepali guides who were on the mountain during this time and has collected information and material evidence relevant to the controversy. "We have felt the information from the members of expedition teams that were on Mt. Everest for this spring season will also be instrumental in the preparation of the probe committee's report, which will be presented to the Ministry for a final decision," he added. Officials say they are waiting for the response from the foreign climbers. But even before the finding is announced, Lakpa has vowed to climb Everest in five hours, without proof, if the committee decides in favor of Pemba.

Many see such attitudes among top mountaineers as a direct fallout of the excessive commercialization of Everest, and the dispute has led to greater skepticism about mountaineering ethics, records and even the value of reaching the top of the world. Cynics point to the recent avalanche of Everest summiteers who made it to the top by spending vast sums of money rather than investing a lifetime of effort. Purists lamented the gross disrespect for mountains, and both Edmund Hillary and Reinhold Messner bemoaned the tourist track to the summit during the golden jubilee celebrations last year.

The climb to the top of world has become a route for self-promotion too. Both Nepalis and tourists have used success on Everest to jump from relative obscurity to international stardom. There is now an undeclared, cutthroat competition among Sherpa climbers to make a name for themselves, the mountaineering equivalent of "publish or perish."



The peril is real. More than 180 climbers have died on the mountain since George Mallory and Andrew Irvine tried to summit it in 1924. About 1,300 have successfully made it to the top. Despite the odds, wannabe summiteers continue to take the risk. But for those with bigger ambitions there is another danger, the risk of being disputed. Such disputes are not unique to Nepal, but in

As the controversy deepens into a major crevasse, the probe committee will be under pressure to come out with a report that not only settles the present dispute but also provides enough framework to avoid future controversies in Everest's name. If they fail, not only Lakpa and Pemba, the entire mountaineering community will suffer. **N**



# THE CURSE OF THE BL

BY SWARNIM WAGLÉ

THESE DAYS, BOTH THE STATE-run Nepal Television and the private Kantipur Television air “people’s views” in their flagship evening news. On 21 July, supposedly a “BP Koirala Memorial Day,” Kantipur TV asked pedestrians if BP’s protégés were making his *sapana saakar*. That this translation of “dreams fulfilled” has become yawningly boring and vacuous is beyond doubt, but the answer given by everyone on TV was less dull by only a margin: “No. The politicians are not fulfilling BP’s dreams,” they said, “the politicians are fulfilling their own dreams.” Nepalis, like everyone else, love to hate politicians for everything that’s awry around us. We wish if only they were cleaner and more visionary. Some see the entire fault in outsiders—the designs of expansionist India, conspiring Westerners and surplus-extracting capitalists from the metropolis! Some might even blame God for not putting us next to Finland, Canada or Liechtenstein. Whatever the people’s verdict on the cause of our woes, they span centuries and involve a cast of diverse actors. But the thing with even the most crudely assembled “people’s views” is that some of them represent some of the truth, and open societies are obliged to take note. But do we? Or better still, do they, the economists who have over the past 20 years assumed remarkable ascendancy in Washington and other capitals, shaping policies that influence livelihood choices of millions?

In a letter to David Ricardo in 1817, Malthus termed the study of the causes of the wealth and poverty of nations as the “grand object of all inquiries in political economy.” What ails nations that are poor? What did the rich do to become rich? Fifty years of mainstream economics has settled, not too helpfully, for two words: accumulation and technology. Of course, factors that originate in culture, society, politics and history are important, but most economists avoid

working with variables that cannot be measured and tested. These two simple notions have now spawned a cottage industry aimed at answering the following: if accumulation (human and physical) and technology drive economic growth, what foster accumulation and technology in the first place? In this vein, over the past decade, some of the best minds in the profession have probed the varying influences of “institutions,” “economic integration,” and “geography.” Some work in this area is fascinating, not least for the rigor they have employed for inquiry. For lack of space, I highlight just one strand of literature that argues that the role of geography is fundamental. There is no consensus on this, of course. While the likes of Jeffrey Sachs argue that it plays a huge and direct role, Turkish economists like Dani Rodrik and Daren Acemoglu, temper the view by saying geography is important, like trade and economic integration, but only to the extent that it indirectly shapes the quality of institutions. The new mantra is that all development is about institutions.

True, as Sachs argues, geography is a major issue to some countries, especially landlocked ones like Nepal. Just note his claims. i) Of the 35 landlocked countries in the world, the 29 that are outside Europe are dirt poor, except Botswana (well-managed diamond mines) and Belarus (heavy Soviet investment). ii) The six in Europe are only technically landlocked, for they are all well integrated into the European market and have access to navigable rivers. iii) Even Switzerland, the most famous landlocked country, has half its population living north of the Alps with access to the Rhine. Some of the poorest countries in Asia are also landlocked: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Laos, Mongolia and Nepal. What holds them back? The journalistic anger over unhelpful neighbors aside, economists say it is high transport costs that inhibit their ability to engage with the outside world to trade goods, exchange capital and borrow ideas. When this isolation perpetuates over decades, the outcome is evident.



# BLUE SEA

## BETTER FUTURE

But surely, geography is not destiny. Even if it shaped outcomes over the long run, this doesn't absolve our politicians of their ineptitude. And, if geography is key, how do we explain the dramatic differences in economic progress made by South Korea, but not North Korea, and by West Germany but not the East, who share the same land and climate. The answer, then, must lie in policies and institutions that accord varying importance to rule of law (including expropriation risks and property rights) and credible incentives to create wealth. In a recent series of papers from the National Bureau of Economic Research in Massachusetts, Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson employ sophisticated econometric work to gain useful policy insights. Using mortality rates of European sailors, bishops and soldiers in the colonies between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they argue that depending on whether the colonists could settle in their new land or not affected the type of institutions they set up. Since the quality of

institutions more or less persisted even after colonial independence, they argue, much of today's fate can be accounted by how institutions originated. Colonies like the U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia had settlers adapting European institutions that were conducive to wealth creation. In parts where empire builders couldn't settle en masse because of disease or heat, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, they set up "extractive" institutions to siphon away the loot. Without reading the authors' highly technical papers, these claims sound naïve, but the message they seek to convey is that it is bad institutions run by bad men that affect development. Once institutional variables are controlled for, they say, geography's role in shaping outcomes is minimal.

As the Geography-versus-Institutions debate rages on in the ivory towers of the American East Coast, where does this leave a landlocked Nepal? Further, with institutions that are either non-existent, or worse, resemble what economists call the "extractive" kind, after the Belgian exploits of the Congo, does this then mean we are doomed? Not quite—we can always work around our geographical constraints by making shipping less relevant through lightweight manufac-

tured or processed agricultural exports, and we can convert our perceived geographical liability into tourism and water wealth, and other service-based industries. As for institutional quality, it is we who create bad men and bad institutions, and as long as we remain democratic, there is hope that we can contest, choose and improve our ways and means. Yet, still, some of the handicaps are so severe that even with halved corruption, increased investment, ceased violence and better rulers, we may never ever be gloriously rich. Even if we start doing many things right from now on, so as to trigger growth, say, at rates as miraculous as 8% per annum for the next 12 years, our per capita income will still be under 500 dollars per year, one of the world's poorest. But the larger point is this: While we will never become Singapore or Seychelles, we can do better than now. With those growth rates over the next 12 years, we can halve our illiteracy and infant mortality, better our roads, schools, hospitals and water supply and even afford nicer parks and libraries. But these modest goals will still require Herculean efforts, and looking at where things stand at present, we can only dream or despair.

## THREE CURSES

So, next time we blame politicians for not making BP's dreams "saakar," neo-classical economists would also have us curse the following three facts. First, for most of the past 200 years, we had institutions and rulers who resembled the Belgians in the Congo. Second, at 61 meters above sea level, the district of Jhapa only narrowly misses a port and a beach. And third, Prithivi Narayan Shah died one year earlier than historically prudent—a year after his death in 1775, Adam Smith published "The Wealth and Poverty of Nations" detailing the virtues of water-carriage, markets and industry. And if Shah had survived Smith's treatise, he wouldn't have stopped his conquest in River Teesta. He would have marched all the way to claim the blue seas of Bengal, and we just might have had a different Nepal. **N**

*Views expressed in this column are personal, and do not necessarily reflect those of institutions the writer is affiliated with.*



# INSURING HEALTH

Only 5 percent of Nepalis have health insurance. Why?

BY INDRA ADHIKARI

**I**NSURGENCY-RELATED RISKS, A new consciousness about personal health care, rising medical costs and the threat of cross-border health hazards, such as SARS, have driven up demand for health insurance in urban parts of the country.

Despite the demand, there are few options for personal health insurance, partly because insurance companies have become wary of the all-pervasive violence. More importantly, companies who did enter the market say they had a high rate of fraudulent claims. Most have now stopped providing coverage to individuals, choosing instead to cover groups of clients through packages issued to particular organizations that they think are reliable.

Insurance companies also avoid providing any kind of coverage to residents in areas perceived as “highly affected” by the insurgency, and even residents of Kathmandu are not covered for injuries resulting from violence. The argument: The violence is so widespread in the present-day Nepal that issuing coverage for hazards related to violence would bleed the companies to death.

“We had no claimants for the last two years,” says Karuna Manandhar, manager of United Insurance Company, in reference to fraudulent claims. The company’s packages are designed for large business houses, hotels, INGOs and local staff at diplomatic missions. This is a safe business practice, according to insurance companies. It minimizes risk of fraud, since group insurers get their claims investigated before sending them for reimbursement.

Relying on individual insurers for business can be risky, as insurance companies have found. General manager of Himalayan General Insurance Company

(HGIC) Subarna Shrestha says his company has faced high rates of fraud and attributes them to fake documents claimants produce. This, he fears, can completely undermine the expansion of the fledgling health insurance services in the country. Verifying documents can be extremely dicey and complicated, as few clinics, nursing homes and hospitals keep a history of the patients. It is also not too difficult to produce false documents.

This substantially increases the risk of fraudulent claims during compensation. “Few medical records are found in hospitals when we try to verify the documents,” says Menu Manandhar of the Himalayan General Insurance.

Our own investigations found that frauds are easy to pull off—either through personal contacts or bribes. A number of doctors provide receipts without a checkup, and clinics provide medical bills without the need to actually buy the medicines. These documents resemble originals and are hard to distinguish. Investigation of the documents is further complicated by constant changes of doctors in clinics. Few Nepalis have personal or family doctors who could provide a single-source paper trail for the insurance companies. “We cannot possibly keep investigating a single case for months,” says an executive at an insurance company. “This will end up costing us dearly. We have to stop the process somewhere.”



nw/ss



The problems have driven most insurers out of the business. Last year the government announced that civil servants and security personnel would be covered by a health insurance policy. The Rs. 160 million allocation was aimed at providing coverage of up to Rs. 200,000 for the first 200 claimants and Rs. 40,000 for “normal treatment” (routine examinations). But the idea just didn’t fly: No insurance company showed any interest in the multi-million-rupee project. “We were absolutely certain that there would be just too many frauds,” says an insurance executive.

But fraud is not the only reason why health insurance hasn’t really taken off in Nepal. For many people, insurance premiums are unaffordable, even if coverage is available: Health insurance is an out-of-reach luxury. Government hospitals are the place to go, but only when you are really sick. Trishna Shrestha, a student at Tribhuvan University in Kirtipur, is well aware how health insurance would make her life easier, but buying a policy is beyond her means.



“My first priority is education. Health insurance would cost me more that I can afford,” she says.

Bima Samitee, the government body charged with monitoring insurance services in the country, does not have records, but the number of Nepalis insured for health is below five percent, according to the general manager at Rastriya Bima Sansthan, Khem Prasad Baral. In the United States, 85 percent of people have health insurance.

Company owners themselves concede that the premiums are high and most of their clients are covered through company policies. Generally, premium rates for individuals range from Rs. 350 to Rs. 1,750 per annum and Rs. 1,050 to Rs. 5,250 per family. The age limit is 69, and there are substantial exclusions.

Anal Gautam, an officer with Micro Enterprises Development Program, looked around for a personal health insurance policy for years but just could not convince any company to issue him one. “Finally, I was mighty relieved that I was insured through the organization I now work with,” he adds. **N**

# Home Away From Home

For Nepalis in the U.S., summer is the best time to come see their friends and families in Nepal. It's time to leave now.

BY YASHAS VAIDYA

**E**ight-year-old Sushana Pokhrel is sitting on the floor in her Battispatali residence watching HBO, just like she would be in her apartment in Queens, New York during the holidays. She is dressed in a black *kurta* and sporting a *mehendi* pattern on her hand. She picked it up quick enough. She arrived in Kathmandu on July 8 with her aunt, who had been to New York as well. By her side are her doting grandparents.

"She is like any ordinary Nepali kid," says her grandfather, Mukund Prasad Upadhaya, a retired Roads Department engineer. "She spends most of her time playing with other children in the family." Meanwhile, Sushana remains wrapped up in the movie, betraying no hint that she is missing her parents, who are in New York. She is content answering simple questions. When asked her name, she spells it out, to make sure it is taken down right. She is neither outspoken nor shy. In the summer heat, with her long hair let loose, her impassive face is a picture of calm.

The summer in the United States is the time when schools close for the longest vacation of the year, almost three months, from late June to early September. This is when most American students can head out for an extended visit. Everything has to be finished and the travelers must be home well before the new school calendar begins in the fall.

This schedule also allows the parents a deserved annual break from their hectic routines. Many like Sushana, are

now at the end of their summer vacation. To them, Nepal is home away from home. They come to meet their families, ageing parents, old friends or just to get plain pampered by their grandparents.

For Sushana, it's all been about being with her grandparents. Her parents, who otherwise have been shuttling regularly to Kathmandu, couldn't make it this time. "She considers Nepal her home," says her grandfather. Since her arrival in July, Sushana has been visiting her relatives and practicing her Nepali. The other day she celebrated her birthday and missed none of the excitement of the parties in New York.

Family is probably the strongest attraction for non-resident Nepalis. Take, for example, Binod Basnet, who is a permanent resident of the United States. Basnet, a Certified Public Accountant, went to the United States in 1988. He is now working in an auditing firm in Manhattan and has come back to Nepal after five years. He is here to see his mother, who is 70. These have been hectic times for Basnet, meeting as many friends and relatives as possible. "There are tons of things to do," he says while relaxing by a pool at the Aroma Sports Center in Sanepa. "But it's primarily to see my Mum who has not been feeling all too well." And much like others, he headed out of the United States now because it is his daughter's summer vacation.

For the likes of Sushana, though, these short sabbaticals in Nepal don't only mean time spent with a large number of relatives. It is an opportunity for them to see first-hand Nepal's culture,

lifestyle and its people. Upadhaya, Sushana's grandfather, says that her parents "do not want their children to forget their culture." He himself feels strongly about this for his granddaughter, who was born in the United States. "Our roots are important," he says, and he wants his granddaughter to know them when she is still young and at an impressionable age.



Basnet wants his five-year-old daughter, Upasana, to know about Nepal and to get to know her relatives too. It was important to visit Biratnagar to let her meet her maternal grandparents. Upsana, like Sushana, was born in the United States and is a U.S. citizen. "After two months in Nepal, she is almost always speaking Nepali now. I take that as a bonus, though we mostly

speak Nepali at home in America as well," says Basnet. Upasana is splashing around the Sanepa pool in her black-blue swimsuit.

Many feel that the Nepali language is an important connection that will give these kids a firm grip on

the culture, since they can interact with other Nepalis freely without feeling like a foreigner, a stranger in the family. With this in mind, Upadhaya has been trying hard to teach his granddaughter Nepali. "Your Nepali-ness remains until you speak Nepali," says Upadhaya.

Sushana has already picked up a lot. Though not fluent, she can still hold her own in a conversation. Upadhaya is now introducing her to writing the language.

Namita Kiran-Thuene, a resident of Boston, came here in May after she gave birth to her second child. For her, a newborn in the United States meant too much of a hassle. She found that a nanny for her newborn was not a big deal here as in the United States. A rolling stone herself, she thought the best time to hit the road was while her four-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Carla-Nina, had her summer vacation at school.

While most Nepalis from abroad prefer to spend time catching up with their relatives and friends, Kiran-Thuene's days are packed with learning new things. She has been taking lessons on yoga and meditation, sewing and folk dancing. "These are things I have always thought of doing." Now that she has the time, she is enjoying herself.

But she is not too excited about the prospect of visiting Nepal frequently, though she stresses that she has enjoyed her stay every time she's been here. "Nepalis abroad are so emotionally attached to Nepal," she says. "Many of them keep coming back to Nepal every year." She wishes that they would just as well go out and see the world, "Europe and the Alps." At least the younger Nepalis abroad are doing that, she feels.

To others, there's nothing like home. "You feel great, exhilarated when you're here," says Basnet. "I'd love to come here every year, if I only could afford it... maybe once every two years." Going to Europe would cost him just as much. But he still prefers Nepal. "After all, you are always welcome here," he says with a smile. **N**



**BONDING:** Sushana with her grandfather



**NOTHING LIKE NEPAL:** Basnet always feels welcomed



**ROLLING STONE:** Kiran-Thuene makes most of her stay wherever she happens to be

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# Talking Conscious Purchasing

In a democracy, citizens cast ballots to elect a government. In a market, consumers cast rupee-votes, which decide whether small farmers, street vendors and *kirana pasals* have a future in an era of super-marketization.

BY UJOL SHERCHAN

I have been noticing this expat lady buying from this same vendor on the footpath of Ekanta Kuna and practicing her Nepali for sometime now. Two for the price of one! She drives a blue-plate car. I wonder if she is practicing “conscious purchasing,” out of a desire to help the upstart when she could have done her grocery shopping in better places. I will never know, for I am too shy to ask. However, this best practice raises an interesting possibility: spreading disposable income where it matters more.

*What is “conscious purchasing?”* Any of the following or more: a) buying from upstarts, small vendors or mom-pop shops rather than from more upscale or corporate suppliers; b) buying directly from the farmer or producer; c) buying from stores run by cooperatives that offer employment to the disadvantaged and the marginalized (fair trade); and d) buying environmentally sound products (green movement). The caveat is that conscious purchasing is not always pro-poor and not always practical.

*Will it contribute to more balanced development?* The affluent consumers wield substantial purchasing power. It appears that if they tilt their spending more often toward the urban informal sector—the bread and butter of the urban poor, slum dwellers and farmers—then they can create huge impact. In a democracy, citizens cast votes to elect a government. In a market economy, consumers cast rupee-votes, which may yet decide whether small farmers, street vendors and *kirana pasals* have a future in an era of super-marketization.

*Why focus on the urban informal sector?* The informal sector offers one of the best hopes for reducing poverty and hunger as it generates employment for both migrants to urban centers and the urban labor force. Its role as an engine of development is only growing, if the developing world trend is any indication. However, our government continues to neglect this sector. Municipalities tend to be harsh on street vendors: Municipality cops going after the hapless street vendors is a disturbing recurrent sight, even though the latter clothe the urban poor better than anyone else. Moreover, the informal sector not only subsidizes the formal sector, but also plays an important role in recycling urban waste materials.

*Who are the conscious purchasers?* In general, conscious purchasers detest commercials; avoid brands in favor of generic goods, frown upon conspicuous consumption

and its demonstration effects; favor local and indigenous products over imports; and usually buy from upstarts, small vendors or service providers. Their number is few, but growing. The poor in general are not conscious purchasers because they have little choice but to buy from the informal sector. A trekker who eats at an *eklo bhatti* in remote Nepal is not a conscious purchaser, if that is the only eatery along that 10-mile stretch: He has no choice. A trekker who decides to stay overnight at a roadside inn rather than in a three-star hotel is a conscious purchaser. Conscious purchasing involves choices, which the relatively affluent have more of. While consumers are constantly bombarded with reminders of where to cast their rupee-votes (in conspicuous consumption, of course), very little exists in the way of promoting conscious purchasing or more equitable purchasing. The expat lady, therefore, sets a beautiful counter-example.

*Any criticism?* Detractors argue that conscious purchasing will only encourage rural-urban migration and blame street vendors for polluting and overcrowding public space. Fact is: Rural-urban or urban-urban migration is here to stay. And the detractors are better off going after the bigger polluting or congesting fish, not the bottom feeders.

*Debunking quality:* People tend to associate quality with anything that is neat, clean and standardized, but this is sometimes a fallacy. A case in point: A shiny, beautiful eggplant is more likely to have been doused with pesticide than a somewhat shriveled and not so shiny one. A worm can always be removed before the vegetable is cooked; pesticides are harder to remove. Current purchasing ignorance therefore means that the poor farmer who cannot or does not want to use pesticide is neglected at the expense of the richer, I-don’t-care-if-you-die-of-pesticide using farmer who produces for the preferences of the market.

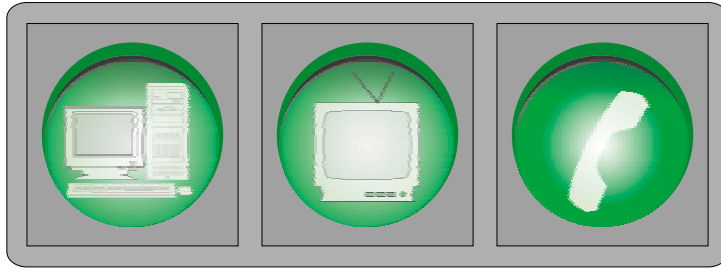
*What are the costs and benefits?* You sacrifice market-dictated quality, warranties and convenience—things you can easily do without often enough, even if this smacks of irrational behavior—as well as risk being called a “miser.” But you end up feeling damn good about yourself.

*Should you practice it?* I once persuaded my foreign friend to try out *tongba*. Today he prefers local liquors to imports. Try conscious purchasing more often, and you may convert for good. The idea is not to do an about turn, but to practice it more often. Not because you have to, but because you want to. Go spread a little dough!

*PS. In the meantime, I may yet muster enough nerve to ask that expat lady why she does her grocery shopping on the footpath.* **N**



ROADSIDE DHABA: Purchasing consciously or conveniently?



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# Crowning Glory

A new beauty queen emerges, tearful but triumphant, at the end of a gruellingly-stultifying-question-&-answer-round-and-embarrassingly-clumsy-song-&-dance-routine session stretched over unendingly stupefying hours

BY KUNAL LAMA

**A**s a slogan, “Miss Nepal 2004” seems to have come a cropper. Instead of shunning Nepal, visitors from all over the world appear to be landing at our doorsteps in increasing numbers. Just into the eighth month of this year, tourist arrivals have already recorded an increment of 31.8 percent over the same period last year. So a big “Boo!” to the Japanese Embassy’s travel advisory to their citizens “... to avoid visiting Nepal unless absolutely necessary.” I’m sure the 28 or so Japanese restaurants in the Valley are breathing huge sighs of relief. Heaps of over-ripening *nattos* and gallons of *miso* soup just idly fermenting away are just too noxious a thought to contemplate. Thank God, we have been spared this virulent variant of a biogas attack. And a very low-bowed *Arigato* to all the Japanese tourists, 863 in July alone, for giving us the benefit of the doubt.

However, for Dabur Vatika, the official sponsors, and Hidden Treasure, the organizers, “Miss Nepal 2004” is going swimmingly, so far. Already into its 10th year, this beauty contest is gathering strength, though still a bit short on stature. Faced with 58 starry-eyed applicants this year, they had the challenging task of whittling down the field to 23 finalists though, inexplicably, only 18 are to be featured for the final event. (Maybe the sponsors and the organizers are the only ones adhering to Minister Pant’s radical “lottery” system. If it were left to Lumbini Overseas, all 58, and many more, would have reached the finals. What a show that would have been!)

Mr. Gajendra Man Rajbhansi, the Managing Director of Hidden Treasure, whose joyful dilemma it has been to select young, beautiful and intelligent women year after year, states “We all support Miss Nepal ... as concerned citizens ... to represent Nepal in the international arena.” The 18 finalists of this year are young alright; beauty has always been in the eye of the beholder; as for intelligent, now let’s have a quick look.

Smiling. Singing. Dancing. Listening to music. Badminton. Basketball. Swimming. Watching football, volleyball and bowling (Bowling?). When I did a quick search on what these beauty-queens-to-be like to do most or are best at, these activities sprang to the top, before I could even say “Google.” It seems we have better chances at the Athens Olympics than at Miss World or Miss Asia-Pacific or Miss Earth, what with all the sporting and athletic talents these ladies possess. Of course, the more mundane interests in children’s welfare, women’s rights, poverty alleviation and social issues were also expressed. How on earth they will manage to achieve all of these lofty ambitions, encumbered as some of

them will be with titles such as “Vatika Fairness Face Pack Miss Beautiful Complex”; “Dabur Lal Toothpaste Miss Beautiful Smile”; “Real Fruit Juice Miss Natural Talent,” beats me. Besides excelling at badminton, basketball and football. And what is the connection, if I may so rudely inquire, between fruit juice and natural talent? (At least the other two sort of made absolute sense.) Especially since most of them displayed their talent, if reports are to be believed, by either singing or dancing. There was no mention of drinking fruit juice till knocked out senseless. Perhaps Mr. Khagendra Sangraula was right in claiming that all the beauty contests are organized with the vested interest of capitalistic societies!

Actually, and personally, I rather support these beauty pageants. Forget the endless and pointless debates about “breaking the shackles



of chauvinism” or “women are not objects and neither are they show-pieces.” If 58 beautiful Nepali girls want to show Nepal and the world that they are equal to the challenge of balancing a diamantéed-tiara delicately on their intricate hairdos (“De Beers Costume Jewellery Miss Perfect Poise”); neatly side-stepping the trailing folds of their voluminous gowns (“Microsoft Search Engine Miss Nifty Navigator”); smiling and waving tirelessly to a gaping crowd of shameless oglers (“Association of Dance & Cabin Restaurants Miss Unfazed & Unfatigued”); managing not to perspire profusely under the intense spotlight (“Rexona Underarm Deodorant Miss Super Cool and Super Dry”); and staying firmly focused on the welfare of the world and its disadvantaged populace (we know these titles), then I say “Go, girls! Go get them! Show them what you are made of!”

So a new beauty queen emerges, tearful but triumphant, at the end of a gruellingly-stultifying-question-&-answer-round-and-embarrassingly-clumsy-song-&-dance-routine session stretched over unendingly stupefying hours. You have worked hard, and now you have won. Wear your crown lightly oh! Miss Nepal 2004. **N**



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# The Book Seller

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI

**T**WENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD Nabaraj Bajagain's story is the stuff movies are made of. A penniless 18-year-old boy comes to Kathmandu from Gorkha, full of inspiration to make it big some day. He struggles into business with help from friends and, a few years later, becomes the owner of one of the country's major publishing and book distribution houses. Eight years on, the Patali Sadak-based company, Buddha Academic Enterprises, is only one of his many projects.

"I feel really odd when someone says I've become very successful," says Bajagain, "In fact, luck has shone since I came to Kathmandu from my village in Marel." He adds, "It was the first time I ever saw a television set in my life, and life here was fantastic."

Bajagain left for Kathmandu immediately after he completed his SLC exam, without even informing his parents. He sensed the toll educating his elder brothers and sisters had taken on his parents' limited finances. So it was time to move, to earn his keep. Like a lot of other starry-eyed kids before him, he left his village with vague dreams of a better tomorrow. Once in Kathmandu, a maternal uncle found him a job in a publishing house where he worked up to 17 hours straight and got big orders. He quit after six months when he was not paid a penny.

That experience motivated Bajagain to start his own business. He borrowed Rs. 10,000 and signed up partners, including two government employees and the son of a former British Army soldier, who was studying at Hira Ratna Campus, just as Bajagain was. The first book they published was Prem Raj Panta's "Handbook of Social Science, Research Methodology."

"We sold them directly to customers and displayed them at libraries without middlemen, as we wanted to avoid paying commissions to booksellers," recalls Bajagain. The book sold 1,200 copies and made Rs. 100,000 for the company. That was just a beginning of Bajagain's success story.



mw/ss





SS/ANU

“Book distribution at that time in Kathmandu was limited to 12 family-run companies, and they hardly allowed a new entrant in their business,” says Bajagain. “Distributors in India believed no other new Nepali company could do better than those already existing.”

Bajagain picked up a little Hindi from Zee TV and went overland to New Delhi with Rs. 2 million of borrowed money to convince the Indian distributors to give him a good price. “Most of the capital required came through a local money lending group of former British Army soldiers’ families in Samakusi at 36 percent interest and 50 percent share in the business,” he adds. His success with the deal was a turning point.



Soon Buddha Academic Enterprises would bid for a major World Bank project. His company won a joint bid; Bajagain’s business recorded a turnover of Rs. 34.5 million while the partner company managed only Rs. 1–1.5 million. “The difference soon built great trust with customers, and even the intellectual crowd at Tribhuvan University

recognized us, as all the books we sent had our company stamp,” adds Bajagain. From that contract, Bajagain was able to pay off his loans as well as record a profit of nearly Rs. 7 million for each of the partners. His partners went on to other businesses; he decided to try his luck in publishing.

“There were only a few Nepali writers, each of whom wrote on 10 different topics,” says Bajagain, “I wanted to change that and focus on specialized writing with quality publishing.” He went directly to well-known university professors to convince them to write. The tactic seems to have paid off. So far he has 65 publications, mostly management books for Tribhuvan and Pokhara universities.

One well-received project is a book on accountancy for 10+2 students, written by 12 well-known writers. “Another one on economics, written by eight writers, is in the pipeline,” he adds. The thickest book he has published is the 795-page “Accounting for Financial Analysis and Planning,” written by Bijay P. Shrestha, Yamesh M. Singh, Narendra Sharma and Khagendra Ojha and edited by Ramesh Pandey.

“I want Nepali books to replace Indian ones,” says Bajagain, “We will compete with quality books written by senior writers and with complete series on a specialized topic.”

Bajagain has more than publishing to keep him busy. Inspired by his own travels, he has entered the travel business with Gurkha’s Encounters Overland Adventure, and he owns a tuition center, the National Academy for Research and Counseling Center. In recent times, his business skills have been tested with his appointment as exclusive distributor for Samsung products to the Royal Nepal Army and Nepal Police.

All this at the age of 25. There’s a world to conquer out there, and at this rate Bajagain might just manage it. **N**

# CITY This Week

## EVENTS



### Violin Maestro

Johar Ali Khan is the son and disciple of Late Ustad Gohar Ali Khan, the violin genius of Indian music. Belonging to the famous Patiala family known for their musical brilliance, Khan is a graded artist of the All India Radio and TV. He specializes in the systematic elaboration of *Raag* melodies and has an innovative approach in presenting *Taan*. He is also well versed in “*Raag Dari*” (purity of Raga) and “*Tant Kari*” (techniques of violin) on the violin. With his good hold over Indian classical music,

he has earned a name for himself worldwide. He also has created innovative and thematic music with artists and groups of international repute.

On the occasion of the 58<sup>th</sup> Independence Day of India, the Indian Embassy is organizing a musical feast featuring this master violinist. The program will be held at the Birendra International Convention Center on August 13 starting from 5:30 p.m.

For passes, contact: The Indian Embassy, Lainchaur, 4410900.

## ART EXHIBITIONS

### CHARCOAL DRAWINGS

This week The Indigo Gallery will be featuring Youdhisthir Maharjan’s drawings. Embodying his mantra—“patience, innovation and liberalism,” this exhibition all in all is the artist’s view of life. Maharjan’s charcoal pencil softly outlines forms on textured paper with a

liberation wed to permanence—charcoal not recognizing the concept of mistake. He uses French cartridge paper, charcoal brushes made of bamboo and soft cotton cloth to apply the powder on larger areas and to create extreme softness and fineness. Ranging from beautiful landscapes to frequent nighttime views of temples and squares—suited to blacks and grays, Maharjan lives the Asian art of inhalation and exhalation. His eyes and hands also grasp the human spirit, and set it out to paper like a moth released from a cupped hand.

At The Indigo Gallery, Naxal. Opening: 11 a.m. on August 14. Till August 29. Gallery Hours: 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. For information: 4411724.



## Tibetan Craft

Antique and replicate fine exquisite Tibetan boxes on display. Susan’s Collection, Kathmandu Guest House, Thamel. Till August 31. For information: 4700632, 9851055435.



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### Films @ Lazimpat Gallery Café

Free admission. All profits from food and drinks will go to PA Orphanage, Nepal.

Time: 7 p.m. For information: 4428549.

### August 10: Kill Bill 1

Kill Bill is Academy Award winning writer-director, Quentin Tarantino's latest venture. The first part of the two-part movie starts with a bloody massacre at a recently retired master assassin's (Uma Thurman) wedding day by a five-member gang led by Bill, her onetime boss and lover. But The Bride survives the brutal attack. She wakes up after a four-year-long coma to wreak vengeance by hunting down the killers in Bill's posse.

### August 12: Kill Bill 2

There were five on her list. Now it's three. O-Ren Ishii and Vernita Green were the first to fall. Now The Bride is out to finish the job by killing Elle Driver, Budd, and last of all, Bill. However, something has thrown off her plans a bit. Her daughter (whom she was pregnant with as she was getting married) is still alive. What affect will this have on her quest for



vengeance is unclear, but the question is, will The Bride complete her ultimate goal, to kill Bill? **Cast:** Uma Thurnam, David Carradine, Lucy Liu, Daryl Hannah, Michael Madsen, Michael Parks, Bo Svenson.

### Cine-Club

Movie: L'627 (1992). At Alliance Francaise, Tripureshwore. Free admission. Date: August 15. Time: 2 p.m. For information: 4241163, 4242832.

### Celebrating 25 years

Choo Choo Train: Kids carnival, frolic-filled fun. At Shangri-la Hotel, Lazimpat. Date: August 14. For information: 44212999.

### Martin Chautari

Opens discussions at Martin Chautari, Prasuti Griha Marga 509, Thapathali. Participation is

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Marg. Everyday. Time: 12-3 p.m. For information: 4230890.

### Executive Lunch

Executive Lunch available for Rs. 170. At Bhanchha Ghar Restaurant, Kamaladi. For information: 4225172.

### Summit BBQ

Barbeque with vegetarian specials. At Summit Hotel. Every Friday. For information: 5521810.

### Continental delicacies

Chef's special. At Keyman Royal Saino Resturant, Durbar

### Fantastic Fridays

A musical night with lip-smacking food. Jazz and club music by various bands. At the Club, Bhatbhateni. Every Friday. Time: 7-11 p.m. No Cover Charge.

### Electronic Open Air Party

Chill out garden. House, Hard, Progressive and Psychedelic Trance with the Funky Buddha Psy. Club. At the Funky Buddha Bar & Cafe (Old Scores Bar). Every Friday. Time: 7:30 p.m. to 6 a.m. Free Entrance. For information: 4411991.

open to all. For information: 4256239, 4240059.

### This week at Martin Chautari:

**AUGUST 10**  
MANGALBARE DISCUSSION  
Topic: Legal fight of journalists against illegal detention. Pundits: Vimarjun Acharya, advocate and Pradeep Ghimire, CEHURDES. Time: 5 p.m.

**AUGUST 12**  
MEDIA DISCUSSION

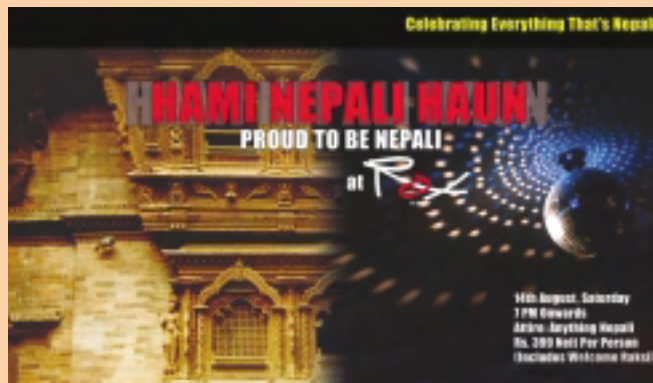
Film @ Chautari: Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11. Time: 3 p.m.

**AUGUST 13**  
YOUTH DISCUSSION  
Youth Initiative in collaboration with Martin Chautari organizes Youth Discussion Series. Time: 3 p.m.

**AUGUST 15**  
POLITICAL DISCUSSION  
Topic: Dalit Movement in Far-western Region. Pundit: Ganesh Bi.Ka. Time: 3 p.m.

# HAMI NEPALI HAUN

PartyNepal.com is the ultimate guide to partying for all party fanatics. PartyNepal caters to the young generation that is forever looking for a party. From salsa dances to techno beats, PartyNepal has done it all. Now, PartyNepal has come up with something different. Unlike parties with young people grooving to the latest western music, "Hami Nepali Haun" will be a night to celebrate us being Nepali. With the theme, "Proud to be a Nepali," this party is organized with the sole purpose of conveying the message that no matter what we do we are still Nepalis. Many Nepali celebrity guests will be present during the program.



Partygoers will be served with local *raksi* as a welcome drink. Even the decor at the Rox will be completely Nepali and Nepali wardrobe is encouraged for the night.

At the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency. Date: August 14. Time: 7 p.m. Tickets: 399 per person, includes welcome drink. For information: 9851068871.

### Dunga Daud

Dunga Daud—A Corporate Challenge, is a downriver rafting challenge between corporate houses from Sundarijal to Gokarna on August 14. Ten to 15 teams will be competing in this timed race. The event, promoted by the Nepal Tourism Board, organized by the Nepal River Conservation Trust (NRCT) and co-organised by the Nepal Association of Rafting Agents (NARA), is aimed at sensitizing the corporate houses to the sport and also providing a welcome break by taking time to enjoy and celebrate the river. For information: 4435207.

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# DECLINE IN READING? NOT QUITE

The habit of reading is actually growing in Nepal, but much better promotion and marketing strategies are necessary to keep up with demand

BY AJIT BARAL

During a recent NTV interview with Bijaya Kurmar, essayist Kamal Mani Dixit said that the reading habit in Nepal is on the decline. He offered the case of Madan Pursakar Pustakalaya, which remains empty most of the time, as evidence. Like Dixit, many others believe that television, the Internet, movies and videogames have cut into our reading time.

Is it actually so? Apparently not.

None of the booksellers in Kathmandu we talked to said that Nepali readers are moving away from the stores. One bookseller said that if Madan Pursakar Pustakalaya remains empty most of the time, it is because it limits access and prohibits photocopying materials.

He says, "Go to the Nepal-India Cultural Center Library and you will know whether book reading is on the increase or not." The Nepal-India Center's library may be the busiest in Nepal. On average 160 persons visit the library every day. The library at the British Council is also very popular, despite a Rs. 4,000 annual fee, and the public reading room and collection at Keshar Mahal bustles all afternoon.

Ask A. B. Shrestha, proprietor of Educational Book Shop at Jamal, if reading is on the decline in Nepal and he will eagerly point to 9,000 copies of Samrat Upadhyay's "Arresting God in Kathmandu" already sold. "Nine thousand isn't a small number in a tiny country like Nepal," he adds. No, it isn't. But "Arresting God" would probably have not enjoyed such a large readership if it hadn't broken into the halloved pages of The New York Times Review of Books and hadn't received wide attention by the mass media in Nepal and the United States.

"My father wouldn't have read 'Arresting God in Kathmandu' if it were

published 20 years back," says Maheshwor Acharya, a bibliophile.

Yadhav Dhungana, who heads Sajha Prakashan, the largest publishing house in the country, also doesn't think that the readership is on the decline. "The print-run of our titles used to be 1,100 copies, but now that has gone up. BP Koirala's story collections now have a print run in excess of 3,000 copies," he says.

"The population has grown. The literacy rate has gone up. Schools have started to focus on outside learning as well. It is therefore only natural for the readership to rise," said Madhav Gautam of Himalaya Book Stall, Dillibazaar. "But has it grown at the same rates as population or literacy?

Maybe not," he says.

One reason is that book marketing is still in its infancy here. "None of our booksellers send their books for





review,” says Gautam, requesting a porter to come to his store to get a review copy of his latest publication. Dhungana, the Sajha chief, acknowledges that they don’t send books for review. Even though reviews are the best way for news of new books to reach readers, it’s still uncommon.

In 1978, Sajha published “The Road to Nowhere,” one of the best books to have come out of Nepal. It had a print-run of only 1,100 copies but hasn’t sold out even after 26 years. That should shame our publishing industry.

“Sajha isn’t concerned about promoting and marketing its books,” says Kamal Prakash Malla, writer and a retired professor of Tribhuvan University. Many other Sajha books are also languishing.

Sajha published Mani Dixit’s novel “Come Tomorrow” more than two decades back; it still hasn’t sold out. But 500 copies of the same novel printed by an Indian publishing house two years ago sold out quickly.

Education Book Shop’s Shrestha says that there is a need for an aggressive me-



dia campaign to promote books. A hundred copies of Hillary Clinton’s “Living History” got sold from his store alone, perhaps due to the trickle-down effect of the media hype in the west over the book.

“A strong tie-up between publishers and the media doesn’t exist in Nepal, as it does in India or in the west, so books get very little space in Nepali newspapers,” says writer Manjushree Thapa. Nepali publishers seldom organize reading sessions and book-talk programs, both time-tested promotional tools. Booksellers point out that publishers

who are also retailers don’t send their publications to other bookstores to avoid competition.

It’s been more than five years since the National Association of Book Publishers and Sellers was established to promote Nepali books. Like so many other organizations, the association is afflicted with the little-work-but-too-much-talk syndrome. Booksellers complain that it is hardly doing much to promote books. One bookseller

went so far as to claim that the organization is being used for personal gains, referring to some association members who are now on a foreign trip.

Weak marketing and shortsightedness have dampened the Nepali book market, but this can be fixed. Cooperation among publishers and booksellers backed up by strong promotion campaigns will fuel the increasing interest in books. People like Dixit are mistaken to think that interest in books has declined. Quite the contrary, as publishers of good books who market them well will find out. ■



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# Saved By The Bell

Athletes and fans got a break last week when the Rana and Singh factions patched up their dispute over the Nepal Olympic Committee. Let's hope the feud is really over. Nepal needs good, professional sports management.

**BY SUDESH SHRESTHA**

**E**arly this year, the thrill of victory was tarnished for one Nepali medal winners at the South Asian Federation (SAF) Games. Standing on the podium should have been the highpoint of his life, but the bitter controversy within the Nepali athletic community preyed on his mind. The athlete, a ninth SAF Games medalist in Islamabad, says that "the Nepali contingent, despite wearing a cloak of unity, remained deeply divided, especially the officials." He adds, "Naturally the players were filled with tension and uncertainty."

Fortunately, his fellow athletes participating in the 28th Olympiad in the Greek capital Athens will be free to compete without having to face the same psychological burden.

Thanks to the timely intervention of the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Nepal Olympic Committee (NOC) and the National Sports Council (NSC) have buried a long-festering feud. On the eve of the Olympics, NOC's Rumka Shumsher Rana and NSC's Kishore Bahadur Singh have made peace over who gets to control Nepal's own Olympic committee. But the peace may have well come at a high price and could at best be temporary.

The ministry's compromise was simple enough: bring in all the disgruntled members of either faction on board the reconstituted NOC. And the result: A jumbo official contingent will possibly be in Athens. "The decision looks

professional enough, which keeps in mind the well-being of the athlete who are sweating it out on the court," says Olympian Sangina Baidya, Nepal's only medal prospect. "It comes as a breath of fresh air for athletes."

That fresh air seemed to have come out of smoke-filled rooms. It took two long meetings on the first two days of August to break the ice. "The first meeting lasted for over three hours, and we convinced the two groups to accept a compromise for a single committee," says Minister for Education and Sports Bimalendra Nidhi. According to him, both parties were asked to propose the names for the new committee. After a

five-hour-long joint meeting, the two sides came to a consensus for a 37-member committee. "The ministry ratified it on Monday (August 2)," says Nidhi. "The controversy surrounding the Olympic movement in Nepal is all over now," he adds. "Nepal will participate under one Olympic committee."

Just as earlier, Rana heads the new committee but the Sports Council member-secretary, Singh assumes the all-important position of general secretary. Insiders say this was one of the key sticking points during the negotiations. While neither party would divulge any details, sources at the ministry say the Singh faction traded formal recognition of the Nepal Olympic Committee (NOC) by the Sports Council for four key positions in the reconvened body.

Dhruba Bahadur Pradhan, who was general secretary in the past committee, has become the first vice-president. Siddheshwor Kumar Singh and Mohan Rai, both from the Singh faction, share the vice-presidency with Dhruba Kumar Timilsina and Indra Bahadur Serchan. Purushottam Shrestha is the treasurer.

Both Rana and Singh, who have indulged in the bitter battle of attrition for over a year, seemed happy that the compromise was possible at all. "The conflict is behind us now," says Rana. "We'll work in unison." Rana says he will now notify both the International Olympic Committee and Olympic Council of Asia of the amicable settlement to the dispute. And Singh echoes the sentiments: "Both of us have now agreed on a common goal, to strive for the development of sports in Nepal. That I think is more important than anything else at the moment." **Fingers crossed. N**



Rumka Shumsher Rana

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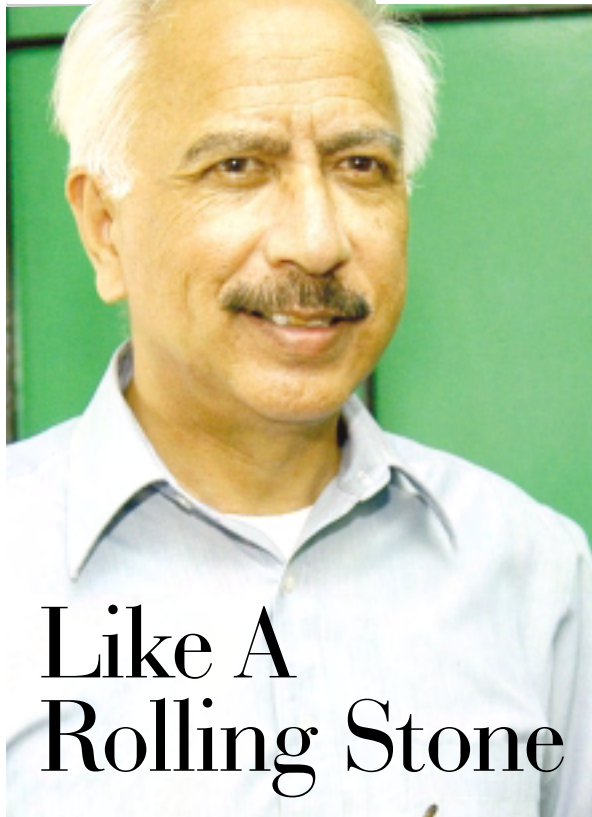
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# Like A Rolling Stone

By his own admission, **KEDAR BHAKTA MATHEMA** is a rolling stone. He has been ambassador to Japan, vice-chancellor of Tribhuvan University, a researcher—among other things on why the SLC failure rates are so high. Mathema is in the news again: as the winner of the newly instituted Hem Bahadur Malla Recognition Prize, named after a management executive at Salt Trading Corporation. The award carries a purse of Rs. 100,000 for his excellence in “academic coordination.” What is the rolling stone going to do with the money? You guessed it right. “I will use the money for some educational purpose,” says Mathema, insisting that the honor was totally unexpected.

# Waste-free Valley

Meet **ASHA KAJI**, the newest arrival to the Valley. Askai, as he is popularly known, is an exemplary citizen, intelligent, and always concerned about the environmental hazards. This farmer is on the move to promote waste recycling. “Why throw out waste? Convert it into money,” Askai urges the public. He is the new mascot for a waste-free Kathmandu Valley. Askai was on the run all of last week, meeting citizens in all five municipalities inside the Valley- Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Kirtipur and Madhyapur Thimi. Let’s hope they heed his message.



# MALLA'S MIX

**SINDHU MALLA** of “*Sasuralima*” fame has turned the tables on her fans. After a long list of folk hits, Malla’s debut album “*Kaha*” is a collection of pop and modern songs. The remixed version of Pradip Rimal’s “*Jhaljhali Aakhama*” is the prime attraction. But she’s not the one to rest on her laurels. Just a few days after her first release, her second offering “*Chitikkai Bhachhu Re*,” a collection of *Teej* songs, also hit the market with a bang. Malla is taking new trails alright, but still continuing what she is best at: the folk songs.

## Vacancies

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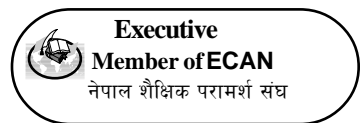
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# The Taxi Driver

**K**athmandu commuters have put up with much, but the traffic jam on the afternoon of July 29 was a new low. Traffic in Kathmandu came to a complete standstill in a unique protest as taxi drivers, members of the Nepal Drivers' Union, blocked roads with their vehicles. Commuters, who were stuck for hours in the jam, are still furious. But the drivers are full of



SS/MS

praise for the man behind the protests, **Ganga Ram Khadgi**, head of the union, who highlighted their long-standing cause against what they call police atrocities. Khadgi talked to Satish Jung Shahi of **Nation Weekly** about police behavior towards the drivers, problems within the taxi business and their extreme protest.

**Do the police treat the taxi drivers as badly as you have been claiming?**

Definitely. They book us for worse traffic offences than we have committed and hand over the chits to us after seizing our license. We are fined anywhere from Rs. 200 to Rs. 5,000 for minor offences that would be fined Rs. 25. They force us to bribe them even when we want to perform our duties honestly. There are many cases where drivers have given up their license just because they don't want to face the police again.

**But the taxi drivers are also cheating honest customers with their doctored meters...**

We have been protesting against these electronic meters since they were introduced, saying they can be easily doctored. That is why we want the government to break the exclusivity of fixing meters and allow us to do it ourselves. The present meter seals distributed by the government are not strong either, and when they break, fingers are pointed at us only. The government is equally responsible.

**Will that not mean that you will be playing both the police and the policed?**

Look, there are a lot of other factors that make taxi drivers cheat customers.

There are no parking facilities and the laws are biased against the taxi driver. That law makes us constantly report to the authorities even when renewing our road permit. You have to also remember that each driver has to pay at least Rs. 800 to the taxi owner, whether they earn that much or not. We have repeatedly asked the *Naaptaul Bibhaag* to take measures to control cheating. Their own people run most of the taxis, and it is they who are cheating. There is a mafia running the taxi business right from the top. That was why we were protesting.

**But was a chakka jam that paralyzed Kathmandu the right thing to do?**

It wasn't our plan at all. Initially we were only rallying from Sinamangal to Koteshwore, when police interfered and

**We are fined anywhere from Rs. 200 to Rs. 5,000 for minor offences**

beat up some of our drivers. You have to also remember that there are around 2,500 members in our union, and I don't deny some of them might have been motivated by wrong intentions. The government, on the other hand, knew the repercussions the chakka jam could create. They turned a deaf ear to our demands. But it was unfortunate the chakka jam took place.

**You also want to remove the rule on compulsory seat belts and identity cards?**

There are cases where drivers have been jailed for the whole day when their front-seat passenger wasn't wearing a seat belt. We have agreed that the driver's duty is to make the passenger aware of the seatbelt rule, but he shouldn't be punished for the passenger's wrongdoing. Regarding the identity card, we weren't against the system at all. We only wanted it to be designed to make it easy for drivers to drive different taxis. The present identity card doesn't allow that. On police atrocities, the Valley's Senior Superintendent of Police Surendra Pal has given his mobile number to contact him if such situations arise. He has assured that all uniformed policemen unnecessarily troubling taxi drivers will be punished. A committee has been formed to follow up on all our demands.

**There are claims that the Maoists have infiltrated Kathmandu as taxi drivers?**

That's not true. We are all laborers. We earn our living by working hard. We honestly hope that peace will prevail very soon. Many of our taxis have been damaged by the Maoists, and violence has put our lives in danger. We do not want to associate ourselves with such activities as being carried out by the Maoists.

**Will you resort to another crippling chakka jam again if the demands aren't met?**

We are well aware that the chakka jam can harm the daily lives of the innocent. For us, it was a compulsion. I will have to sit with my colleagues and decide how to move ahead if our demands aren't met. I will do as they decide. **N**



## Paeans And Platitudes

BY AJIT BARAL

Very few biographies have been written in Nepal, but no one deserved a good one more than Lain Singh Bangdel, Nepal's foremost painter, writer, humanist and art historian. We should be thankful to Don Messerschmidt and Bangdel's daughter, Dina Bangdel, for embarking on the long and arduous journey of writing the life story of one of Nepal's most loved personalities.

The book is divided into two parts: Bangdel's Life and Bangdel's Art. Starting from the migration of Bangdel's grandfather to Darjeeling, the writers sketch out Bangdel's childhood, his schooling and love for drawing. Bangdel's travels, first to Calcutta for art studies and later to Paris and his associations with eminent people like Satyajit Ray, Picasso, Braque, the Indonesian artist Affandi and BP Koirala take up much of the "Life" section. Koriala's comment, "Bangdel-ji, you must come to Nepal," and late King Mahendra's exhortations finally persuaded him to return, uncertainly, to Kathmandu and led to his long tenure at the Royal Nepal Academy.

The second part deals exclusively with Bangdel's work in literature, art and art history. He was equally gifted in all three. Bangdel heralded social realism in Nepali with his novels "Outside the Country," "Maternal Home" and "The Cripple's Friend." He translated the world's greatest short stories for the benefit of Nepali readers, and he wrote travelogues. He was in the forefront of the beginnings of Nepali modernism and worked in varied styles and forms, greatly influencing the next generation of artists. His research on Nepal's ancient art and architecture is extensive and unsurpassed. The book "Stolen Images of Nepal" helped awaken

the world to the theft of ancient Nepali art and has been responsible for the return of some prominent items.

After Bangdel's death in October 2002, newspaper stories portrayed Bangdel as the central figure in Nepali modernism. The book's epilogue tackles but fails to answer the contentious issue: Was Bangdel really the "father of modern Nepali art"?

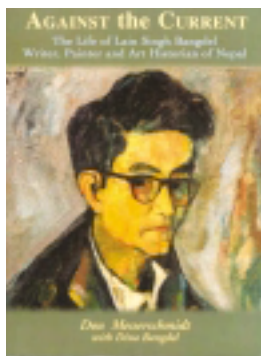
The ten-page reference section shows that the biography is written with some academic rigor, but it is also riddled with shortcomings. Bangdel's daughter, Dina, with whom Messerschmidt wrote the book, doesn't appear in the biography. Nor does Bangdel's wife, Manu, except for a description of Bangdel's stay in Paris and London. These omissions make the canvas of Bangdel's life seem unfinished.

The writers take what Bangdel says at face value and don't feel the need to corroborate from other sources. They say that many improvements took place during his stints as chancellor and member of the Royal Nepal Academy, but details are conspicuously absent.

One comes across references throughout the book that suggest that Bangdel was insecure about his Nepali identity. Why? Was it a mere figment of his imagination, or was there something more than what met the eye? The writers fail to dig into the

psychology of his insecurity. The writers say that Bangdel was disillusioned by the deposition of Prime Minister BP Koirala, but they fail to explain why he later came to Nepal at the request of the very King who deposed him. There are many such issues with the book.

This biography portrays Bangdel as if he were cut out in gold. He wasn't, surely. We need a better-rounded biography that brings out other shades of the man, his life and his influence on Nepali art. That would be an interesting read. **N**



### AGAINST THE CURRENT

(The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel)

**Author:** Don Messerschmidt (with Dina Bangdel)

Orchid Press (Bangkok)

**Price:** Rs. 850

**Pages:** 236

# Book Mark

After months of training for the 18 Miss Nepal participants, the curtains have finally fallen on the Dabur Vatika Miss Nepal 2004. Those on stage who were beamed through national television live were selected out of total 58 applications in two different stages. Though Kathmandu still dominated the demography of the participants, there were still some from far off as Parbhat, Dhangadi, Nepalgunj and Dharan. Nation Weekly met with some of the participants in the International Club, where they were attending their training since July 5, to inquire about their reading habits. Here is what they had to say:

**1. Sarah Gurung:** "Sands of Time" by Sidney Sheldon is her favorite and she is currently reading "Women on Power."

**2. Dhartee Sunwar:** "Chicken Soup for the Soul: A Christmas Treasury" is her favorite and she is currently reading "Harry Potter & the Goblet of Fire" by J. K. Rowling.

**3. Shrismita Amatya:** "Rage of Angels" by Sidney Sheldon is her favorite and she is currently reading "Stranger in the Mirror."

**4. Shailaja Basnet:** "Daddy" by Danielle Steele is her favorite and she is currently reading "Tell Me Your Dreams" by Sidney Sheldon.

**5. Suzan Gurung:** "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho is her favorite and she is currently reading "Congo" by Michael Crichton.

**6. Arati Anand:** "Muna Madan" by Laxmi Prasad Devkota is her favorite.

**7. Sukriti Baskota:** "Mass of Deception" published by Mills and Boon is her favorite and she is currently reading "Sands of Time" by Sidney Sheldon.

**8. Mahima Bhattachan:** "The Diary of Anne Frank" by Anne Frank is her favorite and she is currently reading "Chicken Soup for the Soul."

**9. Bimina Ranjit:** "Ladies Coupe" by Anita Nair is her favorite and she is currently reading "Eleventh Hour."

**10. Payal Shakya:** "Bend in the Road" by Nicholas Sparks is her favorite and she is currently reading "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban" by J. K. Rowling. **N**



# The Everest Call

**T**he government is expected to announce an important verdict any day. It's been a high-stakes battle: Two young Sherpa climbers are fighting it out over who holds the speed climbing record for Everest. It all began on May 21 when Pemba Dorjee climbed the world's tallest mountain in a record eight hours and 10 minutes. And Lakpa Gyelu, whose previous record had been bettered by more than two and a half hours, decided to question the claim.

Controversies have always been the stuff of climbing legends. Mountaineering successes, after all, have launched some extremely successful careers and made simple people instant celebrities. Tenzing Norgay, Edmund Hillary, Reinhold Messner have now become household names.

But the mother of all climbing controversies dates back to 1924. Did George Leigh Mallory and his young climbing partner Andrew Irvine conquer Everest, 30 years before Tenzing and Hillary did? The 1924 Everest expedition has come to light particularly after 1999 when the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition discovered Mallory's body on the North Face of Everest. Though there are no clinching evidences to insist that the Britons had made it to the summit, researchers have presented stacks of circumstantial evidence to argue that they had.

Fresh controversies have erupted over the achievements of two of the world's most famous living climbers. The achievements of Maurice Herzog and Reinhold Messner could get irreparably tarnished over charges of foul play. Herzog became a hero in post-war France after the ascent of Annapurna in 1950. He was the leader of the first expedition to scale an "eight-thousander" (above 8,000 meters).

Perhaps the most accomplished climber of all time, Messner, now 59, began his career in 1970 with the conquest of Nanga Parbat. His climbing partner and brother, Gunther died during the descent down an unexplored route. Other members of the climbing team are now saying Messner was more concerned about personal glory than sav-

ing his sick brother. Messner insists Gunther was swept by an avalanche. Like Herzog in the 50s, Messner would become an international celebrity over time. He now has several firsts to his credit: first to climb Everest without oxygen, first to scale all 14 eight-thousanders, first to traverse Antarctica without the aid of machines or dogs.

The accusations against Herzog are as damaging. Very few know that his climbing partners Louis Lachnenal, Lionel Terray and Gaston Rebuffat were far more accomplished climbers than Herzog, an executive at a rubber company in 1950. In a bid to save their frost-bitten team leader Herzog, Terray and Rebuffat never made it to the summit. Worse, before leaving for Nepal, Herzog made all the members of his team sign a contract that put a five-year moratorium on writing about the Annapurna expedition. Herzog's own "Annapurna," which is laced with all the drama of the 1950 ascent and sufferings thereafter, became a mountaineering classic. It has sold more than 11 million copies to date. Herzog has been mayor of Chamonix, minister of youth and sports in the government headed by Charles de Gulle and the CEO for several companies. It's only in recent years people have begun to question whether his historic Annapurna conquest was all that heroic.

Ever since Tenzing Norgay's success in 1950, the conquest Everest has stirred the imagination of every single Nepali. And to many young Shrepas, the call of the world's tallest mountain and the attendant stardom is too strong to resist. One of them best answered the question for us: "It is the recognition that comes with the Everest success," says Ang Karma Sherpa, president of the Nepal Mountaineering Federation. "It is the ultimate." Now part of the fact-finding team that is looking into the latest Everest controversy, Ang Karma is trying his best to make sure that it remains that way.

Akhilesh Upadhyay, Editor

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