



Times

NEPAL'S TOP NEWSPAPER

EXCLUSIVE

Millennium summit

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala is taking time off from the squabbling within his own party to visit the United Nations and Europe starting 3 September. Sources close to Koirala say he has patched things up with Krishna Prasad Bhattarai for now.

He leaves Kathmandu Sunday for Brussels on his way to New York where he is scheduled to attend the Millennium Summit of the United Nations. On his way home, Koirala will stop in Geneva, where he will meet Nepali ambassadors in European capitals. He will also meet the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata.

Uma-Maheshwor

The 12th century image of Uma Maheshwor is back in Nepal, though not to Wotol in Dhulikhel, from where it was stolen 18 years ago.

On Monday, Marianne Yaldiz the director of the Museum fur Indische Kunst (Museum of Indian Art) in Berlin handed over Uma Maheshwor to the Patan Museum, where it is to stay for the time being.

The 62-cm-tall limestone sculpture was lifted in 1982 and has remained at the Berlin museum since 1985.

\$ stable for now

The US dollar, which appreciated steeply against the Nepali rupee in July and August may have stabilised, at least for the short term. The assumption is that India's central bank won't let the rupee slip further. The dollar which traded for IRs 43.50 in early January (NRs 68.15), rose to IRs 44.58 (NRs 69.90) on 31 May. Further appreciation against the Indian rupee pushed the exchange rate in Nepal to Rs 70.16 in June. The greenback is now exchanging at NRs 72.55.

"Earlier interventions by the Reserve Bank of India were soft, like using state banks to sell dollars," a Nepal Rastra Bank economist told us.

MAO™

THE DESIGNER REVOLUTION

Even radical leftists say Nepal's parliamentary democracy gives enough space for all parties to use the ballot instead of the bullet. But the Maoists believe in a shortcut to power.

BINOD BHATTARAI

Mao nostalgia is at its peak. The English National Opera staged Mao in the London Coliseum this summer. In the land of his birth, Mao remains in a mausoleum and his legacy is marked by a boom in tourist memorabilia.

Here in the mid-hills and forests of Nepal, where Mao's self-styled proteges are carrying on as if the Long March never ended, a People's War being waged in the name of the farmer's son from Hunan has claimed 1,450 lives in the past four years.

On 23 August, three days after Prachanda announced a new "strategic defence" offensive, Maoists hacked to death a primary school teacher in Gorkha—not the first cold-blooded murder of a non-combatant. The same day a group burnt two buses belonging to the Modern Indian School in Kathmandu.

The police say they are now more prepared for Maoist raids, their casualty rates have come down, and they have sometimes even overpowered rebels in daytime encounters. "They seem to be under pressure now," a high-level police source told us. "They've promised fresh attacks but we are prepared."

Nepal's Maoists borrow their military tactics from Mao's treatises and from practical applications by Peru's Sendero Luminoso. Shyam Shrestha, editor of left-leaning *Mulyankan* monthly and a politburo member of one communist faction that was a forerunner of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), calls this "mechanical materialism"—cloning the little red book.

"In China, guerrilla war had become an objective necessity because of other factors such as the Japanese

occupation. In Nepal the so-called people's war has grown out of the party's 'subjective' judgement," says Shrestha.

Mao's sharpest formulation was to "encircle the cities from the countryside". The core of Prachanda's strategy is to build rural base areas (*adhar ilakas*) and hold on to them. Mao said: "Pit one against ten, pit ten against a hundred". Prachanda has been doing precisely that with human waves supporting guerrillas during strikes. Mao's army replenished its supplies with arms captured from the enemy: our Maoists do the same. Mao advised making use of the "intervals between campaigns to rest, train and consolidate troops". The lull in violence since early June may have been just that. Mao said the rest periods should not be very long and sure enough Nepali Maoists like to remind us they're still around.

On the other hand, Mao's revolutionary war was waged in a "semi-feudal, semi-colonial" China. Maoist leader Prachanda says he is fighting the same forces, even though he has not yet defined the exact nature of the "colonialism". Mao recognised the army as the chief component of the state's political power and hence regarded it as the enemy. Nepali Maoists are fighting a largely civilian police.

So far, Maoists have been careful not to hit the army. The Royal Nepal Army is currently building a road from Salyan to Musikot right through an area of the worst violence. The Maoists and the army don't bother each other.

If Prachanda has been executing Maoism by the book, it would be instructive to find out what Mao said would be the next step. Shyam Shrestha says the Maoists have a three-phase plan: strategic defensive, strategic



Adapted from poster for the opera, Nixon in China

balance and strategic offensive.

"They're now in the sixth phase of the defensive that is aimed at keeping the bases they have built in Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan and Jajarkot," Shrestha explains. The "defensive" strategy calls for intensifying propaganda in cities, which may explain the attacks on unsuspecting targets.

So far, the Maoists seem to have an upper hand. Time is on their side, and they strike when they want to and where they want to. Riding a wave of violence, they've taken a shortcut from a leftist fringe to the centre of Nepal's mainstream political discourse in four quick years. "They would not have done as much within such a short time if they had gone through normal political processes," says Sridhar Khatri, professor of political science at Tribhuvan University. "They took the high-risk, quick-rewards road."

Successive weak governments, political infighting and poor law and order since 1995 gave Maoists political space and even support, allowing them to grow into a force to be reckoned with. Their violence bred counter-violence from the state, which bolstered Maoist support among peasants caught in the crossfire.

Aside from terror-tactics against "class enemies", Maoists have also been

playing the hearts-and-minds game far more effectively than the Police in the "base areas". They have collectivised agriculture, set up co-operative banking, given out low-interest loans, banned alcohol and tobacco and emphasised gender equality.

But there are many who believe that this is a cynical application of the Mao dictum that the end justifies the means. "The 'people's war' seems to be an euphemism for extortionist activity and local-level vendetta," says Dipak Gyawali, a political economist. "In war, you hit targets of strategic significance. How does hacking school teachers and burning school buses further the revolution?"

The Maoists say they have been fighting by the rules of the Geneva Convention, and want the police to do the same. "If both sides abide by the rules there are certain things they cannot do," says Gopal Siwakoti Chintan, a human rights activist. "They cannot murder, torture, take hostages, commit outrages upon personal dignity and execute anyone without proper judicial guarantees. That is why dialogue is urgent, even if only to agree on the rules of engagement." ♦

**CONGRESS-K,
CONGRESS-G**
Editorial
page 2

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NEPALI
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NEPAL'S TOP NEWSPAPER



News that matters to people who matter





CONGRESS-K OR CONGRESS-G?

There they go again. K.P. Bhattarai and G.P. Koirala are back at it. These two fellows first create a crisis, and then they busy themselves trying to resolve it. It almost looks like they do it on purpose—so they don't get bored in their old age. It would all have been hugely entertaining if only it were not so dangerous for the nation. Chronic squabbling in the ruling party has brought governance to a standstill.

The Maoists, who had taken a monsoon break in the leech season, seem to be capitalising now on this disarray at the top. The Prime Minister promised MPs of insurgency-affected districts that he would ensure them safe passage back home for the Dasain festival. The Maoists responded with a fresh offensive last week. They chose soft targets to make their presence felt in the capital: setting school buses on fire, lobbing pipe bombs while police wives were having a function, and scaring the Home Minister with another home-made bomb. Elsewhere in the kingdom, they used human shields of women and children to loot police posts, a not-so-glorious technique for a "People's War".

It is doubtful whether such acts of arson and mayhem actually further the cause of "revolution". Even so, the Maoists are not solely to blame for this spurt of recklessness. Prime Minister Koirala, the chief keeper of law, and Sher Bahadur Deuba, the man entrusted with the task of talking to the Maoists, are more interested in undermining each other's influence in their own party than in engaging the rebels. And, as far as they are concerned, the country may as well go to pot.

This ugly grab for power going on at the centre is not the only cause of Nepal's woes, but it certainly looms large. The Maoists are merely taking advantage of it. The ruling party's unruliness is exacerbating the nation's crises, including the Maoist one. With a reshuffle in the air, ministers vacillate, senior bureaucrats obfuscate and the general administration of the country has been left to minor officials left to their own devices. It is a wonder that this man-made disaster (and it is made by men) has not yet completely crippled the nation.

But it will if the mess is allowed to prolong. The Nepali Congress chieftains have to decide: are they going to go on like this or just get it over with and split the party? Patch up or break up.

There is nothing wrong with political parties splitting, they do it all the time. The UML and the RPP both did it. (Some of them even come back together later.) Leaders of the Nepali Congress like to boast that theirs is a mass-based party. It appears to have become a mess-based one. Were it not the ruling party, none of us would have bothered about their internal affairs. But the collective destiny of 23 million people is hanging in the air while the cronies of these two septuagenarians play out their proxy battles.

It is time the infighting is brought to a logical and swift conclusion. The party should formalise its split and bifurcate into a Congress G and a Congress K.

ROADS WORST TRAVELLED

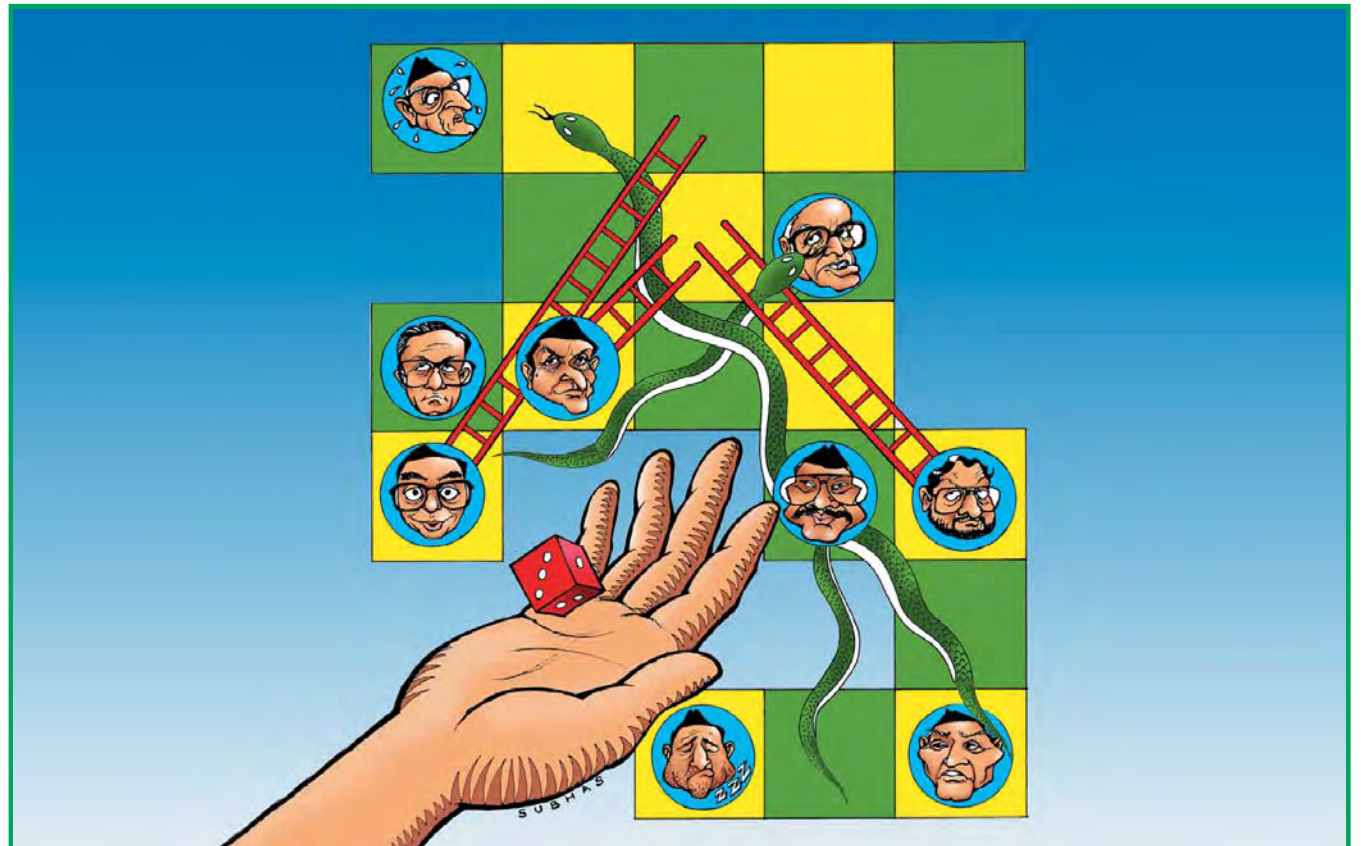
Kathmandu has 10 percent of the country's total road network, but more than half of all the cars in Nepal drive on them. That ratio partly explains the condition of what are euphemistically called "roads" in Kathmandu. The term "pothole" is inadequate to describe the craters that dot the long narrow space between walls in this city. These turn into major lakes in the monsoon that could swallow up a Kursk-class submarine.



The powers that be drive around in their Sports Utility Vehicles, most of them imported duty-free by flaunting the privileges conferred upon them by the last hung parliament. Come to think of it, the honourable people's reps should not be blamed for having chosen all-terrain vehicles. You do need these off-roaders to negotiate Kathmandu's motocross surfaces.

On rainy nights, the roads turn into courses on which participants of the Paris-Dakar Race could get some useful practice. During what is left of the monsoons, pray. Our phobia is not only of Pajeros, Prados and Piranhas but also of falling into the one of these orifices. Small wonder then that our national protector is the Lord of Animals. He rides Nandi, a sturdy bull. Lord Pashupatinath had the right idea: a bull is probably the most suitable mode of transport for Kathmandu. Four legs good, four wheels bad.

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STATE OF THE STATE

by C.K.LAL

When loyalty hurts royalty more



A healthy debate between the two can only help a balanced view prevail over extremist postures.

There is the story of a loyal monkey that used a sword to cut a fly troubling his monarch. As in most such tales, the actual event in this story could be a trifle exaggerated in order to make readers learn an easy lesson: blind loyalty hurts.

Loyals like to believe that they protect royals. "Long live the King" is a line from our national anthem, so there is nothing wrong in chanting it. The trouble is those who chant it loudest are sometimes the ones who are doing royalty the most harm. And for them anyone who doesn't chant in the right way, or loud enough, is somehow less loyal.

The second type of loyalist is the one who ends up hurting the real long-term interests of the monarchy without actually meaning to do so. This type lives in the glory of the past, and refuses to accept that things have changed. In the old days reality could be manufactured, and they think it can still be done. Unfortunately, airbrushing history doesn't work anymore. And sure enough, it is because of loyalists like these that Paras has come back to haunt the Palace. Last week we were greeted by the unprecedented sight of royalty being brought in effigy to the gates of the palace, accompanied by a *kharpan* carrying more than half a million signatures. When the silent speak, the sound is too loud to be ignored.

On the other side are the too-clever-by-half, self-professed protégés of Mao Zedong who keep raising the bogey of republicanism. It is an empty threat: absolute monarchs invite the wrath of their subjects, citizens in a constitutional monarchy actually value that institution too much to be

disrespectful towards it.

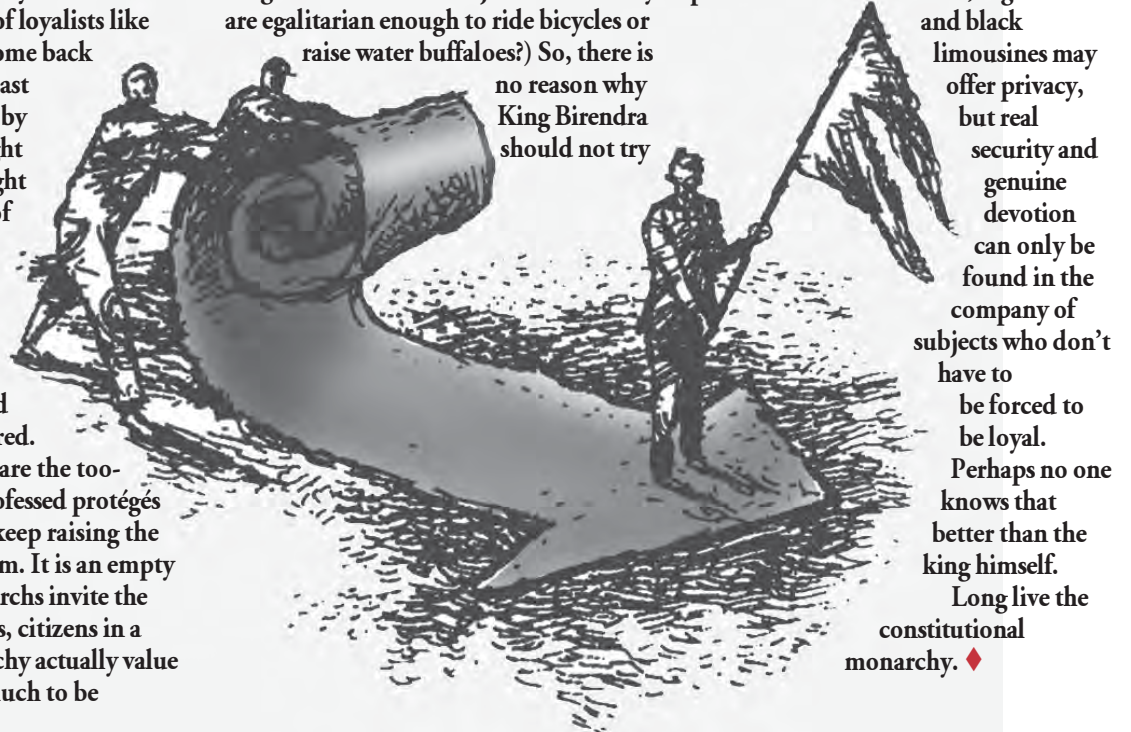
I may not believe in absolute monarchy, but I respect your right to defend it if you want to. Ditto for republicanism. As long as you don't pick up a gun. Freedom of faith is an integral part of democracy. A healthy debate between the two can only help evolve balanced and moderate views to prevail over extremism.

There is something in our fatalistically know-it-all culture that prevents learning. We believe that whatever is worth knowing was already known to our ancestors, therefore there is no need for us to learn anymore. Panchayat ideologues espoused the "Land and Climate Theory" of a system suited to our soil. They prophesied that the monarchy would fall after becoming constitutional. Actually, it has become stronger. There should be no shame in admitting it or learning from the experiences of constitutional monarchies elsewhere in the world. (Why should the minions of our royalty snigger at the kings of other countries just because they are egalitarian enough to ride bicycles or raise water buffaloes?) So, there is no reason why King Birendra should not try

to resolve the controversy swirling around his nephew. The public is convinced that it was Paras who killed Praveen Gurung. Finding a fall-guy, persuading a grieving widow to silence, and subverting the legal system may offer temporary relief. But there is no doubt that the more justice is delayed, the deeper it will dent the credibility of the institution that Paras represents.

As one deeply concerned reader has so rightly pointed out in a letter to the editor of this newspaper (#5), the real issue in the Paras episode is not of a person anymore, nor of legal fine print, it is that of justice. For those who still swear by scriptures in matters related to monarchy, here is what Manu has to say in his canons on the Hindu way of life, *Manusmriti*: "The King should not leave an offender unpunished, whatever may be his relationship with him. Neither father, nor a teacher, not a friend, not mother, nor wife, nor a son, nor a priest should go unpunished for the offence committed."

Rather than leave the fate of royalty in the hands of sycophantic loyalists, it is preferable to have every conscious citizen in this country rise up in defence of the real interests of the king. That is why the monarchy's role should become a topic of healthy and mature public debate. Thick walls, high fences



and black limousines may offer privacy, but real security and genuine devotion can only be found in the company of subjects who don't have to be forced to be loyal. Perhaps no one knows that better than the king himself. Long live the constitutional monarchy. ♦

A Nepali looks at the Bhutan model.

HYDRO-POWER

A Bhutanese proposes a new Nepali model.

BIJAYA MAN SHERCHAN . . .
Like Nepal, Bhutan too is blessed with abundant hydropower resources. But unlike Nepal, which seems to be going nowhere in terms of exploiting its water resource, Bhutan seems to have its goal pretty much in sight. The Bhutanese government has a 20-year Power System Master Plan to guide policy formulation in the development of hydropower. The Master Plan, developed with World Bank assistance, estimates that the four major rivers of Ammochu (Torsa), Wangchu (Raidak), Punatsangchu (Sankosh) and Manas alone have the potential to economically generate around 20,000 MW of hydroelectricity. Currently Bhutan produces 357 MW of electricity (more or less equal to Nepal's own output), but in less than a decade it will be generating close to 1 700 MW.

Three hydropower projects are coming on line. The first stage of the Basochu HPP (60.8 MW) will be complete in June 2001, Kurichu HPP (60 MW) in September 2001 and Tala HPP (1020 MW) in the year 2004. Likewise, the Bunakha Reservoir Scheme (180 MW) is planned to be ready by the end of 2007.

Besides the projects mentioned above, Bhutan has prepared detailed project reports (DPRs) and feasibility studies of a number of other mega-projects. The DPR of the 4060 MW Sankosh project is already ready but implementation is being delayed because of environmental concerns. Detailed feasibility studies are being conducted to generate 1410 MW in two stages from the same river upstream. The feasibility study of the 265 MW Mangdechu Hydropower Project is also going on.

Bhutan receives assistance from many countries and multilateral agencies for energy development, but its most stable and important partner has been India. A watershed in the history of cooperation between Bhutan and India was the commission-

ing, in 1987, of the 336 MW Chukha Hydropower Project. Chukha was built under a 99-year agreement between India and Bhutan, whereby India provided a finance package that was 40 percent loan and 60 percent grant.

Later a guaranteed power buy-back provision was also included in the agreement.

This arrangement has proved beneficial to both a power-deficit India and a poor Bhutan striving towards self-reliant development. Chukha led to the doubling of national revenues between 1985/86 and 1987/88. In 1998/99 the project alone accounted for 35 percent of Bhutan's revenue generation.

Bhutan was initially paid a paltry Nu 0.50 per unit, but India showed substantial understanding and increased the tariff to Nu 1.00 in April 1997 and further to Nu 1.50 in July 1999. (Ngultrum—Nu—is Bhutan's currency and equivalent to the Indian rupee in value.)

A striking aspect of Bhutan's power generation is also the very low construction cost per kilowatt. The 1.5 MW Chumey Hydropower project in Bumthang District cost Nu 43.33 million. Tala is being constructed for a revised estimated budget of Nu 31,300 million, and Basochu for Nu 1,923 million.

This works out to approximately \$ 700 per kW, which perhaps explains why Bhutanese consumers pay what is probably the cheapest rate in the world—Nu 0.70 (Rs. 1.12) per unit in urban centres and Nu 0.50 (Re. 0.80) rural areas. (In contrast, the construction costs of hydropower projects in Nepal are estimated to vary between \$ 2000-2500 per kW and Nepali consumers pay Rs 6 per unit, arguably the highest in the world.)

All these show without doubt that Bhutan has adopted a hugely successful policy in hydropower development. And it is evident that hydropower will propel the little Himalayan kingdom to economic prosperity



Judicious use: the Punatsangchu as it flows by the Wangdiphodrang dzong.

and self-sustenance before too long.

It is Bhutan's very success that automatically begs some questions of Nepal. Does Nepal have a viable reason to justify its failure in hydropower development when a much smaller Bhutan has succeeded so well?

Is there any viable justification for the three times higher construction costs of hydropower projects in Nepal? Is it at all probable, that as long as cheap power is available from Bhutan, India will ever look to Nepal for its hydropower needs?

Is Nepal doomed to limit hydropower generation only to meet domestic consumption and dispense it to the Nepali consumer at tariffs 5 to 7 times higher than in Bhutan? If the answers to the above questions are to be a "No", it is time that the country's politicians, planners, bureaucrats and power pundits did some soul-searching to provide an explanation to us.

(Bijaya Man Sherchan is an engineering consultant who recently visited Bhutan as a member of a delegation from Mustang.)

BHIM SUBBA . . .
Critics often like to use Bhutan to contrast the alleged failure of Nepali policymakers to develop the country's vast hydropower potential. The criticism seems valid considering the rapid strides the smaller country has made since its first 360 kW capacity power plant was commissioned in 1968. Even with a headstart of over half a century, Nepal now lags behind. Are there lessons to be learnt from Bhutan? Can Nepal follow the same path to prosperity? Has Bhutan grabbed opportunities spurned by Nepal?

At first glance it might appear as if Nepal has lost out with poor planning where Bhutan was able to capitalise with sound decisions. But this would be an over-simplification of a more complex issue.

What is often overlooked in making comparisons between the two Himalayan kingdoms is that there are enough differences to make a successful strategy in one country unworkable in the next. The reasons range from the geological (the Chure Hills go no further east than the Kosi) to hydrological (Nepali rivers

contribute more, volume and percentage-wise) to economic to political. Given these disparities, the question of adopting the Bhutan model in Nepal really cannot arise.

For one, it is unlikely that India would have offered Nepal the kind of generous financial terms (capital entirely Indian, 60 percent of it as grant) that gave Bhutan her first break. More significantly, even if such an offer had been made, it is unlikely that Nepal would have accepted it because it is often forgotten that according to the original Chukha agreement the tariff was shamelessly low (Nu 0.10, not Nu 0.50 as mentioned by Sherchan). The project eventually turned out to be a money-spinner only because of tariff revisions which have seen the rate escalate by 1500 percent in just over a decade. It is to Bhutan's credit that through some tortuous negotiations an error was converted into an advantage.

The other point is that Indo-Bhutan collaboration is centred on hydroelectricity, but from barrages on the Mahakali to Gandaki to Kosi, Indo-Nepal bilateral cooperation in sharing rivers has nearly always focussed on water. That these have failed to inspire Nepali confidence is not surprising. Electricity has always been an inconsequential byproduct. In future cooperative efforts, too, this emphasis on water is likely to continue as is clear from the fact that the only schemes on the discussion table are colossal storage projects such as including Pancheshwar, Karnali and Kosi high dams. Run-of-river sites similar to those in Bhutan lie further north, are relatively inaccessible, and have not merited serious bilateral attention. It is clear India is interested in Nepal's water rather than electricity. Unlike the Brahmaputra system to which Bhutan's rivers contribute, there is greater pressure on freshwater in the Gangetic plains. Add the problem of recurring and costly floods in UP and Bihar, and concentrating on water rather than energy makes a great deal of sense.

Unfortunately, India puts no value to either flood control or irrigation benefits.

While the discounting of such important elements of storage projects makes these schemes less attractive than they might otherwise be for Nepal, the larger problem is that developing them is not likely to be easy. Unlike projects in Bhutan which are being financed entirely by India, Nepal will have to look for her share of the costs. But opposition to high dams has grown in recent years and finding the funds to build these mega-projects will become increasingly more difficult, if not impossible.

Nepal has pinned her hopes on the sale of hydropower to boost its revenues while India clearly plans to cash in on the storage capability of the dams. A shift in the Nepali focus, therefore, from electricity export to charging for irrigation water and flood control might see a convergence of interests.

It seems logical that India, as the end user, whether of electricity or water, should be allowed to determine project parameters—for a fair price, of course. If India needs flood relief and water for irrigation; Nepal should be willing to provide the sites for a fee. Electricity can remain the inconsequential shared byproduct. If India is allowed to have her say, she should also be willing to pay more than her share of the costs to build the project and be willing to pay a fair price for the benefits accruing from it.

This may seem far-fetched under the present circumstances with India not even willing to put a price on water and flood control, but if there is going to be any cooperation this looks like the only way to go. This could be the Nepal model to take on the acclaimed Bhutan one.

(Bhim Subba is a former Director-General of the Department of Power, Royal Government of Bhutan.)

LETTERS

WHY TALK?
Your reporting of the deepening Maoist crisis shows sensitivity towards those whose lives have been ruined by the fighting, as well as demonstrating thoughtful analysis of the type rarely seen in Nepal's newspapers.

C.K. Lal concludes his excellent article (Inevitability of talks, #0) with an upbeat, slogan-like epithet: "Stop giving speeches, stop discussing modalities, just do it." Whilst his plea is ostensibly directed towards the Prime Minister and his government, out of context, the words sound rather reminiscent of ideological Maoist propaganda. An end to speeches, an end to discussion and more action are the precise demands of the Maoist insurgents.

Who says Prachanda is playing by the rules? All the cards are in his hand, he risks nothing by agreeing to talks. Despite not being a Maoist, never having met one, and not even being Nepali, I know what the Maoists don't want: they don't want corruption, nepotism, and an ageing, self-obsessed and ineffectual government which shuffles from crisis to crisis. Negotiations can only make headway when there is some vague sense of a middle ground. The Maoists want radical change in the structures of political power, but the government has a vested interest in maintaining these very structures. These two aims may well be irreconcilable, and talks (if they happen at all) will have little chance of success.

*Alfredo Krienen
Amsterdam*

GODS RETURN
Do we put them inside museums or restore them to their original places of worship? Your story "Return of the gods" (#5) provokes debate. It states pros and cons, but argues against the idea of placing a new image of Uma-Maheshwar at the Dhulikhel site and keeping the returning gods in the safety of a museum.

While judging such a potential replacement as "fake", the argument falls victim of the basic attitude of the international art trade which, above all, values the singularity and authenticity of an art object, and abhors anything copied.

It thus dismisses what could be a genuine new interpretation of one of the most popular themes for the stone sculptors of

Nepal, the divine couple Uma-Maheshwar. Repeated in countless variations since more than one thousand years, there is no "original", and thus no negative notion of copy or fake in the traditions of Nepali art.

*Goetz Hagmueller
Bhaktapur*

I found "Return of the gods" (#5) quite informative. But I would like to correct a quote attributed to me. I never said that the best thing is to have a replica in Dhulikhel. My suggestion was to offer a new sculpture the locals, if they agree.

I also would not like to worship to a copy, a pastiche. Other than that, I liked Sujata Tuladhar's article and hope that it furthers the

cause of heritage preservation.

*Wolfgang Koellisch
Dhulikhel*

DIDI IN BLUE
Reading Jasmine Rajbhandary's "Woman to Woman" (#0), I remembered a similar experience I had in April at Kathmandu airport. After both my hand bags were x-rayed I was taken behind the curtain. The "Didi in Blue" asked me where I was going and what I did. She took my handbag and starting going through it. She spotted my purse and asked me how much money I had in there. She also asked me what my father did. I had only \$100, still she asked if I had declared it and started making a big fuss. Then she asked for "paisa for chiya-siya" (tea money). I raised my voice and asked how much she

wanted. Embarrassed, she made me close my bags and took me to her boss who let me through.

Beware of the dreaded Didi of the Departure Hall!

*"SJ"
Boston, USA*

UNFAIR
I read the letters from two outraged politically correct readers (#3) about your "cover girl" (#2) advertising a fairness cream. Fine, they don't like fairness cream, no problem. But why don't they write outraged letters to American travel magazines that advertise skin-tanning cream that turns pale faces brown?

*G. Gurung
Seattle, USA*

Why you shouldn't trek alone



In Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* I wrote that it is only common sense, applicable to a

hiking trip anywhere, that you should not travel alone in the mountains. I expanded on the point by saying:

You should not trek alone. Many times it's useful to have someone to watch your pack—when you have to run off the trail into the bushes, or even when you are in a lodge and go out to the toilet. It's also good to have someone around in case you injure yourself or fall sick while walking. Almost all deaths, disappearances and incidents of violent crime have involved trekkers travelling alone. A companion could help convince a would-be thief to direct his attention elsewhere and can send for help if you fall or are injured. If you do not already have a travelling companion, then you should find one in Kathmandu—either a guide or another trekker. Unless you have a friend to trek with, or are prepared to take a chance on finding a companion in Kathmandu, booking a group trek may be a good option.

Yet Internet newsgroups and chat rooms are awash with comments like “you don't need a guide, just start walking”, and “there's no problem to trek alone, Nepal is perfectly safe”. These comments are true, but they don't take into account the trail conditions in Nepal.

It's true that Nepal is quite safe. Hold-ups by thieves are rare and few people suffer from

serious falls. But many trails are rough, narrow, slippery and exposed and often cross landslides or rickety bridges. It's easy to miss a step or lose your balance when a rock wobbles underfoot. If you're lucky, you'll just end up looking silly in the mud, but each year numerous trekkers—and local people—tumble off the trail.

I remember some trekkers who moved off the trail to let some yaks pass near Tharo Kosi bridge in Khumbu. The clump of bushes they stepped into had nothing but air below and suddenly there were two people with broken legs lying on the rocks of the riverbed. Fortunately a team of trekkers came along and carried them, with great difficulty, back to Lukla. If they had been alone on a remote trail, they could have lain there for days.

Then there's the saga of James Scott, who was lost for 43 days below Gosainkunda in 1992. He was trekking with a friend, but they separated and James became hopelessly lost. It was only after 24 days that his sister finally contacted his trekking companion in Australia and was able to redirect the search to the last place James had been seen. He was eventu-

ally found alive after 43 days.

Others have not been so lucky. When a search party finally spotted the body of a female trekker near Puiyan some years ago they also discovered a second body at the same spot below a narrow and slippery spot in the trail. Both these women could probably have been saved if someone had searched for them within a few hours of their fall. Each season there are reports of missing trekkers and, almost without exception, these people had been trekking alone.

It's not enough to rely on people who happen along to assist in an emergency. If you have a bad fall like Kanak Mani Dixit (*see accompanying article*), chances are you'll end up far below the trail and hidden by bushes. A casual passer-by won't see you and probably won't hear you if you shout. Even if you are spotted, sometimes people won't stop to help. It's sad, but true that some trekkers won't compromise their schedule to help out. We had a tough time finding enough people to carry those trekkers with broken legs back up to Lukla. Local people may ignore an injured trekker because of the trouble they might have. Many Nepalis fear

that when they report an accident to the police they may become a part of, and sometimes a subject of, the ensuing criminal investigation.

If you are trekking with a friend, you're fine, but don't split up. If you find a trekking companion through a hotel bulletin board or one of the organisations like KEEP or HRA, try to ensure they have the same goals as you and are not going to leave you on your own hundred miles into the hills. No matter how careful you are you never have any assurance that your trekking partner won't fall ill or get bored with walking. You can enrich your Nepal experience by spending a few weeks in the company of a Nepali guide or porter. It's not expensive by Western standards and you'll provide someone with a good wage, learn a lot about the country and probably make a good friend. And, if you fall off the trail, someone will come looking for you in a hurry. ♦

(Stan Armington is the author of the *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* and *Nepal*, both published by Lonely Planet Publications.)



Looking for my brother

Little did we know that only 2-3 km away Kanak was spending his third night out in the open, drinking rain, talking to wild animals to keep them away, and desperately anchoring himself on rocks so that he would not slip off the ledge to the river below.

KUNDA DIXIT

From the throbbing interior of the Ecureuil helicopter, Nepal on a monsoon afternoon is a glowing, emerald land. In the blinding splash of chlorophyll, the white vein of the Budi Gandaki cuts through a bright green valley radiant with ripening rice. To the north, veils of rain hide the mysterious velvet depths of the high Himalaya. Here and there, through a tunnel in the clouds, you catch tantalising glimpses of the icy rock of Himalchuli's sky-scraping ramparts.

Despite the dull heartache and the emptiness inside, I couldn't help admiring this stunningly beautiful land. Padam Ghaley, Raju Gurung and I were on our way last week to the Marsyangdi Valley below Manang to look for my missing brother, Kanak. He was on the last leg of his solo Annapurna Circuit trek from Pokhara to Besi Sahar, completing a two-week journey in an

amazing 10 days. After crossing Thorung La (5416m) he had made good progress through the Manang Valley, calling home from Dharapani on 19 August, saying he would fly back to Kathmandu from Pokhara on 21 August. Twenty-four hours after he failed to show up, and worried that he had not made any other calls despite phone facilities being available all along the trail, the family started to get worried.

By 2:30 pm on 22 August, Padam, Raju and I were walking across the tarmac at Kathmandu airport towards the Fish Tail Air helicopter. Right then, my mobile rang. It was Anil Shrestha from Himal, who had been coordinating communications with lodges, police stations and ACAP offices along the Manang trail for the past two days. News had just come in that Kanak had checked out of the Sushma Lodge at Jagat on Sunday morning, 20 August. Right there, we changed plans and decided not to fly

to Dharapani, but to land at Jagat and begin searching from there. This decision, taken in the nick of time, was to make the difference between life and death.

After Besisahar, the Marsyangdi Valley gets wilder and narrower. The steep flanks on either side were barely a dozen metres from the whirling rotors. Below us, the white surf of the monsoon-swollen river dominated everything. Tiny Gurung villages were perched on the mountainsides next to spectacular waterfalls that tumbled down to the deep valley. Padam pointed out Jagat to the pilot: a tiny cluster of shingle-roofed houses in front and below, perilously close to the frothing river. Capt Anil Rawal nudged the helicopter down on a millet field between the river and the houses, nervously close to a huge boulder.

As the whirl of the departing helicopter receded, we were already searching through the room at the Sushma Lodge where Kanak had stayed. We got to Syanje, checking the river banks and the slopes below landslides with our binoculars, talking to chicken porters and tea shop owners who said they had seen him on Sunday morning. Their description of what he said and what he was wearing were accurate. At Syanje he had stopped for tea on Sunday morning. The Gurung *pasalni* remembered he had asked about the huge landslide nearby that nearly choked the Marsyangdi, and he was taking notes.

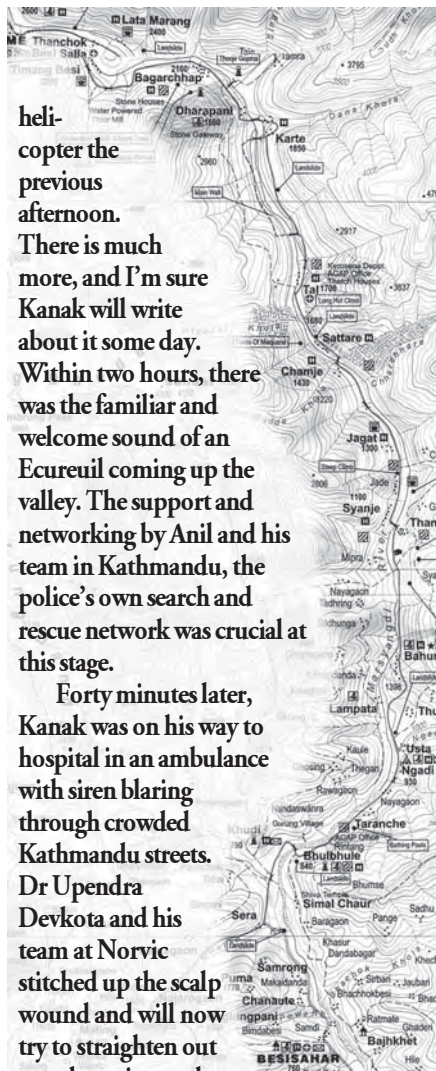
We spent the night at a place called Ghermo. A scenic spot overlooking a 1,500 ft waterfall, mountains in the mist and pine trees that looked like a Japanese painting. It rained heavily all night. The

roar of the Marsyangdi and the waterfall was deafening. Little did we know that only 2-3 km away Kanak was spending his third night out in the open, drinking rain, talking to wild animals to keep them away, and desperately anchoring himself on rocks so that he would not slip off the ledge to the river below.

We left the lodge at six in the morning, and by 7:15 Raju had spotted a blue rucksack about 50 ft below the trail at Lili Bhir, a particularly slippery near-vertical slope directly above a bend in the Marsyangdi. I looked vertically down through binoculars and immediately recognised Kanak's purple cap. It was so steep Raju had to use rope to get down. It took another 15 minutes to find Kanak, lying on his back some 40 ft below. A good Samaritan porter went down clinging to branches, and in a singularly astounding feat of mountain climbing brought Kanak up on his back to the trail. We never found out the porter's name or home village, he just picked up his load and disappeared up the trail soon afterwards.

Kanak was seriously hurt, dehydrated and weak. There was a gash on his scalp and his neck looked badly injured. But at that point, for the three of us what was important was that he was alive. Another porter carried Kanak ten minutes up the trail to a lodge and we put him on some sleeping bags on top of a dining table. Raju had already run up to Bahundanda to call for the helicopter. Fortunately, Jyoti Gurung, a nurse on her way to Tange Health Post in Manang happened to be passing by. She organised an intravenous dextrose drip with Shiva Raj Silwal, an assistant health worker from a nearby health post assisting. They took his blood pressure, cleaned up his wounds, gave him some water and tea. Padam brought some hot soup. His first question for me was: has Nepali Times gone to press? What is the headline?

The drip was already making a big difference, Kanak was alert and joking with Jyoti and Shiva. He told us about feeling the wispy wind of a butterfly flapping past his face, contemplating the best way to eat a bumble bee, of shouting for help but not being heard over the river's roar, and waving feebly at our



helicopter the previous afternoon.

There is much more, and I'm sure Kanak will write about it some day. Within two hours, there was the familiar and welcome sound of an Ecureuil coming up the valley. The support and networking by Anil and his team in Kathmandu, the police's own search and rescue network was crucial at this stage.

Forty minutes later, Kanak was on his way to hospital in an ambulance with siren blaring through crowded Kathmandu streets.

Dr Upendra Devkota and his team at Norvic stitched up the scalp wound and will now try to straighten out two thoracic vertebra. Family and friends have provided tremendous moral support. Kanak is alert, speaking normally and slowly recounting the terrible ordeal of surviving three nights and four days on the side of a cliff. What is emerging is a story of unbelievable will power and determination to survive. Without this, our rescue would have been futile. This is a survival classic.

Words like “luck” and “miracle” are inadequate to describe the survival and rescue. It was a series of many miracles. Some force kept Kanak alive, the same force took us to the exact spot where he was lying, and it made sure we found him. A million things could have gone wrong, a million things went right. May the force be with him. ♦



The precarious trail at Lili Bhir where many trekkers have fallen.

Indecisiveness within Nepali Congress
Deshantar, 27 August

“I don’t want problems within the Nepali Congress to hold the nation and people captive,” said PM Girija Prasad Koirala. But the PM does not seem capable of living up to his words, as he himself seems trapped!

The indecisiveness of the Nepali Congress leaders has almost paralysed the administration. The Maoists also seem to be exploiting this situation by increasing their reign of terror in various parts of the country.

There seems to be no dialogue between Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and Prime Minister Koirala. Bhattarai has stopped receiving Koirala’s phone calls and he did not attend the inauguration of the Midwestern Development Region workshop.

After the sacking of Khum Bahadur Khadka and the presentation of demands to Koirala, both leaders now feel that the atmosphere for a face-saving act has been created by Koirala agreeing to 3 of the 5 demands of Bhattarai:

1. postponing of party congress to be held in Pokhara
 2. reshuffling of central working committee
 3. cabinet reshuffle
- “I have come through the system, through a process and I would like the process and system to remain in the party. Only through this process can leadership be handed to qualified people. This is not possible by fighting. A peaceful process has to be found.”

This shows that Koirala is not willing to give up his position. This means that in the present context, the PM will not bow down to the demands of the Bhattarai camp. But his agreeing to Bhattarai’s other demands gives a hint of win-win situation for both the leaders. And this could possibly end the present stalemate in the party.

Since PM Koirala is open to reshuffling the central working committee and the cabinet, it is speculated that it may take place in the near future. However, it is not expected that new faces will be inducted in either the central committee or the cabinet. Sources say that Ram Sharan Mahat, Purna Bahadur Khadka and Bhakta Bahadur Balayar will be added and Tarini Dutt Chataut, Ram Baran Yadav, Ram Krishna Tamrakar and Jaya Prakash Anand will be removed.

Sources also say that Nona Koirala and Lila Koirala, who are not acceptable to the K.P.-Deuba camp, might

vacate their posts in the central committee while K.P.-Deuba camp will forward the names of Ram Sharan Mahat, Chiranjivi Wagle, Basu Risal and Yog Prasad Upadhyaya.

Well-wishers of Koirala say that he should not attend the UN meeting before the reshuffle of the committee and the cabinet if he is to create an atmosphere for dialogue among the leaders. They warn that leaving without solving these problems could prove fatal not only for the Nepali Congress but also for his prime ministership.

Parliamentary Committee to visit Kalapani soon
Chhalphal, 27 August

The Foreign Affair and Human Rights Committee of the House of Representatives will visit the disputed Kalapani area in Darchula district within the next two months. Committee chairman Som Prasad Pandey said, “Nepal has been demanding that Indian soldiers be removed from the disputed area but nothing has happened. The visiting team will prepare a report based on the visit. This will later be presented to the parliament.”

The Committee had visited disputed Laxmanpur Barrage and prepared a report earlier.

Pandey also informed that UML General Secretary and leader of the opposition, Madhav Kumar Nepal, who also happens to be a member of the Human Rights Committee, will also visit the disputed area. Speaker Taranath Ranabhat may also join the team, he said. He added that the House Committee will soon discuss the present human rights situation with the chairman and members of Human Rights Commission.

Nepal Bandh before Dashain
Nepal Jagaran, 21 August

The Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist-Leninist (CPN-ML), along with other nine communist parties have called a Nepal Bandh on 18 September, Monday. The Bandh has been called to focus attention on the ‘burning issues’ of the nation.

In a statement issued by the communist parties on 29 August, a petition to the Prime Minister will be submitted after which a nation-wide protest rally and a gherao of the District Administration Office and Singha Durbar on 4 September will follow. On the eve of the Bandh, on 18 September,

they have also called for a nation-wide torch rally in protest.

The parties are also preparing for an interaction programme on the consequences of the Prime Minister’s recent India visit.

The parties have taken up various issues including the Citizenship Act, Laxmanpur dam, the Kalapani border, kamaiyas, and the case of Paras Shah, among others. The bandh organisers have also included the issue of the salary increment of Members of Parliament, Ministers and the Prime Minister in their list.

Deuba speaks out
Saptahik Bimarsha, 25 August

In a press release, former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has affirmed that he would not pull back from carrying out negotiations with the underground Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). The statement comes amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty on whether Deuba should retain his place in the commission to initiate talks with Maoists.

The release says: “I want to once again remind everyone that I am still attempting to negotiate with Maoist leadership. Under present circumstances, this conflict does not remain of political interest alone. This problem has affected all Nepalis regardless of their political ideologies. Therefore, it has become very important to end this existing uncertainty. We are all children of Nepal and killings do not help us achieve our goals. Nation building is the challenge of the day. But without peace, there is no hope of development. Therefore, violence and killings should at once be put to a halt. Despite all my efforts to move forward, there still exists an environment of distrust. An environment for mutual understanding is necessary to initiate a fruitful dialogue. I would like to assure fellow Nepalis that I am trying my best to begin a dialogue with the Maoist leadership. I want to move ahead with the talks in an environment of trust. I won’t leave any stone unturned in initiating talks and identifying a proper solution to put an end to all existing problems. There are numerous hurdles to cross to reach this state and it will indeed take time. Therefore, I look forward to help and assistance from all the sectors in understanding the seriousness of the present-day situation.”

ADB to withdraw from rural water supply
Deshantar, 27 August

The Agricultural Development Bank, which has been providing 60 million people with drinking water supplies through its village drinking water and sanitation programme is planning to pull out from the project and begin investing in income-generating ‘small urban water supply projects’.

The ADB reached the decision after its dissatisfaction with the infrastructure development and construction of the 323 projects under the Fourth Water Supply and Sanitation Programme.

Experts said ADB is pulling out of the programme as nothing has been done so far to carry out the necessary survey on the feasibility and extension of the fifth phase of the project.

However, under-secretary at the Physical Development Ministry, Dhruba Bahadur Shrestha, denies any possibility of the ADB’s withdrawing from the project. He said that it might get postponed for a year. “We have been told that they will proceed with the project despite being postponed for a year.” ♦

Suicidal moves by Maoists
Deshantar, 27 August

After taking a step back from the fixed table talks with ex-prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, the underground Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) have again made a conciliatory move to resume talks.



News sources say both moves were carried out by the Maoists after close observation of the way Deuba has been workings and to further inflame internal conflicts within the Nepali Congress party.

According to close Maoist sources, the recent nationwide simultaneous violent attacks were also carried out in order to distract anti-Maoist operations in the regions captured by them by further exacerbating Congress conflicts.

The Maoists who have been keeping close watch on Deuba have been able to exploit his position to further create confusion and strife among Congress party workers. Despise all this, Deuba is till for talks with the underground party.

The recent press release by the Maoists, praising Deuba’s efforts, is a sign of their nervousness towards the police operations being carried out against them.

The recent nationwide violent assaults also tell of its moves to destabilise the police forces working against them. The Maoists have suffered more casualties than the police, whereas it is stated in Maoist military strategy that force is not to be used where there is danger of losing lives.

Maoist sources say: “Party cadres are insecure. Numerous commanders have been arrested by the police and because of the confusion within the party, cadres are withdrawing their support. Under these circumstances, the increase in violent attacks has been a suicidal move for the party.”

According to sources, there is growing conflict among the Maoists regarding the ongoing events. These suicidal moves are supposedly on orders from party general secretary Prachanda who controls the central committee.

There is also a rising conflict between Dr Babu Ram Bhattarai and Prachanda regarding occupied territory. Recently, Comrade Gaurab, a supporter of Prachanda’s in the central committee, expressed scorn for Dr Bhattarai’s concept of occupied territory. The Bhattarai side has not commented on the issue so far.

The power struggle among the Maoists have been going on for the last three years.

Maoists to form a semi-underground front
Nepal Jagaran, 21 August

The recent politburo meeting of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has decided to form a joint front as a sub-committee. According to sources, the necessary policies and ideological criteria to form the new front has already been approved by the politburo and will soon be made public.

Nepal Jagaran was informed by party sources that the front will invite parties which have adopted the Maoist ideology. Earlier, the United People’s Front—an open union of the Maoists chaired by Dr Babu Ram Bhattarai—was dissolved during the fourth anniversary of the People’s War in March early this year. He had argued for the need for a new front to go along with the changing scenario of different political polarisations occurring in the nation.

The sources say the new front will consist of parties or individuals involved in ethnic and regional revolts or those who share similar policies. This is an indication that the party has decided to take assistance with the People’s War. The sources do not say whether the Maoists will make public the names of parties and individuals affiliated with the front.

Intellectuals who have been studying the Maoists say the party will help the front overcome administrative problems by placing it in a semi-underground state.

Sources say 11 representatives of ethnicity and region-based fronts, as well as some independent communist intellectuals will be included in the front.

Nationwide retaliation
Jana-Awahan, 25 August

Maoist rebels swept the nation with attacks two days after a retaliation call made on 23 August by General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) “against the Girija government which soured the environment for talks and took up civilian killings and terrorism”.

It is reported that Comrade Prachanda had agreed to take part in talks and had asked the government to create a minimal environment passed by human rights activists and the public. They say the Girija government had misinterpreted the openness of the Maoists as its weakness and tried dominating them with a ‘Silent Kilo Sierra III’ police mission which has already killed 15 civilians in last one week.

Observers say the move by Maoist rebels, who had already started agreed to talks with the government, is the result of the irresponsible fascist character shown by the Girija government in its traditional blind ways.

They have also pointed out that the training and firepower acquired by the police from the army has been a failed attempt. A military source told our correspondent that the recent failure of the specially trained police force is symbolic also of the military’s defeat.

A reliable Maoist source says that although the Girija government did not agree to create an environment for negotiations, even after hearing of the people’s plight, the situation is still in their favour. The source says that Girija’s defeats in the war front will force the government to initiate talks.

Observers assume that the Girija government is likely to resort to violent bloodshed and abuse of the national economy. They say if the Girija government uses further force, it will lead to its own elimination.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“Kishunji and Girijababu want to talk, want to come to an understanding, when they meet they say let’s meet again and then there is reconciliation. But there is someone who does not want that. Who can that be?”

—Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Poudel speaking at the Nepali Congress Central Executive Committee meeting in Bimarsha, 25 August.



Lokdrishti, 27 August: “Hello. Is Kishunji around?” “Could you please wait while I ask?”

Free to suffer



Freedom has meant a daily struggle for kamaiyas and relief in yet far away

HEMLATA RAI
As the Dhangadi sky bursts open. Saraswati Chaudhari picks up her baby boy from the muddy ground and rushes into her hut with its blue plastic covering. She places him on the *charpoy*, and in a mechanical motion picks up her family’s ration sack and then the handful of kitchen utensils scattered all over the floor to pile them on the other end of the string bed. She hurriedly collects the firewood and that too goes on the bed. All her belongings now safe from the water soaking the floor rapidly, she herself perches on the bed with the baby on her lap.



The kisan and his supporter: Hem Prakash Regmi and Narayan Dutta Mishra.

Since she left her “owner” two weeks ago, the plastic-covered hut has been this former kamaiya family’s only protection against the raging monsoon. And when it pours heavily, the only dry place for her family is the bed.

But Saraswati is among the lucky ones. Angani Chaudhari has been living with his family of 11 inside the skeleton of a hut hoping the government will provide him with at least a plastic sheet to cover it with “someday soon”.

Angani is not alone. There are hundreds of other kamaiya families living under the open sky in the far-western district of Kailali and Kanchanpur, many of them evicted forcefully from their previous homes by the *kisans* (landowners).

The 17 July government announcement abolishing the virtual slavery system of kamaiya came as a surprise to everyone—the campaigning kamaiyas, NGOs and the government bodies—and caught them all totally unprepared. And it is this

unpreparedness, coupled with a lack of interest in the central government and the rigidity of local government officials, that are slowing down the rehabilitation process. “It will take three or four months more just to begin the rehabilitation,” says Rishi Raj Lumsali, chairman of the Kanchanpur district development committee.

The government has so far completed the first phase of updating statistics on the kamaiyas in Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur districts. But there is variance in the figures provided by the government and by the NGOs. Activists doubt the reliability of the new government updates, claiming that the government failed to reach the inner and difficult parts of the districts where kamaiyas are still being held illegally.

“The government teams never reached my family,” says Hira Devi Chaudhari in Kailali. Hira Devi belongs to the first batch of kamaiyas who filed a petition against their landlord, former Nepali Congress minister, Shiva Raj Pant, on 1 May 2000 that kicked off the movement to free kamaiyas.

“Kamaiyas living near towns are now aware of the government ban. But many others are still ignorant of the ruling. They are still unorganised and do not know they have to register themselves with the government,” says Ashok Bikram Jairu, a social worker from Kanchanpur. But he is equally cautious about the figures touted by trade unions and NGOs: “Many non-kamaiyas are out there to enlist themselves for free land the government might distribute to former kamaiyas. And others are being planted by political parties.”

Kailali’s land reforms officer, Maheshwor Niraula, admits the problem. “Thirty-three wage-earning labourers from a single ward at Tikapur were found to have registered as kamaiyas,” he says. Niraula estimates some 25

to 40 percent of the forms may have been filled by non-kamaiyas.

Activists say the local administration is chary about upsetting the kisans. Although nobody verbally opposes the official ban on bonded labour, the kisans are preparing to fight the government decision. The newly formed Forum for the Protection of Kisan’s Rights filed a writ with the Supreme Court on 9 August, demanding the government compensate them the *sauki*, the debt money that tied the kamaiyas to them. Though many of the kamaiyas ‘owed’ their landlords less than Rs 5,000, the kisans claim the waiving of *sauki* might cause them economic burden.

“The government decision is against the Constitution. If *sauki* is illegal then let the courts settle it. Why should government outlaw *sauki*?” says an angry Dilli Raj Pant of the

trouble began when the NGOs started provoking them. In the long run, the kamaiyas themselves will be the losers, their places in the fields will be filled by Indian workers,” says Hem Prakash Regmi, president of the Forum.

Before the 17 July government announcement Regmi had four families of kamaiyas working for him who left his household three weeks back. Now he is determined not to let his ex-kamaiyas enter the huts built in his land: “What if the government decides to declare that the land too should belong to the kamaiyas.”

Kamaiya-kisan tension is also palpable. Young kamaiyas seem determined not to work for kisans though they have no skills outside agriculture, while kisans feel threatened by their aggressiveness.

“This is pain caused by transition. Everything will settle down in time,” says land reforms officer Niraula. That is the kind of optimism that is sorely needed on both sides of the divide now. ♦

Kanchanpur led the way

The day that Shiv Raj Pant’s kamaiya’s decided to begin their movement may go down in history as beginning of the end of the kamaiya system. But few are aware that the kamaiyas of the adjoining district of Kanchanpur who had already started a silent revolution to end the debt bondage months earlier.

“The severity of exploitation and size of kisan landholdings are much smaller than in the other four districts. That is why the activities that preceded the 1 May petition did not catch anyone’s attention,” says Kanchanpur DDC Chairman Rish Raj Lumsali.

Using the authority granted by the Local Governance Act, the DDC fixed the minimum wage for agriculture labourers at Rs 80 on 14 January. Kamaiya Nepal Chaudhari immediately petitioned the Laxmipur VDC, demanding he be paid the minimum wage for all the years he had been working for his landlord. The landlord declined compensation but instead granted Nepal freedom and also waived off his debt as well.

Four days later, on 18 January, the DDC and the kisans reached an agreement according to which kisans would volunteer to release kamaiyas with *saukis* less than Rs 15,000. This led to the freeing of 22 kamaiya families.

In March kamaiyas themselves began agitating for their freedom. Eighteen kamaiyas working for Kalyan K.C. of Shankarpur VDC, filed a petition against their landlord. On 21 May, 48 kamaiyas from six VDCs filed separate petitions with their respective VDC offices demanding freedom. Two days later, Parasani VDC issued a freedom certificate to Bahadur Rana.

Then on 8 July came the Kanchanpur Declaration, which worked a formula to ultimately emancipate kamaiyas in the district.

Forum. Himself a member of the ruling Congress, Pant criticised the government for letting kamaiya system “look like” bondage labour whereas the system in fact is an “annually renewable contract”.

Kailali DDC Chairman Narayan Datta Mishra is sympathetic to the kisans’ demands. “The government should reconsider its ruling on *sauki*. Kisans have suffered because of it,” he says. Mishra believes the “untimely” government announcement to release the kamaiyas in the middle of the agricultural season is a result of “unjustifiable” pressure from the opposition and NGOs.

That kisans hold NGOs responsible for the liberation of kamaiyas is clear. “Our relationship with kamaiyas was perfectly harmonious. The

The hut that Angani built is waiting for a roof.

King Birendra asked to act

Several leftist organisations marched to the Royal Palace gates last week to submit a petition signed by over 500,000 people asking King Birendra to strip his nephew, Paras Shah, of all royal titles and immunities.

The petitioners are demanding legal action against Paras, who is said to have been at the wheel of the Pajero that hit the motorcycle of musician Praveen Gurung and killed him.

Mori wins Nepal’s support for UN reforms

Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori wound up his four-nation South Asia after a six-hour stop in Kathmandu on Friday and went home with Nepal’s support to Japan’s call for reforms in the UN.

“We want to see expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent membership (of the Security Council),” said a senior Japanese foreign ministry official. Nepal said just what Mori and the Japanese wanted to hear: any reform in the world body would be incomplete without expansion of the two membership categories.

The Japanese PM also urged Nepal to hurry with the ratification of the comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT) saying that it would add to the treaty’s universality and send a strong message to both India and Pakistan. Nepal told the Japanese that it was in the process of being ratified.

Nepal and Japan also signed agreements under which Japan would give Nepal Rs 1.13 billion for building primary schools and debt relief. Japan also threw in \$300,000 to provide relief to flood and landslide victims. But these were funds already committed before the Mori visit.

ATR probe takes new turn

The parliamentary inquiry into the purchase of two new aircraft by the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC) took a new turn last week after MPs questioned what exactly the government wanted to do with the airline—privatise it or continue to let it run as it is.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) gave the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation 10 days to explain exactly what its policy regarding the privatisation of RNAC’s domestic services was and how the ATR purchase would fit in the framework.

The PAC inquiry was triggered by the 11 August decision by the airline to purchase two French-made ATR72-500 aircraft at \$16.5 million apiece for its domestic fleet.

The Aviation Policy—revised in late 1999—says that the government would retain 51 percent of RNAC (domestic) ownership and offer the remaining shares to investors, with priority given to private companies already operating air services.

Officials from RNAC and the government who were present at the inquiry made contradictory statements one after another, which even prompted some MPs to ask if the airline and ministry officials ever talked outside the committee room.

Tourism Secretary Barun Prasad Shrestha said his ministry had asked RNAC what it was doing about implementing the Policy some months ago but had not received any response. RNAC Executive Chairman Hari Bhakta Shrestha responded saying that his office had received the letter only two months ago.

The privatisation angle came into debate after Auditor General Bishnu Bahadur K.C. said the fleet expansion could contradict policy if the airline were being privatised.

ICT strategy

The National Planning Commission (NPC) is nearing completion of an Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) strategy, which comes alongside a separate Information Technology policy being drafted by the Ministry of Science and Technology.

The NPC strategy focuses on six sub-themes: human resources development, information and communication infrastructure, e-commerce, e-governance, universal access to information and software development and production.

It seeks to address two major goals—using the available means to tackle Nepal’s widespread poverty and the creation of an environment conducive to the emerging needs of the communications and information technology sector, says Rameshananda Vaidya, NPC member.

Among the approaches suggested one would make information and communication technology widely available, first to institutions such as schools, hospitals, etc, and then to local communities and eventually to families. “That’s the only way we can avoid creating another digital divide within the country,” says Vaidya.

NPC Vice-Chairman Prithvi Raj Legal tried to brush off charges that there was lack of co-ordination between NPC and the Ministry of Science and Technology, saying the two documents would complement each other. IDRC-Canada and the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) provided financial support for the preparation of the strategy.

The papers can be downloaded from <http://www.nepalnews.com>.



Free at last: kamaiyas from Kanchanpur as road workers.

Stock market bullish

Nepal Stock Exchange (NEPSE) Index gained a record 42 points last week reaching an all-time high of 416.94 when the market closed on Friday. The market is riding on the soaring commercial bank stocks, and is further buoyed by expectations of bonus share issues. According to regulations, all commercial banks with less than Rs 500 million paid up capital have to upgrade it by the end of this fiscal year. The market expects banks to meet this requirement by issuing bonus shares and making new rights offers.

Last week Everest Bank announced both bonus and rights shares after which the price of its stock shot up by 32 percent, from Rs 1,080 to Rs 1,425. Another small bank, the Bank of Kathmandu too has reported profits, and consumers expect bonus issues. The market reflects not only the anticipation of bonus shares but also the liquidity in the market, says Dambar Prasad Dhungel, chairman of Security Board, the regulator. "There are few investment opportunities and even bank interest rates have gone down. Hence the interest in stocks." Not everyone expects the boom to last. "We're waiting to see if this can be sustained or not," says Parameshwor Malla, a broker.

Sending food via Tibet

Nepal Food Corporation has begun transporting food grains to Upper Mustang through Tibet instead of flying it in. On 11 August, the first consignment of 138 quintals of rice was despatched to Lomanthang. This route is cheaper by Rs 1,500 per quintal than sending it by plane and then carried on mules.

Trucks take 15-20 days to complete the round-trip to Lomanthang and back. NFC sources say the government had originally planned to use Tibet's road network to supply food to other mountain districts also but only the supply to Lomanthang worked out cost effective. The government spends around Rs 200 million every year transporting food to deficit areas, most of which lie near the Tibet border in the mid- and far-western regions.

PATA dismayed

The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Nepal Chapter has expressed shock over the imprisonment of three Indian tourists for possessing Indian 500 rupee notes.

The tourists from Goa were arrested at Thankot for possessing IRs 71,000 in 500-rupee bills. The Kathmandu District Court ordered their imprisonment. Since the new fiscal year beginning 16 July, it has been illegal to use IRs 500 bills in Nepal. This came some years after the Reserve Bank of India began refusing 500-rupee notes from Nepal, believing the bills are used for money laundering and for financing illegal activities in India through Nepal.

PATA says the three students should be sent home because both tourist organisations and the government have not made adequate efforts to inform Indian tourists about the new law. It adds that it is "dismayed" over government inaction "to mitigate this harsh decision of the Kathmandu District Court". Meantime, the Supreme Court has issued a show-cause notice on a petition filed to question the new government rule. The petitioner argues that it goes against the Foreign Exchange Act that allows the use of Indian currency, which, he argues, also include the Rs 500 bills.

Jobs on the Net

Websoft International Pvt Ltd, a Nepali company, has launched a website to allow job-seekers to find jobs using the Internet. The site allows job seekers to post resumes and look up listings.

As an introductory offer, potential employers are provided three months' access to the resumes and can also list jobs they have to offer. Resumes are posted free of charge. www.nepaljobs.com is already up and its developers say more features will be added in the future.

VAT registrations

The number of businesses registered for the Value Added Tax reached 18,377 in the fiscal year 1999/00, about 600 more than what the government had planned to bring under the new arrangement. Kathmandu topped the number of registrations (7,105) followed by Biratnagar (1,381) and Bhairawa (1330). By law, all businesses crossing the investment threshold of Rs 2 million are required to register with the VAT department. VAT collection for the same period was Rs 10.42 billion, very close to the budget's target of Rs 10.46 billion.

NIC bank opens fifth branch

The Nepal Industrial and Commercial Bank Limited opened its fifth banking office in Birgunj last week and is planning another in Butwal within two months.

The Biratnagar-based bank, which also has branches in Dharan, Birtamod and Kathmandu, says it has collected Rs 2.5 billion in deposits and invested Rs 1.76 billion as loans so far.

Norvic installs Cathlab

The Norvic-Escorts Health Care and Research Centre, Nepal has established a state-of-the-art Cathlab, a technology that allows doctors to pinpoint cardiac anomalies with better accuracy.

The machine provides a magnified screen image of the heart and coronary arteries and helps to identify the problems causing chest pains, defective valves and heart attacks, says a press release. The cost of coronary angiography on the Cathlab costs about Rs 25,000, which is about the same it would in India, but saves travel costs and mental stress, it adds.

The machine has an on line connection with the Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre in New Delhi allowing simultaneous diagnostics both in Kathmandu and Delhi, in addition to specialist consultations. Since May 1999, Norvic has provided cardiac consultations to over 4,500 patients. It is estimated that 10 percent of the 23 million Nepalis are susceptible to heart ailments.



How to kill foreign investment

The Japanese Prime Minister came and went, but we are hard pressed to figure out what was actually achieved. No new Japanese companies said they are willing to invest in Nepal. And no wonder, maybe the Japanese had got a whiff of the gazette notification of 7 August of "An act to amend some Nepali acts".

With one fell swoop, the government has got rid of the only incentives foreigners investing in Nepal ever had. Gone are sops like tax holidays, now the taxman will not spare either dividends from investments made in industry, or profits earned through exports.

The timing was all wrong, coming as it did even as a new Income Tax draft bill was being discussed. What sense does it make for our own the government to tax exports so soon after winning that hard-fought attempt to scrap the four percent special additional duty on Nepali exports to India?

Nepal led the way in South Asia providing extra benefits to foreign investors in the early 1990s, a move emulated by other countries in South Asia. The Industrial Enterprises Act and Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Act were among the most investment-friendly in the region and it was these that attracted the Lever, Colgate and Dabur to Nepal.

The new rules come at a time when joint-venture companies had begun voicing concern that Nepal's much-touted low taxation rates were nothing but an illusion. Foreign

How come no one is bothered by the new regulation that will kill foreign investment in one fell swoop?

industries are required to set aside 10 percent of profit as bonus and 5 percent more for employee housing. With the taxation on dividends, companies will actually be shelling out half of the profits of the company.

The non-taxation of interest on income for foreign companies financing commercial borrowings had made at least some foreign financial institution ready to lend to Nepali companies. Nepal has no credit rating to speak of, and has to

but the private sector's silence. Our own businessmen are quiet because they will benefit if foreign investors leave. The majority in the Nepali private sector has always resisted foreign competition: that is why we have yet to see an international insurance company or a global travel agency or international law firm.

Domestic players like to reward themselves more with profits obtained out of evasion of taxes rather than profits from business. Nepal has not been able to do much with industrialisation, it is trade has been our focus. Incentives were provided to give people willing to take risk and invest in industries with longer pay back period than trade. The new policy will make people think again.

Does the government even understand the repercussion of such a short-sighted decision? Or is it to busy smacking its lips in anticipation of the cash that will ensue? Where are the bilateral chambers of commerce? Where are the bilateral and multilateral donors? Why is everyone silent on this issue? Euro-orient, are you sure you know what you are doing? ♦

Readers can post their views and discuss issues at arthabeed@yahoo.com

The timing was all wrong, coming as it did even as a new Income Tax draft bill was being discussed.

pay four to five percentage points over and above the going international lending rates. Lenders add tax on interest income to their rates which means that the cost of capital will increase. This would make infrastructure more expensive where we have to resort to foreign loans.

The sad story, however, is not the government's attitude

Grindlays Gazette

INTEREST RATE UPDATE

NEPALI RUPEE	CURRENT%	PREVIOUS%
Call Money Avg.	5.30	5.00
81 Days t/bill	5.09	5.17
91 Days t/bill	5.38	5.38
365 days t/bill	6.18	6.16
Repo rate	5.88	5.88

Average rate of T/bill in the secondary market moved slightly lower due to aggressive bidding by some banks. Market liquidity seems to be adequate this week but is expected to remain excessive in the near term as banks are expected to offload long dollar positions. T/bill rate is expected to move in slightly downward next week to 5.25-5.40 pct range.

FOREIGN CURRENCY

	USD	EUR	GBP	JPY	CHF
LENDING	9.50	6.25	6.00	1.38	5.00
LIBOR (1M)	6.62	4.55	6.03	0.34	3.22

CURRENCY UPDATE

AG/USD	CURRENT *	WK/AGO	%CHG
OIL(Barrel)	31.96	30.95	+ 3.26
GOLD(Ounce)	276.65	275.85	+ 0.29
GOLD(NPR)	7115	7095	+ 0.28
EUR	0.9059	0.9016	+ 0.48
GBP	1.4912	1.5010	- 0.65
JPY	108.11	108.68	- 0.52
CHF	1.7213	1.7240	- 0.16
AUD	0.5892	0.5793	+ 1.71
INR	45.65	45.73	- 0.17

* Currency bid prices at 12.30 p.m on 21/8 - Source Reuters

Oil : World price clambered higher as OPEC looked certain to deny parched markets any extra oil ahead of its official policy meeting early next month.

Currencies : The market had very little reaction to news that America's trade deficit had expanded to a record high of \$ 30.62 billion in June as soaring oil prices offset the benefits of stronger exports. Major currencies are expected to stay range bound next week.

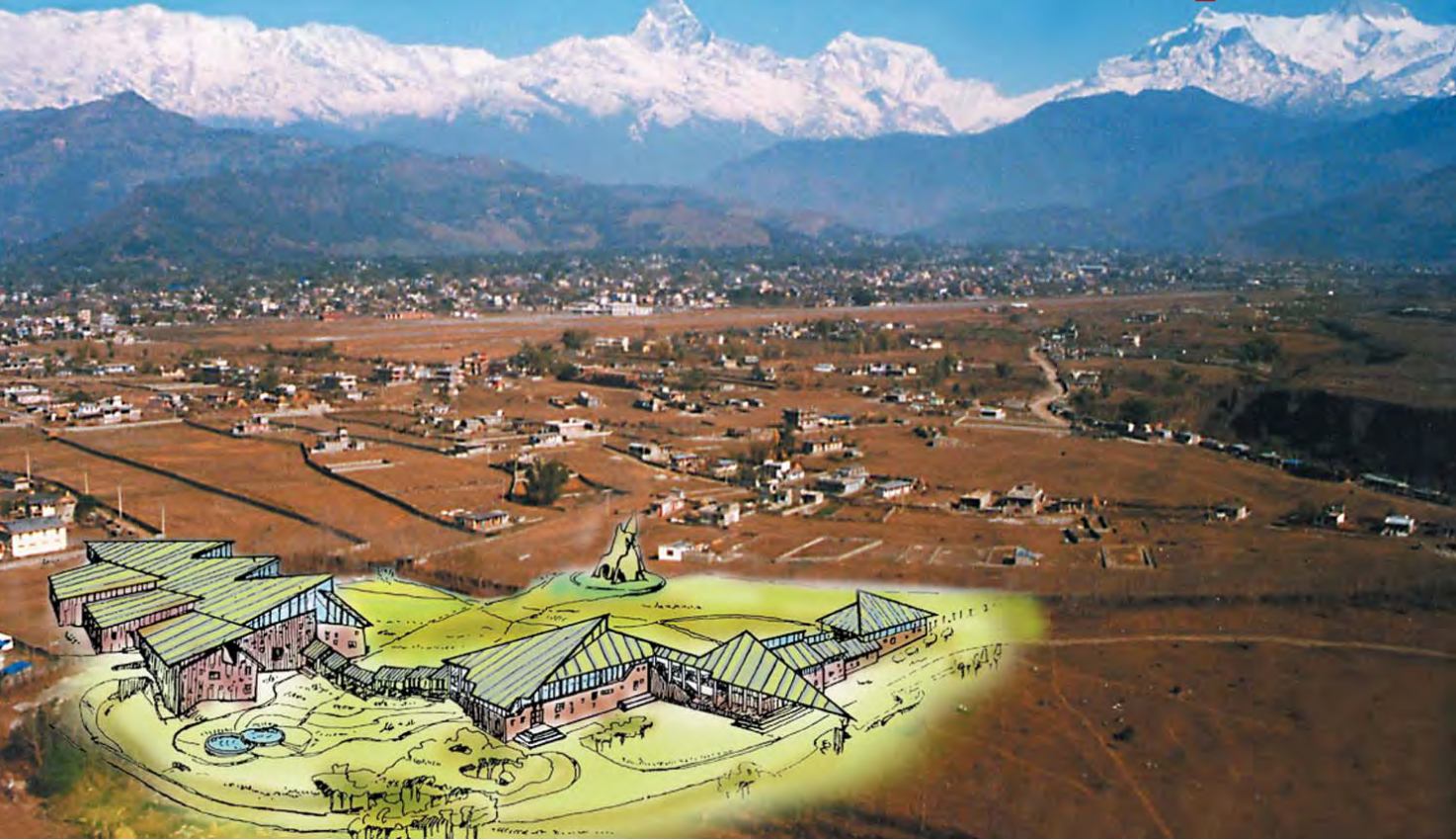
INDIAN RUPEE OUTLOOK :

The India rupee ended on a firm note on Monday amid modest volumes as main financial center Bombay was closed for holiday and traders said it could post further gains after a central bank deadline to exporters to convert their foregin currency. The rupee has now recovered almost one percent from its all-time intra-day low of 46.08 struck on August 11. It is however 4.7 percent off its January level.

INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES FOR NEPALI TIMES

	6 months	1 year
SAARC countries	US\$25	US\$48
Other countries	US\$40	US\$75
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Pokhara's new museum piece



Dogged by delays, the International Mountain Museum in Pokhara is now scheduled for opening in 2002.

RAMYATA LIMBU IN POKHARA

With all these mountains, why do we need a mountain museum? Sceptics scoffed at the idea. Cynics thought that an international mountain museum in Nepal, a country where good ideas have more obstacles thrown in their path than bad ideas, was just not believable.

But it was a great plan. Right there in one of the most stupendously scenic places on earth, in the heart of the Himalaya would emerge a museum that would educate and inform people about the genesis of the greatest mountain range in the world, its formation, its human geography and future challenges. The scope was immense. But could a cash-strapped country take on a project of considerable cost, challenge and commitment? Could it be properly managed and adhere to the highest international standards?

It took seven long years, but the museum is now finally taking shape. It is not just a plan, there is now an actual physical, tangible presence. Flying into Pokhara, the museum is impossible to miss from the air: a massive frame of steel, concrete beams and the unique shape that seems to mimic the Annapurnas in the backdrop.

The basic design of the complex reflects the ethos of the surrounding mountains. The structure is markedly

contemporary in style, and it sprawls over a considerable part of the six hectares of the government-donated land 5 km south-east of the city centre.

"It is a complex structure, especially the roof which fans out to look like a range of mountains," says architect Narendra Pradhan, who says his idea has all along been to integrate the surrounding scenery with the design so that visitors inside will first see the most important exhibit of all: the natural view to the north of the Machhapuchhare pyramid and the magnificent wall of the Annapurnas.

Designed by a consortium of architects from the Kathmandu-based firms of Sanday Kentro Associates and Narendra Pradhan and Associates, the \$1.1 million museum is the pet project of Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA). The museum will not just feature the Himalaya, but will look at other mountain ranges in the world, expanding the perspective of Nepali visitors.

Nearly complete is Phase I which is a cavernous structure designed to house the Hall of Himalayas, the Hall of International Mountains and the Hall of Expeditions. By the time the roof is fitted, doors and windows installed, and the glazing completed in December 2000, the museum will be ready to house exhibits from past exhibitions, geological specimens, archival photographs, satellite maps and other paraphernalia.

The NMA, which derives most of its income from levying fees on climb medium-sized "trekking peaks" in the Himalaya has raised tariffs on 18 peaks between 5,555m and 6,654m from 1 January this year. A major portion of the added revenue is to be spent on the project.

Still, that will not cover Phases II and III which are only at the blueprint stage. Although the overall design looks ultra modern, the details have been "indigenised". Most modern buildings in Nepal suffer seriously on the maintenance and cleanliness fronts. Keeping local behavioural patterns in mind, the toilets and cafeteria are situated outside the main hall, an aspect visiting French and Japanese experts found hard to digest.

"Of course it would have been more convenient to have the cafeteria and toilets inside like in other museums. But we don't want the smell of fried momos and unsanitary urinals permeating the exhibition halls," says Pradhan.

Because Pokhara is a major tourist destination, the museum is expected to get outside visitors, but it is designed primarily to make Nepalis more aware of their mountain environment. Tourist traffic is also highly seasonal, and the locals will keep visitors levels up all year.

The International Mountain Museum in Pokhara is the dream project of former NMA president, late Dawa Norbu Sherpa. When Dawa Norbu died in 1997, work on the museum came to a standstill. The shock of his death and funding shortfalls forced NMA to postpone the museum's scheduled opening during Visit Nepal Year 1998. It is now targeting 2002, which has also been declared the International Year of Mountains by the United Nations.

"Better late than never," says NMA president Tashi Jangbu Sherpa. "Of course there's still a

long way to go. The interior has yet to take shape. Models of mountain ranges have to be built on scale, exhibits have to be acquired."

While requests for exhibits from international alpine clubs have met with positive responses, there is concern that Nepal's own collection may be deficient. The basket of the first ballooning expedition over Everest lies in a derelict condition at the

NMA premises in Kathmandu.

Dawa Norbu had managed to raise money from well-wishing alpine groups the world over, and largely from Japan, to get the museum off the ground. When complete it will have exhibition halls, an audio-visual hall, a gift shop, an exposition area, parking facilities and outdoor landscaping.

"It will be the biggest of its kind. There's no example to follow, nothing on this scale," says Sarosh Pradhan, Museum Project Director. Close in concept would probably be the Banff Mountain Centre in Canada, a mountaineering museum in Trento, in Italy, the Swiss Mountain Museum in Berne and the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling.

Following a public tender, Nepali museum experts have submitted scripts for the museum. "The script is extremely important. It reflects the spirit of the museum, tells the story of the exhibits," says Sarosh Pradhan, who does not divulge the quality

of the entries so far. Rather than wait for a grand launch, the museum will have a series of soft openings, beginning this autumn with French climber Maurice Herzog opening a book exhibition to commemorate his classic climb of Annapurna I in 1950, the first-ever ascent of an 8,000 m peak.

Minor hiccups and major set backs aside, the museum will be completed by 2002 which has also been declared Destination Nepal Year. "Sometimes you have the money, the equipment, the support, everything. But this is Nepal—things still take forever," says an NMA official.

An example of the petty problems that lead to delays include the inability of the museum's core committee to decide whether the special roof material flown in from Malaysia should be clamped down or screwed in.

It was decided to go for the screws, and the work finally resumed in July. This is the kind of delay that the museum project cannot afford if it is to open as planned in 2002. ♦

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Trusses are going up in the Hall of the Himalaya (above). An architect's rendition of the final building superimposed on an aerial photograph of the site (top).



Phashion-sashion

Fashion boutiques have blossomed in Kathmandu, and women are saying "We're Free!" with their clothes.

ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

When Bhanubhakta came to Kathmandu from Tanahu, he was taken aback by the elegance of Kathmandu ladies. The bard even penned some verse extolling their beauty, and the fragrant *gunakeshari* tucked in their hair. Imported fashion is not new to Kathmandu as any old picture of Rana women dressed like their Victorian sisters in billowing black gowns will show. With cable television, the modern Kathmandu woman is also moving in step with global fashion trends.

Tailor? What is that? Today, they are known as designers and it has become a status symbol to be seen inside some of the more trendy boutiques in the capital's swanky streets. But it is also the rising demand for high fashion that explains the proliferation of boutiques in Patan and Kathmandu.

"There has been a cultural revival in Kathmandu," says

Srijana Singh Yonjon a prominent fashion choreographer. "Women these days are becoming more outgoing as well as independent and thus need plenty of outfits to change. Boutiques provide them with moderately priced but effective dresses that suit their personality."

Okay, but is it affordable? We went to find out and the conclusion is that although with the elegant mannequins and smooth interiors they look expensive, Kathmandu's fashion boutiques are a bargain hunter's paradise. Free enterprise has something to do with it, prices are low because of the competition. They are generally lower than in Bangkok or Delhi anyway. And Nepali fashion designers with their certificates from design institutes abroad seem as good as the best in the region.

The stretch of road from Bagmati bridge to Jawalakhel alone has over a dozen fashion boutiques. Some of them are poor clones. But in most



"Teenaged girls come up to us and demand designs taken straight from *Vogue*."

others, the elegant gowns and salwar kameezes are exquisite and affordable.

Chaahat was set up in 1996, and is run by a Rajesh Dhakwa who holds a fashion design degree from Singapore. Chaahat's clientele ranges from teenagers and aspiring models to Kathmandu expatriates. Don't be intimidated by the plush look, you'll find what you want, the way you want it and for the price you want it. But aren't these things supposed to be expensive? Rajesh shakes his head: "I wanted to change the fashion trend in Kathmandu as

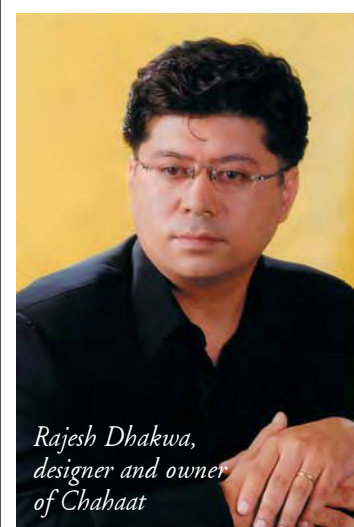
well as get to the middle-income level people."

Right, but what about this wedding outfit here for Rs 38,000? Rajesh says it is one of those custom-made ones, and quickly points to a cosy-looking cotton shirt for Rs 500, and a simple but comfortably-flowing salwar kameez for Rs 1,500.

Up the road, Akarshan is a boutique with aspiring talent. Its designers are younger, but as talented. Sangeet Shrestha runs this shop with his sister, and both are very encouraged by the public's growing desire to dress well. Obviously Kathmandu had a huge pent-up demand for comfortable, functional and elegant clothes that is just now being filled.

Still, there is some ways to go. Sangeet says: "The current fashion trend is not specific and flows with the season."

Patan may have taken the lead in innovation, but Kathmandu is not far behind. Although the really expensive



Rajesh Dhakwa, designer and owner of Chaahat

Top: velvet beaded evening wear (Rs 2,300)

Centre: printed lycra salwar kameez (Rs 2,300)

Right: netted shirt (Rs 650) with tweed suit (Rs 2,300)

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boutiques are located in the proximities of (where else?) Kathmandu's Champs Elysee: Durbar Marg, these cater more to the visitor and expat market. But the more affordable ones in Bag Bazar, New Road or Lazimpat have a largely Nepali clientele.

Fashion Den in Lazimpat has been around for nine years and it was tough going at first, says Mamata Tulachan, designer and owner. "Many have come and gone, but this business requires patience," says Mamata. "It hasn't always been so easy for me either, but the reason why I

am here today and some of my competitors aren't is because I stuck to it through thick and thin."

Mamata believes in the Nepali touch, and includes hand-painted designs of indigenous Kathmandu figures, ranging from the Kumari to Swayambunath. But do Nepalis wear this ethnic-chic stuff? Mamata says her business proves that they do. "Nepali women these days have become more fashion conscious, and aren't just satisfied with

regular salwar kameez and saris. The evening gown has arrived!" Prices range from as low as Rs 500 to 7,000 depending on whether you want one of the hand painted ones, or the simple but graceful shirts that

fashion designing in Nepal because of the pool of talent. Boutiques like Kanta's, Daffodils and Akarshan mainly cater to the Nepali taste and they specialise in embroidered salwar kameezes, suits, and rich

Kathmandu's designer fashion boutiques are a bargain hunter's paradise

might just go along with trousers.

Designers Clothline is operated by three young fashion designers Padma Malla, Bina Shrestha and Rakshya Hirachan. The boutique faces Kasthamandap Bazaar, but Padma is not worried about competition from across the road. "Readymade garments everywhere are the same and people are searching for variety these days. Teenaged girls come up to us and demand designs taken straight from *Vogue*." Padma will be putting on a fashion exhibit with the theme "Essence of Women" in the Radisson Hotel in September, and thinks there is certainly a lot of scope for

evening gowns. Their prices range from Rs 500 and above. The cuts seem to made for the traditional Kathmandu home-maker yearning to be free.

The tourist ghetto of Thamel has its slew of boutiques, but these cater mainly to the tourist market. Most of them sell rough cotton stuff preferred by the trekkies that hang around there. But there are some up-market silk and pashmina shops as well.

So what of Kathmandu's expatriates and other transients? Where do you go? Durbar Marg provides a choice of excellent designs and quality well suited to your taste and (ahem) purse.

Yashmine's is one that has put Nepal on the global fashion map. Run by designer

Yashmine Rana, a French fashion designer who did her graduation from the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. Yashmine has been presenting her creations in the world fashion capitals: Paris, New York, Tokyo, Sydney, Berlin, and Zurich since 1984.

Yashmine's collections are original, innovative with simple forms with bold silhouettes. Yashmine does wonders with luxury fabrics and has given the Nepali "dhaka" a contemporary twist.

Nearby is Wheels, run by Shakun Sherchan. True to her personality, Shakun believes in bold statements with natural fibres. The fashion business now has a turnover of more than Rs 10 million a year and provides direct employment to more than 3,000 people and the business is growing exponentially. That's all fine.

But we just have to say this: now that Nepali women are free, can the men be far behind



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How information and ideas spread on the Net



Memes are the very building blocks of culture. Not every meme is a big idea, but any meme with the right stuff can go global once it hits the Internet.

memes, as are fashions, political ideas and moral codes. They are copied from one person to the next, planting fundamental beliefs and values that gain more authority with each new host. Memes are the very building blocks of culture. Not every meme is a big idea, but any meme with the right stuff can go global once it hits the internet.

For anyone who has not seen the Hamster Dance (sic), its appeal is difficult to explain. A page of crudely animated hamsters singing the same few notes

over and over (and over and over) would not get past the planning stage at most dot.coms. But for Thomas Lotze, a student at Harvard University, it was a mammoth web hit. He found the hamsters on a page that included porn banners and copied them over

to his own smut-free site in February of 1999. Within two weeks it had attracted 13,000 hits, spawning a phenomena that lead to hundreds of imitators, an unofficial single by UK group the Cuban Boys and, that most American indicator of success, threats of legal action for breach of copyright.

The hamsters' creator, Deirdre LaCarte, runs a company promoting the rodent ravers (they now live at www.hamsterdance2.com). In a medium where the replication and redistribution of information happens faster than you can say "I Kiss You", the most unlikely things thrive.

Once memes may have travelled at a steady rate, taking hold with pernicious stealth. Now contagious ideas can be delivered direct to millions through newsgroups, mailing lists and websites. Dancing hamsters and Mahir do not hold the meme monopoly. It seems that just

about any daft idea will do. Cartoon frog in a liquidiser? If it has not already been in your mailbox it soon will be. Internet Cleaning Day? That comes around at least once a year. Potato-powered web servers? The best Internet memes replicate quickly, gaining authenticity and achieving mythical status as their familiarity grows. Endorsement by "legitimate" media sources cannot harm either, but why is the Net such a fertile breeding ground for memes?

British computer scientist Garry Marshall, author of a paper entitled "The Internet and Memetics" (<http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/Conf/MemePap/Marshall.html>), believes that the Internet is a "full-blown memetic system" from the encoded network protocols it employs to the ways people use it.

Even the processes the Net uses to route information as individual packets are analogous to the passage of memes in the real world. How people communicate over the Net contributes, too, encouraging conversation that packs the most amount of meaning into the smallest amount of space. The best Internet memes share the same characteristics as the best traditional memes. They can just be copied and distributed more quickly.

The plethora of urban myths and legends on the Net suggests that memes can be manufactured. Just include components that combine elements of truth with a catchy or "contagious" idea.

An email that recently came

back into circulation titled Save Sesame Street asks respondents to petition the government against budget cuts to the PBS public TV network in the US.

Students at the University of Chicago started the meme back in 1995 when Big Bird and his chums faced real peril in the form of diminishing funds. While the financial issues were quietly resolved shortly after, the "petition" continues to replicate at a rate of knots—only the dates get changed. A case where direct action worked far too well.

Although many engineered memes are pranks or hoaxes, webmaster John Stoner is trying to spread a meme to encourage people to act more kindly towards one another. His site at www.generosity.org urges you to "do something good for someone, like pay the toll of the car behind you in the tollbooth, or buy a treat for the next person who walks in the door at the bakery". You are then encouraged to leave a card for your beneficiary stating: "This is for you! Now it's your turn: go do something good for someone else. Do it anonymously. Pass on this card."

The basic definitions for what constitutes a "meme" remain fairly constant, but debate rages about whether memetics is a science, a philosophy, a part of cultural studies or simply a buzz word to describe something we were all aware of anyway.

But by discussing the topic, even to question its validity, you spread it. Memetics is itself a meme... ♦ (The Guardian)

KARL HODGE IN LONDON . .

Ideas and information may replicate themselves in the same way viruses spread. Self-replicating packets of information were christened "memes" (pronounced "meems") by author Richard

Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. And you will recognise them from countless urban myths, email "spams" and Net-born heroes.

These are much more than just whispers being passed down a line. Religion and ritual are

Viral marketing

For advertisers who sweated bricks trying to reach a resistant audience of net users, "viral marketing" is the Holy Grail. One of the most high profile examples is Hotmail.

From an Internet start-up offering advertising supported free email, Hotmail signed up 12 million subscribers in its first 18 months. Hotmail succeeded by embedding a meme into every message sent, a single line at the bottom saying: "Get your private, free email at <http://www.hotmail.com>", turning every Hotmail user into a rep for the product.

Amazon.com's affiliate programme is another success story. Affiliate users place links to Amazon in their pages, receiving a percentage of revenue for

every sale that comes from linking through their sites. By letting you choose specific categories to advertise, even specific book titles, the site lets you tailor the advertising to the content of your own pages.

People do not like advertising, but they do like things that are free or entertain them. The Internet is, in principle, both free and entertaining. It also has the advantage of a structure that makes it easy for ideas to spread quickly. By "piggybacking" marketing messages onto messages people actually want, they become memes, multiplying invisibly and rapidly through the population. ♦

Macchendranath meets cyberspace



Sitting in my little office sailing through cyberspace, desperately seeking to stay in touch with the rest of the world I suddenly lost contact!

Oh, damnation, another power cut somewhere, but I've got to reach my client before they go on vacation for a month. Why in heaven's name can't NEA get it together. Don't they know how important this immediate communication stuff is? How is e-commerce going to prosper with power-cuts? I must write to the IT pages and complain.

I call up my server, "What's the problem?"

"We're down," comes the answer, "and will be up in two-three hours."

Oh, great, don't they understand we're talking milliseconds here? I might lose three sales by then. How can an email service provider be without a phone line. I have to get across by tonight, so I jump into a taxi and head towards Jawalakhel where my ISP is.

Reaching Jawalakhel I'm greeted with the mother of all traffic/people jam I've seen since Woodstock. What in heavens...? Oh, yes, it's Bhoto Jatra. Finally reach the intersection and get my turn to circle the roundabout—but where is the chariot? And as I look around, lo and behold, there is the Macchendranath leaning on my ISP's building (Worldlink) and cutting off the phone lines. The chariot is swinging low, its turret nuzzling gently on the facade. One of the guide ropes had snagged in the transformer on the street and Lord Macchendranath had simply called it a day.

Now it was all clear. This was a bolt from heaven, a Sign, a message from on high of the impermanence of earth and sky. What is here today is gone tomorrow, yes even the Internet will one day grind to a halt.

Jai to Bungadayo, Karunamaya, Chenresie, Rato Macchendranath. Long may you bring down the lines of cyberspace and invite us to join you in unity in the community. Thank you for making us stop and come together in celebration, in spite of this mad age of gigabytes and nanoseconds.

Jimmy G

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Kumaratunga's gamble for peace



Having failed to win the support she needed to change her country's constitution Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga is now pinning her hopes on the outcome of October's General Election.

LUCIEN RAJAKARUNANAYAKE
COLOMBO - Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga is nothing if not determined in the labyrinthine politics of her island homeland. Even a botched attempt on her life, which left her injured and for the moment contained behind a tight security screen, has not quenched her ambition to reach a peace deal with the island's Tamil community.

Her chosen vehicle has been a new constitution aimed at giving equal rights to the Tamils and seeking a negotiated end to the war with the separatist Liberation Tamil Tigers (LTTE). But the ride to date has been hugely bumpy and the end of the road is still out of sight.

Having failed in recent weeks to secure the two-third majority needed in the Sri Lankan Parliament to amend the present constitution, Kumaratunga is now pinning her hopes on the outcome the country's general election to be held on 10 October.

And her party machine will be looking at the numbers very carefully. Earlier this year Kumaratunga thought she had the constitutional change in the bag. She needed 16 votes from the opposition United National Party (UNP) which negotiated with her for nearly five months, agreed, eventually, on a document which it called a historic consensus, only to throw the whole thing back in her face in an abrupt about turn.

Observers muttered darkly about bribery, cash inducements and other forms of political skullduggery but what is real is that the UNP U-turn came after its leader Ranil Wickremasinghe met with a high-ranking contact of the LTTE in Singapore.

President Kumaratunga remains unabashed. In a television interview after the UNP scuppered her plans she said she would have the new

constitution adopted within two months of her People's Alliance party winning the October election—fighting talk from a President whose government has only had a single-vote majority in parliament the past six years.

There is no doubt the government has lost some of the popularity it had in 1994, when Chandrika Kumaratunga took power ending 17 years of UNP rule, but the president still has

her own appeal which she hopes will help restore the fortunes of the PA. The minority Sri Lanka Muslim Congress has already said it would support the PA and although the Tamil political parties in parliament have yet to decide what role to play it will be difficult for them to oppose the president after the effort she made on behalf of the Tamil community.

But the Tamil parties remain on an uncertain and dangerous path. Those living in the areas in north and east Sri Lanka controlled by the separatists live in the shadow of the gun. The LTTE could force Tamils not to contest the elections unless they pledge support for the separatist cause or the gunmen could stop people voting altogether or force them to vote a certain way, almost certainly in favour of the UNP.

Kumaratunga's main strengths are her own personal popularity and the weakness of her main rival, UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, who in recent years has led his party to defeat in seven local government and provincial elections and in his failed bid for the presidency. His position is shaky with his leadership now challenged from within the ranks of his own party.

However the president may not be able to exploit her personal popularity to the full ahead of October's poll. Since the LTTE tried to kill her, just three days before the presidential election last December, tight security has virtually confined her to her official residence which means that with rallies and meet-the-people walkabouts ruled out she will have to campaign, via the electronic media, specially TV.

While the spin doctors argue the restrictions on her freedom could win a sympathy vote, the UNP begun working on bread-and-butter issues and hopes to capitalise on the rising cost of living and the devaluation of the Sri Lankan rupee. It will also target the Kumaratunga administration over corruption and the failure of its economic policies.

Bread and butter perhaps but there is substantial public opinion that accepts the economic costs of the war against the LTTE and having now pushed the LTTE forces back from their positions in Jaffna further military gains would certainly put the President and her government right on top. In the absence of such a success, the outcome of the October poll remains for the moment too close to call. ♦

(The Observer)



Aid agencies under threat

Security in Indonesian West Timor is continuing to deteriorate with international organisations reporting threats by Indonesian-backed militias. Militia members threatened to attack members of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in West Timor if militia leader Pedro Pereiro is not released from jail in East Timor, a UNHCR spokesman said Friday in Geneva. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said it will abandon a building in the West Timor border town of Atambua after militia members threatened to burn it down. On Wednesday, the UNHCR withdrew international workers from refugee camps in West Timor after three workers were attacked. Both the UNHCR and IOM representatives say Indonesian armed forces have tried to dismantle road blocks set up by militias on a road often used by East Timor refugees returning to East Timor from West Timor. But the road blocks were replaced within an hour. Attacks by West Timor-based militiamen across the border in East Timor, which in 1999 voted for independence from Indonesia, have increased in August. (dpa)

Japan looses on crime

Official statistics show that Japan is in the middle of its worst crime wave in two decades, and its police service, which has been plagued by scandal, seems unable to meet the challenge. Although Britain and America remain far more dangerous, the crime wave has prompted calls for action by politicians and generated anxious editorials in the media. While the number of offences has increased, the arrest rate has declined. In the first six months of this year, the national police agency (NPA) investigated 1.1 million crimes, an increase of 12 percent in the same period of 1999, and the first time that the half-year figure has exceeded 1 million. During this period, the number of arrests fell by more than 20 percent to 281,000, prompting police officials to acknowledge that investigators can no longer keep up. The admission—from a police service at a low point in terms of morale and public respect—is seen as a plea both for sympathy and extra resources. Since late last year, the NPA has been embroiled in a series of scandals, culminating in the resignation of the country's top police officer after revelations of a high-level cover-up of drug abuse by a senior officer. The arrest rate for murder, burglary and arson may have dropped by 12 percent from January to June, but for many Japanese, the most alarming crimes have been those which the police have been powerless to stop: random acts of violence by youngsters offending for the first time. Experts are divided on the causes of this crime wave. Some say it is a reflection of the hardships of a country still struggling to emerge from its worst recession in 50 years, but many psychologists blame a lack of morality in an affluent generation over-exposed to violence in video games, television and comics. Nationalist political leaders, however, have blamed the immigrant population. (The Guardian)

No change in Burma junta's posture

CANBERRA - A leaked cablegram from the new Australian ambassador to Burma paints a bleak assessment of the prospects for an improvement of human rights in the country, saying "there are clearly no grounds for optimism" the military will ease its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement. "The (junta) shows no signs of being interested in relinquishing power," said the 21 July cable, sent by Ambassador Trevor Wilson to his government. "There are clearly no grounds for optimism in the SPDC's unchanging approach to opponents of the regime. Nor do observers in Rangoon detect any signs that the regime is willing to bend in the direction of political dialogue or any hints that meaningful movement towards transition to a freely elected government is contemplated," said the cable. "Rather, all the indicators point to the regime being determined to remain in power at all cost, allowing only marginal reforms in the economy and society. Neither the appointment of a new special representative by the UN Secretary-General, nor other attempts at more direct engagement with the regime have yet resulted in many substantive improvements," the cable warned. The cable, written just four days after the first in a series of Australian government-sponsored human rights workshops for 75 officials in the military regime, increases pressure on the Australian government to withdraw its funding of the controversial U\$100,000 training programme. The Director of the Sydney-based Burma Office, Dr Myint Cho, says the cable confirms what the democracy movement has been saying all along. "The human rights situation is not improving," said Cho. "We don't believe the human rights training programme will be successful in assisting with change. The Australian government should work with the international community to create constant pressure to force the regime to enter into dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi." The Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Laurie Brereton, has renewed his call for the Howard Government to cancel its human rights training programme with Burma's military regime. "The political assessment by Australia's Ambassador to Burma demolishes the credibility of the Howard Government's engagement with the Burmese military," he said. Another multi day workshop for 25 officers of the Burmese regime is scheduled for next month. While the United States and the European Union remain committed to isolating Burma's military regime with sanctions, Australia has broken ranks and sought to engage the regime in the hope it can be encouraged to ease its tight grip on the Burmese democracy movement. (© IPS)

COLUMN

by AL GORE

A green decade for America and the world

WASHINGTON - We have to make the next 10 years the Environment Decade, in America and around the world. We can and must turn the tide against pollution and global warming. It is increasingly clear that global pollution risks not only our quality of life, but the very fabric of life itself.

There are still powerful apologists for pollution who will always argue that pollution is the inevitable price we pay for our prosperity. That is false. Worse, it invites and excuses a politics of environmental irresponsibility.

If we make the right investments, if we make the responsible choices, we don't have to choose between the economy and the environment. America's environment is cleaner than it has been in a generation. At the same time, we have entered the longest period of economic growth in our entire history.

It is not extreme but mainstream to champion cleaner fuels, and energy efficiency. It's the right thing to do, and it's the responsible thing to do.

When it comes to our air, our water, and the Earth itself, we all have a responsibility to look not just to ourselves, not just to the politics of the moment, but to future generations—to forge a future where none of our children have to worry whether the water they drink or the air they breathe is safe and pure.

It has been seven years since we first joined with the leading auto-makers to create the Partnership for a New Generation of Vehicles. Our goal was to work with the best manufac-

When it comes to our air, our water, and the Earth itself, we all have a responsibility to look not just to ourselves, not just to the politics of the moment, but to future generations.

turers to come up with vehicles up to three times more efficient than what we had then—with no sacrifice in performance, safety, or cost.

We can now look forward to a date in the next three or four years when cars with far greater fuel efficiency will be mass-produced. We can also look forward to the day when families will be able to buy cars with remarkable new fuel cell technology—engines that run on water, and are likely to increase fuel efficiency by 400 percent. These vehicles will create no greenhouse gas emissions at all.

This new partnership pursues a strategy against pollution that must reach across our economy, and all around the world in the coming years. A strategy that sees people as allies, not adversaries, in meeting environmental challenges. An approach that builds upon our responsibilities to one another—to the air, the water, and the land that we hold in common, across borders and across the generations.

In the Environment Decade, we must form partnerships with every industry that will produce fuel-efficient trucks that the critics said could never be made. We have to make the free market the friend of the environment, not its enemy, and invest more in conservation, in renewable energy, and in fast-growing technologies that combat pollution.

We need to enforce tough, realistic, achievable standards to reduce smog and soot, and protect our children's health, and expand the right to know of every area where pollution of any kind threatens public health. We have to protect our forests and our rivers and our precious public lands.

We must meet persistent global environmental challenges. We must continue to ban the chemicals that eat away at our ozone layer and expose us to dangerous, cancer-causing ultraviolet rays. If we face this challenge head-on, we have the prospect of completely closing the ozone hole over Antarctica over the next two generations.

We must take decisive steps—not just in this country, but everywhere—against global warming. Though we don't yet have a consensus on this issue, I believe that the United States has to ratify the Kyoto agreement, which would commit us to significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

We must ensure that all developed and developing nations are committed to doing their part. We can combat global warming in a way that creates jobs by aggressively pursuing a global market for new energy technology that is expected to reach 10 trillion dollars in the next two decades.

These challenges are not easy. And for me, they have never been without controversy.



More than a decade ago, when I set out to write "Earth in the Balance", I was warned that it was politically foolish to make so clear a commitment to environmental protection, written down in black and white, for all to see.

But for me, a commitment to the environment has always run deeper than politics. We have to do what's right for our environment, because it involves all of our lives—from the simple security of knowing that our drinking water is safe, to the more ominous thinning of the ice caps at the top of the Earth.

The earth is in the balance. Save it we can, and save it we must, for this is the great responsibility of our generation. Now let us resolve to finish the job. ♦ (© IPS)

(Al Gore is the Vice President of the United States and the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in the November elections.)

Debt relief is "fraud": Oxfam

International efforts to cut the debts of the world's poorest countries are leaving some paying tens of millions of dollars more to their western creditors, according to the British charity, Oxfam.

The aid agency described the debt relief package which the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are offering Zambia, one of the most impoverished countries in Africa, as a "fraud". Confidential papers from the IMF obtained by Oxfam show that Zambia's interest payments are set to rise from \$ 136 million in 1999 to \$ 235 million in 2002, even though it is expected to enter the west's official debt relief programme in October this year. The increase is due to payments falling due on a large IMF loan.

Oxfam has called for the fund to write off all the money owed to it by Zambia over the next few years, instead of offering the country limited debt relief. "The ultimate yardstick for measuring debt sustainability must be human need, rather than abstract financial indicators during creditor horse trading," Oxfam's director, David Bryer, said.

Debt campaigners have slammed the slow progress of the World Bank and IMF's heavily indebted poor countries initiative since Western leaders promised in June last year that 25 countries would benefit from debt relief by the end of 2000, and that \$100 billion in Third World debt would eventually be written off. With four months to go to the deadline, only nine countries have formally qualified for debt relief and none has received any debt cancellation.

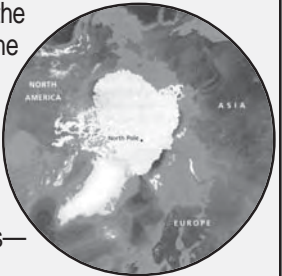
Oxfam's figures show that in six African countries—Mali, Burkino Faso, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi—debt payments will outstrip spending on basic education even after the countries have graduated from the debt relief programme. *(The Guardian)*

Warming shortens polar shipping route

NEW YORK - Arctic warming could not only make it possible for tourists to visit the North Pole but could also completely change international shipping. Both the North West Passage along the northern coast of America as well as its Siberian equivalent, the North East Passage, are generally free of ice in the summer months.

The sea routes from Europe to Asia, which until now have been around the Horn of Africa or the Panama Canal, could be reduced by about 4,000 km. Finnish shipbuilders are already planning an ice-breaking oil tanker to use on the new routes.

The dramatic extent of the melting of the polar ice is shown by surveying results. The surface of the permanent ice at the North Pole—which does not melt in summer—has declined by 14 percent over the past two decades. That is the equivalent of the size of France. Scientists say that the North Pole could be free of ice in 50 years—if the trend continues.



This has no influence on coastal regions or on sea levels. Ice such as the northern polar ice which floats in water displaces the same volume of water that it later would occupy in a fluid state—just as a glass full of Coke does not spill over the top when the ice melts. But whether the ice will actually melt at the North Pole is something which scientists cannot predict—because the reasons for the melting are still in dispute. *(Die Welt)*

German work permit for asylum-seekers

KARLSRUHE - The German government decision to restore the right to work to asylum-seekers comes at an especially appropriate time, in the middle of a vigorous public debate over ways of combating rising neo-Nazi and neo-Fascist right-wing extremism.

The conservative government of ex-chancellor Helmut Kohl had prohibited asylum-seekers from working in 1997. The far right wouldn't like the new government move at all, but the labour minister plans to issue new directives in four to six weeks that will restore the right to work.

Dieter Wiefelspuetz, domestic policy spokesperson for the Social Democratic Party's parliamentary delegation, said the decision to give back the right to work to asylum-seekers was not just a matter of "human dignity." Asylum-seekers have to be able to work to support themselves, he said. The arguments in favour of letting asylum-seekers work, said Wiefelspuetz, go well past questions of human rights. Employed asylum-seekers don't need welfare. Asylum-seekers who do the dirty work that Germans think they're too good for. Asylum-seekers work will have an easier time integrating themselves into German society because they'll be a part of that society.

The last German government prohibited asylum-seekers from working to make life in Germany seem less attractive to potential economic refugees. The current government is looking for a compromise—freshly arrived asylum-seekers will wait for a year, then be eligible for a work permit. That's a realistic approach because by then immigration authorities should have been able to make tentative decisions about whether to grant the refugee's petition for asylum or to deport him. *(Sueddeutsche Zeitung)*

Japan revs up for Security Council

TOKYO - Japan is stepping up its longstanding campaign for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, as the second richest country in the world prepares for the UN Millennium Summit in New York next month.

The Japanese government sent out letters on 14 July to 162 member nations of the United Nations, asking their leaders to mention reform in their speeches at the UN summit scheduled to start 6 September, according to Japanese media. Reform of the United Nations has been listed as an issue for discussion at the summit.

In Dhaka last week, Mori said, "United Nations reform is an urgent and necessary matter. I will emphasise this at the UN Millennium Summit."

Japan's wish to be included on the Security Council has been a long-time quest, and a pillar of its foreign policy for more than a decade. The other permanent members of the Council are China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Tokyo believes that having a permanent seat on the Council is natural given its high financial contributions to the United

Nations. The country gave more than 20 percent to the UN's ordinary budget last year—the second largest contribution after the United States.

In March, impatient and younger political leaders from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party even proposed that Japan's voluntary contributions to the United Nations be cut unless it is made a permanent member of the Security Council in the near future.

Apart from being the world's top donor—\$ 15.3 billion in overseas aid in 1999—Japan believes it is an important global player that must have a permanent seat on the Council. Japan wants international prestige—a crucial factor for a country that suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of the Allied forces when it surrendered in 1945 at the end of World War II.

"This is the reason why Japan remains dissatisfied with its much-envied economic clout," Hiroichi Matsumoto, a respected commentator on international affairs explains, referring to perceptions of Japan as an economic power with much less political influence. ♦ *(IPS)*

Who says women are the weaker sex in sport?

SHARON KRUM

Marion Jones wants to be the Mark Spitz of the 21st century. The 24-year-old track and field star plans to win five gold medals at the Olympics next month, setting a new record in athletics the way Spitz, with seven in 1972, set it in swimming.

It may well happen, for Jones, currently the fastest female in the world, clearly has the talent. But she also has a confidence, many say arrogance, that is pushing people’s buttons in a way unseen before. From the beginning, Jones did not dare to suggest, wish, or hope she might win five medals. She declared it a certainty.

Even to a public shed of many sexist attitudes about women being non-starters in sports—witness the hysteria following the US women’s football team winning the World Cup, the Spice Girls-like adulation for the Williams sisters at Wimbledon—Jones is too much.

She is too boastful, too assertive, too cocksure she will bring home the gold. In short, she is displaying character traits Americans ascribe to male athletes. But in men the chest-thumping is admired. In women, it is shocking, and has led to Jones being called arrogant, pretentious, and a certain word that rhymes with rich.

But Jones won’t apologise for her bravado, and nor should she, suggests Colette Dowling, author of an audacious new book about women and sports, *The Frailty Myth*. Though not published until September, it has already sparked a heated debate in the athletic world.

The reason there aren’t more Marion Joneses, Dowling says, is not because women can’t or

Women still play three sets of tennis while men play five, because the myth that women are too “frail” to play long games persist.

won’t compete. Rather, she paints women as victims of a vast conspiracy to keep them off the playing field. To blame are: culture of misogyny, parents and teachers who pander to gender stereotypes, and a media that rewards women for looking weak and feminine, and excoriates them when they display strength.

“Women have been excluded from so much in life because of the frailty myth,” she writes. “First we believed we were weak. Then we began to suspect that we weren’t but kept getting told that we were. Then we began proving that we weren’t and were mocked as men because we were strong. Women have thrown themselves over hurdle after hurdle during the course of the past century, demonstrating extraordinary physical powers and skills, and still we’re being kept back for no reason other

than we’re female.”

The book is a powerful clarion call to both sexes, demanding they abandon the old saw that women are the weaker sex. She argues that the belief female-equals-frail has done untold damage to women’s health, self-esteem, and social status. Physical equality, she warns complacent feminists, is the real final frontier of women’s liberation.

To make her argument stick, Dowling draws on research in exercise physiology, which proves there are no biological reasons for women to stay off the sporting field. Dowling explains that before puberty, boys are neither taller nor heavier than girls. And whereas it was long thought that only boys experienced a muscle-building surge of testosterone during puberty, girls do too. Modern medicine knows this, so why, she asks, given their ability to develop athletically, did women never venture beyond sewing, cooking and Barbies?

Dowling says the answer is cultural, and continues to be. Frailty has long been sold to women as feminine. “Strength has a withering effect on male identity. To salvage men’s failing sense of dominance (post-industrial revolution) women were encouraged to scale back their own physical development.”

The frailty myth endures, despite the leaps women have taken in professional sport in the past decade. Men need to keep women weak, off the football field and out of the boxing ring, so they can continue to feel strong. They do this by criticising muscular women, announcing they are unfeminine, whispering that they are probably lesbians. Teenage girls in particular, living in a culture that glorifies whippet-thin models as the benchmark in femininity, sexiness and glamour, quickly get the message that boys don’t like muscles and strength.

But to suggest that if men suddenly declared big muscles sexy, women would storm the football field is plainly untrue. As the noted American anthropologist Helen Fisher argues in her book *The First Sex—The Natural Talents of Women and How They Are Changing the World*, girls will never be as obsessed with sports as boys, because evolution wires women to be co-operators, not competitors.

“Nobody pushes girls into the doll corner—they go there naturally,” she says. “Throughout their lifecycle, girls show more tendency toward nurturing activities, and we believe this is linked to the production of oestrogen. It’s amazing how many people have to try to prove that everything is all socialisation, whereas biology and culture go hand in hand.”

Women are drawn to activities that involve nurturing and co-operation, and men

competition, and that is pure biology. You can’t discount it.”

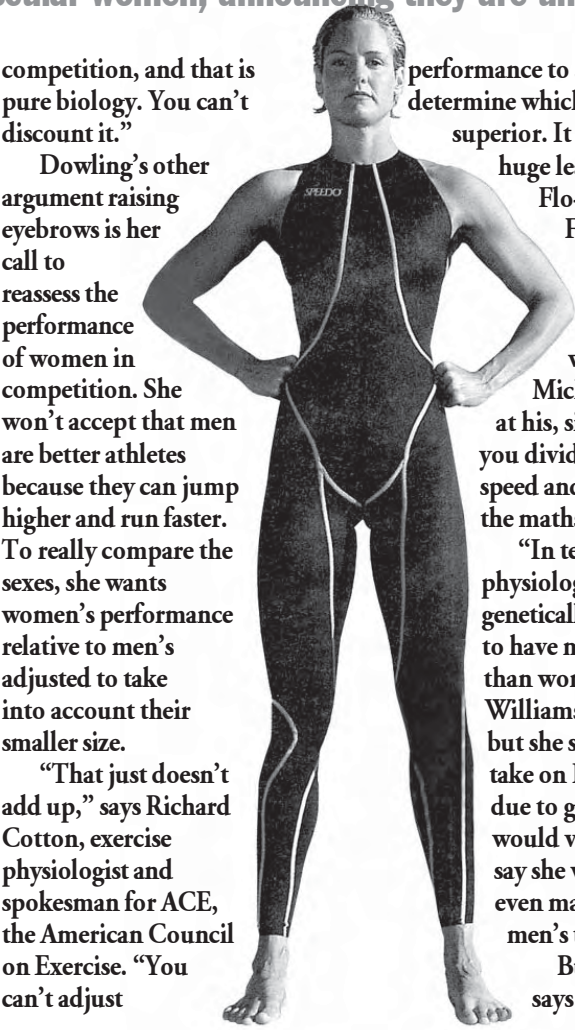
Dowling’s other argument raising eyebrows is her call to reassess the performance of women in competition. She won’t accept that men are better athletes because they can jump higher and run faster. To really compare the sexes, she wants women’s performance relative to men’s adjusted to take into account their smaller size.

“That just doesn’t add up,” says Richard Cotton, exercise physiologist and spokesman for ACE, the American Council on Exercise. “You can’t adjust

performance to size to determine which athlete is superior. It would be a huge leap to say that Flo-Jo, (sprinter Florence Griffith-Joyner), at her peak, was faster than Michael Johnson at his, simply because you divide her size and speed and average out the maths.

“In terms of physiology, men are genetically predisposed to have more strength than women. Venus Williams is a big girl, but she still couldn’t take on Pete Sampras, due to genetics. I would venture to say she wouldn’t even make the men’s tour.”

But Cotton says Dowling is



correct in that biology doesn’t prevent women pole vaulting or boxing. “But we do encourage girls to stay indoors because as a culture we don’t like muscular women. Yet I think that stereotype is breaking down.”

This Dowling concedes too. She waxes lyrical over the strides American women have made in sports since 1972, when Title IX, an amendment to the Civil Rights Act guaranteeing equal funding for girls and boys sports, went into law. (Then 300,000 girls were in team sports. Today there are 3.2 million.)

Throw in society’s attitudes breaking down about women athletes and television networks smelling profits in women’s games, and Dowling admits these seem like glory days for women athletes. So why isn’t she doing a victory lap? Simply because she doesn’t see the battle won. Remember, women still play three sets of tennis while men play five, because the

myth that women are too “frail” to play long games persist.

Dowling does applaud the increased participation and acceptance of women in sports, but cautions against celebrating. In the year 2000, female athletes are still encouraged to feature in nude team calendars to prove they are feminine. The fashion MTV culture, she contends, tells girls to rein in their athleticism.

She also fears a new kind of male backlash as more women, inspired by Marion Jones and that strip-to-her-bra soccer player Brandi Chastain, buck the “weak girl” stereotype, get onto the field, and then, shock, horror, take it over. But Dowling urges women to ignore the sneers, lace up their trainers and tackle the sexism head on. “As different beliefs supporting the frailty myth shatter, one after another, the change will not be trifling. It will alter the way women walk the earth.” ♦ *(The Guardian)*

soaltee ad

ManU in 'Mandu



ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

With satellite and cable, the whole world is in the grip of football fever. And your favourite team need not be your small hometown club. Today, there are Arsenal fans in Asan, Juventus fans in Jawalakhel and Chelsea supporters in Chabahil.

But it is the show-biz type glamour of Manchester United that has grabbed Kathmandu

fans like nothing else—all thanks to the integration of sports with global media, merchandising and worldwide Internet fan networks. No place on earth is too far to follow your favourite team's progress through the leagues.

Manchester United is the most famous football club from the land of the craziest football fans, England. It is famous all over the world for celebrity

As the English Premier League kicks off, Manchester United fans, like this rickshaw puller in Thamel, are awake past midnight watching their favourite team on cable.

players, flamboyant tackles and attack combinations. And Nepalis too have succumbed to the ManU bug.

Patan entrepreneur Devendra Bahadur Shrestha is an avid ManU fan. "I used to be a supporter of Arsenal during the 'Road to Wembley' era but after ESPN started airing the premier leagues Manchester United got my attention. It's one of the most well behaved teams in the game," he says. (Road to Wembley used to be broadcast weekly by Nepal TV before the cable days.)

"There are other good teams to watch for as well, but the victors will surely be ManU."

ManU fans are all praise for their team's stylish and accurate passes, their offensive formations which never seem to fail. "When David Beckham files a cross it's sure that either Dwight Yorke or Andy Cole will head it in," says Devendra. "I'm sure that ManU will take the cup this year. With

Sir Alen Fergusson as their head coach, ManU's got to be the best."

Many Kathmandu fans are glad that British law did not allow media baron Rupert Murdoch to buy ManU. "It's no fun if a British Club is owned by an Aussie," says Devendra, who doesn't seem to know that

Murdoch now has US citizenship. "The whole aura of being a truly English Club changes and besides I'm sure it would make it more commercial and would spoil not only the name of the club but also the game."

Kathmandu fans are football purists. Sandeep Shrestha is a computer programmer and a Liverpool loyalist. He thinks ManU may be better, but Liverpool has won more than 18 premier leagues till now. He asks: "Can ManU beat that?"

Sandeep is among fans who think that ManU is too confident for its own good. Players like Beckham are too arrogant and just because he is married to Posh Spice he thinks he is a star. "He's more into uplifting his celebrity image than his game. In contrast look at Jeremy Rednap or Gary Maclaster from Liverpool. They are among the

best strikers," he adds.

College student Bishal Karki says it doesn't matter if ManU players are equally well known off field—as long as they win. "No one can beat Manchester United. It's the best club and has always been so," he says with an air of finality. "Look at Bobby Charlton in the 60s, Eric Cantona these are all ManU figures."

ManU fans are

all praise for their team's determination and never-say-die attitude. Also, they like the fact that ManU players are mostly English players, despite the induction lately of French sensation, keeper Fabian Barthez. Says Bishal: "If you watch other clubs they have all these foreign players. There's no fun in watching the EPL if it's filled with foreign players."

It's not just Kathmandu men who are ManU fans. Garima Rana is a law student and thinks Manchester has been consistent over the years and has good pace. She says, "Their game is a lot more exciting and the players have passion. I'm also impressed by the way they handle the media pressure." Garima is a sports buff, and watches cricket, women's volleyball and football on cable. Adds Garima: "In the final analysis, what is important is that ManU always delivers at the end of the day."

Another Manchester United fan is college student Niren Rajbanshi, who thinks the team will definitely win the English Premier League. "There are other good teams to watch for as well but the victors will surely be ManU," he says.

Fans admit that ManU gets a lot of media hype, and sometimes this can be counterproductive, but they say their team gets media attention because they play well. Fans are keeping fingers crossed for ManU, but they say the chances of Liverpool, Chelsea and Arsenal cannot be written off just yet. ♦



Higher, faster, stronger with dope

Doping for gold

Drug testing: how it works

1. Athletes selected for testing—randomly or based on final results
2. Selected athlete is notified by a doping control officer immediately after the event and accompanied by an officer from then until testing is over
3. After medal ceremonies and press conference, athlete provides urine sample under direct view of officer
4. Samples put into two containers marked A and B and couriered to laboratory for tests on both
5. If test is positive, IOC Medical Commission conducts a hearing and advises IOC Executive Board, which decides on sanctions
6. Athlete can appeal to the IOC Court of Arbitration

Jamaican sprinter Merlene Ottey tested positive for nandrolone in Lucerne, Switzerland, in July 1999

Drugs will be simmering beneath the surface at the Sydney Games. The criterion for success these days is not just winning—but being able to win without being found out.

winner of seven Olympic medals, was found to have tested positive for nandrolone in Lucerne, Switzerland, in July 1999. Determined to establish her innocence so that she could compete in her final Olympics this year at the age of 40, Ottey appeared before an IAAF arbitration panel in June and succeeded in clearing her name.

And Javier Sotomayer of Cuba—the first high jumper to clear 8 ft (2.4 metres), gold medallist in Barcelona and current holder of the world record (2.45 metres)—is alleged to have tested positive for cocaine at the Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada, last year.

On the one hand it appears ludicrous that an athlete of Sotomayer's reputation—who has taken eight doping tests this year and more than 60 during his career—would want to take a recreational drug like cocaine. Jose Ramon Fernandez, head of Cuba's Olympic Committee, says, "Cuba believes in Sotomayer's innocence, his integrity and his ethics. Cuba knows his conduct and the respect he enjoys around the world."

On the other hand, cocaine is not just a highly addictive drug which gives thrill-seekers a dangerous 'high'. It is also a potent stimulant which can give that extra little fillip to a determined high jumper's flip. It is noteworthy that although new methods for detecting performance-enhancing drugs are being

discovered, there is a definite reluctance by sports authorities to accept them—or even to encourage research into their development.

Whether it is Canada, Cuba or China, the initial reaction of authorities is always to appear dumbfounded when one of their athletes is accused of taking drugs. They defend their charges vigorously, saying it was a conspiracy, a naïve error in testing or even a mix-up of samples, and casting aspersions on the motives of the accusers until it is proved beyond any doubt that the allegations are true.

Take the case of Werner Reiterer, a former Australian Olympic discus thrower and gold medallist at the 1994 Commonwealth Games, who rocked the sporting community when he decided to document his experiences. In his book, *Positive*, published in July, Reiterer makes the claim that many Australian athletes and swimmers were taking drugs. "Here was I doping for gold," he writes, "another guilty athlete swallowed up by a massive sporting culture."

But in response the Australian Olympics Committee did not launch an enquiry—they simply arranged a meeting with Reiterer. He emerged refusing to name names, having been offered a position as Drug Educator at the Sydney Olympic Games. Everything is now forgiven.

Meanwhile, American athletes are

rarely caught out by a random drug test. This is not so much a sign that they are squeaky clean, but that they benefit from a quaint rule that exempts them from drug tests if they are 129 kilometres away from the test site. It is not uncommon for sportsmen, on being tipped off, to get into their cars, drive a safe distance away and make a telephone call to say that they are unavailable for testing.

Could international sports survive in the 21st century if all those taking drugs were caught? I think not. I don't believe that the likes of McDonald's or Coca-Cola or Ansett Airlines would want to pour their money into a drug-infested Olympic Games. The authorities know this too, hence cover-up after cover-up.

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games," said Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, "is not to win but to take part—just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle."

The Baron would be saddened if he knew that after 100 years of modern Olympics, it appears that the criterion for success these days is not just winning—but being able to win without being found out. ♦

(Gemini News)

BARNEY REID IN MELBOURNE

There is an ill wind blowing through the world of sports these days. Ever since star sprinter Ben Johnson of Canada was stripped of his 100-metre title at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, after being caught taking banned drugs, a host of world class athletes have tested positive for "performance enhancing substances".

Several have recently faced daunting

struggles to clear their names. Linford Christie, Britain's 100 metres gold medallist at the 1992 Barcelona Games, allegedly tested positive for the anabolic steroid nandrolone (used to stimulate muscle growth) at a meet in Dortmund, Germany, in February this year. In late August, the International Amateur Athletics Federation served a two-year ban on him.

Jamaican sprinter Merlene Ottey,

SAVING FAITH

by DESMOND DOIG

The 'people' tree



Kathmandu's most popular rendezvous and viewing stand

On Kathmandu's New Road, one of the city's busiest shopping centres where the foreign goods are, is a large peepal tree. In its shade are a platform and several small votive shrines, mostly Buddhist that probably date to the time when an old Newari *bahal* or community courtyard, that collapsed in the devastating earthquake of 1934, occupied the area. The engaging old Rana general who had been responsible for clearing the earthquake damage, described it as 'ruins, ruins everywhere, piled right up against the old palace walls and as far as one dared to look. Like a warscape.' It was he who had planned the New Road and the modern complex about it, but he was not sure about the *bahal* of the peepal tree.

Perhaps there had been one. Perhaps there had been a temple. He would have to consult his old photographs and plans. Though we met again, the subject of the Peepal Bot, as the place is called, was forgotten, and then the wonderful old gentleman died, taking his secrets with him.

Today, Peepal Bot is Kathmandu's most popular rendezvous and viewing stand, a place where if you loiter long enough you will almost certainly meet or see people you wish to. Like editors of local newspapers. Street politicians. The relative or friend of somebody who knows somebody in high places; perhaps just the person who might help you find a job.

Here, on occasion, descend singing and pamphlet-scattering devotees of ISKCON, contrasting with those who gather to mildly demonstrate for some reason or another. Here one might meet the self-styled Global Emperor, dressed in an antique black overcoat, black Nepali cap decked out with beads and badges and carrying a tattered file filled with dictats written in his own hand on the backs of gods' pictures. Rumour has him an agent of some sort or another, a government spy keeping tabs on traffickers in drugs and black money or visa-less foreigners, or, and this is the story I like best, the deranged Romeo who was denied the love of a high-born lady.

He himself, claim some of the legends about him, came from a leading family of Kathmandu. He often stops me and in the most gentle of confidential whispers tells me that Krishna has the veto. At each meeting, I am enriched by a vivid god picture and one of his messages to mankind which he begs me to publish in the world press.

The Peepal Bot attracts shoeshine boys and hawkers of everything from cigarettes to snacks. Worshippers come at all times to make offerings or pray when there's no one about or to fight their way through the late afternoon and evening crowds. The platform is often used for Newari *bhoj* or feasts, participants suddenly squatting in circles under the tree, oblivious of the crowds passing by. Here people come not only to see but to be seen. Like the dying breed of New Road cowboys who wore natty denim outfits, high-heeled boots, hats or eye shades, transistors and Walkmans, and subconsciously affected John Travolta habits. One of them featured in a BBC television film—banned in Kathmandu—to the music of *Saturday Night Fever*.

That phase is done. Today's New Road cowboys, if indeed one can call them such, and a cautiously emerging breed of New Road cowgirls, prefer imported tee shirts, coloured neck scarves, and discreetly tailored clothes and hairstyles. In the winter it is down jackets or leather.

But mostly, the Peepal Bot is a meeting place for those who come to read the latest newspapers and magazines and discuss the day's news. There was, until recently, a convenient and well patronised bookshop just across the street, which to the dismay of the confirmed Peepal Bot habitue, was torn down and replaced by a slender concrete highrise, innocent of newspapers and magazines. Nothing daunted the hawkers who moved in, so one can buy every popular Nepali, Indian and foreign publication under the peepal tree and find an immediate and informed coterie to share or argue your views with.

For years, a cafe that looks almost like a tree house in the branches of the Peepal Bot, has endeavoured to attract the potential customers below. And perhaps in recognition of all that concentrated reading, there are a fair number of shops selling reading glasses about the small square, and just a reach away is the busy office of Nepal's largest newspaper group.

Apart from being something of a Mecca to Indian tourists who on occasion can be seen picnicking in the Super Bazaar, New Road is the ceremonial highway to the old Royal Palace and Durbar Square. I have seen the present king, and his father before him, ride to their coronations in splendid horse-drawn carriages, escorted by mounted guards, flag bearers, priests, officials, military bands and troops in olden and modern uniforms, to return leading magnificent processions of elephants. Every year the king passes by in a more simple motorcade to witness the beginning of the Kumari *jatra* and receive the blessings of the virgin goddess.

An imposing bronze statue of the Rana prime minister who had the road built, occupies a traffic island to gaze down the length of his creation. How modern the street must have appeared to him then, almost too wide in its absence of traffic and today's crowds.

One wishes he could have had a preview of New Road as it is today, with its policeman chasing away parking cars that narrow the Street, and its huge tourist coaches that require a traffic lane to themselves. Once they came overland from Europe, emblazoned with exotic signs and promising enchanted tours. The ghost of one still haunts the car park near the old palace. It was called the Chapatti Express. Whatever could have become of a coach with so unlikely a name? ♦

(Excerpted with permission from *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, HarperCollins, 1999)

ART REVIEW

by MANJUSHREE THAPA

IN RAPTURE AND DEVOTION

Banira Giri is one of the most poised and commanding Nepali poets of today. Her work can be immensely energetic as it sweeps the reader along in a flood of words towards their frothy and eddying conclusions. Lively, sonorous, and rich with cultural allusions, Giri's erudite poems can be intimidating to the reader unfamiliar with Nepal's myths and narratives. Yet their reclamation of cultural territory is decidedly modern in concern. She connects with the past in ways that are fresh and unexpected, and she allows the reader to find contemporary meaning in our heritage.



The poem below reveals the intensely private sentiment of devotion. Though this piece can be read metaphorically in a sacred context, I prefer a more literal interpretation; the narrator speaks, to me, of the touch between a man and a woman, meeting in rapture. No authority, no cultural sanction is required, here, to purify their touch. Rather, this touch is rendered sacred by the longing of the one who is touched.

For me, this poem recalls, by contrast, Parijat's classic novel *Sirishko Phool*, whose intellectual anti-heroine Sakambari dies after being kissed by a soldier and rapist. That work—relentlessly nihilist in outlook—shows the damage done to a woman's being by the profane and unwanted touch. Giri's more hopeful poem celebrates the enlivening of individual spirit through the reciprocity of desire.

YOU TOUCHED ME: I'M PURIFIED NOW

You touched me
I'm purified now
To attain such purity—
is to become the golden-haired Sunakeshari maiden
bathing in Lake Mansarovar's redolent waters
on awakening from twelve years of sleep,
is to drop gold coins of experience
into the heart's treasure box,
is to make one's way along gardens
of marigolds and chrysanthemums,
is to have trust issue drop by drop
from a ceremonial bowl plated with hope

You touched me
I'm purified now
To attain such purity—
is to be showered by light on a dark moon night
is to have golden moonbeams spread over
the cascades of the Bagmati river
Those golden rays are intended perhaps
for filling the maiden's pitcher
for pouring onto her limbs
I don't know—
Is the moon purified by such unions?
Is the river purified, is the maiden purified?

You touched me
I'm purified now
To attain such purity—
is to have a woman released from a boulder
at the caress of Lord Ram,
is to see Ram taste a plum
already defiled at the mouth of his devotee Shavari
I don't know—
how our learned sages explain this
Was Ram purified by such devotion or was his
devotee purified?

(This and other translations of Giri's poems can be found in the upcoming *Himsheekhar* publication *From the Lake*, Love edited by Wayne Amtzis.)



The Peepal Bot this week, and (top) in 1981.

ABOUT TOWN**FILMS**❖ **Foreign**

The Hurricane - Kathmandu Mini Vision (226169, ext 512)
L'accompagnatrice - French feature with Charlotte Gainsbourg and Romane Bohringer at Alliance Francaise, Thapathali. Big screen. 6:00 pm. Free entrance. 1 Sep, Friday. 242832.

❖ **Nepali**

Bar Pipal - Bishwo Jyoti (221837), Ganga, Mailee - Goon (Kha) (520668), Krishna (470090), Ranjana (221191)
❖ **Hindi**
Hamara Dil Apke Pas He - Manakamana (225284), Gopi (470090)
Saitano Ka Honeymoon - Ashok Tera Jadu Chal Gaya - Goon (Ka) (520668)
Deewane - Kumari (414932)
Dhadkan - Jai Nepal (411014), Tara (476092)

THEATRE

❖ **Tuborg Maha Sanjh.** Comedy performance by the famous Nepali duo, Madan Krishna Shrestha and Haribansa Acharya at Royal Nepal Academy. Two performances, 'Nepal Bandh' and 'Salik', by Maha followed by other performances by renowned Nepali comedians including Raja Ram Poudel and Kiran KC. Tickets: 100, 200, 300, 500 and 1000. Available at the Royal Nepal Academy.
❖ **Doctor Knock.** Nepali adaptation of *Doctor Knock*, a French play by Jules Romains presented by Alliance Francaise and the theatre group Arohan at Royal Nepal Academy, Exhibition Road. Call 242-832 for information. Play continues till 3 September, Sunday.

MUSIC

❖ **Gazal** evening with Ghulam Ali at Nepa Dhuku, Radisson Hotel. 6:00 p.m. Rs 3000 per person. (Inclusive of elaborate Mughlai-Frontier dinner & complimentary CD of his first Nepali album, Sambandh). 1 Sept, Friday. 411818.
❖ **Ghulam Ali Live** at Hotel Radisson on 31 Aug and at the Royal Academy Hall on 3 Sept at 5:30 pm. Nepali and Urdu gazals. Tickets available at venue.
❖ **Jazz**
Live jazz by Cadenza at Upstairs Restaurant, Lazimpat. Every Saturday 7:30-10:00 pm.

FAIR

❖ **Book Fair** organised by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) at ICIMOD premises in Jawlakhel. 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Fair closes 31 Aug. 525313.

EXHIBITION

❖ **Platform Nepal Online Art Gallery.** Currently displaying black and white photographs of renowned Nepali photographer M.K. Panday. gallery@platformnepal.org

GET LUCKY!

Delicious way to Sydney
Dine at any restaurant at the Soaltee Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza from 10 August-14 September and win a two-way air ticket to Sydney Olympics 2000. Tel: 273999

ADVENTURE SPORTS

❖ **Mountain Biking.** First-ever Nepal National Championship Mountain Bike race in three phases: 9 September, 1 October, and 11 November.

Registration open till event eve. MTB theory and practice workshop follows after the championship by international cyclists. Check www.bikingnepal.com or contact Peter Stewart, Race Director at Himalayan Mountain Bikes, Thamel. 427427.

FESTIVALS

❖ **Teej. 1 September, Friday.** Women clad in red saris crowd Pashupati Temple from early morning. Unmarried women fast on this day in the belief it will help them find a husband of their choice. Married women fast for the well-being of their husbands.

Devotees believe Shiva and Parvati will bless them with a happy family life this day. Married women visit their paternal homes on the day. Daughters and sisters receive gifts from their male kin and an elaborate feast is prepared for them on the eve of Teej which is followed by cheerful celebration till midnight before the strict fasting begins.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com

FILM REVIEW**Mukundo**

Directed by Tsering Rhitar Sherpa

If Dreamworks had produced *Mukundo*, we'd have had Tripura Devi and Mahadev morphing and warping through cosmic vortices, all over the screen. Tsering Rhitar Sherpa has the advantage of living in Nepal, so he has no need to fake it. Instead, he turns his camera on the world around him. Spirit possession is not unusual in his world.

At the very beginning we are informed that the film is based on an actual occurrence. According to Kesang Tseten, who collaborated with Tsering on the story and also wrote the screenplay, the "actual occurrence" was summed up in a brief article in a Kathmandu newspaper some years ago stating that a *jhankrini* had killed her woman patient. Nothing more.

Starting with that tiny seed, the collaboration generated a tale that explores the universal dyad: Sacred-Profane, at the level of the individual and in the context of contemporary urban Nepal. *Mukundo* (Mask of Desire) is charged with a myth-like quality that recalls the classic 1950s film *Black Orpheus*, where an extraordinary event is made plausible by setting it against the Dionysian background of the Rio Carnival. In *Mukundo*, the Machhendranath Jatra is used to establish a similar atmosphere of communal ecstasy.

It is the myth-like quality of *Mukundo*, and the universal noble element in Gita the *jhankrini*'s drama, that allowed me to project onto her (whether Tsering and Tseten intended it or not) the dilemma of all women torn between society's constraints and their own human sexuality.

Gita (Mithila Sharma) is not born a shaman. The goddess Tripura possessed her while she was a traumatised unstable child-widow, unjustly blamed



Mask of Desire

for the suicide of the sickly demented boy she had been married off to. With training, Gita learns to channel the power of the goddess and acquires the title "Mata" and a reputation as a healer who can cure where doctors fail.

The film opens on Gita, surrounded by ritual paraphernalia and offerings, possessed: trembling with the power of the goddess and locked in combat with a malevolent spirit that she is exorcising from the body of a suffering woman. She is ferocious and imperious in her holy trance: intimidating, threatening, as she binds and physically thrashes her patient, to dominate the demon and drive it out.

Later, when the trance passes, we find Gita, an attractive, unhappy woman, at her mirror, removing her shamanic regalia and expressing

contempt for those she has healed. We learn that her special gift has become a heavy burden to her—she longs for the human love that is forbidden by her sacred calling. Her attendant priest (Nirmal Pyakurel) appeals to her social responsibility to use her gift to benefit others. He warns her that if she pursues her base desires, she will weaken the power of the goddess and that indeed, she herself risks being lost in the nether-world.

The movie then takes us into the home of the nicest, most uncomplicated, young family one can imagine. Dipak and Saraswati, with their two little girls, have made a simple nest of love in a small flat, on a small street in Patan. Dipak (Ratan Subedi) holds a steady job, as a night chowkidar, while the couple await the birth of their

third child. Saraswati's all-consuming wish for a son leads the couple (through a series of visually delightful scenes that feature ash-smeared sadhus, picturesque riverside shrines, and the magical landscape of Pashupatinath) to the feet of Mataji/Gita. The son that she prayed for has died, and Saraswati seems to be losing her mental stability.

The conflicted Gita, who is both the channel for a goddess and a flesh-and-blood woman, is drawn to the warmth that flows between the couple and magnetised by handsome Dipak's gentle masculinity. The Saraswati-Dipak-Gita triangle and Saraswati's oncoming breakdown is the dynamic that drives *Mukundo* to its stunning climax.

It's a great movie. There's so much in it. Is anybody going to accept Bollywood knock-offs from our Nepali filmmakers anymore? ♦

(*Mukundo* is being screened at 5.30 pm, starting 1 September, at Hivaratna Cinema Hall, Kalo Pul. The film is sub-titled in English.)

HAPPENINGS

Visiting Japanese prime minister Yoshiro Mori of Japan with panchakanyas during a welcoming ceremony at the Regal Suite of the Soaltee Crown Plaza on 23 August.



The Nepali fusion band, Maha Yantra performed on 26 August at the Russian Cultural Centre (l to r) Manose Singh (bamboo flute), Navaraj Gurung (percussion) sunil Bandawa (guitar).



Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansa Acharya in the premiere of their hilarious Gai Jatra comedy, *Salik*, currently showing at the Royal Nepal Academy.

HIMAL BOOKS



OFF THE BEATEN TREK

by KANAK MANI DIXIT



all but the most intrepid travellers. The pace in the villages is slower, the *bhatti pasalnis* have more time to chitchat, and there is general renovation and growth all over. Even the black half-mastiff who must be called “Kaley” at Tikhe Dhunga has the time to gamely accompany you on the killer climb all the way to Ulleri (2240m).

The other thing that accompanies you throughout the trek is the sound of water: dripping, pattering, gurgling, roaring, thundering. Nepal at this time of year is rainland. And as long as you know to scurry across a landslide section when the rain is coming down hard, you are okay. Watch the Kali Gandaki at it becomes of slighter girth as you travel upstream. You are now entering Nepal’s most celebrated rainshadow area starting at Thak Khola and to Upper Mustang. The tropical foliage of the southern slopes gives way to alpine, and still further up the stunted growth of dwarf juniper and thorn bushes.

There are other small advantages of walking these monsoon paths: any other time of the year the trail is littered

with mule droppings and the ammoniac stench is overpowering. In the monsoon the dung is washed clean by the rains. Also, being a mule highway, the Kali Gandaki trail is rocky and wide so the leeches can’t get at you if you walk along the centre of the path.

By the time you arrive at Jomsom and meet up with the throng which has been waiting for flights out for a week, and hence have stopped appreciating the scenery, you are truly in desert terrain. The splendidly fluted curtain of Nilgiri is (disconcertingly) to the south—yes, you are still within Nepal but the Himalaya forms the southern horizon.

At Muktinath is the sacred flame in close proximity to a gurgling underground brook that flows by. In this holy land, fire and water mingle. The trip so far is on the whole a low altitude trek, but if you have the energy and the interest you have the option of “taking a hike” upwards from Muktinath to Thorung La, the great watershed separating the Kali Gandaki and Manang

Valleys. At the top, you take a glass of water and pour half of it to one side and the other on the other side. The eastern half will flow down to Manang and the Marsyangdi to meet the Trisuli (later Narayani) below the great suspension bridge at Mugling. The western half of the glass will join the Kali Gandaki, and the water will be part of the process cutting the deepest gorge on earth. Water from two halves of the glass will meet again where the Kali Gandaki meets the Narayani at the holy sangam of Dev Ghat. It’s good to know your Nepali geography, particularly on a trek. ♦



Excerpt from Kanak Mani Dixit’s trek diary written just before he slipped and fell last week (see page 5).



PADAM GHALEY

YOUR WEEK

by KARUNA MAYA



ARIES 21 March-19 April
The joys of friendship are in the offing. Explore your inner self and energise days with creativity and drive. Contemplative thinking will help overcome mental barriers in relationship. Social service



LIBRA 23 Sept-23 Oct
Work becomes more interesting with some set boundaries. Some may take advantage of your good nature. Let others relate to you spiritually and mentally.



TAURUS 20 April-20 May
Try to add deeper expressions in romance. At work you need to open up your potential to its fullest. Don’t be satisfied with little. But don’t get too excited. Ease your mind.



SCORPIO 24 Oct-21 Nov
You will enter the week tense. But soon you will feel more in control and content on the decisions you have taken. Open up with a trusted friend your inner desires to make changes and reforms.



GEMINI 21 May-21 June
Don’t worry yourself too much about others not appreciating your efforts. Just do it. Wait for the right person to walk into your life. Best time to think about goals ahead.



SAGITTARIUS 22 Nov-21 Dec
Don’t let go of little things that might look irrelevant. Start acting on opportunities to achieve what you’ve been looking forward to. Romance will surround you this week. Remain expressive and joyful.



CANCER 22 June-22 July
Open up your inner ideas and notions with a close friend or loved one. Communication with fellow professionals at work is easy this week. A promising educational opportunity or new job offer is likely.



CAPRICORN 22 Dec-19 Jan
New efforts to improve your health and wellbeing. The mind-body connection you have is your ultimate strength this week. Your earthy nature will lead others along to the path of success. Share ideas.



LEO 23 July-22 Aug
Attachments with friends and family might be a burden this week. Look for ways of detaching yourself from desires lingering in you. Find ways to rediscover your lost self.



AQUARIUS 20 Jan-18 Feb
The week starts with vibrant and jovial atmosphere. Follow your thoughts and consciousness. You will feel more alert. Remain passionate about things you like. Romance will manifest itself naturally.

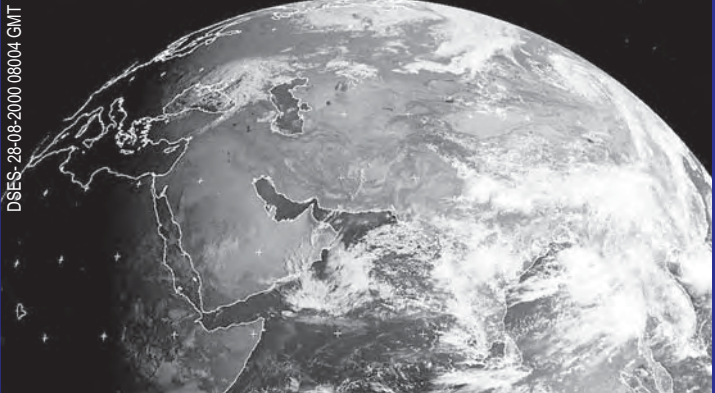


VRGO 23 Aug-22 Sept
Make an effort to do something nice for yourself at this time. Break some of the rules of life, indulge. Try bursting out the emotions and passion you’ve been suppressing. Don’t think too much about the future.



PISCES 19 Feb-20 March
Follow your heart. Gather momentum and reach out to people, they are waiting for you. Don’t prolong taking decisions, be a little impulsive. Sudden flares of energy will arise. Take yourself to the edge of all experiences.

NEPALI WEATHER



The low-pressure circulation over the southern Bay last week that we were expecting to hit the Bangladesh coast took a wrong turn and headed due west across the Deccan Plateau. This did not bring the expected resurgence of heavy showers over the Himalaya, but it affected central India very badly. We are now experiencing only the margins of this huge system. The Tibetan plateau is beginning to see the first effects of the annual southerly migration of the jet stream. This will gradually weaken the monsoon. But look out for heavy localised showers and night drizzles.

KATHMANDU

Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
30-18	29-17	30-17	30-17	30-18	30-18	29-18

ups ad





Funny Side Up

by Kunda Dixit

After the excitement of the Yoshiro Mori visit—the shortest ever to Nepal by a visiting chieftain—Nepalis can now get back to the serious task of nation-building. Nepal is forging full-steam ahead on the path of national development, and the Japanese knew they shouldn't take too much of our time.

They know we are a people in a hurry. This is why they promised to keep the visit as short as possible so that 300,000 Kathmandu commuters would be stranded in traffic at Tundikhel for only half a day.

Pretty soon they realised that Nepal was stubborn, so they pushed for a Japan-Nepal Mutual Non-Aggression Pact. No doubt, this is a very touchy issue. The Japanese remember all very well how we chased them out of Mandalay 50 years ago with our then weapon of mass destruction, the khukri.

By this time, the Mori delegation was looking very worried, according to our source. The Japanese said they would feel more secure if Nepal signed the CTBT and refrained from building nuclear weapons as well. Mori said, and here I quote from his press conference: "We humbly request Nepal to ratify the CTBT, it would send a very strong message to India and Pakistan." We said we'd think about it.

By now the Japanese were in panic, they'd have to go home empty-handed. There was one last point: Tokyo's request that Kathmandu put in a good word with the Big Five that it get a permanent Security Council seat. But the Nepali side played hardball, we

Arigatogozaimasu



Understandably, Mori-san was concerned that Nepal may be engaged in developing weapons of mass destruction. Unusually reliable sources close to the Prime Minister have told us that the Nepali delegation refused to budge on the weapons issue. "Nepal laid it out in no uncertain terms that as a sovereign nation with lots of territorial integrity (not to mention extra-territorial ambitions) we reserved the right to develop any weapon of our choice whenever and wherever we want," said the nameless source on condition of complete anonymity, who in actual fact does not exist and is a figment of my imagination.

would endorse it only if the Japanese opened their market to Nepali gundruk.

There was very little time left for other business. And an official statement said the talks were "satisfactory and fruitful" (half-ripe mango and guava slices were served), that the general tenor of the talks were "comprehensive and constructive" (Japanese contractors may be allowed to bid for Nepali infrastructure projects), and that there was a "free and frank exchange of views" (Mori gave Girijababu a postcard of Fuji-san, and Girijababu gave Mori a poster of Phewa Tal).

And on that note, Yoshiro Mori rushed out to the airport to catch his plane back. ♦

ambassador whiskey

NEPALI SOCIETY



After a gap of two years, Nepal's best-know comic duo, Maha (pronounced "Maw-Haw"), are back on stage before a Kathmandu public. Their latest productions, *Shalik* and *Nepal Bandh*, comes as a fitting answer to those who had predicted that the pair had lost their edge or that their political satire was losing its bite. Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansa Acharya performing at the Royal Nepal Academy Hall prove beyond doubt that they are still kings of Nepali comedy.

Shalik is replete with hilarious innuendoes about the dysfunctional anarchy of the post-1990 period, and how in many ways, the *chakari* system and ways of feudal oligarchy were more familiar, more predictable, and more comfortable for many Nepalis than democracy. Juddha Shumshere's statue on New Road (Hari Bansa) comes alive to meet a drunk and debauched elected leader (played by Madan Krishna) and the two exchange notes on concubines and the other perks of office.

Hari Bansa comes up with a superb impersonation of Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, complete with *paan* pout and walking stick in *Nepal Bandh*. Madan Krishna plays an ordinary citizen trying desperately to take his wife to hospital during a nationwide strike because he thinks she is pregnant (she is not, she just has worms). Kishunji refuses to let them through, but is finally cajoled through an elaborate farce that has the audience in the packed hall rolling on the aisles.

It is always a joy to watch Maha in action for it is clear they respect their audience too much to pass off slapstick as comedy. Even after two decades of working together, their humour has not lost its touch. Only the ones who are likely to be at the receiving end of their satire may not enjoy it. Others will not stop laughing. ♦



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In US\$	Dal-Lentil 1 kg	Bhat-Rice 1 kg	Petrol 1 Litre	Diesel 1 Litre	Kerosene 1 Litre	Electricity 1 Unit	\$ Rate
Bangladesh	0.74	0.37	0.40	0.22	0.37	0.04	53.80
Bhutan	0.65	0.31	0.56	0.33	0.18	0.02	44.46
India	0.65	0.37	0.58	0.29	0.14	0.05	45.85
Maldives	0.25	0.28	0.40	0.30	0.42	0.21	11.82
Pakistan	0.44	0.46	0.55	0.24	0.13	0.04	54.45
Sri Lanka	0.77	0.38	0.64	0.25	0.20	0.03	78.08
Nepal	0.66	0.39	0.55	0.33	0.18	0.08	72.55

All prices are in US dollars, collected from informal sources, and are only indicative.