



NEPALI Times

NEPAL'S TOP NEWSPAPER

8

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DOLPO



At home with Monica

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EXCLUSIVE

Nordic jaunt

Why is Sweden so disinterested in Nepal? Swedish aid to Nepal has dropped dramatically in the past few years, and it is the Nordic country with the lowest contribution to Nepal's development. Is it a failure of our economic diplomacy, or have the Swedes given up on Nepal?

Foreign Minister Chakra Prasad Bastola is planning to get it straight from the horse's mouth when he swings through Stockholm this week. Bastola then goes on to Norway, which unlike Sweden, remains fully engaged in Nepal. This will



be a thank-you visit to Norway, which is the third largest investor in Nepal after India and the United States. Norway's Statkraft has invested in the Khimti project.

Sweden, the largest of the Nordic economies, gave Nepal only \$1.1 million in 1998, while Denmark and Norway provided \$22.9 million and \$8.8 million respectively.

Encephalitis

We called the Health Ministry to find out the status of the encephalitis epidemic raging in mid and far-western Tarai. We were told the spokesman was on an extended visit abroad. We then called the office of the Secretary of Health. He was conferencing in Florence.

Next we called Dr B.D. Chataut, Director General of Health Services. He was in New Delhi attending a WHO conference. Going around in circles, all we found out was (in the words of one employee) "everyone is abroad as it is most of the time".

Only Health Minister Dr Ram Baran Yadav was where he should be: in west Nepal.

Dear gas

Petrol price is headed skyward. Petrol could cost as much as Rs 50, diesel Rs 30 and kerosene Rs 18. The prices may, however, remain at present levels until the Dasain festival is over.

page 8

UNACCOUNTED FOR

The good news is that male MPs don't file maternity claims. The bad news is that ministers are not paying their phone bills.

A NEPALI TIMES INVESTIGATION

If you are a taxpayer, some of the money the government is taking from you is paying for the following expenses:

- Rs 1,158,000 in phone and electricity bills for ministers over a six-month period.
- Eight phone lines registered in the names of dead lawmakers yet to be returned to the Parliament Secretariat.
- Padded expenses amounting to thousands of dollars by ministers and senior officials on foreign junkets.
- Pork barrel funds MPs have put into private accounts instead of for development work in their constituencies.

Two years ago, ministers of His Majesty's Government said that rather than depend on their offices to settle their personal utility bills, they would take the money from the government and make the payments themselves. Between August 1998 and June 1999, 19 ministers took Rs 1,158,000 from the national coffers to pay their telephone, electricity and water supply bills, according to the latest Auditor General's report. Now it turns out many of them never cleared the bills. What's more they have amassed more utility arrears.

The breakdown of some of the unpaid bills just for periods between 1998 and 1999 are as follows:

- Electricity bills from October to July totalling Rs 561,000.
- Telephone bills from August 1998 to January 1999 amounting to Rs 1,771,000.
- Water bills from October 1998 to January 1999 totalling Rs 281,000.

It seems our leaders are not as brazen as they used to be when male MPs billed the exchequer for maternity expenses, or took winter holidays in southern climes paid for by you and me. But, as the Auditor General's report shows, there are big holes in the national book-keeping—evidence that chronic and widespread misappropriation of public funds continues.

Arrears have been detected everywhere: in government, in the courts and in parliament. Many of the

irregularities were also pointed out in the past, and still remain as wrongs because the executive has not taken basic steps to regularise the spending.

Past efforts by the parliament's public spending watchdog to get back some of the misused money have failed to achieve much. Last week, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) summoned officials and gave them another deadline to make amends. "We'll go to the extent the law allows to get the accounts straight," says Subash Nemwang, PAC chairman.

The Committee has also instructed concerned agencies to publish names of defaulters and deduct money from the salaries of employees to settle advances.

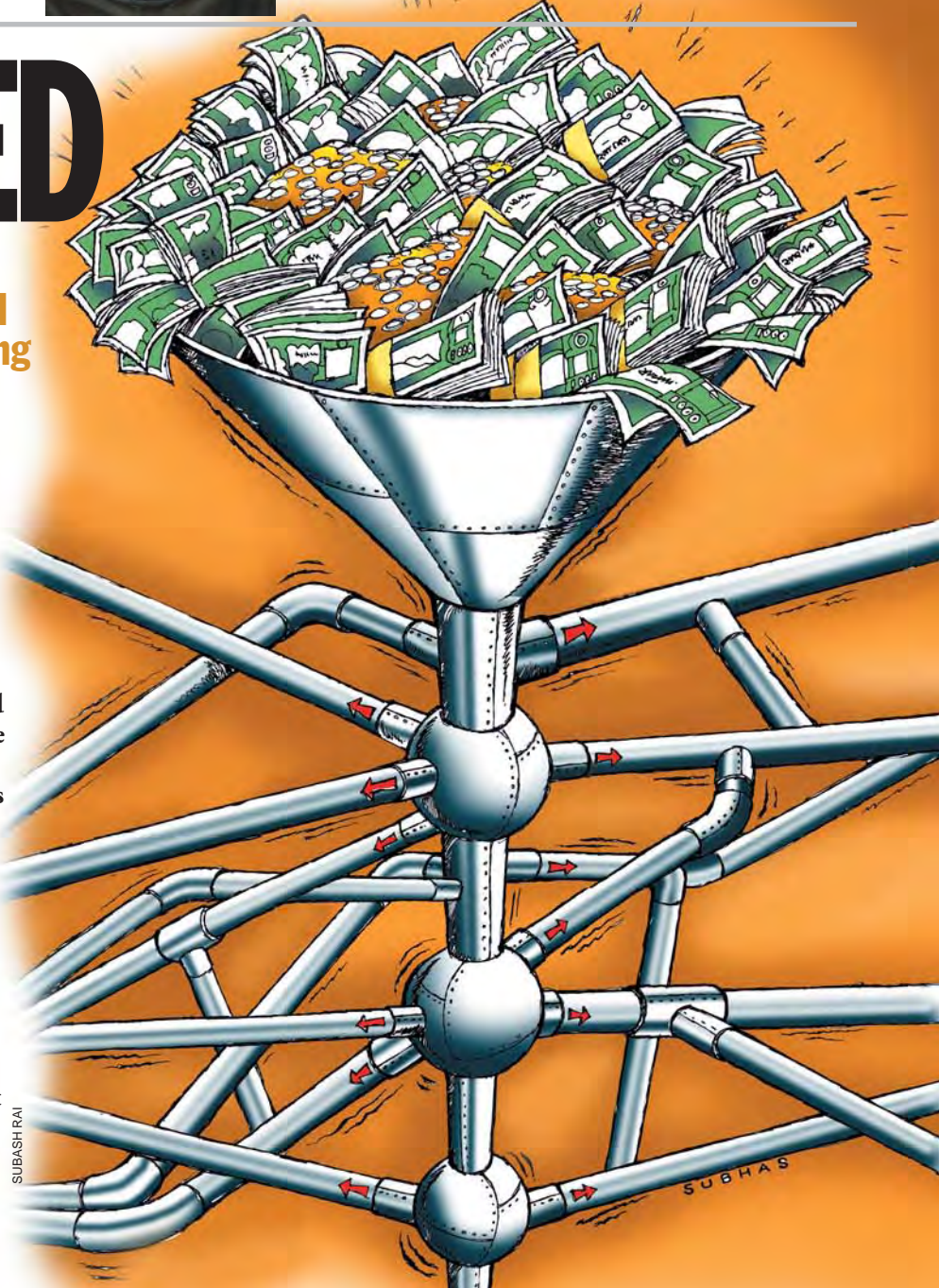
"There is much money that still remains to be accounted for," says Bishnu Bahadur K.C., the Auditor General. "I just don't understand why no major effort is made to realise the misspent money."

The Auditor General has also pulled up the Prime Minister's office which has Rs 2.5 million at its discretion for grants to the needy. Last year it spent Rs 1.16 million, but we don't know who the needy were.

Members of Parliament have been enjoying Dasain allowances even though there is no provision in the legislature regulations allowing this.

The issue of Dasain bonus may be a minor procedural lapse, but it is an example of the widespread inability of lawmakers to make laws and abide by them. More serious are actions by politicians, which show malafide intentions. A sampling from the Auditor General's list:

- A minister for parliamentary affairs leading a delegation to Moscow for the 100th meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in September 1998, billed \$500 as taxi fare from hotel to conference centre to airport. A joint secretary travelling with the same group billed \$1,200 for the same ride.
- The Parliament Secretariat has not taken back 111 telephones from former MPs, eight of whom have already died.
- The personal assistant to the



SUBASH RAI

SUBHAS

Chairman of the National Assembly signed for the salary of the entire staff of his (the Chairman's) private office. The Vice-Chairman went a step further—he personally signed receipts for the salary of his private staff. The auditors don't know if the payments were actually made.

Since there are no receipts, one is forced to believe that pocketing salaries of assistants seems to be a well-entrenched system of augmenting the *hakim's* own earnings. Such irregularities have even been detected in the hallowed halls of the judiciary too. The then Chief Justice collected Rs 249,000 on behalf of all seven people he was entitled to appoint to his private office. There were no records to show when the employees were hired.

The honourable judges got much bad press in 1997 collecting salaries on behalf of their household orderlies. The PAC has since ordered that proper papers be submitted. Last year all 19 Supreme Court justices, 47 appeals court justices and 25 district court justices received Rs 1,649,000 on behalf of their

assistants. But this time, the Auditor General found that many judges had presented receipts signed by orderlies or came armed with authorisation letters.

Every year the Auditor General reminds us of how our money is being misspent, and the next year he reminds us again.

Regular irregularities page 4

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NEPALI Times

NEPAL'S TOP NEWSPAPER



News that matters to people who matter





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UNGOVERNABLE

Tilak Rawal, the dismissed governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, has decided to go to the courts to challenge his ouster last week. In principle, his anger is understandable. Changing tenured chief executives of autonomous government bodies midway through an administration does look inappropriate. But then his appointment had kicked up even more controversy, leading to the resignation of Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya from the cabinet of the Krishna Prasad Bhattarai government five months ago. What was surprising was not that Rawal got the sack, but that it took so long. Look at the sequence of events: a prime minister brings his protégé in as governor, finance minister doesn't like this and resigns, prime minister is ousted and new prime minister comes in, finance minister who doesn't like governor is re-instated. The logical conclusion of this can only be: governor leaves. And so it happened last week.

By his own account, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala first asked Rawal to resign, citing the old tussle between him and Mahesh Acharya. Rawal reportedly asked for more time "to prove his usefulness". Obviously, Rawal, who is reputed to be a king-maker in his own right, couldn't.

The showdown between Minister Acharya and Governor Rawal is symptomatic of the tussle between top bureaucrats and their political bosses in this country. These rifts seldom take place on policy issues of national importance. Mostly, they are about who gets to distribute the patronage at the cost of exchequer. As such, they are almost always destructive.

Nepali super-bureaucrats live under the illusion that they are independent power centres. They habitually meddle in politics by mobilising MPs, and the criteria is regionalism, community or caste. Financial "inducements" help move things along so politicians will campaign for them. And the favour has to be returned. While we agree that it's not desirable to have chief executives of public sector enterprises function at the mercy of concerned ministries, it's also our opinion that what is desirable is not always achievable. Ministers cannot and shouldn't be puppets in the hands of tenured officers. The buck has to stop somewhere.

Super-bureaucrats, and their political patrons, need to realise that team-work requires division of tasks and coordination of performances. Not interference. The team manager (in this case the prime minister) is the person who has to ultimately decide. Otherwise the team becomes ungovernable like a Ravana with multiple heads but only two hands.

We have nothing personal against Tilak Rawal. Judging from the way he has reacted, it looks like politics is a more appropriate calling for him. May he excel in that field. Meanwhile, our best wishes to Dipendra Purush Dhakal, the new governor. May he govern well, and enjoy better rapport with the finance minister. And let's not dally any more with the much-delayed banking reforms, and kick-start this economy.

WHAT NEXT ?



NABIN KC

Binod Chaudhary wants to help improve Aryaghat, the holiest cremation site for Nepali Hindus. He has already written a letter to the Prime Minister stating his pious intentions. However, he chose to publish his letter rather than send it by e-mail, fax or hard copy. Thank you, Binod. For us in the profession, your faith in the fourth estate is commendable.

Apart from being a budding philanthropist, Mr Chaudhary also happens to be a sensible businessman. Naturally, he wants the renovated Ghat be renamed after his late mother once his contribution is accepted.

Altruism in business is never anonymous, is it? But there is a slight problem: Aryaghat is a part of the Pashupatinath Temple Complex, and it is in the list of World Heritage Sites. Despite its deplorable state, changing its name may not be permissible.

This may be a blessing in disguise. If allowed to go unchecked, the renaming business could get quite out of hand. We already see traffic islands named after various engine oil and mineral water companies. Next to go could be our venerable monuments. Fancy calling that great erection, the *Dharhara*, the *Dhal* Tower. Or *Kot* renamed the *Shikhar* Court. Or the Chobhar Ganesh temple named after a cement company.

After all, if you can call Aryaghat something else, someone someday may decide to pour enough money for the renovation of Pashupatinath and change its name too.

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MANOHAR RAI

STATE OF THE STATE

by C.K.LAL

Do we speak the same language?



Nepal will continue to be important for Japan. And not because of Lord Buddha, god-incarnates, Kawaguchi, or kite-flying.

He came, he saw, he smiled. He even danced a few steps at Patan Durbar Square. And by evening he was off again. The short stopover in Kathmandu by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori last week at the tail end of his South Asian tour left his hosts in the Himalayan kingdom gasping for breath.

Our leaders paid effusive verbal tributes to Nepal's 'largest donor'. Newspaper columnists celebrated commonalities like Nepal and Japan both having kite-flying contests. The name of Lord Buddha was solemnly invoked. Ekai Kawaguchi, the Japanese monk who had stopped by on his way to Tibet about a century ago (see facing page), was fondly remembered. It was cliché time, the first-ever visit of a Japanese Prime Minister to the Kingdom of Nepal. And an opportunity to establish a more enduring basis of mutual relationship was squandered.

Japan and Nepal do not speak the same language. English is the mother tongue in neither country. And yet, we made elaborate banners welcoming the Japanese prime minister in a language that most people in neither country speak. The banners were a symbolic reminder of our lack of imagination, the inappropriateness of our actions, and the fact that we do not speak the same language.

A sizeable and influential section of Japanese population is non-Buddhist. There are Shinto people, like Mori himself, who have no particular attachment to Lumbini other than the fact that it is a World Heritage Site. In Shinto ideology, as Mori told a group of his supporters recently, it is Japan that is the "divine country". And yet we tirelessly try to rub it in and get the Japanese to do double flips for Lumbini.

Buddhism came to Japan from China in the sixth century AD. It is a painful reminder of the first cultural invasion of Japan from the mainland in historical times. In any case, international relations are seldom governed by the soft spot a country may have for another country's religious persuasion. If that were the case, saffron *Bharat* would have been *daju-bhai* with the

world's only Hindu kingdom by now.

Nepali officials also thought they were being gratefully polite by praising Japan for all the aid money it has poured into Nepal. Many Japanese find such genuflection quite embarrassing. It makes them at least partially responsible for the mess that we have made of foreign aid over the last 40 years. Besides, many Nepal experts from Japan know just how much more the Japanese corporate houses, the *zaibatsu*, have benefitted from the "aid" to Nepal. Charity has its rewards, but no sensible person or nation wants to be seen as a permanent patron of a beggar with a bottomless bowl.

Aside from the ugliness of seeing our leaders grovelling for more, which is quite revolting in itself, the lack of self-esteem that this implied would have been an insult to any self-respecting nation. But not to us, somehow our sense of self-worth has taken such a beating that we don't see the irony of it all. It is time we rethought the strategy of Nepal-Japan relations in order to meet the challenges of changing times. In the coming days, Nepal will continue to be important for Japan. However, it will not be so because of Lord Buddha,

Japanese in Burma and Malaya during the War, has no such historical baggage.

In economic terms, there is pressing need to shift emphasis from aid to trade. Japanese expatriates in South Asia feast on Japanese rice grown in Nepal. There is scope for further growth in this trade. It could have been either some itinerant Buddhists monk or the Nepali students who went to Japan in 1902 for further studies who brought back chrysanthemum seeds to Nepal. Today it grows wild in the vicinity of Kathmandu Valley. Considering that it's one of the holiest flowers in Japan, where the imperial throne itself is named after it (and seeing how well the flower grows here) there must be a possibility of a bountiful flower trade.

Along with his ceremonial three-minute address to the millennium meet of the UN General Assembly, the second most important engagement for Prime Minister Girija Koirala in New York is to attend a reception hosted by Mori. On neutral turf, it is possible that the two prime ministers will be less ceremonial and more informal. Nepal can support Japanese aspirations at the



SALL SUBEDI

god-incarnates, Kawaguchi, or kite-flying.

Nepal's location holds strategic importance for Japan. China is most likely to emerge as the challenger to Japanese economic dominance in Asia. India will probably become the single largest market for consumer goods in this region. Any ambitious power, and Japan is certainly one despite its loud disclaimers, would love to have a convenient watch-post here. East of Nepal, the Japanese are still barely tolerated. Painful memories of the Second World War are still fresh. Nepal, despite Gurkha action against the

UN, but we should be assured of their assistance in learning to bake our own bread rather than be content with the loaves thrown at us in the name of aid.

One of the things they need to discuss is ways to increase the number of Nepalis who speak and write Japanese. Or getting more Japanese to learn Nepali. Learning each other's language is perhaps the best way of starting to speak the same language over issues like trade and cooperation. And next time, let's have the banners in Japanese. ♦





SALIL SUBEDI
When the Japanese Zen monk Ekai Kawaguchi went home to Japan a century ago after his tour of Nepal, Tibet and India his tales of adventure received a mixed reaction. Even as there was general celebration to mark his trip, there were some who didn't believe his stories of the Land of the Buddha.

Eight years after Kawaguchi's death in 1945, Jiro Kawakita set foot in Nepal as an ethnography and geography expert in an 11-member Japanese team invited by the government of Nepal. "We walked into the slow rhythm of Kathmandu of the mid-1950s. I felt a sense of peace, and also of anticipation at all the things unexplored in this exotic land," recalls Professor Kawakita.

It was not until he reached Pokhara that Kawakita stumbled upon what would turn out to be his life's mission in Nepal: to retrace the steps of his great compatriot and predecessor, Ekai Kawaguchi. Sunning himself on the banks of the Phewa Tal, he met the sons of the man who had hosted Kawaguchi in Tukche. Anang Man Sherchan and Krishna Man Sherchan told him legends of this mysterious Japanese monk. Kawakita had never heard of Kawaguchi before, and he was immediately fascinated.

In Pokhara, Kawakita also ran into two interesting contemporaries. Fellow-geographer Toni Hagen was at the Swiss mission hospital in Pokhara. At that time Hagen was well into his geological study of Nepal and the two

exchanged notes. "Toni was an energetic and humorous person," he recalls. Kawakita also met the *Badahakim* of Pokhara, Puran Singh, who had fought the Japanese Imperial Army in Malaysia and Burma while serving in the British Indian army during World War II.

Kawakita soon discovered that his trekking route to Pokhara was the same one that Kawaguchi had taken more than five decades previously. He recalls being pleasantly surprised and filled with curiosity. "I decided to find out as much as I could about Kawaguchi, and with the help and assistance of my Nepali friends it was possible."

At Tukche, where Kawakita conducted some of his research he found that Kawaguchi had entered Tibet via Thak Khola and Mustang. The Zen monk had reached the Tibetan border drawing maps and collecting details of villages and societal affairs in these remote trans-Himalayan highland villages.

After Tukche, Kawaguchi lived in Tsarang and Marpha to read sacred texts. But all his research and study were looked upon suspiciously by locals, some of whom thought he was a British spy. Kawaguchi fled north up the Dhaulagiri trail to Thorpo in Dolpo where he gathered information on the animistic Bon Po religion that pre-dates Buddhism in Tibet. Kawakita went over these routes like a detective.

Comparing local descriptions with notes from Kawaguchi's journals, Kawakita found the diaries to be accurate and the information meticulously noted and precise. "Even the population of villages, the maps, sketches and description of mountain peaks were very correct," says Kawakita, who only laments the fact that Kawaguchi never lived to see his life's work taken seriously.

From Thorpo, Kawaguchi bid farewell to his porter and

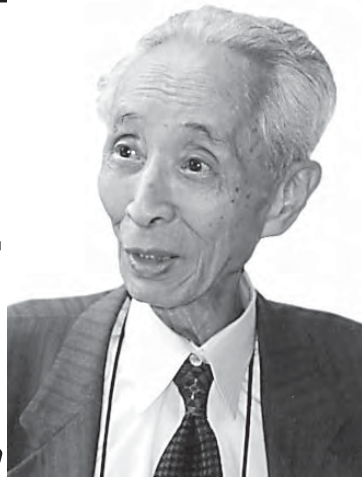
carried his possessions himself and disguised himself as a Tibetan monk to avoid being taken for a foreigner in reclusive Tibet. He spent almost two years in Tibet until the authorities found out his real identity, and chased him to Darjeeling. He then backtracked into eastern Nepal and finally arrived in Kathmandu for an audience with the Rana prime minister, Chandra Shumsher.

It was on this trip that Kawaguchi wrote his famous letter to the prime minister. In it the monk advised the astute dictator how to run affairs of state, to keep his cool in dealing with the British in India, about political strategy, and in avoiding the company of sycophants.

"His trip to Tibet was an effort to find the original texts with the teachings of the Buddha. Kawaguchi believed that in Tibet, he would be able to find the closest version of the original text kept safely," says Kawakita. "Kawaguchi was sometimes labeled a spy for the British and sometimes for Meiji Japan but he was basically a lonesome wanderer, a historian and a pilgrim."

Kawakita, who himself is the first anthropologist to have extensively travelled in Nepal during the 1950s, also played a big role in the establishment of a cable car and water supply project in Myagdi in mid-western Nepal during the early 1970s. Kawakita remembers how the community's voluntary participation helped the project grow. He is a firm believer in the "small is beautiful" concept of projects that people can manage by themselves. "Nepal needs small projects which are flexible enough to blend technology with the society's situations," says the professor who remains optimistic on

From Kawaguchi to Kawakita



A hundred years after Ekai Kawaguchi (left) travelled across Nepal and Tibet looking for the Buddha's original teachings, a Japanese anthropologist Jiro Kawakita (above) who retraced his footsteps is back in Nepal to see how development is faring under democracy.

grassroot participatory approach. He suggests that villages in Nepal should be self-sufficient entities so that each community can groom itself as there would be voluntary collective efforts working towards a common goal.

Together with Toni Hagen and Italian historian Giuseppe Tucci, Kawakita was among the pioneer researchers in Nepal, involved in conducting the first

working on a seminal book which he says is "totally offbeat". His students say it will reflect his thinking on development, modernity and tradition.

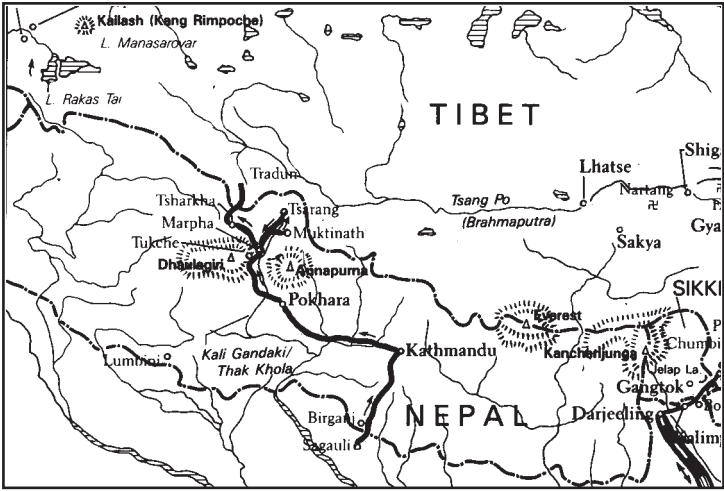
Kawakita has a cult following back home because of his famous "Kawajero Methodology". Among his admirers are his colleagues, Prof Ryzo Takayama, a Nepal specialist and the man who accompanied Kawakita in his early travels,

is not missed out, information must be extracted as a creative synthesis of real life.

The Kawajero Methodology remains controversial because of its complexity. But Kawakita says: "It's easy once you understand the logical framework. It depicts the reality of ordinary people and that is why the elite in society don't like it." It is a bottom-up approach, you don't find solutions from the top.

"Nepal is in the same situation as Japan in early 20th century. Big changes are taking place," he says. "Some of these changes are not unique to Nepal, they are happening all over the world. There have to be major reforms and changes in the current bureaucracy to let democracy function to its fullest. For now, the elite is too busy pursuing their self-interests."

Kawakita is a frugal man, who eats little, likes to laugh a lot and is completely humble despite the adulation he gets among Japanese academics. He is worried about Japan: "Society is heading towards an unknown darkness. The young generation is lost in a quest for inner peace. People are getting agitated over small things. In the time I have left, I have decided to do something for the country I love, Nepal." He is planning to open a school in Pokhara, and is currently raising money for it. ♦



Ekai Kawaguchi's route through Nepal on his first trip, 1899.

extensive anthropological studies of Nepal by a foreign expert. Apart from several research articles in Japanese and English he has three major books in English to his credit—*Hill Magars and Their Neighbours*, *Nurturing Creativity in the Himalaya* and *People of Nepal Himalaya* (ed H. Kihara). Currently the professor is

and Prof Hiroshi Ishii, the famous Japanese Nepalologist and director of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

The Kawajero Methodology is a basic problem-solving method that takes a blank slate and without pre-conceived notions. When data has to be collected, it has to be done in such a way that qualitative data

LETTERS

DESIGNER REVOLUTION

Your coverage of Maoism (#7) misses some crucial points. Oppressed and neglected people everywhere, if they are oppressed and neglected enough, will rise up. They do not need an ideology. Mao is a convenient label. If it weren't Mao it would be some other prophet promising salvation. Don't you get it? For those in the movement, it does not matter if the target is a school teacher, or school buses. It does not matter who the victims are: the end justifies the means. What you call the Maoist



movement is here to stay, it has actually never really disappeared from any country where it has been "suppressed" (Sri Lanka, Peru, Philippines). And of course they are following Mao by the book, what else would they do? The leaders may disappear because they are from the middle class and the temptation for them to be reintegrated is high if the rewards of power are attractive enough. Like Che Guevara or Regis Debray, the leaders will either be killed or join the mainstream. But what about the peasants? As in Bolivia or Peru, they will continue with the struggle, because they have nothing to lose and they are angry enough to keep on fighting. The leaders will

put any colour on a revolution: today it is red, tomorrow it may be saffron or green or anything as long as the "iskra" (spark) is there.
Tarun Ghosh
Calcutta

TEXT BOOKS

Perry Thapa (#6) raises the important issue of substandard school textbooks. It is a very sorry state of affairs. Most textbook writers and publishers tend to believe that words without a semblance of logical arrangement and structure are OK as long as they are in English. Most private schools claim English medium teaching to be their main aim—but who is looking at the quality of English?

Thank you for raising this critical issue to the notice of the education establishment. Who is going to control quality in these textbooks with poorly constructed language structure and ill-digested argument? The authors have no sense of style, there is no coherence and logical connection. There is no clarity of thought, no conciseness of expression and the text is stale and cliché-filled. And these books are our language role models! And it's not just a question of English. Nepali textbooks are no better. For example, the section on Nepal's foreign policy in the Social Studies textbook begins with inane sentences like: "Nepal has always wished to maintain friendly relations with all the countries of the world." This is

the sort of mediocrity you see in careless journalism and boring speeches by politicians. The real worry is that no one sees anything wrong with these books.
Hriseekesh Upadhyay
Kathmandu

FED UP

I agree with your editorial page sentiments (#2,3,4) on the state of the state. As Nepalis we are fed up with big speeches, false assurances and inadequacy of what is called our "government". When an elected government cannot even resolve its own internal problems, when will it ever get around to solving the country's problems? Now they want to fool us with the Melamchi Project. Millions of

gallons of water are wasted through leakage and theft, all they have to do is to stop the wastage. We don't need more promises, we don't want false dreams, and we don't want our children to be in debt. Stop playing the dirty games of politics with the lives of innocent citizens of this nation.
Yam Bahadur Gurung
Lalitpur

ONE MORE COPY

Nepali Times is a pleasure to read, it is informative and the content is of the highest standard. You can be assured that you will sell one more copy regularly from now onwards.
Navyo Eller
Kathmandu

Regular irregularities

BINOD BHATTARAI
Misappropriation and irregularities uncovered by this year's Auditor General's report may look petty and routine, but they add up to large losses for the exchequer. More importantly, they are violations by individuals and institutions on whom the people have put their trust.

The report shows that unsettled advances taken by government officials have shot up and so have uncollected revenues. In some instances it is just poor bookkeeping, but there are more serious offences where officials have cut corners or bent rules for personal gain.

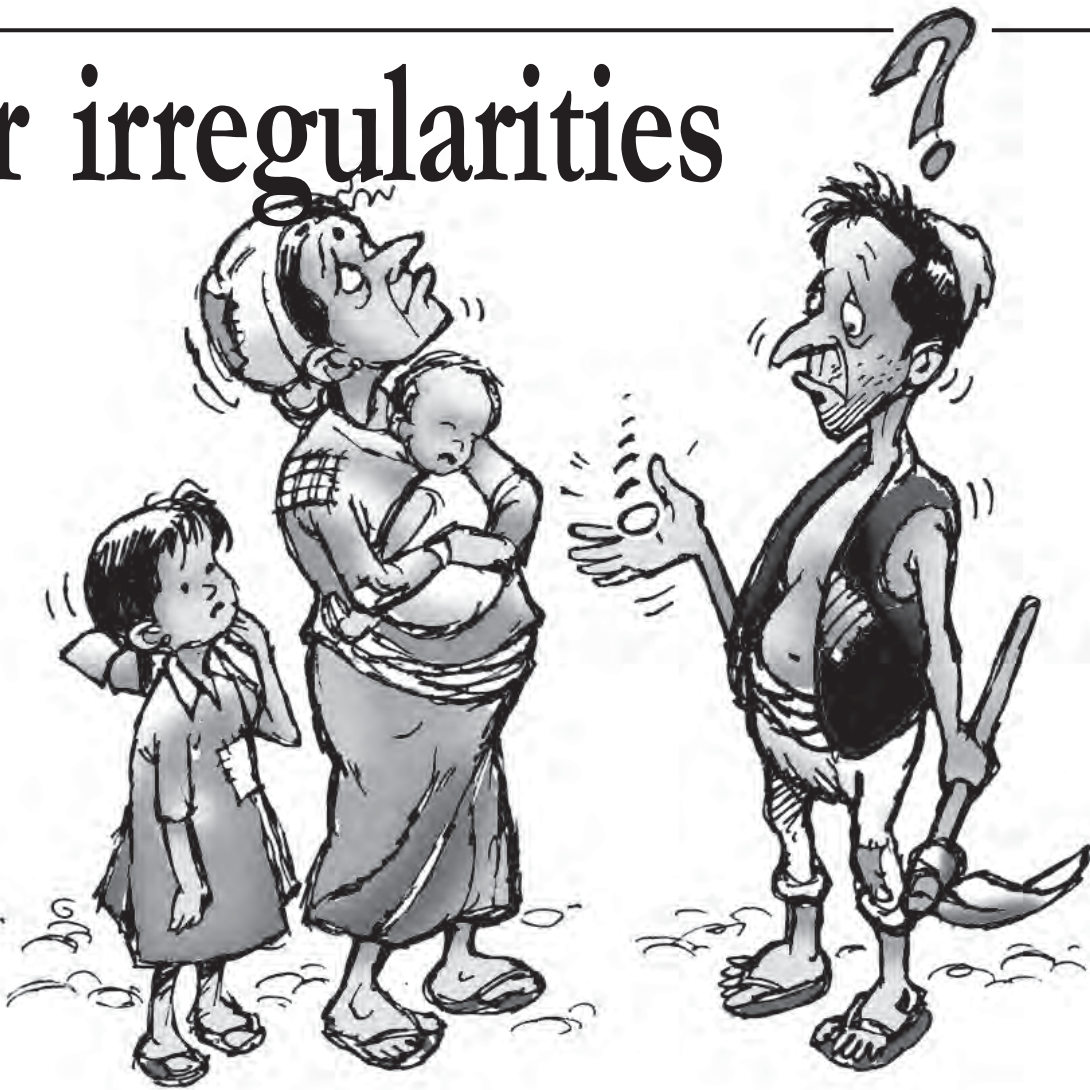
The irregularities reported in this year's report—including everything from non-compliance to rules and even corruption—adds up to Rs 25.70 billion, of which the cumulative unsettled advances total Rs 7.31 billion. This money is almost equal to what the government plans to spend on the social sector this fiscal year.

Most of the rules were disregarded at the Ministry of

Finance, which is responsible for almost 28 percent of the total irregularities, followed by Ministry of Water Resources (10.6 percent), Works and Transport (8.86 percent) and Home Affairs (8.02 percent).

By law, employee advances have to be settled within 35 days. The government has authority to take what is due directly from the salary thereafter, but that has not

happened. Where defaulters on advances are not employees, the law authorises the government to publicise their names and realise the money. That too has been rare. The government, semi-government agencies and district development committees taken together account for a whopping Rs 11.68 billion in



Irregularities add up to Rs 25.7 billion, an amount almost equal to what the government plans to spend on the social sector this year.

advances. The top five ministries with the highest unsettled advances are defence, local development, works and transport, education and home ministries.

What is more worrying is that successive governments have not even been able to collect revenues. The uncollected revenue in the past five years has reached Rs 13.53 billion. This is money that only needs to be collected. The Auditor General admits that though his figures may not be absolute and is an estimate culled from information gathered during the audit.

All said and done, the Auditor General's report for the fiscal year 1999/2000 says as much as Rs 50.25 billion remains to be realised, in terms of uncollected revenues, foreign aid payments overdue, dividends, unaudited accounts, etc (see table).

Foreign aid also greases bad governance, sometimes. A lot of foreign aid to Nepal seems to be unaccounted for. The charitable explanation for this is that money has been spent without the government knowing about it, but it is equally possible that aid money may have been siphoned away from the

targetted beneficiaries.

Aid ceases to be accounted for when it is not included in the budget. But there have been instances where grants were not budgeted, and in other cases the donors have spent the money directly, without the government knowing how it was used.

The government is required to begin spending money after the agreements are signed but there are chronic delays in reimbursement. Donors, on the other hand, don't even bother to send expense reports to the concerned ministries. The Auditor General therefore does not get the accounts for many bilateral and multilateral grants.

One example is a 1.2 million Kroner (\$200,000) Danish grant for the implementation of the Value Added Tax. The money was not included in the budget for 1998/99 and the bilateral agreement requires the Danish Embassy to provide the government with an annual expense report. Last year the Auditor General asked for the report and was unable to get one, and neither did they get one this year.

In the EC-funded Gulmi Integrated Rural Development Project the concerned ministry told the auditors that a Rs 14

million grant had been suspended. But when the auditors visited the project site they found that Rs. 51.2 million had been received of which Rs 41.1 million had been spent. The spending hadn't been audited.

The money spent on building 22 bridges on the Mahendra Highway in West Nepal with Indian aid and the bridge in Pokhara constructed with Chinese aid are also not reflected in the books.

But these may be innocent lapses compared to other glaring irregularities with grant aid. Soon after the two Airbus crashes in 1993, an Italian company was ready to install a radar at Kathmandu airport for Rs 300 million, but a Japanese grant assistance costing twice as much was used instead.

"No questions were asked because it was donor money," a senior official told us. "If you have seen all I have seen, you will know how hypocritical it is for donors to talk about corruption and good governance."

National auditors are bypassed, necessary papers are not made available and no one knows where and how the money is spent. The Auditor General was provided information on only 40 of 448 agreements on technical and other assistance about which the government had informed parliament.

"I don't think that donors want to bypass parliament by not including their grants in the budget," says Auditor General Bishnu Bahadur K.C. "It may have happened because of miscommunication." He adds that his department is capable of providing the information needed by donors and that he needs to be given a chance. "Trying to audit to meet their standards will also help build our capacity," he adds. ♦

King asks PM for details

King Birendra has asked the government to furnish details on the accident that killed singer-musician Praveen Gurung. Palace officials wrote to the leader of a communist students group protesting the alleged hit-and-run by Paras Shah, the monarch's nephew, informing him of the development. The King was responding to a petition signed by over 500,000 people asking him to punish his nephew who is believed to have been at the wheel of the vehicle that hit Gurung on 6 August.

NC row over, for now

The Nepali Congress has announced new dates for its general convention and named an election committee to ensure fair elections when it meets to elect a new president early next year.

The row between the two septuagenarian leaders, Girija Prasad Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai was patched up at a meeting in Baluwatar last week (right). Relations had got worse after Koirala sacked a senior minister from his cabinet who was reportedly conspiring to mutiny. Jumping at the opportunity to get even with Girija who had engineered his ouster in March, Bhattarai announced five demands as conditions for a truce. Koirala agreed to three but refused to give in to the other two. The new date for the party's 10th Convention originally scheduled for November is 19-22 January.



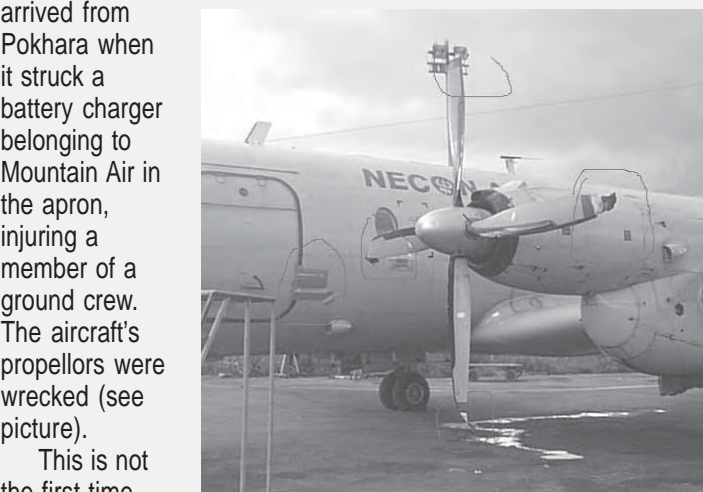
LPG standard demanded

A lawyer has asked the Supreme Court to order a stop to the import and operation of vehicles running on liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Petitioning the court, Bharat Mani Gautam said the order is needed because Nepal does not have both emission and safety standards for LPG-run vehicles.

Gautam argues that instead of setting standards, the government has subsidised LPG vehicles on the assumption that they are emission-free, whereas experts say studies show that emissions from LPG vehicles are equal to that of petrol-engines. The LPG vehicles operating in Nepal use gas cylinders meant for household use and are dangerous in public transport.

NECON Avro grounded

A Necon Air HS-748 has been grounded for examination following a tarmac accident on 3 September. The Avro had just arrived from Pokhara when it struck a battery charger belonging to Mountain Air in the apron, injuring a member of a ground crew. The aircraft's propellers were wrecked (see picture).



This is not the first time Nepali airliners have had accidents on the ground. Four years ago, a Nepal Airways Avro collided with another one belonging to Necon at Pokhara airport, both aircraft were written off. The accidents point to carelessness and serious overcrowding on the ground as well as in the air. An average of 50 flight take off and land every morning during the rush hour at Kathmandu airport.

Bandh on 21 September

A coalition of nine minor leftist factions have called for a nationwide general strike on Thursday, 21 September, to protest the government's failures to address a host of issues, according to a pamphlet distributed by the group. The strikers have called for the closure of all transport, educational institutions, factories and the marketplace in protest. Among the reasons for the Nepal Bandh is the non-implementation of a two-year-old agreement between the government and the communist grouping.

Essential services

The government has banned employees of financial institutions and public utilities from organising demonstrations, lockouts and strikes by invoking the Essential Services Act 2014. The new order comes in the wake of three weeks of protests and strikes that paralysed state-run financial institutions and public utilities.

ARREARS

| Particulars | Rs. (in millions) |
|--|-------------------|
| Irregularities and unaudited accounts | 27,989 |
| Irregularities and advances | 25,705 |
| Unaudited accounts | 2,284 |
| Uncollected revenues and other collectibles | 22,267 |
| Revenue remaining to be collected | 13,530 |
| Foreign grants remaining to be reimbursed | 1,075 |
| Foreign loans remaining to be reimbursed | 3,824 |
| Advance tax deductions not submitted to govt. coffer | 202 |
| Govt. guaranteed loans paid but not collected | 1,459 |
| Dividends payable to government | 244 |
| Other payments due from state enterprises and others | 1,930 |
| Total | 50,256 |

Source: Auditor General's Report 1999/00

Women in the driver's seat

RAMYATA LIMBU

S seated on the steps of the Open-Air Theatre near Tundikhel, Sumitra Dungal watches as the Safa tempo makes its way around the muddy field. The driver is a young, sari-clad woman who is concentrating hard as she accelerates, brakes and then backs the electricity-powered vehicle between two iron posts. As she makes it past without touching the posts, Dungal nods approvingly and offers a word of praise. "She's a fast learner, considering she's only been at it for a couple of days," says Dungal. "Some of the women who come for lessons take five months or more."

Dungal is Nepal's first woman tempo driver. Having begun operating three-wheelers four years ago, she now runs a school that teaches women how to drive tempos. The 27-year-old law graduate is up every morning to instructing housewives, former teachers and other women from low income households on the intricacies of tempo-driving. "It's not enough being a skilled driver. You need plenty of guts, attitude, and people skills," says Milan Shrestha, one of two dozen women tempo drivers who were taught by Dungal. "Avoiding potholes and manoeuvring a tempo over uneven roads is one thing, dealing with bossy traffic cops, angry passengers and working late shifts is something else," says Shrestha.

However, her no-nonsense and forthright attitude, learnt from her mentor Dungal, is effective in deterring those who try to make trouble for her. The 29-year-old has become used to the curious stares of passengers and passers-by, for whom a woman at the wheel of a public vehicle is still a novelty.

The thought, however, did not deter Lalita Balami from signing up for classes at Dungal's school. The former Kathmandu housewife was inspired after observing a driving training session, while visiting the city hospital across the road from the driving school. "Once I become a

Kathmandu may soon become famous not only for its electric tempos, but also for the women who drive them.



MIN BAIRACHARYA

Instructor Milan Shrestha at the wheel of an electric three-wheeler

proficient driver, I hope to obtain a licence and start driving on the passenger routes," says Balami, who managed to convince her husband and in-laws that the extra income could help the family.

A tempo driver can earn between Rs 3,500 to 4,500 rupees a month. In a good month, a driver can make as much as 10,000 rupees. The driving classes themselves were initially free. Today, Dungal charges Rs 5,000 from those who can afford to pay.

The money is used to repay a Rs 600,000 bank loan she took to buy her training tempo and meet its servicing and maintenance costs. "When I first started out, I had to look for candidates, I had to coax and cajole women to join," says Dungal, who invested Rs 15,000 borrowed from well-wishers and friends in driving lessons for herself.

Her efforts appear to have paid off. More and more women, literate and semi-literate are coming to her to be trained. They have either heard of Dungal's school from acquaintances or called after noting down the

telephone contact number painted on the back of her training tempo. The women share a common goal—to make tempo driving an acceptable and paying profession for women.

To some extent that has already happened. Take the case of Anita Shrestha, a mother of two, who was encouraged to join by her husband. She hopes to complete her lessons in a month, get her licence and begin plying passenger routes in three months.

Dungal aims to form a women transport workers' organisation before the end of the year. She hopes to concentrate women tempo drivers on one route. "At present we're spread over the city. If we're organised on one route, it'll be safer, we'll have a stronger voice, and above all we'll be visible," says she.

A former student union leader, Dungal knows how effective organising can be. Thanks to her, Kathmandu may soon become famous not only for its electric tempos, but also for the women who drive them. ♦



Training comes the hard way during the rainy season

MIN BAIRACHARYA

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Note: Only short listed candidates will be called in for an interview during 15th-30th November 2000.

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Journalism Without Borders

NC elections like “General Election”

Saptahik Bimarsha, 1 September

Despite being alone in the current crisis, PM Koirala was able to have his way and bring the party back to a state of normality.

A meeting between the two senior leaders proved that issues, like one man-one post and the prime minister not standing for party presidentship, were swept under the carpet. By fulfilling some of the demands of Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, Koirala felt that he had nothing to lose. The present crisis in the party has now been resolved.

The Central Working Committee meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday was held in a congenial atmosphere. Bhattarai and other CWC members have given the PM the liberty of re-shuffling the CWC and the Cabinet after returning from New York and at his own convenience. This means that the re-shuffling has been postponed for at least four weeks.

Members of the CWC said that the meeting was very successful, very frank and open, had no hidden agendas and the only issue concerning them was how to make the 10th party convention more open and democratic.

The result was that the convention was postponed by three months, which fulfilled the purpose of Koirala's camp because the earlier date gave them a short period of only six weeks and the national festivals are also due soon. Bhattarai's second demand was postponing the convention by five months and the three-month compromise satisfied them both to a certain extent.

Bhattarai's camp was satisfied that an election committee would be formed although they had not asked for it. It is believed that a new trend would be established by including professionals not directly connected with the party in the committee.

All issues concerning the party convention were accepted. The dissatisfied groups had only been harping on the issue of how to make the convention fair, democratic and non-controversial. At this point Bhattarai was getting fed up as no solution was in sight. Finally Mahesh Acharya came up with a proposal that everyone accepted.

Acharya's proposal was that the names of active members (voters)

would be published three months before the party convention. Protests and counter protests could be lodged with the district committees and if not accepted by them, then it could be lodged with the central office and the central office could then give its decision.

This means that the process would be identical to the process of the general election. In earlier conventions the voters' lists used to be published just a few hours before the party election. This time the names of the voters will be published by the center before 10 September and by the district committee by the end of the month. To ensure fairness and party democracy, the central committee will be able to accept any protest and pass judgement if the district committees do not accept it. Earlier district committees had final authority to adjudicate.

Although this proposal was accepted, Sher Bahadur Deuba was still doubtful about the fairness and evenhandedness of the central committee. He wanted the protest to be discussed by all the members of the central committee before a decision is reached.

Bhattarai got angry at Deuba for objecting and a conversation followed which went like this:

Bhattarai: Deubaji, do you know which convention is going to take place?

Deuba: The 10th.
Bhattarai: That means the 9th convention was also held, wasn't it?

Deuba: Yes.
Bhattarai: Then the 10th convention will be held in the same way as the 9th. The central committee will have final authority. You cannot doubt the fairness of the protests lodged. How can the office be run if all the applications are sent to each and every central committee member's doorstep? If you want to, I will even request the party president to make sure that you are the person who is in charge of the registration desk and receive all the complaints. You claim to be the first leader of the younger generation but speak and act like a student leader.

The meeting ended with Bhattarai declaring that from now on he would not stand for election to any post, either party or government. ♦

Paparazzi in Kathmandu

Naya Sadak, 4 September

Security personnel snatched the camera of photojournalist Rabi Manandhar of Naya Sadak daily on Sunday while he was shooting the Nepali athletes' preparation at the swimming complex at Satdobato.



Crown Prince Dipendra was also at the complex to observe the Nepali athletes preparing for the Olympics. Manandhar's camera was taken away by a security guard although it was later returned after the film with the prince was exposed.

Photographer Manandhar had not been forewarned that pictures would not be allowed.

Bhattarai's surrender

Budhabar, 30 August

A meeting of the Congress working committee was held yesterday. This was basically to discuss the agreement reached between the Prime Minister and Bhattarai last week.

Instead of going over the agreement the meeting discussed some matters that were not very important and this surprised some people. Dissatisfied members hoped the meeting would discuss matters that they were not happy about, but this did not happen. Many members could not understand why and were shocked.

Some of them realised that Bhattarai had as usual given in to Koirala's demands. This has always been the case with Bhattarai and they were not surprised. Koirala agreed to a few demands of Bhattarai's but he did not agree to the main one, namely, the issue of one man-one post. In fact at the end of the meeting Bhattarai again said that Koirala is and will be the Prime Minister.

India eyeing Purnagiri

Budhabar, 30 August

The Pancheswor multipurpose project and the Mahakali Development Treaty seem to be on the verge of creating major problems for the people of Dadeldhura district. This is because the Indian side seems bent upon building a dam at Purnagiri.

According to the people who have begun agitating against the project, almost 13,000 hectares of land are going to be submerged and 55,000 people and 50,000 domesticated animals are going to be affected in a major way.

It was only after the group of surveyors from the office of the Survey of India started surveying the area that the local people came to know about the project.

The committee formed to act against the construction of this dam has released a statement that says, "We have seen that India has already built the Laxmanpur dam and the misery it has

caused to the people of Nepal. India does not follow international rules and regulations and many villages along the banks of the Rapti are already affected. Nepali leaders just cannot speak to their Indian counterparts and since India cannot complete the Pancheswor project they are going ahead with this project."

The committee has also stated that all understandings and agreements between the two countries should be made public and that both governments should scrap this project.

Dalits dying of hunger

Chhalphal, 3 September

Ever since the Chamars (cobblers) of Saptari refused to handle carcasses, they have been ostracised by the 'upper caste' people and are now slowly starving to death. There has been a social boycott of Chamars since 28 July.

More than 160 Chamars of Haripur village in Saptari are not allowed to walk on the streets, cannot work as labourers, cannot buy provisions and medicines, and cannot use wells and other sources of water. Since they are completely ostracised their stock of foodgrain is being rapidly depleted and starvation has set in. Those who need medication are not able to receive it and their condition is rapidly deteriorating. The only way out for the Chamars is by paying a fine of Rs 1,000.

According to the Nepali law, discrimination against people based on their caste is considered a criminal act. Yet, both the government and the National Human Rights Commission have remained mute spectators. In fact some high-ranking government officials of the district are helping the 'higher castes' people.

When some government officials, reporters and human rights commission people went to the district, they were manhandled by the 'upper caste' people, they were beaten, their cameras destroyed and made to sign a statement that they would not enter the village again. The delegation are now demanding drastic action against the people responsible.

Earlier this year Siraha district had faced the same kind of situation. But the 'low-caste' people of the district were able to ensure that no harm would come their way. The Chamars of Saptari had hoped to emulate them.

Deuba committee for continuing dialogue

Deshantar, 3 September

The Deuba committee has asked the government not to shut the door to a dialogue with the Maoist rebels even if the conditions are not favourable. A source close to the committee has said that the government must have both a short-term policy and a long-term policy to deal with the problems. In the long term the government should go for massive development of these affected areas.

The committee has suggested a multi-pronged action consisting of economic, political and social changes to solve the problem. It states that many unemployed youth are attracted to the Maoist cause because of the lack of opportunities in their areas. Maoists attract these youth with a ready supply of money and arms.

The committee has criticised the government for not paying proper attention to the problem earlier and feels that had it done so the present crisis could have been averted. The committee is going to present its report

as soon as the Prime Minister returns from New York.

Earlier it had been stated that since the groundwork for the meeting had not been prepared there would be no dialogue between the two sides. Now Deuba is optimistic that the talks will move ahead. He has asked that all armed action be stopped while the talks are going on. He has asked the leader of the rebels to consider this point very seriously.

Sources say Deuba is waiting for a reply from the rebels. Another source points out that contact between the rebels and Deuba which was earlier broken has now been re-established.

Maoist recruitment assisted

Deshantar, 3 September

By postponing the bandh called by them, the nine left parties have unexpectedly helped the Maoist rebels in their recruitment drive.

One of the parties in the alliance has stated that the bandh was postponed for technical reasons and that they know nothing about the call of the rebels to increase recruitment.

Since it would be difficult for the government to deploy forces evenly in all parts of the country, the rebels have decided to begin recruitment. The main recruitment areas are Rukum, Rolpa, Salyan, Jajarkot, Gorkha, and Sindhupalchowk. The rebels want to establish one of these places as their permanent base.

The rebels have publicly stated that their recruitment drive starts from 21 September and they are seeking to recruit people who are prepared to fight for the people and the country, are at least 18-year-olds and are basically fit and healthy.

The police, because of its own inefficiencies and lack of ideas to take on the rebels, is demoralised and not ready to take on the rebels. It is rumored that the higher ups in the police spend more time running after the political leaders than thinking of ways to tackle the rebels.

Defining bribes

Himal Khabarpatrika, 1-16 September

"It has been found that members of the judiciary are offered bribes and this committee recommends that the language and system used should be improved upon."

This is the recommendation passed by the Bheri Anchal Transport Association. It has been proved in a number of cases that the Kaski District court is easily influenced by money and the clout of the transport association.

In 1998/1999, 27 people died in road accidents in Banke district. The district courts granted bail to almost all the drivers and only a few of the cases registered are being pursued.

Incidents have shown that if certain members of the judiciary can be tapped by depositing Rs17,500 with the courts the case is dismissed. Sometimes the driver may have to spend a couple of days in custody.

Even the president of the Bar Association admits the courts and members of the judiciary are easily influenced by money. He feels that the courts should be far sighted and work for the benefit of people and be responsible and answerable to the people.

Members of the judiciary, police and the courts are provided free passes on buses by the Bheri Anchal Transport Association. This system is extended to their families too. The reason: "To improve relations between the Association and the police, judiciary and the courts."



Budhabar, 30 August

"So, Kisunji, we'll see each other again at our next understanding?"

‘Lahureys’ prop Nepal’s economy

Nepal now has a remittance economy, money sent home by workers abroad equals the annual budget.

RAJENDRA DAHAL

When Kaji Amar Singh Thapa lost his Malauna Fort to the British 185 years ago, his Gorkhali soldiers looked for alternative employment. They had two choices: join the British forces, or go over to their rival, the Punjab army under King Ranjit Singh. Pretty soon, any Nepali soldier who fought for a foreign army began to be known as a “lahurey”, so called after the Sikh king’s capital in Lahore (now in Pakistan). Today, any Nepali migrant worker abroad is known by the generic term, *lahurey*.

Nearly 200 years after they first started enlisting in foreign armies, the descendants of lahureys are propping up Nepal’s otherwise stagnant economy. According to investigations by *Himal* magazine, remittances from Nepalis abroad today contribute more than Rs 70 billion annually to the economy—more than tourism, foreign aid and exports put together and nearly equal to this year’s budget. Nepal’s economy today is a remittance economy.

There is now so much cash in the informal economy that when a commercial bank made an initial public offering of shares worth Rs 175 million it was oversubscribed within a week to the tune of Rs 1.4 billion. Banks in remote districts report difficulty in keeping up with interest payments due to burgeoning savings.

Nepal’s per capita income grew by Rs 1,500 in 1998/99 compared to the previous fiscal year. Balance of payments rose by 100 percent to reach Rs 9 billion in Nepal’s favour. The government’s current account, which had been in the red in previous years, showed a surplus last year, and foreign currency reserves marked a 16 percent increase to reach Rs 75 billion. Although imports from India doubled, Nepal’s banks still have convertible and Indian currency reserves to cover a whole year’s imports.

Where is all this money coming from? The only explanation is the remittances from Nepalis working abroad, a cumulative amount that is now larger than the money generated by Nepalis exports, tourism, and foreign aid put together. Government officials say the main reason the Nepali financial market is witnessing the present excess liquidity is the huge amount of remittances entering the country.

The only figures the government has on remittances from outside the country are what the British and Indian governments pay their former soldiers. And this has been substantial. Till as late as 1971, the earnings of British Gurkhas were the highest source of foreign currency for Nepal. Tourism and exports, took over the top spot later.

Besides the serving soldiers, there are 26,000 pensioners from the British Army, while



The economy on their shoulders: Nepali workers heading out to the Gulf region sign up at Tribhuvan International Airport’s Labour Desk.

ex-Indian Army servicemen number 105,000. According to the government’s Economic Survey 1999, the pensions paid to these two groups amounted to Rs 6.2 billion in the first eight months of 1998/99 alone. With the the British government decision to raise Gurkha pensions by 100 percent or more from January 2000 this amount has gone up significantly.

The only known study on Nepalis working abroad was conducted by British scholar David Seddon, with his Nepali counterparts Ganesh Gurung and Jagannath Adhikari, for the British aid agency, Department for International Development (DFID). This study released in late 1999 showed a staggering Rs 35 billion came into the country in 1997 as remittance from the 392,000 Nepalis working in nearly 20 countries around the world (*see table*). But because the figures mentioned in the DFID study are three years old, even they do not tell the complete story.

The number of Nepali workers in the Gulf has risen dramatically in the last few years and has crossed 200,000 (more than twice the number provided by Seddon), with almost 100,000 in Saudi Arabia alone. The number of Nepalis in Qatar has also risen rapidly. While Nepalis earlier went as labourers, drivers or brick-layers, in recent years, college graduates have been making their way over to the oil-rich countries.

The DFID study put the number of Nepalis in all of East

Asia at 34,000, but the British Gurkha office in Kathmandu has a tally of some 70,000 Nepalis working in Hong Kong alone. Most of them are children and relatives of former Gurkhas who were granted Hong Kong IDs by the departing British. There are an estimated 50,000 or so Nepalis working (legally and illegally) in the other countries of Southeast and East Asia. Of these, around 2,000 (mostly former British Gurkhas) are employed as security officers in Brunei and Singapore, and sources say their annual per capita savings on average amounts to more than Rs 1 million. There are thousands more scattered across Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

In the case of India, the DFID calculation included only those Nepalis in the Indian Army and those working for the public sector. If the unorganised and private sectors were taken into account, the study believed there could be as many as one million Nepalis working in India. A Nepal Rastra Bank study estimated that Nepalis working in India were sending back Rs 40 billion annually.

The preferred mode of money transfer for Nepalis in countries other than India is *hundi*, which entails payment in rupees within Nepal for a premium on hard currency deposited abroad. The foreign-earned wealth then comes into the country in kind, the bulk as gold. Based on the declarations of gold imports at Kathmandu airport it is believed that all the

money used to purchase this gold is hundi money, since none of the Nepali banks have provided foreign currency to import gold. This totalled Rs 35 billion during 1998/99. (Presently most of the remittances are coming into Nepal through regular banking channels because the difference between bank and hundi rates have fallen to 3-4% from the earlier 12-14%).

By this reckoning alone, the total annual remittance from all Nepalis working abroad is Rs 75 billion. For comparison, Nepal’s annual budget for 2000/2001 is Rs 92 billion. But surprisingly, there is still no

official acknowledgement of the substantial role that this money from outside plays in keeping the country’s economy afloat.

Only in recent years has the Nepali government been taking note of the importance of foreign employment for the Nepali economy. Even then, it views it more as a safety valve to relieve the pressure of unemployment rather than as a source of income. Neither has there been any attempt by the state to facilitate entry of cash into the country. Overseas remittances sustain the Nepali economy. It is this country’s economic lifeline. ♦
(Adapted from Himal Khabarpatrika)

Major golf course in Pokhara

Major Ram Bahadur Gurung is a retired Gurkha officer who has invested his lifetime’s earnings in a business not many would ever think of: a golf course.



Golfing is Major gurung’s hobby and he has come up with an 18-hole golf course on the banks of the Seti River in Pokhara at the confluence with Bijaypur Khola. He has spent over Rs 20 million buying and holing the 700 ropani land and has named it the Himalayan Golf Course.

The Major has a genuinely Nepali technique of maintaining the grass on the greens: releasing half a dozen sheep into the course so they can trim the grass. “Golf was invented by sheperds in Scotland, so it is quite appropriate. In fact, it is more fun playing with them around.” No one has asked the sheep what they think of the round white projectiles whizzing about.

Major Gurung feels the main reason why ex-Gurkhas lack the ability to invest intelligently is because of their extended stays away from home which causes a total lack of ideas as to what business may do well.

Many Gurkha retirees therefore stay at home with their money stashed away. Pokhara today is in an ironical situation: there is so much cash around, but there is very little besides real estate to invest in. Commercial banks have very little business. “Actually it should be the government which should help ex-Gurkhas invest their money, and provide the right opportunities,” he says. “In the beginning, returning Gurkhas only believe in the government.”

THANKA AD

| Country | Number | Remittance |
|----------------------------|----------|----------------------------------|
| India (public sector only) | 250,000+ | NPR 6 billion (USD 87 million) |
| West Asia | 90,000 | NPR 1.5 billion (USD 22 million) |
| East Asia | 34,000 | NPR 23 billion (USD 333 million) |
| Europe/North America | 15,000 | NPR 4.4 billion (USD 64 million) |
| Others | 1000 | |

Seddon, et al 1997

BIZ NEWS

Fuel prices to go up

Because of a global increase in oil prices it is only a matter of time before the government announces new rates for Nepal too.

Nepal Oil Corporation sources say that diesel could cost up to Rs 30, kerosene Rs 18 and petrol Rs 50 per litre once it begins to supply oil recently imported. Selling the new consign-ment at existing rates would lead to huge losses, they add.

In the past one month, the international price of kerosene has increased by 15 percent and that of diesel by about 24 percent. The last consignment of NOC's kerosene import, on 10 August, had cost \$ 286.77 per metric ton-almost 64 percent higher than compared to a year ago. After adding transport and foreign exchange costs, that kerosene would cost Rs 17 per litre upon reaching Kathmandu.

The prices of petroleum products have remained unchanged since September last year. That was when the price of kerosene was increased from Rs 10.50 to Rs 13 and that of diesel from Rs 15.50 to Rs 23 per litre.



Even at that price, kerosene was being subsidised by Rs 3.50.

With Dasai just around the corner, the government may continue with the old rates in order to avoid price sending the price of other commodities spiralling upwards. But it all depends on whether India decides to revise its rates or not, for even a small price difference across the border can trigger outflows from Nepal.

PPA review

The parliament's Finance Committee has asked the Ministry of Water Resources to look into the possibility of reviewing the power purchase agreements (PPA) between the Nepal Electric-ity Authority and independent power producers (IPPs).

The Committee is concerned the NEA is likely to incur huge losses if it purchases power at the agreed rates and terms. The NEA has PPAs with Khimti, Bhotekoshi, Indrawati and Upper Modi hydroelectricity projects.

Committee members also rapped the NEA for purchasing the "flood energy" generated by the projects during the rainy months. They also asked the government to work towards finding a basis for reopening the PPAs and renegotiating the terms. The Committee has also asked that no new agreements be reached until after the issue was resolved.

Meantime, businesses that have already invested in the power projects say that while the Committee may be right in looking after the country's interests, it is too late to make any revisions in the agreements. They argue that any attempt to re-open negotiations on agreed PPAs would scare away the little foreign investment there is in the sector forever.

Kali Gandaki cost

The cost of the Kali Gandaki project has escalated by almost 40 percent, or \$78 million more than the \$330 million it was expected to cost.

The parliament's Public Accounts Committee says the cost escalation is against financial regulations, but project officials claim it resulted from appreciation of the US dollar against the rupee (\$1:Rs 56 four years ago to \$1: Rs72 today) and the "unfavourable" geology of the project site.Only 65 percent of the 144 MW project has been completed and it will come online only in 2002.

BPC shares on sale

Seventy-five percent of the shares of Butwal Power Company (BPC) is open for sale once again as part of the move to privatise the company. Bidding had been cancelled in December last year after one of the bidders pulled out citing "irregular circumstances" about the entire process.

Interested companies can bid until November after which the government will begin evaluating the technical proposals. Another 12 percent of the shares will be offered to BPC employees (at special rates) and to the general public within a year after privatisation is complete. The government plans to retain 10 percent of the shares.

BPC, which became a limited liability company in 1997, employs 300 people and owns and manages two hydropower stations that generate a total of 17 megawatts. It also owns 15 percent of Himat Power Limited, which owns and operates the 60 MW Khimti hydropower project. The government owns 96.1 percent of BPC shares.

Of the two foreign bidders in the earlier round, Independent Power Company, a British/American party, withdrew its offer alleging the government of favouring Interkraft, its Norwe-gian rival. IPC had offered US\$ 10 million for 75 percent shares while Interkraft had said it would pay US\$ 8.25 million, adding that it would offer more if the government agreed to an advance Power Purchase Agreement to be effective from 2001. Both companies had two powerful local business lobbies as local partners.

Hyatt opens softly



Hyatt Regency opened to business on Thursday, to become Kathmandu's sixth 5-star property. Eighty of the hotel's 290 rooms are open for business so are the banquet rooms, gym, cafes and the swimming pool. Hyatt, located on the way to Baudha, plans a full-scale opening in November. The hotel is spread over 37 acres of land that is well known for its view of the Himalayan range north of Kathmandu.

Hotel staffs stir

Employees of Nepal's star hotels have asked their establishments to compulsorily bill guests a 10 percent service charge. A 10-member Joint Central Action formed to lead the agitation has given hotel managements until November to fulfil their demands.

INTERVIEW

“I am not related to the Koiralas”

–Dipendra Purush Dhakal
Governor, Nepal Rastra Bank



The sacking of Dr Tilak Rawal as governor of Nepal Rastra Bank finally put to rest the differences between him and Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya. The new appointee, Dipendra Purush Dhakal, 48, is a former government secretary, and he takes charge of the central bank at a time when urgent reforms are needed in the financial sector. Excerpts from a short conversation with the new governor follow:

How do you feel about your new appointment?
This sector is not really new to me because I have had some association with it earlier through the joint venture banks. In fact I have served four or five years as director in those banks. I am aware of policy and major problems faced by this sector. I was also appointed to the board of the Nepal Rastra Bank itself.

But you skipped as many as five consecutive meetings, and by NRB rules you should have been removed from the board...
The reason is I am now mourning my father's death. There are a lot of rituals one has to perform every month. At the same time I was also working full-time as Managing Director of Kathmandu Medical College. Because of this, I missed some meetings. I don't know exactly how many though.

You join NRB at a time when the finance sector is in a very bad shape. How do you plan to tackle this?
Yes, the financial sector is going through a very difficult phase. People are slowly losing confi-dence. Depositors are getting scared about the safety of their deposits. The amount of bad debts that have been projected is another reason for worry. The operations of many banks are also being questioned. The central bank will intervene when needed to resolve these issues.

I have also heard that operations of some financial institutions are very troublesome. If poor monitoring and supervision leads to any of the institutions becoming bankrupt it will not only damage that particular organisation but also the people who have saved there or taken loans will be jeopardised. One dying institution can cause an upheaval in the economy.

Where do you stand on the issue of autonomy for the central bank?
The autonomy debate has been going on in the financial sector and there have also been discus-sions in international forums. Central banks are autonomous in many countries, in others they are not. We are also discussing what would be the

most appropriate for Nepal Rastra Bank. I would rather like to assess the issue very seriously and only after making my observations will I make recommendations.

Do you have any comment on the present economic situation?
It is not very bad. It is a little different than what has been projected. Economic growth is in the range of six percent, which is good. Inflation is at 3.3 percent, which is good for a country that has at most times experienced a double-digit inflation. Similarly, government borrowing was not very high last year. These are positive indicators. There are some negative indicators also, such as revenue collection in the early months. It needs vigilance.

What about banking, interest rates?
The market determines interest rates. If savings are not up to desired levels interest rates could go up. This keeps on fluctuating. We used to get up to nine percent interest on savings and up to 13 percent in fixed deposits. You don't get that anymore. Again it is related with the overall economic situation because we are not a closed economy anymore.

Is that not a core area the central bank has to look into?
Very true. The major responsibility of the central bank is to manage money supply. You adjust money supply to adjust inflation. You also fix certain bank rates, which indirectly influence the interest rates of commercial banks. The core is money supply and we have to look into that.

Are you related to the Koiralas of Biratnagar? Some papers say your new appointment came because you are related.
I am not related to that family. I am from Dhading. My grandfather came to Kathmandu and we settled here. I have two brothers and four sisters. None of my sisters is married to a Koirala. My younger brother is married to a Koirala, but to one from Pokhara. ♦

Grindlays Gazette

INTEREST RATE UPDATE

| NEPALI RUPEE | CURRENT% | PREVIOUS% |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|
| Call Money Avg. | 5.20 | 5.30 |
| 84 Days t/bill | 5.10 | 5.09 |
| 91 Days t/bill | 5.30 | 5.32 |
| 365 Days t/bill | 6.18 | 6.16 |
| Repo rate | 5.80 | 5.82 |

Average rate of 91 day T/bill moved slightly lower due to aggressive bidding by some banks. Market liquidity seems to be slightly excessive and it is expected to remain at same level in the near term. T/Bill rate may come under pressure in coming weeks and is likely to move in a slightly lower range of 5.20-5.40 percent.

FOREIGN CURRENCY : Interest rates

| | USD | EUR | GBP | JPY | CHF |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| LENDING | 9.50 | 6.25 | 6.00 | 1.38 | 5.00 |
| LIBOR (1M) | 6.62 | 4.73 | 6.04 | 0.35 | 3.27 |

CURRENCY UPDATE

| AG/USD | CURRENT * | WK/AGO | %CHG |
|---------------|-----------|--------|--------|
| OIL(Barrel) | 31.95 | 31.96 | - 0.03 |
| GOLD(Ounce) | 274.25 | 276.65 | - 0.87 |
| GOLD (NPR *) | 7075 | 7115 | - 0.56 |
| EUR | 0.9030 | 0.9059 | - 0.32 |
| GBP | 1.4720 | 1.4912 | - 1.29 |
| JPY | 106.25 | 108.11 | - 1.72 |
| CHF | 1.7093 | 1.7213 | - 0.69 |
| AUD | 0.5732 | 0.5892 | - 2.72 |
| INR | 45.77 | 45.65 | + 0.26 |

*Currency bid prices at 1.30 p.m. on 28/8 - Source Reuters

Oil : OPEC oil ministers meet on Sept. 10 and are expected to raise output by 500,000 bpd under an automatic price mechanism that calls or lifting production if the price of a basket of crudes remain above \$28 for 20 working days.

Currencies : The Euro held above its psychologically key \$0.90 level against the dollar supported by weak U.S economic data, gains in the Swiss franc and growing expectation of hike in the Euro interest rates. The Yen rose to seven-week peaks against the dollar amid optimism about the Japanese economy.

INDIAN RUPEE OUTLOOK :
The Indian rupee ended firmer at 45.77/78 per dollar as exporters sold the dollar and banks unwound long positions. Both the exports and foreign investors were selling dollars and importer demand was low in a thin market on Monday.

INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES FOR NEPALI TIMES

| | 6 months | 1 year |
|---------------------------|----------|--------|
| SAARC countries | US\$25 | US\$48 |
| Other countries | US\$40 | US\$75 |
| marketing@nepalitimes.com | | |



MIN BARACHARYA

Trade is essential for Nepal’s survival. But Nepal must do more than survive, it needs to prosper. And to prosper quickly there is really no other way than to let trade flourish freely.

Some 600 years ago, the city of Bhaktapur, straddling the trade route from Tibet, was the most important business centre in the valley of Kathmandu. Here caravans from Tibet found a bountiful welcome awaiting them at Bhote Bahal. The people of Bhaktapur treated the traders to feasts in which *aila* flowed like water, and put them in the right frame of mind for trade negotiations.

Bhote Bahal still stands in Bhaktapur and there are other Bhote Bahals in Kathmandu and Patan which bespeak the trade origins of Nepal.

Being landlocked, trade continued to flourish. By the middle of the 20th century there were “shutter” merchants who had one pull-down door to their shops displaying a variety of goods from Tibet, India and even Czechoslovakia, from where came the “pote” beads so loved by Nepali women.

Until very recently Nepal was entirely trade-oriented, and it must get back to the days when trade was given the priority it deserved. The problem has been that it is illegal businesses that have been allowed to grow at the expense of manufacturing and legitimate trade.

Exports are the only way to pay for imports. And Nepal has to import just about everything;

it is imported petrol which keeps Nepal’s transport system running and imported planes provide domestic air transport. Imported computers allow us to take advantage of the Internet, imported cosmetics and electronic consumer goods allow us to enjoy the finer things in life. These imports cannot be financed unless there is money from exports to buy them with.

For a small, landlocked country like Nepal, trade is everything. Bigger countries like India or the United States don’t really have to be that dependant on trade, but Nepal must learn from city-states like Singapore which have transformed themselves into hubs for global trade and prospered dramatically.

Nepal has to, indeed Nepal must, specialise in manufacturing what it is best at, from handicrafts or pashmina shawls to software and micro-electronics. You then use the proceeds to buy anything else you need. Closed-door hermit policies will only turn Nepal into a North Korea.

What we need is a trading system that builds on Nepal’s natural advantages. Trade is essential for Nepal’s survival. But Nepal must do more than survive, it needs to prosper. And to prosper quickly there is really no other way than to let trade flourish freely. To achieve this

the government must remove all restrictions on trade.

There could be a worry: won’t we run out of dollars if we keep on importing? What about foreign exchange requirements? But that is a problem only because the government micro-manages foreign exchange.

What it should do is leave the people to fend for themselves. Let all foreign currency transactions be freed from government control: let the market decide. If I want to import, let me arrange my own foreign exchange. Similarly, if I am an exporter let me dispose off of my exchange in the manner I like. Let the government step aside and let businessmen fill the void.

If that happens, Nepal’s trade will bloom: and everyone will benefit, not just those who benefit from keeping trade restricted. When people find that they can import anything they will also realise that this alone is not enough.

They must possess the dollars, the yens, the hard currency required. This extra demand for foreign exchange will be an automatic incentive for people to earn it and trade both ways: exports as well as imports. This will lay the seeds of prosperity.

Indeed, Nepal has few other options. Come April 2001, the final phase of India’s agreement

Free trade is Nepal’s passport to prosperity

with WTO will come into effect. With this, India will have no quantitative restriction left on imports: no items will be on the banned or restricted list. Also India’s customs duties are now far below what they were a few years ago.

Under the circumstances Nepal can no longer import for export to India with its present import regime and duty

structure. It must, therefore, remove restrictions and eliminate or substantially reduce all customs duties if it is not to be marginalised.

To remain attractive to businessmen and foreign investors, and to generate employment, Nepal must be less restrictive and less taxed than India. After all India has the additional attraction of

being a huge market, and this has to be compensated for somehow by Nepal.

If Nepal plays its cards right, there is no cause for worry. It is up to Nepal to seize this opportunity knowing that it is in good company. Country after country has prospered from free trade, low duties and a liberal economic environment.

Whether it is Singapore, Hongkong, or the United States, the formula is the same. Remove restrictions, eliminate or reduce taxes and watch the country’s businessmen do the rest. There is every reason to believe that Nepal will be no different. The moment is now. Free Nepal’s trade, eliminate taxes and watch this ‘kingdom of the gods’ be blessed with unimaginable prosperity. ♦

(Rakesh Wadhwa is a writer and economist who manages two casinos in Kathmandu.)



MIN BARACHARYA

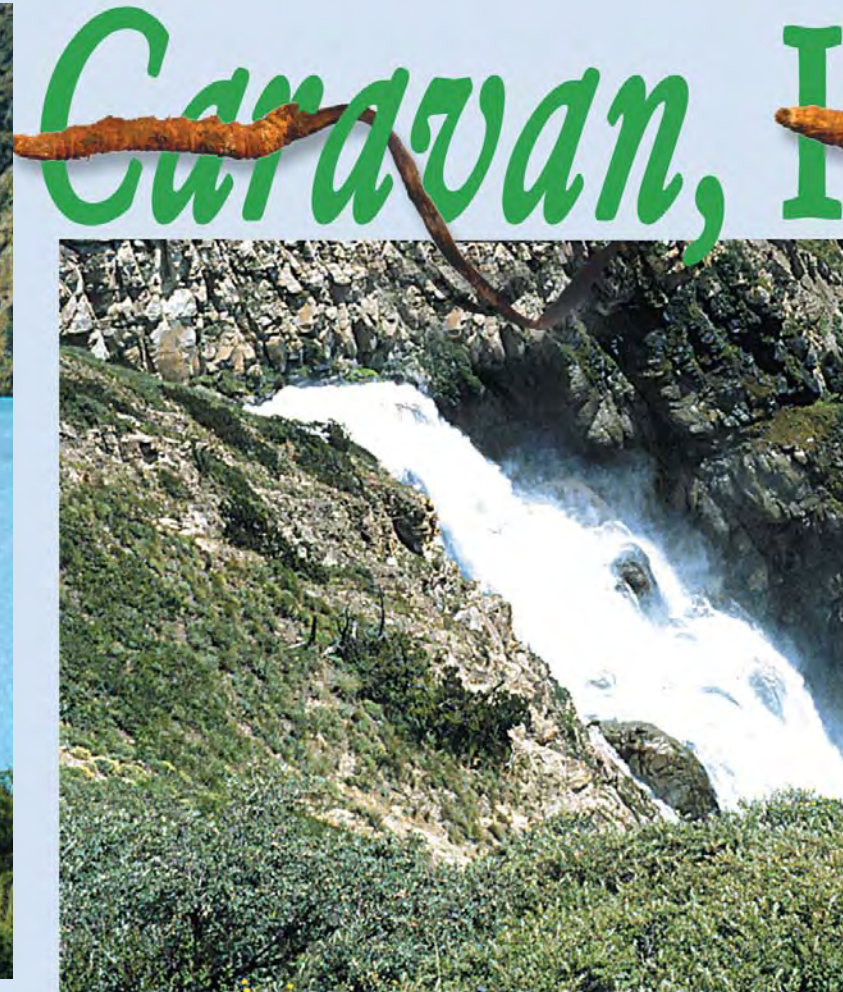
The original Bhote Bahal in Kathmandu from where Kathmandu trade with Tibet flourished. Chinese goods at Maha Boudha (top)

nabil
bank

NEPAL’S MAJOR TRADING PARTNERS

| Export to | Million Rs | Import from | Million Rs |
|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| India | 13088.0 | India | 32430.4 |
| USA | 9520.3 | China | 10199.2 |
| Germany | 7820.7 | Singapore | 9679.0 |
| Bangladesh | 1296.3 | Switzerland | 7545.2 |
| China | 589.7 | UAE | 2763.3 |
| United Kingdom | 521.8 | Japan | 2251.5 |
| France | 479.2 | South Korea | 1956.2 |
| Italy | 330.9 | New Zealand | 1785.3 |
| Austria | 330.9 | Malaysia | 1779.8 |
| Belgium | 283.3 | United Kingdom | 1639.5 |

(Figures are for 1998-99. Source: Nepal and the World: A Statistical Profile 2000, FNCCI.)



Tourism is driven by fads. Last year it was Easter Island, this year it is Koh Samui. In Nepal itself, the flavour of the season is Dolpo.

PADAM GHALEY IN PHOKSUNDO
After the rush on the Everest Trail in 1999 following the huge global success of the IMAX film, Monsoon 2000 has seen a rush on Dolpo. This is mostly due to the Oscar nomination in the best foreign film category for the unique French-Nepali production, *Caravan*. The film

lost to Pedro Almodovar's *All About My Mother*, but not without a successful box office run all over the world, including our own Jai Nepal Chitraghar where it was screened for an unprecedented four months. Trekker traffic in Dolpo has seen a six-fold rise this season with about 20 groups travelling all over Lower and Upper

Dolpo, a few of them even traversing the high pass into the Mustang Valley. And because of *Caravan*, the must-sees in Dolpo these days are not just the waterfalls and Bon Po monasteries, but also the locations where memorable scenes from the film were shot. Across the lake, along the slender path to Shey Gomba

above the gossamer Phoksundo Lake is the exact spot where the yak fell into the water. The locals will tell you how the filming was done, how it was not a live yak that fell, but a make-believe, French-made stuffed yak. A stunt yak did the last bit just before the fall. The path looks well maintained now, no danger of humans or yaks falling victim to gravity.

Down near Ringmo are the wheat fields across which the film's hero, Karma, was seen

film—mainly because Eric Valli tried not to glamourise Dolpo and used its grime and earthy colours effectively. We looked for the handsome lead yak, Nygimpo (who plays himself in the film) everywhere but couldn't locate him.

All in all, despite reports in the Kathmandu press to the contrary, the film seems to have done a load of good for the local economy. Aside from the Rs 7 million or so that the production team spent directly in yak caravan rentals, renovation of gombas and houses, maintenance of trails and hiring locals

The trekkers are mainly from France, Switzerland and Germany and stay in their tented camps and eat what is brought in from Kathmandu. But the tea shops along the way are doing brisk business selling potatoes, salt, oil and *tsampa* to the porters that accompany the tourists. Every tourist needs at least five porters to carry the essentials needed on a Dolpo circuit from the airstrip at Jufal to Tarap, Ringmo, Phoksundo and back.

"I haven't seen the film myself, but we have no reason to complain. The film made Dolpo known all over the world, and people are now coming to see what this place is like," says Kunga Tsering, who owns a tea shop in Ringmo.

Earlier, Eric Valli had chosen a Tarap lass to take the part of the heroine, but the role was too demanding, and in the end he settled for the astoundingly professional and restrained acting of Lhakpa Tsamchoe from Dharmashala. Except for her part and that of Karma's, everyone else in the film was a local, including Thinley Lhondup from Saldang (who plays Thinley). The grandson was played by a Saldang boy Karma Wangel, who is now studying in an English school in Baudha in Kathmandu and is seen walking to class in a shirt and tie!

Outside Tarap, we ran into



walking off with his caravan in defiance of the village headman, Thinley. Then the high pass near Tarap Dho where the powerful sky burial scene took place. The photogenic little village of Saldang where most of the indoor shooting was done is almost exactly as it looked in the

to act in the film, the fallout of increased tourism is now bringing an indirect bonanza to locals. With more trekkers, more Dolpopas are being hired as guides, there are more porters walking up from Baglung and Pyuthan with rice and other essentials.



CARAVAN

Caravan was filmed entirely "on location" in 1998 in Dolpo's challenging terrain. In Lhondup (left) is a tradition-bound villager carrying salt from Tibet to Nepal. Thinley Lhondup (left) is a tradition-bound villager carrying salt from Tibet to Nepal. Thinley wanted him, and is opposed to Lhakpa's friend tradition to lead the caravan south through the mountains. "It is a film about power, pride and glory in a western," says Eric Valli, the French director of *Caravan*. The story is centred on the Lhakpa, between tradition and modernity.

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Himalayan viagra, the Dolpopa



Clockwise from top left:

- Phoksundo Lake with ledge on far side from which yak fell in **Caravan**.
- Phoksundo Falls, the roar can be heard miles away.
- Yarchagompo, the Himalayan viagra.
- Summer flowers in Dolpo with yak caravan.
- Monk from Saldang who acted in the dance sequence in **Caravan** and (left) chorten on way to Ringmo.

All photos Padam Ghaley

another “extra”, a lama in the local monastery, who had acted in the dance sequence following the funeral. He has gone back to his normal life of saying prayers and raising barley.

With increased tourism, Dolpo is also drawing in food,



consumer goods and other items from outside. The big change these days in the Dolpo valleys are the traders from Tibet, and the bazaars are full of Chinese beer and a potent whiskey with a Chinese label depicting a lion that the locals call “*singha marka*”. There are also Tibetan mountain goats and wool in abundance. Dolpo is now obviously more accessible from the north than from the rugged, roadless parts of central Nepal—another reason why the film *Caravan* was such an ethnographic masterpiece in documenting the life (even though it was fictionalised) of the endangered salt caravans from Tibet. It is now easier to transport even rice and flour from Tibet instead of sourcing it from the Nepali *rongba* (lowlander) traders from the south.

The other item of hot trade between Dolpo and Tibet today is the “Himalayan Viagra”, which locals say is a half-plant half-worm that the Tibetans call yarchagompo, a Dolpo specialty. As a worm, the yarchagompo slithers in the shade at elevations of around 4-4,500 m during the monsoon. One yarchagompo hunter from Ringmo took us to see the young worms with their tails sticking out from the ground and wagging in the air when the sun shines. He looks for the tails and pick them off the ground, putting them in a big sack on his back. Dolpo yarchagompo is taken into Tibet and can be seen laid out on the streets of Lhasa, and even in traditional Chinese medicine shops in Hong Kong.

In Dolpo, one little yarchagompo about 7 cm long used to cost just Re 1 about 12 years ago, today a dried yarchagompo in good condition can cost up to Rs 70, one kilogram costs Rs 150,000. Yarchagompo can be pickled inside a *raksi* bottle and taken like ginseng, or ground into powder and mixed with milk. Either way, the locals swear it works wonders.

After eight days of walking from Jufal, across Numa La pass (5150m) the trail drops steeply down to the holy Phoksundo

Lake at 3,600m. Nothing prepares you for the size and the vivid colour of its deep waters. The forests along the side and the steep mountain flanks that plunge into the waters give the lake an out-of-this-world scenic quality. By the lake side in Ringmo is a Bon Po shrine—the animistic religion that preceded Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet. It is in the Tibetan rimlands of Mustang and Dolpo in Nepal that Bon Po

of Bon Po, Buddhism and modernity it is no wonder why they keep coming.

Phoksundo lake is drained by one of Nepal's great natural wonders: the Phoksundo Falls. A lone lammergeier circles lazily in the watery mist that rises from the falls, and we think it could very well be the same one that "acted" in Lhakpa's funeral scene in *Caravan*. The spectacular waterfall descends 1,600 m



through a series of steps to the confluence of the Bheri and Tarap Chu at Dunai. From Dunai it is a three-hour climb up to the airstrip at Jufal to which private airlines now operate regular flights from Pokhara and Nepalgunj.

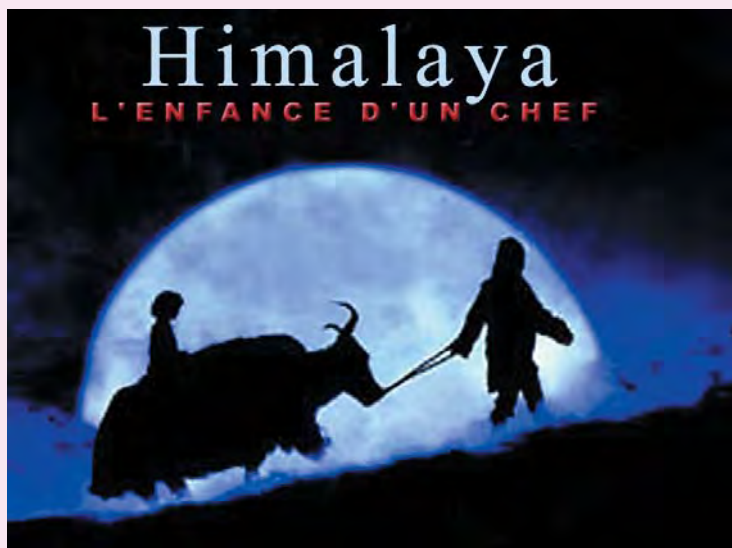
You can see that even without the film, change is coming fast to Dolpo. Powdered iodised salt from India has now replaced Tibetan rock salt from the lakes on the plateau, and with this the traditional annual salt caravans are disappearing. The yaks these days are more likely to be carrying “*singha marka*” Chinese whiskey or flour from the roadheads in Tibet to cater to Dolpo’s trekking industry. ♦

survives.

As the indigenous early shamanistic religion of Tibet, Bon Po has a powerful following. Some Bon Po practices have been assimilated into Tibetan Buddhism and two exist syncretically. One tip: while passing a Bon Po shrine go around it anti-clockwise while you have to do it clockwise for a Buddhist *chorten* or monastery. Along the lakeside, you still see shrines, dilapidated bridges and steep rails described by David Snellgrove in his great 1961 Dolpo adventure classic, *Himalayan Pilgrimage*.

Others have been through here: Peter Mathhiesen before writing his book, *Snow Leopard*. French anthropologist Corneille Jest also did most of his work among the Dolpopas of Tarap. Jest's book *Tarap Dolpo* will be translated into English this fall by Himal Books. Seeing the outstanding physical beauty of the place, the fascinating layers

mirinda



tion" from September 1997-July 1998. The film Thinley, played by Thinley Dorjee, is a village headman who has led yak caravans across the Himalayas all his life. His son, Lhakpa, wants to lead the caravans after him, but Karma wants to lead and Karma defies him. The film is a rough blizzard and adventure. "This is a sort of western. A Tibetan filmmaker who made a tension between Thinley and Karma."



Ask not what computers can do for you, but what you can do with them

SUJATA TULADHAR AND ANIL KARKI

It is so familiar. You put your lifetime's saving into a state-of-the-art computer with a Viper graphics card, the mother of all motherboards, RAM coming out of its gills. And then a few months later, it is too slow to run the latest version of your favourite application or Quake III. The planned obsolescence of hardware in this business can get on your nerves and empty your

wallet. So what do you do? Even before you plunk your money down, it is important to know what upgrades are possible and whether you can afford them so that your hardware has a longer shelf-life. Computer sales and services have come a long way in Kathmandu, today it is not seen as a luxury anymore. It is not just the telecommunications industry, banks, studios, creative media like animation, graphics that use

computers, it has become a communication, information and entertainment device for the home as well. Deciding to buy a computer might not be as hard as choosing which one to buy, especially with the gimmicks in the market that extol the "fastest, highest and strongest". Moreover, the market is crowded with computer resellers offering every brand you have ever heard of. When you start off on a computer hunt, to choose between branded computers and assembled ones could be a major dilemma. Our survey of the Kathmandu market for branded products got us these companies—IBM, Compaq, Acer, Dell and Toshiba. The major difference the brand names have with clones is, of course, the price. In a price-sensitive market like Kathmandu, the 30-40 percent differential between branded and clones is a point to consider. While a top-end branded computer will cost at least Rs 95,000, an assembled one could be as low as Rs 40,000 depending on the configuration you choose. For instance, a difference in just one key component like an Intel

(genuine) and a Tomato motherboard could cause a price difference of up to Rs 7,000. The challenge for dealers of branded computers is that the clones are so much cheaper. Rajan Man Shaky of CAS Trading House says, "The market for branded computers was not so bad in Kathmandu 3-4 years earlier because the custom duties on the components was at par with that on the entire system. But now that the duties is far less for components than for the entire systems, the assembled pieces have become very cheap." But what you get in return for the extra money for a branded computer is reliability, performance and durability. In addition, they come with a three years' warranty. The first year of the warranty period is on site while for the rest of the two years you will have to take the computer to the reseller. The warranty is an assurance that if anything happens to the computer, you need not cover the maintenance cost. But in case of assembled computers, a dealer would not be able to give a warranty of more than a month. With assembled computers, the only guarantee

you have is that it'll hang frequently, and there will be a major problem within three months of purchase. Branded computers give you fewer surprises. Since all parts of a branded computer are standard products of the company that manufactures it, any compatibility problem would be a rarity. Even if there is a problem the reseller is unable to solve, you can always get to the manufacturers and get it fixed. The total cost of operation is also much lower for branded computers as the power consumption is less (maximum electricity consumed by a branded computer is 150 to 200 Watts). Durability is higher and the system is safer, at least you know what you are dealing with! The advantage of clones however is that because of the higher turnover, delivery is fast. Within a few hours of ordering, you have a living breathing computer sitting on your desk waiting to carry out your every command. There is a small catch, though: you never know when it will crash. However, assembled computers give you a variety of choices as far as configuration is

concerned. From Pentium 300 MHz to the latest Pentium III 1 GHz, everything is available in the assembled market. So, even if your requirement is for a glorified typewriter, then you can get a cheap one. No point buying a Ferrari when all you need is a Maruti. Designer computer brands come with only a standardised configuration and they are packed with the latest chips and that jacks up their cost. Kathmandu has various authorised branded computer resellers. Mercantile Office Systems on Durbar Marg is the authorised reseller of IBM and Acer computers. Computer Advance System (CAS), Kathmandu Plaza, is an authorised reseller that sells Compaq, NEC and Hewlett Packard products. Within a delivery time of 2-3 weeks, any model of Compaq desktop or laptop computer will be served. If your choice is Dell or Toshiba products, then there is World Distribution Nepal, Siddhi Bhawan. World Distribution does not have anything in stock but within four days of order, the chosen item can be delivered. ♦

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| Brand | IBM | COMPAQ | ACER | TOSHIBA | DELL | Basic Configuration |
| | Netvista 300GL PC 300 | EZ2000 7300 7400 7500 7900 EN Series EP Series | Acer power 4400 Acer power 8000 Acer power 8400 Acer veriton 7100 Aspire series | | Power Edge 2450 Power Edge 4400 Optiplex GX 100 Optiplex GX 110 | 700MHz + to 1GHz, 512 Cache, 128-1 GB SDRAM, 13.5 to 27.2 GB HDD, Multimedia, APG 4-8MB, Operating system: Win 95/98/NT Free softwares |
| Price | 100,000+ | 90,000+ | 100,000+ | | 95,000+ | |
| Warranty | 3 years | 3 years | 3 years | | 3 years | |
| Laptops | | | | | | |
| | Thinkpad 390 Thinkpad 600 Thinkpad 770 (weight 3.1 to 7 lbs) | Armada E500 Armada E700 Armada V700 | Travel Mate series | Satellite series Satellite pro. 4300 | CPx Series J650GT H500GT Ls H400ST CSx H500XT | Pentium 700 Mhz+, 64 RAM+, 12.1+ LCD Monitor CDROM (optional), DVD Drive (optional), Sound Card, Modem 56K, Operating system: Win95/98, Infrared 3-4hrs battery, back up 3-3.5 kgs |
| Price | 180,000+ | 140,000+ | 180,000+ | 200,000+ | 200,000+ | |
| Warranty | 3 years | 3 years | 3 years | 3 years | 3 years | |
| Assembled | | | | | | |
| Processors ranging from 300 Mhz (PI) to 1 GHz P III available. Intel mother board with built-in 8 MB AGP and sound card. Other mother boards like Tomato BX with VIA chipset and ZX with Intel chipset. 6 GB to 30GB HDD of Seagate, Quantum LCD and Flatron monitors also available. DVD ROM of 24X (Sony) speed has already been seen in the market CDROMs and CDRW. Modems, Joysticks, Home theater sound systems are other accessories which can be easily bought. Depending on the configuration of a computer from Pentium 300MHZ to PIII 1GHz the price varies from Rs. 34,000 to Rs.60,000 and even above. These local vendors offer a one-month part warranty period and one-year service period. But support is given at their site. | | | | | | |



COLUMN

by DANIEL LAK

South Asia's IT blues

Don't try to tell me that a highly-speculative hype-driven micro-economy will bring prosperity to South Asia.

The Internet and the World Wide Web are wondrous things, technologies that make geography irrelevant and open up uncharted realms of possibility. This, in various forms, is the mantra of the information technology generation. If you're reading this newspaper, than you're part of it. So am I. So is my mother in Canada. But Internet-driven hype about IT is reaching dangerous proportions in South Asia, and reality is being replaced by the two dimensional distortion of the computer screen.

Consider a recent announcement in Pakistan of a new government programme to provide free Internet access to a wide variety of people. The Science Minister was on BBC Radio last week, waxing eloquent about how this would spread opportunity far beyond the cloistered urban enclaves of the present elite. Perhaps. But am I missing something? Is this the same Pakistan with a rural female literacy rate less than 20 percent;

an overall adult literacy rate under 40 percent? Don't we need to teach people to read before we give them an Internet kiosk?

Information technology hype certainly has urban India in its seductive grip. The admirable Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, seems sincere and capable, and is possibly his country's most interesting politician. His government has hooked many rural districts of the state up to the Internet, and placed land records online. Land disputes in Andhra can theoretically be resolved at the click of a mouse. In practice, power cuts and perfidious local officials are keeping the full benefits of the system from the people. Nonetheless, things are changing and Naidu's drive for IT-led development deserves the credit.

India's private sector high priests of IT may not have motives as thoroughly benign as Naidu. They say their country will leapfrog the industrial age through

its software and IT expertise. They point with somewhat justifiable pride at India's successes in the field, and the insatiable demand for its hi-tech savvy abroad. Sadly though, little of this is filtering through to those most in need-indigenous tribals, Dalits, rural women and others. Social activists and NGO workers who have been soldiering on behalf of the poor for years point this out continuously, even as they use the obvious advantages of the Internet to raise awareness of their agendas.

All too often, it seems, the Internet boom in India and across Asia is made up of "get-rich-quick schemes" for the existing moneyed classes. There are many new Internet companies offering inexplicable products and backed by high-risk venture capital. Typically these businesses earn no revenue but spin their initial share offering into huge sums before going out of business, or being bought out by a larger rival. All's fair in love and post-modern capitalism, you say, and perhaps you're right. But don't try to tell me that a wildly speculative, hype-driven micro-economy will bring prosperity, or even subsistence to hundreds of millions below the

poverty line. Even established and reputable companies, providing online services like transcription and airline ticketing, e-profit from advantages that the region might not have for long-plentiful cheap labour and lots of empty office space.

Don't get me wrong. I do believe that IT, the Net and computers will empower and enrich vast numbers of people in Asia, eventually. First though, real social change is necessary. A good place to start is with decent primary education for all, funded by a middle class that pays its taxes in full and on time.

Let me give the last word to someone who should know. As a confirmed Microserf for many years, I am no great fan of Bill Gates. But I have to give him his due. When a glitzy American television reporter asked him last year at a news conference about "the digital divide", and how pouring billions into Internet connections for the poor was the answer to poverty, Gates visibly winced. "I'll answer yes to that question," he said, "when someone develops the software to deliver safe drinking water, female literacy, reasonable nutrition and human rights on the Internet. Let's get our priorities straight here." ♦

(Daniel Lak is a journalist specialising on South Asia based in Kathmandu.)



Taliban moves against Masoud

KABUL - The Shomali Plain used to be known as an Afghan breadbasket, praised as the Garden of Kabul, its grapes were exported to Pakistan. Today, this fertile plateau surrounded by mountains is the latest and fiercest battleground in the 22-year war for control of Afghanistan.

Since their conquest of the capital, Kabul, in 1996, the Taliban have pursued a relentless campaign to take control of the rest of the country. They currently govern 80-90 percent of Afghanistan with the last refuge for their more secular opponents to be found in the north-west.

Ranged beyond are the forces of the Taliban's only viable opponent, Ahmad Shah Masoud who embodies the heart and soul of resistance. Since his rise to fame in the 1980s fighting the Soviet invaders, his followers have called him the Lion of the Panjshir. Masoud belongs to Afghanistan's Tajik minority.

For the farmers of the Shomali plains, retreating northwards is no option, as Masoud's last bastion in the north-west is constantly under attack by the Taliban. And the mountainous areas of the north-east are too barren to support much agriculture or cattle.

Breaks in the fighting are unknown in this war. Taliban missiles provide a constant shock for fighters as they defend Masoud's frontline. One of the Shomali's many farms serves as protection for the fighters. The worn-out and ragged men keep fighting for a simple reason: their villages and families—or rather what is left of them are right behind them. *(Die Welt)*

Bangla-Bhutan trade pact

DHAKA - Landlocked Bhutan has sought transit facilities and the use of Bangladeshi ports for its foreign trade in a new bilateral agreement.

But although Bangladesh and Bhutan renewed a bilateral trade accord for three years in talks last week, they decided to give more time to their officials to strike a new long-term agreement on transit. Bangladesh trade officials said Saturday that the existing 10-year trade accord would expire within a week. *(dpa)*

In Iran, real power is elsewhere

PARIS - Iran's reformers find themselves sandwiched uncomfortably between their hardline-conservative enemies and their disappointed backers among the general population. Instead of being able to formulate new strategies they are spending more and more time calming the frayed public tempers.

"If you get caught in a trap set by the opposition and break the rules just as it does, you will become prisoners in its hands," was the stark warning given to incensed students by Muhammad Reza Khatami, the president's brother and leader of parliament's reform-minded majority. "We must suffer their violence without responding with violence."

His speech came at the culmination of days of unrest in the city of Khorramabad in western Iran where the country's largest student association was holding its annual conference. Groups of Islamic bully boys tried to disrupt the meeting as best they could, by blocking the airport and preventing banned speakers such as the liberal theologian Mohsen Kadivar and the well-known philosopher Abdol-Karim Soroush from leaving the building.

The president's brother's warnings can be seen as an exhortation to common sense in these dangerous times. They also mirror the approach adopted by President Muhammad Khatami himself. The president has made a habit of greeting his opponents' attacks with supreme calm, obviously believing that open confrontation would only exacerbate the prickly state of affairs. *(Sueddeutsche Zeitung)*

Pakistan sets up women's commission

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan's military regime announced on 1 September that it has set up a commission to "promote the interests of women and achieve gender equality".

Attiya Inayatullah, the regime's minister for women affairs, told a press conference in Islamabad that the commission will "review all laws, rules and regulations affecting the status and rights of women".

Headed by Shireen Sardar Ali from a conservative ethnic Pashtoon background, the commission will "redress violation of rights and individual grievances". Earlier this year at a convention on human rights, Pakistan's military ruler, Gen Pervez Musharraf, condemned "honour killings", saying such actions have no place in Islam nor in law. "It is murder and will be treated as such," the general said.

More than 300 men and women are killed in Pakistan every year in the name of family honour, according to the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

To improve women's status Musharraf's government has also granted Pakistani women married to foreigners the right to seek Pakistani citizenship for their children, a right previously enjoyed by Pakistani men only. *(dpa)*

To export or not to export

MOSLEM UDDIN AHMED

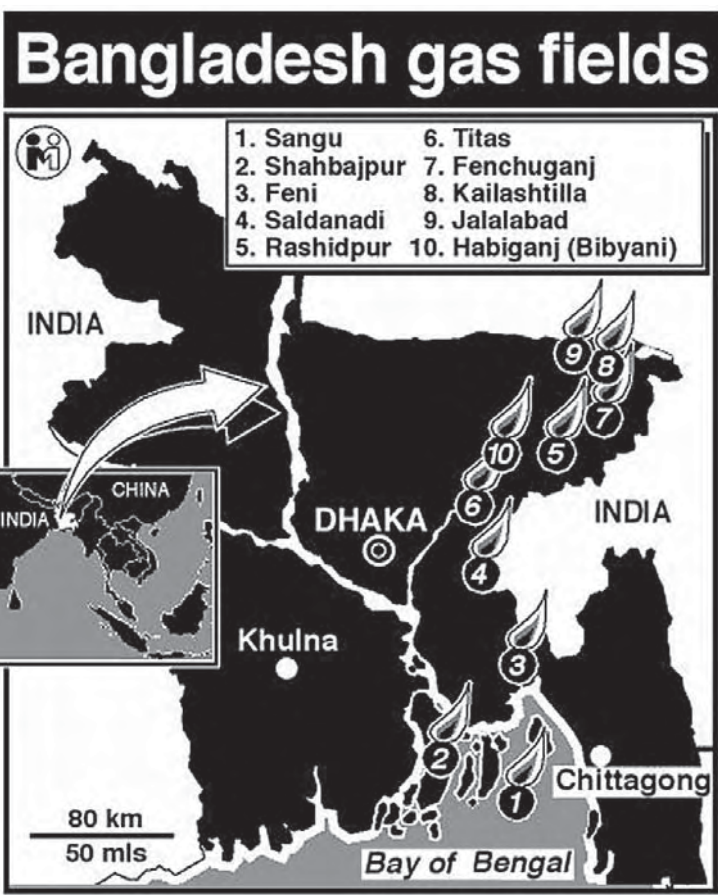
Bangladesh is under pressure from international oil companies to allow gas exports to neighbouring India. Foreign companies, including the US oil giant UNOCAL, are threatening to "scale down" their investments in the Bangladesh oil sector if the government does not relent soon.

UNOCAL bosses indicated that unless they are assured of a profitable market for the gas discovered in the biggest field, Bibyani, in the next 18 months they would be cutting back on their investments. The warning came in early August from Charles A. Pierce, vice-president of UNOCAL in talks with Bangladeshi journalists who were on a trip (sponsored by the oil companies) to the US and Canada.

Foreign oil companies have put millions into the country's hydrocarbon sector and now want returns on their investment by selling the gas they have struck. But before permitting gas exports to India, Dhaka wants to know the extent of its gas reserves. The US Geological Survey, in co-operation with Petrobangla, the state petroleum agency, is to conduct an appraisal of the reserves. This will take one year to complete and is intended to help the authorities to plan future investment in the hydrocarbon sector and also to determine whether Bangladesh should permit pipeline gas sales to India.

Due to faults in the initial contracts for the first drilling concessions, the government is paying the companies more than market prices for the gas and selling to consumers at subsidised rates. What has stopped the government from saying "yes" to gas exports to India, however, is the fear that the political opposition and others will use latent anti-Indian feelings to attack the administration.

Even the political left, usually considered friendly to India, has started a crusade to save "oil and gas resources in the national interest from imperialists' bid to loot". The left-wing 11-party alliance has already fomented demonstrations against the government's recent oil price hike that saw gas prices going up by 15 percent and all fuels by between 9 and 20 percent. "The fuel price raise is to cheat the people and fill the coffers of the foreign oil-gas companies," the leftist alliance said. With political groups and trade unions planning more demonstrations and strikes against price increases, the government does not want to be seen conceding to oil company demands.



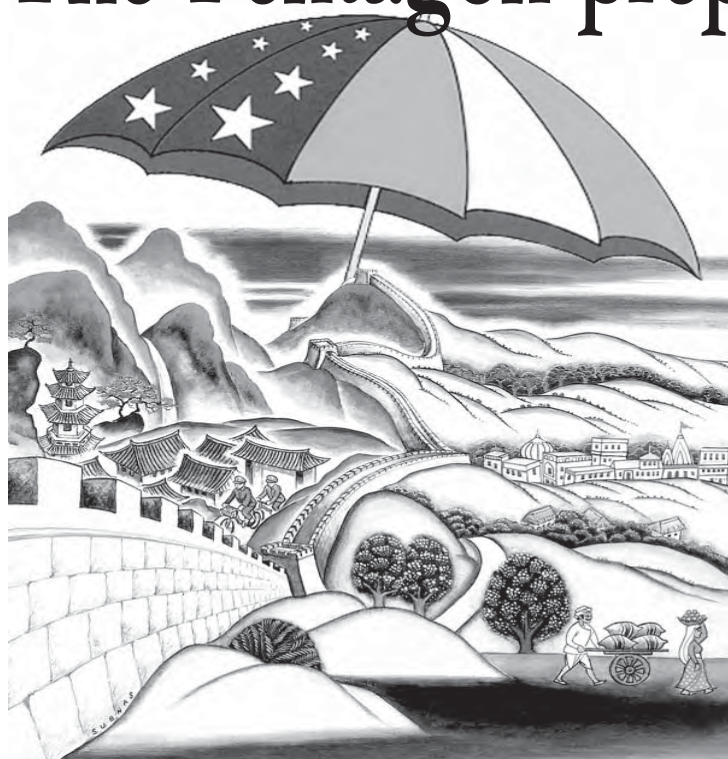
The Bangladesh government is caught between local anger at fuel price hikes and pressure from oil companies to start exporting gas to India

Until gas exports are allowed, foreign companies have a domestic market of just 260 million cubic feet per day they can sell to. The country's daily consumption of gas is around 1,000 million cubic feet per day, of which roughly 800 is supplied by the state companies. Moreover, foreign oil companies who sell their produce to the government for redistribution to consumers have not been paid for months.

With the prospect of gas exports uncertain, foreign oil companies that recently initialled contracts under the second round of bidding, have had written into them a "dormancy period" of up to three years between the signing of a contract and the start of drilling. The companies are staying their hand on oil explorations until Bangladesh decides on whether to export or not. *(Gemini News)* ♦

The Pentagon prepares for Asian wars

A restricted Pentagon study entitled “Asia 2025” lays out the scenario for future war with China in which India is portrayed as a “potential partner of choice”.



HIMANUSUBHAS RAI

Planning for a war with China appears to be quite advanced at the Pentagon: a war in which the US moves militarily to defeat an “unstable” China on an adventurist course. “Occupying more of the Philippines’ sea territory” and “intervening in a riot-racked Indonesia” are other scenarios anticipated in a restricted US department of defence study entitled “Asia 2025”.

The study, conducted at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, in the summer of 1999, provided one of the key inputs to the recently released Pentagon global strategy document, Joint Vision 2020, which foresees more and more of US military concern shifting to Asia from Europe owing to the rise of China as a “peer competitor”. In each of the possible scenarios or contingencies identified by the study, one of the key “recurring geopolitical developments” is the emergence of China as “a force for instability and constant competitor”.

Another is the rise of India as a regional power that could be a “potential partner of choice for the United States”. India’s potential role as partner might lead the US to “rethink its strict

anti-proliferation policy, as some states that acquire nuclear weapons may actually contribute to American national security goals”.

As a result of these developments, the US defence department faces several key “recurring challenges”. One is the necessity of shifting the focus of strategic planning and military resources from Europe to Asia. Another is embarking on a “substantial” strengthening of the US military presence in the region which, in contrast to Europe, is said to be marked by a lack of bases, poor infrastructure, inadequate force structure, and long distances. Five possible scenarios are detailed in the report. In the “Unstable China” scenario, foreign adventurism is an attempt to whip up nationalist sentiments to regain government legitimacy that is being frittered away by a slow-motion economic crash that triggers growing urban and rural unrest. With the defeat of Chinese incursions in Southeast Asia by US naval intervention, Chinese politics enters a tailspin that is accelerated by a “de facto” coup by the military in 2010 that launches China onto a new round of expansionism, this time directed at seizing “energy assets” in Siberia, the Russian Far East,

and Kazakhstan, which ends with Russia and China on the brink of nuclear war.

The Pentagon is also preparing for a “Strong China” scenario. Here, China consolidates its dominance in continental Asia, achieving hegemony in Southeast Asia, establishing virtual protectorates in Central Asia, and carrying out extensive economic penetration of the Russian Far East and Siberia. Continental consolidation is accompanied by a maritime strategy aimed at breaking the US-Japan maritime dominance.

One senses that the Pentagon’s analysts consider this to be the most likely scenario, and the most difficult one for Washington since it would involve pitting the US against a foe that makes very calculated moves that do not expose it to a hardline military reaction, where Washington has the advantage.

In the “New South Asian Order”, Pakistan disintegrates after a war with India, and an Indian Confederation emerges that becomes a regional hegemon that solidifies its ties with Iran and the other Gulf states. China is a big loser from this event. A new regional alliance emerges around the US, India, and Iran, whose “moderation and democratisation” have led to an improvement in its relations with the United States.

There are two other scenarios played out in the report, one entitled “Asia Realigns”, the other “The New Sino-Indian Condominium”. The key lessons underlined are the emergence of China as the greatest regional threat to US interests, the need to address the lack of forward operating bases in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asia if Washington is to remain a key player in these regions, the emerging strategic

potential of India, and the need to prevent at all costs a China-India alliance.

Reading this document raises the issue of how the US defence department views the Clinton administration’s approach toward China, which stresses “engaging” that country to allow US financial and industrial firms to reap opportunities from exploitation of the China market. The administration, backed by corporate power and the financial lobby, is also a big force supporting China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), hoping that the application of WTO rules will push China to end its protectionist trade and investment structure and weaken the currently strong state regulation of the operations of transnational corporations.

One suspects from “Asia 2025” that people at the Pentagon are not happy with the current policy, which might be viewed as a way that the country they see as the US’s strategic rival could strengthen itself both economically and strategically using US investment and trade. The conflict between “engagement” and “containment” as the strategic approach towards China will likely come to a head, perhaps in the near future.

With the consistent identification of China as the US’ rival in all scenarios, the study speaks volumes about the Pentagon’s grim determination to counter any significant threat to US strategic hegemony in Asia. The lesson for Asia is clear. (© IPS)

(Walden Bello is Executive Director of Focus on the Global South, a research, analysis, and advocacy programme of the Bangkok-based Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute.)

Poverty agenda at Summit

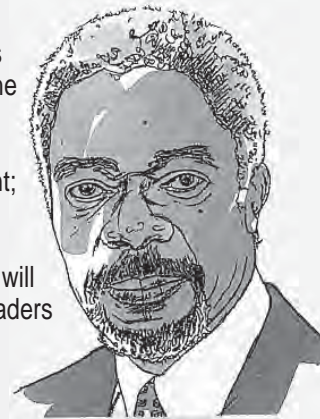
LONDON - The yawning gulf between the United Nations’ stated policy on debt cancellation and the action it has taken to achieve it will be discussed by more than 130 heads of state when they gather for the Millennium Summit in New York this week.

Though the UN claims to support wholesale debt cancellation, as advocated by Jubilee 2000, it put its name to a recent document endorsing existing policies on non-cancellation of debt, written by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who govern debt relief through their Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Many NGOs like Jubilee 2000 believe debt relief is bogged down by IMF-World Bank “bureaucratic inertia”.

Amid widespread criticism of the UN, even its secretary general, Kofi Annan, is accused by Dr Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, of being party to a propaganda exercise for international financial institutions whose policies are at the root of the problems facing the poor.

Annan, however, has an impressive track record on speaking out in favour of debt cancellation. He has called on donor countries, the IMF and the World Bank to consider wiping off all official debts of the HIPCs in return for those countries making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction.

“The Role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century” will be the theme of the summit with leaders discussing four key issues—peace and security, including disarmament; development, including poverty eradication; human rights; and strengthening the UN. The summit will provide an indication of whether leaders are prepared to support a more prominent role for the organisation they created. (*The Observer*)



Pollution kills more than accidents

LONDON- Twice as many people are killed each year in Europe by air pollution as die in road traffic accidents, according to research sponsored by the World Health Organisation published this week in *The Lancet*. Analysis of deaths in France, Austria and Switzerland shows 6 per cent of all deaths—around 40,000 a year—stem from air pollution, around half due to tiny particles in vehicle exhausts, particularly diesel.

In addition, traffic causes 25,000 new cases of chronic bronchitis in adults, 290,000 cases in children and more than 500,000 asthma attacks. The research says motorists do not pay for the true cost that driving imposes on society.

The Lancet says in an editorial that if the cost of motoring on the state health service were taken into account, spending on better public transport would appear far more reasonable, with taxes and laws to reduce driving more publicly acceptable. The environmental pressure group Friends of the Earth said that the number of British deaths was probably 19,000 a year.

In most of Europe because of the high traffic levels tiny particles, 100th of a millimetre across, called PM10s, are always present in the air and are far worse in towns where there is a high population and density of traffic.

The Lancet paper says that life expectancy is shortened by six months for each extra 10 micrograms (100th of a gram) of particles in the air. This means that in cities people die 18 months earlier than they would otherwise. The research concentrates on the death rates of older people but says there is increasing evidence that air pollution kills babies and infants.

(*The Guardian*)

Global warming causes extinctions

LONDON – Global warming is likely to destroy more than half the earth’s colder habitats by the end of the century, causing the extinction of species which cannot adapt or move quickly enough to reach new homes, according to a report by WWF. Worst hit will be the colder places in the northern latitudes of Canada, Russia and Scandinavia, where warming is expected to be most rapid as Arctic species have nowhere left to migrate.

In order to adapt and survive plants may need to move 10 times more quickly than they did when recolonising previously glaciated land at the end of the last ice age. Few plant species can move at a rate of one kilometre per year, the speed that will be required in many parts of the world.

High migration rates will particularly threaten rare, isolated or slow-moving species but will favour weeds and pests that can move, reproduce or adapt quickly. Conditions today make it much more difficult for species to move to new habitat than was the case thousands of years ago. The last time the climate warmed anywhere near as quickly as is predicted this century was 13,000 years ago.

Any plant or animal that needs to move must contend with roads, cities and farms. The WWF study shows that human barriers to climate-induced migration will have the worst impact along the northern edges of developed zones in central and north-western Russia, Finland and central Canada. (*The Guardian*)

Rundown UN HQ

NEW YORK – When world leaders visit the United Nations headquarters this week for the Millennium Summit, hot steam from a leaky heating pipe could scorch them, or perhaps they might be hit by plaster falling from the ceilings. Or they may slip and fall in a puddle of water created by a bursting pipe.

And if there is a fire alarm, they will have to struggle with other statesmen in trying to escape via very narrow emergency exits. These are potential perils facing political leaders attending the forthcoming “Millennium Summit” from September 6 to 8—at least according to a recent report about the sorry state of the UN headquarters building.

Just ahead of the “biggest summit conference of all times”—with more than 140 state and government leaders expected to attend—UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has called attention to the severe structural and safety deficiencies of the UN building. The report says that those in the UN complex have a lower chance of survival in a fire than in other comparable buildings in New York. The UN building does not fulfill even the most minimum fire safety standards or of energy efficiency.

Simply put, the general decay has been “dramatic” at the building designed 50 years ago by the famous architects Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer and Wallace K. Harrison.

A Kenyan diplomat doesn’t mince his words when he says about the UN headquarters building: “This is one big junk heap. Even in

Africa we have more modern buildings for international conferences.”

Besides the quite evident safety deficiencies, thousands of UN employees have become tired of other irritating things like escalators breaking down and carpets smelling musty.

If you want to get a UN diplomat to start cursing, just mention the air conditioning system—it heats the building in the summer and cools it in the winter, and otherwise is suspected of circulating any number of air pollutants into the offices and conference rooms. The reasons behind this sorry state is clear. For years the world body has lacked the money for any major repair work. But now the frustrated building maintenance workers see a ray of hope.

Namely, they hope that when the world’s most influential men and women gather for the September 6-8 summit to lay down an agenda for the 21st Century, they will also cast an eye on Annan’s “Capital Master Plan” to reconstruct the UN headquarters. Maybe they will even give the plan their blessing.

However, one figure in the plan is likely to be underlined in thick red lines—the one billion dollars which the planners say will be necessary for the job. This is some 160 times the original \$65 million which the 39-storey building originally cost.

Under the plan, the skyscraper of the UN Secretariat, the General Assembly building and the surrounding structures are, starting in 2001 at the latest, to undergo a thorough step-by-step rejuvenation. It would mean that hundreds of UN employees will have to work for months, if not for years, in provisional offices. To foot the bill, the more affluent among the UN’s 188 members will be called on to contribute, in particular the United States, Japan and Germany. ♦ (*dpa*)

The east is east, and west is west



HEMLATA RAI IN DHANGADI . . .
It is within living memory for a large number of Nepalis that travelling to other parts of the country meant going down to the railhead near the Indian border and taking a detour through Indian territory to reach their destinations.
It was precisely to avoid this dependence on India that the idea for an east-west highway was first conceived by King Mahendra, after whom the it is now named. After 35 long years of construction, and with assistance from India, the UK, the USA and the former Soviet Union the road was finally completed earlier this year. The 1,024 km Mahendra Highway now connects the borders rivers of Mechi in the east with the Mahakali in the west.
With the construction of 22 bridges in the western section of the road, it becomes finally possible to travel across the length of Nepal throughout the year. And it is people living in the far western region who are going to benefit from it most as

their economy is better integrated with the rest of the kingdom.
The far west is home to approximately 10 percent of Nepal's population. Until the bridges were up, the region would remain totally cut off from the rest of the kingdom during monsoon season. People from here depended on India for everything from health care to employment, education to consumer items. Even today, the Kailali Chamber of Commerce and Industry says that Nepali consumers buy goods worth Rs1.5 million every day from the Gauri Phanta border market in India alone.
The districts of the far west are at the bottom of the country's social and development ladder. Poverty is higher here than elsewhere. Development experts say it is the historical lack of proper representation from this region in Kathmandu that is behind the neglect.
Local hotelier Anand Raj Joshi says, "The far west has been neglected for years. The

Centre always preferred to concentrate its development expenditure and development concerns for the east. Far westerners may not forget the neglect for some time to come." For Joshi, the neglect becomes vivid every time he visits his ancestral home in the capital and sees the investment lavished on the capital and its environs.
It is not only physically that the far west is removed from Kathmandu. There is a psychological distance as well. Anthropologist Shaubhagya Shah says the rulers in Kathmandu have never been concerned enough to narrow the emotional distance between the far west and the capital. Writes Shah: "Given the political will, geographical obstacles can be easily surmounted. Otherwise, how could a desert country like Israel or a mountainous Switzerland have developed?"
Things are changing slightly. Karunakar Pandey, a journalist from Dhangadi, feels more and more people in the west now identify with happenings

Forty years after it was first conceived, the East-West Highway may finally link Nepal's far west into the national mainstream.

elsewhere in Nepal. However, narrow political concerns have the potential to easily wreck any attempt at uniting them with the rest of the country. During the last general elections, a CPN-UML candidate in Kailali appealed to migrants from east of the Karnali River to unite and vote him to parliament.
Cultural and regional differences found among the districts in the far west region are twisted and used by leaders for their own political gains. The tarai districts like Kailali and Kanchanpur are home to migrants from hill districts both east and west of the Karnali river, and various organisations are active in the name of protecting cultural identities, which in turn means

Suspended animation: The impressive bridge over the Karnali River on the Mahendra Highway is the far west's symbolic link with the rest of Nepal.

emphasising sub-regional differences.
A Nepali Congress MP elected from a far western district told us that this division among far westerners weakens their regional voice at the Centre. "The Centre is reluctant to hear the opinion from far west. But it's our fault too. We too are divided," he says.
Damodar Bhatta is from the far west and a member of the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries in Kathmandu. He says it is the failure of the Centre to maintain a regional balance on infrastructure and essential services that is responsible for the alienation of the far west. "All the powerful ministers come from the east, and they hardly feel obliged to develop the west," he says.
Perhaps now that the East-West Highway is complete it will serve to bridge the emotional void. After all, that was part of King Mahendra's grand plan when he conceptualised the road. ♦

Tarai fever

The reason the death toll in this year's annual encephalitis epidemic is not higher has nothing to do with preventive measures by public health authorities.
.....

DHANGADI - August and September are encephalitis months along the Nepal-India border, and it proved no different this year. According to an official count, more than 100 people have died so far this year. Thousands more are in poorly-equipped, understaffed hospitals all along the tarai. Many more are silently suffering and dying far away from hospitals, undiagnosed and untreated.
The only thing remarkable about this year's toll of 103 deaths so far is that it is four times less than last year, though the monsoon is not over yet. We have seen from past years that the intensity of an encephalitis epidemic tends to be determined by the intensity of the monsoon and its timing because of the ponds and puddles where the virus-carrying mosquitoes breed.
As usual, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television are repeating public health announcements through the air waves: drain puddles, stay indoors, use mosquito nets. But for many the announcements came too late. Although everyone knows that encephalitis is an annual phenomenon, the announcements only started after the epidemic had already spread.
The worst affected this year are the mid-and-far west tarai where hospitals and health posts are bursting at the seams under the pressure of patient numbers. Doctors are overworked, one hospital here had to pull a clothesline across the corridors to hang intravenous drips administered to patients scattered on the floor.

Because the disease needs close monitoring, almost an equal number of people accompanying the sick have flocked to the hospital making disease management a nightmare. "Most of the sick are very poor and weak," a doctor in Dhangadi told us. "These are the ones that die first."

Older, weaker people are the most vulnerable. Children usually survive the first onslaught, but could develop neuro-psychiatric complications if the infection is not treated properly and in time. Open sewers, water logging and stagnant water on paddy fields allow mosquitoes to breed, which then transmit the disease from pigs and ducks to human beings.
Protection against mosquito bites is the most effective preventive measure. Japanese encephalitis usually starts as a flu-like illness, with fever, chills, tiredness, headache, nausea, and vomiting. Confusion and agitation can also occur in the early stage. Symptoms usually appear a week after the bite of an infected mosquito. Then there is the danger of being wrongly diagnosed because the early symptoms are common for many tropical diseases and people tend to ignore the ailment until it is too late.
It is around Dhangadi that the epidemic has hit hardest this year, and it is here where the newly freed kamaiyas (bonded labourers) are camped out in the rain after being evicted by landlords. Public health officials criticise the government for its public service announcements on radio and television that came too late and also for being unprepared to tackle an epidemic they knew would happen. Last year, the government received a donation of live SA14-14-2 vaccine from South Korea and vaccinated about 170,000 children in the tarai districts.
In Nepal, doctors say about one in ten infected patients die. But half of them suffer long-term neurological disorders because the virus invades the central nervous system, including the brain and spinal cord.



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Hunt for elusive gold

NADEEM YAQUB

It has been 16 years since Pakistan won an Olympic gold medal in men's hockey—and that's rather a long time for a country which once so dominated the sport that wherever it played the only question for bookies was who would come second.

But as Pakistan's Class of 2000 left for Sydney in August, seeking the gold that has eluded them since the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, not many pinned their hopes on the team. Internal bickering within the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF) has hampered preparations, ending with a new management taking over just weeks before the team's departure for warm-up matches in Australia and New Zealand.

The national training camp, which appeared to be running smoothly in the port city of Karachi, was inexplicably moved to Wah, a small town on the outskirts of the capital Islamabad, upsetting the momentum of the team.

But team manager Islahuddin Siddique, in charge of his third Olympic team after Seoul in 1988 and Barcelona in 1992, argues that Sydney could well turn things around: "Bad luck dogged us from achieving the desired results in the past Olympics. This time, however, I am confident we are going to win."

Grabbing a gold will be tough for a side that lacks consistency and is without any star names for the first time in many years. The state of hockey in Pakistan—just like in neighbouring India—is in the doldrums. Before India's partition in 1947, the country's domination of the sport was total, winning all six Olympic golds and 30 consecutive games from 1928 to 1956, before Pakistan broke the

Hockey styles

India dominated Olympic hockey for 30 years from 1928 to 1956, winning all six gold medals, before Pakistan broke the stranglehold in 1960. Since the 1980s, Australia, Germany, S.Korea and the Netherlands have emerged as the new hockey powers, playing in the European style.

| EUROPEAN | SOUTH ASIAN |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good at penalty conversions | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fast and attacking |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Attack in groups | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Individual brilliance |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Excellent man-to-man marking | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Beautiful stick-work and dribbling |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Energy-efficient | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Attractive to watch |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Slow | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tend to concede goals in counter-attacks |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tend to play for the penalty and short corners | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Weak in defence |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hit-and-run style is not attractive | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Poor marking |

The Asian style of playing hockey is known for its sheer magic and beauty—unfortunately, its rate of success hasn't quite kept pace with rapid technological changes in the sport.

stranglehold in 1960. Pakistan rose meteorically after that—until the 1980s, which saw the rise of Australia and European countries like Germany and Holland with the introduction of the artificial Astroturf surface in place of grass. India has not won an Olympic gold since the 1980 Moscow Olympics—a game

that suffered from a Cold War boycott by the West and its allies, including Pakistan. And Pakistan, which once held the Olympic gold, the World Cup, the Junior World Cup and the Champions Trophy, is without a title today. The three-time winner of the Olympic gold (1960, 1968 and 1984) took the

bronze in 1992 and ended up sixth in Atlanta, its worst-ever showing. For Sydney it had to suffer the humiliation of qualifying.

Pakistani players and experts alike give many reasons for this state of affairs. At one time an important event in the sports calendar, the national hockey championship is no longer held regularly. There is a dearth of the expensive Astroturf pitches. The youth rarely take up hockey any more—to them cricket is more attractive and rewarding, for that is where all the money is. With no major trophies coming home, the game's following has fallen drastically. The common perception is that poor administration is to blame.

The new PHF boss, Lt Gen Mohammad Aziz announced soon after assuming charge that he would focus on the grassroots level. But critics say Aziz, a serving army officer, is not likely to have much time for hockey.

Among those who lament this decline the most is former Olympian Shahnaz Sheikh. "We have to adopt the fast changing system by making modifications in our style of play. The Asian pattern of fast flowing hockey is good only if there's 100 percent perfection in attack. If that is not the case, then we have to adjust ourselves accordingly," the great inside-left says. "We used to beat the Europeans because our percentage of attack was very good. Sadly this is not so anymore. We go for individual brilliance while our European rivals play an attack in groups."

With the Pakistan hockey scenario presenting a depressing picture, say critics, a major surgery is needed in the system if the country is to realise its dreams of reviving the golden age of Asian hockey. ♦ (Gemini News)



RUN-UP TO THE OLYMPICS

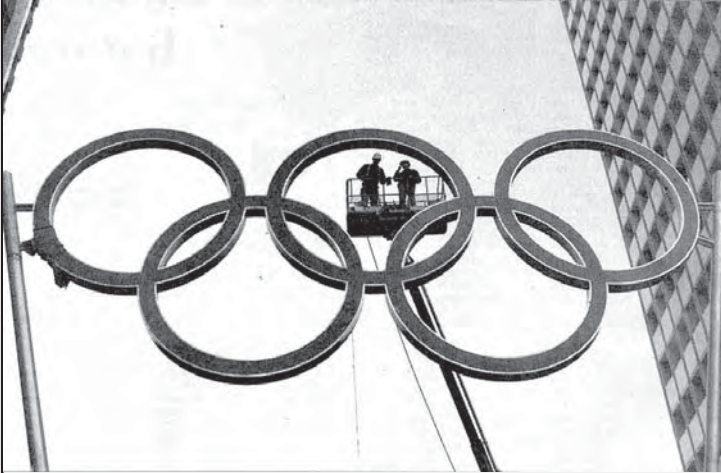
Let the rip-off begin

SYDNEY - Olympics visitors have voiced outrage at blatant profiteering by taxi drivers, restaurant owners and virtually anyone else offering a service in the Olympic city. Taxi fares are up 10 percent, restaurateurs are ready with hefty fines for patrons who don't turn up and over the month of September there's a 20-percent Olympic surcharge on tourists climbing the Harbour Bridge.

"It's outrageous. They are taking advantage of us. It's extortion. We are visitors and this is the hospitality we get," growled Charles Kelly, a teacher from Wolverhampton in England on a once-in-a-lifetime Olympic holiday.

Dave Roman, another Englishman out for the Games, said the taxi fare surcharge from 13 September to 4 October was particularly galling. "What's the justification? They're going to be coining it in over the Olympics anyway. Why should they get more?" Roman said.

New South Wales Transport Minister Carl Scully defended the hike, which comes on top of the existing 20 percent surcharge on trips after 10 pm. The Restaurant and Catering Association said fines for no-shows were fair because of higher prices for fresh produce during the Games. The price hikes have angered the Australian Consumers Association as well as visitors here ahead of the 15 September Opening Ceremony. The association's Gail Kennedy said an Olympic surcharge "smacks of opportunism and profiteering". (dpa)



Sydney installs Olympic rings

Australia has strength in numbers

SYDNEY - Numbers man Stephen Clarke reckons the "home advantage" will turn the Sydney Olympics into a gold mine for Australians. "Historically the home team wins over three times their usual percentage of medals," says Clarke, a maths professor at Melbourne's Swinburne University.

Clarke is predicting 60 Sydney Games medals for Australia, up to 20 of them gold. But there are plenty of other academics to dispute the underlying assumptions of modelling showing Mexico did 3.6 times better at the Mexico Games, Korea did 3.6 times better in Seoul and Spain 5.1 times better in Barcelona.

They note that Canada failed to win a single gold in Montreal in 1976 and that the Soviets failed to double their tally in Moscow even though a worldwide boycott ensured the locals started favourite in most events.

Stephen Juan, a noted author and Sydney University anthropologist, argues that the concept of the "home advantage" is too simplistic to be of use. "I'm critical of all this. It's very complicated. A crowd can intimidate the opposition but it can also put the local team under greater pressure," Juan said.

But no amount of research seems able to dislodge the view that Australia's 625-strong team will win more medals in September because it's competing at its first home Olympics in more than four decades. (dpa)

Flu threatens Olympics

MELBOURNE - A week before the Olympic Games are due to open in Sydney, experts have warned that a flu epidemic could be about to take grip of the city.

The pernicious Sydney virus has been particularly widespread this year and stressed the need for athletes to be vaccinated as a precautionary measure. Athletes who have received a flu vaccine at some stage over the course of the last two years are the fortunate ones in Sydney at the moment. Although the Sydney viral strain is not contained in this year's internationally prescribed vaccine, having been replaced with the so-called "Moscow Type", the northern hemisphere strain does provide some degree of protection. "This virus is very similar to the Sydney Type, so the vaccine offers some protection against both," says Professor Reinhard Kuth, director of the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin. (Die Welt)

OGB

India's medal hopes slim

NEW DELHI - India may have a population of one billion people, but that has not translated to large numbers of medals at past Olympics Games. When Leander Paes won the silver medal in men's singles tennis at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, all of India was caught up in a wave of euphoria.

Paes made became the first Indian to win a medal in an individual event since 1952, when Indian wrestler Kesaba Jadhav bagged the bronze at the Helsinki Olympics. The last Olympic gold medal for India was in 1980 when they won top honours for hockey. But the Moscow Games had been boycotted by other hockey giants protesting Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

Experts attribute the dire results to India being a reluctant sporting nation without a mass sporting culture besides its keen interest in cricket. Pundits complain that attempts to train athletes are only made in the buildup to the Olympics or Asian games instead of keeping this an on-going process.

"You can't make an athlete in 10 days," shotputter Bahadur Singh quipped. "We send two-year-olds to school, but ho many of those children ever see a gym? We have no shortage of population, only a very dire shortage of participation."

India dominated hockey for decades but have since been overtaken by rivals like Germany, Australia and Pakistan. Still Indian hockey coach Vasudevan Bhaskaran believe his team can compete at the Sydney games. "The boys are in fine form. We know our rivals and also our own weaknesses," Bhaskaran said.

Despite the poor track record, most experts believe India has a realistic chance for a medal in Sydney—in tennis. Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi made up the world's top doubles team last year, winning two Grand Slam doubles titles (French Open and Wimbledon) and reaching the finals of the other two. Said Paes: "We can do it. We're not going to Sydney to make up the numbers. We're going to compete, to win." (dpa)

When Indra was caught stealing

This week Kathmandu celebrates Indra Jatra which is fused together with the festival of the Virgin goddess, Kumari.

Imagine Amitabh Bachchan in heavy disguise, a burkha perhaps, riding down Calcutta's Dharamtalla Street with not a glance in his direction. Then choosing a maximum crowd at the Eden Garden stadium, he is suddenly transformed into the glittering superstar he is, decked out in something natty, his personality blazing. The crowd howls, stampedes. The football players run for their lives. When it appears that Mr Bachchan will be trampled into a rather unglamorous pulp, he is whisked away by his levitating mum who appeases the crowd by assuring them of free seats at every one of her son's movies that year, a promise impossible to keep. Now Mr Bachchan, for all his fame and good looks, is a mere mortal. How much more amazing the descent of a god from heaven dressed in peasant's clothes and bent on a very human pursuit, like stealing flowers. The deity concerned was no ordinary god. He was Indra, the Lord of Heaven. When he descended on Kathmandu wrapped in a concealing cloud, no one recognised him. So much so that when he was discovered gathering *parijat* flowers, people caught and bound him hand and foot like a common thief.

For reasons best known to himself, Indra refused to reveal his identity and none suspected it even though his celestial elephant began searching the streets of Kathmandu for him. In heaven, Indra's mother, who had required the *parijat* flowers for the observance of a festival, grew so anxious at her son's disappearance, also descended on Kathmandu and lost no time in letting it be known who she and her son were. Great was the people's rejoicing and, presumably, their embarrassment. King and commoner alike celebrated their amazing good fortune with feasts and processions, song and dance. And when their divine guests were about to depart they asked a boon of Indra's mother. Would she take with her to heaven the souls of all those who had died that year? This she readily granted, besides bestowing a gift of her own—a gentle morning mist that would blanket the Kathmandu valley during the autumn and winter months to ripen the harvest. Farmers are still apt to call it the gift of milk. As for the souls of the dead, she advised that they form a chain behind her holding on to each other, with the first taking a firm grip on her saree. Away they went like the tail of a

great kite. They hadn't travelled far, when something as unfortunate as spiritual vertigo or fatigue caused the chain break and all the souls fell into a lake atop a mountain south of Kathmandu where bereaved families went to worship and honour them.

Right now, Kathmandu celebrates Indra Jatra which fused together with the festival of the Virgin goddess, Kumari, and the epic of the Nepali king Yalambar who was slain by Krishna at the battle of the Mahabharata, is Nepal's most colourful celebration. Everyone, from the king, the royal family, ministers, government servants, the general public—even foreign diplomats—are involved.

For this is the time of the year when the king receives the blessings of the Kumari who places tika on his forehead. Superstition, well supported by strange circumstance or coincidence, enhances the belief that the Kumari, in fact, bestows upon the king the right to rule for another year. When, on occasion, she has mistakenly placed tika on the wrong forehead dire consequences have resulted. This too is the time when all the valley's Bhairab masks are displayed, particularly the great silver mask that Yalambar wore to battle, and the even larger, bejewelled golden mask of the white Bhairab in the old palace. All over the valley, in city, town and village are strange erections of wood, like wayside crucifixions, to which are tied masked dummies representing the captive Indra. Numerous images of other gods are brought out to watch the festival, for nobody, not even the hosts of heaven, would like to miss so wondrous an event.

Hung from a tall pole in the old palace square of Kathmandu is a colourful banner representing the flag presented to Indra by Vishnu. As long as it is there it means that the lord of heaven is in Kathmandu, bestowing upon the city and the country, his blessings and protection. At the foot of the pole is a small cage, both confining and enshrining an image of Indra and a golden elephant, his traditional mount. They represent the god's captivity, so many long legends ago. The pole itself is invested with significance. Some days before the festival begins, a government appointed priest and a select group of men from Kathmandu make for a pine forest not far from Bhaktapur. There, following ancient ritual and on-the-spot portents, they select a



Kathmandu's young new Kumari will be riding a chariot through the streets of the city on 12 September.

tree, offer prayer and blood sacrifice and after felling it, drag it in procession to the potters' village of Thimi. Men of Thimi bear it to Kathmandu's Tundikhel or maidan from where it is finally taken to the old palace square in Kathmandu by men of the city. There follows a blessing by the royal priest, who comes accompanied by soldiers in the olden uniforms of King Prithvi Narayan's Gurkha army carrying muskets and swords, and marching to a military band out of history. As the pole is raised into position, cannons boom and music plays. When the festival is done the great pole is taken in procession to the river Bagmati where it is immersed, cut into pieces to feed the perpetual flame that burns at yet another Bhairab shrine on the river bank.

So much for the living, for whom the Indra and Kumari jatras are carnivals of numerous attractions: dances representing the demons Lakhe and Dagini, enactments of the mortal incarnations of Vishnu, folk dramas, processions of masked 'deities,' a dancing elephant made of bamboo, painted cloth and human legs, and the massive trundle of the Kumari's *rath*, followed by lesser chariots of the living Ganesh and Bhairab, virgin boys selected in much the same way as the Kumari. And there is the king who can be seen more closely and more relaxed than at any other official occasion.

For the dear departed, are processions of lights and symbolic processions of men and women, holding onto each other in the way the spirits of old held hopefully to the saree of Indra's heaven-bound mother. There are prayers and fasts and feasts, and finally every bereaved family sends at least one member to the mountain top



lake where the spirits once fell.

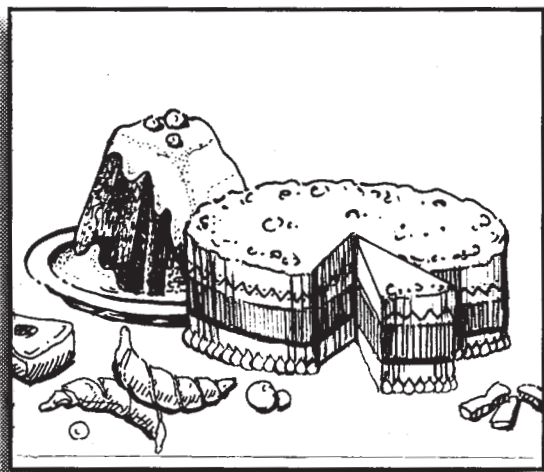
For those who like a more scholarly reason for festivals such as this, it is thought that the warrior king, whose Aryan forces overpowered India, inevitably turned his attention to the Himalaya. Perhaps the warlike hill people nagged his flanks.

Leading an army against them he was captured and held prisoner until he promised some boon of settlement. The great Nepali king Yalambar ruled Nepal at the time. No one less than a god, and the Lord of Heaven at that, could have

fought and come to terms with him: an interesting thought as festival chariots toll through Kathmandu. ♦

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

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Hum Aapak Dil Me Rehte Hai - Padma
Jawani Ki Kahani - Jai Nepal (411014), Shivadarshan
Sabse Bada Beiman - Kumari (414932)
Tera Jadu Chal Gaya - Goon (Ka) Plaza 1
❖ **Video show** at a American Centre, Gyaneswor (415845) 7 Sept, 3 pm
The Great Space Race
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EXHIBITIONS

❖ **"Thangmi"**, an exhibition of black-and-white photographs by Sara Shneiderman, representing the Fulbright scholar's ethnographic work with the Thangmi (Thami in Nepali), a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of 40,000 indigenous to Nepal's northeastern districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok. Sale of prints will benefit projects in the Thangmi cultural area. The Bamboo Gallery (opposite the US Embassy). Phone: 412507. 10-5 pm., 10-20 September.

MUSIC

❖ **Rusty Nails**, a Blues & Rock outfit, at Simply Shutters Bistro, Baber Mahal Revisited. 8 September. 8 pm onwards. Entry and buffet dinner for Rs 750 per person. Call: 253337/ 981023934.
❖ **New Filipino band Spice and Ice** at the Gurkha Grill, Soaltee Hotel. 7:30 pm onwards. Tel: 272555
❖ **Classical guitar by Kishore Gurung** at the Chimney, Yak & Yeti Hotel. Call 248-999. 8 pm onwards, Thursday-Saturday.
❖ **Jazz**: The Jazz Commission playing live at the Harlem Restaurant & Bar, Hotel Yak & Yeti Road from 7:30 to 11:00 pm.
❖ **Live jazz by Cadenza** at Upstairs Restaurant, Lazimpat. Every Saturday 7:30-10:00 pm.
❖ **Live Music by Robin 'N' Looza** at the Bamboo Club, Thamel. Wednesday and Friday.

EXHIBITION

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

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

Kupondole's amazing swallow dorm



SALIL SUBEDI

SALIL SUBEDI
They come in ones and twos, then by the dozen. A cloud of swallows circles in a holding pattern above the Bagmati Bridge, before sweeping down one by one through the door for a landing. Then begins the noisy squabble for their favourite perches on the rafters. The chirping is shrill, as 600 birds get ready to call it a day. Slowly, the cheep-cheep subsides into a sleepy rustle of feathers.
By this time, Dhana Shrestha has covered most of the wares in her *pasal* with a large plastic sheet to protect them from swallow droppings. She moves around the pasal under a small umbrella as she attends to her clients—most are from the neighbourhood and they have got accustomed to a ceiling alive with birds. One little bird doesn't

make much poop, but multiply that by 600 and you have a guano factory.
No one's quite sure why the swallows have adopted Dhana's pasal as their base camp. But for Dhana's family, it is an auspicious sign and a good luck omen. It started with one pair nearly 35 years ago and the numbers just grew and grew.
After you cross Bagmati Bridge while going from Kathmandu to Patan, there is a small shop with a yellow sign on the right. The shop itself smells like the inside of a cave with the pungent odour of birdie do-do. "These are free birds, and when they come in every evening, it is like your children coming home," says Dhana. "They are free birds, and we are honoured that they have chosen our house."
Dhana's mother who passed away

As evening approaches, Dhana Shrestha gets out large plastic covers and spreads them across her small *pasal* in Kupondole. The birds are about to come home for the night.

last year believed that they were the luckiest people in town when the swallows decided to move in. She persuaded her family to let them stay even though the poop situation got worse and worse as the swallow population swelled. No one in the family touches the birds. "If you touch them they die," says Dhana. "Sometimes they sit on our shoulders, but we never touch them."
Over the years of growing up with the birds, Dhana, herself in her mid-30s, has become rather attached to them, and also it seems, they to her. With so many, they may look like an anonymous flock, but Dhana suspects there are one or two that are particularly close to her. "Once they are comfortable in the ceiling, some of them look down at me quizzically, as if wanting to communicate," she says.
By the first light of dawn, the swallows swoop out once more for a day on the wing above the Kathmandu skyline. You see them in the glint of the morning sun, soaring past temples or skimming the surface of the Bagmati to take an in-flight sip of water.
And that is what worries Dhana, if the people of Kathmandu are so badly affected by the dirty water, polluted air

and the garbage, what is happening to the health of her swallows? So far though it seems, not much.
However, Kathmandu's loss of green cover and pollution has affected other migratory birds that used to make Kathmandu their stopover. And resident scavengers like crows have driven all other birds away.
But with the Kupondole swallows, it is the other way around. They have stopped migrating south in winter and have now decided to stay in Kathmandu all year round.
The biggest calamity for the birds was during the uprising in 1990. Because there were curfews that lasted days, Dhana's mother had to keep the shop doors closed and the swallows could not go out to feed. Many died.
The swallow house also draws curious Kathmandu residents, school children on field trips and even bird-watching tourists from Britain, Japan and Taiwan. Some of them, like the Wild Bird Society of Taipei, leave their banners, with the date of visit: February 1994.
Next time you are crossing the Bagmati Bridge, do take the time off to go and say hi to Dhana Shrestha and her amazing swallows. ♦



Nepali ghazal singer, Bhakta Raj Acharya, launches the CD Album "Sambandha" by Pakistani singer Ghulam Ali at the Radisson Hotel on 31 August. At left is Supal Man Singh of Digital Symphonic.



Girija with the girls. The Prime Minister attended a Teej Singing Festival on 1 September at Radio Nepal in which women from all walks of life sang their hearts out.



General Secretary of the International Rugmark Foundation, Keshab Mathema addressing the Third International Rugmark Meeting at the Shangrila Hotel on 4 September.

HIMAL MAGAZINE

NEPALI SOCIETY



ALOK THUMBANGPHEY

Hard to tell when you see the ‘Made in Nepal’ girl Monica Chaud in advertisements that the confident-looking face belongs to a 19-year-old high school girl from Kathmandu.

Monica is already a “household face” in Nepal, easily recognised when she goes out to shop or eat. She has also made up her mind about what she wants to be when she grows up: a fashion designer. “I want to

represent Nepal through fashion designing,” she says, and Monica would like to go abroad to widen her wings and get a broader perspective on the world. Despite the glamour that has come with modelling, Monica at home is as normal a girl as any. A bit shy and reluctant to open up in the beginning, but increasingly animated as she talks about her passion in life or about her career. She loves to read Agatha Christie whodunits, and she also imagines herself as the main character in Mills & Boon stories. She is a vegetarian and loves *tittaura* and fried instant noodles (mmm, I’d go easy on the junk food, Monica,

have to watch that complexion). How does it feel to have a huge billboard with your face staring down at you at Bagmati Bridge? Many people who see the billboard, the newspaper ad or the television commercial are shocked to hear that Monica is actually a full-blooded Nepali. She is tired of people who ask her where in Europe she is from. Actually her family is from Baitadi in western Nepal. And what does she feel about the fairness cream that she models for, is the colour of a person’s skin important? “No, it’s not important,” she says. “What is important is what is inside. Intelligence and personality are more important.” Although she has been portrayed as a vibrant, modern girl in the commercials she appears on, Monica seldom goes



Monica poses with her father and sister at home and (left) in her school uniform.



out and prefers to spend time reading or watching television at home. Dad is retired army colonel Lal Bahadur Chand, who is quite protective of Monica and her two sisters. He vets all visitors, including journalists. We take a careful look at the colonel and drop the inevitable question about boys. Monica fields the question with a diplomatic “I’ll only think about it once I am fully independent, but definitely not an army man.” ♦

NEPALI WEATHER



Don't write off the monsoons yet. There is still plenty of clouds massed up all along the coast of the Bay of Bengal and they are headed our way. Some of this is a part of a low pressure circulation driven by southwesterly winds which will change direction to the left when they hit the wall of the Himalaya. For the rest of this week and into next week, expect typical sharp and localised bursts of *bhadaure* rain in the day time and night drizzle. Clearer weather with fine sunny spells towards the end of next week.

KATHMANDU

| Weds | Thurs | Fri | Sat | Sun |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | | | |
| 28-19 | 27-18 | 27-18 | 28-19 | 28-19 |

Hillayri
Travels

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Funny Side Up

by Kunda Dixit

You must have noticed by now that there are no cats in Katmandu. During the monsoon it never rains cats and dogs here. It rains only dogs. This is a meteorological oddity, for which many explanations have been put forward, none of them quite satisfactory. One reason could be that since the top of the food chain has been occupied by omnivorous dogs, fussy cats never had a chance here.

the plane’s hind undercarriage, bibs around their necks, waiting for the stewardess in a sarong kebaya to come down the ramp and ask: “Mutton with rice, or prawn with noodles for you today, sir?”

Then there are those who live in the wild side, denizens of the city’s rough neighbourhoods, who would feel perfectly at home in the dog-eat-dog world of Nepali politics. You can’t teach an old dog new tricks, but senior leaders of the Nepali Congress are up to their old tricks and don’t need to learn any new ones. The fight to be Top Dog is hotting up in the runup to the Party Convention in Pokhara in January. Not to worry, the bark of our toothless leaders is

Dogmandu

Capuchin monks who came through in the 17th century said Katmandu was the dirtiest place they had ever been to in their travels through Cathay, but even they didn’t spot any cats. “No cats here,” the Brothers noted in their chronicles. “Only dogs.” In fact, by their account, Katmandu in AD 1646 had already started going to the dogs.

In the centuries since, the valley has made steady progress towards being a true melting pot for dogdom. Today, Katmandu has emerged as the most canine-friendly city in the SAARC region. It’s a paradise for Man’s Best Friend. Where else are dogs allowed to roam freely through the corridors of a government-run hospital? We passed one the other day and greeted him: “Whassup, Dog?” He wagged his tail and disappeared into the orthopaedic ward, he must have been a bone specialist. At Kathmandu airport, the Runway Dogs are some of the most pampered and best nourished in Bagmati Zone. There they sit near

new threats. The mayor’s office does not believe in letting sleeping dog lie and is planning to forcibly vasectomise them. Not only does this deprive the Dingos of Dogmandu of one of the few pleasures in life, but it may also decimate the hardy species altogether. There have also been reported cases of dognapping by certain embassies of dog-eating nations in Katmandu whose national delicacy is Fido marinated in kimchi sauce. Police have deployed radio-collared undercover labs to nab dog-eating dips.

And last but not least, an increasing number of dogs are being martyred on our streets by hit-and-run drivers. Enough is enough. You can’t run over my dogma with your karma. ♦



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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 | 53.85 |
| Bhutan | 0.65 | 0.31 | 0.56 | 0.33 | 0.18 | 0.02 | 44.46 |
| India | 0.66 | 0.37 | 0.58 | 0.29 | 0.14 | 0.05 | 45.75 |
| 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 | 54.86 |
| Sri Lanka | 0.77 | 0.38 | 0.64 | 0.25 | 0.20 | 0.03 | 78.28 |
| 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.

Ambassador
vodka

Total lubricant