

10 - 12

PATAN MUSEUM



New home for Nepal's rhinos

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EXCLUSIVE

More embassies

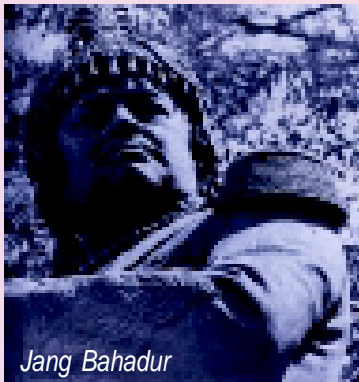
The government is considering setting up an embassy in the Nordic countries to better liaise with donors and investors in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark. At present, Nordic affairs are handled from the embassy in faraway London. The Foreign Ministry is also considering opening an embassy in Canberra, and perhaps downsizing the Rangoon mission. The only embassy in the African continent may be relocated from Cairo to Pretoria. Ambassador Damodar Gautam has been recalled from Washington, and Kedar Bhakta Mathema's term in Tokyo has been extended by two years, presumably as a reward for getting Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori to visit Nepal. Meanwhile, career diplomat Lila Prasad Sharma has been named ambassador to Russia.

No chads here

The Nepali Congress' local elections are over, and from the results so far, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's loyalists seem to be leading, giving him an edge in the run for presidency. So far, 65 percent of the delegates to the general convention are from the Koirala camp with 25 percent from the Deuba-Bhattarai panel. The remainder include results yet to be declared, and the "unpredictables".

Tour de France

Krishna Prasad Bhattarai had to cancel his trip to Paris just as he stepped down as prime minister in March. Now his successor, prime minister Koirala is set to do what no Nepali prime minister has done since Jang Bahadur Rana in 1850: visit France. Jang Bahadur was presented with a sword of Napoleon's, wonder what Koirala will be presented with.



Jang Bahadur

Nepal oil corruption'

A NEPALI TIMES/HIMAL INVESTIGATION

Two weeks ago the country was almost shut down to protest a steep hike in fuel prices. What the opposition parties should actually have been protesting is a nationwide adulteration scam that costs the Nepali people Rs 1.2 billion a year.

Our investigation has shown that from the moment the "mother stock" of petrol and diesel enters Nepal from India, there is systematic adulteration every step of the way: along the side of the highway to the Nepal Oil Corporation depot at Amlekhgunj, in the distribution network from Amlekhgunj to Kathmandu, at petrol pumps all over the country. The protection racket goes up the NOC ranks, to the politicians. And everybody gets his share.

Krishna Upreti of New Sita Oil in Parsa, Chitwan, told us bluntly that there is no way he can make a profit without mixing kerosene with petrol and diesel. "By the time I sell my petrol it is almost 50 percent adulterated," he told us. "If adulteration was stopped, half of all the petrol pumps would go out of business."

We checked if Upreti wanted his name used in this story. "Go right ahead," he told us. The fact that petrol pump owners can say such things on record is an indication of how barefaced and brazen the crime has become.

When the government decided to crack down on adulteration two years ago, petrol pumps went on strike. Today, our sources tell us, the tentacles of profiteers from adulteration reach the highest levels of government.

Protected by their patrons, the foot soldiers in this business are the tanker operators and petrol pumps. One senior NOC official, appalled by the blatant corruption within his organisation, says: "Cuts from allowing adulteration is the only way you can make extra money in this corporation."

Last year, an internal NOC investigation charged a petrol pump in the tarai with having its regional chief on a Rs 60,000 a month retainer to look the other way during spot checks against adulteration. If that is the "going rate" for one gas station, and there are 600 of them nationwide it is easy to calculate the scale of this scam.

When confronted with evidence, most



SUBAS RAI

In Nepal oil and water mix. So do kerosene and petrol, water and diesel. A few people get rich quick, the Nepali people lose out.

officials and even the cynical public, have a ho-hum "so what else is new" reaction. But the matter is much more serious than just loss to the consumer, the national exchequer and the damage done to the internal combustion engines. Adulterated fuel is not just cheating consumers but has other far-reaching effects.

Adulterated fuels make exhaust gases more poisonous, worsening the pollution crisis, causing acute respiratory infections and other ailments. For example, when kerosene is mixed with petrol it does not

burn completely and releases more cancer-causing hydrocarbons, nitrous oxides and carbon monoxide instead of the less-harmful carbon dioxide. "It shortens your life, and it shortens your vehicle's life," says Amrit Nakarmi, who teaches at the Institute of Engineering at Pulchowk.

Adulteration of diesel has a different effect, kerosene additive lessens diesel's lubricating function, leading to faster wear and tear of the pistons and higher maintenance costs. In addition, the soot particles carried by diesel exhausts also have

unburnt and harmful hydrocarbons from the kerosene.

Finding the bureaucracy is up to its neck in it, the government two years ago set up a three-member commission under a former Supreme Court judge to investigate the NOC. It found up to 65 percent adulteration in petroleum products.

⇒ **Thou shalt not adulterate**
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HUMAN RIGHTS AND WRONGS

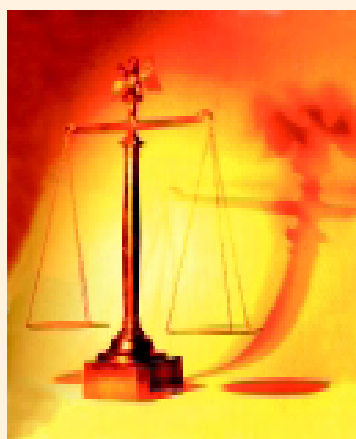
The month of UN days is upon us. This week alone 1 December is World AIDS Day, 3 December is the International Day of Disabled Persons and the 5th is the International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development (shouldn't every day be for social and economic development?). Then come the International Civil Aviation Day on 7 December, the Human Rights Day on the 10th, the International Day of Solidarity with Migrant Workers and Their Families on the 18th and the International Day for Biological Diversity on the 29th. At this rate, we will need an almanac to figure out what all the days in the year are for. In this land of *jatras*, the *bikas* anniversaries have themselves become *jatras*.

Devoting a "day" to something as important as social development in a sense trivialises it. Perfect excuse for ministers to give vapid speeches that people hear, but don't listen to. Television covers it in detail: minister at podium reading from a prepared speech, pan across bored-looking donor faces, cut to chief guest delivering keynote address.

On the Human Rights Day, you can be sure there will be more ministers giving more speeches, NGO-wallas organising seminars and paying ample lip service. This year it will be marked on an even grander manner since the Human Rights Commission has just come into being.

In an age when media and public have become jaded with all the sterile rhetoric, it is difficult to imagine how revolutionary the Universal Declaration of Human Rights truly was when it was signed in 1948. But in the years since, it has become clear that if you leave it up to governments they will define human rights according to what serves their interest. It doesn't matter that they are sons-of-bitches, as long as they are our sons-of-bitches.

Basic human rights are not just inalienable. Political rights must co-exist with social and economic rights. Freedom does not just mean not being jailed for one's political beliefs; it also means freedom from hunger, freedom from illiteracy, and freedom from disease. In Nepal, this



means at least the minimum amount of food for a healthy life, the right to at least basic education, the right to primary health care. In today's Nepal, it is also the right to go and tend the fields without being shot, the right to be a teacher without being beheaded in broad daylight in front of your students.

Violations of human rights need not always be overtly violent. Human rights can be violated silently by crooked priorities and crooked politicians. When a corrupt official pockets kickbacks while building maternity

hospitals, and schools don't have roofs because the contractor bribed someone to get away with it—those are violations of the peoples' rights. The challenge for Nepali civil society is to show the same sense of outrage about the mass death of thousands of children in Nepal every day of preventable causes like diarrhoeal dehydration, measles and respiratory infections as they do about high-profile prisoners of conscience.

Indeed, we have seen that the violations of social rights within countries ultimately lead to the violation of political rights as well. Just look around you: it is deprivation, neglect, impoverishment and corruption that create the conditions for demagogues in government and extremists to carry out their agenda of intolerance. This is the beginning of the backlash against an uncaring national elite. A ruling class that cannot after 50 years fulfil the basic human right to health, education and shelter of its neediest citizens has no pontificate about human rights. Let us remember the saying: "If you are among thieves and you are silent, then that makes you a thief as well."

This December, please spare us the speeches.

1000% BETTER

Indiscipline is the mother of all evils. All domestic institutions—agencies, banks, and companies—have been hurt due to lack of discipline or governance. If institutions cannot stand how can society move ahead? All the political parties should try to write down discipline in their policy platforms. Their leaders and members should act as role models. They can do so by keeping their word, acting in good faith, completing their assignments according to a specific time frame, setting targets and accomplishing them as promised. If they can do half of these things, the country will be 1,000 percent better off.

—The Nation (Bangkok)

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STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL

The India gameplan



during a human rights seminar here last week one Indian journalist was particularly emphatic that we should not say 'Indians' when all we mean is the 'Indian Government'. Point well taken. But there is a slight problem. When it comes to issues concerning Nepal, or any other foreign policy issue for that matter, Indian media functions like an extension of South Block.

The latest proof of this is the campaign launched by foot soldiers of India's External Affairs and Commerce ministries in the Indian media. First, they spread outlandish rumours about Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) subsidising Nepali businessmen to smuggle cheap Chinese goods to India through Nepal. But that turned out to be a red herring. The real issue came out this week in a daily barrage of news leaks in Indian financial newspapers and the Internet about Nepali goods flooding the Indian market.

It is difficult to say what plot is being hatched in the byzantine corridors of power in India this time, but it must have something to do with the scheduled minister-level talks in January to discuss trade and transit during which India would like to roll back the Gujral doctrine, the gains made in bilateral trade since 1996 and impose a more favourable definition for manufactured goods. Indian trading houses and policy-makers in Delhi were never happy with the treaty, since for the first time Nepali goods were given limited access to the Indian market. It went against the general strategy that these pesky small neighbours must be put in their place, and power is the only language they understand. Being an enlightened forward-thinking person, I K Gujral did not think so: he felt a more prosperous Bangladesh or Nepal would actually be in India's strategic interest. Poverty breeds instability, and a richer middle class in both countries could, after all, only mean bigger markets for Indian goods.

In the internal policy battles in New Delhi, it seems the narrow-minded hardliners have won out again. They are cracking the whip, and once more, the media vanguard is softening the Nepali positions for the muscle-flexing and arm-tweaking in January. It's a deliberate strategy aimed at drawing parallels with similar media bashing that preceded the embargo of 1989.

The media harassment has been

India must realise that a poorer Nepal is not in its long-term strategic or economic interest.

accompanied by harassment at the border. Customs officials have introduced debilitating non-tariff barriers like quarantine charges, for instance, on Nepali cauliflower exports to India. If a cauliflower farmer of Bhedetar has to fork out Rs 5 per kg for the privilege of taking his vegetable across the border, he is better off feeding the cauliflowers to his cattle. There are other new and imaginative bureaucratic hoops that Nepali traders have to jump through: they need Bureau of Indian Standards Certification. In theory, quality checks are good. In practice,

onslaught following the hijacking of IC-814 sabotaged this. Even the partial recovery of tourism this season has been thwarted by the absurd new bilateral agreement that only Indians and Nepalis with passports or voter ID cards are allowed to visit each other's countries by plane.

Our government needs to realise that all diplomacy is economic diplomacy these days. Shital Niwas should be more proactive in using friends across the border to anticipate and counter the Indian gameplan. If our embassy in Delhi was less preoccupied with ferrying

Nepali VIPs to and from the airport as

they transit to Bangalore for a darshan of Sai Baba maybe it would serve as a more effective early warning system for sounding out the Indians on what to expect at the talks in January.

In the final analysis, India must realise that a poorer Nepal is not in its long-term strategic or economic interest. So the present policy-makers in South Block's Nepal desk should stop needling Nepal with paranoid accusations and find win-win ways to benefit the people of both countries. We are not denying there is smuggling, but many Indian businessmen will be the first to admit that the level of contraband crossing the border is miniscule compared to India's total imports of the same goods. Those affected are small-time traders in West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and they are the ones raising a big hulla.

Having said that, our own authorities at Singha Durbar need to take a close, hard look at the way unauthorised trade has hijacked the agenda between India and Nepal. Smuggling cannot be the basis of the Nepali economy for much longer. Not only does this empower the mafia, it also has no future now that the WTO will make it obsolete. Some individuals may benefit from such transactions, but they damage the national economy almost permanently. The countdown for the sacrifice of Nepali trade at the altar of Indian intolerance has started. Both Shital Niwas and South Block must look beyond scoring diplomatic points. Poor people in India and Nepal are suffering for the follies of the high and mighty on both sides of the border. ♦



no Nepali entrepreneur will probably be able to negotiate this latest maze of Indian babudom. The only Nepali enterprises that will be able to compete in India will be those that have their de facto head offices in Calcutta or Delhi.

The withering broadsides from the Indian media in the past week have been effective in doing three things:

- WORSEN already shaky relations between Nepal and India
- CONFIRM the Nepali public's perceptions about Big Brother
- AMPLIFY the managed voices of protest in India's trade lobby

Can it get any worse? That's exactly what bothers us. It's with a lot of effort that at least some Nepali products like biscuits, noodles, vegetable ghee, milk and milk products, or yarn were able to compete in the Indian market, even that only in the border areas. But the surge in Nepali exports after the 1996 treaty had a role in narrowing the huge gap that exists in the balance of trade between our two countries. But the gap is still there and another way to bridge it could have been tourism. But the motivated India media

“We have not had a real statesman after 1990.”

—Prabhakar Rana

On Nepali business culture
A corporate culture is not taking root in Nepal as fast as I had expected. But it is inevitable, it is the future. We talk about joining the WTO—but we need to run our businesses professionally first. That is what makes Sri Lanka different from all other countries in South Asia. It adopted the corporate culture long ago in the 70s, and if JR Jayawardene had had his way he would have joined ASEAN and not SAARC. Here in Nepal, the foundations lie in better education and more say for women. Without that there will be very little change.

Hiccups
Whatever progress we have made in investment legislation and a general improvement in the business climate was achieved during that first half of the 1990s when the Nepali Congress was in power. After that, it has been downhill. I don't understand why leaders have not been able to convince people, because that is what leadership is all about. If you cannot take firm decisions for the fear of losing votes, then you are led, not a leader. We have not had a real statesman after 1990. If only we had one statesman, things may have been different.

Soaltee's hydro investments
It was Girija Babu's goading that led us to take up Bhote Kosi. Our generators are already working and we're confident that we'll come online soon. On the price issue, I remember it took us two hours and forty-five minutes—for the US ambassador and the then water resources minister Pashupati Sumsher Rana—to go through the five-volume document. Now Dr Ram Sharan Mahat says (the agreement) was wrong. But he was finance minister then and his finance

Prabhakar Rana is corporate chairman of the Soaltee Group which has invested in hydropower, tourism, agri-business and even shipping. After 40 years dealing with successive governments in Nepal, he understands the inner mechanism of doing business in Nepal very well. He spoke on a wide range of issues in an interview with Nepali Times. Excerpt:

..... secretary was witness to the agreement. How can you change (the tariffs) after you have agreed to it? I represent my shareholders and not the government of Nepal, and securing the best deal for my shareholders is paramount. Bhote Kosi should teach us a lesson. They had a watertight agreement and shareholders interests were protected.

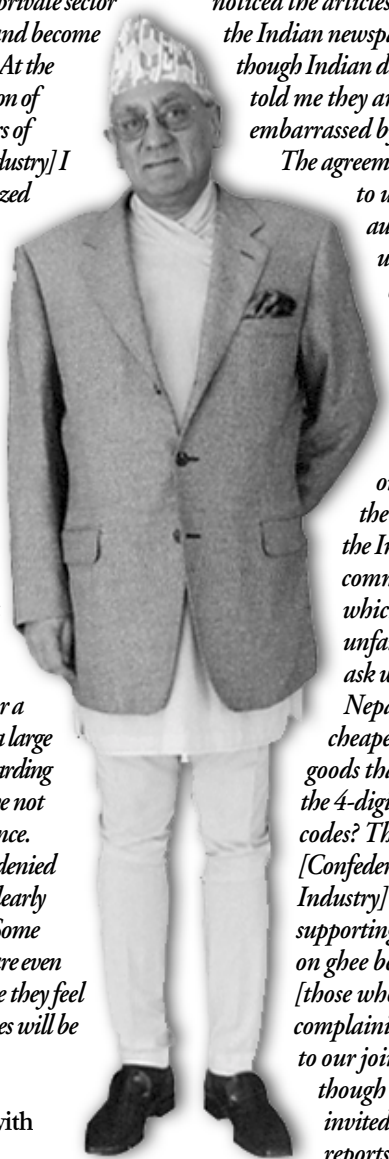
Future of hydroelectricity
Hydro-investment opportunities have been lost because we don't have a clear policy. For example, after the Bhote Kosi they had given us a survey licence for middle Bhote Kosi, which could have been much quicker to build. All we needed to do was reuse water from the upper turbine and generate electricity. But the government told us that NEA now has sufficient power, and asked us to sell power to India. We have tried to do that. But NEA is also building its own projects. So my partners feel that we are unwanted. We need a clear policy to attract private investment. Investors ask why distribution and transmission is not privatised. We are ready to establish our own company for that and we will sell our own power. But NEA fears we'll take their best customers away. Obviously, since customers will choose better services.

Taxes on dividends, interests
Recent changes in policy are sending out wrong signals to investors. Investors will come to Nepal only if they see an opportunity to make profits they would not elsewhere.

They will not come here to invest just because they like our mountains.

Political will, leadership
There are problems with political leadership but the private sector too has to change and become more professional. At the FNCCI [Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry] I am sometimes amazed by the discussions—most of the time they are concerned about protection to compete with India. Now they realise how things will change after WTO, and they are clueless. For example, the law says you can have a joint venture in courier businesses. We have applied for a joint venture with a large multinational forwarding company, but we've not been granted a licence. Why are we being denied something that is clearly stated in the law? Some FNCCI members are even opposing it because they feel their little businesses will be hurt.

Trade relations with India



Our trade agreement comes up for renewal every five years. I think there could be difficulties this time when it comes up (because of) the Bombay Club. You may have noticed the articles coming out in the Indian newspapers, even though Indian diplomats have told me they are a little embarrassed by these reports. The agreement is favourable to us since it has automatic renewal, unless abrogated by one side. I don't think India will go to that extent [of abrogating it]. It all depends on how we handle the grievances of the Indian business community, some of which are of course unfair. We should ask what is wrong if Nepal supplies cheaper and better goods that come under the 4-digit harmonised codes? The CII [Confederation of Indian Industry] is not supporting Indian business on ghee because they [those who are complaining] did not come to our joint meeting even though they were invited. The media reports against Nepal is

more a reflection of the Indian worries on how they will compete after 2004 when the WTO regime comes into effect, because the initial surge for investing in India which we saw at the last World Economic Forum meeting is no more.

Goal-setting
Nepal needs to focus on three things: agri-business, tourism and hydropower. And we need to set and meet firm targets. Why can't we make Nepal self-sufficient in food in the next five or ten years? Now that prices of agri-products have fallen (as is bound to happen in a free market), farmers are demanding protection. There was a bumper crop in India and also in Nepal. If only the government had silos, it could have bought the surplus. Without that, it alternates between plenty one year and scarcity the next. India has food reserves for three years and with another bumper crop they may be thinking of a fourth year.

We need to concentrate with real targets for tourism too. Stop talking about it, and start building the roads, airports and other basic infrastructure for tourism. Growth in tourism has happened on its own, not because of the result of any government policy. The third area of promise is water, and hydropower. But we need to be clear on what will be done by the private sector and what by the NEA. Should transmission and distribution be privatised? They tell us to sell to India, but the power sale agreement they signed has not been ratified for three years. That agreement is crucial.

Brain drain
There is a worrying trend today—some of the best and brightest Nepalis are going abroad and not coming back. Some eventually return and bring back their experience, but they are the

exceptions.
Having workers abroad is important because they send money and Nepal's overseas reputation is growing. But with a continuous drain of trained workers, it takes time and money to prepare the next batch.

Nepal's silver lining
In the last ten years we've had an open press. It has often been negative, but we have not had another revolution because people can now talk freely and let off steam. A free media has served as a safety valve. The charges about too much freedom are hollow. Maybe we just don't know how to use our freedom.

Next generation
I never studied business, which is why I am quite confident that the next generation in my company would do much better because they have been trained in business management. We need better and more education centres here. Kathmandu University is doing a good job. What I found at a class there was every encouraging—there was an equal number of girls and boys, and I found the girls were smarter. There were also many in the class who had studied abroad as children and had come back. Their parents could have afforded to send them abroad for college. If there are good schools, Nepalis will remain here.

On retirement
I was planning to quit as chief executive this year, and the job as chairman of Soaltee Group when it ends next year. At the last board meeting, my colleagues said that I should stay because there are changes in the ownership structure of the hotel. My stay here could help facilitate the process. Although they would prefer to have me here, I am confident that there will be no problems after my exit. ♦

MIN BAJRACHARYA

LETTERS

KMNTC
This is in reference to the item "Future of KMTNC bleak" (From the Nepali Press, #17) which was translated and reproduced from *Deshantar*. It seems the reporter was trying to build a case against the King Mahendra Nature Conservation Trust (KMNTC) just because some staff had left the service of the Trust. In fact, among the names mentioned in the news, Siddharth B Bajracharya has not left the Trust but is on study leave to pursue his PhD programme in the UK. Similarly, Anil Ranjit and Mukesh Pudasini had to resign to join UNV, as there is no provision in the Trust regulations to grant unpaid leave as requested. Staff mobility is continuous in any organisation and is a natural process. In fact many reputed national and international non-governmental organisations working in conservation have staff members who once worked with KMNTC. This we believe is the strength of the Trust rather than a weakness. The *Desanhar* report has also assumed that SNV and NORAD are withdrawing support

from KMNTC. This is misleading. KMNTC is one of few organisations with a reputation for effective utilisation and accountability of funds received from various donors. Donors usually provide support for specific projects or programmes for a period. This is to reduce donor dependency and to make institutions self-reliant and sustainable. Even so, there has been no decrease in support from donors for KMNTC despite competing claims for the limited funds available. The most-far fetched argument in the report is the mention of a letter by Sir Johan Chapple of KMUKT to imply that the letter itself was a reflection on the weakness of management. Both the information and the interpretation are misleading and malicious. It is unfortunate that the *Deshantar* staff reporter has tried to put together unrelated bits of news and gossip to fabricate a damaging article about the Trust. **Arun Rijal**
Director, Information and Public Relations
KMNTC

AI&W
Enjoyed reading the brilliant editorial (AI and W, #16) on the US election fiasco. I especially liked the punch-line: "The world has too much at stake to let only Americans decide who becomes their president." However, you may be giving a bit too much credit to Al Gore's environmentalism. The candidate has not followed up on his earlier commitments to clean up. And it is certain that Ralph Nader would have been much better for the global environment than Gore. **Mina Matthew**
via Internet

I liked your editorial about the correlation between the United States elections and the global environment and am mailing it on. It is important to see the issues laid out so clearly and with such impact. We get spun around so much here by the media. **E. Fabian**
Connecticut
Your editorial on the US elections was very insightful. Neither Gore

nor Bush is any good, but Gore at least has some good instincts, though whether he could get anything done for his country and the planet is an open question.

Rajendra
via Internet

HUMLA
Thank you for printing the excellent expose by Hem Bahadur Bista on the plunder of northern



Humla ("Nepali timber to Tibet", #17). The deforestation was already rampant two years ago when I visited the area, and at the pace it was going I was certain there would be no forests left by the end of the decade. If I were a concerned Humlali, I would give up on the government in Kathmandu doing anything. It is this dependency that created the crisis in the first place. After all, you can't keep flying in foodgrains forever—even if it means the foodgrains will save the forests.

P Gurung
Kathmandu

UJELI
I read the article by Jan Salter about Ujeli ("Ujeli", #18). The organisation and the people involved are to be commended for their help to Ujeli. This true story shows how a little help and concern to begin with can end in helping someone find a normal life once again. We should take a lesson from this kindness and humanity that saved a life that could have been easily lost to the confusion of modernity. **Mahesh Kumar Malla**
Lazimpat

HOTEL STRIKE
Thank you for highlighting the impending hotel strike ("DEADLOCK", #18). It looks like neither the politicised unions nor the hotel owners care about the country, which can go to the dogs so long as their own selfish concerns about money and power are met. These two are holding the country's tourism industry to ransom. By not negotiating seriously, they're playing dangerous brinkmanship. They better both wake up and start talking. Otherwise they'll end up taking themselves and this country down with them. **(Name withheld on request)**
Kathmandu

CORRECTION
The picture accompanying the article CENSUS 2001 (#18) missed the credit. It was taken by Mani Lama.

One step forward,

Hotel unions and owners are on a collision course, and the impact could shatter Nepal's tourism industry.



MIN BAJRACHARYA



MIN BAJRACHARYA

HEMLATA RAI

a hotel strike planned for mid-December threatens to wreck years of concerted effort to develop Nepal into a major tourist destination, and unleash a chain reaction of damage on the economy. Hotel workers agitating for a ten percent service charge are in no mood to compromise, and

hotel owners seem adamant to lock out. The government is trying to mediate, so far ineffectively, while the 12 December deadline for the strike looms ahead.

Having agreed to postpone their agitation on 19 November, the Hotel Workers' Joint Agitation Committee (HWJAC) says thousands of members of the two

unions under its umbrella will start wearing black armbands to work starting Thursday next week. If there is no agreement they will then launch an indefinite strike from 12 December. Eyeball-to-eyeball, the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) says it is still "optimistic" about finding a "amicably acceptable solution". But privately hotel owners are defiant: they say they will shut down the hotels, come what may.

The HWJAC says the strike threat is the culmination of its 20-year struggle to get a 10 percent service charge added on all hotel bills. Five-star hotels in Nepal have at various times over the last decade agreed to the service charge demand and provided the government gave the nod. But the official sanction never came, and the agreement with the unions could not go into effect. According to documents made available to us, Hotel Soaltee had as far back as

1991 agreed with its workers' union to introduce the 10 percent service charge from October the same year on condition that the government did not object. According to the unions, other hotels like Yak and Yeti, de l'Annapurna, Shangri La, Malla, and Dwarika's, had also stated they had no problems with the service charge. But the government approval never came.

So why did the government drag its feet? The only explanation seems to be that successive governments have been far too pre-occupied with staying in power to devote attention to much else—even to a sector of the economy as vital as tourism. In 1997, the Ministry of Labour did form a taskforce to study what the economic impact of levying a 10 percent service charge would be. However, the taskforce avoided making any recommendations claiming that it was not mandated to do so, but neither did it rule out a service charge. Analysts now say that the two parties could have used that document as a basis for negotiation.

The government's reluctance to announce a service charge in hotels even after several of the big players have agreed to it in principle, and the present intransigence on the part of some hotel owners has intrigued some independent observers. "The present inflexibility displayed by HAN represents the vested interest of a certain class of investors in the hotel industry," says one independent industrial relations expert, who requested anonymity. "Levying service charge helps make hotel transactions transparent, and some hotels might not find that desirable."

HAN says it represents the entire hotel industry, and is not lobbying on behalf of any particular section. A HAN representative says he is "hopeful" that the mediation panel constituted on 14 November (a day after the unionists agreed to postpone the 19 November agitation) would be successful in convincing the unions to wait for another three months. By then the high-powered committee would have submitted its report on introducing the service charge. However, HWJAC has refused to recognise the committee saying it was "tricked" into postponing the strike. HWJAC refused to attend mediation meetings called by the government twice this week.

"We do not recognise the committee and we will not sit for talks unless the government and the management promises to levy the service charge. We are ready to wait for another six months or a year to decide on the modality and percentage of the service charge," HWJAC member secretary Bishnu Lamsal told us. This shows some flexibility on the part of the unions, and could be the starting point for compromise. But, as the deadline approaches, it is difficult to see how a shutdown can be avoided if hotel owners and the unions are not even speaking to each other.

Despite official optimism on the part of HAN, it is easy to see that both sides are rolling up their sleeves for a showdown. Says HAN President Narendra Bajracharya: "We are not going to compromise on anything before the report of the high-powered committee comes about. And, even if the government decides to levy the service charge we will not comply under the present structure of taxation and

the present investor-unfriendly Labour Act."

Bajracharya says that by rejecting the government committee, unions have directly challenged the government. He is adamant that there have to be changes in the taxation and labour laws because without that Nepal's tourism products would not be competitive in the regional market. Other countries that have the service charge provisions, he said have lower taxes on other items and limit the collective bargaining rights of unions.

HAN has already registered its demand that the Labour Act 1991 be amended, describing it as an obstacle towards a liberal economic policy. In another attempt to avoid the proposed strike, HAN has already appealed to the government to put the hotel industry under the Essential Services Act that would outlaw all kinds of lockout and strikes in the sector. Given the trade union background of the prime minister himself the government is not quite likely to agree to that, but that has not stopped HAN from trying.

For the first time in 20 years, the HWJAC has brought together the Nepali Congress-supported Nepal Tourism and Hotel Workers' Union and the UML-backed Nepal Independent Hotel Workers' Union. A HAN insider says that if the proposed strike is postponed, the government could influence the NC-supported union to withdraw the strike threat. But that may not solve the problem because the rival union backed by the UML is likely to continue the strike, and add a politically polarised element to the current dispute. ♦

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



Guilty (and filthy) as charged

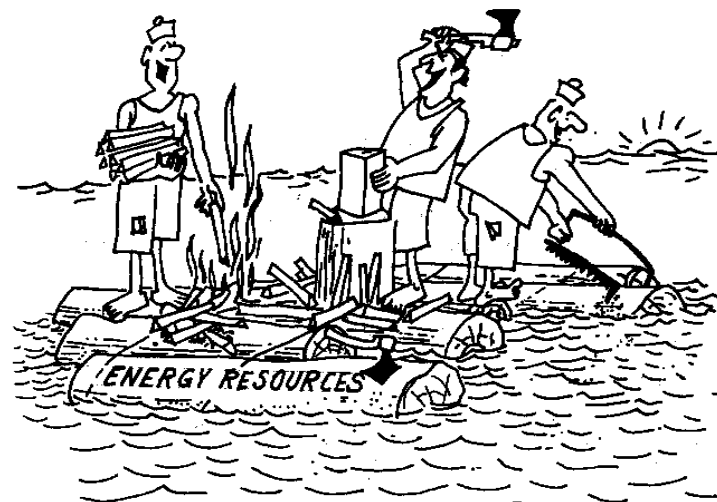
the failure of the climate change talks in The Hague last week might come up in court some day. That will be the day that our children sue us for making an absolute mess of things and pretending all was well.

In the early 1990s, my sort of person was becoming the dominant demographic in the developed world. Educated, middle-class, liberal, even radical—social values inherited from the struggle in the 1960s to assert the agenda of youth. When Bill Clinton was elected to the White House, and later Tony Blair to Number Ten Downing Street, we had arrived. One of us was in charge, and things were going to change, baby. Injustices, inequalities, the environment, and senseless militarism—all the diseases bequeathed by our parents' generation (as we saw it) were on their way out. A decade of serious prosperity was just beginning, and we were going to Have It All—a just, clean, green society and a good life. Call it meaningful materialism if you like, but we all felt that way. Reagan and Thatcher were gone; the sixties generation was in charge.

Wrong on all counts. As we smugly made our way into boardrooms and parliaments everywhere, change was happening to us, not the system or the situation. It's a natural process. You acquire things; your interest changes and you shed your old ideas. Churchill's adage, "A man less than twenty five who is not a socialist has no heart. A man over thirty who is not a capitalist has no head", was being demonstrated as fact.

Looking around my circle of friends from college in Canada, I can count five or six millionaires. These are people who rode the wave of information technology-driven share markets and opportunities to amass fortunes that their parents could only dream of. These are also people who marched in anti-nuclear rallies and joined Amnesty International, and spent time hugging trees. Ask them now what really gets under their skin, what they'd

Whatever the reason for the failure of the climate talks in The Hague last week, the loser is the Earth. And our children.



WOLTER

most like to change about the world? They'll reply that their taxes are too high, that we're letting too many immigrants into the country, and affirmative action for women and minority groups is denying opportunity to the privileged. Oh, they'll still pay lip service to environmental causes, but

they won't change their own behaviour, or slow their consumption of scarce or polluting resources. And they, we, let the climate change talks fail.

Okay, okay, I am being too harsh. And maybe there is slight taste of sour grape since my own stock market activity hasn't exactly put me in the Forbes 500. But I am angry about our priorities and how vividly they resemble the things we used to hold in contempt. And how little the fate of our children seems to mean to us. What will be the point of leaving vast legacies of cash, property and securities to our progeny if they have to wear anti-pollution masks when they go out on the street? What indeed are we leaving them?

The talks in The Hague were unsuccessful because American forty-something negotiators failed to agree with mirror image counterparts from the European Union about reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. No one disputes the reality of climate change anymore. It's fact, not theory that the world is getting warmer and will continue to do so for another hundred years or so even if we reduce our carbon dioxide and other emissions. Americans wanted the right to keep spewing filth into the atmosphere so long as they planted a few trees to offset the CO₂ increase. Europeans objected and wanted drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions across the board and tree planting. Cynics said the mediocre statesmen and women of Europe always resort to America-bashing when things are tough at home.

Whatever the reason, the loser is the Earth, and my children. That's why I'm urging them to sue. My daughter has already been on the Internet, looking for a lawyer to take the case. ♦

two steps back



“Employers are not sincere about ending the dispute.”

Bishnu Lamsal, Member Secretary, Hotel Workers' Joint Agitation Committee

What is stopping you from sitting for talks to resolve the issue? From the very beginning we have shown flexibility to resolve this issue through talks. At the request of the government we agreed to postpone our agitation, overcoming opposition from our members. But the employers and the government took our decency to be our weakness. Instead of finding ways to end the deadlock, the government constituted a committee to study our demands that we refuse to recognise. The employers are not sincere about ending this dispute. They have, till date, cheated the workers of their rightful benefits. They have broken promises to introduce the 10 percent service charge time and again, and this time they are trying their best to impose the Essential Services Law and to deny the workers from exercising their right to peaceful agitation. But nothing will stop us this time, not unless an agreement is reached between the employers and unions.

Are you not concerned about what a lockout can do to the economy? We have not conducted a comprehensive study to assess what ill effect our strike will have on the national economy, but we are aware that such strikes cost everyone dearly, the government, the employers and the workers themselves. We are aware that one million family members of hotel workers will suffer if we are made to go for a lockout. But what we also realise is that the peak tourist season is the most effective time to make our points clear to the government and the employers. We are putting our own and our family's welfare at stake to make our point, to tell the government and the employers that we can and will use our collective strength to get what we should rightfully get.

Why is the 10 percent service charge so important? It is customary to fix a percentage of service charge in hotel sectors all over the world. We are not demanding an extra benefit, but asking what rightfully is ours. By not agreeing to a charge that would bring equal benefit to workers in all areas of the hospitality business, the employers are encouraging mistrust among workers themselves. That will certainly affect their productivity. Fixing a service charge is helpful also to ensure other rights of the hotel workers such as bonuses on a hotel's profit. But it is not only for the workers' benefit that we are staging this agitation, it is also good for the national economy. It makes the hotel accounts transparent, and helps the government collect tax from this sector.



“We don't work with ultimatums.”

Narendra Bajracharya, President, Hotel Association of Nepal

What is keeping you two from sitting for a talk to resolve the problem? We are always open for talks, but the unions should also come to the table with an open mind. This is an old problem, prolonged for more than two decades because neither the government nor the employers nor the unions were serious about it. Now HAN is serious about finding a permanent solution to the problem, but we don't work with ultimatums. The question of imposing a service charge does not concern hoteliers only, the unions are jeopardising a lot of other jobs. Introducing a service charge in the hotel sector will have a spillover effect on other sectors also. Hotel workers are already better paid with various other benefits than workers from other sectors. With the introduction of the 10 percent additional service charge, they would be earning three times more than workers in other comparable sectors.

What problems do you have with giving workers 10 percent service charge? Tipping is a reward, it is voluntary, it cannot be forced on clients. We are aware that some workers may never get tips because they never come into direct contact with the guests. But the salary structure is such that they are compensated. Nepal is already an expensive destination, imposing extra 10 percent charge would make the competition with rival destinations like Thailand, Singapore, and India stiffer. The government should play the role of mediator and find an amicable solution to this agitation. But introducing the charge without a comprehensive study of the salary and other benefit structures in the hotel sector vis-a-vis other industries, and without a comparative study of other countries allow service charge in the hotel sector could be suicidal for the hotel industry.

You say Nepal's labour laws are anti-investor. Is that what is behind the present deadlock? The present labour law is against the spirit of the liberal economic policy the government talks so much about. It protects workers, but does not protect investors. We have already put forward our suggestion to amend the Labour Act, we have demanded that the hotel industry be enlisted as an essential service to outlaw lockouts in the industry. The present law allows workers to go on strike, while it bars managements from doing the same without prior notification. We also demand that the management be given the right to fire workers and the provision no-work-no-pay be introduced. Without these provisions, trade unions can go on strike for even the smallest problems. The present tension between the management and the workers has been made worse by political parties, not by weaknesses in the Labour Act. HAN feels that both the management and trade unions should come to an understanding and wait for the recommendation of the high-powered committee formed by the government to look into the issue of service charge in the hotel industry.

Everest shrinking?

A Xinhua report from Beijing last week said Mount Everest is shrinking as a result of global warming. Scientists from the Chinese State Bureau of Surveying and Mapping said they had discovered that snow on the peak of Everest has thinned in the past 30 years. The Chinese researchers also discovered that Everest was moving between 2.4 and 2.8 inches at an azimuth angle of 54 degrees [northeast] every year! Surveys over the past 30 years show that changes have occurred in the area through crustal vertical movement, and experts said that these changes have resulted from a large rupture on the northern side of the mountain. Research also showed that the changes corresponded to different seismological periods.

Polluting vehicles to go

A year after the government threw out 640 smoke-belching diesel three-wheelers from the streets of Kathmandu, it has decided on a blanket ban on all polluting vehicles.



The ban is to take effect in all of Nepal's 58 municipalities. All vehicles made before 1980, and three-wheelers running on petrol or liquefied petroleum gas are to go when the decision becomes effective 15 November next year. The government notice also bans diesel tempos from Nepal effective August 2001.

Of roughly 260,000 registered vehicles in Nepal, half are two-wheelers and of the remaining 130,000, some 60 percent ply on the streets of the Kathmandu Valley. "We've begun work to see how many vehicles will be affected by the new law," Krishna Murari Sharma, Director General of the Department of Transport Management told us.

The Ministry of Population and Environment (MOPE) says work on the ban had been underway for some time now, and, according to Sher Jung Karki, an official at the legal section, is aimed primarily at checking pollution. "We have several technical committee studies saying it's the old vehicles and their numbers that cause most of the air pollution." Last year MOPE threw out 640 diesel-run three wheelers from the streets but allowed their owners to import 15-seater vans for public transport by mandating VAT exemption and just one percent customs duty, as opposed to the normal 130 percent. "There are no financial incentives this time," says Karki.

Hepatitis-B

Doctors say Hepatitis B, the "silent killer", is becoming a major problem, with 200 new liver cancer patients being added every year. The reported number of Hepatitis B patients in Nepal stands at 200,000 but doctors say there could be many more hidden cases around. Doctors say the viral disease is the cause of 34 percent of liver cancer cases reported in Nepal. Santosh Man Shrestha, chairman of the Nepal Liver Foundation, says that about 10 percent of those suffering from acute jaundice between 1982-1985 were infected with the Hepatitis B virus. Now the infection rate has gone up to 35 percent. The dangerous disease is difficult to diagnose until it is too late and, like HIV, it spreads through body fluids and contaminated needles, in addition to spreading through contaminated food and water.

Lauda Air deal

It appears that another deal by the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC) may be terminated after a sub-committee of the parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) recently recommended its cancellation. The PAC sub-committee says the deal was "irresponsible and illegal" and has also recommended legal and departmental action against the officials responsible for the deal. The committee found fault with Royal Nepal's decision to lease a Boeing 767 from Austria's ailing Lauda Air through direct negotiations instead of seeking bids from suppliers through a global tendering process, and against the express instructions of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA). The commission has begun its own investigation into the leasing deal.

Investigations by the PAC have revealed that the aircraft to be leased does not belong to Lauda Air but to another company in Hong Kong not mentioned in the lease document. RNAC has already paid Lauda Air \$1 million to guarantee the deal, which it stands to lose should the contract be cancelled.

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The roads not taken

SALIL SUBEDI AND ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

When the Ring Road was completed in 1980 it looked futuristic. It took into account the projected growth in vehicular population and the improbability of heavy traffic running the narrow inner routes. It included a green belt running along its length and a service road for connectivity to settlements flanking the road on either side. The approximately 27-km-long Chinese-built Ring Road was to have a main road 20 m wide, with 15 m green belts on either side, and service tracks of 6 m each. From the centre of the road to either end that's a total of 31 m.

Two decades later, the condition of the Ring Road is an example of how myopia, apathy and a top-down approach to management can ruin a good idea. The Ring Road lies neglected, the green belt has been encroached upon or simply destroyed and the service track is virtually non-existent in places.

Construction of the service track began more than a decade ago when the Panchayat government passed a Bill to the effect and started tearing down all structures that stood on the space required. No compensation was paid to landowners. While a few demanded recompense for houses and buildings torn down, many kept silent as they believed a service track skirting their land would result in a higher real estate value.

For some time after, the construction of the track looked real. Truckloads of gravel, stone and sand were dumped along the area. State-owned television and radio told us that even the houses of big guns had been torn down. But predictably, it was too good to



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The Valley's main artery has been slashed at several places, but no one seems to care.

last and all activity ground to a halt. The blame lies with the early planners. They did not assign responsibility to any agency to protect and develop the idea—both Lalitpur and Kathmandu municipalities, and also the Department of Roads simply pass the buck now—and took no initiative to involve communities.

Although the Department of Roads now claims that the plan is back on track, past record indicates that such optimism is misplaced. “Last year, the budget allocated for the service track was diverted to pave roads during the SAF games. This year Rs 7.5 million has been allocated for the construction of the

inner track. We are in the process of inviting a tender bid early December,” says Indu Dhakal, Kathmandu Divisional Head of the Department of Roads. According to Ananta Poudyal, engineer at the same division, Kathmandu will get Rs 5.5 million and Patan, Rs 2 million.

But it is not clear how and where the work will begin, and many government officials don't even know of the existence of such a fund. Damodar Gautam, chief engineer at Patan municipality, says, “There is no budget to carry out any activity. The central government policy is weak. It is very tough to implement any actions against the will of the local people.” He believes local participation is crucial for things to start working.

Theoretically, the process of initiating the project might sound simple, but the ground reality is that encroachment and interference by communities and local clubs around the Ring Road has become too complicated to be solved easily. Dhakal remembers how he was almost burnt alive inside a truck by an angry mob which had gathered to protect illegal settlements at Tinkune which Dhakal, with a small police force, was about to demolish.

“The problem lies within the system. First of all, the government should undertake strict and strategic planning and implement it accordingly. Otherwise the department is in no position to use force except to go about fencing areas with barbed wire,” he says. “Everybody talks big during planning meetings and interaction. But at ground level, only a minority of us remain. We can't just go about pulling down houses and disrupting public life,” he says.

A decade after the service track was laid, the roads department is unable to open it fully or pave it. There are several houses and workplaces built on the service track, which have inevitably spilt over to the green belt. New settlers, a large part of the migrant population into the valley, have

started to squat on this land, even opening small tin-roofed shops and automobile workshops. The worst of this 'reclamation' is at intersections where traffic flow is high. At places like Koteswor, Chababil, Kalanki Chowk, Balaju and Gongabu, the greenbelt simply does not exist, and any official undertaking to clear the settlements will certainly be met with strong, possibly violent resistance.

At Kalanki, for instance, scrap metal and the remains of vehicle chassis litter the area of the service track. On the other side people sip tea in a tin-roofed shop besides a huge garbage dump. A local club, the Kalanki Chowk Sudhar Samiti even collects a 'tax' from each shop—up to Rs 10 every day. Says a fruit-vendor from Jhapa: “We pay them five rupees per day. In return we get to sell our stuff without any hassle from the traffic and the municipality police.”

According to the chairman of the Kalanki committee, Ram Sharan Thapa, the funds are used to do things like pave the area and manage parking space at the Chowk. “These are the responsibilities of the government, but since the situation started getting worse, we decided to run this committee ourselves,” he says.

Locals like feeling empowered. Says local resident Roshan Kaji Maharjan, “It's good they are managing things the government is supposed to do. But at the same time, it is very important for the municipality to keep track of the revenue to prevent it from being misused.”

The Road Department's solution to encroachment seems to be occasionally bulldozing the small trail roads that connect the service-track to the main road. “But that does not result in any permanent solution to the problem and neither is it healthy,” acknowledges engineer Shyam Bikram Khand of the Lalitpur section of the Road Department. Poudyal of the Kathmandu division offers a solution: “Unless the service track

is made operational, encroachments will continue.”

Further, it is obvious why most houses have their own small trail connecting them to the main street. “Who are we to go and ask house owners to tear down their houses because I need the service track? It's the job of the government and the road department. If they do it

The Maharajgunj model

The Ring Road can be developed and protected through community participation. Shanti Thapa of Maharajgunj has done it.

It wasn't easy converting the wasteland that the green belt had become into a park. Shanti had to bury open toilets, clear bushes, plug an open sewer, and remove heaps of construction material along the 156 m stretch. “My first lot of roses worth Rs 3,600 disappeared the very next day. Some people still dump garbage around the area, but locals are beginning to realise its importance,” recalls Thapa. She was even manhandled once by a neighbour, although the man later got a talking to from the neighbourhood.

It started with a proposal to the Ministry of Population and Environment to create a park for children. The road department approved the plan and released Rs 400,000 for the construction of the Hausala Bai Udhyan. “There were prolonged delays in the supply of materials. But now I feel happy that at least the area has been developed,” says Shanti.

Her reward is the company of neighbourhood kids at play. “I love this space. I am attached to every plant that grows here,” says Shanti, who contracted polio when she was three. Shanti has a female gardener who she pays Rs 1500 a month. Recently, the Manakamana Cable Car company helped paint the poles and swings, and they contribute Rs 3000 every month. Some people in the neighbourhood also volunteer time and money for the park. “Friends like Ramkaji Khome, Tshering Lama, Sita Gurung, Lamabhai and the Dabur Nepal office have been contributing Rs 200 a month,” she says.

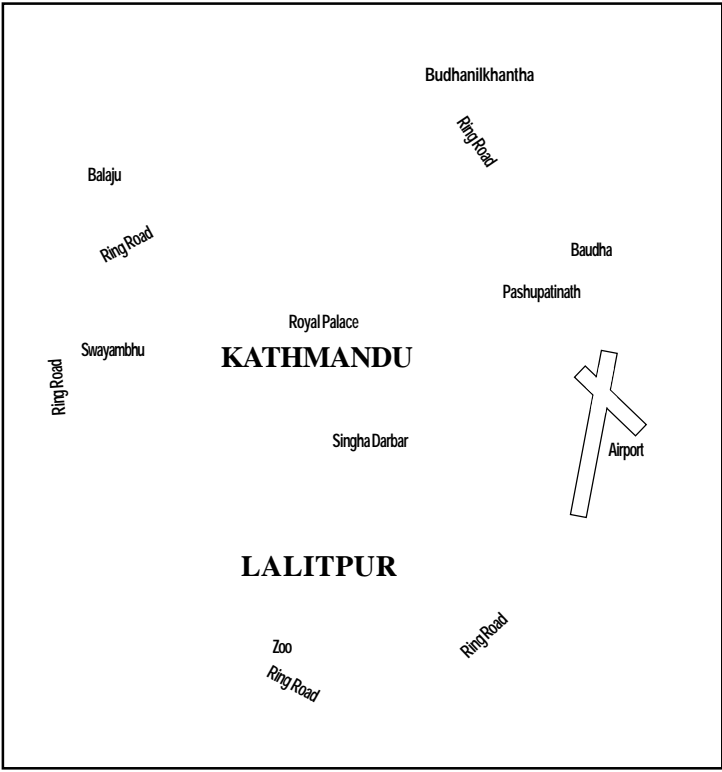
Recently, Shanti added another 50 m stretch of the green belt to the park area, with a budget of Rs 40,000. Half the money came from her own NGO (Hausala), and the rest from the Social Welfare Ministry. “It doesn't need much. If a polio patient like me did it almost single-handedly, can't the young citizens do so... It just needs awareness and an aesthetic will,” she says. The residents of Maharajgunj and Dhumbarahi are certainly grateful. ♦



MIN BAURACHARYA



MIN BAURACHARYA



Thou shalt not adulterate

⇒ From page 1



From l to r: Tankers on the highway from Birgunj to Amlekhgunj, entering the depot at Amlekhgunj, motorcycle being refueled in the capital.

The estimate of our sources who have carried out tests to see how much deviation there is between diesel sold at the pump and the mother stock from India say the adulteration is as much as 45 percent. For petrol, it is 25 percent. Translated: for every litre of diesel you buy, nearly half has been removed and replaced with kerosene and water.

Last year Nepal used 800,000 kilolitres of petroleum products, of which petrol was 70,000 KL and diesel 350,000 KL. At today's prices and if the 25 percent added to petrol was kerosene, then the amount Nepalis have overpaid for petrol adds up to Rs 437 million. Likewise, the amount you've been overcharged in diesel purchases adds up to Rs 708 million. Altogether, the Nepali people are cheated of at least Rs 1.2 billion every year, and the spoils are shared by the tanker syndicates, the filling station owners, NOC officials and politicians.

Sources at the NOC with inside information on the process told us adulteration takes place in three stages:

- during transport from the Indian border to Amlekhgunj
- on the way from Amlekhgunj to the dealers, and
- before fuel is actually sold to consumers

NOC imports kerosene and diesel from the international market through global competitive bidding and delivers the fuels to the Indian Oil Corporation at the port. It then

takes the different products it needs—including petrol, aviation fuel and lubricants—from convenient IOC depots along the border. Roughly two-thirds of NOC's supplies from the IOC enter Nepal at Raxaul and are stored at Amlekhgunj. The tanks here can store up to 12,770 KL, but our sources tell us the fuel is already contaminated by the time it reaches Amlekhgunj.

Every day up to 200 tankers hired by the NOC transport petroleum products from the border town of Raxaul to Amlekhgunj. The tankers are filled at noon, but they come across the Nepali customs only at around 2 pm, and show up at Amlekhgunj, just 35 km away, only after 20 hours.

We followed some of these tankers, and found out many stopped at petrol pumps between the border and the depot at Amlekhgunj. All of these have a similar layout: storage tanks in an area adjoining the station but separated by high walls and tall metal gates. Many tankers headed to Birganj, where our sources told us the petrol and diesel are extracted and replaced with the cheaper kerosene. One tanker operator bragged to us that the amount mixed depends on an "understanding" between the petrol pump owner and transporter. He said that the going adulteration ratio is "putting 1,500 litres of kerosene in a 25,000 litre tanker".

The present per litre market price of petrol is Rs 47, diesel is Rs

26.50 and kerosene is Rs 22. The tanker operator sells petrol and diesel for a rupee less than the market price and purchases kerosene at a rupee over, thus the pump gets two rupees for every litre. It's even more lucrative for the tanker operator: the differential is Rs 23 per litre for petrol and Rs 3.5 per litre for diesel. In other words, for every 25,000-litre petrol tanker he drives, he makes Rs 34,500. Of late, many petrol pumps have started operating their own tankers to increase their profit margins. There is a petrol pump every kilometre along the 35 km stretch between Raxaul and Amlekhgunj, a density several times higher than the national average. And there are more coming up.

Tanker operators privately admit to hanky-panky, but they have their own gripes. The Amlekhgunj depot only takes in fuel in the mornings, and they have to pay NOC officials even to get their supply unloaded at Amlekhgunj; the rate is the price of 100 litres of the fuel being transported. If it is petrol, that makes a greasing charge of Rs 4,700 to the official. But that is a small price to pay because after it is taken in at Amlekhgunj, the fuel then gets the NOC's seal of approval.

Pradip Raj Adhikary heads the Amlekhgunj depot. He does not mince words when asked if his fuel is adulterated. He responds with a

series of rhetorical questions: "Yes, it is, but why single out petroleum products? Is edible oil pure? Can you guarantee that Coca-Cola is not adulterated? If I were a trader wouldn't I too have done that?"

One way for testing oil quality at Amlekhgunj is by measuring the volume (after making allowances for evaporation losses) and density. There is a two-degree temperature difference between Raxaul and Amlekhgunj, so the volume of oil shrinks by the time it reaches the depot. The standard loss allowed is 1.06 litres per KL petrol and 0.75 litres per KL of diesel.

But the same standard can also serve to justify thousands of litres in accumulated losses. Our NOC source told us that if employees at its depots reported losses lower than the "standard" they were dismissed as "ghans khane" (grass-eaters). Trucks leaving Raxaul are kept on the road overnight to ensure that the tanks cooled down and even water is added for cooling. The greater the temperature differential, more room there is for adulteration.

A petrol pump and tanker operator in Birganj told us that payoffs can be made at Raxaul to ensure that a higher temperature is noted in the despatch slip. There have been days when, according to drivers, they've reported a 8-10-degree temperature difference between that of Amlekhgunj and



ALL PHOTOS : MIN. BAJRACHARYA

the Indian border.

The second tier of adulteration takes place at the petrol pumps where owners, by their own admission, add kerosene to diesel and petrol. Tirtha Dongol of the Consumers' Forum Nepal told us that most pumps have two or three underground storage tanks: one for holding adulterated fuel, and the other for "unadulterated" supplies received from the NOC. There are valves to switch the supply from one tank to another, and Dongol says gas stations open the tank containing unadulterated supplies during the NOC checks.

In Kathmandu, NOC's general manager, Madan Raj Sharma, says the corporation has taken action against those who are caught, but laments: "We do not have the capacity to do nationwide spot checks." Just as well, given how much money seems to change hands

during spot checks.

Sharma says the government's move to lower kerosene prices from Rs 26 to Rs 22 after opposition pressure will boost adulteration. "Today there is a price difference of 5.50 rupees (between kerosene and diesel) and in a poor country like ours it becomes difficult to guarantee there is no adulteration at all," says Sharma.

That doesn't seem too convincing considering that just across the border in India, they don't have an adulteration problem. Some of it does go on, but at the petrol pump level and certainly not at an institutional level like with the NOC. In fact, oil companies there challenge customers to test their fuel if they are not so sure. And here petrol pumps shut down just at the hint of a check, and the government sits with them across the table and begs them to come back in business. ♦

BARBS

by BARBARA ADAMS

Alice in Nepal's wonderland

The benign weather is lulling us into believing that aside from the garbage and the traffic, things are still pretty much what they once were.

.....
Infuriatingly nonchalant politicians, trying to convince us that if only those "communist terrorists" would go away Nepal would be peaceful and prosperous, and illegal anomalies like torture and disappearances would not be necessary. There is an Alice in Wonderland quality in today's air.

As politicians continue to squabble over power and spoils, Western countries continue to provide them the wherewithal for such quarrels. The Human Rights criterion for foreign aid, which is imposed so rigorously in some countries, when it suits the West, is never mentioned here. Is it that living is so pleasant here that normally sensitive people just choose to turn the other cheek to what they know, but somehow manage to forget, when arranging for still more money to enrich the already rich?

The recent talk programme on Politics and Human Rights was attended by Amnesty International's international directors and its urbane and quietly passionate president, Pierre Sane, who described and documented the increasing and frightening deterioration of the human rights situation in Nepal.

Sane deplored the killing and other human rights violations by the Maoists, but he made it clear that torture, extra-judicial killings, and disappearances carried out by the state authority was worse than inexcusable and totally discredited the government's pallid lip service to human rights. Referring to ex-Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's statement that Nepal had abolished capital punishment, he stressed that although law may have banned capital punishment, the number of extra-judicial killings by both the Police and the Maoists, had increased alarmingly. Sane felt it should be possible to bring the Maoists into the political process. Public opinion in Nepal is headed in that direction: free elections held by an all-party government is one of the solutions that has come up.

Sane, whose name is perfect for one so balanced (although it is pronounced differently), was so articulate and so obviously caring and passionate about what he was preaching, that he held the usually cynical audience of journalists, politicians and auxiliaries thereof, spellbound. When at the end of his talk he said: "Human Rights, spelled H-U-M-A-N-R-I-G-H-T-S, spell it with me," the entire audience spelled human rights aloud, including this usually cynical non-joiner. We were energised and enthused to join the struggle. Who, or what, is going to energise the Human Rights Commission? ♦

(Barbara Adams is a long-time Kathmandu based writer and ommentator.)

This de-clawed and defanged columnist has hesitated to resume writing after returning from the US because every time she sits down to the computer she has to control her anger, her passion for and against causes, and her worry about the future of her adopted country. Finally, last week, she took the bit in her teeth and set out to find the new office of Nepali Times. "Opposite the UN building" the man usually seen on the back page with the funny hat, had said.

When I got to the UN, and couldn't locate this newspaper, I thought of asking Nepali friends inside if they could tell me how to find their offices. Not so easy any more. It took a lot of persuasive Nepali, and my best attempts at charm, to persuade the guards to open the gates for my ancient, and, I suppose, disreputable, vehicle.

One of the most disconcerting aspects of today's Nepal, for one who has lived here forever, is the "security apparatus" everywhere one goes. In the old days one walked, drove, or rode one's horse freely into any compound, except the Royal Palace, of course, and was always warmly welcomed. In these days, of what is still called democracy, a disconcerting sort of paranoia reigns. Chanting Buddhist monks in red robes are taken for Maoists shouting slogans, human rights activists are accused of "supporting terrorists", and the American Embassy has turned its once relaxed club at Phora Durbar into an exclusive fortress for a handful of diplomats.

The benign weather is lulling us into believing that aside from the garbage and the traffic things are still pretty much what they once were.

The Nepal Rastra Bank has prepared an 18-point strategy which includes prescriptions for the financial sector and relates to its own supervision and monitoring capabilities as well. Top on the list is improving management of the country's two large banks—Rastriya Banijya Bank and Nepal Bank Limited—which an auditor early this year described as “technically insolvent.” There had been similar prescriptions for the two banks in the early 1990s, when the government even put in Rs 3 billion to upgrade their capital. It left ‘improved management’ to the banks, but that never happened and explains why the central bank, this time, wants to hand over the two banks to foreign companies under a two-year management contract.

Other reforms include putting a halt to investment by commercial banks in competing ventures, withdrawing government ownership from the Nepal Bank Limited, and introducing stricter rules to govern investments—especially a ceiling on loans that can be provided to the same borrower. Also on the cards is an investigation into and re-organisation of the ownership of private commercial banks, to weed out the possibility of insider lending that has plagued Nepal Bank. The Rastra Bank's role would be to function as a strong regulator, for which there would be a stronger law, possibly in the compilation of all legislation relating to the financial sector as one Act.

The Vishal Group Limited—promoters of Nepal Industrial and Commercial Bank, among others—and India's Life Insurance Corporation have joined hands to enter Nepal's large but virtually untapped life insurance market. The two companies signed a memorandum of understanding in Kathmandu last week and their new company—Life Insurance Corporation (Nepal) Ltd (LICNL)—is to become operational by March next year.

"We hope to sell 10,000 policies in the first year of operation," says GN Vajpai, Chairman LIC India. "The market here is very good because it is not very developed." LICNL will have a paid-up capital of Rs 250 million, of which the LIC will hold 55 percent and the Vishal Group 25 percent. The remaining 20 percent shares are to be sold to the general public. "Our main goal is to provide quality insurance services in Nepal," says Ashok Agrawal, Chairman of the Vishal Group. "I'm confident this venture will bring a new era in the insurance sector."

LIC used to operate in Nepal before the Rastriya Beema Samiti was incorporated in the early 1970s. Its global assets are valued at Rs 2574.9 billion. LICNL, the first joint venture in life insurance, will have to compete with two existing companies and four others that are in the pipeline.

A new controversy has clouded the Arun-III hydroelectricity project, with the government blaming EurOrient for not paying Rs 40.2 million as guarantee of performance, and the American company asking for more time to get paperwork done. EurOrient officials are visiting Nepal to resolve the "misunderstanding", and a company source told us, "We're still very much interested in the project".

The controversy erupted after the Electricity Development Centre (EDC) wrote to the American company on November 7 asking it to submit Rs 40.2 million as performance assurance, "within 15 days", warning that only such a submission would entitle it a survey licence for the 402 MW project. The company's position is that its insurance agents would need 60-90 days to underwrite the performance assurance bond, something that has already been commissioned. It has already paid Rs 60,000 to the EDC as survey licence fees, but had at one point requested the EDC to allow it to pay the remaining money when it applied for a survey licence. The government requires companies to submit bank guarantees for the money, a way to prevent licensees from squatting on licences.

Himal Power Limited (HPL) officials have ruled out a renegotiation of the power purchase agreement with the Nepal Electricity Authority, arguing that the deal was done when there were a different set of uncertainties and that it is wrong to raise the issue now. King Birendra inaugurated the 60-megawatt, \$140 million project at Kirneta in Dolakha district on Monday.

Politicians and government officials have been talking about possible renegotiation of electricity sold by the HPL though the NEA has not made a formal request to that effect. The PPA was signed on 30 March 1994. Under the 20-year agreement NEA is required to purchase the electricity at 5.9 cents per unit (now roughly 6.9 cents after adjusting for inflation). HPL began commercial sale of electricity on 11 July.

Norwegian power-developer Statkraft, the major shareholder in HPL, will have to transfer 50 percent ownership to the government after 20 years under the licence agreement. The remaining stock is to be transferred to the government upon completion of the 50-year Build-Own-Operate-Transfer (BOOT) contract.

The Kathmandu Metropolitan City has decided to charge about 130,000 residents living on the main thoroughfares a fee for collecting household waste. The Household Waste Collection Programme is an attempt to get people involved in keeping the city clean, city officials say. Municipal trucks are to pick up waste from 6:30 to 9:00 am and residents will be required to dump their waste directly onto the trucks. The fee for using the service ranges from Rs 75 a month—for a household producing 10 litres of waste—to Rs 20,000 for large establishments like five-star hotels. Kathmandu produces about 350 tonnes of solid waste every day. Municipal police will monitor the new order and non-compliance can result in fines of up to Rs 15,000.

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	54.00
Bhutan	0.65	0.31	0.56	0.33	0.18	0.02	44.46
India	0.64	0.36	0.56	0.28	0.13	0.05	46.88
Maldives	0.25	0.28	0.40	0.30	0.42	0.21	11.82
Pakistan	0.41	0.43	0.52	0.22	0.12	0.03	57.87
Sri Lanka	0.74	0.37	0.61	0.24	0.19	0.03	81.31
Nepal	0.65	0.38	0.63	0.36	0.30	0.09	74.05

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

Armed Raxaul cop buying Chinese blankets in Birgunj last week.

why is there such a hue and cry? It seems some people can't digest the fact that the international-quality toothpaste they brush their teeth with is Made in Nepal.

The Indian government is cognizant of the informal trade between the two countries. Everyone knows that tons of the gold that enters Nepal finally finds its way into India. In the early nineties, when the Nepali population was only around 18 million, Nepal officially imported 50 million umbrellas each year and Rs 41 million worth of flashlights. These goods originated mostly from China and found their way in here through the porous border.

The preferential trade treaty was signed between India and Nepal for mutual benefit. It was thought that the populous border states of North India would be served more cheaply through manufacturing units based in Nepal rather than, say, in South India.

This encouraged Indian manufacturing giants like Hindustan Lever and Dabur to set shop in Nepal. Trading communities on both sides of the border quickly found loopholes in the treaty and have exploited them for ages. If the regulators in both countries are weak, the informal economy should not be blamed. Nepal, despite its normally ham-handed implementation of anything, has initiated regulation of trade with China by making the use of banking channels mandatory. The proportion of goods re-exported from Nepal to India is statistically an insignificant figure, as the bulk of exports are agro-based, and the remainder are from Indian-owned production units in Nepal.

The underlying issue is that India is flooded with cheap goods from China, but not only from Nepal. They come from Dubai, Singapore, Thailand and even Burma. Chinese companies are setting up factories in India and these are definitely things like electronics at a cheaper rate.

India needs to rethink this sporadic Nepal-bashing. If Chinese goods available in Indian markets are cheaper and better than the spurious junk produced in the backyards of Chandni Chowk, it is not Nepal's fault. Indian business and industry are to blame. ♦

*Readers can discuss issues at
arthabeed@yahoo.com*

INTEREST RATE UPDATE

NEPALI RUPEE	CURRENT%	PREVIOUS%
Call Money Avg.	5.25	5.25
84 Days t/bill	5.05	5.08
91 Days t/bill	5.31	5.33
365 Days t/bill	6.18	6.16
Repo rate	5.81	5.83

The average rate of 91 days Treasury Bill decreased marginally to 5.3086 percent compared to 5.3314 percent in the previous week due to higher demand from Commercial Banks. Expected range for the coming week 5.25 percent to 5.40 percent .

FOREIGN CURRENCY : Interest rates

	USD	EUR	GBP	JPY	CHF
LENDING	9.50	5.75	6.00	1.50	5.13
LIBOR (1M)	6.70	5.11	6.07	0.54	3.65

BANK RATES (DEPO/LENDING)		Mkt Hi/Lo Mkt Avg
S/A NPR	6.0/3.5	5.23
F/D 1 YR	7.5/6.0	6.73
OVERDRAFT	15.5/12.5	13.54
TERM LOAN	14.5/13.0	13.37
IMPORT LN	13.0/10.5	11.52
EXPORT LN	13.0/10.0	10.63
MISC LOAN	17.5/13.5	15.03

CURRENCY UPDATE

AG/USD	CURRENT *	WK/AGO	%CHG
OIL(Barrel)	33.06	32.88	+ 0.54
GOLD(Ounce)	269.40	266.35	+ 1.15
GOLD (NPR *)	7055	7040	+ 0.21
EUR	0.8528	0.8482	+ 0.54
GBP	1.4187	1.4231	+ 0.31
JPY	110.43	110.12	- 0.28
CHF	1.7759	1.7915	+ 0.87
AUD	0.5249	0.5094	+ 3.04
INR	46.88	46.80	- 0.17

*Currency bid prices at 2.00 p.m. on 28/11 - Source Reuters

Oil: World prices stayed firm above \$30 a barrel on Tuesday, worried by possible supply hiccups from Iraq and how the US winter would be. Analysts say a stand-off between Baghdad and the UN could disrupt flows of crude from Iraq, roughly 5 percent of world exports.

Currencies : The dollar slumped on Monday, tumbling from its 9-month peak against the yen and falling 1.5 percent against the euro, an outcome of protracted uncertainty about U.S. election results. Jitters about possible European Central Bank intervention to boost the euro also helped the single currency, although there was no purchase. The dollar closed at 0.8512 against the euro and at 110.64 against the yen on Monday.

INDIAN RUPEE OUTLOOK : The Indian currency ended Tuesday at a new low against the dollar driven by corporate flows and sharp falls checked by support from state-run banks. It ended at 46.885/89 per dollar, breaching its previous closing low of 46.865/885, on October 31. The outlook for the Rupee remains bearish on higher oil prices, sluggish foreign fund inflows and the strengthening dollar.

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

ADVENTURE

ALL PHOTOS: ULTIMATE DESCENTS NEPAL

SALIL SUBEDI

Whitewater rafting has been described as the perfect adventure sport and there is no place better for both the beginner and the pro than Nepal. Up by the Bhote Kosi, some three hours east of Kathmandu, Claire Davies is about to get into a raft for the first time. She's "a little shivery, nervous and excited". Her fellow-rafters also have mixed feelings, but it won't be long before the river guide yells "Forward team!" and suddenly there's no time to be nervous as they paddle through huge rolls of rapids and falls. Adrenaline, sweat, splashes of crystal-clear mountain water fuel the trip. Before they begin, along with wet suits, helmets, life jackets and paddles, rafters get a briefing on

safety, paddling, emergency tips and the excitement to follow. The river guides literally show you how to sit in a raft, and tell you not to panic so often you begin to wonder what you're getting into. River guides are real showmen (yup, they're all men), mixing humour, a sense of excitement, and vital information. A good guide puts his team at ease before

All rivers operate in the Autumn (Sep-Dec) and Spring (Feb-May), except the Sun Kosi, which is operational only until June and the Trishuli, navigable throughout the year. The international system of river classification for rafting and kayaking is based on the gradient of the river flow and difficulty of the rapids. Class I is easy moving water with few obstacles, while Class VI is almost impossible to negotiate and meant strictly for professional rafters. If you're in reasonable physical shape, Classes I- III shouldn't be a problem. Beyond that require some rafting experience and confidence in water.

RIVER	DURATION OF TRIP	CLASS OF RAPIDS	COST (AVERAGE)
Karnali	12 days (includes trek)	III to IV	\$400
Kali Gandaki	3-7 days	III to IV+	\$99
Marshyangdi	5-6 days	IV to V	\$250
Sun Kosi	8-10 days	III to V-	\$350
Bhote Kosi	2 days	III to V	\$80
Tamur	11 days (includes trek)	III to V	\$650
Trishuli	1-2 days	III to IV (IV in monsoon)	\$70
Seti	4 day Kayak clinic	II to III	\$220
Arun	8 days (includes trek)	NA	\$600
Lower Bheri	2-3 days	NA	\$120

Source: Ultimate Descents and NARA

giving instructions and commands. "This is very important," says Ashish Lama, a river guide. "Each rider has to follow the commands to keep the raft free-floating. Otherwise... everybody will start swimming." According to the Nepal Association of Rafting Agents (NARA), some 26,000 people, including a tiny number of Nepali tourists, went on professionally organised white water rafting trips in Nepal in 1999. After trekking, rafting is the largest sector of the tourist industry, generating 25 percent of the tourism-related

rapids down the Trishuli near Kurintar village, Puran Gurung, a 30-something river guide from there, remembers that eight years ago the older folks did not like what he was getting into. "But now they're happy about it." His

business also provides a livelihood for other men from Kurintar, like Gangaram Silwal. "I grew up beside the river and now I earn my living here. If not for rafting, maybe I'd have become a driver or wage labourer, I don't know... maybe a simple farmer," says Silwal. It isn't entirely a dreamy, living-off-nature business, though. Most river guides earn around Rs 3,500 a month, besides the tips. A lucky few earn more. It isn't big money compared with what they have to go through—the constant anxiety of safeguarding lives and risking their own, physical stress, and trouble with management—and many guides say as much. The All Nepal River Guides Association (ANGRA) president, Dev Raj Gurung, says most guides have no insurance cover or provident funds. "Only a few of the well-to-do agencies provide life insurance for their guides. We're now trying to organise some basic insurance for all river guides in Nepal," he says. There is money in the business. Small rafting companies net profits of up to Rs 1.3 million in a year if the two

necessary accessories is an additional Rs 100,000 per raft. Establishing a small company with a fleet of four of the cheapest rafts requires around Rs 1.2 million, not a really large sum for businessmen. "Those with money and without knowledge of the field are into it," says Gurung. "Many *salu*is who run rafting agencies don't even know where the rivers are located." Most rafting companies themselves are located in, you guessed right, Thamel in Kathmandu, and in Patan, with some branches in Pokhara. Any company you see outside these centres is likely only a storage station or a contact point. How much of rafting-generated revenue goes outside these urban centres is anybody's guess. But these issues aside, the industry is now fighting other forces. Rafting company owners and guides alike are anxious about the increasing number of dams being constructed on Nepal's free-flowing rivers. (A "free-flow river" is trade slang for a river full of rapids and without man-made obstructions like dams, tunnels and canals.) Dams on the Kali Gandaki and the Marshyangdi are cited as classic cases that seriously cripple the industry. Chhedyup Bomzan of Drift Nepal says business has already taken a downturn, as trips now last fewer days and some areas are simply off-limits. "We don't oppose dams but there have to be ways to guard the pristine wildlife and flavour of Nepal. If the rivers are blocked, there will be no rafting. Okay, we may not be the biggest contributor to the tourism industry, but it would affect other tourism-related businesses too—hotels, airlines, restaurants, resorts," says Chandra Ale of Ultimate Descents Nepal. Chandra's brother, Megh Ale, one of Nepal's foremost professional rafters, is trying to do his bit to keep the green flavour in. He heads the Nepal River Conservation Trust (NRCT), which conducts awareness and educational campaigns for river guides and villagers who interact with the rafting sector every year. The guides, through ANGRA, are devoted to different kinds of community service. They carry out humanitarian and social welfare projects like blood donation camps, clean-up campaigns and first-aid training. They're also renowned for their disaster-relief work and rescue operations during landslides and floods in Nepal. NCRT also organises an annual River Festival (this year from 1-3 December on the Bhote Kosi), to raise awareness about Nepal's rivers, their resources, and conservation. This year there will also be activists protesting the casual construction of dams as well. Rafting is not just fun, but the perfect adventure sport that makes you manage adrenaline, challenges and skills, and also engage with questions of philosophy and inner peace. Nepal's free-flowing Himalayan rivers, flora and fauna, the vistas, and some rough terrain offer world-class adventure. The challenge now is to make it true eco-tourism, i.e., compatible with equally vital development projects. ♦

nepal dist



The past with a future

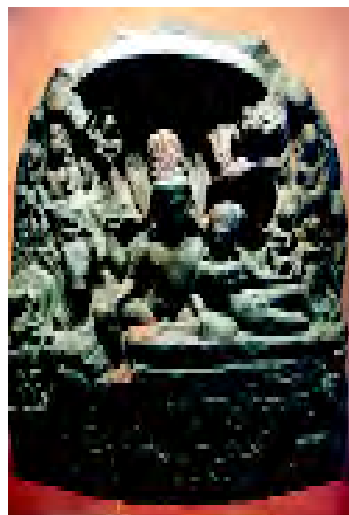
SUJATA TULADHAR

What's a lovingly restored 18th-century palace doing with a spectacular collection of rare artefacts from Tibet, India and the western Himalaya? Welcome to the Patan Museum.

Your trip into history begins at the entrance. The palace museum is part of a larger living museum: Patan's cobble-stone Durbar Square, with some of Nepal's most impressive temples and monuments. Two ferocious lions guard the famous gilded door, and above, overlooking the Square, is a gilded window with an image of Shristi Kanta Lokeshwor. Inside, it's a different world.

You enter into a courtyard that immediately and gently morphs your world into one that is outside modernity, noise and dust. Keshab Narayan Chowk, the quadrangle around the main courtyard, was once the residence of the Malla Kings of Patan. Seated inside the courtyard is Keshav Narayan, the guardian deity of the palace. Invariably, the visitor spends some time here, admiring the structure that encloses such tranquillity.

The galleries begin on the first floor of the completely reconstructed eastern wing. The staircase leading up to it is itself an example of how architectural restoration adapts buildings to new uses. They do not follow the traditional Malla design in that they are wider than most staircases of the time, and have unusual banisters. The staircase was broadened to make two-way passage possible and also to draw attention to the beautifully carved wooden struts, salvaged from temples destroyed in the earthquakes, hung on the walls on the side. The banister is neither Malla nor Regulation Modern but instead, Tibetan. It begins at the foot of the staircase and not at waist height and therefore does not run parallel to the stairs.



"The reason I chose this railing is that I found it comfortable, and also in good combination with the range of Tibetan sculptures upstairs," explains Götz Hagnmüller, chief architect of the Patan Museum project (see box). The atypical stairs lead to a typical Newari door. Raise your feet and lower your head to avoid tripping over and bumping your head. After you negotiate that, you're safely in Gallery A.

Gallery A is like a preface to the other eight divisions. As at any world-class museum, here the visitor learns more about the treats to come, through detailed explanations and descriptions of some Hindu and Buddhist deities, their postures and moods. This is one of the best things about Patan Museum: every exhibit has an explanatory text and viewers don't have to rely on—or claim to have—prior knowledge. You certainly don't have to be intimidated about visiting, even if you know nothing about art history.

The 200 sculptures currently exhibited are representative of all major religions practised in medieval Nepal—Hinduism, Buddhism and Tantricism. The diversity of the collection is both exciting and sad. The good side is that it preserves some of the best of Nepal's medieval history in the sculptures. It's sad, though, because this museum's gain is an inventory of the losses of many temples, shrines and monasteries from where the images were stolen. There's no doubt that this is preferable to having the artefacts on the mantelpiece of a wealthy private collector. At least here they still tell the stories and context of a unique culture, heritage and religion—lost

and rediscovered.

One of the highlights of the museum is a beautiful golden throne of the kings of Patan, which has an interesting relationship with its makers. An inscription just beneath the seat says "anyone can have this throne on payment of Rs 2 to the families of coppersmiths and the carpenters". Oral history suggests the throne was presented to the then Hindu king Srinivasa Malla by a Buddhist resident of a nearby monastery. Another highlight is a recent arrival: a 12th-century idol of Uma Maheshwor, that toured Western Europe after

traditions of metalwork deserves special mention. It displays, step-wise the technique of repoussé, the hammering of metal sheets into relief designs, and the process of casting images using a technique known as 'lost wax'. Here, a wax model is encased in clay and then melted out and replaced by molten metal. Also not to be missed is Gallery H, which houses a rare collection of photographs and paintings of Kathmandu Valley, some of which date back to 1899.

A thorough tour of the museum can take a few hours and be forewarned: it can induce acute

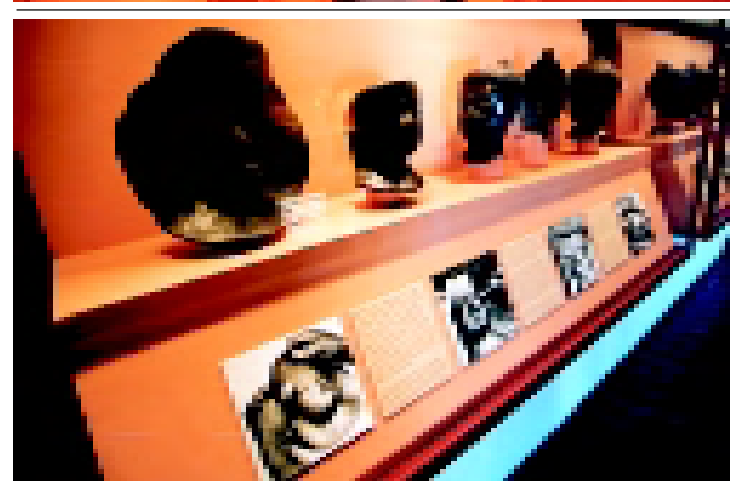
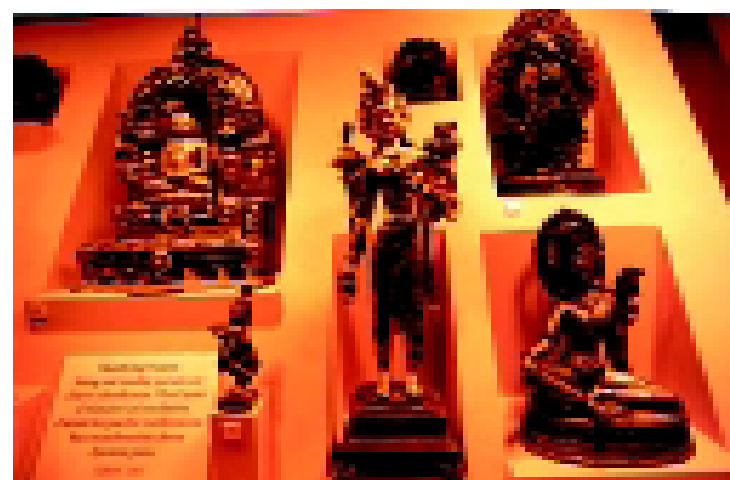
There's an island of tranquillity and history in the heart of Patan, Nepal's best-preserved and only self-sustaining museum.

being lifted from Dhulikhel in 1982 and returned to Nepal three months ago by the Museum für Indische Kunst (Museum of Indian Art) in Berlin, after it was found to be of dubious provenance. Patan Museum was considered a safer home for the statue in comparison with its original home, the Dhulikhel shrine. Another recent addition is the original silver sheathing of Bagalamukhi shrine, donated to the Museum, and again for reasons of security and protection. The museum created a replica and presented it to Bagalamukhi, so the shrine loses little of its flavour.

Like the explanatory placards, the presentation is also professional and in keeping with international museum standards. Objects are either encased in illuminated cases or on pedestals with mirrors. The attention to modes of display ensures that every detail can be appreciated. "We have tried to give some dignity to these objects as they should be getting in their original temple or shrine", says Hagnmüller, who has lived in Nepal long enough to see iron bars being installed at many temples to protect idols from theft.

Gallery G, which focuses on

nostalgia for a past you never thought you'd know. The exhibit-after-exhibit routine, which at most museums can get a little weighty and mind-boggling, is leavened by the constant flow of soft "natural" music. Commonly mistaken for pre-recorded music, this wonderfully pleasant sound comes from wind chimes kissing the burnt tiles on the



roof of the palace, given a constant, almost ecclesiastical continuity by an electric fan below. This subtle but brilliant touch is just one of the many that make Patan Museum such a joy and provide a hint of how intricately the restoration and display were planned.

It is also hard to miss the cleanliness, a rare treat when many of Nepal's holy shrines and archaeological treasures are lying in grimy neglect. The floors are waxed every month and the wooden windows oiled every six months, and even the daily cleaning routine is impressive. There are comfortable gaddis placed on the windows—it's quite common to find a weary visitor comfortably ensconced at the resting places taking in the clean tranquility of the museum.

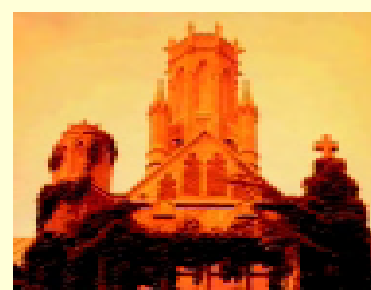
The restoration of the palace was a timely rescue. Nepal's heavy monsoon, two major earthquakes, and the use of the palace as a school prior to being converted into a museum, had all taken their toll, and caused considerable alterations in the original design. A fourteen-year, \$3 million restoration project

supported by the Austrian Government has transformed the palace into Nepal's finest and only self-sustaining museum. After its extension, restoration and partial reconstruction, the palace now resembles what we believe it might have looked like back in 1734, when a Malla king first walked into his new palace. Though its original foundations are much older, the palace received its final historic shape and embellishments in the early 18th century.

The structure has been reinforced using appropriate modern technology—the walls, for example, have been damp-proofed at the bottom and reinforced at the top with concrete ring beams for earthquake safety. All roofs are new. Though traditional tiles have been used for roofing, there's a water resistant membrane hidden beneath them. The balcony overlooking the courtyard from the upper floor was reconstructed based on the design of other balconies intact elsewhere in the building. The windows and doors, meticulously carved copies of the original, were added later, and

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the eastern wing was completely reconstructed.

The museum attracts around 200 tourists daily, with around 50 of these coming from SAARC countries, and there are an almost equal number of Nepali visitors. Patan Museum gets the highest number of visitors of any museum in the Valley. Much credit for this success goes to its governing body—a semi-autonomous board with the authority to make decisions on its finances, among others. There’s little doubt that this unprecedented governing system has worked marvellously with the museum’s self-sustaining policy, and steps are now being taken to get other Valley museums to adopt similar systems.

The museum has not gone unnoticed. It has merited a stop from almost every foreign dignitary who has visited Nepal after its construction. The last high-profile visitor was Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori. Mori was apparently so pleased with the Museum that he left quite a generous tip. That certainly called for a celebration.



“We added some money of our own to it and had a big feast,” recalls Jala Krishna Shrestha, director of the Museum. The VIP Visitor’s Book has been signed by quite a few of the rich and famous, and also a number of royals including the Prince of Wales and the Princess of Thailand. The rest of us are also, of course, welcome to sign the visitors’ book maintained at the museum every day from 10:30 am to 4:30 pm.

There is something for everyone in Patan Museum. Art and history displayed in the best possible way, culture in the most respected state, and a scrumptious meal waiting to be ordered at the Museum Café run by Hotel Summit within the premises.

A word of caution though: watch your head and your step while in the Museum. Still, even the occasional bump on the head or a slip isn’t the end of the world—it’s a small price for getting to admire the best of Nepali history in its full glory. ♦

For more information on Patan Museum visit: www.asianart.com/patan-museum

COMMENT

by GÖTZ HAGMÜLLER

Not just a museum piece



giving a building that has outlived its original purpose a new lease on life is a way of utilising a cultural heritage resource for the benefit of future generations. Often an innovative, adaptive design is required for an appropriate new use that preserves the substance and value of historic buildings. The former palace of the kings of Patan, and its current incarnation as a museum for Nepal’s sacred art, the Patan Museum, is a good example.

Museums are often conceived as non-profit cultural and educational institutions. They depend on annual government allocations for operating costs and their staff are civil servants. Entrance fees, kept deliberately low by government bodies, are not at the museums’ disposal and there is no incentive to raise other revenue because such income normally goes back to the central budget office. Maintaining and operating a museum of international standards in a country like Nepal is impossible

unless the issue of independent sustainability is addressed. How can such a museum be operated without further burdening the national budget?

Nepal affords extremely limited funding for culture-and heritage-related institutions and activities. Unsurprisingly, public museums generally have low standards of display, information and maintenance, inadequate security provisions, and under-qualified staff. Sometimes, there isn’t enough money for the electricity bill or to replace a light bulb—bad news for the visual enterprise of a museum. South Asian museums usually appeal neither to local people nor to foreign visitors used to higher standards. They don’t achieve their educational aims or realise their potential as tourist attractions despite the often high quality of their collections.

The challenges for a new alternative museum in Patan were both devising an institutional structure that allowed self-reliance, and convincing the Government of

the benefits of such a pilot approach. With an understanding of similar developments in other countries and the advice of local and Austrian consultants, the Department of Archaeology, the legal custodian of Nepal’s cultural heritage, agreed to an institutional framework allowing the Patan Museum to be administered as a public corporation governed by a semi-autonomous board. An existing legal provision for development organisations, the “Development Committee Act 2013”, was adapted for the first time for a cultural institution in Nepal. The constitution of the Patan Museum Board gives it the right and duty to operate the museum as a revenue-generating cultural institution, to guide its development plans and programmes, employ its own staff, and manage its budget, pricing policy and revenue generation. Thus, the museum could manage its operational and maintenance budgets and maintain high standards independently.

When it opened in 1997, the museum fixed the entrance fee at Rs 10 for local visitors, and Rs 30 for tourists from SAARC countries. For other visitors, the fee was fixed experimentally at Rs 120 (the equivalent of \$2 then), but an increase is being considered in light of Patan Museum’s international recognition.

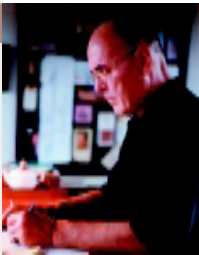
The sale of tourist tickets will remain the mainstay of the museum’s economy, but there are other facilities to generate additional revenue and also provide client services, a vital

component of an inter-national-standard museum. These include:

- The Patan Museum Café in the newly landscaped palace gardens, one of Kathmandu Valley’s most attractive outdoor restaurants.
- The Patan Museum Gift Shop with a selection of Himalaya-relevant art and other books, and also posters, postcards and other publications exclusive to the museum.
- A Guest Studio on the top floor overlooking the palace gardens for use by visiting scholars and artists.
- One gallery and the courtyard’s open arcades for temporary exhibitions, another gallery overlooking Durbar Square for lectures or seminars, and the main courtyard for cultural performances.

The Patan Museum has had around 40,000 annually visitors since 1997, on average 100 per day. About half of these are foreign tourists. These numbers seem small in comparison to museums overseas, but it should be remembered that the Museum’s 20,000 annual foreign visitors constitute 5 percent of all tourist arrivals here. No museum in the world can compete with that.

Sustained by the acclaim of major guidebooks and by word-of-mouth buzz, the numbers are sufficient to guarantee a sustainable and self-reliant future for this museum, one of Asia’s best. ♦



TUBORG

SIDDHARTH LAMA

There was a time when the Greater one-horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) roamed safely, and in great numbers, the floodplains and riverine forests of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra. This was until habitat loss to human settlements, trophy hunting and poaching for the mythical medicinal properties attributed to the rhino horn, decimated their numbers. Figures dropped drastically on the Indian side and by the mid-1960s the total population of rhinos in Nepal too was estimated to be a mere 100, down from around 1000 animals back in the 1950s.

Fortunately the Royal Chitwan National Park was formed in 1973, and afforded



more importantly, that it was actually still asleep. Blood samples were taken and the rhino was fitted with a radio collar—to help track and monitor its progress once released. Despite all the commotion, it was actually quite a smooth operation, and in less than forty minutes the beast had been loaded onto the sled and hauled to the open space where the trucks and cage stood.

Here too there was much commotion as the rhino was loaded, still on the wooden sled, into a 7 x 7 x 11 ft cage and the rear door firmly shut. The front door was partially lowered after an antidote had been administered to revive the rhino. As he found his unsteady feet, the sled was hauled out of the cage from under his feet and the door completely closed. This was done because the sled was needed for other rhino-hauling operations and to give the animal, now christened Claude after WWF's Director General, more room to move about in the



ALL PHOTO CREDITS:WWF NEPAL

this species a safe haven of sorts within Nepal. But poaching was reduced only after 1976 when the Royal Nepal Army was stationed within the park to curb such activities. Since then, numbers have recovered and currently there are about 612 rhinoceros in Nepal. The recovery from the brink of extinction is no doubt a conservation success story, but with only around 2100 animals in existence today, they remain an endangered species.

An added concern is that most of this population is located in just two geographic areas—544 rhinos in Chitwan and roughly 1300 in Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India. A case of having all your rhinos in one basket so to speak, and natural calamities, disease, or adverse human action affecting these areas could have catastrophic results on the

existing rhino population. A possibility painfully highlighted when 31 rhinos were lost in the 1998 floods in Kaziranga.

In order to protect this species, conservationists have been working towards creating new populations of rhinos in other suitable habitats. This would spread the existing population of rhinos over several locations and protect them from adverse events affecting any one area. Translocation has been successfully used in Nepal to create a new population of rhinos in the Royal Bardia National Park where there are 67 rhinos. That 54 of them are translocated animals and 13 were born there points to a viable breeding population. Also, with the population of rhinos in Chitwan reaching 544, park resources are being stretched to meet the demands of this huge population and translocation is a

The latest translocation operation is aimed at creating a third viable population of the greater one-horned rhinoceros in Nepal.

means to ease this situation.

Rhino population figures within the parks changed in the last fortnight in a major translocation effort. Fourteen elephants lumbered through the early morning mist and the high elephant grass of the Sukebar area west of Sauraha, Chitwan. Their aim was to find a suitable rhinoceros, herd it to a selected area, tranquillise and render it unconscious, and move it to Bardia or Shuklaphanta where it would be released. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and the King Mahendra Trust for Nature

Conservation (KMTNC) were conducting the entire operation jointly, with financial support from the US Fisheries and Wildlife Services, WWF-US and WWF-Netherlands.

The earlier party of fourteen elephants and their crew were joined that morning by another ten elephants carrying various guests and officials who had been invited to participate in the search and capture of the first rhinoceros to be translocated. These guests included officials from the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MFSC), DNPWC, KMTNC, WWF and park staff. The terrain was along the Reu river floodplains with the Someshwar hills to the south—an area of tall elephant grass, open Sal forests and marsh combined with patches of open grassland.

Rhinos would make themselves tantalisingly visible and then just as the elephants approached, slip through a gap in their ranks, cross marshy ground or disappear through tall grass and make good their escape. The tall grass made visibility even between the elephant-borne parties limited, rendering coordination of 24 elephants almost impossible with most communication taking the form of shouts between elephant drivers, relayed by those within hearing or sight.

It was midday before we heard that a beast had been cornered and so we lurched and swayed on our mounts to the

location. The cornered animal was an adult male and Dr Claude Martin, Director General of WWF International had been given the honour of darting the animal. The shot laden with Etonphin hydrochloride (M99) mixed with Acepromazine found its mark on the right shoulder of the beast and sent it trotting through the grass and brush towards the forest, hoping to shake this Hannibal-like party that had interrupted his foraging, and gone on to add injury by sticking a dart in his shoulder.

Whatever plans of retribution this mega-herbivore might have had in mind were soon to fade as the drugs in the dart took effect and ten minutes later, he was quite unconscious in a thin grove of trees, 300 yards south of where the loading and transportation crew were located.

As word of the sleeping rhino reached the crew, they were off with their translocation paraphernalia. This included 15 men on a sled and a big blue earthmover deployed to haul the sled and cut a swathe through the brush if necessary.

Fortunately, a path existed to the site where the beast slept and it was simply a matter of loading the rhino onto the sled and hauling it to the truck. Perhaps the term 'simply' does not do justice to the operation because there was a lot of shouting and earthmoving and grunting involved before the animal was finally loaded onto the wooden sled and hauled off.

While all this was going on, a team of technicians consisting of vets and park officials were monitoring the animal to make sure it was in good health, and

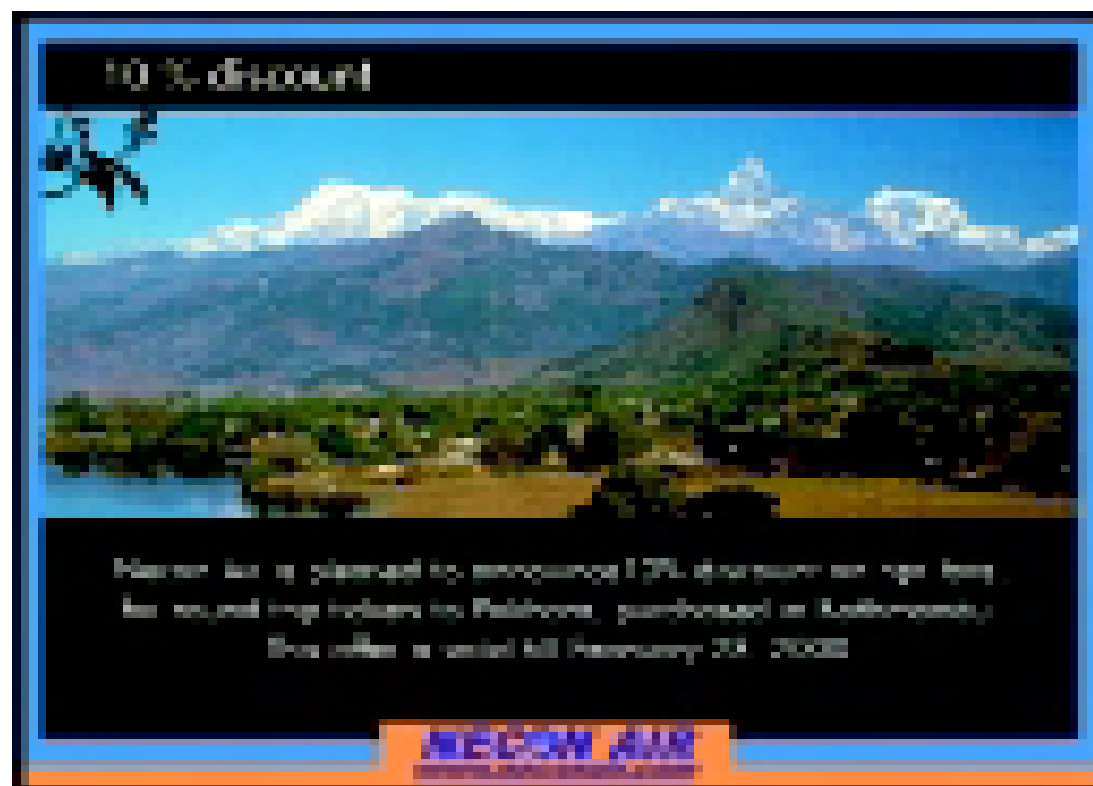
(Operation rhino, from left to right: Claude being herded on elephant back; going down under the influence of tranquiliser; blindfolded to protect eyes the rhino is tended by vets; and, loaded onto sled for the trip to Bardia.)

cage. I suspect that finding his feet after being drugged and then finding the floor hauled out from under him must have led Claude to suspect that he had eaten herbs his mama had warned him about.

The big blue earthmover and the team of helpers then loaded the cage onto a waiting truck that had been backed into a shallow ditch to make the operation easier. Claude was now ready for his 300-km journey to Bardia National Park, accompanied by a team of vets and park officials to ensure a safe passage.

In all, ten rhinos are being translocated in this operation and this would increase the rhino population of Bardia by 6 and that of Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve by 4 animals. This will be the first time that animals are being translocated to Shuklaphanta and it is hoped that over time, this area will be able to support a third viable population of rhinos within Nepal—it takes about 50 animals to form a viable population.

If the animals in Shuklaphanta survive and breed this will be another success story in the efforts to conserve the Greater one-horned Rhinoceros of Asia. Claude is now a resident of Bardia and another male and female have set up home in Shuklaphanta. Early successes of the translocation programme have shown that this is possibly the best way to ensure the survival of the rhino in this part of the world. ♦



The Bush at the heart of the matter

George W Bush's running mate may be little more than a Trojan horse

Because of the metaphorical significance of the vice-president's ticket—"a heartbeat away" from the Oval office in the ancient phrase—candidates have traditionally been younger and healthier than the first man on the slate. When George W Bush broke this convention by hitching his own ambitions to an older guy who had endured three heart attacks and cardiac bypass surgery, the consensus among commentators was that this demonstrated Bush's stupidity and the influence of his father, the last-but-one president, whom Cheney served.

But let me try out a conspiracy theory, which raises the alternative possibility that the younger Bush, in choosing Cheney, was being extremely clever, but that his brilliant plan was threatened this week by the would-be Veep's closing artery. This is how the theory goes: for most of the 1990s the Republican party in America craved a particular presidential candidate. They wanted him to stand in 1996 and again in 2000 but, when he refused to run, made do with Dole and Bush. The absent contender was General Colin Powell, the one right-wing figure able to win over female and black voters from Clinton's core support. But the general ducked the ballots. It's generally reckoned that there were two reasons for this. Powell feared being shot in New Hampshire or Iowa by some racist crazy and resented press scrutiny of his wife's medical history and certain episodes in his own military career.

In short, the problem was that General Powell wanted high political

office but did not want an election campaign. This is a common enough problem which leads to many potentially able people being elected only in their own heads. But it is my wild surmise that George W Bush saw a way of parachuting in the general without the irritation of primaries and campaign tittle-tattle.

Two years into a Bush presidency, Vice-President Cheney calls reporters to the official residence. Flanked by wife and daughters, he explains that he could simply not refuse the call in 2000 to serve his nation but that the stresses of the job have proved greater than expected—there has perhaps been a recession or international crisis by now—and his family have urged him not to take foolish risks with his health. A non-specific "scare" might be cited. (A really extreme version of this conspiracy theory has Bush gambling that Veep Cheney would not even need to call a press conference on leaving office, but I'm not yet that cynical about politicians.) President Bush nominates Colin Powell, who instantly inherits a presidential level of security protection and is nodded through by Congress and press in these emergency circumstances. A Bush-Powell ticket is little George's best bet of getting the second term his daddy didn't.

But then, on 7 November, it all went wrong. The presidential transition became as tense as 100 elections and Cheney's heart put him in hospital. He insists that he will be fit to take office if the Florida numbers

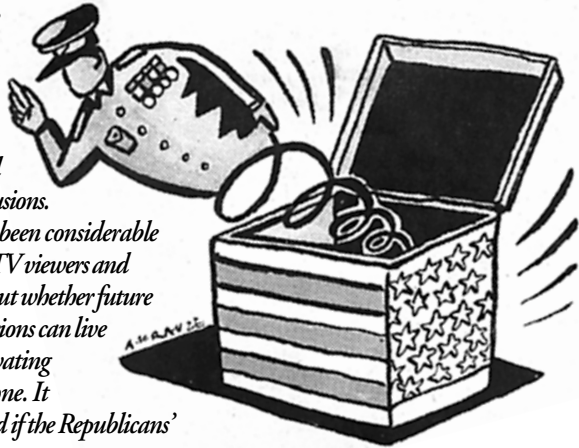
work out but, if he does, every winter cold or changed engagement diary will crash Wall Street. Under Bush and Cheney, America would be in the hands of a recovering alcoholic and a crock.

If a new vice-presidential candidate is needed, Bush could nominate Powell now but the general would assume office amid the kind of media scrutiny he was desperate to avoid. But there are two intriguing alternatives to the anonymous throng of government and senators who Cheney overcame during the initial pick.

Little George would be the first dynastic president of modern times and is a politician who has surrounded himself with his pop's friends. This trait at least partly led him to choose his cardiac-patient running mate. Now, though, he could cut out the middle man and appoint the previous President Bush as his vice-president. This Bush-Bush ticket would be the logical conclusion of Little George's political career, which has largely been motivated by working out patriarchal and Freudian confusions. There has also been considerable worry among TV viewers and journalists about whether future American elections can live up to the captivating lunacy of this one. It certainly would if the Republicans'

Bush-Bush 2004 slate was challenged by the Democrats' Clinton-Clinton, with Bill as Hillary's running-mate. Leaning on Dad, though, might draw too much attention to the dynastic ambitions of the clan and Little George's status as the first genetically modified president. So, instead, the replacing of Cheney could be used to heal some of the wounds caused in America by the current electoral confusion. In this scheme, Bush would invite Gore to become his vice-president in a national unity ticket. Many commentators have suggested that the virtual tie reflects the problem of succeeding Clinton. Each candidate had half of Clinton's skills—Gore impressive behind a desk, Bush happy in front of a crowd—but lacked the other half. The electoral dead-beat acknowledged the impossibility of having both. Well, now they can.

These last two proposals are more than half-joking. About the first, though, I am entirely serious. Dick Cheney's health broke for real a year or two before it was supposed to give him a tactical sick-note. He was the Trojan horse running-mate. ♦ (The Guardian)



Disowning Fujimori

TOKYO - Tokyo remains mum about ex-Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's request to stay in this country, but more and more Japanese are urging the government to roll up the welcome mat. Many say that the longer the 62-year-old Fujimori stays, the harder it will be for Tokyo to convince other nations that it had not looked the other way while the former leader was being accused of corruption, among other things, in Peru.

Fujimori, whose parents are Japanese, arrived here on 17



November, supposedly to arrange for loans for Peru from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation. But then he suddenly announced his resignation as Peruvian president, and what was supposed to be an overnight visit here is turning into a prolonged diplomatic nightmare for Japan. His resignation has been rejected by the Peruvian legislature, which fired him last week on grounds of "moral unfitness". Fujimori is also suspected of having remitted as much as \$18 million to Japanese bank accounts after his political future in Peru had become tenuous at best. Speaking last week, Fujimori termed the allegations part of "a political plot" hatched by the Peruvian media. But Tokyo has yet to say anything concrete about Fujimori, even failing to clear up how long he would be permitted to stay or if he has in fact applied for asylum.

Many Japanese were only too pleased to claim Fujimori, elected President of Peru in 1990, as one of their own. But concerns grew after he dissolved an opposition-controlled parliament, drafted a new charter that gave him more power and failed to curb the military's human rights abuses. Fujimori won an unprecedented third term last March, but his victory was marred by accusations of electoral fraud. Then came a bribery scandal involving his intelligence chief.

Activists here now question why Japan continued to pump more overseas development assistance (ODA) into Peru even as criticism over Fujimori's dictatorial ways increased. In 1998 alone, Japanese ODA for Peru was a whopping \$2.32 billion. According to the activists, what happened in Peru only shows why Japanese ODA needs to be more transparent. They also say this is precisely why the dispensing of public money overseas should keep to official guidelines that keep tabs on human rights in developing countries. (IPS)

Victory on both fronts

BONN - Technical co-operation between industrial and developing countries should be widened to include measures to strengthen the security sector, says a study by a German think-tank. This does not imply, however, that donor countries' organisations should work closely with military, police and crime prevention agencies, explains the author of the report, Herbert Wulf, who heads the Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC).

Wulf did the study for the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ), which is in charge of implementing projects on behalf of the German Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development. The report is purported to view development, not as a compartmentalised issue, but as part of overall efforts to enforce "global human security", says GTZ director general Bernd Eisenblaetter. A Human Development Report, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994, instituted the concept of global human security. The report said: "The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want."

"Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace...No provisions that can be written into the Charter will enable the Security Council to make the world secure from war if men and women have no security in their homes and their jobs," said the Human Development Report. Wulf pleads, in his study for the GTZ, for a reform of the security sector, which calls for implementation at several levels. Reforms at the political level involve strengthening of the civil society, enabling it to enforce a system of checks and balances. Reforms at the economic and developmental levels calls for measures aimed at disarmament, demobilisation of armed troupes, and their re-integration into the society. Also the resources used for military purposes should find a civilian use. At the societal level, says the report, ways should be found to enable civil society control over arms imports and the misuse of small weapons.

Against this backdrop, Wulf regards the demand for good governance an important aspect of reform. This is also reflected in the guidelines set out by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in May 1998. In a document, published earlier this year, the DAC said: "The emerging development approach to security-sector reform is manifestly different from the ideologically-inclined and technocratic approaches that create an accountable and effective security sector." ♦ (IPS)

Milosevic down, not out

VESNA PERIC ZIMONJIC
IN BELGRADE

he Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), headed by Slobodan Milosevic, held a special congress this week dedicated to the future role of the SPS, which ruled uninterrupted for 55 years. From 1945 to 1990 it was the Communist Party and in 1990 changed its name to be a Socialist party.

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Since 1990 its leader has been Milosevic, who until 1997, was also president of Serbia, which with Montenegro forms Yugoslavia. From 1997 until the elections in September, Milosevic and the SPS, ruled Yugoslavia. This hastily convened congress was to devise strategy for December parliamentary elections.

There were no apparent surprises at the congress. Milosevic was re-elected party head by 85 percent of the 2,300 delegates, who officially represented its 500,000 members. Milosevic called the dozens of top SPS officials who quit earlier this month to form two 'democratic' parties, "cowards".

The party concluded it could recover from the defeat and win next month. Opinion polls in past weeks indicate the SPS commands between eight and 10 percent of the votes. Analysts here agree that neither Milosevic nor his SPS will regain their stature in the country's political life. SPS official Ivica Dacic admits the party had 700,000 members before September, but has lost 200,000 since. "Eleven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the classic communist regime has finally died here," says analyst Vladimir Goati.

"It is not only the problem of losing power," says Belgrade sociologist Slobodan Antonic. "It's the

Milosevic claims he was ousted in an "illegal, street coup", and is regrouping his forces for the Serbian parliamentary elections.

problem of learning how to be the opposition. The SPS may have revolved around one man, but it has a strong infrastructure and huge financial resources." SPS controls all the property of the former Communist Party, worth hundreds of millions of dollars. And the parallel "underground" structures that SPS spent over a decade organising within the secret police, commerce and paramilitary groups should not be overlooked, Antonic says.

Analyst Zeljko Cvijanovic says Milosevic's victory is temporary: "With Milosevic as head, the SPS' influence can only dwindle further and it will be only a matter of time before its membership starts drifting away." The parties formed by ex-SPS officials Zoran Lilic and Milorad Vucelic will attract disappointed SPS members and sympathisers. "Their parties lack wealth and infrastructure, but they aren't saddled with an indicted war criminal as president."

The Hague-based International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indicted Milosevic and four aides for war crimes against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. New

Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica refuses to hand over Milosevic to the ICTY, saying he should be tried here, "for all the crimes he committed against his own nation."

For Borisav Jovic, a top official who left the SPS, the party "is heading for catastrophe with Milosevic as its head". According to Jovic, many members and top officials realised the historic and dramatic change that happened in September and during mass protests in October, but Milosevic didn't. Milosevic apparently insists he never lost to Kostunica, but was forced out in an illegal and violent "street coup". He is convinced that he stepped aside to spare the nation from bloodshed, loyal associates confide.

Goati says the final path to democracy remains uncertain. "In reality, Milosevic did not lose the war. He only lost a battle. It is difficult to imagine that he and his party could recover and consolidate quickly, but they could slow the process of transformation to a market economy and make it much more expensive in economic and social terms. And that is the long-term effect of 55 years in power." ♦ (IPS)

War, drought and the Taliban



ANWAR MANSURI
IN ISLAMABAD

After ten years of Soviet occupation and another decade of civil war, few observers thought the situation in Afghanistan could get any worse. Yet it is poised to do so. This month a harsh winter is bringing another year of fighting between the dominant Taliban faction and opposing Northern Alliance to an end, but not the sufferings of the war-ravaged poor Afghans.

A United Nations study released last June said the “process of pauperisation” throughout Afghanistan was being exacerbated by the worst drought in 30 years. Up to half of Afghanistan’s population is affected by the drought. Pippa Bradford, an official of the World Food Programme, warned last week that between half a million and a million Afghans would die of hunger unless the international community came to their help.

“If we do not receive new

pledges of aid this month, we will have to cut down or stop our operations in Afghanistan at a time when the Afghans will be in the midst of the pre-harvest hungry season,” said Gerard van Dijk, WFP director for Afghanistan, appealing for \$54 million in donations.

Erhard Bauer, Kabul-based coordinator of the German NGO Agro Action warned: “The misery will be extreme during winter especially in the rural areas.” This will also affect the towns and cities eventually as refugees pour in.

“Programmes that deal with women or families have come to a standstill because Kandahar repeated the decree that forbids the employment of women,” he said in reference to a ruling issued by the Taliban’s paramount leader Mullah Muhammad Omar from his power base in southwestern Afghanistan. Bauer warned that dramatic changes might occur in the North and the West of the country if the nomads lose their cattle. Ironically, it’s not a shortage of food, or high prices

After suffering a decade old fratricidal war, Afghans are now fleeing the worst drought in thirty years.

that make the drought-stricken go hungry but a lack of purchasing power. Food supplies from Iran are said to be plentiful and cheap.

It is not just war and drought that are uprooting rural Afghans but also a ban imposed by Taliban chief, Mullah Mohammad Omar, on growing poppy. It is also driving Afghans out of their lands under international pressure. Bernard Frabi, the United Nations Drug Control Programme officer for Afghanistan, disclosed that Afghanistan, the world’s largest producer of opium, produced 28 percent less opium in 2000 than last year. But this December the UNDCP is winding up a programme to help Afghan farmers grow substitute crops. The reason—a lack of funds. Some 30,000 Afghans have already fled the fighting and the growing poverty to neighbouring Pakistan. Around 500 cross the border daily, according to the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Islamabad.

Pro-Taliban Pakistan has been playing host to 2.4 million Afghan refugees for 20 years, and a similar number live in anti-Taliban Iran. Along with the new crop of refugees, the recent military successes of the Taliban in areas bordering Tajikistan have raised new tensions in the region. The Islamic Taliban, which now controls 95 percent of Afghanistan territory, and the opposition Northern Alliance have recently

agreed to hold a political dialogue under the auspices of the United Nations.

“Yes, we have given that in writing to the United Nations,” the Taliban ambassador in Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaef, told reporters in Islamabad. Afghanistan’s neighbours Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, together with Russia and the United States, have also formed a six-plus-two group to promote political dialogue for a peaceful settlement rather than providing support to a favourite Afghan faction.

But deep mistrust continues to divide them and their favourites. The Northern Alliance, led by commander Ahmad Shah Masood who has found an ally in his former enemy Russia, demands a coalition government in Kabul, while the Taliban demand the Alliance’s surrender. A meeting of the defence ministers of the former Soviet central Asian republics convened by Russia in October declared Taliban-ruled Afghanistan a source of terrorism and prepared security plans to meet the threat.

Russia had earlier agreed to fight international terrorism with the United States which has been threatening the Taliban for providing asylum to the militant Islamic leader, Osama bin Laden. Washington accuses bin Laden of sponsoring international terrorism. ♦

Trouble in the Triangle

For the second time this year, the Thai government showed that it would not yield to those using what it considers “terror tactics” on its soil in pursuit of political goals in other countries. Last week, Thai commandoes killed nine Burmese nationals fleeing to Burma after breaking out of a Thai jail, holding prison officials hostage. The escaped prisoners were in jail on charges of smuggling drugs across the border. Drug smuggling is regarded by Thai authorities as one of the biggest threats to national security, with young Thais increasingly falling prey to drug abuse. The hostage taking follows other incidents involving Burmese nationals that have threatened Thailand’s internal security in the past year. These incidents have also reduced Thai sympathy for those battling the military regime in Rangoon.

Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai said the action showed that Thailand wouldn’t give in to such violence. Earlier this year, when Burmese Karen rebels seized a hospital in the Thai province Ratchaburi, 100 km from Bangkok, similar action was taken. The rebels demanded that Thai military stop “assisting” Burma’s military rulers. Though Thai authorities came under flak from human rights groups for the ‘cold-blooded’ killing of the Karen rebels, there was little public sympathy for the rebels this time. Even the Thai media, normally supportive of the dissidents’ battles, sharply criticized them.

The October 1999 seizure and hostage taking of the Burmese embassy didn’t provoke much public outcry in Thailand, though Thailand’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand offered himself in exchange for the freedom of scores of embassy officials and tourists, and travelled with the rebels to the border. But, the incident severely strained Bangkok-Rangoon ties, and Burma ordered Thai fishermen out of its coastal waters. Thailand has moved quickly this time to prevent a misunderstanding with Burma. Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, in Singapore for a meeting of ASEAN leaders, met his Burmese counterpart Win Aung to talk about the jailbreak. “It of course would not affect relations between Thailand and Burma,” he said a day before Thai commandoes gunned down the hostage-takers. The Thai government is pushing Rangoon’s military regime to respond to international concern about its human rights record. It is also concerned about Burma’s role in increasing drug abuse among Thai youth.

Political observers expect a change in Bangkok’s stance toward Rangoon after national elections in January 2001. The party tipped in opinion polls to replace Chuan’s government has accused it of using a “Western approach” in dealing with Burma. Instead, it favours greater economic cooperation between Thailand and Burma. ♦ (IPS)

Waving red at the Greens

A Supreme Court directive to shut down hazardous industries triggers off unprecedented mass agitations in Delhi.

RANJIT DEVRAJ IN NEW DELHI

Three days of rioting by thousands of workers, which crippled life in the Indian capital last week, has pitted the political rulers of Delhi state against the country’s apex court. The government of Delhi state, ruled by India’s main opposition Congress party, says the Supreme Court has gone too far with its concern for environmental protection.

It is complaining that the court’s order to remove thousands of polluting and hazardous industrial units from the capital has snatched the livelihood of tens of thousands of low-income workers. As officials began sealing the factories last Monday to comply with the court’s orders, enraged owners and workers took to the streets of normally business-like Delhi, where mass agitation is a rarity. Angry mobs of workers blocked traffic, torched buses and battled policemen with stones and bricks. At least three persons were killed in retaliatory firing by the police.

The chief minister of Delhi, Sheila Dixit, a senior Congress leader, has declared that her government cannot allow over a million people to become jobless overnight. The state government says it will amend zoning laws to allow the factories to operate within the capital, though with modifications to their operations. However, the Supreme Court maintained that it would not bow to blackmail by “hooligans”. The

judiciary said the Delhi government could not take shelter behind the plea that closing the offending units would lead to violence and unrest.

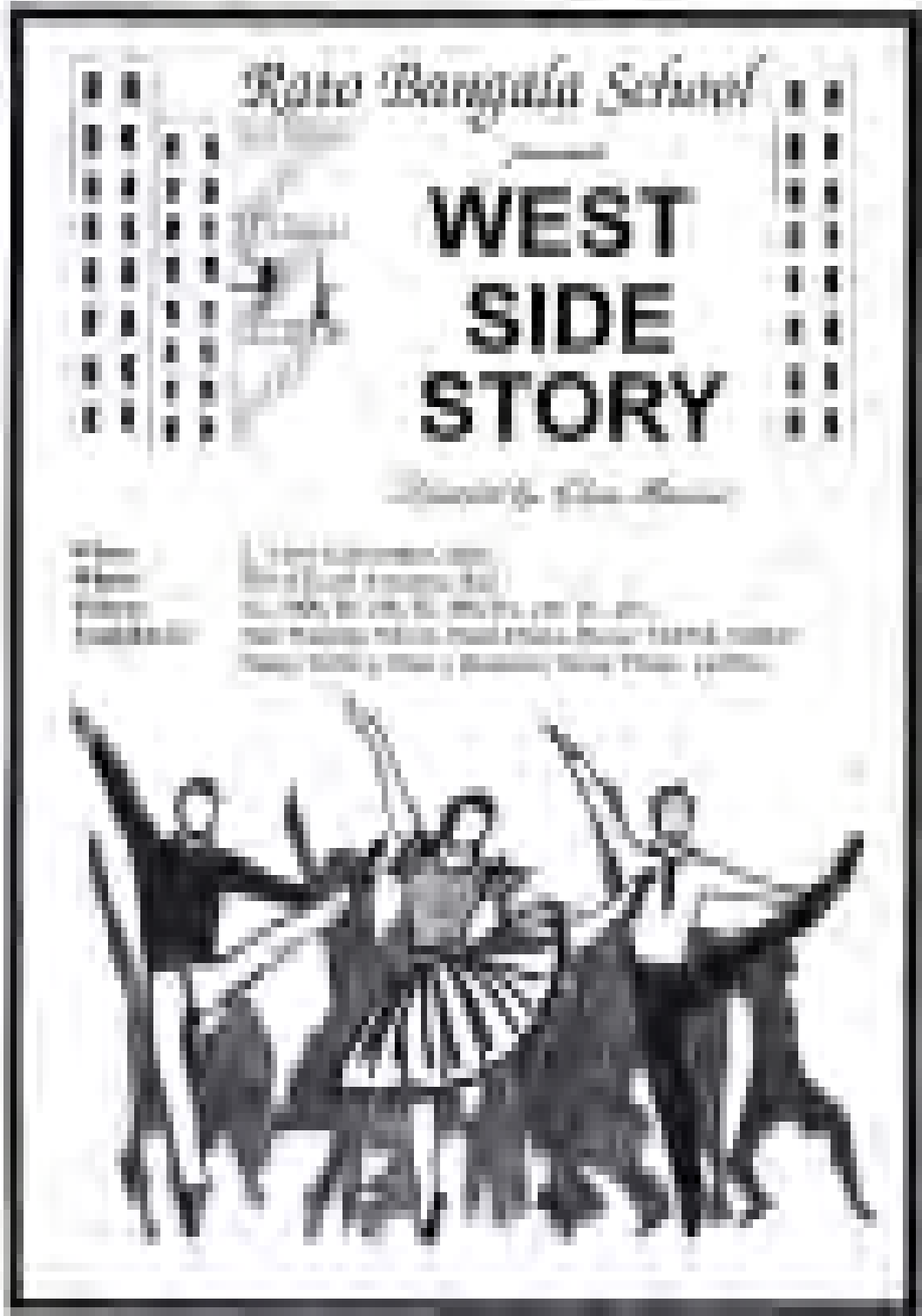
The dispute centres on about 50,000 factories making an assortment of electrical parts, automobile accessories and household goods. Most of these units are located within residential areas of the capital and are considered to be a serious environmental and public health hazard. Pollution control laws are rarely enforced in India and in recent years the country’s apex court has been compelling the government to ensure compliance. Dixit said the relocation of the units outside the state would also cause her government to lose hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue earnings from these factories.

Apart from a stern Supreme Court which has threatened erring officials with contempt action, Dixit has to reckon with the central government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Last Wednesday, central Urban Development Minister, Jagmohan, himself from Delhi, blamed successive Delhi state governments for ignoring the four-year-old orders of the Supreme Court to remove polluting and hazardous industries from residential areas. “It was only when the Supreme Court issued contempt notices to Delhi’s chief secretary (the top state government official), that officials began sealing the polluting units, leading to a massive public outcry,” Jagmohan told the

Indian Parliament. His ministry was prepared to amend the Delhi zoning plan and acquire more land to relocate some of the industries from residential areas, he said. The minister added that his ministry would appeal to the Supreme Court to allow more time to relocate the units.

Also speaking in the house, opposition Marxist lawmaker Jeevan Roy said it was not enough to amend the zoning plan. He demanded that the central and Delhi state governments should consult workers and their unions before taking a decision. “No one is talking about compensation for units which are to be relocated and the workers they employ who are likely to suffer from the dislocation,” Roy said.

Former prime minister Chandra Shekhar backed the Supreme Court’s order. He told parliament that drastic action was necessary to control the growing environmental pollution in the national capital, which had become a public health menace. Those critical of the Supreme Court’s order refer to the large-scale relocation of hundreds of industrial units from the Indian capital four years ago, also under the court’s orders. According to a survey by the Delhi People’s Empowerment Forum, that action resulted in more than 50,000 workers losing their jobs. Most of these workers were never compensated because they were employed as casual workers. ♦ (IPS)



Educational institutions to close

Saptahik Nepalipatra, 25 November

The All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) have stopped their 15th national convention mid-way and are now preparing for a nationwide agitation. A press release yesterday by ANNFSU president Devendra Parajuli stated that if the government did not fulfill their 15-point demand by 7 December, all schools in the country would close down for a week 8-14 December. The release also stated that the ANNFSU meeting, which was held on 23 November, had already taken an important decision in this regard. The demands relate to matters such as the one-shot lumpsum payment of fees, singing of the national anthem, privatisation of the education sector, private and boarding schools, national unrest and terrorising of people, the administration's direct involvement in the education sector, rise in the price of commodities and petroleum products. The statement warns that if these demands are not met by 7 December all government-funded schools will close for a week. The release mentions the brave stand taken by students when the police intervened and tried to disrupt their convention being held in Himal Middle School and Ratna Rajya College, Kathmandu.



The union also says that if an agreement is not reached between the agitating Kathmandu Teachers Association (Revolutionary) and the government, then all educational institutions in the country will close down for an indefinite period. The government has said that it is studying the demands.

'Revolutionary' students declare bandh

Jana Ahwan, 24 November

The government must now face the wrath of the student bodies because it tried to suppress the student convention. The president of the All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) has warned that the government has to take responsibility for all actions that will follow. Students' revolts have always led to the fall of governments. The students' revolt of 1980 resulted in the referendum being held. Students played a major role in the 1990 revolution and people should not forget this. The government seems to be scared of the agitation started by the ANNFSU which is gaining a lot of popularity. The announcement of an agitation soon after the incident at Ratna Rajya Campus has raised the political fever of the nation. The meeting of the ANNFSU yesterday has confirmed that an agitation will start soon and that it will shake the very foundation of this nation.

The demands put forward by the ANNFSU (Revolutionary)

Education-related demands

- 1 Stop schools from taking lumpsum fees in one shot immediately.
- 2 Abolish the teaching of Sanskrit. Mother tongues should be taught.
- 3 Abolish the national anthem.

Stop privatisation and commercialisation of schools

- 1 Government should take over private and boarding schools.
- 2 Stop the phasing out of +2 from the university immediately.
- 3 Stop taking loans from the IMF, WB and other nations that affect our education sector, immediately.
- 4 Stop foreign interference in our education system.

People-oriented demands

- 1 Stop police interference in educational institutions and take action against those responsible.
- 2 Make public the whereabouts of those who have disappeared, central president Lekhnath Poudel, Ganga Shrestha, Rishi Ghimire, Jhak Bahadur Malla, Nirmal Acharya and Nep Bahadur Choudhary.

Issues related to people

- 1 Stop price rise, corruption and the commission system.
- 2 Withdraw the rise in prices of petroleum products.
- 3 Issue 10 litres worth of coupons per month to all students on the basis of identity cards.
- 4 Reduce by 50 percent prices for transportation, health, education and all other public areas.

National issues

- 1 Withdraw from all unequal and unjust treaties.
- 2 Get back all land that has been encroached upon [by foreign countries].
- 3 Make public papers on all unequal treaties and encroached land.

Journalists angry

Saptahik Bimarsa, 24 November

Suresh Acharya, president of Federation of Nepali Journalists, has released a statement that reads, "FNJ is saddened by the irregularities that are taking place in the import of newsprint. As soon as FNJ came to know that paper for printing newspapers was not available, it got in touch with the ministry of information and the National Trading Corporation and asked them to make the paper immediately available. Since the chairman of NTC promised to import paper at once, FNJ is hopeful that paper will be available quickly. If this scarcity prevails for another week then FNJ will be forced to take action. FNJ requests the concerned bodies to supply paper as soon as possible. If this period of scarcity remains FNJ will be forced to take drastic action."

Conflict on between Hoteliers and Workers

Drishti, 28 November.

The uprising initiated by the hotel workers demanding the implementation of a ten percent service charge is now taking the shape of a fierce brawl between the entrepreneurs and the workers. The situation was created by the aggressive stand taken by both sides against reaching any point of negotiation.

There was much hope when the United Central Committee of the workers put off its strike from 19 November to 11 December. The government formed a high level committee under the chairmanship of the vice-chairman of the National Planning Commission, Prithvi Raj Ligal, to address the issue. But the workers refused to recognise the Ligal committee from the moment it was formed.

None of the workers' representatives turned up at the Legal committee meeting of 27 November. Ligal informed Drishti that the representatives of the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) too were adamant that they wouldn't negotiate towards fulfilling the workers' demand. "After much request, the workers finally showed up and presented their case. At present, the issue is in no position to be solved through negotiations," Ligal said.

Hotel entrepreneurs are accusing the workers of trying to disrupt the hotel and tourism industry in the nation. Shyam Kakshayapati, ex-chairperson of Restaurant and Bar Association Nepal, says that customers pay a total of 12.3 percent tax including the Value Added Tax (VAT) and other minor taxes and if they are made to pay another 10 percent service charge the total will reach up to 23.3 percent. "Customers are already affected by the present taxes. What will happen to them if a further 10 percent is added? That's why we are in no position to fulfil the workers' demand. The workers also have to understand this fact seriously," he says.

On the other hand, member-secretary of the United Taskforce Committee, Bisnu Lamsal, says workers will move to a nationwide agitation and accuses the hoteliers

of using the movement as a means to threaten the government into fulfilling their own interests. Saying that a struggle was really necessary now, he said, "We will move towards agitation. We don't have any trust in the negotiations. They've announced the suppression of our uprising, so let's see if they have the guts to do it. Now the fight has begun."

The tussle between the hotel entrepreneurs and the workers will surely affect the nation's tourism industry. And if that happens, the present government will have to take responsibility. That is because the government for a long time knew the workers' demands and did nothing. Even at present the tourism minister Tarani Dutta Chataut promised to talk to the workers and requested them to give him some time. The workers complied and postponed their strike by 22 days. But now it seems the minister is avoiding talking to them.

Who are the 'frauds' at Gorkhapatra?

Drishti, 28 November

More than seventy employees at the Gorkhapatra Corporation were found to have presented fake educational certificates to the management. The fact was made public after the Public Accounts Committee received a list containing the names of everyone in the corporation who had a false certificate.

The investigation committee informed that those with fraudulent papers include employees starting from the peon level to top management officials. The Deputy General Manager Hum Bahadur Basyal himself is found to have fake certificates. All his certificates after the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam were found to be fake. In a report submitted by the corporation, Basyal's first and second semester certificates in the intermediate exams, as a private candidate from the Uttar Pradesh Madhyamik Shiksha Parishad, were said to have been issued on the same date. The report also says there are a lot of discrepancies like the use of different surname on certificates at each examination level. The surname changes from BC in the SLC marksheet, to Chetri in the SLC certificate, Basel Chetri in the IA certificate and Basyal in the Bachelor's certificate.

Likewise, deputy controller Yagya Raj Joshi has also been accused of having fake certificates starting from the SLC exam. It has been pointed out that necessary action ought to be taken against Joshi, as he has not responded to any of the demands that the originals of the certificates be presented. The certificates of another manager, Sudan Aryal, also appear suspicious as he has not presented the admit card to his BA first year exams and he has not passed the English exams as required by all Tribhuvan University graduates. He too has not complied with the request to present the original certificates.

The investigation initiated by the PAC has not only created panic situations within Gorkhapatra but in many other corporations as well. Many are trying to blame honest staff members while the guilty ones

are resigning from their posts. The staff at Gorkhapatra are demanding that the guilty be punished according to the law before they slip away. Government employees of other big corporations have also been shaken by the recent news of the fake certificate investigations and many have begun demanding that their organisations be investigated as well.

Why the hike in electricity tariff ?

Shree Rupprekha, 29 November

The government is showing a fine example of "good" governance by hiking the electricity charges in a nation that has widespread poverty and unemployment. The Nepal Electricity Authority is waiting for the right time to raise the tariffs by up to 30 percent, which the water resources ministry has already approved. The Council of Ministers has not decided on the tariff hike as yet. NEA sources say the decision has been deferred to prevent protests that could result from incitement by members of the ruling Nepali Congress party, which is now neck deep in electioneering. The ruling side does not want its opponents to use this as an issue.

Electricity generation is very expensive in Nepal, perhaps the highest in all of South Asia. Even in Bhutan, whose geography and economics resemble that of Nepal, the generation cost per megawatt is \$1,300 while in Nepal it is \$2,000. Still no one seems concerned. The opposition parties are good at shouting strongly worded slogans against price hikes and even force nation wide strikes. But they don't really look into the root to identify the real causes leading to the high prices.

The reason why they do so is because they have also been in government (and have an idea of the spoils). While they are in power, they also don't pass up a single chance to make extra change and thus have also indirectly contributed to the price hikes. The main reason why tariffs have to be increased is widespread corruption, kickbacks, and the recruitment and retention of excess staff.

The NEA has for long served as a place that water resources ministers have used to earn extra money. That's why all ministers who have taken charge of the ministry at any time in the past have to take the moral responsibility for what we're being forced to bear today.

The electricity leakage in Nepal is also among the highest in South Asia. In fact those giving clearances to expensive hydro-projects are also responsible for the tariff hikes. But as the saying goes "a thief will have the loudest voice"; no wonder they shout the loudest while protesting the tariff hikes.

Before complying with the Asian Development Bank's conditionality to raise electricity tariffs, it is very important that the government makes public the facts about electricity generation in the country. Any hike in tariffs would be considered okay only if the public understands and accepts arguments in its favour. If that were not done, all blame would fall squarely on the NEA and the government. ♦

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"Communists don't kidnap, hurt and loot people. That's why the Maoists won't succeed."
—KP Sharma Oli, deputy leader of the parliamentary party of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) addressing party workers in Jhapa, quoted in Drishti, 28 November.



"O.K. Comrades. continue with your majority. I'm heading elsewhere."
—Spacetime, daily 26 November

Ganesh 1, Geeta 1

Nepal’s football fraternity waits as the match moves into extra time.

MUKUL HUMAGAIN
When Ganesh Thapa brought Geeta Rana into the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) as an ordinary member three years ago, not in his worst nightmares had he imagined that she would one day remove him as president of the organisation. Once close friends, Thapa and Rana have turned bitter foes. Now, Geeta Rana rules from the ANFA Complex, once Thapa’s preserve, with the backing of the government, while a humiliated but wiser Thapa has opened his own new office at Pulchowk.

After Geeta Rana’s successful coup prior to the ANFA election with the support of the National Sports Council, it was thought Thapa’s dominance over Nepali football was over. But that wasn’t to be. Thapa not only held the poll and became president of his own ANFA, but also got due recognition both from FIFA and AFC (Asian Football Confederation). With two associations claiming legitimacy to manage football in the country, the crisis is far from over.

So far, Thapa, a former captain of the Nepali national team, has been on the defensive, while Rana, who has never played active football, is calling the shots. This was evident from Thapa’s decision not to lay claim over the organisation of the Birthday Cup once Rana announced she would conduct the tournament. After her appointment as chairperson of the ANFA ad hoc committee, Rana has held several meetings with the A division clubs, referees and even paid visits to districts outside the capital to garner support. On his part, the usually aggressive Thapa has remained uncharacteristically quiet apart from attending an AFC meeting in Lebanon. But Thapa’s trump card is the 30 October letter from FIFA recognising the Thapa-led ANFA as the official one. Rana and NSC member-secretary Binod Palikhe have said they won’t bow to pressure from FIFA and AFC, but have yet to inform the world body of the ad hoc committee.

With Thapa and Rana both remaining inflexible, it is Nepali football that is suffering. Players and coaches are in two minds about whom to support. NSC sacked Shiva Bhakta Joshi, Mani Shah, Birat Shah and Rajesh Maskey—four coaches working in NSC as permanent employees—after they participated in the ANFA election.

Probably the most at stake is the future of the ANFA Academy. After the recent controversy, of the 40 children at the Academy, 34 are with the Thapa faction while the rest are living at the ANFA hostel at Satdobato. The Geeta Rana-led ANFA accuses Thapa of forcefully keeping these children after they returned from the Dasain-Tihar break. But Thapa claims it was his duty to look after

Thapa and Rana have time and again said that they would run ANFA professionally and that their battle is not personal. Everyone knows that is strictly for the birds.

them since they came to him. These children are still studying at Galaxy School (which Geeta Rana runs) as per the agreement, but Thapa has housed them at Lagankhel and they practise at the Jawalakhel grounds. Thapa had proposed forming a neutral group to take care of the children, but Rana wasn’t keen about the idea.

Thapa and Rana have time and again said that they would run ANFA professionally and that their battle is not personal. Everyone knows that is strictly for the birds. Over the years, ANFA has become country’s richest sporting body. With funding coming from FIFA, AFC and the Japanese Football



Association, it is the only sporting institution in the country that is not economically dependent on the NSC. Being in charge of ANFA means controlling the budget and also disbursing junkets that come in aplenty. Recently, Nepal was also the recipient of the Goal Project from FIFA. With an annual \$1 million coming in for this ambitious project, the stakes are pretty high.

Thapa has begun implementing the Goal Project. His ANFA is already looking out for land in five regions where regional academies and mini-stadiums can be built. But Geeta Rana is not going to let Thapa work so easily. The NSC has already written letters to Nepal Rastra Bank to

deny foreign exchange facilities to Thapa.

In the five years that he ran ANFA, Thapa managed to elbow out many of his rivals. An unlikely Geeta Rana proved to be his undoing. She came out openly when Thapa tried to hold organisational elections secretly in June. Since her elevation to the ANFA top post, she has vowed to run it democratically and transparently. This is precisely what Thapa has been swearing by over the years, so only time will tell if Rana intends to keep her word.

Both sides agree that an election is the only way out of the present impasse, but disagree on the modalities. Thapa insists the elections be held in accordance with the suggestions made by FIFA, and that NSC dissolve the ad hoc committee first. (FIFA has asked both ANFA and the NSC to change the statute, if necessary, send it to them for amendment and then hold elections.) Rana says elections should be held as per NSC rules. With such rigid stances the game is far from over. ♦

gtz ad

JS tyres

A temple to a secretive goddess

Patan's temple to Balkumari is beautifully located on the outskirts of the town. The city hasn't reached it yet, and the track that leads to it, a country lane, is uneven, dusty, and flanked by wild hedgerows. Great old trees tower above the building on one side, shading it in summer, and in winter providing a screen of filigree through which rolling countryside, village, the valley wall and high snow summits can be seen. In days gone by it must have been a lonely, isolated spot, probably forested, a place where travellers halted briefly and made offerings for a journey begun or ended. A temple grew.

The *pujari* of the temple told me that the original image was of stone. Then, presumably miraculously it supported images of Balkumari on one side and Bhairab on the other: it's still there, in a small pit below the more recent metal image. I asked him if it was true that Balkumari was a consort of Bhairab, or a female manifestation of the god of terror. He answered that she was married but her husband's identity was a closely kept secret. He knew of course, but he must never divulge the information. The goddess' husband is just one of the mysteries surrounding the goddess. Apparently, she is deeply shrouded in them, mysteries that the temple priests alone see in revelations. At least one of my books, which to a page are strangely silent or hesitant about the Patan Balkumari, do say she is one of Bhairab's many consorts but the *pujari* greeted this information with a look of exasperation and fairly rudeness.

Why, I asked him, did the exquisite gilded image of her in the temple represent her riding a peacock? Why was there a peacock on a high stone pedestal facing the temple? That apparently was a fairly modern interpretation. She was originally a stone goddess; presumably, though he refused to say it, one of the early mother goddesses. Then why Bal? If she was another goddess, with a secret, powerful consort, why was she represented as a girl? My Nepali friends and I were obviously trespassing upon the mysteries. The *pujari* wore a beatific smile which could have been one of long suffering. 'She has sisters,' he volunteered.



The tree is gone, but the ambience around this elegant three-tiered temple of Balkumari is still the same today as 25 years ago.



The moral behind the story of this lovely temple in sylvan surroundings is surely that treasures should not be kept in temptingly isolated places. Not in today's crass world of image lifters.

'Younger sisters. Mahalaxmi and Sikkadai.' An intelligent young man standing nearby suggested that Balkumari was one of the *astantrikas*, but the *pujari* snorted again. Her companions in the temple are Ganesh, Bhairab, Dakshin Kali, Mahalaxmi and Bhairabi. Asked their significance, the *pujari* gathered himself up and walked away. 'She is a goddess of sickness,' said the intelligent young man. 'Her powers are particularly efficacious in the treatment of dysentery and diarrhoea. People who worship her and live under her influence seldom suffer these diseases. She is also propitiated by the newly married and young men straight from their thread ceremonies.'

To sketch the early seventeenth century temple, set in a small surken courtyard, its four approaches guarded by large stone lions, I climbed atop a nearby building where interference from passers-by was minimal. One of the inevitable old men who crouch about temples either as their official or unofficial guardians asked my driver what the American was doing. Had he perhaps come to steal the image? Apparently his suspicions are well founded, though why he got them confused with Americans I can't think. There are three Bal Kumari images in Patan. The main one is in the temple of my sketch, another is in a prayer house that once belonged to a Mallaking, and the third is in a potters' colony. The latter has remained untouched. The one from the Malla prayer house has been stolen and recovered twice. The temple deity has also been stolen twice but never recovered: the present image, of a lovely woman riding a peacock, her head slightly inclined, her slender hands in a prayerful *mudra* is the second replica. The handsome Ganesh image that stands besides it is also comparatively new, the original having been stolen.

As I sketched the temple, a small procession arrived carrying a gilded image of Balkumari that looked exactly like the one in the shrine. It was dumped without much ceremony against a pillar, where passers-by, mostly women, paid obeisance, or children tinkled the small bells that are part of the

image.

The image has been stolen several times. The first time it was stolen it was recovered from the customs before it could leave the country. A devotee from Patan who happened to be there at the time instantly recognised the goddess. Strangely, the image is light enough for a single priest to carry easily. Yet, in its look in the customs shed it had assumed magical weight.

The second time this lovely image was stolen it disappeared for a year. When the three persons responsible for stealing it fell out over its disposal, the police got to know and it was found in a private house buried in the floor. Legend or coincidence? As the image was uncovered, Patan was rocked by an earthquake. Perhaps divine interventions prevented the beautiful gilded finial being stolen quite recently. A sudden high wind unseated the thief as he dislodged his golden prize from the temple roof so that he fell with an alarming clatter and broke his leg in the bargain. Easily caught, he was bound to a post supporting the temple bell and given a sound beating. Anyes, the finial he attempted to steal was not the original. That had been stolen ages before.

The moral behind the story of this lovely temple in sylvan surroundings is surely that treasures should not be kept in temptingly isolated places. Not in today's crass world of image lifters. ♦

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

THE URGE FOR EQUALITY

Purna Bahadur Vaidya

Purna Bahadur Vaidya has written over a twenty-year period 84 poems in Nepal Bhasa: *La La Kha* (Water is Water: a collection of 84 poems refracted through water). Although some of these poems have appeared in translation in Nepali and in English, one can see from the concise alliterative *La La Kha* how readily the intensity of the original is lost in translation. The long-term commitment made to the craft of poetry and to insight gained through repeated encounters with a single theme should stand as a guideline for writers. Vaidya's threefold commitment—to the language he writes in, the society he lives in and to the person he would become hones itself against necessity. Water when seen as an elemental force, when investigated in its own right, clarifies human endeavour. It is not nature Vaidya is concerned with, but human nature. The mirroring force of his poetry demands that one attend to the details of living and not turn from the inevitability and power of necessary action, be it personal, political or social.

In "Mutual Quest", through the simple act of immersing oneself in water, the experience of giving one's self to another is examined as a moment of mutual and self definition. Sensuality establishes the basis for the exploration, yet what emerges is an understanding of the limits underpinning the encounter.

Mutual Quest

Only when naked
fully immersed
can I be touched throughout
Submerged,
I realise the warmth,
the pressure
Through touch I know
my own warmth
given over
What holds me fears
being fire, and
I fear those icy claws
To meet somewhere between
that's our mutual quest,
our meeting point

In "The Restless Urge For Equality" a description of a river flowing through land characterised as an ongoing encounter between the freeing force of nature and bounding enclosure of civilisation resolves itself with a statement of self recognition that carries with it social acquiescence and political commitment. The relentless force of water is tempered by all that resists it, but it flows on, itself a tempering force, and it is that levelling urge that draws it on.

The Restless Urge For Equality

Before moving water rounds itself
and rises ever so slightly
with an eye to sorting out where the land slopes
where depth lies
Encountered, the world gives it flow, direction, speed
As always water's intention is to fill and raise
Where boundaries create you & me
where between yours & mine walls rise—it revolts
Gathering strength it flows,
and wherever it flows
as day follows day walls collapse,
boundaries are dismissed
In the absence of boundaries and walls
we see wider land—where water calmly, naturally, moves on
This struggle tells me
that the character of the land is uneven
Tempered by the speed of the flow
my own innate desire
is the equality I seek

In *La La Kha*, Purna Bahadur Vaidya, avoiding the rhetoric of his contemporaries, has become the most unlikely of political poets, while his exacting descriptions purifies poetic language in Nepal today. For he has identified in nature a force that cannot be denied; staying close to that force and recognising its qualities, he has clarified his own vocation as a poet. Through understanding nature—not praising its majesty nor playing with its illusive forms—he has explored what it is to be human. Clear yet sensual; understated, yet political—underpinning commitment with a sure sense of what is and an intent to continue until limits are unbounded and privilege is undone—these water poems distil from Nepal Bhasa a fine and bracing liquor ready to be decanted.

(Poems from *La La Kha* were translated by Wayne Amtzis and Purna Bahadur Vaidya.)

ABOUT TOWN

FILMS

❖ **Nepali**
Aago - Ranjana (221191), Ganga Chalchitra
Basanti - Plaza 1
Darpan Chhaya - Bishwa Jyoti (221837), Krishna (470090), Prithivi (Online Booking), Nava Durga (Online Booking)
Dhukdhuki - Goon (Ga) (520668)
❖ **Hindi**
Gopi - Gopi (470090)
Jung - Ashok
Kahin Pyar Na Ho Jaaye - Goon (Kha), Manakamana, Metro, Tara (476092)
Kurukshetra - Goon (Ka), Shivdarshan
Mission Kashmir - Plaza 2, Radha
Mohabbatein - Padma
Shikari - Kumari (414932)
Online bookings at <www.nepalshop.com>

Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival
1-4 December (Friday-Monday) at the Russian Cultural Centre, Kamal Pokhari, presenting select documentaries, docu-dramas and films on mountains from 20 countries but covering a wider geographical terrain. First day, public screenings being at 3 pm after the inauguration ceremony. Other days, shows begin at 10.00 am onwards in two halls. Repeat screenings will be held on the fourth day of the festival on popular demand. All films are in English or have subtitles. Organised by Himal Association. Tickets Rs 20 per screening. Tickets available at the venue. 542544.

THEATRE

West Side Story. A fund raising presentation of the musical by Rato Bangala School Theatre Troupe. Wednesday, 6 December. 5.30pm. Royal Nepal Academy Hall. Tickets: 1500, 1000, 500, 250, 100. 522614.



MUSIC

Charity Piano Concert. Performance of European Classics (Bach, Beethoven, Chopin), American Classic (Gershwin, Joplin) and Popular Tunes (including from the Sound of Music) by American Pianist Douglas Weeks to generate funds which will be donated to Agro-Forestry Basic Health and Co-operatives/Nepal (ABC/Nepal) and the Women Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) to help their efforts to combat women and child trafficking. Sunday, 3 December. 7-9 pm. Hyatt Regency Hotel, Baudha. Rs 350. Available at: American Centre (415845), ABC/Nepal (630346), Hyatt Regency Hotel (491234), AWON, WOREC (494815) and Phora Durbar Recreation Centre (228548).



Live Jazz at The Jazz Bar, Hotel Shangrila. Featuring this month – A host of jazz bands including Elaine Mc Innes & Chris Masand with the Jazz Commission, the Swingtones, the Latin Lovers and others playing Cole Porter, Gershwin, Brubeck and Coltrane. 412999.

RALLY

Beetle Mania for Charity. Volkswagen Beetle rally from Kathmandu to Dhulikhel organised by Ganesh Foundation to raise money for cleft lip operations for Nepali children. Owners, drivers and a mechanic (if you need one) start from Hotel Yak and Yeti after breakfast and end at Himalayan Shangrila Hotel with lunch. 9 December, Saturday. Entry fee Rs 200. You can also sponsor a harelip operation for a Nepali child for Rs 6,000 and take part in the rally. susan@ics.wlink.com.np

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

NEPALI WEATHER

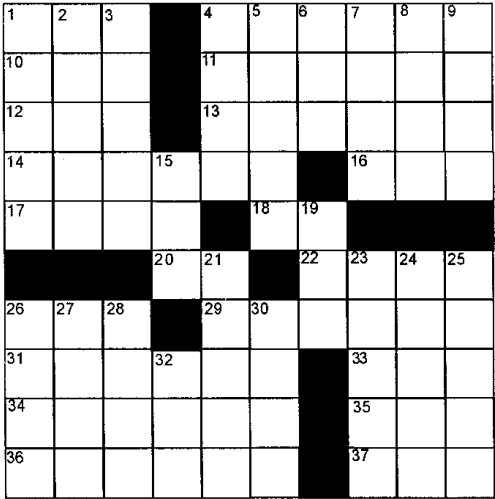


If you are wondering why the air has suddenly cleared, it is the sucking action of this elegant cyclone just swirling into the Tamil Nadu coast. A weather band that was a part of this system came up to eastern Nepal, but was quickly blown away by westerly winds. A weather system from the west passed over Nepal with only a sprinkling of snow in Jumla this week. The present cold air mass blowing in from Tibet will bring down temperatures further and blow away the North Indian haze for a week more. The next westerly weather pattern is fairly long way off, and may not affect Nepal till the middle of next week. Likelihood of winter rains is still low, and November has passed with zero precipitation in most of Nepal: a fairly rare occurrence. Kathmandu will have cold mornings with bright and warm days.

KATHMANDU

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
24-05	24-05	24-05	23-06	23-04

QUICKWORD 9



Terms and conditions
1 The contest is open to everyone, except employees of Himalmedia Pvt Ltd and Infocom Pvt Ltd.
2 In case of more than one correct entry, the winner will be decided by lucky draw.
3 Entries have to reach Himalmedia, by 5 pm, Tuesday.
4 The winner will be announced in the coming issue.
5 The prize has to be collected from Himalmedia within a week of the announcement. Please come with an ID.

Across

- Tricky sensory perception (3)
- Peripheral, like the Derby Lunatics (6)
- Rao moved the catamaran (3)
- Organisation in fixed orbit (6)
- Status no change (3)
- Kangaroo, Kookaburra or Foster's (6)
- Clear the auditory socket (6)
- Spots the commercial (3)
- Take the pressure off (4)
- Equine force (2)
- Bark with bone in mouth (2)
- Dizzy, or frizzy perhaps (4)
- Hail yellow (3)
- Take the route past the antenna (6)
- Prepare the sack (6)
- Put two and two together (3)
- Motions to the edges (6)

- Draw after being neck and neck (3)
- Nasal jet propulsion attempt (6)
- Offspring of the circus (3)

Down

- Chef's crowning glory (5)
- Birches after the steam (5)
- Holds up the stage (5)
- German lady (4)
- Take with the smooth (5)
- Squat on the determiner (3)
- Houston star gazers (4)
- National transmission tangle (4)
- Sights a shifty pair (4)
- Spanish holler at the big cat (3)
- Equal on the green (3)
- Spin in the ballroom, triple time (5)
- Sanctions against the Italian auto (5)

- Video was indicted for the killing (5)
- Archaic for the yesteryears (5)
- Drink out of the Zodiac overlap (4)
- Unknown, archaic for soon (4)
- Say cheese (4)
- Otherwise, cut steel (4)
- The hero's number (3)

QUICKWORD ANSWER 8



Out of 9 correct entries the lucky winner is **Subash Shakya**

To send in your entries, please fill in the details below and fax to 977-1-521013, or email to crossword@himalmedia.com. Entries can be dropped off at Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur.

Name.....
Ph.....email.....

Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival

1-4 DECEMBER (FRIDAY-MONDAY), 2000
PLAZA 2, BAUDHA, KATHMANDU



PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION: FROM 10.00 AM onwards in both halls. There will be a variety of speciality food items between 1 and 3 pm. Special screenings will be held on the fourth day of the festival on popular demand. All films are in English or subtitled in English. The name of the director is in Italian.

1 December

TIME	TITLE
10.00 am	THE MOUNTAIN FILM FESTIVAL
11.00 am	THE MOUNTAIN FILM FESTIVAL
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Tickets Rs 20 per show. Available at festival venue.

organised by himal association



HAPPENINGS



FIT FOR A PRINCESS: Britain's Princess Anne visits the British School in Sanepa on 28 November at the end of her five-day visit to Nepal.



PUBLIC SPHERE: UNESCO, INPUT and Himal Association representatives at opening of seminar on public television on 25 November at Himalaya Hotel.



ALL DECKED UP: Opel's Astra cars on the catwalk at their gala debut at a well-attended pageant at the Yak and Yeti Hotel on 26 November.



WARM ENOUGH: Kasthamandap Models, Inc organised this fashion show with its winter collection at the Verge Inn Club on 25 November.

ART REVIEW

by AJIT BARAL

HAIR

Ashmina Ranjit paints for women's causes. Last year she portrayed feminine characters in her installations. This year it is sexuality—female sexuality—that she interrogates through an exhibition entitled *Hair Warp*. Her work on show last year was vibrant and well conceptualised, and so is her current exhibition. The show, a mix of installations and paintings, is on at the Nepal Association of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Balmandir, Naxal, until 15 December.

The visitor to the exhibition is first confronted with scenes of bare legs, a woman wearing a red sari, hair being shaved, and a *dijo* being snuffed out in a video installation. And they compel you to view them in our cultural context. For, culturally, a red sari is the symbolic representation of marriage, and (one could say) bare legs of post-marriage lust and sensuality. The shaving of a female head is an obvious reference to widowhood, while the snuffing out of the *dijo* stands in for death. In charting the stages from the consummation of marriage to the separation by death, she talks about the suppression—self-inflicted or otherwise—of a woman's sexuality.

Though this video installation lacks artistic finesse and the sound of hair being shaved off is rather putting off, it helps one enter Ranjit's work. For hidden within paintings that are seemingly of

hair, braided and loose, you can discern female figures—some lissom and voluptuous and others merely allusions to the female form. And you could well have missed noticing these figures, and maybe even what the exhibition is about, if the video installation hadn't set the stage for them. These preliminary hints guide the viewer to stop, instead of moving hastily towards the next painting, move back and forth, and stare hard at the paintings in search of women lurking somewhere within the plaits of hair, even if there isn't one.

The paintings—every last one of them, from beginning to end—relate to the title "Hair Warp" and its symbolic implications, and so do the installations. The works are mostly monochromatic—charcoal in some, pencil in others. The vibrancy in the exhibition comes

from a few works that break the pattern. These have a splash of bright red, usually to paint the ribbon binding the hair, which adds a surprising and thought-provoking note to the otherwise subdued charcoal black-and-white hues of the exhibition.

Like I said, if you set your mind and eye to it, you could find female figures in all the paintings, but you don't have to stare too hard in others. In one painting in particular, you can see, within the curve and twist of hair, a woman with exaggerated breasts contorted into an awkward and constrained position. It is almost as if someone has fettered her and her sexual craving. In another painting, two braids of hair form the labia—red and enticing. And you are shocked by the boldness of the artist.

The execution of all Ranjit's

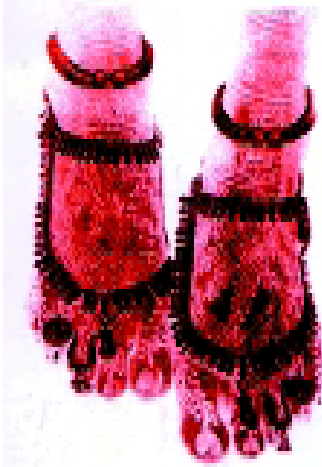
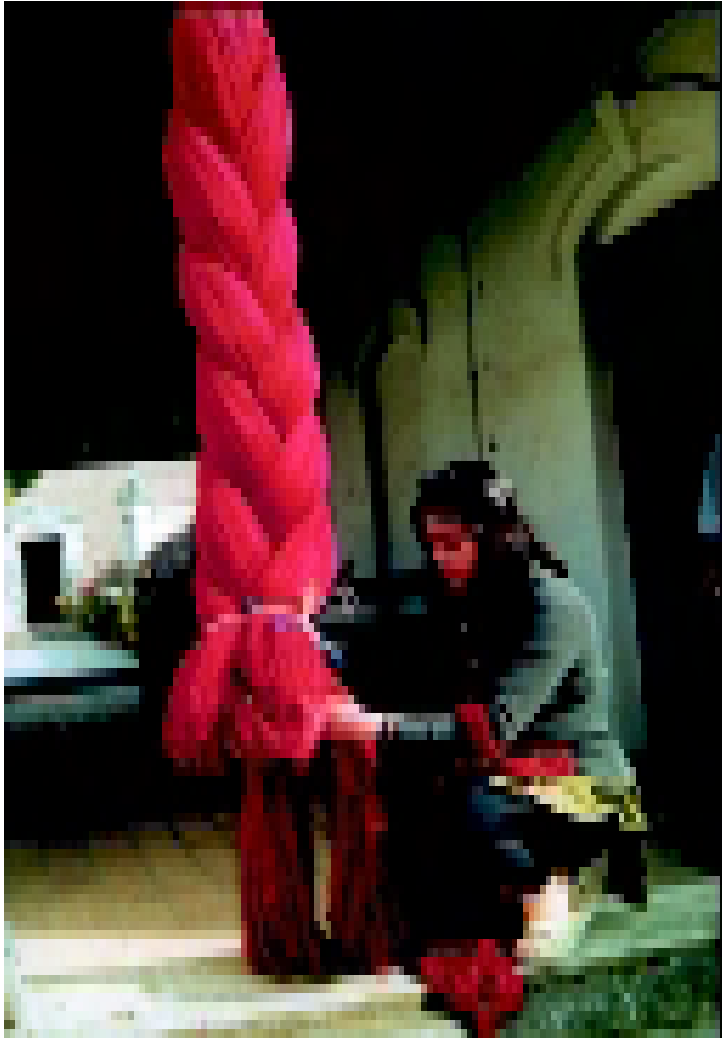
works is, however, nothing to write home about. I don't mean the usual illiterate gag "I can draw like that", though few visits to exhibitions, this one included, are free of the annoyance of hearing someone say just that. But does it matter that the execution is mediocre? When modern art has been pushed (I would personally say, relegated) to the conceptual level, maybe the question of skill become unimportant. Concepts rule in this realm. Moreover, the means Ranjit uses to make her statements doesn't place a premium on execution.

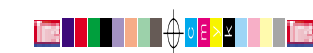
If you believe the medium should be subservient to the theme, this exhibition is for you. Otherwise, you may be frustrated by how Ranjit paints hair. She works hair that is braided, silky, flowing and texture-less on textured Nepali *lokta* paper. Not all are painted on *lokta*, though, and looking at these works I feel that she should have stuck to plain paper all through, as this would work better in expressing the qualities of hair she explores. Charcoal on *lokta* just doesn't work for the kind of textures she's trying to convey.

Ranjit has worked some relatively large paintings in this exhibition. These works, displayed on the terrace of the NAFA building look imposing and add to the ambience of the bohemian, and, dare I say, slightly kinky, artiness a place like that should have. And they certainly make you think about Ranjit's critique of patriarchal society and its exploitation of female sexuality. ♦



Ashmina Ranjit's show on sexual politics is a little kinky, but not too exciting.





Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

The arrest last week of Gajendra, the Zoo elephant, for a serious traffic violation at the Singha Durbar intersection is a signal that it is never too late to get the animals that use the capital's streets to abide by the rules. Gajendra passed the breath analyser test (just bad breath, no alcohol) but was booked for doing do-do below the

Animal Kingdom

statue of King Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great, an intersection frequented by the Prime Minister and other members of his Cabinet. Elephant poo is a serious traffic hazard, and it was an alert member of Kathmandu's finest that spotted the Great Balls of Fibre and traced them to their pachyderm perpetrator who was promptly apprehended.

This miscreant was nabbed, but what the elephant episode showed was an urgent need to regulate the bodily functions of Kathmandu's street fauna. As traffic flow increases, we can no longer have one set of rules for four wheels, and no rules for four legs. But hope is at hand: the Traffic Police is now working on strict rules to regulate the Animal Kingdom:

- Fowls: Chicken crossing the road will henceforth be required to first sign an affidavit in triplicate (with Rs 5 stamps affixed) explaining why they wish to do so. From the next fiscal year, the officer on duty will be allowed to arrest jay-walking roosters on the spot, and eat them, unless they are able to satisfactorily explain why it

- is they wish to get to the other side. Ducks: Speeding ducks are a threat to life and limb, and ducks found to be recklessly going around speed bumps on the Godavari Road will with immediate effect be sent to the Quack-Quack noodle factory. The ground-speed limit for ducks and geese is now set at 55 mph.

- Goats: Parking on the grass is now strictly prohibited, and guilty ungulates will be violently removed from the scene of the crime and sacrificed by the Municipality.

And that means ewe.

- Cows: The new regulations bequeath Kathmandu's streets to its rightful original owners and

give them the right of way. Always pass a sitting bull on the left, unless it is moving, in which case all approaching traffic has to stop until El Toro decides what to do next.

Which could be until the cows come home.

- Dogs: Chasing cars while barking wildly is a dangerous activity and has been banned with immediate effect. Dogs will be allowed to baptise tyres only in the privacy of their own homes.

During their annual mating season, dogs must give traffic at all major thoroughfares the right of way from

nine to five on weekdays and ten to two on weekends. At other times, dogs can continue to do whatever it is they do to enlarge their genetic pool.

- Elephants: Only elephants with green stickers showing that they have passed emission tests and with valid Continence Certificates will be allowed to cross the Singha Durbar intersection.

- Zebras: To get across, zebras must only use pajama crosswalks after looking in both directions to check for speeding ducks. ♦



NEPALI SOCIETY

Homegrown

They say you have to give in order to receive. Regardless of size, the first earning of the day of Easy Link Cyber Café in Thamel goes to a fund that provides scholarships to needy students from Rampur, Palpa. This may be why Nepal's first cybercafé survives even in the face of heavy competition. The fund currently supports ten students.

The man behind it is Mahendra Poudyal, who is also from Rampur. He started Easy Link Cyber Café

with two 486s in 1996, when the internet was still a mythical figure in Nepal. Poudyal, who received his degree in computer science in India in 1988, had until then been a teacher at computer institutes in Kathmandu. He wanted to do something different and innovative, and decided to experiment with running a cybercafé, something he had seen on his travels abroad. He was such a success that scores of internet cafés popped up in Thamel in his wake. Easy Link now has 27 PCs, which it upgrades regularly.

Mahendra is serious about his job. He spends about 16-18 hours on the net everyday and even his elder son who is just in



MIN BAIRACHARYA

class eight is already starting to build web pages.

But Easy Link is not Poudyal's only project. One of the first websites on Nepal, www.visitnepal.com was his creation. The website was in operation even before Visit Nepal Year 1998, and became a vital component of its marketing on the net. The site disseminates diverse information about Nepal, though the main focus is on the travel trade sector. Although the site got little support from the government's side, Mahendra still went on with it.

"People thought it was the official site because we had so much information there and we tried our best to answer their queries," says

Poudyal, who likes to do his bit for the country. Today he also has a web design firm called Visit Nepal Network.

Poudyal who is innovative by nature is sceptical about the current mushrooming of cybercafés in town, especially in Thamel. "The unlimited internet access provided by ISPs has made things even more difficult for the already saturated cybercafé market."

Poudyal, of course, already has another trick up his sleeve. He will soon be starting Nepal's first tele-marketing operations which will provide real-time service and an easily accessible call centre. "It's not necessary to go abroad to make money. You can earn a decent living in Nepal too, you just have to think," says Poudyal. He knows that all right. ♦

AMBASSADOR WHISKEY

MAYOS

