

EXCLUSIVE

Close schools, or else.



Schools across the country are preparing to close down 8-14 December in response to threats from an extreme student group allied to the Maoists. The All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) say they (among other things) don't like Nepal's national anthem that extols the monarchy, and they want India to return occupied Nepali territory. And these demands should have been met by Thursday!

A letter signed by Devendra Parajuli, president of the student body, "requests" all schools to show solidarity with their struggle by shutting down. He told a press conference this week schools not voluntarily closing down would face action, and he warned the police not to intervene.

Most private schools have announced they will close down, not voluntarily, but out of fear of repercussion. Private schools in Lamjung and Gorkha districts have already closed after Maoist threats, and only government schools are open there. Analysts say this is part of a new Maoist strategy to extend their presence in the Valley and other areas where they are not active by seizing on what the underground group figures are populist causes.

Strike cost

What would a hotel strike mean? Let's look at the numbers as provided by the Hotel Association of Nepal. The shutdown would affect 846 hotels, 350 travel agencies, 400 trekking companies, 70 rafting outfits, four casinos. It calculates that in the peak season, tourists in Nepal spend Rs 30.4 million every day, paying for hotels, food, tours, treks and adventures. There is another Rs 50.5 million worth of business hotels provide everyone from vegetable vendors to poultry farmers.

DON'T VISIT NEPAL YEAR?

If an enemy wanted to sabotage what's left of Nepal's economy this is what they would do: shut down all hotels indefinitely. Instead, we are doing it to ourselves.

KUNDA DIXIT AND BINOD BHATTARAI

By refusing to compromise on the issue of service charge, hotel owners and unions are once more waiting to see who blinks first. This time it is not just the hotels and employees who will be affected, the whole economy better brace itself for a catastrophic crash-landing. The impending disaster is only the latest indicator of a crisis of governance in our country, as the government belatedly began its efforts to restart mediation.

Hotel owners say the demand for a 10 percent service charge for employees is outrageous, and are determined to go for a lockout. The hotel unions facing them say they are prepared for a showdown.

The two sides are digging in and don't appear to be in any mood for compromise. Even if a dramatic reconciliation occurs over the weekend, much of the damage will already have been done: Nepal's hotels, travel agents, trekking agencies and foreign airlines have begun notifying overseas tour operators that they cannot guarantee hotel rooms for guests after 11 December, while those already in Nepal have been advised to make "alternative arrangements".

The threat of strike couldn't have come at a worse time for the country's tourism industry which has only just begun recovering from bad publicity following the hijacking of IC 814 almost exactly a year ago. The autumn season saw a healthy growth in non-Indian arrivals as two more international airlines began services to Nepal, and Royal Nepal Airlines finally expanded capacity with the lease of a Boeing 767.

All agree that the long-term impact of an indefinite hotel strike will be worse than hijacking. It will not be confined to tourism, the fallout will affect all downstream activities that depend on tourism: from pashmina workers

to breweries, domestic airlines to taxis, poultry and vegetable farmers to folk dancers. "I can't even attempt to quantify the losses of an indefinite strike," says Pradeep Raj Pandey, whose job as head of the Nepal Tourism Board is to lure more tourists to Nepal. "I am worried about what would happen if the hotels were to close for just one day."

A Nepali Times survey this week showed that if the strike goes ahead at current occupancy levels hotels all over Nepal will cancel daily purchases of food, provisions and fuel worth Rs 15 million from local markets. Add room sales, the

multiplier effect on handicraft shops, restaurants, treks, safaris, casinos and you come up with a figure of more than Rs 264 million of lost income per week for the country. A longer strike would hurt the one million Nepalis dependent on salaries of people employed in the tourism industry. Hotel employees are represented by two labour unions affiliated to the ruling Nepali Congress and the UML communists, and have united under the Hotel Workers' Joint Agitation Committee which had threatened strike last month, but called it off at the last moment after the government set up a high-level mediation committee. But the unions refused to talk to this committee, saying they were tricked. After meeting deputy prime minister Ram Chandra Poudel on Wednesday, we were told the unions had finally agreed to sit down with the committee.

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NEPALI Times

NEPAL'S TOP NEWS PAPER

LOOK OUT, LOCKOUT!

Strike while the iron is hot.

That seems to be the maxim for Nepal this winter. Now is the time to pick a cause, any cause, because our rulers are not ruling. And if there is a government we don't sense the presence of one. So the All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) is forcing the closure of all private schools unless the government meets its 15-point demand for everything from stopping the teaching of Sanskrit and the singing of the national anthem, to halting inflation and getting back Nepali territory occupied by foreign powers. It is doubtful if any government, even a Maoist one, could fulfil such demands. But the 7 December ultimatum stood, and since the government did not meet the demands schools have no choice but close down or face the consequences, whatever they may be.

No sooner had the government declared hospitals Essential Services last week, thereby making strikes there illegal, than the non-medical staff in hospitals went on indefinite strike. The hospitality industry is now taking the cue from hospitals to finally go through with the strike hotel employees threatened last month to win a ten percent service charge from all billings. More than any previous or on-going strike, this one has the potential to decimate the economy. As we have said over the past three issues, the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) and the Hotel Worker's Joint Agitation Committee are playing dangerous brinkmanship here. This is not like closing down a garment factory. It is not about service charges, or just about the hotel industry anymore. The fallout of an indefinite hotel strike will wreck not just tourism, it will ruin the economy.

As far as we can tell, there is a lot of posturing going on. No one really wants the strike, the hotel workers are rattling sabres, hotel owners are acting macho, the government is paralysed by its own lack of ideas, the FNCCI is looking at next week with horror, the political patrons of the unions don't want to be blamed for the popular backlash if jobs and businesses are lost. Still, as with everything else in Nepal, it never seems to be enough that no one wants something to happen. It happens anyway.

The negotiations (actually, the lack of negotiations, since hotel owners and unions don't even seem to be talking directly and the government has so far been serenely aloof) have entered a dangerous phase. No one cares a hoot anymore. Hotel owners are taking a deep breath and saying, OK, so if we have to close down we might as well close for the whole winter season. Unions have used inflammatory rhetoric, saying they'll turn their places of work into "cemeteries". In the absence of talks, such attitudes harden positions on both sides and make compromise impossible.

The Tourism Ministry, which should have by now been pressing panic buttons to get the warring parties to the table, couldn't be bothered. Tourism is a fickle industry, it is not like exporting pashmina. The slightest hint of trouble, and your visitors will go to Laos instead. The old attitude "We have Mt Everest, tourists will come" is not going to work anymore. A hotel lockout from 11 December will mean you can kiss tourism and the economy goodbye for the year 2001 and beyond. That is why we may as well declare it a "Don't Visit Nepal Year", and put a big padlock on the country.

VISIT NEPAL NOW!

It's important to play devil's advocate on occasion. Especially when all you've been doing is making dire prognostications. So here goes: A hotel strike is terrible for the economy, but a fine time to be in the city. You can walk all over Thamel unafraid of being brained by large backpacks falling out of cycle rickshaws. You and your grandmother can take your time huffing and puffing up the stairs to Swoyambhunath and not be depressed by the sight of absurdly fit 18 year-olds whizzing by. You can buy that fleece jacket for Rs 12 or whatever the super-low discounted price might be. Maybe you could let yourself be persuaded to buy matching mittens for a similarly modest price tag. You can indulge in Kathmandu's famous video nights and watch last week's US release—for once not in an overcrowded, claustrophobic room redolent with the reek of unwashed travellers and sweaty socks. And if you want to go out of the city, well, you and a friend could do some independent tea-house trekking kitted out in your new warm gear. So that's the silver lining on this whole mess. Hell, anything that can make me look on the bright side of things can't be all bad.

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STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL

Difficult to be friends? Let's agree not to be enemies.



Cynical as we may be about South Asian talk fests, they need to keep happening. It is the last remaining chance for Indians, Pakistanis and the rest of us to meet. Without these junkets, we would be even more remote.

NEWDELHI - The India International Centre (IIC), the favourite haunt of seventy-something retired Indian technocrats, is a hive of activity notwithstanding its new five-star rival around the corner, the Indian Habitat Centre. The IIC's excellent library and eateries are where you will still run into India's movers and shakers. They are getting on, so they are shaking more than moving.

One such is the (former) Maharaja of Kashmir, Dr Karan Singh, who introduces himself to all Nepalis as the "jwai raja" of Nepal. Karan Babusahab was inaugurating a seminar on "Tradition, Culture and Modernity in the South Asian Context". His suggestion that we go beyond politics and help fashion institutions to cooperate in areas of environment, interfaith activities, education, media and information technology is worthy of attention at a time of extreme distrust and disinformation. About Pakistan, the ex-royal of Kashmir had this to say: "OK, it's difficult to be friends with so much bitterness all around. Doesn't matter. To begin with, let's agree not to be enemies at least."

Noble thoughts, and much as we'd all want to believe it, not likely to happen anytime soon. The only hope was for Track Two and the problem with parallel citizens' groups is that they are just too beholden to government. They are either still in the hope of getting state patronage and do not want to sabotage their chances, or if they already have it don't want to risk losing it. Our intellectuals prefer manufacturing apologies for the failure of the government, donors, or NGOs. The intellectual class in South Asia is an extension of the establishment, and nowhere is it truer than in India. Just look at the fear psychosis they have spread in the corridors of power in New Delhi regarding Nepal. One sample question this week from an Indian researcher that was fairly representative of the paramia: "Are there ISI agents even at

Pashupatinath Temple?"

Looking around the IIC seminar and at other parallel-SARC events going on all over the subcontinent at any given time, I can't help wondering: How is it that Indian diplomats become the epitome of reason and conciliation only after they shed their posts? Like Hindu gods, their wrathful side is replaced by a benign demeanour, post-retirement.

... Krishna Prasad Bhattarai is in India these days, and surprisingly, there are no journalists accompanying him unless one can call Dr Narayan Khadka a scribe for writing the occasional column in *Kartipur*. Bhattarai is here primarily to accept the honorary doctorate to be conferred on him by the Banaras Hindu University. But he will also do what all very, very important Nepali visitors to India invariably do these days: get a *darshan* at Tinupati and pay respects to Sai Baba. Who knows, Kishunji may even be the proud receiver of a clock materialised out of thin air. (Giri jibabu got a gold watch from the Baba.)

The reception that our man in Delhi hosted in honour of Kishunji began an hour or so behind schedule thanks to the Royal Nepal Always Cancelled Flight. The guests at the cocktail reception were the usual suspects: Chandrashekhar, Ram Krishna Hegde and few other hirsute has-beens of Indian socialism. Some of these politicians have ceased to matter so much that even rubbing shoulders with our

own Kishunji makes their day. And Kishunji obliged willingly by chatting them up amidst gales of laughter. Prominent Nepalis spotted amidst the old world charm of the Barakhamba Road residence of Ambassador Bhekh Bahadur Thapa included Chandani Joshi, Madan Upadhyay and Niranjana Koirala.

Then there was Meera Kumar, Joint Secretary "in charge of Nepal" at the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. A stunner in Draka print sari and rhododendron-red *cholo*, Kumar has the self-assured air of someone who knows she is in control. I sought out N N Jha, the former diplomat who is convenor of the foreign policy cell of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. A career diplomat seasoned by the Cold War years, Jha pretended to know nothing about the stalled SARC process. More forthcoming was Shama Jain, "in charge of SARC" and colleague of Ms Kumar at the MEA. "What's the problem?" Shama asked demurely. "Doctors are meeting, writers are talking, and intellectuals are getting together. The Summit will take place in due course of time when the environment is right." Shorn of diplomatese, what she was saying is: no Summit now. Why? 'Cos we say so. Kumar and Jain are the policy-framers of India's external relations, and they are two tough cookies. Keep an eye on them, Bhekh.

Meanwhile, across the room, Nepal's *jwai sahib* is desperately trying to put a fun spin to it all. "SARC doesn't excite us any more," sighed the man whose one-time *riyasat* is the main cause behind Indo-Pak confrontation. "But we do need something like it. And since it's already there, why not revitalise it?"

Cynical as we may be about these South Asian talk fests, they need to keep happening, for no other reason than that it is one of the last remaining places where an Indian and Pakistani can meet and talk at a people-like-us level.

Without junkets like these, South Asia would drift even further apart. ♦





MADE IN CHINA

You get a free T Rex with every pack of chicken mcnugget bought on a London street, the plastic dinosaurs are made in China. Plug-in adapters for Taiwanese laptops bought in Singapore are made in China. Plastic water guns on the shelf of a New York Toys R Us: Made in China.

When the whole world is awash with Chinese exports, it is no wonder that mainland commodities should sweep across the Himalaya into the world's second-largest market for manufactured goods: India. The looming trade war between China and India is beginning to resemble a fight to the finish between a ferocious T Rex and a vegetarian Brontosaurus. And Nepal is caught in the middle.

These are the days of the WTO, borders for trade are disappearing, traditional protectionist tendencies are eroding, it's a worldwide free market. Some well-known Indian companies are beginning to import the cheaper Chinese consumer goods, stick their own brand names and sell them in the domestic market significantly improving their margins. In the next few years, Chinese products are likely to make significant inroads into the Indian market. Even well-known brands like LG and Samsung, which have just started penetrating the Great Indian Middle Class, are likely to be displaced by the cheaper newcomers. These "white goods"—particularly television sets, music systems and refrigerators from China—are both qualitatively competitive and as cost effective as the items imported into or assembled in India.

In the past month, there has been a flash flood of coverage in the Indian media about the threat posed by Chinese goods and how they have penetrated the domestic Indian market: either illegally

dumped by the Chinese, who it is alleged subsidise manufacturing; imported by Indian companies; or smuggled in through Nepal. Although the press reports started with the smuggling through Nepal, the long and difficult supply route across the Tibetan plateau and the Himalaya limits the volume of this traffic. The real worry stems from speculation about why Chinese goods are so cheap in the first place, not just in India but also in Europe and the Americas. Trade and industry circles have even imputed political and ideological engineering of prices by China.

It is clear three economic and policy variables on the part of China have led to the present situation:

- Over the last ten years the Chinese did some intensive, behind-the-scenes homework to enter the WTO where cost-effectiveness is the main mantra. This preparation was mainly based on running small- and medium-sized industries as efficiently as possible.
- A large number of Special Economic Zones were set up primarily catering to mass exports. For this, the Chinese government provided an array of services, including a very liberal line of credit, dynamic infrastructure and export facilitation measures.
- Chinese labour laws were made both flexible and friendly.

In other words, unlike in India, Pakistan and Nepal, the Chinese injected reforms at all levels of activity and management. The

result was dramatic: tremendous gains in economies of scale reflected in the versatility of Chinese goods in price, quality and variety. Batteries, calculators and other electronic items made in China are now even sold by weight—such is the astonishing economies of scale and cost-effectiveness of Chinese manufacturing.

In some measure, India's reaction to the influx of Chinese goods by using harsh counter-measures and non-tariff barriers, including anti-dumping laws, only indicates the hollowness of economic reforms in India and the stubborn resistance of Indian business to shed its well-entrenched and protected inefficiencies. But let us remember that it is not only the

press reports blame smuggling through Nepal, Bangladesh and the Indian northeast. Government sources for their part blame Indian importers who they say bring in the stuff illegally. The economic liberalisation of the early 1990s was focussed on opening up trade, and import duties were brought down from 150 percent to the present 35 percent. Other barriers in the import of goods were removed and under the direction and supervision of the WTO these import duties and barriers will be further reduced within the next five years. So why the fuss?

The reason is that cheap Chinese goods have dealt a severe blow to small- and medium-scale manufacturers, the Indian "cottage industry". Chinese goods have always been popular in India: most consumers know they are cheap and the quality is not bad. But once the Chinese goods came in, lock-makers of Aligarh went out of business, sales of Indian bicycles plummeted, and HMT watches have all but disappeared. This is the reason for the backlash. And given the state of relations with China, questions of economic security are accompanied

isn't anyone worried about those imports? Is it because Chinese goods are cheap, or is it because of Indian foreign policy, or is it a security concern? Everyone in India seems to have their own interpretation.

Nepal has traditionally been seen in India as the chief conduit for Chinese smuggled goods into India. This is because of Nepal's historic relations with China, the open border between Nepal and India, the importance of Nepal in India's security context and the special trade policies between the two. Nepali goods can be imported into India without import taxes. This one-way special treatment has led to tremendous growth in the exports of goods from Nepal to India. In 1995/96 India imported goods worth Rs 3.68 billion from Nepal. By 1998/99 it had swelled to Rs 12.53 billion. Now come allegations that Nepal is misusing this facility and exporting to India goods manufactured in other countries but to which "Made In Nepal" labels are attached.

If these goods are being exported to India illegally then the question arises as to who is doing it? Who is misusing this treaty: businessmen, federations or the government? The burden of labelling goods correctly has been given to the national federation, and there may be a lack of

understanding about the definition of manufacturing, or in the policies. But can national issues be handled in such a carefree and careless manner? In the hope that ordinary people will get some benefit, Nepal harkened for 40 years for the 1996 trade treaty. Now, the actions of a few Nepali or Indian businessmen is jeopardising economic relations between the two countries.

In plain economics, where there is demand, supply flows. There is a great demand for Chinese goods in India, so they flow into India—mainly because the same goods are not produced in India as cheaply. For how long can India halt the entry of cheap Chinese goods? Nepal might seal its borders, but Chinese products could continue to come through Burma, or through Bhutan or through Chittagong. How can free import policies, and import policies with barriers work in tandem? Geography will not let it work, public demand will not let it work and inefficiencies of cottage industries will not let it work. Indian policy-makers will have to understand this. Relations between India and Nepal hinge on this understanding. ♦

(Mahendra P. Lama is Associate Professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)



protected and patronised Indian industry that is spending sleepless nights: all major European countries are bearing the brunt of the same Chinese export invasion fever along with Southeast Asia and the United States. It will be interesting to see how this global drama unfolds, as China and India are required to abide by WTO norms in the coming years.

In India, cheap, attractive and easily available Chinese goods are raising hackles in the corridors of the Indian finance ministry. Indian

by questions of internal security. If consumer goods are being smuggled, can arms and ammunition be far behind? Has foreign surveillance and spying also increased? Is smuggling related to the violence and terrorism in the northeast and Kashmir? This is the reason for the deluge of alarmist coverage on television and in the print media.

In Delhi markets like Karol Bagh, Chinese goods are displayed alongside goods manufactured in Japan, America and Britain. Why



Shopping for Chinese goods, Bishal bazaar, Kathmandu.

NIN BARRACHARYA

LETTERS

TIP OR SERVICE CHARGE?

No one is forced to pay a tip when going to a hotel or a restaurant. Depending on the friendly service you receive or the food you've enjoyed you happily tip the waiter or the bellboy or the room maid. Many guests are often generous with their tips. However, service charges normally added to hotel or restaurant bills are mandatory, and have nothing to do with what a guest gives out to individuals. If the service charge is a part of the Hotel Owner's calculation, then add it to the general cost and don't mislead the customers by giving it a wrong name. If not, transfer the money on to where it belongs.

What makes people like Artha Beed ("Service Charged" #18) think that service charge should be limited only to areas linked to food and beverage? Every employee directly or indirectly serves a guest, be they in housekeeping, engineering, front

office, laundry or the administrative department. Each employee contributes his or her share in the smooth running of the business, and so does not deserve to be excluded from their share of bonuses and distribution of service charge.

Having myself worked in 5-star hotels both in Kathmandu and in West Asia as an Executive Secretary, I had no contact with hotel guests, but while working in West Asia, every month I too received my share of service charge with my salary. Managers and Department Heads were exempted, and everybody right down to the cleaners and dishwashers received the same amount of service charge. We didn't receive a fixed amount, but depending on the occupancy of the hotel, the amount we received fluctuated.

Hotel employees in Kathmandu going on strike demanding their share of service

charge have all my sympathy and I can only wish them success. You have a right to your share of the service charge, but make sure that when it does eventually come into force it is not just for those in the food and beverage department.

Deb Shova Kansakar Hilker Juenkerath, Germany

As it already exists in other countries, why can't our hotel workers also not be allowed a service charge? Let's give them small financial support to survive in this expensive world. Tourists generally give them not less than 10 percent as a tip, so why not make it legal and standard.

(Name withheld on request) via Internet

UJELI

Thank you for publishing the beautiful and true story of "Ujeli" (#19). Jan Salter deserves many

many thanks from all of us. This is not the only story with a happy ending. We have provided our service to more than 500 mentally ill patients in the last six years. Over 65 patients picked up from the streets have been reunited with their families.

We also have stories with not-so-happy endings. Mentally ill patients, even after getting treatment, relapse very often due to irregular medication and inappropriate cooperation from family and community. Patients often end up back on the streets. Who is responsible for this? Does this mean we always have to seek out people like Jan all the time or do we change our attitude and pay a little more attention to improve the situation of the mentally ill by social, financial and moral support? A small part of the money spent in Nepal for fashion shows, building temples and shrines,

sporting events could at least help buy medicines and food and allow the mentally ill to live more decent lives. But who is ready to make that beginning?

Prabhat K Pradhan Maryknoll Nepal/Aasha Deep

AMBASSADOR GAUTAM

News of the early recall of Damodar Gautam as Nepal's ambassador to the United States and Canada has come as a shock to the Nepali diaspora in North America. Mr Gautam was an excellent ambassador by all accounts. He maintained a working relationship with all the Nepali organisations based in the US and Canada.

We have been fortunate to have a man with such a magnanimity and affable personality and who was willing to work hard for Nepal. It is rather very disappointing that he has been recalled prematurely just as he was in the process of putting together a wider network of contacts for the

next two years. Mr Gautam's recall is a huge disservice to the cause of Nepal and Nepalis in North America. The government should reconsider its decision and let him finish his four-year term

Gaury S Adhikary America Nepal Medical Foundation, Ann Arbor, Michigan

CORRECTION

The picture accompanying the item "Tour de France" (#19) incorrectly identified Ranodeep Singh as Jang Bahadur. The real Jang Bahadur appears here.



Nepal's 'Russian mafia'



There are more than 5,000 Nepalis who studied in the ex-Soviet Union. Even though the scholarships have stopped, Russia-returns still contribute greatly to Nepal's development.

SALIL SUBEDI & ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

a generation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it may sound far-fetched to say that Nepal owes much of its development to the land of Lenin. But it is true. And we don't mean the fans of Vladimir Illich in our leftist political firmament; we mean the forgotten pioneering role played by hundreds of Soviet-trained technocrats, doctors and artists holding key positions in Nepali society today.

The biggest service they provided is that, unlike many Nepalis who went to Western Europe and the US to study, most of them came back. The 5,000 or so "Russia returns" have fond memories of their college days in Moscow and Kiev, of summers in the Black Sea coast and the dark and dreary Russian winters when the condensation on the dam

windows would freeze over. Decades later, with the Soviet Union shattered into 14 pieces, and communism itself in a coma, they still keep in touch with each other, and with things "back in the USSR".

It was during the deep freeze of the Cold War in the late 1950s that King Mahendra saw Nepal's future in developing the human resource. And what better, and cheaper, way to give young Nepalis a higher education than to get a ready and willing Soviet Union to pay for their education in engineering, medicine and other fields. Of course, Soviet rulers at the time had their own reasons for handing out scholarships to thousands from Africa, Latin America, the Arab world and Asian countries like Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and in the early years even from China (former Chinese prime minister Li Peng was Soviet-

educated). They were planting the seeds of Soviet-style communism in the future leaders of the Third World. But most of those who returned from the Soviet Union also had an opportunity to tour Western Europe during vacations and, having seen the disparities between the two sides of the Iron Curtain, were vaccinated against Soviet-ism.

Bi Jaya Man Sherchan recalls the words of an American Jesuit priest from his high school in Kathmandu who failed to convince him not to go to the USSR: "From now on I'm going to pray for you every day." Fears about living, studying and working in a country "at an advanced stage of socialism" were exaggerated: the students got a good education and they did not return with minds clouded by communism.

Thus, with the blessings of the Panchayat government, those who

excelled in their college exams headed for the USSR. In those days, merit was the main criteria. "Source force" played its part, but not as much as it does these days. Some notable Russia returns in Nepal today are: Dr Hariman Shrestha, whose thesis on



hydroelectricity first expanded on the vast energy potential of Nepal's rivers, Dr Avanihushan Upachaya, eminent cardiologist, Dr Bishwabandhu Sharma, one of the few psychiatrists in Nepal, artists like Ram Prasad Bhaukaji, the pioneer of Saha tempos, Bi Jaya Man Sherchan, and the only Nepali with a doctorate in criminology, Dr Lokendra Sharma.

A Nepali Students' Union was formed during the 60s. Political economist Dipak Gyawali, who became president in the mid-70s, says: "Politics had't entered the union then. We used to get together and just have fun." Their favourite pastime was regular stuff-getting together and cooking *dal, bhaj, tarkari* and washing it all down with swigs of pure Moskovskaya vodka.

Russia returns founded their own organisation called Mitra Kunj in 1967, which helps returnees keep track of friends and colleagues home and abroad. The association hosted the First Asia Meet of Graduates from the former Soviet Union in March this year with a well-attended gathering of ex-students from across the region. "We have started networking through the Internet. The prime objective is to generate an exchange of ideas, skills and experience we gathered in Russia," says Sherchan.

For TP Gauchan, a flight engineer, the time he spent in the USSR were the best days of his life. "Amarvelous six years. All of us kept in touch with each other, we enjoyed going to the Black Sea for a vacation-the sea gave us a

The monument to Soviet space conquerors in Moscow (left), a landmark for Nepali students studying there in the 1970-80s. TP Gauchan at his office and singing with his Russian friends (below at extreme right). Bi Jaya Man Sherchan (centre, right) poses with other Nepali students in Moscow in the early 1970s, cross-country skiing in winter and picking hay in a collective farm in the summers.



HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK

Stuck in the throat



It may be somewhat unkind, not to mention late, to reflect upon something that moved me powerfully at the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival, now sadly over. But here goes. The film was *Genghis Blues*, made by two young Americans, Adrian and Roko Belic. And I can't get it out of my mind.

Genghis Blues purports to be a documentary but it is actually an intense and entertaining exploration of the human spirit. Any passing resemblance to a serious work of journalism is in the eye of the beholder, certainly not this one. It was a delight to watch, and I've never before seen a documentary that I could describe that way. It tells the tale of Paul Pena, a blind, blues musician from Cape Verde via Boston, and his journey to the heart of Asia. Pena develops an unlikely passion for the deeply eerie throatsinging from the obscure central Asian land of Tuva—the place that spawned Genghis Khan's most respected general and little else in the intervening years. Except for that music. It defies the power of words to describe Tuvan throatsinging save to say that there is no place for a space or a hyphen between those two syllables.

Tuvan throatsingers hold and sustain impossible notes, below their voice boxes. They are able to produce sounds an octave lower or higher than their own voices. It's an impossible thing to imagine without actually hearing the keening, gut-wrenching sounds that these people can produce.

Paul Pena, stuck in a perpetual bluesman's rut and plunged into deep depression by the death of his wife, stumbles onto throatsinging while whirling a shortwave dial one dark night in 1980s San Francisco. He takes to it like a junkie to a new drug, and soon teaches himself Kargyzaa, the lowest, most rumbling sounds of the four types of



"...I still haven't decided whether I was watching a story of immense human dignity and the common ground that unites diverse cultures, or a tale of Westerners dancing among the exotic of the mystic east, the New Orientalists."

throatsinging. As a man with the blues, he already knew how to hit the low notes. Kargyzaa plunges him into musical depths unplumbed by anyone outside of the vast steppes of Tuva.

The film follows Pena on a madcap trip to the Tuvan capital Kyzyl, a place I would challenge even a BBC World Service radio newsreader to pronounce properly without reaching for an encyclopaedia. He meets throatsingers galore, plays the blues and sings Kargyzaa. He drinks gallons of fermented mares' milk, and seldom seems to be without a litre bottle of Russian beer in his hand. He bathes in a holy river, and wins a throatsinging contest in the Kargyzaa category. A series of misfortunes are dealt with by Pena conducting a shamanic ceremony to cleanse evil spirits from a Tuvan drum.

More mares' milk goes down his throat. And he goes home reluctantly with tears and throatsingers' grief everywhere in evidence. This is one of those films that end so abruptly that the audience can't believe it, doesn't want it to be true, and then sits for all of the credits, hoping that the projectionist has perhaps put on the wrong reel. Unfortunately, *Genghis Blues* is a finite experience. Let me tell you though, it stays with you for days, possibly much longer.

I rushed home and found a website, genghisblues.com, of course. And I learnt that Paul Pena is gravely ill from pancreaticitis and may not recover. He's living in virtual poverty back in San Francisco. Devastation is too mild a word for the way I feel. And I still haven't decided whether I was watching a story of immense human dignity and the common ground that unites diverse cultures, or a tale of Westerners dancing among the exotic of the mystic east, the New Orientalists. Do whatever you can to see this film, and then drop me a line and help me make up my mind. Or else I'll practise my throatsinging in your garden. ♦

totally new vision of nature since we grew up without seeing one." For Kalyani Shah, a lawyer and director at *Himalaya Times*, studying in the Soviet Union gave her confidence as a woman and a professional. "I was treated as an equal, and the Nepali Students' Union helped me a lot in identifying and raising a voice for different causes."

In the early days there were as many Nepalis earning their Masters in the Soviet Union as there were in India. At any given time more than 500 Nepalis would be scattered across some 20 different cities of the USSR with not more than 15 per city, and most of them ranking among the best in the class. Since they were the cream of their country, Nepalis routinely excelled in their studies, topping their classes and giving students from the Himalaya a good reputation throughout Russia, and the only competition they faced

were from the East Germans. "Russian professors were so impressed with us that as soon as we finished our first year of language studies they would come searching for us," recalls economist Dipak Gyawali. "Nepalis were very popular among Russian teachers and students alike."

The Soviet government provided each student with 90 rubles a month, which in those days was a lot of money and much more than enough to live decently. But even if they saved the money, there was little to buy in the shops. Most Nepalis began making annual trips to Nepal to bring electronic goods and consumer items and selling it to the Russians, and making enough money for their roundtrip ticket home. Others travelled to Finland and Germany on organised shopping expeditions, bringing back everything from chewing gum to jeans, and sold them for astounding profits. It was

in a communist country that Nepalis learnt the ways of a true capitalist free market.

After years of waking up to the reality of a Russian winter, sweating for a graduate degree, the respect these engineers, architects, doctors, geologists and artists got on their return home was immense. If there is one ideology that most Russia-returns agree they didn't come back with, it was communism. But they did return with something more potent: a sense of commitment and a resolve to do something for Nepal.

Unfortunately, most Nepalis with Russian degrees soon found themselves in the civil service, doing mundane bureaucratic jobs. It was bad for morale, but for many the idealism and Soviet education proved its worth. Without hesitation, doctors willingly worked with the rural poor, civil engineers went to remote areas to work on highway construction, and geologists criss-crossed the country on prospecting expeditions, mapping every inch of Nepal. "It cannot be the final truth that all those who returned from Russia played a big role in the nation's development, but it cannot be denied either," says Gauchan. Adds Gyawali: "I could go to any of the 75 districts in Nepal and probably find at least a doctor or an engineer who studied in the USSR."

Another problem the graduates faced on return was language. If they were doctors, all the terminology they knew was in Russian. Says Pasm Singh: "We underestimated how much of a handicap the lack of English would be for our professional career after coming back to Nepal." Gauchan remembers how he didn't even know the English word for screwdriver. A disappointment for the recently returned medical graduates is the reluctance of the Nepal Medical Council to recognise their degrees.

With the end of the Brezhnev era, the first products of Nepal's own New Education Plan started getting scholarships. That is when the decline began. Meritocracy began giving way to under-qualified students getting scholarships because of their affiliation to political parties. It was particularly in the field of medicine that Russian graduates lost credibility. After 1985 the trend of students paying their

own way began to increase, and the general standard of graduates began a decline. Everyone blamed falling standards in the Soviet Union, but few looked at the decline in quality of the students going there. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the restoration of democracy to Nepal, the number of students going to Russia declined drastically. Corruption on both sides took its toll: you could study in Russia as long as you could pay tuition fees in dollars.

The 1,000 or so Nepali students studying in Russia today don't have the sense of security as their predecessors. Education is no longer free, costing anything up to \$3,000 a year in tuition fees and more for dorm facilities and food. Then there is the mafia and crime, which used to be unheard of in the old days. The technical faculty is still as popular among the Nepali students, and every year about 200 Nepali students still go to Russia and the other former Soviet states to study, but about 30 percent of them never come back. That is perhaps the most significant difference. ♦

NOTABLE RUSSIA-RETURNS

- Amod Dixit, geologist
- Aruna Upreti, physician/social activist
- Awanihushan Upadhaya, cardiologist
- Badan Lal Nyachyun, engineering consultant
- Bijaya Man Sherchan, mechanical engineer
- Biswabandhu Sharma, psychiatrist
- Deepak Rayamajhi, filmmaker
- Dirghasingh Bom, chest specialist,
- Govinda Raj Bhatta, Secretary, Ministry of Population and Environment
- Govinda Sharma, Director, Nepal Electricity Authority
- Hariman Shrestha, hydropower engineer
- Hari Bahadur Basnet, former minister, RPP
- Harshaman Shrestha, ex-Director, Nepal Electric Authority
- Javed Shah, cinematographer
- Lokendra Sharma, criminologist
- Meena Acharya, economist
- Nilambar Acharya, ex-ambassador to Sri Lanka
- Prakash Adhikari, Professor of Geology
- Prem Shrestha, police doctor who helped set up the Police Hospital
- Rishi Kalley, urologist
- Ramprasad Bhaukaji, artist

Good and bad news

Nepal has made progress in the battle against iodine and vitamin deficiencies. According to the Nepal Micronutrient Survey (NMSS) 1998 involving 15,000 households, iodine deficiency disorder, that retards cognitive development in children, is close to being eliminated. Similarly, Vitamin A deficiency, which decreases a child's ability to battle illnesses, has almost disappeared from pre-school children.

But the NMSS also highlights a new problem: 68 percent of women (75 percent of pregnant women) and 78 percent of preschool children have severe anaemia. Anaemia in pregnant women causes birth complications that lead to the delivery of low birth-weight children. The highest prevalence of anaemia—88 percent—was in children between 6-23 months, a critical period of growth and development. It means that Nepali children are born with low iron stores, and do not receive enough iron in complementary foods.

AIDS update

Half of all new HIV/AIDS infections have been reported among young people between 10-24 years, most of them women, warns UNAIDS. In Nepal, the infection is no longer a problem confined to a handful of drug addicts and prostitutes, and as numbers show, it could be creeping into populations once thought to be "safe". UNAIDS says that the larger population is "vulnerable" to a rapid spread of the epidemic.

HIV/AIDS prevalence among Nepali drug addicts and sex workers is also growing fast. According to UNAIDS, prevalence among sex workers in Kathmandu is up from 2.7 percent in 1996 to 17.3 percent in 1999, and from 1 percent in 1993 to roughly 50 percent in 1999 among injecting drug users. The World Health Organisation and UNAIDS estimates that 34,000 Nepalis have HIV/AIDS, and that 140 people have died of HIV/AIDS so far.

Refugee impasse

Nepal and Bhutan are planning to sit down at another attempt at resolving the 10-year-old refugee impasse. The meeting to be held later this month will essentially seek ways to agree on the main sticking point—refugee "verification". Nepal has agreed to the formula suggested by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which suggests taking dependants up to 25 years as members of one family unit for purposes of verification. Bhutan has rebuffed the UNHCR proposal.

Top US diplomats passing by Kathmandu on their way to Bhutan last week said they would be making a new proposal to resolve the verification stalemate. Karl Inderfurth, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, and Julia Taft, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, flew to Bhutan on 4 December. Nepali government officials say the US proposal is not very different from the UN formula. Bhutan's ambassador to Nepal Dago Tsering, who was in Kathmandu for another meeting, did not comment on the US proposal on the excuse that he had not read the document.

WFP aid to refugees

The World Food Programme (WFP) will provide \$3.8 million to be spent on the upkeep of Bhutanese refugees from January through June 2001. The money will be used to provide rice, pulses, fortified oils, sugar and iodised salts to all registered refugees living in seven camps in Jhapa and Morang districts. With the new aid package the total amount spent by the WFP on Bhutanese refugees goes up to \$62.5 million.



js tyres

Goodwill ambassadors



HEMLATA RAI

If you thought only Nepali soldiers and policemen risked their lives maintaining peace across the world, think again. Apart from the blue berets and troops serving in armies elsewhere, Nepal also has an excellent record of volunteerism—over a hundred mid-career Nepali professionals are currently serving the war fronts as United Nations Volunteers (UNV).

UNV is the volunteer arm of the UN system, extending hands-on assistance for peace and development in nearly 150 countries. Created by the UN in 1970 and administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNV works through UNDP country offices to promote volunteerism around the world.



Kristiina Mikkola

with extensive experience in over 100 professional fields, serve with the UNV each year.

It may sound surprising but little Nepal was the fifth largest source of UNVs last year, with 113 Nepalis posted at different locations around the world. UNVs from the Philippines, Spain, Belgium and Japan outnumbered Nepalis last year, but this year the UNV Office in Kathmandu hopes that Nepal's

position as a source of volunteers may rise to the third position. In the first six months of this year alone, 58 Nepalis have already been posted overseas. Forty of them are in tough Kosovo, half of them working as civil administrators and the rest as registration supervisors.

"The performance of Nepali UNVs even under difficult and risky situations is superb. They have earned an international reputation for their work. Demands for Nepali volunteers have gone up," says Simon Forrester, UNV Programme Officer in Kathmandu. Nepalis are working specifically in three areas as UNVs—humanitarian relief, technical assistance and short-term observatory jobs. And it is long-term technical assistance that hosts the largest number of Nepali volunteers.

Returning UN volunteers in Kathmandu offer various explanations for the good performance of Nepalis overseas. However, they all agree on one good reason—a "positive attitude and sincerity" towards their work. (If you are wondering why not here, wait, they explain that as well.) The other reasons cited are their ability to quickly adapt to an alien culture, dedication to duty and the encouragement and appreciation they receive for their work. "Here your contribution is not appreciated. If you are posted outside the valley, you are forgotten, and opportunities for professional growth are scarce if you consent to work in remote areas," said Bimala Maskey,

acting president of the Returned United Nations Volunteers Association of Nepal (RUNVAN).

Maskey worked in Botswana 1995-97 as principal teacher for the in-service education wing of the Botswana's Ministry of Health. After retiring as joint secretary from the Ministry of Health in Nepal, Maskey was rather unhappy with her job at a government-run vocational training centre, CIEVT, when the UNV offer came along. "The job as a UNV was an exciting substitute to my work at CIEVT. Working as a UNV brings you encouragement and recognition," she says. If that is the way Nepali volunteers feel about working abroad, UN volunteer in Nepal Kristiina Mikkola from Finland echoes a similar sentiment:

"Professionally my duties here [in Nepal] are very exciting and rewarding."



Rajesh Aryal

Many mid-career technical professionals use the programme as a platform to explore their abilities in a different social and working environment in a foreign country. "I have mixed feelings working in Kosovo. I miss my country and family dearly but on the other hand it gives me an inner satisfaction that I am working for a mission to make this place better for its citizens," says Rajesh Aryal, now serving in Pristina. For some, a short-term UNV position offers an exciting break from monotonous bureaucratic or administrative jobs within the government machinery. Others accept it as an opportunity for international exposure that can turn a stepping-stone for further personal and professional progress. And yet for others, the most attractive part of working as a UNV is the money.

Former bureaucrat Bishnu Lal Maharjan earned about Rs 5,000 as salary, but as a UNV in Lesotho as Assistant Expert at the

Nepal is the third largest contributor to the UN volunteer programme.



Where in the world are Nepali UN volunteers posted?

Ministry of Commerce and Industries between 1980-82 and as Trade Promotion Specialist later in 1985-87, he was paid \$800 (Rs 50,000 approximately). "With high salaries and low cost of living, a position as a UNV offers an opportunity for savings. When you are economically secure your mind is freed for creativity and you can devote yourself to your work more sincerely," Maharjan said, citing economics as one of the reasons

why Nepali UNVs do well in countries like Lesotho than back home. "Most of the time Nepali professionals are busy moonlighting to support their families. How can you expect sincerity and creativity from them when their minds are so preoccupied with earning for their families," he adds.

The fact that Nepali professionals perform better overseas sure speaks volume about the working environment

back home. The good news is that Nepalis are earning an international reputation for their efficiency and professional excellence. Such performance, and not only by Nepali volunteers, has not gone unnoticed. The UNV programme has caused the UN to work for greater South-South development experts from industrialised nations on underdeveloped ones. ♦



Year of the volunteer

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan opened the International Year of Volunteers 2001 this week by urging governments and institutions worldwide to recognise and celebrate the vital contributions of volunteers. "Societies need to recognise and promote volunteerism as a valuable activity. They must facilitate the work of volunteers, and encourage volunteer action at home and abroad," said Annan. "By calling upon volunteers and building partnerships with civil society, governments can help increase the efficiency of public services, and ensure that they reach more people. In these few words, the General Secretary had captured the essence of the four objectives of the IYV: recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteerism.

In 1997, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers. The government of Nepal was signatory to the resolution. The Bonn-based United Nations Volunteers (UNV), which has close to 5,000 UN volunteers serving in the field annually, was designated as the year's focal point.

"I believe that the contribution of volunteerism in creating and enhancing economic and social capital is one of the best-kept secrets of the modern world," said UNV Executive Coordinator Sharon Capeling-Alakija. "Volunteerism remains largely undervalued and overlooked as a positive force for social development. IYV 2001 can turn that around." Key objectives of the year will be to recognise the work of millions of volunteers from all walks of life and build global networks among them.

In Nepal, the National Steering Committee for IYV has scheduled the launch of IYV to be celebrated by the opening of a three-day Exhibition on Voluntarism at Bhrikuti Mandap Exhibition Hall, 15-17 December. It is expected to draw over 50 national and international organisations that operate in the voluntary sector. ♦



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VILLAGE VOICE

by RANJIT DEVRAJ

Missing the wood



KUNDA DIXIT

A new law may undo the success of community forestry in Nepal.

Cutting down a luxuriant stand of 200 trees was a sad occasion for the inhabitants of this verdant mountain hamlet 35 km east of Kathmandu. But the electricity lines it paid for more than recompensed them.

Every night, Khushadevi now glitters like a jewel on the mountain slopes of Kavre district. People in neighbouring hamlets still use dim, smoky kerosene lamps to light up their houses. "My two school-going boys now study longer and we have even got a television set," says Balkumari Shrestha as she takes off the load of livestock fodder and kitchen firewood she has brought home from a nearby forest.

It is barely two months since electricity came to Khushadevi. Locals often forget that they have to switch off the light and not blow at the bulbs as they used to do with the kerosene lamps. "It is all very new but now we cannot think of life without electricity," says Balkumari, who enjoys watching television every evening. Her schoolteacher husband, Mohan Kumar Shrestha, thinks it was a wise decision by the villagers to allow the trees to be cut. "We can

always grow the trees back but we need electricity right now," says Shrestha.

The decision was taken by the forest user group, which, under a seven-year-old law, has the power to use and manage the local forest. Similar stories abound elsewhere in the mountain hamlets of Nepal. The residents of Thulakan village, in the adjoining Lalitpur district, have installed a drinking water system and carried out urgent repairs to the local school building. The money for this came from the sale of Christmas trees every season to luxury hotels in Kathmandu. The hamlet of Karkitar, also in Lalitpur, earned \$2,044 by selling timber and used the money to build farm irrigation canals and a drinking water system. In the village of Baghmari in Dary district, locals are building a secondary school with money gained from selling forest produce.

These success stories have been made possible by the 1993 law, which has given control of 621,942 hectares of degraded forest land to villagers for re-vegetation. As an incentive, they have been allowed to sell timber or other forest produce

from these lands. According to top government forest official KB Shrestha, a leading expert on community-managed forests, the decision to hand over degraded forest areas to local communities was taken keeping in mind both the needs of locals and the health of Nepal's green cover. "One can already see the difference between community forests and government-run ones," he says.

However, the villagers may no longer be able to use degraded land because the government is now trying to undo the 1993 law. "We

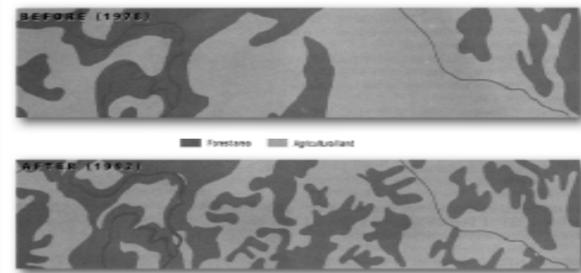
heard of the new law banning further tree felling and other activities over the radio, but we are yet to see a formal notice. We are not going to hand back the hard earned rights of the people," says Bhim Nepane, who heads the Khushadevi village council. A member of the main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), Nepane believes that corrupt government bureaucrats have made the change. "Now that we have improved the forests they want a share in the timber profits," he says.

Experts at the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) too have criticised the reported government move. Giving a stake to the locals in their forests is the best way to ensure their protection and nourishment, they say. According to ICIMOD community forestry expert, Anupam Bhatia, Anupam Bhatia, it is important to clarify rights and issues because vague laws can lead to a spurt in tree-felling with people moving in to fell trees and sell them while they still can. "But if groups of people are assured a long-term stake in healthy forests they are hardly likely to cut them down," he points out.

Responding to the growing criticism, the government insists that the ban on tree felling applies only to forests in the southern plains of Nepal. It is meant to deter the growing smuggling of commercially valuable timber from forests in this area, say senior government forest officials. ♦ (IPS)

Then and now

Satellite images show that in 1978 the total agricultural land in Kavrepalanchok district was 1,380 hectares (ha) and only 149 ha was classified as forest land. But by 1992, agricultural land had decreased by 414 ha, and forest land had increased to 556 ha.



MOUNTAIN RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

THEATRE REVIEW

by DUBBY BHAGAT



BRAVO

Part Shakespeare, part Greek tragedy, part Ziegfeld Follies, wholly Broadway. Rato Bangala's production of *West Side Story* was masterful.

Talent is a non-taxable export and Rato Bangala School's production of the 1950s musical *West Side Story* underscores the belief that Nepal's wealth of talent

could be born to blush unseen, were it not nurtured. Talent that, once mature, could represent Nepal anywhere in the world.

Until *West Side Story* the most ambitious production in Nepal was the HAMS production in the 80s of *Fiddler on The Roof*. Even that did not combine all the elements contained in *West Side Story*—school kids taking on the social complexities of the West in an extraordinary extravaganza that required split-second timing and the disciplines of song, dance and acting.

Nominally about Puerto Ricans in New York, *West Side Story* is a musical rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, that is, about star-crossed love everywhere and the attendant controversy and sorrow. *West Side Story* has it all, and audiences witnessed stylised gang fights, peaceful moments on balconies, the blossoming of love, death, the law's indifference, and neglected children.

Directed by Chris Masand and brilliantly choreographed by Bishwabandhu Ghimire, what emerged were stellar performances by Priya Joshi, who brought innocence, anger and fire to her role as Maria, the Juliet of *West Side Story*; Kushal Regmi in his portrayal of Tony, the Romeo of the piece, was fitting as the post-adolescent protagonist in search of individuality away from gangs and peer acceptance. (Both seen in picture, above)

The supporting cast rendered some dazzling performances: a tempestuous and joyous Himali Dixit as Anita, Juliet/Maria's friend, the brooding, inescapable presence of Bernardo as head of the Puerto Ricans brought to life by Miku Dixit, and the understated cool of Kundan Dhakwa as Ice.

West Side Story is about new immigrants in America but it could be about newcomers to any country, and about relationships that try to transcend established social barriers. The play is happening in real life today in Nepal, as boundaries of caste begin to break and a new social order beckons. And as the play stresses, the villains of the piece are audiences everywhere who watch impassively as tragedy after tragedy unfurls. The world, instead of helping, watches on.

And yet another tragedy away from the play is that the Priyas, Kushals, Himalis, Mikus and Kundans will probably end up in mundane offices and homes instead of allowing their talent to take them the way of a Chris Masand or a Bishwabandhu Ghimire

Part Shakespeare, part Greek tragedy, part Ziegfeld Follies, wholly Broadway, *West Side Story* and Rato Bangala owe us an encore. What about *La Mancha* next? ♦

DON'T VISIT NEPAL YEAR



from p 1

Union leaders say service charge is an internationally accepted practice, and argue that it would actually help the GNP by increasing the living standards of hotel employees. Laxman Basnet of the NC-backed Nepal Trade

Congress says: "We have to put tourism workers under a social safety net, and a service charge would do this, and at the same time force hotel owners to be more transparent with their taxes." Basnet denies that there has been any political pressure on his union to discontinue the strike. "Strike action is a form of negotiation," he adds.

Both sides have told Prime Minister Girma Prasad Koirala and the leader of the opposition, Mahav Kumar Nepal, their side of the story. The two leaders are fully aware of the seriousness of the issue, but so far appear to want to let matters take their own course. Faced with possible liability claims from clients should there be a last-minute strike, HAN has decided to play it safe by stopping bookings. Those still here may have time to revise their itineraries, but tourists already in India or other countries on their way to Nepal will have no option but to cancel their visits. Said one hotel manager: "It doesn't make much of a difference for us. If you close down for a week, you may as well close down for the whole season, this is

not a business in which you can just turn the switch on and off." Says another hotel manager in Pokhara: "This is an extremely fickle industry, you don't fool around with it. We had one major conference for December, and full bookings for New Year's. We don't know how we are going to handle that."

It is obvious that the employers, unions and the government are behaving as if this were a classic strike in a coal mine, or a garment factory. It isn't. Even the threat of strike can cripple an industry that contributes 15 percent of the country's hard currency income. As the negotiations broke down this week, it was clear that the strike represented a collapse of institutions. The Tourism Ministry was nowhere in the picture, and no one trusted anyone. The unions don't trust the owners and vice versa, neither trusts the government, and the government doesn't trust hotel owners.

It is also becoming evident that there are other games being played behind the scenes: government officials say privately they think hotels are a papered bunch of tax evaders and want to teach them a lesson, hotel owners think their contribution to the economy has never been recognised by a government that only wants to pile on more taxes and squeeze them dry. Hotel managements also want more friendly labour laws and that the hotel industry be declared an essential service, something that politicians will hardly find feasible at the moment. Besides, as the hospital strike shows, declaring something an essential service doesn't mean much anyway.

HAN has firmly said that it will not negotiate under threat of a strike, but it could sit down to discuss the unions' demand provided the government and workers agree to review the Labour Law. Says one hotel manager: "A 10 percent service charge would add 50 percent to my salary budget. We could pass it to our clients, but the minute you pass it on to your clients you don't have clients anymore."

Nepal has to compete with countries like Laos and Vietnam in the wholesale tour markets of Europe and North America, and middlemen are getting more and more price-conscious. But the unions are just not ready to listen to these arguments. We asked them if they had taken into account the economic impact of the strike. Bishnu Rimal, of the UML-affiliated General Federation of Trade Unions (GEFONU), deflected the question by saying that employees have struggled 20 years for the service charge, and the hotel owners have exploited their flexibility. He says adamantly: "Nothing has changed, the strike is still on."

Rimal says if the hotels accept the service charge in principle the strike can still be called off and the unions can begin negotiations. This could be the beginning of a compromise, and there is a last hope that the government's mediation committee may be able to hammer out a last-minute compromise. But with positions so rigid, it could prove difficult. Hotel owners say they want it resolved once and for all, and they're willing to shut down for months if that is what it takes. With this kind of a stalemate, each side blind to the concerns of the other, and a government that doesn't seem to have grasped the gravity of the crisis, the country teeters on the brink. ♦

BIZ NEWS

Economic report card

Government spending was slow despite early disbursement, price rise was minimal and exports to India continued to do well. That summarises Nepal Rastra Bank's brief on the state of the economy. The National Consumer Price Index (NUCPI)—a measure that indicates inflation—grew by 2.1 percent, compared to 4.2 percent in mid-October last year. The slow increase in the NUCPI is attributed to the fall in prices of items such as cereals, oils and pulses in the food and beverage basket. The prices in this category declined by 4.6 percent compared to an increase of 3.9 percent a year ago. The price index increased by 2.8 percent in Kathmandu, 3.9 percent in the hills and 1.1 percent in the Tarai.

Trade continues to boom, with exports growing by 24.9 percent to touch Rs 13.5 billion and imports by 7.5 percent to reach Rs 25.5 billion. Exports to India continued to grow but there was a decline in exports to other countries. There was a decline in traditional exports—readymade garments and carpets—while increases were recorded in the sale of tanned hide, pulses and pashmina. Pashmina sales in mid-October were worth Rs 3.3 billion. The central bank reported a balance of payments surplus of Rs 1.6 billion and a 38.4 percent increase in foreign exchange held by the banking system. Foreign exchange reserves in mid-October stood at Rs 99.4 billion, of which 83.3 percent was convertible currency.

Rupee at new low

The Nepali rupee dipped to new lows against the dollar last week responding to a slide in the value of the Indian rupee against the greenback—for the 22nd time in 11 months. In mid-January Rs 69.05 could buy a dollar. When the rupee depreciated on 29 November, it was dearer by Rs 5.60. The Nepali rupee is pegged to the Indian rupee at NRs1.6=IRs1 and every devaluation of the Indian rupee leads to corresponding change in the value of the Nepali currency.

Tourism recovers

In line with projections of the Nepal Tourism Board, for the first time in 11 months, tourist arrivals bettered that of last year. The increase for November, up 2.6 percent, was due to increased arrivals from countries other than India. Arrivals from India dropped by 23.5 percent to 7,667 and that from third countries increased by 10.8 percent to 35,463. There was a 36 percent slump in Indian tourist arrivals between January-June, a fallout of the December 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft after takeoff from Kathmandu. NTB says December arrivals hinge on the outcome of the threatened strike by hotel workers.

Nepal-China pact

Nepali and Chinese companies have signed six agreements for joint ventures in herb processing, pashmina, agriculture, surface transport and pharmaceuticals, says the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI). The agreements were reached during the fourth meeting of the Nepal-China Non-Governmental Cooperation Forum held at Wuxi last week. FNCCI and the All China Federation of Industry & Commerce (ACFIC) also agreed to hold the next forum and a Chinese trade fair in Nepal in December next year.

NIIT-Nepal expands

NIIT, the Indian software and training company, has opened its third learning centre in Patan. The company, which describes itself as e-Business Solutions Corporation (valued at \$270 million), has over 1,900 computer education centres in 26 countries. CIS Pvt Ltd is NIIT's partner in the Kathmandu and Patan ventures. The company's other branch in Pokhara is managed directly by NIIT.

Break free with Bolero

India's Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd has introduced the Bolero GLX, the latest in utility vehicles in Nepal. The 4-wheel drive comes for Rs 1.62 million, including value added tax, while a 2-wheel option is priced at Rs 1.55 million. The Bolero GLX comes with air-conditioning, power windows, audio system and central locking. "It's aimed at those who want an attractive, powerful utility vehicle that offers car comfort and sheer driving pleasure," the company says. It adds that its higher ground clearance is well suited to Nepal's terrain.



Grindlays' microcredit

Nepal Grindlays Bank Ltd is to provide Rs 30 million to the Centre for Self-help Development (CSD) to fund its microcredit programmes in poor and deprived communities. The CSD will use the money to provide small loans (maximum Rs 30,000) mainly to women for income generating activities. CSD is already providing such loans to 29,829 borrowers in rural areas.

ECONOMIC SENSE

by ARTHA BEED

Share scare



To play Nepal's stock market, forget all you know about profits, losses and balance sheets.

The Nepal Stock Exchange Index (NEPSE) crossed the 500 mark last week, a milestone in the history of Nepali securities trading. Such are the psychological barriers that markets create and conquer. The Index has been developed on the basis of the total market capitalisation of securities listed at the Stock Exchange, taking as its base 100 in February 1994. Market capitalisation indicates the total value of the shares listed at the market price. The current capitalisation is Rs 62 billion, which represents close to 17 percent of the GDP. The trading volume, however, at just over Rs 10 million a day is an insignificant portion of the outstanding securities.

The Nepali market is yet to be understood and sways more to emotion than any concrete reasons. The economy is not climbing, and investments are not increasing but it is interesting to note that share prices are soaring. The last couple of weeks saw a bull run and people have gone berserk trying to reap maximum profits.

Though the index has jumped from less than 200 a year ago to its current high level, the surge is more in bank shares alone. What happens in the market here has nothing to do with the fundamentals of share trade. As a broker told this Beed, if you want to play in this market you

should forget everything you know about profit and loss, accounting and balance sheets. Bank shares have increased due to speculation by companies going in for stock splits to meet the Rastra Bank requirement of Rs 500 million capital, and not because of their bottom line.

The previous bull run also came about in winter, in 1994, and the timing this year is no coincidence.

Companies usually hold their annual general meetings six months after the closing of accounts in

mid-July. The market is tense and expectant, especially about bonus shares. We Nepalis love to gamble and our fondness for speculation and rumour-mongering carries over into the share trade. Trading in Nepal is like playing lotto. Keep an eye on the market and prices this coming March to see what happens when there are no speculations to chase wildly.

There are few institutional investors in the market and the investors as a group are far from knowledgeable. The money chasing the handful of scripts in the market is what would have gone into fixed

deposits or real estate in more favourable circumstances. Interest rates have nose-dived and real estate prices are still in a slump—there are simply no other avenues for investment in the country.

The share market needs to grow organically. These sporadic sharp increases and declines do not bode well. The securities market, both long-term debt instruments and shares, should be developed for sustainable growth rather than wait for it to go through periodic swings. Institutional investors, especially those from overseas, have to find the prospect attractive as well as trustworthy. Fundamental changes need to be made about, like the use of internationally accepted disclosure norms. The institutional framework

to regulate the market must improve. Finally, we have to move towards paperless trading.

Nepal's share market can offer many possibilities and opportunities, but it needs to be developed in an organised manner. The way we are going now, there may be a couple of wealthy people created each year. But that will be at the cost of thousands who lose. The market has to graduate from being a variation on a lottery to a strong arm of the economy. ♦

Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com

Grindlays Gazette

INTEREST RATE UPDATE

NEPALI RUPEE	CURRENT%	PREVIOUS%
Call Money Avg.	5.50	5.25
84 Days t/bill	5.05	5.08
91 Days t/bill	5.29	5.33
365 Days t/bill	6.18	6.16
Repo rate	5.79	5.83

Average rate of 91 days T/Bill moved slightly lower on excessive liquidity position of several banks. In coming weeks this trend is expected to continue with banks are expected to offload their long dollar position to NOC for the oil payment. Expected range for next week 4.20 to 4.30.

FOREIGN CURRENCY : Interest rates

	USD	EUR	GBP	JPY	CHF
LENDING	9.50	5.75	6.00	1.50	5.13
LIBOR (1M)	6.70	5.00	5.99	0.71	3.43

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)	32.29	33.06	- 2.33
GOLD (Ounce)	269.80	269.40	+ 0.15
GOLD (NPR *)	7110	7055	+ 0.78
EUR	0.8763	0.8528	+ 2.76
GBP	1.4383	1.4187	+ 1.38
JPY	110.96	110.43	+ 0.48
CHF	1.7277	1.7759	- 2.71
AUD	0.5386	0.5249	+ 2.61
INR	46.83	46.80	+ 0.06

*Currency bid prices at 1.40 p.m. on 4/12 - Source Reuters

Oil : Oil prices ended dropped on Monday as Iraq and UN discussed a possible compromise over a dispute that led to Iraq's export suspension on Friday. Iraq exports a fifth of the world's oil.

Currencies : The US dollar fell sharply against major currencies as market fretted about slowing US growth. Dogged by worries over weak economic data and volatile stock prices, the dollar hit 2 1/2 month lows against Euro's single currency 3 1/2 month lows against the Swiss France and one month lows versus the Sterling.

INDIAN RUPEE OUTLOOK : The Indian rupee remained slightly volatile in 46.75/46.90 range with SBI seen helping the currency weakening the currency intermittently. The Indian rupee will continue to trade with a weak bias as importers buy dollars both to hedge and arbitrage on the overseas markets. But this move will be range-bound with large dollar needs likely to be met by state-run banks, acting on the central bank's behalf.

Sentiment was slightly boosted by a sharp \$ 1.2 billion rise in foreign exchange reserves to \$ 38.91 billion in the week ended November 24. Economists estimate the rupee is overvalued by 1.5 to 2.0 percent on the real effective exchange rate.

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



In US\$	Dal-Lentil 1 kg	Bhat-Rice 1 kg	Petrol 1 Litre	Diesel 1 Litre	Kerosene 1 Litre	Electricity 1 Unit	\$ Rate
Bangladesh	0.74	0.37	0.40	0.22	0.37	0.04	53.85
Bhutan	0.62	0.30	0.53	0.31	0.17	0.02	46.62
India	0.64	0.36	0.56	0.28	0.13	0.05	46.80
Maldives	0.25	0.28	0.40	0.30	0.42	0.21	11.82
Pakistan	0.42	0.43	0.52	0.23	0.12	0.03	57.64
Sri Lanka	0.74	0.37	0.62	0.24	0.19	0.03	81.25
Nepal	0.65	0.38	0.63	0.36	0.30	0.09	74.30

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

Oodles of noodles

MUKUL HUMAGAIN

If there is any sector in Nepal that can match up to the brewing and distilling business in the regularity with which new brands enter the market it has to be instant noodles. In the last three months alone two new brands came into the scene in which ten companies are fighting it out for a share. Now the healthiest segment in Nepal's manufacturing industry is taking its wars abroad.

Domestic compulsion has made this necessary, as has demand. The internal market is tight and competition is intense, and, most important, after the Nepal-India treaty of 1996, Nepal-made instant noodles have found a ready market in India. (The popular Wai Wai noodles now controls nearly 90 percent of the market in northeast India, and Bhutan.) With 10 companies in the field and some more expected to come up in the near future, observers agree that the two-decade-old industry has come of age, and had better go overseas. And that is what the makers of Wai Wai and the newly introduced Mayos are doing by

training their sights on the billion-strong Indian market and beyond in Bangladesh and the Maldives.

Nepal's instant noodles production began in the early 1980s when Pokhara-based Gandaki Noodles stepped into a virgin market with Rara. This came at time when there was a growing demand for instant noodles in Kathmandu but the only ones available were the expensive Thai brands. Rara was an instant success and several other companies followed in its wake. Some survived and some closed shop, but it is the entry of big business houses like Choudhary (with Wai Wai) and Khetan (Mayos) that has changed the face of this Rs 1250 million market.

For years Wai Wai remained ahead despite a premium of Rs 11 per packet it charged, while the rest sold at lower prices. But with Mayos, the scenario has changed. For the first time, Wai Wai is facing a competitor that is confident of selling at the same price. Retaining control is

a matter of pride for the Choudhary

Nepal's noodle barons are entangled in a domestic brand war, and in chowchow imperialism.

group, having dominated the market for so long with a 50 percent share. In fact, it is said that a large part of the Choudhary group's revenue comes from Wai Wai. The Khetan group, which burnt their

fingers in the noodle soup earlier with Yum Yum, kicked off an aggressive ad campaign for Mayos. The Choudharys have reacted in kind with their own campaign for Wai Wai. The first shots have been fired in the Great Nepali Noodle War.

The stakes are high. According to Rajendra Khetan, group managing director of the

Khetans, they hope to capture half the market share within three years of operation. "We'll apply the same strategy we used when we launched Tuborg beer," says Khetan.

It won't be easy going for them with the Wai Wai network in place around the country, built up and strengthened over the years. But Khetan is optimistic. "We've launched this product as there was a need in the market," says he.

The Choudhary group has plans to expand its sales

throughout India to corner a 33 percent share of India's 13,000-tonne annual market. However, a new Indian rule requiring quality certification of each consignment has posed a problem for noodle exports. The Khetans too plan to enter India soon.

But not everyone can think of taking their stuff abroad. "Unless you are backed by a good promotion effort, it's very hard to sell the products there [in India]," says Anil Hada of Multi-Food Industries. His company has been sending its MinMin noodles to West Bengal, Assam and Sikkim since 1997. Now they are planning to enter central India through an Indore-based agent.

There is also strong competition in the lower-priced category—the snack (*khaja*) segment, following the success of Hits. Introduced by General Food Industries, the makers of Yum Yum, and priced at Rs 6, Hits is extremely popular among children and in the tarai. Struggling to keep up are Choudhary's Mimi and Wah Wah, Multi-Food's MinMin Khaja and Yes Papa, and Anupam Food's Jony.

Strategies too have had to change due to competition. Companies are now pulling rather than pushing—the days of trade schemes are nearly over and the focus is on brand positioning through powerful advertising. Budgets for the ad campaigns have increased substantially, although some pushing is still done on the side. Despite a 20 percent annual growth rate, the noodles industry still runs on credit. Wholesalers thus play an important role in the pushing business. "Those who can provide the maximum credit to the sellers have the big market," says Hada.

The intense competition has seen prices remain almost constant over the years despite heavy increases in the cost of raw material. It is now volume that sustains them. "Unless you have huge volumes, it is difficult to survive," says Manoj Loya, General Manager (Sales and Marketing) of the Choudhary Group.

With prices remaining the same, it is consumers who have benefitted from greater choice at the same price. And that certainly is no reason to complain. ♦



Brand name	Company
Wai Wai, MiMi, MaMa-1 minute, WahWah	Nepal Thai Food/FastFood Nepal
YumYum, Hits	General Food Industries
Rara	Gandaki Noodles Pvt Ltd
Femee, Jony	Anupam Foods Nepal
Aa-Ha	Everest Noodles Industries
MinMin, MinMin Khaja	Multi-Food Industries
Ramba	Pokhara Foods
Mayos	Himalayan Hygienic Snacks and Noodles Pvt. Ltd
Rumpum	Asian Thai Foods Pvt Ltd

nepal dist

The first Kathmandu Mountain Film Festival (but not the last)

"Festivals like these hone your critical abilities, and sharpen the eye. You learn to read films fast at festivals."

ANAGHA NEELKANTAN

So *Cazavan* didn't win the audience award at the first-ever Kathmandu

International Mountain Film Festival. Neither did *Mikurb*. Instead, viewers chose *Roko* and *Adrian Belic's Gerghis Blues*, already a cult film in the US. Which is fine, as long as New-Agey faux-throatsinging doesn't become music of the month in Kathmandu as it did in New York-New Year celebrations would be depressing.

In many ways, *Gerghis Blues* was the odd film out at the festival. It asked few questions about modernity and as for adventure and physical challenges, let's just say that Paul Pera, the star of the film, was persuaded to sit on a bare horse for five minutes. What the film had, though, was real heart. It tells the story of Pera, a blind

African-American blues musician from San Francisco, who stumbles upon some very strange music on Russian radio's world service. Somehow, Pera figures out how throatsingers from Tanna-Tlwa, Central Asia, do what they do. Complications ensue, passions are inflated, and developments develop, and soon there are half a dozen people accompanying Pera to Tlwa to make a film about his visit and participation in the annual throatsinging contest. Pera is a hit and in a nice parallel, wins the audience award for his relapse of bluesy, improvised lyrics and throatsinging classics. In keeping with American movie tradition, though, there's a little too much explanation, and the film is structured such that there's a classic moment of doubt and conflict that helps develop characters and create

suspense about *How It Will Turn Out*. Of course, it all happened, it's all true, but it's sad when life mimics trite art. One of the real delights for me, other than watching spectacular landscapes go by, was getting a feel for the rhythm of life in Tlwa, something the filmmakers seemed almost unaware they were showing or seeing, except through the lens of annoying Californian spiritualism. But this is nit-picking: at the end of the day, it's such a bizarre story, and Paul Pera is such an incredibly astute (and obsessive) person, that it's hard to go too wrong.

The other films were more of a kind and straight forward. They reflected on the lust for adventure, lunacy, modernity, religion and natural beauty. There was ethnography, re-enactment, journalism, drama, satire, essay and



every style in between. The *Everest* films were a hit, and *Lost on Everest* (BBC), about the search for Mallory, and *Everest-The Death Zone* were screened a second time on popular demand. It's hard to really say much about films like

these, except *It Wuz Good*.

There were two real surprises in the adventure/insanity category, though, both by Polish director Mirek Dembinski, whose production company is, ironically enough, called Film Studio Everest.

Icarus, about a controversial hang-glider, Bogdan Kulka, captured the poetry that is often lost in films about people who do crazy things. Watching footage shot by Kulka and his wife before his death, hearing him shriek with joy,

Nawang Kapadia, Chitra Bahadur and a Place of Roses

KUNDA DIXIT

Lt Nawang Kapadia's death along the India-Pakistan line of control in Kashmir on 11 November would perhaps have been just another statistic in that endless and costly Himalayan war. But two things made it different: Nawang was the son of renowned Bombay-based mountaineer, explorer and writer, Harish Kapadia. And he died while trying to rescue one of the Nepali soldiers under his command, Havaladar Chitra Bahadur Thapa of Besisahar, Lamjung.

Harish Kapadia was in Kathmandu this week to address the First Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival and spoke to a well-attended hall on Monday about, among other things, his pet project: a proposal to turn the world's highest battlefield on the disputed Siachen Glacier into a Peace Park. Despite the shock of his son's death, Harish decided not to cancel the planned talk and came to Kathmandu with this wife, Geeta. "We came in Nawang's memory, and to cherish his love for mountains and his connection to Nepal through his Gorkha regiment."

Nawang belonged to the 4th Battalion of the 3rd Gorkha Rifles, was commissioned only in September this year and had just joined the platoon under his command in Kupwara near the Kashmiri capital of Srinagar two weeks before he was killed. The 4th Battalion had been involved in operations to stop infiltration across the line of control, and had previously taken casualties from the battle-hardened Afghans of the Al Omar Tanzeem group. On 10 November, the battalion received information about a large-scale incursion across the border nearby, and Nawang led his platoon on a search-and-destroy mission. The soldiers came under fire from a dozen or so Afghans hiding in a nearby forest. Chitra Bahadur was advancing towards the gun positions when he was hit in the stomach. Nawang ordered covering fire and went in with his own guns blazing for the rescue. He slung Chitra Bahadur over his shoulder and had started rushing back when he was hit in the face and killed instantly.

The attackers were all killed, and identified as belonging to a mercenary band of Afghans. Chitra Bahadur was taken by helicopter to a hospital in Srinagar, but died on the way. Chitra Bahadur was Nawang's "Guruji", an older Gorkha soldier whose responsibility it is to teach every new Gorkha officer the nuances of being Nepali: customs, cooking, songs and language. Recalls his father, Harish: "When he last called, Nawang told us everything was fine, he was missing fish, but he was enjoying *dal-bhat* and even practised a few Nepali words."

When Harish and Geeta came to Kathmandu they had planned



An Indian Gorkha officer dies in Kashmir while trying to rescue his Nepali comrade. His grieving parents want to dedicate their lives to set up a Peace Park in the world's highest battlefield.

to proceed onwards to Besisahar to meet the family of Chitra Bahadur. But when they contacted the Indian embassy here and were told it could not be verified if Chitra Bahadur's family had been notified or not, they decided to postpone it for some months as they did not want to be the ones to break the sad news.

The tragic deaths in Kashmir have once more brought home to Nepal the uncomfortable truth that its citizens are fighting in the army of a SAARC nation that is arrayed against that of another SAARC country. There are seven Gorkha regiments in the Indian Army, and another 3,000 Nepali troops serving under the British flag. Another 4,000 more serve in the Sultan of Brunei's guards and in the Singapore Police. In the 1962 India-China war, Indian Gorkha regiments were deployed against the Chinese. In 1989 Nepali soldiers fought Tamil Tiger rebels on behalf of Sri Lanka as part of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force. In last year's Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan, 13 Indian Gorkhas were killed. And today, in an ironic twist, Nepalis are once more killing and getting killed by Afghans—170 years after the British Afghan campaign and the disastrous retreat from Kabul in 1842.

Harish Kapadia is an accomplished mountaineer who has climbed and explored with Dave Wilkinson, Chris Bonnington and others. "It was very unusual for a Gujarati cloth merchant from Bombay to be interested in mountains, and they thought I was crazy," he says. And a near-fatal crevasse fall in the Himalaya 20

years ago in which he broke his hip confirmed their views. Harish learnt rock-climbing and took the basic course at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling in 1964 under famous Sherpa climbers like Tenzing Norgay, Nawang Gombu and Sardar Wangdi. When their sons were born, the Kapadias named them after famous Sherpas: first Sonam, and then his younger brother Nawang. And it was natural that virtually from the moment they learnt to walk the Kapadia brothers were hiking and trekking with their parents. Nawang was the adventurous one; from a very early age he was reading up on military

matters and was especially fascinated by Nepal's Gorkha soldiers who earned a reputation for valour first in the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, and later in the British and Indian armies. Nawang's friends in Bombay say his happiest moments were when he joined the Officers' Training Academy in Madras at the age of 24 and when he passed out to join the 3rd Gorkha Rifles. "His dream was always to serve in a Gorkha regiment," says Harish with a sad smile.

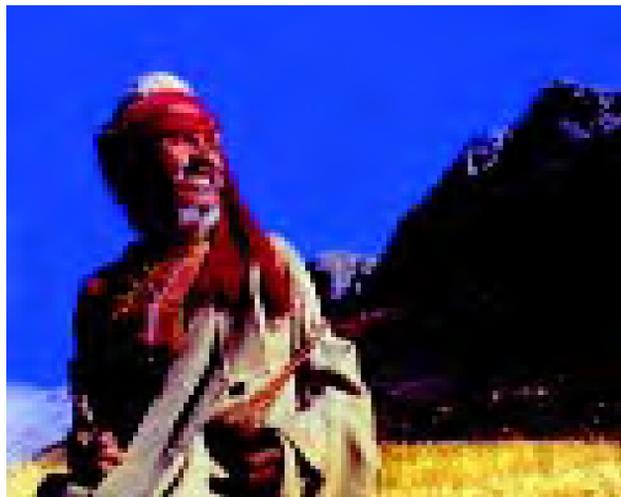
With their son's death, the Kapadias are pursuing the Peace Park proposal with new energy and passion. Since the fighting in Siachen started in 1984, nearly 4,000 people have died and more than 10,000 injured on the Indian side alone. It costs India \$2 million a day to keep the fighting going on at altitudes of more than 6,000 metres. For Harish, it is an uphill battle convincing the defence establishments to give up the senseless fighting, but he says there are more and more people who are fed up with the war. He has climbed and explored in the Siachen Glacier (Siachen means "rose" in the Balti language) and says the only face-saving way out for both sides may be to agree to declare it a transboundary Peace Park. He says: "The only solution to save this great wilderness is to stop the war. As a mountaineer and a lover of this glacier I can only pray that the powers that be will listen to the anguish of the glacier and the soldiers serving in it." ♦

International



MIN BAURACHARYA

MIN BAURACHARYA



Clockwise from left: Caravan, Mukundo, Gabriele Tautscher with guests from Dolakha district, Prof. Toni Hagen inaugurates the photo exhibition

eye. You learn to read films fast at festivals." And of course it's a great way to stimulate debate about what films, especially films about people from other countries, from "remote" places, should be like, about how these are different from films made by "natives", and about who is allowed to say what. (It would be interesting to consider, for instance, what "Oetzi", the mummified Stone Age man discovered in a glacier in 1991,

would have said about the recreation of his world, complete with grunts, wild animals and shaggy hair, in *The Ice Man of Oetz Valley and his World*.)

There were nearly 30 filmmakers and producers in attendance, which undoubtedly added a great deal to the general atmosphere of excitement. Kathmandu was lucky to have had the festival doesn't have a large budget, and everyone who was here flew in at their own expense. In return, they saw their films running to packed halls. The turnout was truly impressive, and there was a dangerously large number of disappointed ticket-seekers. But there was some consolation for them: a great exhibit of photographs by Mani Lama, Devedra Basnet, Jagdish Tiwari and Deb Mukharji, the present Indian ambassador.

I learnt a few things at the festival: one, people hate people with all-across badges, and two, never ever tell a person desperate to see a film that they should've bought tickets earlier, especially not if you're wearing one of the aforementioned badges. It can get very ugly. All things considered, we should do this more often. Maybe next time there will miraculously be a larger venue with more than one women's loo. ♦

Raving, and ranting

It isn't too surprising, actually, that *Mukundo* or *Caravan* didn't win the popular vote. Certainly, both played to packed houses and were very well received just on the level of being films set in Nepal and in the case of *Mukundo*, made by Nepalis. But most viewers seemed ambivalent about what they really expected from the films.

One of the first questions tossed out to Jean de Tregomain, executive producer of *Caravan*, was the usual "what did you do for them after making so much money" rant. In reply, he suggested that perhaps we ought to ask what the Nepali government did with the large fees they demanded before allowing *Caravan* to be shot here. It's more than just an amusing answer. Does using non-actors in films mean you have to take care of them for the rest of time?

The trouble with *Mukundo* was not just that some people thought the actors didn't do justice to a strong story and an otherwise really well-made film, but the more nebulous charge of making a movie for a "Western audience". Director Tsering Rhyar Sherpa and scriptwriter Kesang Tseten emphasised, rightly I think, that everything in the movie—shamanism, sexuality, individual angst—was inherent in the real incident that inspired the film. What *Mukundo* did was try to understand why events unfolded as they did.

Genghis Blues was another world, with no troublesome questions like these. ♦

listening to his wife and friends talk about his angst and read aloud his writing on hang-gliding as if it were ballet, you start to understand why this particular man died the way he did, and why he glided in suicidal situations, sometimes dressed as a pink chicken.

Deibinski's other entry, *Garak*, was a different order of "adventure film" altogether. Aman climbs a mountain solo as his wife and young son go about their day. There's narration, just the remarkably articulate little boy talking about his father, mountains and life in general, and occasional glimpses of the family together. Once again, Deibinski conveys something of what the endeavour means to the people involved. One often needs to be reminded that adventure and risks are about more than just adrenaline.

This isn't to put down the other adventure films, though: for sheer madness and humour, there was the UK film *From Nowhere to the Middle of Nowhere*, about two paragliders, one with a video camera, gliding across the Himalaya, shooting as they go along, and eventually landing in Junla. Other than the slightly inebriated man overhead protesting that Junla was not the middle of nowhere, this and a rafting film were the only ones set in Nepal that didn't invite real critique or discussion.

Gabriele Tautscher, the anthropologist behind *Chickenshit and Ash-A Visit to Paradise* was asked, naturally, why she decided to take two Tamang men, Bir Bahadur and Jit Bahadur, to Vienna, and perhaps she ought to have left the question unanswered. Not too many people were impressed by the fact that she and her colleagues learnt a lot about *themselves*, and her insistence on the charming and instructive "common sense" of the gentlemen was doubtless meant well, but is quite open to accusations of condescension. The film itself was about thirty minutes too long: there was simply no need to show us the Dolakha village in such seemingly random detail. The

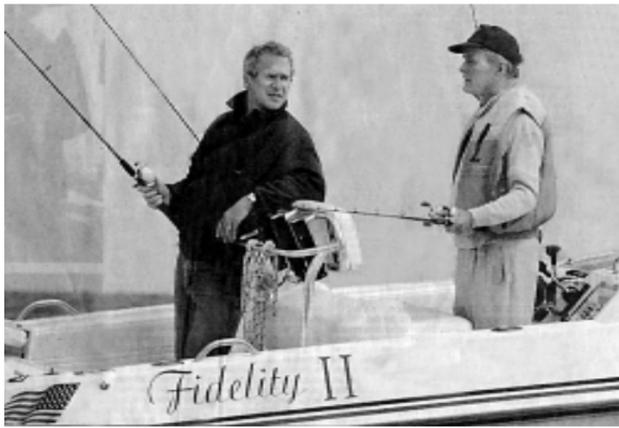
best part of the screening was having the women there to answer questions too. Yes, they liked Vienna, but they'd rather stay in Nepal, and no, they weren't bothered by the camera, they said. After all, someone else was schlepping it around.

The representatives of *Yeti, the Call of the Snowman*, ought to have been interrogated thoroughly, but weren't. A number of viewers expressed the desire later to take them to task for not including songs in the film. (A Yeti-Sherpa duet would've been greatly appreciated.) It was popular enough to warrant a second screening, and was, in its own way, extremely thought-provoking. What exactly were they thinking when they made this film? It started out feeling like one of those old movies based on an Agatha Christie novel set somewhere in the Colonies and then proceeded to enter the realm of the surreal. It is one of the few movies that is all the funnier for taking itself seriously. You have to appreciate anyone who can make a movie in France in 1999 that is a cross between Disney, a western, and pure Bollywood. And about a Yeti, for god's sake. That takes courage, especially having a rather Caucasian-looking Yeti.

As for the makers of *The Fish of the Gods* and *Their Home Is Below Karchenjunga*, it's a good thing they weren't there: they would've been grilled. *The Fish of the Gods*, a French film about the quest of western Nepali Raji fishermen for the elusive golden masheer, was beautiful to look at, but the voice-of-God narration was nightmarishly reminiscent of bad 1930s anthropology. The same was true of *Their Home Is Below Karchenjunga*, which claims to offer viewers a glimpse into life in Gunza, in north-eastern Nepal, except that it wasn't even particularly visually captivating. Still, I'd rather have seen them and had the chance to savage them, than have had two films less at the festival. As one of the delegates said, "This sort of thing hones your critical abilities and shapes the

toyota

Best democracy money can buy



Last week, I mailed my overseas ballot for the US presidency—and you can wipe that smug little grin off your face. I won't put up with condescending comments about America's democratic rituals from a nation with an unelected House of Lords occupied by genetic fossils and, soon, Chris Woodhead.

In fact, you could think of the \$3 billion spent in the US campaign in positive, New Labour terms. Call it "the efficient privatisation of the democracy"—though an outright auction for the presidency would be more efficient still.

If the guy who lost the vote, George W Bush, nevertheless wins the White House, he'll have surfed on a crushing wave of nearly half a billion dollars (\$477 million), my calculation of the suffocating plurality of cash from corporate America, a good 25 percent more than Al Gore's take.

George W could not have amassed this pile if his surname were Jones or Smith. The key to Dubya's money empire is Daddy Bush's post-White House work which, incidentally, raised the family's net worth by several hundred percent.

Take two packets of payments to

Examining the sources of the \$500 million that boosted Bush's bid for the White House.

the Republican Party, totalling \$148,000, from an outfit called Barrick Goldstrike. That's quite a patriotic contribution from a Canadian company. They can afford it. In 1992, in the final hours of the Bush presidency, Barrick took control of US government-owned property containing an estimated \$10 billion in gold. For the whole shooting match, Barrick paid the US Treasury only \$10,000.

Barrick made deft use of an 1872 gold rush law meant to allow pan-and-bucket prospectors to gain title to their tiny claims. In 1992, Clinton's newly elected administration was ready to prevent Barrick's stunning grab. But Barrick is a lucky outfit. Bush's Interior Department expedited procedures to run through Barrick's claim stake before Clinton's inauguration. Ex-Pres George Bush was lucky, too. When the electorate booted him from the White House,

he landed softly on the Barrick Goldstrike payroll, where he comfortably rested until last year.

Who is Barrick? Its founder, Peter Munk, made his name in Canada in the 1950s as the figure in an infamous insider stock-trading scandal. Munk headed a small speaker manufacturer that went belly-up, just after he sold his stock. This is not quite the expected pedigree for an international minerals mogul.

If we look in the shadows behind Munk we can see the more accomplished player who provided the capital to set up Barrick-Saudi arms dealer Ahan Khashoggi.

During Bush's presidency, Khashoggi was identified as conduit in the Iran-Contra conspiracy. He had already run into trouble with US law when, in 1986, he was arrested and charged but not convicted of fraud. He was bailed out of the New York prison by Munk, who provided the \$4 million bond. Bush performed an even bigger favour for Khashoggi's alleged co-conspirators, key members of Bush's own cabinet. As a result, no case could be made against Khashoggi.

In 1996, a geologist prospecting in Indonesia, Mike de Guzman announced his discovery of the world's richest gold field. Munk rapidly deployed his president, Bush,

on behalf of Barrick, contacted officials of the former dictator Suharto who were in control of mining concessions. Thereafter, De Guzman's company was told it would have to turn over 68 percent of its claim to Barrick.

Barrick didn't have long to gloat. Jim-Bob Moffett, the tough, old Louisiana swamp dog who heads Freeport-McMoran Mining, had a private meeting with his old benefactor Suharto. At the end of the meeting, Jim-Bob and the dictator stood on the steps of the presidential palace to announce that Freeport-McMoran would replace Barrick. (Ironically, Barrick lured it again. The gold find was a hoax. After Jim-Bob learnt he'd been suckered, his company invited geologist De Guzman to talk it over. Sadly, on the way to the meeting, De Guzman fell out of a helicopter.) Beyond Barrick, Daddy Bush has many other friends who filled up his son's campaign kitty while Bush performed certain lucrative favours for them. In 1998, Bush gave a stom in Argentina when he lobbied his close political ally President Carlos Menem to grant a gambling licence to Mirage Casino Corporation.

Bush wrote that he had no personal interest in the deal. That's true. But Bush *did* not do badly. After the casino flap, Mirage dropped \$449,000 into the Republican Party war chest. The ex-president and famed Desert Storm trooper-in-Chief, also wrote to the oil minister of Kuwait on behalf of Chevron Oil Corporation. Bush says honestly

that he 'had no stake in the Chevron operation'.

Following this selfless use of his influence, the oil company put \$657,000 into Republican Party coffers. Most of that loot, reports the Centre for Responsive Politics, came in the form of 'soft money'. That's the squishy stuff corporations use to cooze around US law, which you may be surprised to learn, prohibits any donations to presidential campaigns in the general election.

Not all of the elder Bush's work is voluntary. His single talk to the board of Global Crossing, the telecoms start-up, earned him \$13 million in stock. The company also kicked in another million for his kid's snn.

And while the Bush family steadfastly believes that ex-felons should not have the right to vote for president, they have no objection to ex-cons putting presidents on their payroll. In 1996, despite pleas from US church leaders, Daddy Bush gave several speeches (he charges \$100,000 per talk) sponsored by organisations run by Rev Sun Myung Moon, cult leader, tax cheat and formerly, the guest of the US federal prison system.

There are so many more tales of the Bush family daisy chain of favours, friendship and campaign funding. None of it is illegal which I find troubling. But I don't want to seem ungrateful. After all, the Bushes helped make America the best democracy money can buy. ♦ (The Observer)

Health for some by 2000

The health of nations

1992 - '95	doctors/100,000 population	nurses/100,000 population
HIGH HUMAN DEVELOPMENT		
US	245	878
SWEDEN	299	1,048
MEDIUM HUMAN DEVELOPMENT		
CUBA	518	752
MALAYSIA	43	160
LOW HUMAN DEVELOPMENT		
NEPAL	5	5
MAURITANIA	355	1,020

Pledges have been made since Alma Ata in 1978, only to be broken.

sanitation, only 35 percent of the wastewater is treated in Asia, while in Latin America it is 14 percent. In Africa, "only a negligible percentage".

Such widespread lack of sanitation is inexcusable, says Dr Richard Jolly, who heads the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), a Geneva-based international organisation. "It is shameful, a scandal that almost half of the world's population does not have access to adequate sanitation," he is quoted as having said in a WHO media release. According to the WSSCC, if the prevailing scenario is to be reversed, a "people-centred approach" needs to be followed, ensuring greater public involvement in decision-making. And already, the WSSCC has two success stories to serve as models under its 'Water for People' initiative.

"In the Indian state of Gujarat, for example, we have shown that rolling out water and sanitation services according to the precepts of (the 'Water for People' initiative) has had a dramatic impact on the health and well-being of the state's citizens," says Jolly.

However, the Africa regional coordinator of the International Peoples Health Council, David Sanders, says initiatives to combat water-borne diseases do not sit well with the health care industry, given its emphasis on the "curative aspects" of health. In a background paper prepared for the EPA in Bangladesh, he argues that such logic has also been embraced by public health policymakers. "Hence, oral rehydration therapy for diarrhoea management is proposed as an essential component of a core health package while water and sanitation, which have an indirect and less easily quantifiable impact on diarrhoea, are deemed 'cost-ineffective' and therefore not recommended as an area for public sector investment." ♦ (IPS)

MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR IN MEXICO CITY

By this year, another global pledge was to have been achieved: primary health care for all. Such care was deemed essential to enable all citizens of the world "to lead socially and economically productive lives", states a document from the landmark international health conference in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan in 1978, where the pledge was made.

But as 2000 draws to a close, it has become clear that both the governments and the international community that backed the Alma Ata Declaration have fallen far short of meeting their obligations. And an international health conference to be held in Bangladesh from 4-8 December—the People's Health Assembly (PHA)—provides an opportunity for health experts, researchers and activists from over 90 countries to ask why another set of promises were broken.

But where should such a review begin? Access to safe water and basic sanitation serves as a useful point of departure, given what was stated in the Alma Ata Declaration. It identified the "provision of an adequate supply of water and basic sanitation" among the essential features to secure the promise of 'Health for All by 2000'.

Yet, according to the findings in a report, released by the World Health

Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) last month, close to 1.1 billion people in developing countries do not have access to "an improved water supply". In addition, around 2.4 billion people still do not have "any acceptable means of sanitation".

Such deprivation results in 4 billion cases of diarrhoea in the world every year, "with 2.2 million deaths, mostly among children under five", note the authors of the report, *The Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000*.

For Gro Harlem Brundtland, the director-general of the WHO, and Carol Bellamy, the executive director of UNICEF, this situation is tantamount to being denied "basic human rights". "Access to safe water and to sanitary means of excreta disposal are universal needs and, indeed, basic human rights," they state in the introduction they jointly wrote for the report. "They are essential elements of human development and poverty alleviation and constitute an indispensable component of primary health care," they added.

Yet, as the Global Assessment reveals, such essential features remain a luxury for a large slice of the world's rural and urban poor. In Africa, for instance, close to 30 percent of the rural water supply systems do not function, while in Asia it is 17 percent, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, four percent. As for

bhaju ratna ad

Outrage, hope and democracy

fourteen years ago, Filipinos ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos in a festive, three-day uprising that restored democracy in the Philippines and pressed the end of authoritarian regimes elsewhere in Asia. Democracy was an exhilarating experience. Citizens spoke out freely, the press spilled out all stops in its reporting and newly formed political parties slugged it out in the electoral arena.

But Filipinos soon realised that democracy did not necessarily bring about prosperity or good government. As the years passed, and the distractions offered by democratic politics lost their novelty, they found their hopes dashed by corruption, ineptness and a growing realisation that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

When corruption is rife and the rule of law senescent, at best, democracy reaches an impasse. Until eight weeks ago, that seemed to be the case in the Philippines. The country was lagging behind its Southeast Asian neighbours, a textbook case of corruption and crony capitalism. At its helm was Joseph Estrada, a popular movie star who won the presidency with an overwhelming mandate even if he was a self-confessed gambler and womaniser given to all-night drinking and eating binges.

Estrada surrounded himself with a coterie of cronies, many of them with links to the underworld of gambling, smuggling and other illicit trades. He dined out on favours and concessions to his business friends, some of

whom have been accused of large-scale tax evasion, insider trading and price manipulation at the stock exchange. Riding high on his popularity, Estrada showed little appetite for the responsibilities of the presidency. While claiming that his government was committed to helping the poor, he kept four households in high style and indulged in marathon mah-jongg sessions, in which as much as \$1 million was at stake in one night of gaming.

Yet, despite all that, Estrada remained popular with the masses. He spoke their language, made fun of the educated and wealthy and evoked his movie roles—that of an ordinary man who takes on the rich and powerful—in his recreation of the presidency. For all his supposed lack of education (Estrada likes to boast that he is a college dropout), he had a very sophisticated understanding that in modern democracy, image is more important than reality. He also knew that in a country where the rule of law is weak and institutions are compromised, popularly elected leaders can get away with much.

Until recently, it seemed that Estrada was right. After all, Filipinos, like citizens of other countries where corruption thrives, are no longer shocked or indignant that those they elect are corrupt. The thievery of public officials is nothing new; it's only in the scale and the manner of theft that they differ. When faith in democratic institutions has been eroded, citizens become acquiescent: they know corruption exists, and there is nothing anyone



As the Philippines gets ready to impeach a president, it is evident that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

can do about it.

Today, events in the Philippines are proving the cynics wrong. In the eight weeks since an Estrada ally made a stunning exposé that the president had received some \$10 million in bribes from illegal gambling, the streets of Manila have been the site of huge rallies by outraged citizens. The Catholic Church, the

business community, labour unions, political parties and civic groups have joined a growing clamour for the president to resign. The House of Representatives has voted to impeach Estrada and impeachment hearings are scheduled to start in the Senate in the second week of December.

If Estrada resigns or if the Senate votes for his impeachment, he will be

the first Asian head of state to be removed from office because of corruption. The current crisis is thus a test of the institutions of the Philippines' still fragile democracy. The Senate, in which the president's party has a majority, has to prove that it can conduct credible hearings against the most powerful official of the land and demonstrate the viability of constitutional processes for checking on the excesses of a powerful executive.

If there are serious doubts about the conduct and outcome of the impeachment trial, the future of Philippine democracy would also be cast in serious doubt, and citizens will question the effectiveness of constitutional mechanisms for accountability. Marcos was ousted after the discovery of a failed coup attempt that set off a popular uprising. If Estrada resigns in the face of imminent impeachment or is forced out of office after being judged guilty during the impeachment trial, it would mark the first time in Philippine history that a head of state is ousted by constitutional means.

It would also be a powerful example to the rest of the region, particularly in countries where corruption and cronyism are rife. In the last few years, there have been increasing doubts whether political reform is possible within a democratic polity. The Asian economic crisis set off serious thinking about issues of governance, transparency and accountability. In Thailand, the crisis has catalysed constitutional and other

reforms intended to check corruption and money politics. In Indonesia, the crisis precipitated the fall of Suharto and brought about the establishment of a still-tenuous democracy. Under Estrada, the Philippines, not as badly hit by the contagion as the rest of the region, blithely went on with life as usual. But the current crisis, which is battering the economy and causing the peso to drop to all-time lows, is forcing a re-examination of the link between good governance and economic stability.

There is a sense of déjà vu in all this. In 1986, a floundering economy and agitation on the streets eventually forced the ouster of Marcos. Today, respected figures like former President Corason Aquino and Catholic Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin, who led the uprising against Marcos, are again out on the streets, this time calling for Estrada's resignation. So are the middle class and the business community, which formed the bedrock of the 1986 uprising.

This time, though, the rules of the game are clearer. While there is a consensus that constitutional processes should be followed, there is also a realisation that these processes will not work without the vigilance of citizens who are out on the streets. The lesson from the Philippines is that democracy is hard work. The establishment of formal institutions is no guarantee. In the end, the burden is on the people. That is why democracy requires a bit of faith in the capacity of citizens for outrage and hope. ♦

(Sheila Coronel is the Executive Director of the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism.)

Little cameleers



ALEXANDRA PIRONTI IN DUBAI

Shortly after sunrise and again before sunset each day, Sheizad and the other little riders are strapped to the backs of camels for endless hours of training at the racetracks amid the sand dunes and glittering skyscrapers of this rich Arab emirate.

Behind a camel's hump, the frail figures of some of the children—most of them only five or six years old—are virtually invisible. Despite a government ban seven years ago against the use of young children as camel jockeys, the practice is still widespread in Dubai and the rest of the United Arab Emirates.

Hundreds of children are forced or lured into a life of virtual slavery as jockeys in several Gulf countries, where camel racing has been a traditional sport. Most of the children come from Pakistan, India,

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Sudan—countries bound together by poverty.

Sheizad, from Bangladesh, is too young even to know his age, which cannot be more than five. On a warm afternoon, he arrived at the Camel Race Track in Dubai, together with other young waifs in the back of a van. Nearly all of them are dirty, barefoot and looking like orphans robbed of their childhoods. By contrast, at the nearby Nad Al-Sheba track which hosts the \$6 million Dubai World Cup every year, horses usually arrive in clean, air-conditioned comfort.

Most of these children have either been abducted by unscrupulous traffickers who sell them to agents in the United Arab Emirates for 20,000 dirhams (\$5,500), have been sold by poor parents or relatives, or lured there under false pretences. These include promises to their parents that the children will get good work and

Hundreds of children are forced into a life of slavery to race camels in the Gulf.

education, said Anwar Burney, a human rights activist from Pakistan who has helped return some of the children to their families. The agents, most of them from the Indian subcontinent, are the middlemen between the kidnapers and local sheikhs or powerful families who keep the children and train them between eight or nine hours a day, said Burney.

"The people in charge of the children mistreat them, and they beat them. While they give very good food to the camels, the children are not even allowed a proper meal for fear that they will gain weight and be too heavy for the camels," Burney said during an interview. Often, the children are forced into crash diets in order to lose weight before an important race.

The small jockeys are bound to a camel's back, often using adhesive straps. But sometimes the kids slip off and either get trapped underneath the camel or are trampled. It is not uncommon for children to fall off or get dragged along, sometimes to their deaths, according to a 1999 report by the London-based human rights group Anti-Slavery International. "The children work hard and long hours. They usually go to sleep between 10 pm and 11 pm, and get up at 4 am for the start of their daily training an hour later," said Burney,

who heads the Anwar Burney Welfare Trust. The training extends until 11 am or 12 am and then in the afternoon between 3 pm and 6 pm, said Burney, who has often visited the Emirates over the past few years to investigate and rescue kidnapped children.

"We have recovered hundreds of children in the past three years. The UAE government is very interested in ending the trafficking of children, but is difficult to stop children entering the country when they arrive with couples who pose as their parents," Burney said. Last week, he helped police in the UAE rescue two Pakistani brothers, ages four and six, kidnapped three months ago and brought here illegally. The use of children in the camel races has been illegal in the UAE since 1993. Regulations prohibit children from racing camels, and call for jockeys to weigh at least 45 kilograms in keeping with international standards for horse jockeys.

Once Sheizad is atop a camel, his job is to utter a series of blood-curdling screams from the outset, whipping the animal as much as he can in order to make it run faster. But if Sheizad's camel comes first in the race, no wealth or fame awaits the child. All the honours go to the camel's owner. ♦

AIDS vaccine years away

LONDON - Scientists have been working on an AIDS vaccine for 15 years, yet an effective drug to combat the world's worst epidemic is still years away. In the best-case scenario a vaccine could be ready in three years—if tests in Thailand and the United States show promising results. If not, it could be another decade, or even two, before an anti-AIDS vaccine hits pharmacy shelves.

Even then such "first generation" drugs may only have a limited effect in fighting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. "The first generation vaccines will probably not be highly effective—perhaps 40 to 50 per cent," says Saladin Osmanov, a medical officer for the World Health Organisation/UNAIDS HIV Vaccine Initiative. "It's a long, long way away before we have a very effective vaccine...perhaps a couple of decades."

In a world where AIDS infects 15,000 people a day, a decade could translate into 55 million new HIV infections and 30 million AIDS deaths. More than 36 million people now live with HIV or AIDS, according to UNAIDS. AIDS has killed an estimated 21.8 million people since the epidemic began in the 1980s. Despite recent advances, AIDS vaccine research is still in its infancy. "The fact is there are quite a few candidate vaccines that are being developed and tested in trials today," Osmanov says. "But these trials don't tell us about the capacity of a vaccine to protect against infection...to do that we need to do large studies." Over 25 different types have been tested in more than 50 clinical trials in about 5,000 HIV-uninfected volunteers.

Vaccines go through three stages of clinical trials after lab research, including animal testing. Phase I trials take 12 to 18 months and are carried out on 10 to 30 healthy volunteers to study side-effects and ensure safety. Phase II, a two-year stage, examines the side-effects on the immune system of 100 to 300 volunteers. Phase III takes three to five years and assesses whether a large number of people at risk are protected against natural infection. Only one type of vaccine has reached this final stage: US biotechnology firm VaxGen is carrying out Phase III testing in Thailand and the US, and expects to have initial results late next year. Others are at earlier testing stages.

Aventis Pasteur of France is finishing Phase II testing of two vaccines in the US, Uganda, Thailand, Haiti, Trinidad and Brazil, while several other researchers and drug companies are just starting Phase I tests. ♦ (Gemini)

What was his crime?

Nepal Samacharpatra, 3 December

A small thatched hut, walls covered with posters and slogans of the All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) [affiliated to the CPN-Maoist]. In the small clearing in front is a woman of around 20 years of age dressed in the white of a widow, sobbing continuously. Nearby sleeps a two-month-old baby. Everyone gathered has tears in their eyes.

This is the scene from Tarigaun village in Dang district and the house belongs to Num Bahadur KC, the policeman killed at the Kotwadi police station by the Maoists in their fight for the "common hardworking class".

"He had called about 10 to 12 days back asking how his two-month-old son was and said that he would come and see son's face when he comes home in February. But it was his dead body that arrived yesterday." Num Bahadur's wife, Maya, can hardly speak the words. Maya, who is an SLC graduate, and Num Bahadur were married four years ago. They have a daughter who is 18 months old and it's only two months since the son was born.

Num Bahadur's father, Ghanshyam KC, 68, is presiding over his sons final rites. Num Bahadur was the second of Ghanshyam's three sons. "When he left home last summer we told him to quit his job, but he didn't agree. 'My elder brother is in the force. My younger brother is in Malaysia. How can I feed my family?' he had asked. 'On top of everything all our land is being withheld by the court. We don't know what will happen, so I will go no matter what happens.' He had argued and gone off, but now he's gone forever. Everyone, his mother, father and mother-in-law, everybody were pressuring him to resign but he didn't agree....," says the grieving father.

Ghanshyam KC has only a small plot of land to his name that he had bought for Rs 1,400 from Iswari Prasad Lamichhane, a local, when he had moved to Dang from Pyuthan in 1965. But Ghanshyam is yet to receive the land even though he has already paid up the full amount. The case is being fought in the Supreme Court. "Last year a local leader of the Nepali Congress and the Dang chief of the commission to settle the landless, Mahesh Acharya, and a justice from Rukum, Narayan Dhital, claimed they had bought the land from Iswari Prasad and tried to drive us out even though they knew that the question of the ownership of the land was currently being looked at by the court," says Ghanshyam, wiping the tears in his eyes. "If they hadn't tried to take the land from us my son would have left the police force. But fearing we would become landless if we lost the case, he didn't."

The mother of the dead policeman, Pima Devi, spoke in a voice breaking with grief: "We have been cursed last year and this year. Last year our son-in-law died in a car crash when my daughter was two months' pregnant. She gave birth to a granddaughter. I am raising my granddaughter here. This year my daughter-in-law had a son two months ago. How am I going to feed my grandchildren?"

Num Bahadur has four sisters. A younger sister says, "Last Tihar we called him for Tika but he couldn't get leave and we called our elder brother, but as he too is in the police force he couldn't come either. Our youngest brother is in Malaysia, so there was no question of him coming. Our foreheads remained empty."

The tragedy-stricken family has only one question in mind, "What had he done that he had to be killed?"

When asked whether the government had provided any help, Ghanshyam answers, "Yesterday (Friday) the SP and came gave us Rs 25,000 for the cremation. Our son's death will forever hurt us but after the SP and others from the police came and consoled us we are feeling better."

Ghanshyam adds, "The land we bought in 1965 has not come in our possession. The local Congress leader Mahesh Acharya tried to throw me out saying he had bought land from Iswari Prasad even he knew that I bought the land. I was taken to the police and district officials. The land dispute is being heard at the Supreme Court. If we lose the case we will be landless. What will my grandchildren do? My son died serving the government. The government must take note of the injustice being done to us. Please don't forget to write about the land in the papers."

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"If the government makes public the whereabouts of those (party workers) who have disappeared and initiates the process to release them, we are ready to come for talks. We've also been making it clear that the problems faced by the country and people cannot be resolved by talking to the Giri Ja faction alone. We think talks with all concerned political sides are essential."

-Prachanda, or Pushpa Karal Dahal, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in an op-ed article in Kantipur, 4 December.



"Lada Air can take it and eat it."

-Spacetime, 26 November

UML and the constitution

Bidhakar Saptahik, 28 November

The main opposition party, the CEN-UML, held a meeting on 27 November in which the issue of amending the constitution was given priority in the discussions. It was decided that the UML would first have discussions with other political parties on major issues and only then would it move towards the people and hold a country-wide discussion with them. The problems faced by farmers was also discussed in the meeting. Apart from Bharat Mohan Adhikari and Mukunda Neupane, who were not in the capital, all central committee members attended the meeting.

The question of bringing changes in the constitution is being taken very seriously by the UML. The party has asked everyone to come forward and hold free and frank discussions on the matter. The UML is ready to hold discussions on any of the issues and questions arising in this context.

The UML is very keen on getting the people's opinion on this as well. It is conducting interaction programmes on a massive scale throughout the country. Besides the political parties, it wants to get the opinion of intellectuals and the educated masses about its proposals. According to sources in the party, the UML is forming a committee under the leadership of a party heavyweight which will be in touch and carry out discussions with all major political parties.

Since last week, the UML has already begun holding meetings and discussions with other political parties. It has also explained in



detail its plans to its own followers and activists and wants the proposals to be understood properly and be supported by all the people of this country. The party has started a nation-wide campaign to explain to people why changes are required in the constitution. The party is preparing a list that will explain clearly what changes are required and in which particular areas.

Teachers' boycott

Ghatara Ra Bichar, 29 November

Almost 50,000 teachers working in schools throughout the country have not been made permanent. These teachers have been agitating for the last three years for a change in their status but since nothing has come of their efforts, they are planning to change their course of action. The question of appointing teachers on a permanent basis has now become a political one. The Nepal Teachers' Association and the Nepal National Teachers' Association, aligned to the Nepali Congress and the UML respectively, have decided to work together to solve this problem.

An agreement was signed between the government and the agitating teachers' associations to make

permanent all teachers who were hired on a temporary basis. This agreement was signed in the middle of last year, but even after 17 months, the government has not taken any interest nor has it done anything to implement that agreement. For these reasons, the teachers' associations feel that a new strategy will have to be formulated, and agreed to boycott classes on the 30 November. If no steps are taken by the government to solve their problems, the teachers are prepared to boycott Teachers' Day, celebrated on 23 February, and other programmes connected with it.

Maoist-Unity

Ghatara Ra Bichar, 29 November

Sources say that a meeting was held between General Secretary Prachanda of the Maoists and General Secretary Prakash of the Unity Centre. The Unity Centre is the leftist party that is closest to the Maoists, and this meeting between the two of them has generated a lot of interest among other leftist parties. According to sources, the formation of a common front, and united action were topics of discussion. Since the two parties hold common views on many issues, it is presumed that the talks were fruitful and will be continued in future.

The Maoists are planning to continue their "class struggle" in the villages and implement it in the cities too. The Maoists believe that the Unity Centre will support their actions. This is the second meeting was between Prakash and Prachanda, both of whom are still underground.

Koirala invincible

Saptahik Binaasa, 1 December

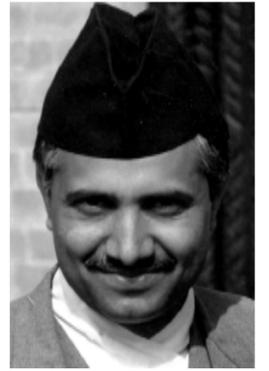
The recently concluded party elections of the Nepali Congress has infused new life into the party. Since people had already announced their candidacies for party president, Congress members thought the election would lead to a break-up of the party. But this did not happen. Instead, it seems that the grassroots workers and other party activists have sent a message to the leaders that division of the party should not take place at all and that the party should stay united. Giri Ja Prasad Koirala may not have been completely successful in providing direction or efficient leadership to the party, but the elections have shown that party members want him to continue as party leader. Party activists have strengthened Koirala's hand and made him invincible for the time being.

Koirala himself could be surprised by this verdict. Despite all the infighting and discrepancies in the election process, more than 68 percent of the party members voted for Koirala and his supporters. Ten percent were not clear about their choice, but in most cases Congress members joined the winning side. In places where they were not clear as to whom to support, it seems the Koirala camp swept the posts for district leadership. District presidents from the Koirala camp were seen to be more influential and powerful.

There were many who had never imagined such an outcome. Most thought that it would be 40 to 60 percent in Koirala's favour, and that with Krishna Prasad Bhattacharya's help Sher Bahadur Deuba would be able to weaken Koirala's position, but undecided voters proved this wrong.

People will decide

Nepali Patra, 1 December
(Excerpts from an interview with Nepali Congress spokesman, Nar Hari Acharya)



Q Deuba and his camp are saying that leadership of the party should be transferred to the younger generation. A Even before 1959, this was the way in which leaders of the Nepali Congress were elected. In the last convention Chiranjivi Wagle had stood for elections. Only in 1992 was a consensus reached. Everyone has the right to stand for elections. 1435 voters representing more than 4000 VDCs and towns will be present and whoever they want as party president will be elected. Concerning the issue of the young and the old, which generation did Wagle represent? The issue of leadership by any generation will be decided by the representatives.

Q Because of the infighting in the NC, the expectations of the people have not been fulfilled in these 10 years. What do you have to say?

A Not only the people's expectations, the expectations of the NC too have not been met. This is the truth but three general elections have been held and each time the people have found the NC the most capable and given it the maximum number of votes. From this we can see we have to become responsible and alert. We are going to review the past 10 years in the forthcoming convention. We are going to find and analyse our faults, where we went wrong and what our future plans are going to be and so on. The president has time and again asked that we review the past 10 years. This is one of the reasons to hold this convention.

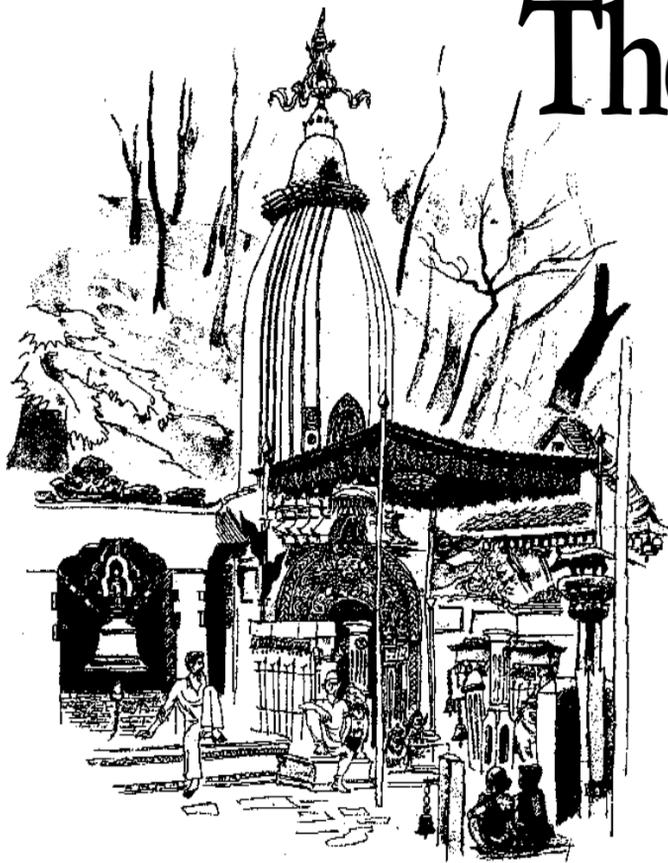
Q Will the question of one-man-one-post arise again in the convention?

A This is not a political issue but a personal one. This will happen according to the circumstances present. Sometimes we may have a situation of one-man-two-posts if necessary, while at other times we can go for one-man-one-post, and sometimes there may be no post at all. All this depends on political circumstances, necessities and compulsions.

Q Moving to a different topic, what is the opinion of the NC on the issue being raised nowadays, changes in the constitution?

A We have made our opinion public many times. We have said that if changes have to be brought about, then a complete and precise list of what needs to be changed should be presented. The NC has not prepared any list of what should not be changed. We are prepared to hold discussions with any party that feels that changes are necessary. But first we should get a list and only then will we present our views. The only reservation we have is that changes must be constitutional.

The temple of the rising sun



On a wooded hillside, south of Bhaktapur, is the fascinating and very popular temple of Surya Vinayak, the Sun Ganesh. Chosen by meticulous calculations of the court astrologers of the Licchavi King, Vishnu Deva Varma, many centuries ago, the site is so placed that the first rays of the rising sun strike the golden, masked image of the elephant-headed deity. By so doing, Surya the Sun God pays homage to Ganesh and seeks blessings for his day's journey across the heavens.

There must have been an artist among those astrologers because the site is outrageously lovely. There is a view across the roofs and temple towers of Bhaktapur to the great snows beyond, behind which the sun

rises. Immediately below the forested shrine are terraced fields through which the track to Surya Vinayak climbs dustily between old rest houses and a gentle village. The final ascent is up a stairway tunnelling through green.

A king gifted the ceremonial bell to Surya Vinayak, two devotees donated the intricately worked gilded lintel and a golden mask for the deity. I wonder who offered the pair of late Victorian water hydrants that stand on either side of the main shrine? They look incongruously at home among stone images of devotees and lions.

In recent years it has become fashionable to be married at Surya Vinayak. But the families who throng the temple are praying for the well-

In recent years it has become fashionable to be married at Surya Vinayak.



The shrine of Surya Vinayak, complete with golden lintel, bell and water hydrants.

being of their offspring for the God has a reputation for curing retarded children. The forests around the temple are known to

be rich in healing herbs. ♦
(Excerpted with permission from My Kind of Kathmandu, HarperCollins, 1994.)

Khagendra Sangroula

ON TRADITION AND CHANGE



Best known for his penetrating social criticism, Khagendra Sangroula is an independent leftist whose writings are deeply concerned with the social and political upheavals of our times. His most poignant stories and essays focus on the hard fact of exploitation, and on the difficulty of attaining justice. Sangroula often travels where few Nepali writers dare to venture: far into the remote hinterlands of the country. In his recent novel Junkirko Sargel, he tackles caste discrimination

head-on, examining the economic, social and personal devastation it wreaks in rural Dalit communities.

The story below displays a lighter side to Sangroula's oeuvre, though it raises prickly questions about change and progress. It displays the author's characteristic flair for high literary language mixed with colourful spoken dialect. The allegorical quality of the story makes it particularly suited to a younger readership.

The Bhoto Shirt

By chance, they met at the banyan and boohi tree—the tiny farmer and the wandering ascetic. At the end of the day, even as the sun sought shelter on the far side of the western hills, a few rays of light still remained suspended over this side. The farmer had returned from tilling the headman's fields, as in his father's and grandfather's time; the ascetic had arrived to perform the last rites of his day's wanderings. They both cupped their palms and drank heartily from the clear waters of the stone tap. Then they sat on a shaded platform, fanning the cool air.

"That's extremely old," said the wanderer, pointing at the farmer's bhoto shirt.

"Yes it is," the farmer replied. He placed his hands on the bhoto, as though the unknown wanderer might jump up and grab it.

"Take it off and throw it away," the wanderer said, smiling. He took out a new shirt from a bag, and held it up. "Here, I have this."

Two separate expressions stired in the farmer's face: one of fear, and the other of greed. "No." Stammering anxiously, he said, "I won't throw this away. And yet..." Clasp his bhoto with his right hand, he reached for the new shirt with his left hand.

The wanderer looked with disgust at the farmer's bhoto. He pinched his nose shut. "Tell me, doesn't that stink to you?"

"Why would it stink to me?"

"But brother—it stinks to me."

The farmer's bhoto was in fact quite dreadful: torn into strands, caked with dirt and grime, it had lines of lice crawling along its surface. It looked as though it wasn't from this age, but from the time of his grandfather.

"That's true," the farmer said, lending witness to this fact. "It is indeed from my grandfather's time. It covered my grandfather's back, and then my father's, and now mine—and after me..."

"It's become really old, hasn't it?"

"It has."

"So take it off and throw it away. And then..." The wanderer held up the nice new shirt, which fluttered attractively in the wind.

Still clasping his bhoto with one hand and reaching his other hand forward, the farmer said, "But this is a memento left by my ancestors. A token of love, a sign of compassion, a relic of their reverence."

The wanderer spoke in a harder tone: "Take it off and throw it away." He pinched his nose even more tightly, and looked as though he was trying to hold down the bile that was rising in his throat.

"I have to uphold my ancestors' honour," the farmer said proudly, as though the bhoto smelt of fragrant *rajanigandha* flowers. "This is the mark of my hope. This is the package of my aspirations. This is the symbol of my dhama. This is the fruit of my karma, the source of my cultural mores..."

"These are lies. They're delusions," the wanderer argued, raising his voice. "These are your three generations-long foolishness."

"The man's quite stubborn," murmured the astonished farmer in a voice so low that only he could hear. Then, filling his voice with a little force, he struck a combative pose, "You act like a clever man. Tell me: who are you?"

"I'm an ordinary person."

"You try to act quite clever."

"I don't know a lot of things, brother. But I'm sure of one thing."

"What?"

"That patched-together bhoto is a bundle of your patched-together delusions." Then, roaring like thunder, he cried, "Fool! Take off your stupidity and throw it away."

The nice new shirt kept fluttering in the wind. The farmer continued to clasp his bhoto with one hand while reaching for the shirt with the other. One of his hands was quaking in fear, and the other was desperate with greed.

"Go and bathe. Then throw that away and wear this."

The farmer finally went down to the tap. He rinsed a smooth stone, and put his bhoto on it with great care, the way a loving mother puts down a baby. Keeping his eyes glued to the bhoto, he hurriedly wet his body, and then at the speed of light he put the bhoto on again.

"You'll get this shirt only once you throw that away," said the wanderer, still pinching his nose shut in disgust.

"Baba! May I be allowed to pull that shirt on over this one," pleaded the farmer, his greedy hand thrust out.

The new shirt hung in the air. With the billow of the slow-blowing breeze, it danced slowly, slowly, in a mesmerising way. The farmer didn't dare reach for it. And would a river twist and turn just to come to a thirsty person? No, it didn't look like the shirt would come to him all by itself.

"I'll just pull it on over this bhoto, Baba. I have a strong wish that my son should wear this bhoto after my funeral."

Something burned like fire in the wanderer's eyes. "You're a fool! You're an idiot who thinks that a rotten corpse smells fragrant."

Afraid that he might leap on him and tear his bhoto to shreds, the farmer kept clasping his bhoto with a shaky, but crab-like grip. This bhoto was a priceless object, which must never, ever leave him. It was like an authentic form of life, and he was like its submissive shadow. At his wedding he had worn a fine *daura-suruwal*; but even as he sat at the ceremonial fire, this dirty, griny bhoto was stuck to his skin, beneath the fine *daura* top. At the time of the Dasain festivals, he always ordered a new pair of clothes, as befit his stature. But beneath the new clothes, this old

bhoto always remained. For fear that it might fall apart when squeezed, twisted, or pummeled, he never washed the bhoto. For fear that it might get lost if he hung it on a dresser, he never took it off when he slept. How could he throw away a bhoto that he had been saving with such love, such care, such attachment? "No," he said. "This is a reverence with which I can uphold my ancestors' honour. I won't throw this away even if I have to lose my own life."

"So you're not going to wear the new shirt?"

"Baba, I'll wear it. I'll just pull it on over this." Still clasping his bhoto with one hand, the farmer reached for the new shirt, and almost-almost touched it.

With a look of disgust on his face, the wanderer told a tale. "Lord Mahadev once asked—oh pig, will you go to heaven? The pig said—I wouldn't go, Lord! Hell is dearer to me. Understand, cow dung? You're a pig." Saying this, the wanderer stumped the farmer with a strike to the neck. Then, without turning back, he set on his path like a fast-sweeping storm.

Flat on the ground, the farmer just watched on.

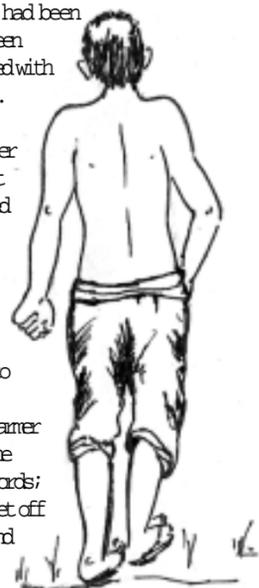
Later, much later, that bhoto-clad farmer got into a huge altercation with his headman. The headman's vest properties bordered the edge of the farmer's loin-cloth-sized land. The headman took over about one inch of his empty border. Well, then, the two of them got into an enormous row. The headman was brawny, like the legendary Bhimsen. The farmer was bird-like of body and impoverished of strength. Bhimsen lifted up the bird and duped him on the ground, then clattered him on the back, with fists like iron pestles. Then, pouncing on the farmer, he scratched him with his nails and teeth, and ripped his bhoto to shreds.

The tiny farmer, lying defeated in the mud, stood up flinching in pain. When his pain subsided, he looked down, and what did he see? Oh mother, death! Like rags hung on a rope, the threads of his bhoto hung off his body—in the front, to the behind, on this side, and on the other side.

He sat beneath some banyan and boohi trees, and studied, with his accursed, teary eyes—oh Lord! His bhoto had been destroyed. His truth and cultural mores had been destroyed. The shredded scraps were all covered with blood: there was nothing left to patch together.

Till now, four of the farmer's children had died of hunger. And his was a father's heart, after all; each time a child died, he released a torrent of tears. The mental anguish he felt now seemed more acute than if all his children had died at once. The bhoto that upheld his ancestors' honour was gone. He lifted the bhoto and looked at it with a soft, melted gaze, as though it were a mirror, and his soul's truth were quivering in it. As he looked on, the bhoto slipped from his hands and fell to the ground.

Paying his last respects to the bhoto, the farmer sighed a long, joyless and harassed sigh. Then he remembered the wandering ascetic's piercing words; and with his naked, blood-splattered back, he set off to find new clothes—walking slowly at first, and then progressively faster, faster, faster. ♦



ABOUT TOWN

FILMS

❖ **Nepali**
Aago - Shivdarshan
Basanti - Plaza 2
Chhoro - Goon (Kha) (520668), Plaza 1, Ranjana (221191)
Darpan Chhaya - Bishwa Jyoti (221837), Krishna (470090), Prithvi (online booking), Nava Durga (online booking), Goon (Ka) (520668), Ganga Chalchitra
 ❖ **Hindi**
Dragon - Ashok
Jwalamukhi - Tara (476092)
Kahin Pyaar Na Ho Jaaye - Goon (Ga), Manakamana, Metro
Mafia - Kumari (414932),
Mission Kashmir - Radha
Mohabbatein - Gopi (470090), Padma
 Online bookings at <www.nepalshop.com>



ART EXHIBITION

❖ **Reflections of Nature.** An exhibition of paintings by German artist Dagmar Mathes. Chiefly depicts impressions gathered during her stay in Nepal over six years and mostly from treks to Dolpo, Mustang, Manang, Solu Khumbu, Nubri and Tsum. The artist uses watercolour, acrylic and pigments from tumeric, saffron, cinnamon and nutmeg in paintings and collages made on Nepali handmade paper. 12-17 December, 9 am-5 pm. GTZ, Neer Bhawan, Sanepa. 470584
 ❖ **Carol Irvine Ceramics and the Art of the Lathe.** An exhibition by Dan Hogan at the Indigo Art Gallery, Naxal. Last date 10 December. 424303.
 ❖ **Etchings by Seema Sharma.** Seema Sharma's works on the Kumari are a result of a long fascination with religion and culture, inspired by a visit to the Living Goddess in Basantapur. Works focus on worship and festivals of Nepal. Open until 16 December. 11 am-6 pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited.



CHRISTMAS

❖ A wonderful day for children to spend time with Santa, get involved in games and fun at the AWON First New Millennium Annual Christmas Bazaar. Christmas gifts from among thousands of the best Nepali crafts and handmade products. 9 December, Saturday. 10 am-4 pm. Hotel Soaltee Garden and Megha Mahal Hall. Entry Rs 50, children under 12 free.

MUSIC

❖ **Jazz Sessions.** Live Jazz at The Jazz Bar, Hotel Shangrila. Featuring this month—a host of jazz bands including Elaine McInnes & Chris Masand with the Jazz Commission, the Swingtones, the Latin Lovers and others playing Cole Porter, Gershwin, Brubeck and Coltrane. Enjoy drinks from a bottomless cellar, gourmet food, coffee, cognac and cigars and hear... interpret Ella, Sarah, Louis. 412999.



CAMPAIGN

❖ **HIV/AIDS sensitisation program.** Closing of a week-long event to create awareness on HIV/AIDS in collaboration with @sian Artists through various programmes including artists' workshop, conferences, poster competition, documents and condom distribution. 8 December, Friday. Alliance Francaise, Thapathali. 242832.

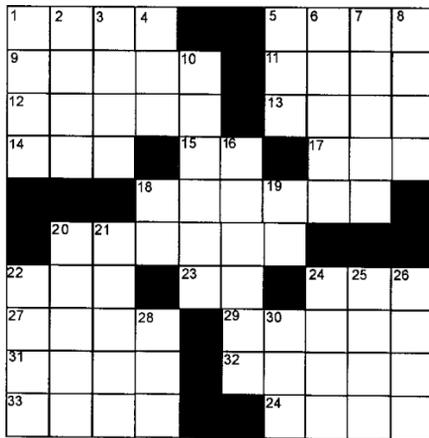
MARTIN CHAUTARI

❖ **Nepali classic literature discussion series: Parijat's Shirish Ko Phul.** Sangeeta Pandey and Ashutosh Tiwari will lead the discussion. Participation open to all. 12 December. Martin Chautari, Thapathali. Write or call for directions: chautari@mos.com.np/246065

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

QUICKWORD 10

by CROSS EYES



Across

1. Jailhouse blues (4)
5. Socialist exited (4)
9. Flaming *Nanglo* perhaps (5)
11. Of man, water everywhere (4)
12. Sticking out in Sofia (5)
13. Folks, gurus crib meetings (4)
14. Positive (3)
15. First Everest dude? (2)
17. Eastern stretchable time (3)
18. Danzig to the Polack (6)
20. Losers convey messages (6)
22. Debt wish, perhaps (3)
23. Died with Dodi (2)
24. Legit money launderer (3)
27. Weakest in the litter (4)
29. Water nymph (5)
31. Go forth, or multiply (4)
32. Protect the rook (5)
33. Eye the pigpen (4)
34. Leaves nest (4)

Down

1. Bathwater and sweetheart? (4)
2. Malarial fit (4)
3. Problems with pills (4)
4. Deadwood (3)
5. Serve by word (3)
6. Richard, painter (5)
7. Little keg (5)
8. Check (4)
10. We did uproot (6)
16. Reckless (6)
18. Joe (2)
19. Novascotia (2)
20. Boxer's numerals (5)
21. Diminutive (5)
22. Rainbow goddess (4)
24. Spaghetti greeting (4)
25. Cut or peel (4)
26. Puts the fathers together (4)
28. Biped digits (3)
30. Gathering of the month (3)

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.

QUICKWORD ANSWER 9



Out of 9 correct entries the lucky winner is **Dr RP Shrestha**

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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.....

NEPALI WEATHER



If you are complaining about the cold, just remember that if it weren't for the Himalayan barrier, it would be much colder in Kathmandu. The mountains prevent the northwesterly cold air mass and snowstorms blowing down from the plateau. Wednesday's satellite picture (above) shows a weak westerly disturbance over Afghanistan and Pakistan but these are unlikely to come our way, which means no winter rains that would have cleared the air. The current haze level covers the entire Gangetic basin up to an altitude of 12,000 ft. Thick fog till mid-morning will continue to cover the Trisuli Valley, Pokhara and Chitwan. Kathmandu will have cold hazy mornings and sunny afternoons with a slight rise in minimum temperature over the weekend.

KATHMANDU					
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	
23-02	23-03	23-03	22-02	22-02	

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HAPPENINGS

MADHU MANGAL SHRESHTHA

**YOUNG ARTISTS:** Students from St. Xavier's School performing the Nepali opera Asatoma Sadgunya during its golden jubilee celebrations during which Their Majesties the King and Queen were present.

MIN BAURACHARYA

**MOUNTAIN FILMS:** Director of Eco-Himal Kurt Luger, Prime Minister Koirala, Kathmandu Mayor Shapit, and Himal South Asian editor Karak Mani Dixit listen to Ranjita Limbu, director of the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival, at the festival inaugural.

MIN BAURACHARYA

**ELECTRIC ATTRACTION:** Nepal-made transformers draws some curious visitors during the 3rd International Electric Exhibition at the Bhrikuti Mandap.

MIN BAURACHARYA

**VIEW FROM THE FRONT:** Heads on the stage, including that of PM Koirala, at the special convention of the Teachers' Association on 5 December.**SALIL SUBEDI**

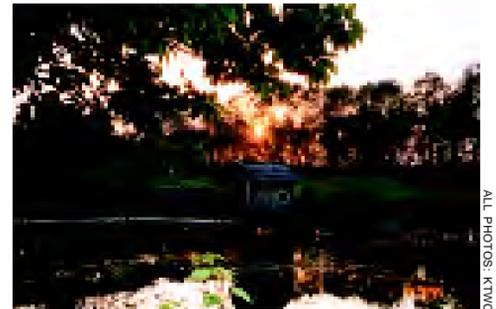
The birds haven't let us down this year. Nepal's best wetlands and biggest man-made reservoir are teeming with bird life, unlike the stricken tourism industry. Thousands of birds, from as far as Siberia and Spain, have flocked to the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve to winter and breed in the 175 sq km expanse of riverine forest and wetlands.

Set up in 1976 to protect the Ama—the rare wild water buffalo—Kosi Tappu also shelters an astonishing 420 bird species, both migratory and resident, 514 plant species, and the endangered Gangetic dolphin in the lower reaches. Running north of the Kosi barrage on the Nepal-India border in eastern Nepal, this area was recognised as a wetland in 1987, after the reservoir formed by the barrage across the Sapta Kosi became a favourite haunt for birds.

The Ama is still endangered. This year's official park census records 146 pure-bred, and 101 crossed between the local semi-wild cows and the wild buffalo. Of the pure-bred, there are 57 male, 53 female, 17 under one year-old, and 19 between one and two years old. The count was carried out only by specialists who can differentiate between pure and hybrid buffalos. "It's a tedious task, but for eyes long trained on the species, it's only a matter of time," claims Basudev Aryal, ranger of the Park.

The same goes for birdwatching. Ornithologists get excited about looking for rare species, but a first birding trip to Kosi Tappu is a bit much for an amateur birdwatcher. By the end of the day, repetitive sightings and an overload of Latin and common names can have you in a flap. Naturalists sighted more than 35,000 ducks of 20 different species in 1999—teals, godwits, bar-headed geese, grebes and others. The wetlands are also a paradise for egrets, storks, curlews, kingfishers, water coots, snipes, sandpipers, jacanas, cranes, terns, and herons.

Bird and buffalo country



ALL PHOTOS: KTMW



Wake-up calls come early in the three camps located in the villages outside the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve. Eager birdwatchers head for the Sapta Kosi, from where wooden or inflatable rafts take them across the river to the park border. If you are



planning an independent trip, be sure to have company and camping equipment to pitch camp beside the park office outside the boundary. A trip down the river is full of sighting possibilities. If you are on a package tour offered by the resorts, a naturalist-guide will tell you about the species. You can also get off the raft at places to take a short walk into the not-too-dense scrub and jungle. The only dangers are the aggressive Ama, the Ghariyal, and the rare Python. It's wise to follow the guides on forest fashion—bright colours are not for the jungle, wear browns and greens that merge with the bush. And never venture into the forest alone.

The Reserve is a popular day-trip for noisy picnickers from Dharan, Biratnagar, Itanagar and Lahan. But, they're more likely to scare our feathered friends than take the time to observe them. The reserve is easily accessible: a 45-minute flight from Kathmandu to Biratnagar, then a one-and-a-half hour drive north gets you to the park. Travelling overland is equally exciting—the drive along the East-West Highway highlights the contrast between the mountains and mid-hills, and the plains. If you are at Chitwan National Park, Kosi Tappu is only a six-hour drive east. The river route is strictly for tough whitewater rafters who arrive here after a gruelling 8-10 days down the Sun Kosi. Three resorts offer the only tourist-standard accommodation in the area. Not too many tourists make their way here on their own, so the resorts only offer package deals.

But this ecosystem is in peril through rampant poaching. Down south, where the park area adjoins the Indian border, both Nepalis and Biharis trap birds. Some hunters wear a pot on their head, with small holes for the eyes, and glide slowly

A hike in fees at the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve has businesses and villages worried.

across the waters to catch surprised ducks and geese. The birds end up at border restaurants and other Indian hotels. In the nearby Indian village of Bipur and the Nepali town of Bantabari, there are signs that read: 'Birds from Nepal sold here'. 'Many rare species have already been wiped out that way,' says Sanju Karki, a naturalist.

But it is not really the number of birds that has entrepreneurs and promoters worried these days. It's the sudden hike in fees for activities related to Kosi Tappu. As per the new rates a wooden raft has to pay Rs 500 (earlier free), a synthetic raft Rs 1000 (earlier free), and the boatman Rs 100 (up from Rs 10). For foreigners, entry into the Reserve is Rs 500 (up from Rs 310), Nepalis Rs 100 (up from Rs 20) per day. The charges for vehicles are also up from the earlier flat rate of Rs 100—now you pay Rs 1000 for vehicles with four passengers, Rs 2,000 for jeeps and Rs 2,500 for bigger vans. (The last one at least has dissuaded many picnickers.) 'With few tourists and such high fees we might be compelled to close,' says Sanju Karki, manager of Kosi Tappu Wildlife Camp in Prakashpur.

The villagers too are troubled. 'Our village has benefitted because businesses employed our youth, and constructed schools for us,' says Nayan Achikary, a primary school teacher at Prakashpur, pointing to three school buildings built by tourism entrepreneur Bharat Basnet who owns one of the three resorts.

Park ranger Basudev Aryal has the last word: 'This place was never meant to be open for tourist delights. It was set aside for the conservation of rare fauna. Those who want to come here to see rare species will have to pay.' ♦



sharp



Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

News that an Islamic court in Saudi Arabia has sentenced a passenger who used his mobile phone during a domestic flight to 20 lashes with a wet camel-hide whip, is a wake-up call for our own legislators to update Nepali laws regarding the use of handphons in restricted areas.

Having once observed the Minister of Telepathy and Communications take a call on his mobile phone which rang while he was at the podium delivering a keynote address in the Hotel Yaketyiak on the theme "Nepal and the WTO, Problems and Prospects", I must admit that this is a sign that our nation has finally arrived at the doorstep of the information revolution. But it cannot be free-for-all, there has to be some regulation, and we can immediately set an example by banning the use of mobiles in the men's loo of the House of Representatives.

Having once had the opportunity of using the facilities in the august house, I noticed that it is invariably just as the honourable member steps upon the podium for the anointment ceremony that his cellphone will emit a cheerful warble.

What follows is an intricate series of sequenced manoeuvres that involve a) untying two sets of *surwal* knots, b) clasping the hem of the *chura* under the chin, even as c) the mobile is held in position by one uplifted shoulder to the right ear, while d) hopping around on one leg like Peter Sellers as the barometric pressure builds up. All members of the male species will readily attest that such emergencies wreak havoc on aim, and if there are a sufficient number of such near-misses then members will inadvertently be raising a big stink in the house. Hence the law declaring loss out of bounds for MP mobiles.

As we all know, Nepal has some splendid laws, the

world's best, in fact. But we have a slight problem implementing them. There is no point just banning mobile use in restricted areas, it has to be accompanied by a serious deterrent. And here we have a lot to learn from the Saudis who have no problems at all with implementation because they are world leaders in the highly specialised field of amputation jurisprudence. For example, you never hear of Sheikhs adulterating their country's crude oil

Mobilising the nation



exports with 30 percent seawater because the punishment for doing so is on-the-spot dismemberment of the hose in question, or a frontal lobotomy, or both. Now, if we had deterrent like that you can bet your bottom carburettor that Mr Krishna Upreti of the New Sita Oil Stores in Parsa who admits to committing adultery with our nation's fuel supply would quickly mend his ways.

We greet the Ministry of Imobility for having finally decided to turn the humble

handphone into a handy multi-purpose tool for national development. The new phones can also serve as:

- pollution detectors
- remote controls to change traffic lights
- microwave transmitters to heat tea at work
- stunguns to punish ministers who get calls on mobiles while delivering keynote addresses
- lie-detectors (beeps when pointed at the podium)
- a global positioning system to precisely locate white plate cars on Saturdays
- bugging devices to eavesdrop on MPs breaking the law in the loo. ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

TSERING

Tsering Ritar Sherga likes Iranian films. He likes their simple stories, rich detail, and lyricism, especially for the strong budgets and censorship constraints they emerge from. "They remind me of RK Narayan novels," says the 32-year-old maker of *Mukurub*.

Mukurub is Nepal's official entry to the Academy Awards in the foreign-language category, but before you get too excited, Tsering adds it has yet to get through the selection committee that determines the final five in the fray. "There are a lot of good movies being made around the world," he says modestly. Still, it's not bad going for a man who five years ago couldn't find work in Kathmandu.

Tsering first got interested in cinema, with a capital C, as a student at Delhi University. Although it was hard to come by international cinema in Delhi, classics like Hitchcock's *Ryoko* got his juices flowing, and in 1992, he found himself at IIMC in Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia. There, he learnt about still photography, making videos, writing scripts and shooting on 16mm film. And, of course, watched a lot of movies.

Returning to Nepal was unpleasant initially. For a year, Tsering couldn't find any work or meet anyone in the film industry. Frustrated, he just went out, bought a camera and made his first independent film, *The Spirit Doesn't Come Anymore* in 1996-97. The award-winning documentary, about an old Tibetan shaman and his son in Tsering's own village outside Pokhara, is a wonderful exploration of the place of a spiritually charged individual in a



SONAM SHERGA

changing world.

A stray news item about a female spirit medium killing a patient instead of healing her had caught his eye. Puzzled and inspired by the incident, he wrote a story. A casual conversation with writer Kesarj Tseten resulted in the screenplay for *Mukurub*. Tsering had barely begun raising funds, when NHK stepped in.

And so we have "the first Nepali art film". Tsering is unfazed by suggestions that *Mukurub* panders to a Western audience. "Films should be honest, true to the maker's intention. Making a film that's different from the norm in Nepal doesn't automatically mean I'm targeting a Western market." As for Nepali cinema, Tsering wishes directors and producers took their work more seriously and watched

more international cinema. "There's talent and potential, but the social structure doesn't really support young independent filmmakers. Unlike Iran, Nepal doesn't even have a film committee that funds cinema or nurtures raw talent."

So what's Tsering's bread and butter? His firm, Mila Productions, works on other people's projects. He has a few stories in mind for his next feature, but it will take time to develop a story and then raise money. Documentaries, features, song-and-dance extravaganzas, he doesn't rule anything out. He isn't what he calls a "celluloid snob" and is eager to work in digital media if issues of distribution can be resolved. He promises, though, that whatever his next film, it will be as personal and deeply felt as *Mukurub*. We can't wait. ♦

AMBASSADOR WHISKEY

MAYOS