



SUBHAS RAI

EXCLUSIVE

Palace and Paramilitary

After five months of ping-pong, King Birendra has approved the ordinance for setting up a crack paramilitary force to be deployed to tackle the Maoists. We hear it took over 20 meetings between the Prime Minister and a hard-to-convince king before all the questions were cleared. Even though there was no official word on the ordinance till Wednesday, we were told that only "formalities" remained. Nevertheless, there is word that some last minute changes have been made, what they are will be clear only when the *sarkari* Gazette is published next week. The earlier draft was silent on arms procurement; the final version is said to define a procedure. The draft had a clause allowing the armed police to search any premises or vehicle if they had reason to suspect wrongdoing. We're not sure if that has been retained or erased in the seesaw between Narayanhiti and Singha Darbar.

Immobile?

The Supreme Court is hearing a case filed by employees of Nepal Telecommunication Corporation (NTC) seeking to bar the Nepal Telecommunication Authority (NTA) from issuing a license to a private mobile operator. The employees are banking on provision 22.2.1 in the Telecom Act 1997, which says no other licence will be granted for five years for operating the same telecom service. On the other hand, the same law also states that a license can be granted if "additional service" is required. The Telecom Policy (1999) is clear on the government's intention to have two mobile telecom service operators, one of them the NTC. Officials at NTA told us NTC was granted a "preferential" licence without having to go through the nine-month bidding process. They also argue NTC employees could have sued earlier if their intentions had been anything other than to delay the arrival of private-sector competition. Meanwhile, the NTC has suspended issue of new mobiles due to "congestion" of its network and plans to add capacity with another 10,000 lines within four months. The Corporation has also sought bids for setting up 50,000 mobiles to be distributed along the highways from Kakarvitta in the east to Pokhara in the country's centre.



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WHICH YOUNG TURK?

With a race for leadership coming up in Pokhara, the Nepali Congress may finally be evolving into a true political party.

BINOD BHATTARAI

Individually, the membership in the ruling party reads like a political Nepali Who's Who. Among them are leaders who've spent the best years of their lives in jail for the sake of the people, technocrats with unrivalled experience and specialisation, grassroots workers risen up the ranks, and even Panchayat-era politicians made good. As a party, however, the 50-year-old Nepali Congress is still struggling to emerge as an entity that is not constantly crippled by power struggles at the top.

Two weeks ago, the party, now headed for its 10th General Convention on 19-22 January to be held in Pokhara, staged its umpteenth drama. A recap: as Nepal was recovering from the rampage over what was not said by a young Indian actor, a Congress faction—instead of rallying behind its government to restore calm—made a grab for power. By the end of the week the rebels were back licking their wounds and the NC government of Girija Prasad Koirala went back to work, pretending nothing had happened.

All eyes are now on Pokhara, where history of sorts is going to be made as delegates from all over gather. Whereas in the past the elected party president nominated all the members to the NC's Central Working Committee (CWC), this time half the members will be elected from

the floor. (Nominating the other half will still be the prerogative of the president).

The election of half the delegates is sure to transform the inner dynamics of the ruling party. To begin with, the relative strengths of the different factions and factional leaders will be cleared than in the earlier situation where the party president chose one and all. Also, it is not clear how the relationship between those who have been nominated and others who have made it on the strength of votes cast will evolve.

It is likely, however, that this first time election for CWC membership will point to the likely successor(s) after the septuagenarian dons Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai retire. This would be much better, and a more 'democratic' process, than having to choose successors only from among those already anointed by the presiding don.

The Congress has always been a president's party. Delegates to the General Convention elected him, and he in turn nominated the entire CWC.

A CWC appointment, meanwhile, has always been seen as the first step towards a ministership. All this may change after Pokhara, making it possible to gauge a leader's popularity among the party rank and file.

For years a subject of ridicule for its inability to hand over power to the second rung, the NC realises well that Bhattarai

(77) and Koirala (78) cannot go on forever. Bhattarai, the now-you-see-him-now-you-don't leader of the anti-Koirala camp, is actually semi-retired. Even Koirala has set a deadline for himself. "I will quit both positions within three years," says the prime minister and party president in *Himal Khabarpatrika's* forthcoming issue. "The younger generation must be more patient."

Laughably, that younger generation is itself in its mid- to late-fifties. But even then they quarrel like boys (and a girl—there is Shailaja Acharya) over a new toy. In fact, Bhattarai and Koirala have borne the burden of leadership mainly because there

has been no clear front-runner among the 'youthful' wannabes. The Pokhara convention may be regarded as the primaries for the leadership round among this second rung, where the wheat will be sifted from the chaff.

Among the top leaders in this generation are Ram Chandra Poudel, Sher Bahadur Deuba and Shailaja Acharya.

WHICH YOUNG TURK?, p6 ➡

Earthquake coming



IMAGES OF A CENTURY

"At exactly 24 minutes and 22 seconds past 2 o'clock in the afternoon, a great rumbling was heard deep in the earth and with that began the earthquake of 2 Magh 1990 [15 January 1934]. Because of the strange sound from down below, at first no one knew what was happening. Then the land moved like waves in the water. It seemed at first that the earthquake was moving east to west. Then the ground seemed to twist and turn, and buildings and monuments began to topple over... Houses collapsed with sounds like cannon shots. The dust made everything dark... Thousands were crushed to death under the rubble; thousands others were injured; the soldiers parading in Tundikhel could not stand and crouched on the ground; a portion of the Tundikhel to the east ruptured and water erupted. Just then, Dharabaha and Ghantaghar both broke into pieces and fell down like a sawed-down tree..."—From *Nepalko Mahabbukampa* (1990 Saal) by Brahma Shumsher JB Rana, 1935.

One of the most visible legacies of the Great Quake of 1934 is today's New Road. Seen in the picture taken from Basantapur Darbar in 1936 is a section of the street that was widened while reconstruction was taking place. Rana Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher named the road after himself and had his statue installed at its western end.

(See also: Waiting for the Big one, p 11,12)

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PAKAUDA POLITICS

Last Sunday, Prime Minister and Nepali Congress president, Girija Prasad Koirala, had his party MPs for high-tea. The same evening, Koirala's competitor and leader-in-waiting Sher Bahadur Deuba invited his loyalists over for dinner. Apparently, ruling party faction-leaders seem to have come to the conclusion that the way to the hearts of parliamentarians is through their stomachs. No wonder, really, as their tribe can stomach almost anything. From chicken-legs to leg-pulling, anything goes. Everything seems fair game in the ruling party these days.

Those who struggled for a multi-party system hadn't quite bargained for this multiple party politics of non-stop partying. When the Nepali Congress parliamentary party enacted the farcical no-confidence motion last week against the leadership of Girija Prasad Koirala, the only ingredient missing was the five-star safe-house for captive MPs pioneered by Bam Dev Gautam in the bad old days of the hung parliament. Otherwise, it was a tiresome replay of the same uncertainty and instability even though we have a lower house where one single party—the Nepali Congress—is in absolute majority. This time round, MPs only jumped the camp-fence instead of party fences. Some consolation.

At a time when everyone is feeling the need for all political forces reaching a consensus over issues of common national interest, the petty infighting in the ruling party is not only distracting, but downright dangerous. Its tragic consequences were seen in the last week of December. When the capital was burning, one group of ruling party MPs was walking to the parliamentary party secretariat to register their no-confidence motion. The other group, presumably, was chalking out plans to counter this challenge to Koirala's leadership. Deuba was baking his separate cake, while Koirala-loyalists were trying to fry their own pakaudas. None were interested in the fire outside the kitchen that had started consuming the whole country.

Prime Minister Koirala, or his challenger Deuba, do not seem to have realised that communal conflict, if not handled properly, will prove to be even more dangerous than the Maoist insurgency. A hill-plains divide puts a question mark over the very survival of Nepal as we know it. The ruling party does not seem to have realised that if there is no kitchen, they can't cook their *khichadi*, neither together nor separately.

One reason for the lack of cohesion in the ranks of the Nepali Congress could be its ideological confusion. The slogan of democracy, socialism and nationalism has outlived its utility for the party of B.P. Koirala. Nepali Congress, as it stands today, is neither democratic in its functioning nor socialistic by conviction. Its nationalism has degenerated into Panchayat-style chauvinism. The party must find what it stands for. Only then will it be able to maintain its relevance.

On the surface of it, there seems almost nothing in common between faction-leaders Sher Bahadur Deuba and, let's say, Ram Chandra Poudel. Deuba swears by the market, has his eyes on mega-dams and finds nothing wrong in associating himself with the likes of Khum Bahadur Khadka and Bijaya Gachhedar. Poudel, on the other hand, still goes by Gandhi's self-reliance, quotes Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* with stars in his eyes, and tries to maintain a safe distance between himself and Govinda Raj Joshi. The question then is: why are they together in the same party? Bhattarai and Koirala aren't for ever. It is these middle-aged youth leaders who have to learn to chart their own different courses. Like-minded politicians will then get on board, and the country will have something to choose from.

We have said it before, and we say it once again, it is time for the Nepali Congress to formally bifurcate instead of wasting all the political energy of the country in fighting each other in the same party. Will that happen any time soon? Don't bet on it, watch this space instead. To be continued, as usual.

LONG MARCH TO NOWHERE

The dawning of the hour of the Peace March (Revolutionary) bodes ill for the lazy amongst our leaders and would-be leaders. The call of the hour is walk, walk, and then walk some more—for peace, which we won't see in the near future, and spouting messages of hope we are beginning not to believe in. Why does it take something like the chaos with which we ushered in the new Gregorian millennium to bring our self-righteous many to their feet? And it could be argued that it's fitting punishment that those who either fanned the flames, or did nothing to stop the idiocy, should be made to inhale the dust and carbon monoxide. First we fiddle while the Valley burns, then we go on *padayatras* weeping crocodile tears. As a species, with stunning regularity, we seem to be prone to missing the forest for the trees. Sanity, change and good governance are a long way off, but not down this road.



Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Poudel worn out after a peace rally.

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STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL

Look back in sadness



**My storehouse having
Burnt down
Nothing obscures the view
Of the bright moon**

-Masahide

down through history, Kathmandu evolved as an important entrepot for Tibeto-Gangetic commerce. For a trader, tolerance and humility come with the territory, which is why the world over mercantile sophistication makes for an urbane and cultured citizenry. No wonder, even high-caste Newars are generally bereft of what Prof Dor Bahadur Bishta chose to call *bahunistic* bigotry.

And this is why the old towns of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur remained relatively calm during December-end display of mob fury in the Valley. If a *Dhoti*-clad Madhesi and a wool-capped Pahadi could warm themselves from the same tyre-fire (see photograph in this column last week) it could happen only in Asan or Mangalbazar or Chyamasingh.

Such a culture of accommodation is increasingly being challenged by the venality of politicians, the vacuity of the intelligentsia, and the vulgarity of the media. Most of the members of today's Nepali power-elite have brought the baggage of biases from their rural backgrounds.

Our politicians certainly share more of the blame for the conflagration. Not one of them stood up to be counted when adversity paid a call on Kathmandu society on 27 December. The minister for 'communications' chose to follow street rumours and asked for an apology from a Hindi film actor! While Kathmandu burnt, Nepali Congress dissidents marched on Singha Darbar to register their lack of confidence in Girija Prasad Koirala. Comrade Madhav Kumar Nepal did ask us to beware of those who would fish in muddy waters, but what of his party's student wing, which was actively involved in roiling the waters in the first place?

The self-proclaimed Maoists too failed to rise to the occasion. In

characteristic display of Marx's "rural idiocy", Dr Baburam Bhattarai and Comrade Prachanda allowed the peasant's pettiness and parochialism prevail over the politics of social accommodation. How do they expect to take the whole nation ahead?

The very professionals and 'intellectuals' who now piously join rallies and carry sombre banners calling for social harmony remained firmly indoors the whole week that the capital was taken over by the lumpen brigade. None, not even one to cite as an exception, came out against the insane jingoism of the day.

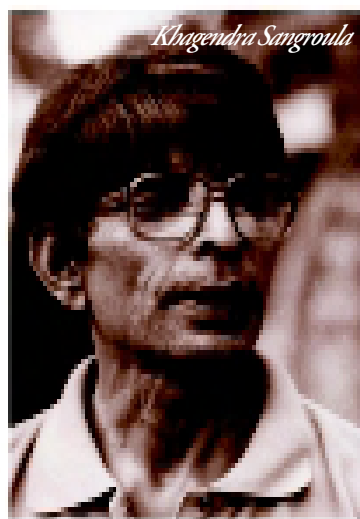
It turned out writers had not outgrown their Panchayat-infused knee-jerk hatred of India and Indians. The wonder of it all was to see Kishor Nepal and Khagendra Sangraula—two gifted penmen of the right and left, respectively—condoning the Hritihik

have been misplaced.

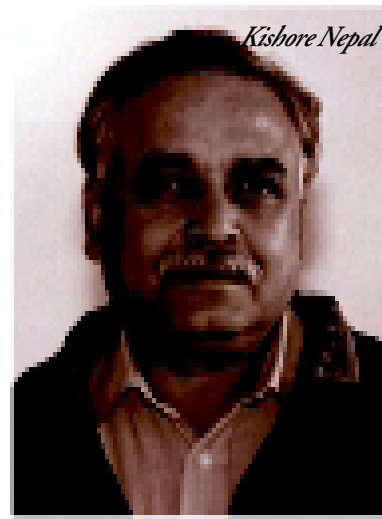
Through its incendiary coverage, the press poured generous quantities of *ghiu* into the fire started by politicians, encouraging under-educated youth to wreak mayhem. It was the private sector media that disappointed most, for the broadsheet dailies and FM stations fell upon the post-Hritihik scenario like flies upon a dung pile. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr of the US Supreme Court once wrote: "The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing panic." But that was what the Kathmandu press did, and it needs to be condemned for that.

The editors shouted fire, all right. They gave prominence to a patent plant, printed coloured reportage, and were unwilling to qualify the false Hritihik quote with a simple 'alleged'. By playing jingoistic songs non-stop, the fledgling FM stations

ratcheted up the insane rage of the goondas. As a result, anyone who 'looked' Indian was fair game. A dark-hued fellow journalist, whose surname itself is 'Newar', was chased down the main thoroughfare by a mob that took him for an Indian. A Bahun milkman was nearly burnt alive in Baneshwar



Khagendra Sangraula



Kishore Nepal

bashing and its dark fallout. The eminences were celebrating lawlessness and vandalism, no less. Mr Nepal saw in the mob violence "an awakening of national pride", while Mr Sangraula saluted the vandals who set fire to a cinema hall as "flag-bearers of Nepali pride and honour". One was left wondering, looking at the pyrotechnics of the (pahadi Bahun-dominated) national press, whether bahunism and bigotry go together. The belief that Nepal's media scene had advanced in the last decade of democracy turns out to

for the same reason.

The lesson to be learnt from the disaster of end-December is clear. Evidently, the foundation of Nepali nationalism is still shallow. Our much-vaunted tolerance is fragile. The social harmony of the surface is wafer-thin. Deep down, we still harbour shards of hatred for each other. If that is so, then it was perhaps to the good that the pus was allowed to flow. If we are indeed shaken out of our complacency, then perhaps the scars on the psyche of Nepalis of Tarai-origin will have been worth it. ♦

On bandhs

bandhs and general strikes are the ultimate weapons of citizens to express dissatisfaction in a peaceful and democratic way. They are protest methods we use to boycott work, march, make a speech or two and shout slogans to express our displeasure, instead of breaking each other's limbs or skulls. By providing a peaceful outlet such as that, a society channels protests into civilised and non-violent forms.

However, general strikes can be misused as they have often been in Nepal. After the spontaneous street protests during the 1990 People's Movement, most general strikes here have since degenerated into coercion, intimidation and violence. Streets are deserted and shops down their shutters usually because of fear of retaliation than genuine support for the strike call. This is counter-productive even for strikers, because the entire protest exercise leaves the impression that it is not voluntary even when there may be some genuine support for the cause. The organisers may claim that a bandh is "successful" because the streets were deserted, and the government may say it was "peaceful" because there were no "untoward incidents", but usually it is neither. Both are simply suffering from self-congratulatory illusions. Given a free choice Nepali people are smart enough to decide what they support and what they don't.

Numerous surveys in media have now proven that most urban Nepalis are fed up of bandhs, and want to see an end to them. So, why not declare a moratorium on all bandhs for a year and see what happens. Most people are going to welcome it because it will mean industry, trade, education and normal life will not be periodically disrupted. We have imported this form of protest from the north Indian heartland and Bangladesh, which have become famous for their violence-prone shutdowns. There still haven't been week-long hartals here, but, with the two-day strike last week, we seem to be getting there too. We have also imported a political culture that equates a bandh with the exercise of democratic rights, so it may not be possible to do away with them completely right away. But we can bring some order, accountability and common sense to bandhs. First we have to be clear on the



Freedom does not mean the freedom to deprive the public of its freedoms, including the freedom to disagree.

definition of a bandh:

- it should be directed by legitimate demands;
- it should be voluntary; and
- it should be peaceful.

A bandh cannot be a cheap substitute for a programme of action to achieve something. But that is exactly what it has become—announce a bandh through a press statement and a three-wheeler going around town with a loudspeaker, and a conditioned public will comply by staying off the streets because they don't want their motorcycles smashed or their shops stoned. This violates the basic freedom of citizens and dilutes the importance of the issue because it is enforced by fear.

Our country has ground to a halt for 34 days in the past five years, with estimated cumulative losses to the tune of Rs 1.3 billion. Who paid the price? Besides the country's economy, manufacturing, tourism, shops and businesses, it is the ordinary citizen who faces immediate hardship. The sick and emergency medical cases, students who want to study, daily wage-earners, the self-employed, small shopkeepers, and tourists all suffer. The affluent can get by. Top government officials travel around

under police escort, and the main organisers of the strike are generally under custody or directing it from off the streets. If they get their demands fulfilled they gain, though that has almost never been the case. About all they get to do is create a public nuisance to embarrass current rulers and massage their own egos. An opposition which calls a bandh is only returning the favour, because when it was in the opposition the present government perhaps did the same thing. This eternal tit-for-tat neither proves the righteousness of a cause nor does it imply the consent of the people. It is a cynical use of a threat of violence by politicians for whom the end justifies the means. We have to call a halt to the chain reaction of bandhs and counter-bandhs and arrest the epidemic of forced strikes before it tears the fabric of our economy beyond repair.

It has been argued that in a democracy, people have a right to protest. Fair enough. But, by the same token, in a democracy you cannot coerce people to protest for you either. Bandh organisers argue that their cause is legitimate and that a general strike is the only way to put pressure on a ruling party to listen to their demands. Again, that could be true if people closed their shops and didn't bring their vehicles out without

fear of a reprisal. Most citizens or students groups that perhaps should be at the forefront of challenging the bandh culture because it disrupts their lives or affects their studies are either cowed down by the threat of retaliatory violence, or are in some way allied to one or other of the myriad political parties. The time has come, therefore, to adopt some basic norms and guidelines for bandhs in Nepal.

Only the political entities and groups actually calling the bandhs should be the ones to make the sacrifices and bear the self-inflicted pains for the cause they believe in—not the general public. If they are not prepared to make that sacrifice, then you can be sure that the cause is not worthwhile, and no one else should be made to suffer.

The target of a bandh should be the party in a position to do something about it, not innocent citizens, schools, colleges, trade and industries. Everyone not responsible for redressing a grievance should be left out. Why hold the entire country to ransom to further the aims of a political party? A right not to participate in a bandh is as important as the right to, and that must be respected. Not everyone agrees with every cause.

A bandh is a very serious

expression of a group's opposition to existing policy or certain state of affairs, it is not a frivolous act and cannot be taken lightly. It is the bandh organiser's responsibility to keep it peaceful, be in complete control of the actions of its cadre on the streets, be accountable for the damage to private and public property, and compensate wages and earnings lost. A few public interest litigation cases will do wonders in hammering home the principle of accountability, and sending a message to all political parties.

epidemic of unpredictable bandhs and allow people to plan their lives.

Or take the matter of forced "chakka jams". These are not an acceptable form of protest, and a government that cannot ensure the smooth flow of vehicles and public transport probably isn't serious about governing. Nobody has the right to block the freedom of movement of fellow citizens—even in a democracy. The anarchy in our



MIN BAJRACHARYA



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Nepal's parliamentary democracy currently provides enough political space for everyone to be heard. There are alternatives to bandhs, and these should be explored since in most cases they will actually be more effective in addressing the grievance. Some suggested alternatives:

- Make full use of the media for public debate.
- Organise protest meetings and rallies of party members.
- Ceremonially hand over protest notes and memoranda of grievances.
- Hold press conferences, and issue media statements.
- Wear black bands, wave banners, flags and placards.
- Initiate boycotts and similar actions.

Even if bandhs are forced on the public, the following sectors should not be affected: pharmacies, hospitals, clinics, eating-places, hotels, public and private transport, electricity, water, garbage collection, communication and phone services.

And if bandhs there must be, why not have them on Saturdays? Seriously, this is not as crazy as it sounds since it is traditional here to have auspicious days designated for every milestone in life. It may be a good use of a non-productive day to further a cause one believes in. This will also bring some order into the lives of Nepalis dislocated by the

highways when traffic is blocked for days because locals take the law into their own hands after an accident only shows a breakdown in state authority and capability.

Any government worth its salt must develop an operating procedure to handle bandhs. The police, crowd control, information handling, emergency services like fire, and medical help—all need professionalism and training. Municipal ward representatives and officials should be included in these efforts. In the end, the maturity of a nation and its leaders is shown by the form protests take in that country and by the orderly process it has developed to address grievances. When our political leaders start behaving like anarchists, can you blame the citizens for following in their methods? A general strike is an extreme means of communicating grievances. Unfortunately, it is often the voice of a loud minority that purports to speak for the silent majority.

Nepal needs to tone down the decibel level of its protests so that the saner voices of our usually silent majority are not drowned out in the din. ♦

(Padma Jyoti is Chairman of Jyoti Group of Companies, former President of FNCCI and presently Vice President of SAARC Chamber of Commerce & Industry.)

YO NEPAL HO
Let me first congratulate you for such a wonderful newspaper. I have been reading every issue of the Nepali Times. And I had to write to you after reading the last issue (29 December 2000-4 January 2001).
I work in the US as a molecular biologist. Every year I try to come home and be with my family and friends. And when I get back to the States my Nepali friends always ask me about Nepal—some of them have not been back here for over a decade. It is relatively easy to give them parcels of sukuti and chiura and tell them how their moms and dads are, but I find it so hard to tell them about the condition of Nepal. This year though I decided to take copies of

the late-December issues of Nepali Times and let them read for themselves.

Of course, they will find it funny as well as sad reading the Hrithik Roshan story. I know their exact



reaction to this—"Are we stupid?" The article on "Journey to Maoland" will make them worry about the future of Nepal. Are we getting ourselves into a civil war? After reading "Symbol of Nepali

nationhood", they will probably ask yet another question—"Will the King save our country?" They will also figure out that Nepal has no planning whatsoever and the Melamchi project is a clear example of this chaos. And the editorial itself will give them a clear view of what is going on in this so-called peaceful Himalayan kingdom.

And there you have it, the whole past, present and future of Nepal in one single issue of Nepali Times. A newspaper cannot get better than this. Hopefully, next year when I come back, I will find such an issue again.

Dibesh Karmacharya
Princeton, USA

LETTERS

STILL NO MAIL
You've got mail, maybe, and so do I, sometimes. I am a foreigner living in Kathmandu for the past 15 months. I have sent and received many packages and letters to and from the USA and Italy. Most of these parcels came and left Nepal by hand carrier exactly because of what you mentioned in your article (#23).

Last week the organisation I work for sent out a newsletter with a circulation of about 400 recipients, 385 of whom are outside of Nepal. We decided to take the time and bear the extra expense to find people travelling overseas to post it from a foreign country. Mission

accomplished; we covered Southeast Asia from Australia, North America from the USA, and Europe from Germany. I have already received notice from people who received our newsletter in the USA and Europe, but am yet to hear from recipients in Nepal! Ke game, yo Nepal ho!

Paolo Bonetti
Bishal Nagar

BAM DEV
I am a regular reader of Nepali Times and want to congratulate you for what you guys are doing for the state of the free press.
In your last edition I read Bam Dev Gautam's interview to the BBC. Now I realise why parties split. It's all because of intellectually challenged people like him. After reading the



transcript of his rantings, my perception changed. I found out that he is anti-Nepali and does not care about the country. He is someone who is easily carried away by rumours. I don't understand how a person like him can say such things in the media and how he became the Secretary General of a national party is still a mystery to me. Shame on being a Nepali like Bam Dev Gautam.

Anup Shrestha
Kathmandu

The gobar economy

The biogas pit showing the brick lining and intake pipe.



KUNDA DIXIT

In a country where there is so little to cheer about, the enormous success of Nepal's biogas programme has been a shining beacon for development projects here, and also serves as a model for other developing countries. The accomplishment has been possible because of a strong and sustained national focus on this alternative energy source, the development of a simple and affordable design suited to local conditions, and political commitment accompanied by donor support for a subsidy strategy efficiently implemented by the private sector.

Just look at the figures. There are now nearly 80,000 biogas plants all over Nepal, and at present growth rates this number is expected to reach 100,000 by end-2003. Nepal overtook India in the ratio of people per biogas

plants several years ago, and has now even surpassed China. And more impressive is the finding that as many as 98 percent of the household gas plants constructed in the past 20 years are functioning optimally—the figure for China and India are only 60-70 percent. Still, Nepal has only constructed 3.8 percent of the estimated 1.3 million plants that are possible all over the country.

For Brinda Chaudhary of a tiny hamlet in Rupandehi District, biogas has been the best thing that ever happened to her family. She likes to show visitors her kitchen, where the clean, odourless blue methane flame from the fermenting gobar is heating the evening meal. "Look, there is no smoke, it is easier to clean the pots because they aren't black, we women in the family don't have to spend hours looking for firewood. It has made our life much easier," says Brinda.

Construction process in building a Nepali design biogas plant in Lesotho.



Don't laugh. The future is in cow dung. Biogas is already producing as much power as a medium-scale hydroelectric plant, and we haven't even begun to scratch the surface.

Surveys confirm that in some areas biogas has saved women three hours of hard work cooking, cleaning and gathering firewood every day. And even more importantly, it has reduced the incidence of acute respiratory infection among women and children who would otherwise be breathing smoke from wood fires indoors.

On the outskirts of Bhaktapur, Sri Prasad Neupane serves piping hot tea to visitors—and there are many these days: curious villagers, people from other parts of Nepal and even foreigners who want to inspect his biogas plant. Neupane had no personal property, and needed first to convince his father to sign off the family land as collateral for the soft loan of Rs 14,000 to have the plant built. "In

four years we have paid back the loan, and we save about Rs 1,000 every month in firewood and kerosene. But more than that, it has given us pride and made us self-sufficient," Sri Prasad tells visitors.

Nepal has one of the lowest per capita energy consumption in the world, and most of this is met by burning agricultural waste and firewood, known as biomass. Still, the country spends nearly 40 percent of its hard currency earnings to import petroleum products to meet mainly urban demand. Nepal is better known for its enormous hydropower potential, but hydropower is capital intensive technology and the energy is too expensive to use for heating. On the other hand, a 10 cubic metre

biogas plant for a family of eight can be built for Rs 30,000 and will pay for itself within a year or two. The beauty of biogas is that it has no moving parts. The cow dung goes into an airless pit, bacteria already inside the cow's stomach go to work breaking down the waste into methane which is piped to the kitchen and lit just like any other gas stove. And that is not all: one by-product of gas generation is the digested slurry that comes out of the pit which is prime fertiliser that can sometimes double vegetable production.

"At a time when our electricity grid is having a hard time meeting demand in remote areas, here is an energy source that is already generating the equivalent of 120 megawatts,"

says power expert Bikash Pandey, director of the research organisation Winrock-REPSO Nepal. "We now know that forests can't be saved with electricity, biogas is the only true alternative renewable energy source." Besides saving firewood, biogas also helps forest regeneration by requiring livestock to be stall-fed, which means forests have a chance to regenerate because there are no free-ranging cattle to munch up the undergrowth. In fact, Nepal's community forestry programme combined with the spread of biogas has been credited with a dramatic rise in forest cover in Nepal's mid-hills over the past 20 years.

The technical breakthrough that made this all possible was the design perfected by Nepali and Swiss engineers in 1978 of an underground digester capped with an airtight concrete dome. This simplified construction made it cheaper and cut down maintenance drastically. Unlike the Indian design at that time which consisted of a floating steel drum, the Nepali concrete dome did not rust, didn't need to be painted every year, and lasted almost indefinitely. Also, because of lower temperatures in the hills, the underground pit had advantages because it prevented the temperature of the digester from dipping too low.

Amrit Bahadur Karki, a pioneer of biogas in Nepal summarises it all: "The success of Nepal's biogas programme was because we had a good design, a workable private sector system subsidised by donors and the government, and in addition there was effective quality control and follow-up." Today, there are nearly 40 private companies which build biogas plants all over the country. The procedure is very simple: the farmer applies for a loan, the paperwork is finished within a week after the collateral

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



(Bio)Degraded in Bangkok

A few days in Bangkok and feeling very much the country cousin, I've been marvelling at the various temptations presented by vast consumer choice. In the mega-malls of this mega-town, there's much to make the jaw drop open in amazement. For example, did you know that the latest thing amongst the au fait of Krung Thep (what Thais and frangis in the know call this place) is rough wooden furniture that was probably rejected from the set of *Little House on the Prairie*. I mean it. Amidst the designer toilet paper and French porcelain fountain pens that line the shelves at the Central department store on Ploenchit Road, you enter an earlier, cruder age in the home furnishings department. Looking for all the world like bolted together log piles of sawmill offcuts and weather-beaten picnic benches, you spot them at first because of the crowd of breathless Thai homemakers hovering around.

Okay, it turns out that they're actually there because a local politician is making the rounds. He's probably there thanking people for the result of last week's general election, for booting out a perfectly good government and installing what's bound to be the sort of coalition that would make Israel look stable. He's got a few goons with him, and photographers, hence the attention. But the ladies out for their Sunday shop soon start running speculative fingers down bits of log, flaking off the bark and getting impossibly painful splinters. Hey, the sales person assures them, it's the latest thing. I personally watched two full living room suites of this hideous muck get bought, despite those splinters and the clear discomfort of families trying out the couch—a steal at \$400! The best thing that can be said about this furniture is that it is truly biodegradable. In fact,

it's already so biodegraded that tropical plants, burrowing insects and questionable reptiles are thriving in the countless cracks and crevasses of the well-rotted wood.

Another thing, Indian glass seems to be popular here too. This is an area where I am somewhat of a self-appointed expert. In various exotic places and hellholes that occupied my time, I have usually bought a few pieces of the local glassware. A lot of that is Indian glass—the same sort that the Thais are buying. It has two attributes. It's nice, and it's cheap—made by Muslim artisans (and their children) in a town near Agra. But wait, how much are the good folk of Bangkok paying for this stuff? Well, I bought my best pieces for around 10 cents each, but here the smoky amber vase or the artfully spiral-cracked bowl costs close to 50 bucks! And then there are the Sri Lankan candles and high-end handicrafts on sale from vendors' carts everywhere, again commanding



Sometimes you have to go away to really appreciate what you've got at home.

huge premiums over what the village folk labouring in Colombo factories could ever hope to receive.

The food shops of this town are something to marvel at too. Here, in Asia's other great nation that's never, ever been colonised, the supermarkets brim with Japan's imperial cuisine. Apologies to Japanese friends, but I've never been able to see the point of eating raw fish, or plain vegetables cut into shapes too lovely to chew. But the sushi counters in Thailand are doing a roaring trade. Perhaps it tastes better on a splintery, log bench with rusty iron bolts to balance the seaweed wraps.

Last stop, Asia Books, the country's top chain. Oh dear. I didn't know Tom Clancy, Robert Ludlum or Jeffrey Archer had such transcontinental appeal. And like Indians, the Thais seem to devour the worst sorts of western self-help and pop psychology—the kind disguised as the secrets of the world's great managers. Given that those managers seem to have managed to steer a booming global economy into an as yet inexplicable recession, the appeal of their thoughts on anything but rough-hewn furniture seems to be of little interest and even less validity.

So after weeks abroad, it's back to the real world of Kathmandu, bandhs, Hritbhik Roshan riots and all. Sometimes you have to go away to really appreciate what you've got at home. It's good to be back. ♦

is valued and subsidies worked out. For a plant costing Rs 30,000 the subsidy amounts to Rs 12,000 in the remote mountains, Rs 10,000 in the hills and Rs 7,000 in the tarai and urban areas. The technicians inspect the site and start digging the pit. The biogas company provides a three year guarantee on the digester dome, inlet and other fittings and makes regular diagnostic visits to see if everything is working fine. So far there has been nearly 100 percent payback of all loans. Says Karki: "The economics of it makes so much sense that more and farmers are showing an interest, and there will be 25,000 new plants built every year." The Biogas Support Programme was launched in 1992, and is supported by the German Financial Cooperation (KfW) and the Dutch organisation, SNV-Nepal. The only future problem could be with sustainability as more and more private companies join what has come to be seen as a lucrative business, and when the donors pull out the subsidies.

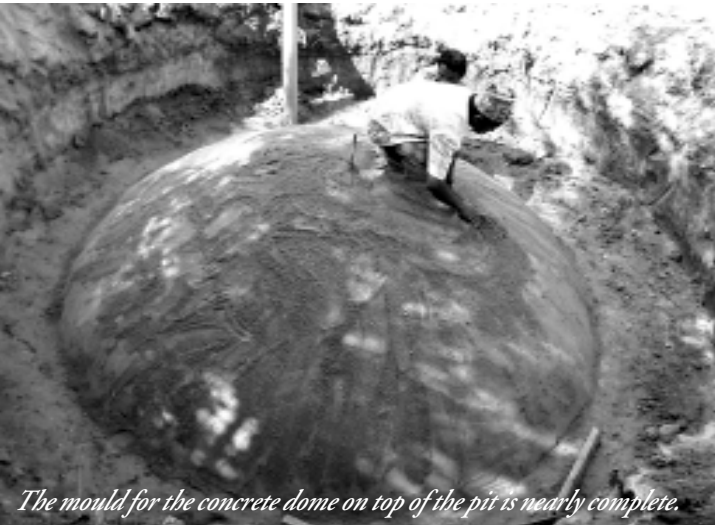
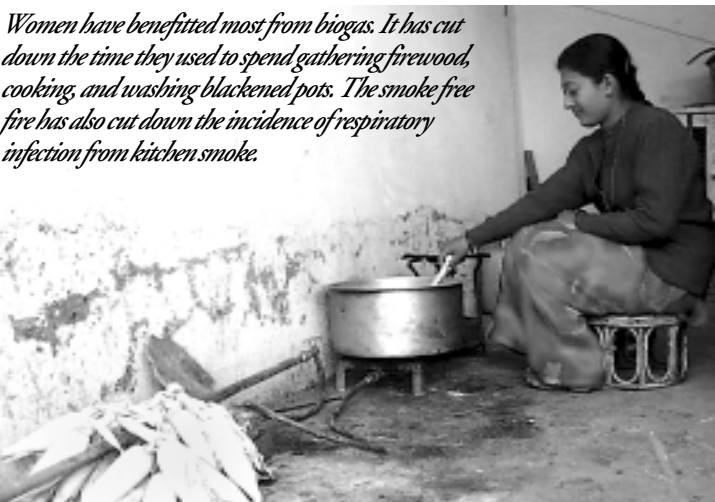
Twenty years ago when biogas plants started being built in Nepal, the main rationale was that they would save forests. The focus has now shifted slightly; also being stressed these days are the benefits to agriculture of the nutrient-rich slurry, and the connection of family latrines to the biogas digester. Says agricultural expert Krishna Murari

Gautam, an early promoter of appropriate energy: "Perhaps the greatest change in the past 20 years is that Nepalis have overcome their traditional taboos against using human waste." The latrine connection not only improved sanitary conditions within households, but also augmented gas supply. Today, more than half of all biogas plants in Nepal are hooked up to latrines.

Although technically there is potential for 1.3 million plants, most experts say it is realistically half that number. Even so, at present rates of growth, Nepal can probably reach that target in 15 years. An Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPIC) under the Ministry of Science and Technology has been set up to promote not just biogas, but also wind energy and solar power. The cold winter months see a drop in gas production in biogas plants, but it is possible to integrate solar heating of underground digesters and some organisations are carrying out research to see if it is economically viable. For example, with an additional Rs 40,000, a solar heater can bring the temperature in the underground digesters to a constant 24 degrees even in winter and increase gas production by 25 percent.

The boom in biogas has also benefited ancillary industries: most stoves are now manufactured locally, the gas pipes, slurry mixing devices

Women have benefitted most from biogas. It has cut down the time they used to spend gathering firewood, cooking, and washing blackened pots. The smoke free fire has also cut down the incidence of respiratory infection from kitchen smoke.



and even lamps for biogas used for lighting purposes are now manufactured locally. About 3,000 people (engineers, masons, and others) are directly employed by biogas companies. The Agriculture Development Bank, Rastriya

Banijya Bank and Nepal Bank have been involved in channelling the loans, and the private biogas companies do most of the paperwork for the client. Nepal has seen the future and it's odourless. ♦

Immobilising the nation



ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

This could turn out to be the mother of all strikes. Peeved by a government decision to throw out all ageing vehicles now used in public transport, the Federation of Nepalese Transport Entrepreneurs (FNTE) says it is determined to do anything to stop the government from having its way. Transport operators already have a three-pronged strategy to oppose the government—stop paying taxes, submit memorandums, and most importantly, bring all public transport to a halt. The deadline for the government to capitulate or have another crisis on their hands—15 January.

The transport operators mean business. "The government decision will take away the livelihood of one million people. There is no way we are going to get our vehicles off the roads. If they don't revoke the decision we will raise hell for them and ultimately either the government will go down or we'll go down," warns Bharat KC, who runs a goods carrier.

In a decision aimed mainly at cleaning up the air in the Kathmandu Valley, the government announced last November that it would ban all vehicles manufactured before 1980 from the streets starting mid November 2001. The same decision also aims to ban all petrol and gas powered three-wheelers with two-stroke engines from all municipalities across the country by July 2001. Later the Ministry of Population and Environment (MoPE) said that the ban would not apply to privately-owned and operated vehicles that have crossed the age limit.

The pollution and congestion caused by Kathmandu's ageing vehicles is no secret. Research by an environment forum concluded that Kathmandu has at least three times more suspended particulate matter in the air than the level specified by the WHO. Most of it is due to two stroke engines like the ones used by Bajaj three-wheelers. But those competing for road space and fighting for their right to exhale also include buses left here by hippies in the 60s and 70s after overland journeys, and those retired from long-distance "night bus" duties. Smaller polluters include over 50,000 two wheelers, Japanese cars from the 1970s, and hundreds of three wheelers that run on petrol. The most notorious polluters however are government vehicles and old buses. Combine all of these and you start to understand Kathmandu's air.

About 5000 vehicles in the public transport sector in Kathmandu alone, and another 55,000 across the entire nation including buses, minibuses, and tempos, will be displaced by MoPE's decision if it is implemented. "The decision was

In response to the government decision to ban old and polluting vehicles, transporters' unions threaten to bring all public transport to a halt.

taken because this is the only way we can improve the air quality," says Govinda Raj Bhatta, Secretary of MoPE. Earlier when the government banned diesel-powered three-wheelers from the streets, it offered the owners of those vehicles duty concessions of upto 99 percent on the import of new minibuses. This time, though, the government says it has no plans to do the same, because the owners have been given a year's notice to make alternate arrangements. The government's resolve to not provide import tax subsidy also has to do with the fact that this ban calls for a change in the entire transport sector of the country and providing duty concessions on replacements will mean a heavy revenue loss.

Transport entrepreneurs say the ban would put thousands out of work and create new problems for the government. They are convinced that pollution is not caused just because their vehicles are old and poorly maintained but more because of adulterated fuel and bad roads. "It's a one sided decision," Bishnu Siwakoti, General Secretary of the FNTE remarked. "We suspect they are trying to help manufacturers of new vehicles sell more cars." Even environmentalists agree that a complete ban is not the best solution. "If the government's present policy of labelling offensive polluters with red and others with green stickers can be strictly applied, and adulteration of fuel controlled, a lot of this pollution can be checked," says Ramesh Parajuli of Martin Chautari, the group that conducted research on pollution in the Valley a few months ago.

It isn't difficult to understand why transport workers are ready to fight tooth and nail to keep what they have, in many cases their only means of income. "Instead of just trying to throw us out the government should concentrate on supplying unadulterated fuel, and providing us with a maintenance subsidy," says Tulsi Ram Maharjan, whose only source of income is the creaking Mercedes Benz minibus he bought in 1975. Said one bus driver: "You should watch government vehicles coughing when they climb the Pulchowk hillock. Our vehicles are better maintained because they're our only means to earn bread."

The one group unaffected by the MoPE decision is electric vehicle operators. They say the government should press on with its decision and think about subsidising the import of batteries. They also want MoPE to consider replacing at least 25 percent of the old vehicles with battery-run three wheelers.

The FNTE had planned a nation-wide shutdown for 2 January, but postponed it due to the recent riots. Their sympathy for the ailing government won't last long if their means of living are taken away and they are not offered better alternatives. If the decision is not revoked before 15 January, or some sort of compromise is not reached, we could be looking at another long month of strikes and shutdowns.

The government and the FNTE are now having discussions on how to find a mutually acceptable solution. But it's hard to see how any solution can avoid one of two unpleasant things—polluting vehicles stay under a watered-down version of the government's decision, or the nation's public transport system grinds to a complete halt. Any which way, Nepal stands to suffer. ♦

Lauda, Lauda

A month after Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation added a Boeing 767 aircraft to its three-jet fleet, it seems clueless as to how to use the new addition. The operation plan—or lack thereof—as witnessed on Tuesday, 2 January is a case in point. Passengers bound for Osaka first boarded Royal Nepal's own B757, and at around midnight were asked to deplane and board the B767 leased from Lauda Air. The flight eventually took off about three hours after its scheduled midnight takeoff.

RNAC sources say the problem resulted from the controversial leasing decision, which has failed to address many issues related to day-to-day operation. As the story goes, the B767 reported technical problems after its morning flight in from New Delhi.

The scheduled evening flight to Delhi was then passed on to a RNAC B757. After the aircraft came in from Delhi in the evening it



was assigned to fly to Osaka. Newspapers reported that this flight to Japan even refuelled with passengers on board after pilots realised just before takeoff that the aircraft did not have enough fuel. (This could not be confirmed independently despite several attempts). Lauda Air then reported it was ready to fly and hence the switch.

Pilots at RNAC say Lauda's operations are co-ordinated from Vienna and the Corporation's operations department has little or no control on the use of the aircraft. The technical snag may have been reported to Vienna and therefore taken a very long time to fix. That's the straightforward explanation though: "When we have no control over operations, how can we use the plane to our benefit?" asks a Royal Nepal pilot.

RNAC said it needed a wide-body jet to expand its flights but so far it has not added any new routes. Instead it has been using the B-767 in routes that were adequately covered by the corporation's two B-757s and one leased B-757. The New Delhi connection has been RNAC's most profitable route but of late—because of the post-hijack publicity and regular bad press in the Indian media—has not had enough passengers even to fill up the smaller B-757s. Presently the leased Lauda aircraft is doing two Osaka flights, one to Frankfurt and one to Singapore.

Where's the LPG?

First it was the price of kerosene, and now with Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) becoming scarce, winter couldn't be worse. The Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) has repeatedly said that supply has improved but there's just no LPG at the distribution outlets.

The NOC maintains it could be seasonal demand and the increase in LPG-run vehicles that could have skewed its assessments. "We've increased monthly imports to 3,500 tons since December. We think that should be enough to meet the demand," says Madan Raj Sharma, General Manager, NOC. "The scarcity is not due to any real shortage but related more to matching demand and supply."

Businesses say the hike in kerosene prices late last year may have led to more people using LPG for cooking, one reason for the increased demand. Besides, not just minibuses and three-wheelers but even many taxis use subsidised cooking-gas as a substitute for petrol. Part of the problem is poor LPG storage capacity, which nationwide adds up to about 835 tons.

Well done IOE

Nepal's Institute of Engineering figures among the top ten engineering colleges in Asia, according to the Bangkok-based Asian Institute of Technology (AIT). It was rated as the third best engineering school based on the performance of its Masters level students in 2000. The Institute, established in 1972, has produced 985 civil, 64 electrical, 61 electronic and 46 mechanical engineers, and 21 architects so far.

⇒ from p1

For now, Deuba represents the vortex of anti-Koirala sentiment, through his one-point agenda of forcing Koirala to relinquish one of his two responsibilities. Deuba's strengths are his support in the Far West, his having been prime minister once, and the fact that Koirala castaways have coalesced around him—the power brokers Khum Bahadur Khadka and Bijaya Kumar Gachbendar in particular. Disadvantage: affinity to Nepal's former ruling elite, including a clique within the Royal Palace.

Koirala's maverick niece Shailaja Acharya began politics well before both Deuba and Poudel. Without popular or regional support and having lost her parliamentary seat, Pokhara's vote is her only chance of re-emerging in the race. Her well-known disadvantages: frank honesty and unpredictability.

The other underdog is Ram Chandra Poudel, described as a hard if unimaginative worker. Known to have a limited, Tanahu-

centric vision, Poudel lacks the strong regional support which is Deuba's trump card. By siding with Koirala since March 2000, however, Poudel has improved his chances. He can carry the delegates that Koirala controls in Pokhara. Besides, serving as home minister is said to be good for your political career.

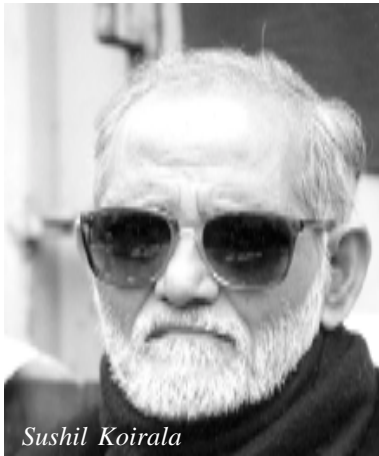
The other Congress-wallahs to watch in Pokhara are the party general secretary Sushil Koirala and Khum Bahadur Khadka. Of the two, Sushil is said to have a firm grip on the party machine, but he prefers backroom manipulations to taking the rostrum. Ditto for Khadka, a one-time home minister who is now said to be masterminding Deuba's challenge.

However the cookie may crumble, the Pokhara convention looks like it will mark the beginning of the end of the NC's two-man oligarchy—an incongruous situation that was maintained (with all its tantrums and unnatural patch-ups) mainly because the strength of the

WHICH YOUNG TURK?



Khum Bahadur Khadka



Sushil Koirala



Ram Chandra Poudel

second rung was never tested. In Pokhara, even if partially, it will be.

For Deuba, the upcoming convention will hold a special challenge. He has used opposition to Koirala as a useful strategy to establish himself as a strong challenger. He will now have to prove his ability to garner votes from NC representatives from all over, and not just from his Far Western satrapy.

Ditto, of course, for Koirala and his benchmen and women.

There is no doubt that Deuba is the frontrunner in the race to inherit the party, but now the rules of engagement have changed and the party election has given delegates the power to make or break the leaders. An upset is always possible, and the lion of the far west may not be able to sleep

with the sheep of east.

And what of the slew of other tried and tested fifty somethings who too are waiting in the wings—from Ram Sharan Mahat, Chakra Prasad Bastola, Narendra Bikram Nemwang, Tara Nath Ranabhat, Chiranjibi Wagle, Prakash Koirala, Amod Upadhyaya, Govinda Raj Joshi and so on. They, too, are all 'young'. Oh, well... ♦



Shailaja Acharya

Dharan at 100

This village of settlers has grown to be a center of excellence in education and development. It now wants tourists.

DUMBARKRISHNA SHRESTHA

The accompanying photographs are testimony to how rapidly a place can change in a short span of only four decades. An asphalt highway and concrete buildings have replaced the rural dirt road and the tin roofs of yore. Only the small tin-roofed house seen in the right corner of the new picture remains unchanged.

Dharan, a city in east Nepal, is celebrating its 100th year of establishment this year. It saw its first residents around 1894. They were settlers who lived in clusters of small huts near the forests and made a living by felling trees from what used to be thick forests of the Char Koshe Jhadi. In fact the city got its name from the Nepali word for a platform on which wood is sawed, because these first settlers used the platforms to work the trees they chopped in the forest. Rana ruler Chandra Shumshere, who announced the formal settlement of Chandra Nagar (now called Purano Bazaar) in 1901, is credited for the beginning of planned human settlement in Dharan.

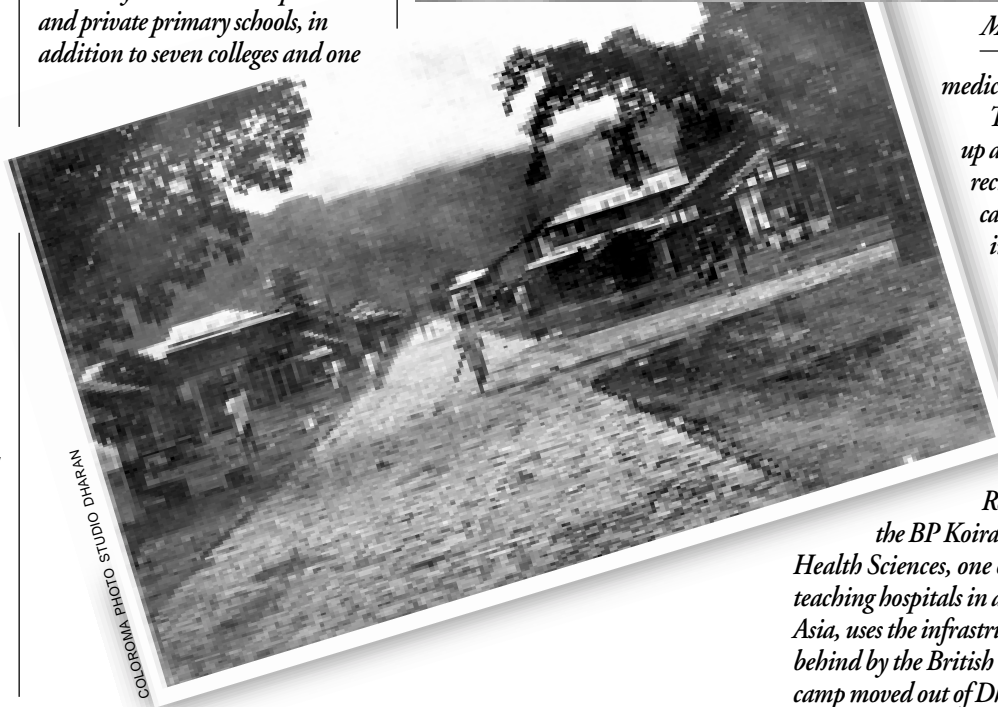
It took another 37 years for the neighboring township to emerge, which is part of present-day Dharan. In 1938, another Rana ruler Juddha Shumshere established Juddha Nagar (now called Naya Bazaar) and established the Juddha Nagar Aspatal (the now-closed Dharan Hospital) to encourage people from the eastern hills to migrate and settle there. After the hospital came Dharan's first

primary school, which was set up in a local teashop. By the early 1940s, Dharan had developed into a main gateway for people migrating from the eastern hills to the fertile tarai plains. Economic and commercial activities intensified, accompanied by a rapid increase in population. And by 1944, with two weekly markets on Fridays and Saturdays, the city had grown into a centre of commerce for the entire eastern tarai.

During the 1950 revolution, Dharan was a hotbed of rising political consciousness. Around the same time, the city began to grow into a center for art, literature and education. The city has come a long way since, especially in the field of education. It now has 20 secondary schools, 70 lower-secondary schools and 60 public and private primary schools, in addition to seven colleges and one



Main street of old Dharan Bazaar (left) taken circa 1960, and today's bustling Bhanu Chowk (top)



medical college. The British set up a Gurkha recruitment camp in Dharan in the early Fifties, after which it grew into a hub for the entire Eastern Development Region. Today, the BP Koirala Institute for Health Sciences, one of the leading teaching hospitals in all of South Asia, uses the infrastructure left behind by the British when the camp moved out of Dharan about a

decade ago. When Nepal was divided into 14 administrative zones and 75 districts in 1965, Dharan was designated the zonal headquarter of Koshi zone. Bijayapur, the capital of Kirati kings on a hillock east of the city, was a planned settlement long before Dharan was established. Likewise, the Bhatabhunge Rajako Darbar, and the Buda Subba, Dantakali and Pindeshwori temples all have histories dating back hundreds of years. The ancient city of Bijayapur, Ghopa Camp (British Camp) and the Bajagara village development committee in the south, all come under Dharan's municipal boundaries. Even after the devastating earthquake about a

decade ago Dharan remains a beautiful and vibrant city. Dharan is about 350 meters above sea level. The city, which spreads across 1,223-hectares, is home to 125,000 people. Dharan, where the flat plains start merging into the hills, has a moderate climate with temperatures ranging between 31 degrees Celsius during the summers and 14 degrees in winter. Dharan is already a leader in different arenas of development and planners now want it to also become a center for tourism, and excellence in health and education in the next two decades. ♦

(Adapted from Himal Khabarpatrika)

Cancer refuge



It is ironic. A smoke-belching Vikram tempo takes you to the BP Koirala Memorial Cancer Hospital (BPKMCH) in Bharatpur. Ironic, because it's common knowledge that toxic exhaust fumes can trigger fatal lung cancer that the hospital identifies as one of the top three killers among cancers prevalent in Nepal. The irony is compounded when one also discovers that most deaths due to cancer are due to lack of awareness—even among medical professionals. Medical research indicates that 90 percent of cancers are caused by environmental factors, the rest are attributed to genetic factors. Nepal lacks a comprehensive study on cancer prevalence, but it is emerging as one of the leading non-communicable diseases in Nepal—there are an estimated 35-40,000 cancer patients in the country. Deaths are approximated at 120 per 100,000,

The BP Koirala Cancer Hospital provides excellent treatment and spreads awareness to help prevent thousands of cancer deaths each year.

..... with cancers of the cervix, breast and lungs as top killer cancers in Nepal. Doctors believe that most of these deaths are preventable. Studies show that a third of cancers are preventable and another third are curable if detected early. Giving up smoking can prevent about 30 percent of cases triggered by environmental factors, while another 35 percent require minimal changes in food habits, like avoiding fats and smoked food. Other environmental factors need changes at the policy level like limiting pesticide and chemical fertiliser use in farming and curbing air pollution. "Most preventable cancers are caused by changes in lifestyle brought about so called modern living," said BPKMCH Public Health Officer Bhola Chalise. A random survey conducted before the establishment of the hospital showed cancer prevalence in urban areas of Nepal at nearly five times that of rural areas. Approximately 25,000 new cases are detected annually, but oncologists suspect an equal number of patients die without diagnosis and treatment. Their concern needs to be taken seriously, since only about 20 percent of Nepalis have access to more specialised levels of medical help. Until about a decade ago health policies totally neglected cancer as a

public health threat and the development of specialised health care was slow. It was only in 1992 that the BPKMCH was established in the central tarai city of Bharatpur in Chitwan with assistance from China. Four years later, it was declared autonomous under the BP Koirala Cancer Hospital Act of 1996. The hospital conducts activities to raise awareness among communities at risk, and provides service for diagnosis and treatment. Out-patient services (OPD) began in June 1999 and in-patient services with 25 beds from July that year. The medical team comprises Nepali, Chinese and Indian specialists. There are 30 doctors, 10 graduate nurses, 42 registered nurses and 12 chemotherapy-trained nurses. On average it provides OPD services to about 130 patients a day and undertakes 15 major and 10 minor operations per week. Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and simulation services are provided to 50 patients each day. In recent months the hospital has seen an increasing number of Indian patients from the states bordering Nepal. Cheaper services, subsidised medicines and a lower patient burden in the hospital draw them here. "Treatment is almost 50 percent cheaper than in India, and one does not have to wait," said Gauri Shankar Ghosala, an oesophagus cancer patient from Sarlahi who was being treated at a Patna hospital before the BP Koirala hospital was set up. The hospital provides a whole range of radio-diagnosis services, pathology and radiation oncology services, including CT scanning, mammography, general and special X-ray, tumour markers, histopathology tests and a range of



Clockwise from left: The entrance to the BPKMCH; patient undergoing counselling before being admitted for treatment; and a hospitalised cancer patient.

endoscopy procedures. In addition, a total of 124 beds at the hospital are available for patients requiring short and long term hospitalisation for multi-modality therapy including radiation, chemotherapy or surgery. A hospice situated within the hospital premises provides domiciliary care to 36 terminally ill patients. "The government concentrated only on communicable diseases all these years. As a result public awareness regarding cancer is low. Even medical professionals hardly consider the possibility of cancer in their patients. When they get here, in many cases it is already too late," said Public Health Officer Kishor Pradhanang who conducts an awareness programme for people visiting BPKMCH and awareness workshops for medical professionals at sub-health posts, health posts and district health care units. The outcome of a 1995 random survey conducted at six major hospitals in Kathmandu revealed that of 172,000 patients discharged, 5100 displayed symptoms of various cancers but had not been referred to an oncologist by their doctors. The Hospital Based Cancer Registry started in 1995 reveals that a similar percentage of men



and women are affected by cancer in Nepal. The highest percentage fall within the 50-69 age bracket followed by people from the 30-49 age bracket. The Registry also revealed another curious fact—most cases are reported from the Chhetri, Newar and Babun communities. "These are preliminary findings, we need further investigation and data to establish the facts behind why these three communities have higher cancer prevalence," says Dr Murari Man Shrestha, head of Department of Cancer Prevention, Control and Research at BPKMCH. He says that lack of awareness among medical professionals and patients and the consequent delay in availing treatment is causing high cancer deaths in Nepal. "If the government had intensified cancer awareness programmes 20 years ago, we could have prevented almost half of the cancer related deaths at present." ♦

FEEDBACK

by PETER KARTHAK

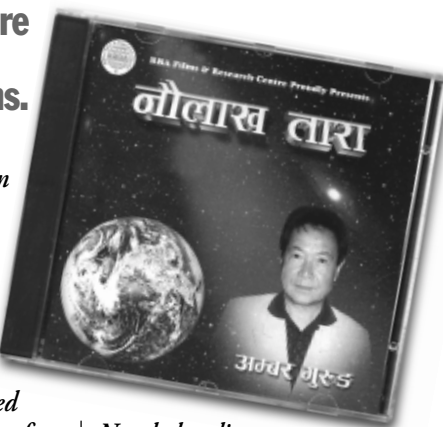
The enigma of Naulakha Tara Udae

I think the time has come for us to shed the habit of continuing to go back into the politics of poetry, the diplomacy of dialogue and the literature of lyric discovered by clever critics in *Naulakha Tara Udae*. Its interpretations at all levels, mostly in India and Nepal, have been cleverly manufactured by all and sundry for many years. Umpteen paeans have been written to the Agam Singh Giri-Ambar Gurung partnership of *Naulakha Tara Udae*. The late Shanker Lamichhane upped all ostentatious academics by stamping it as "the right song penned by the right poet and composed and sung by the right singer at the right time". What right time, when it provoked so many unnecessary and controversial reactions and outbursts? Mere academic exercises pointing out political overtones distracted sincere searchers, and they missed the musical milestone of Ambar's creation. Through a so-called intellectual processes, a pure musical happening was distorted beyond all civilised decency by uncalled-for interpretations and inflated meanings that were ostensibly sought and found in it. Such critique and its circus, fanciful

jazz and razzmatazz, have prevailed all along at the cost of minimising, if not losing, the true musical ramifications of it all. The poem is only a lonely soliloquy, albeit a forceful one. This private, esoteric and iconoclastic lamentation went public only later when defined by the arty as a festering sore of a wounded lyric aired by the musical poetic justice of Ambar Gurung. *Naulakha Tara* is much more than a mere cry-baby literary piece. We need to look at Ambar Gurung's unique rendition, his pioneering orchestration despite the availability of only obsolete instruments, the primitive condition of monotrack recording and a single microphone in the studio, plus young Ambar's own lack of experience in the phonogenic mechanisms of those days. (All this, however, can be improved in today's digital world: the song can be re-recorded as a neo-choir in Kathmandu's sophisticated studios with an amalgamated ensemble of Nepali singers and musicians.) It was the avant-garde musical challenges of *Naulakha Tara* that awed us young disciples and musicians at his Art Academy of

Darjeeling in 1960. The music was unprecedented. Frankly, it was heretic to us then. It was difficult for us to fathom its pitches and scales, orchestration range, chord progression, harmony, and arrangement. It was so revolutionary and unfamiliar that its sudden modernism was like a strange looming monster we had to grapple. Only continuous and rigorous rehearsals brought us to terms with the score of the song and Ambar's singing of the lyric. We were forced to familiarise ourselves with the song and its musical dimensions through our own willing conscription to its notes, scales and major and minor chords springing with quick surprises. It was the first instance in our musical memory when we had to become not only musicians but also technophiles. Nepali music went techno more than forty years ago. Ambar Gurung never tires of telling me, "What's all the big fuss about the song? I merely composed it as [an] *ekoboro* and *saral* 'geet'". True, he is right about the linear monotony of the tune and the song's simple staircase melody. This is because he crafted the melody for his own convenience—he designed the singing segments of the song for

Through so-called intellectual processes, a pure musical happening was distorted beyond all civilised decency by uncalled-for interpretations. the ease of his own glottis, for his own individuality and comfort. *Naulakha Tara* is never about the so-called Nepali diaspora, because there is no such thing even faintly similar to the exodus of the Biblical Israelites, or the exile of the Tibetans. The old migration of the Nepali hill and mountain people was due to their own choice and the magnetising "lure of the south" from where they moved further down and then dispersed to the east and west, or opted for similar northern heights and altitudes of the Muglan. A diaspora is a journey that is ultimately a preparation for a return home. In this case, no long-gone Nepali is expected to return to Nepal, whether from Fiji, Thailand, Burma, Sikkim, Bhutan, Darjeeling, Bhagsu or Dehradun. Anything like a real Nepali diaspora began only with the disillusioned departure of Bala Bhadra Kunwar and Amar Singh Thapa, a pattern that continues to this day with the deliberate economic migration of opportunistic and politically frustrated Nepalis to foreign climes, and the decision of recent employees and retirees in alien lands who decide to remain where they were employed. In *Naulakha Tara*, Agam Singh Giri simply identified and described the existence of Nepalis in their foreign enclaves. There is no farfetched notion of nationalism or sense of being an outsider. Far more importantly, since these Nepalis had entertained no thought of ever returning home, the poem provoked the powers that be in their host countries to amalgamate them into the respective national mainstreams. The song sounds pithy and maudlin but the portrayal of the situations and conditions are real enough not to be so simply taken as something convoluted or vacuous. There is a raw, gritty world out there, carved and crafted by Nepalis for generations. Ambar Gurung understood this and applied his musical talents to the poem's literary dimensions. The music redefined and then conveyed the message of the verse. Agam Singh Giri's message is not to



Nepal, that distant and forgotten land of yore and his ancestors, but to the anachronistic seesaw and pendulous systems prevailing within his people's own chosen and leavened spheres of influence and existence. These are the reasons why *Naulakha Tara* is a milestone in Nepali and world music. The others are effervescent, temporal and chameleon-like interpretations nurtured by a fleeting fleet of Nepali critics more prone to speculation than understanding the solid truths behind the phenomenon of the poem-song. The difference is in whether you choose to see it as a provocative poem penned by an angry Agam Singh Giri, or a spontaneous song made immortal by Ambar Gurung. ♦

BIZ NEWS

Business is bad, and could become worse

The February 10 deadline labour unions have given government to resolve the service charge hotel workers are demanding expires in under a month. The threat of a strike looms large and comes at a time when the spring tourist season and bookings begin. But even this is no longer an issue, businesses say, given how the investment climate in Nepal has deteriorated over the past year.

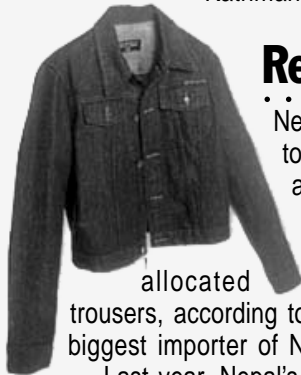
Last week (Trade in tatters, NT #24) we wrote about how bad things were—it could now be getting worse. Large multinational companies are getting increasingly edgy about doing business in Nepal, wondering if it's worth their while at all. "Last week we had a meeting and they are very worried," says Prabhakar Rana, chairman of the Soaltee Group, which also runs Surya Tobacco. "That's more worrying to us because they can afford to just pack up and go." The Nepal operations of a company like Unilever—whose Indian operations even account for only 2 percent of its global business—doesn't mean much to the conglomerate. But businesses know that a company of that scale packing-up means irreparable losses for Nepal as a whole, and a dark shadow over business prospects.

Just look at some of the problems they already face: The government is sitting on over Rs400 million of money belonging to companies like Unilever. Worse still, it shows no signs of being willing to pay it back. "At the very least, it could promise to pay back in instalments. We know the government has used the money already," a business source said. "Instead they refer us to one ministry or another and keep us going in circles."

Now businesses say there are other issues the government must decide. Chief among them is whether it wants a liberal business environment. It indicates nothing of the sort, and is far from amending a number of regressive clauses in the Company and Labour laws. "Or the government should declare that we want to go back to agriculture and we're prepared to pick up the spades and get to work," says Rana. This middle-of-the-road vacillation won't get us anywhere, he adds.

The coalition of 16 business and industry groups that came together to fend off the unions' threat to shut down hotels is particularly worried by the lack of governance, which has become clear in recent weeks. The coalition has commissioned two studies, one to look into the socio-economic impact of the 10 percent service tax demanded by the worker's unions, and another to unscramble the legal tangles governing business and investment. The report is to be submitted to the government in the coming weeks.

Rajendra Khetan, the chair of the Employer's Council at the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry does not mince words: "The labour law needs to be balanced, we want inclusion of the no work-no pay principle and the right to fire unproductive employees," he says. Other worries: Nepal is perhaps the only country in the world that has close to 150 officially sanctioned non-working days. "Add to that the two-day weekends, and we end up having barely five months of workdays in the Kathmandu Valley, but we're required to pay 13-month salaries."



Readymade garments

Nepal has a few years to go before the garment export quotas to the United States expire and exporters could do better with a better transportation infrastructure and without frequent general strikes. Garments exports in the rayon/cotton dress categories averaged only about 80 percent of the total quota to Nepal. Top sellers were men's and ladies' shirts and trousers, according to the Garment Association of Nepal. Canada is the next biggest importer of Nepali readymade garments.

Last year, Nepal's garment exports to the US totalled Rs 12 billion. It sold an additional Rs 7 billion worth of garments to Canada. Nepal has also begun exporting readymade garments to European Union markets. "We have just four years to make the most of the quotas because they will go after the WTO takes effect," an exporter says. "But in some categories we're barely exporting 50 percent of the volume allowed." Nepal's garment industry imports all raw materials, which make its exports more expensive than those from competing nations like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.



Vandalism and arson in Birgunj

Two unidentified groups vandalised two factories in Birjung and set property worth millions of rupees on fire. An armed group overpowered guards and set fire to a storehouse belonging to Balaji Petrochem on Saturday night, and another group may have hurled what appears to be a petrol bomb at the premises of Jayswal Wood Industry. Balaji reported losses worth Rs 60 million and the Jayswal group said it lost Rs1.4 million in the fire.

Bonus Shares

The Bank of Kathmandu (BoK) began distributing bonus shares to its shareholders, taking its paid-up capital to Rs 240 million. A Nepal Rastra Bank directive requires all banks to have Rs 500 million as paid-up capital by the end of this fiscal year which ends mid-July. There is to be another rights issue after the necessary approval is obtained. A BoK press release says that until now it has generated Rs 5.45 billion in savings and invested Rs 3.80 billion. The bank also has branches in Nepalgunj, Butwal and Hetauda.

ECONOMIC SENSE

by ARTHA BEED



Shareholding Nepali style

Where company business seems like fish-mongering.

Last week the annual report of a hotel company was circulated to its shareholders. A small slip was attached to the report that stated that no gift, money or food would be provided to those attending the annual general meeting. It really made people think whether shareholders have fallen so low as to deserve such a notice?

The Nepali corporate world was really introduced to public shareholders only after the establishment of the stock exchange. The then Company Act required at least a quarter of the total number of shareholders to be present at annual general meetings making it practically difficult for companies with a large number of shareholders to get the requisite quorum for the meetings. With shareholders crossing the forty thousand mark in some companies, this provision became absurd. Though the new Companies Act has made shareholder strength and presence the criteria for a quorum, it is still interesting to see minority shareholders in action during these meetings.

The last month and the coming two months are when companies generally hold annual general meetings. It is very interesting to see people with just ten shares occupy the podium for hours, telling people who hold more than 90 percent shares what to do in order to make the company perform better. The wish list of these shareholders is never-ending—from gifts to transportation



expenses for attending the meeting to free meals and even cash rewards. They feel that as owners they can demand and get what they want. A group of such shareholders have become a permanent feature at each of these meetings and they raise issues that are most of the time either stupid or nonsensical. The worst of course is that there have been violent incidents in the past where people have been manhandled.

The main reason for all this chaos is that our Company Act takes democracy too far. We believe that a Nepali Company Act must have that touch of socialism. We tend to forget that companies are a capitalist concept in the first place. The present Company Act requires that 'public' shareholders nominate directors from their own shareholder group, and also auditors. Minority shareholders have made this a major issue. They tend to forget that the directors seated at the dais very likely have enough voting power to see any of the resolutions through anyway. These outdated and impractical clauses in the Company Act give people enough reasons to create pandemonium.

People who've never had the pleasure of witnessing one of these

meetings should get themselves named proxy for a shareholder and go to take part, or at least observe, the fun. The loudest din breaks out when the time comes to appoint auditors. The Act, for reasons of its own, requires an auditor to be appointed and his remuneration fixed at the shareholders meeting every year. Here you can see and indeed even participate in the honourable process whereby an auditor is auctioned and bargained over like a Dasain mountain goat. It is miserable to watch members of a respected profession being made laughing stocks just because of antiquated laws.

What is urgently needed is a review of the legislation in order to make it more pragmatic and suited to contemporary business mores. The people who hold a greater number of shares should have their way and as long as legal conditions are complied with, minority shareholders should really have no reason to complain. We need these changes quickly—there are companies that want to share their success with the public but fear that dark day that they must suffer every year when company business starts to seem like fish-mongering. Nepali shareholders, regardless of the size of their stake in a company, need to graduate to being serious investors and play a more positive role in making companies efficient, transparent and profitable. ♦

Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com

Grindlays Gazette

INTEREST RATE UPDATE

NEPALI RUPEE	CURRENT%	PREVIOUS%
Call Money Avg.	5.10	5.20
84 Days t/bill	5.04	5.06
91 Days t/bill	5.24	5.26
364 Days t/bill	5.53	4.87
Repo. rate	5.74	5.76

The average rate of 91-day T/Bill plunged lower on aggressive bidding by some banks. The market is liquid as most banks opt for investment in the primary market. The average rate is expected to remain under pressure next week as banks offload long dollar positions. The expected range for next week - 5.15 to 5.25 %.

FOREIGN CURRENCY : Interest rates

	USD	EUR	GBP	JPY	CHF
LENDING	9.50	6.50	6.00	1.50	5.38
LIBOR (1M)	5.93	4.76	5.86	0.66	3.39

BANK RATES (DEPO/LENDING)	Mkt Hi/Lo	Mkt Avg
S/A NPR	6.25/3.0	5.15
F/D 1 YR	7.25/5.5	6.63
OVERDRAFT	14.0/11.0	12.67
TERM LOAN	14.0/12.0	13.17
IMPORT LN	11.0/9.00	11.88
EXPORT LN	11.5/9.50	10.38
MISC LOAN	16.0/13.0	14.50

CURRENCY UPDATE

AG/USD	CURRENT *	WK/AGO	%CHG
OIL (Barrel)	27.95	26.80	+ 4.29
GOLD(Ounce)	268.80	272.70	- 1.43
GOLD (NPR *)	7070	7160	- 1.26
EUR	0.9582	0.9422	+ 1.70
GBP	1.5050	1.4930	+ 0.80
JPY	116.28	114.35	+ 1.69
CHF	1.5995	1.6105	- 0.68
AUD	0.5693	0.5592	+ 1.81
INR	46.69	46.66	+ 0.06

Oil: Oil prices have risen in the last week on expectations that OPEC would cut output. OPEC members are said to be considering a 1.5 to 2.0 million barrel output cut when they meet in Vienna on 17 January.

Currencies: The US dollar rallied last week when the Fed announced a half percentage point cut in short term interest rates aimed at shoring up the economy. Analysts say markets are still mulling the longer-term impact of the surprise cut. The dollar had been languishing at six-month lows against the euro. The yen hit a fresh 10-month low against the euro and 17-month low against the dollar. Sterling held at four-and-half month highs against the dollar over concerns of a sharp economic slowdown in the US.

INDIAN RUPEE OUTLOOK : The rupee ended firmer at 46.68 compared to last Friday's close of 46.71 on dollar sales by foreign funds amid mild demand. Forward premium remained higher triggered by uncertainty over interest rate movements.

Standard Chartered

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

Grindlays



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	53.76
Bhutan	0.69	0.37	0.58	0.37	0.22	0.02	46.44
India	0.64	0.36	0.57	0.28	0.14	0.05	46.62
Maldives	0.25	0.28	0.40	0.30	0.42	0.21	11.82
Pakistan	0.41	0.42	0.51	0.22	0.12	0.03	59.10
Sri Lanka	0.72	0.36	0.60	0.23	0.19	0.03	83.00
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.

Here come the Flying Trucks

RAMYATA LIMBU

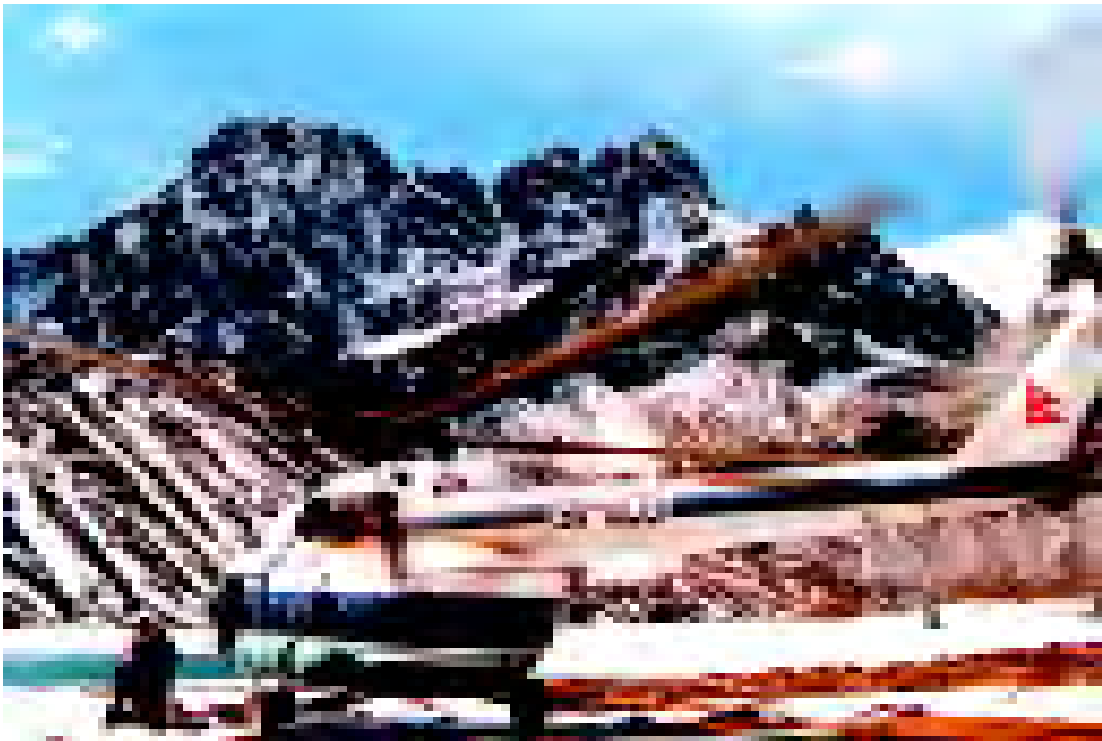
dhurba Basnet thought he'd die. Delirious with typhoid fever and too weak to walk, the documentary film producer thought he would never make it down from the remote mountain pass in Gorkha—a five-day walk from the nearest roadhead. Then he heard the faint whirr of rotor wings, the incredibly welcome sound of a Bell Jet Ranger flying up the Buri Gandaki Valley. Basnet spent a week in hospital and a month recuperating at home. He says: "I didn't think I'd live. I owe my life to that helicopter."

The inaccessibility of Nepal's rugged mountainous terrain makes helicopters the ideal mode of transport, even though for decades they were out of bounds for everyone except the Army and the royalty. Today, thanks to the 1990 deregulation of the domestic airline industry, private helicopter operators are issued licences, and it has never been easier to hire a helicopter in Nepal. Mountain rescue (Nepal Army pilot, Captain BN Sharma, holds the world record for the highest ever landing by a helicopter when he rescued a Greek trekker stranded at 22,000 feet on Khumbu's Island Peak), sightseeing, cargo flights and even pilgrimages are now possible because of these vertical takeoff and landing whirlybirds.

The mountains and valleys of Nepal are abuzz with the sound of helicopters: the deep thuds of Russian built Mi-17s, the whine of French Ecureuils, and the distinctive double-tailed Kawasaki BK-117. While smaller choppers like the Kawasaki BK-117 and the Ecureuil AS 350 offer tourists a bird's eye view of the Himalaya, it is the Mi-17, aptly nicknamed the "flying truck", that has proved invaluable. The chopper can carry up to four tons of cargo and an additional 24 people—about as much as a Tata truck—and is the only feasible way to transport food supplies and construction material to Nepal's remote districts.

And to think these incredible work machines arrived in Nepal almost only by chance. "We actually applied for a licence to operate fixed-wing craft. But since three companies had already been granted permits, tourism minister Ram Hari Joshi suggested that we apply to operate helicopters instead," recalls Tashi Sherpa, Managing Director of Asian Airlines, the first Mi-17 helicopter operator in Nepal.

In his hunt for the ideal helicopter for Nepal's rugged needs, the late Dawa Norbu



Nepal is finally entering the Age of the Helicopter, and there is nothing to match the lifting capacity and affordability of hardy Russian-built choppers.

Sherpa, founder of Asian Airlines, headed for the former Soviet Union and in mountainous Kirghizstan managed to lease two Mi-17 copters along with a Russian crew. "Kazan, the Russian manufacturers, were keen to test their craft in Nepal's terrain. They thought it would be good for promotion," says Tashi Sherpa.

The Russian choppers were a resounding success, and have since carried 200,000 passengers over more than 20,000 flight hours in Nepal without a single accident. There are now six Mi-17s operational in Nepal, while a few others are awaiting their mandatory \$500,000 overhauls having completed 1,500 flying hours. The Royal Nepal Army operates one Mi-17 and is said to be so impressed with its performance and lift capacity that it is thinking of acquiring more.

The Russian machines are cheaper than European ones like the French Super Puma, which carries half the weight of an Mi-17 and costs five times more to operate. An Mi-17 can be chartered for \$2,200 per hour, while a four-hour sightseeing trip around Everest costs \$3,000 in a five-seater AS 350 and \$5,400 in a nine-seater BK-117. "Russian helicopters are cheap, easy to operate, and ideal for heavy-lift work," says Nepal's first commercial helicopter pilot, Lt Col (retd) Narayan Singh Pun.

The range of the Russian choppers is impressive—the Mi-17 can fly up to 6,000m, and pilots swear by the craft's high-

altitude performance. This capability has proved valuable in several rescue operations. Asian Airlines MD and Mi-17 pilot Tashi Sherpa recalls the rescue and evacuation of 500 tourists from Phanga in the Everest area in November 1995, when unexpected snowstorms left hundreds stranded in the mountains. In 1998, he was also engaged in rescue operations at Kangchenzonga Camp 1 at 5850 m.

Nepal's Mi-17 operators are now trying to get permission to operate passenger flights once again. Passenger charter flights were discontinued suddenly in 1998 after it dawned on Nepal's Civil Aviation Authority that the Russian craft were not certified to carry passengers. An exception was made for remote areas in Rapti, Karnali and Bheri zones in western Nepal, where road transport does not exist. Operators are permitted to take in passengers on the way back from these areas once they have delivered cargo. "When we operated passenger flights in the Everest area before 1998, our helicopters completed 700-800 flight hours in a year. Today, we do 440-500 flight hours annually," says Phurba Tsering Sherpa, General Manager of Asian Airlines.

They have reason to hope things will change. South African and Canadian passenger transport-type certification have already given Russian helicopters solid footholds in Europe and North America. However, it is the certification conforming to the US Federal Aviation Authority's Federal Aviation Regulations that opens up a massive market for a helicopter manufacturer.

A new variant in the Mi-8/ Mi-17 series, the Mi-17KF has been manufactured jointly by the Kazan Helicopter Plant in Kazan, in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, and the more design-oriented Mil Moscow Helicopter Plant. Many consider the Mi-17KF, a mid-size multi-role helicopter, a good cross-over craft, suited for commercial as well as passenger transport. It is currently being evaluated for certification by the Institute for

Flight Mechanics and Regulations (IFR), one of the most stringent avionics evaluation bodies.

Certification or not, most Russian whirlybirds have seen some modification in their role in Nepal. Firefighting Mi-8s have been used for helitourism as well as lifting work, for instance. Kazan Helicopters claim they can modify even the Mi-8 and the Kamov Ka-32 to suit passenger requirements in Nepal, but Asian Airlines' Sherpa

says the Civil Aviation Authority hasn't been very forthcoming with the specifics required for this sort of modification.

Till more formal certification and evaluation, the Russian crafts will continue to service the far-west sector, where desperate passengers often engage in scuffles. "We're sometimes forced to carry more people than there are seats," says pilot Tashi Sherpa. "Those who have to stand complain mildly. The Russians built a great craft. It's a pity they forgot to put in straps."

Other companies, like Col Pun's Karnali Air, used to fly the far west, but have discontinued flights to Dolpo, Upper Gorkha and other areas affected by Maoist activity. The fear of Maoist retaliation forced the company to withdraw its support to the police. "There have been several incidents where helicopters have been hijacked and pilots threatened," says Pun.

"One of our helicopters was shot at in western Nepal. The bullet went through the baggage compartment. Fortunately, no one was hurt."

The hills are alive with the sound of choppers and in many ways—for cargo transport, rescue operations and even tourism—that's a good thing, but the question now is what happens to the porters, already among the most disadvantaged of hill communities. A single trip with the Mi-17 filled to capacity puts 500 porters out of work for five days. Choppers are important, but is the diverted income finding its way into the national economy or is it simply paying for expensive foreign technicians, imported machinery and fuel? ♦

Clockwise from below: An Mi-17 belonging to the Royal Nepal Army, a Karnali Airlines nine-seater Kawasaki BK-117, an Asian Airlines Mi-17.



Shangri-La



MIN BAIRACHARYA

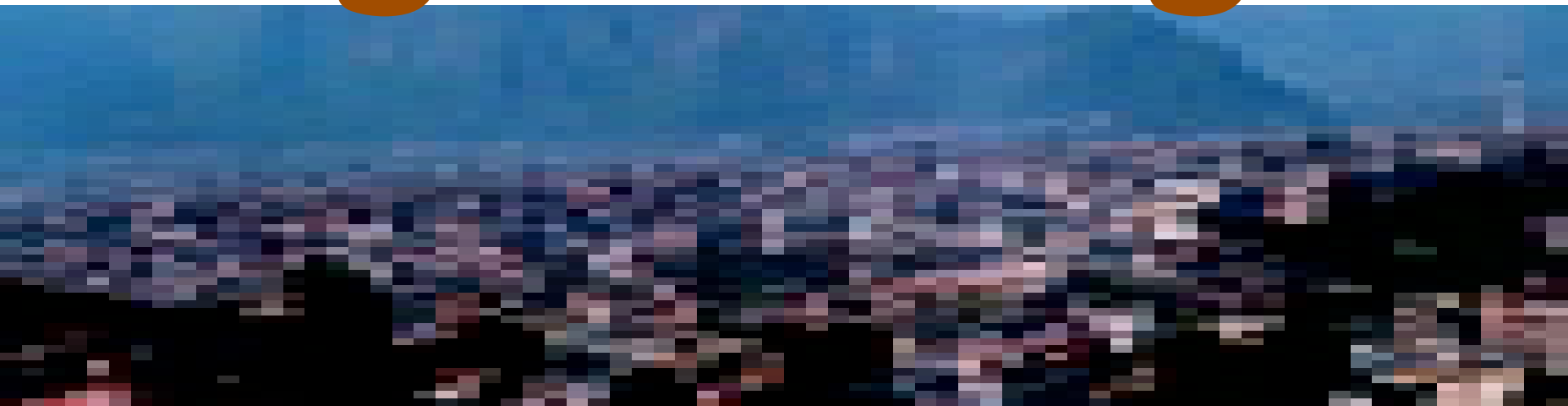
Waiting for the big one

DEEPAK THAPA

Walking past the Bhaktapur Darbar Square, one comes across a tiny whitewashed shikhara-style temple, all out of proportion with its large, multi-tiered plinth. What could have happened? There did once stand a grand pagoda on the site, but it came crashing down in the Nabhay saal ko bhuichalo, or the Earthquake of '90 (AD 1934). The shikhara was put up as a 'temporary' home for the idol.

Talk about earthquake, and conversation inevitably turns to the Nabhay saal ko bhuichalo. It has become the yardstick against which all earthquakes, large and small, are measured. There are still plenty of witnesses around who can recount the horrors of that fateful day, and every inner city family has a lore in its memory chest. But there is nothing as meticulous as the description by Brahma Shumsher JB Rana in his book Nepalko Mahabhukampa (1990 Saal), published just a year after the tragedy. (See excerpt, p.1.)

The Nepal-Bihar Earthquake, as the 1934 event is officially known, measured 8.4 on the Richter Scale. In Nepal alone, it killed 8591 and damaged more than 80,000 houses. The Valley was hit



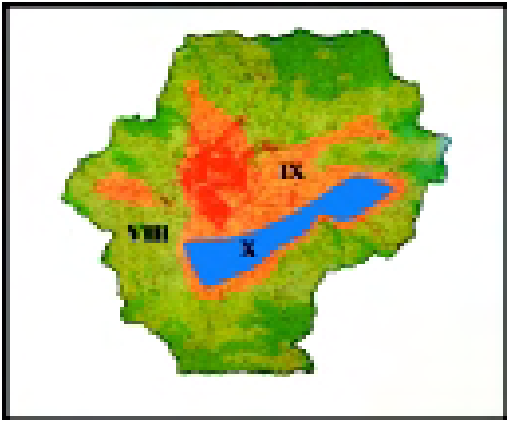
that can be also pretty regular in occurrence: M4-M5 - five per month; M5-M6 - six per year; M6-M7 - one in six years. (The difference between each point on the Richter Scale is 30 fold.) Earthquakes of M7-plus are rarer, but they do strike with geological regularity.

There are two continental plates under Nepal's northern border, with the Indian plate from the south trying to burrow under the Asian or Tibetan plate to the north. With the two plates forever pushing against each other, something has to give and it does as a tectonic slip along faultlines—and we get an earthquake. (The 1994 Seismic Hazard Mapping and Risk Assessment for Nepal found 92 such

What worries seismologists is that the 700-km segment between Kathmandu and Dehradun (including all of middle and west Nepal) seems not to have seen an M8+ earthquake for a long time. There were big tremors in 1803 and 1833, but there were most likely in the M7 range. Says Roger Bilham, the University of Colorado geologist who first raised the warning flag with an article in Himal magazine in 1994, there could even be a potential of up to 20 metres of slip ready to go off anytime between now and 2150.

Grim reaper Kathmandu Valley is at grave risk in the event of a big earthquake because of the population density of both its old and new neighbourhoods. The epicentre of the 1934 earthquake was near Chainpur, around 200 km to the east of the Valley. But even back then, when the Newar towns were a fraction of today's size, the devastation was more fierce in Kathmandu. That was mainly due to the relatively large population of the Valley, but equally so due to the sediment soil of the Valley's former lake-bed that made the intensity of the earthquake greater. Within the Valley itself the silted southern and eastern parts was affected more than the north where the soil is more compact (see map, above right).

The losses will be much greater when the next earthquake hits. The population of the Valley was 300,000 in 1934; it is now 1.5 million. Simple extrapolation from the proportion killed in then would give us 20,000 Kathmandu residents killed were an M8+ quake to strike today. But that would not be taking into account the tall buildings that have come up in every tole and bahal, with bad construction and poor materials. The occupancy rate



The five active faults in the Kathmandu Valley (left). Map on right shows the different intensities with which the 1934 earthquake hit the Valley. Intensity VIII: Damage to masonry structures. Heavy furniture moves or overturns. People frightened and have difficulty standing. Intensity IX: Poorly built masonry structures collapse. All structures are damaged. General panic. Intensity X: Most well-built masonry and frame structures destroyed. People thrown to the ground.

of the residences is also much higher. And so it is not surprising that the Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Management Action Plan, 1998, estimated that up to 40,000 people could be killed outright and close to 100,000 injured if a 1934-intensity earthquake strikes Kathmandu—which it will sooner or later.

The likely aftermath would be even deadlier. Around 60 percent of the houses in the Valley (75 percent in Bhaktapur to the east) will be severely damaged. Many of the houses will topple because of liquefaction, when the soil acquires a liquid consistency. The effect of liquefaction is likely to be more pronounced in the river valleys

where a majority of the new settlements are, such as along the Bishnumati, Dhobi Khola and Bagmati.

Fire Then there is the danger of fire, much more grievous than in 1934. Gas leaks will start conflagrations, as will electrical sparks, and the



hard, with 4296 dead and 12,397 houses totally destroyed. Among the dead were two of King Tribhuvan's daughters and a granddaughter of Rana Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher.

Plus Eight Richter Earthquakes are natural phenomena for the Himalaya, where tectonic plates twist and fold to push up the mountain ranges. Records show that between 1994 and 1999, Nepal experienced an average of eight earthquakes every day of less than Magnitude 4 (M4) on the Richter Scale. These are slight tremors that cannot be felt by humans. The ones

active faults in or near Nepal, and five of them within Kathmandu Valley alone.) According to experts, the Indian plate is creeping northwards at a speed of at least 2 cm per year, which means that every 200 years there is a 4-metre slip ready to happen. But if no major earthquake has happened for 500 years the slip can be 10 metres, enough to trigger off an earthquake of M8-plus. In the past hundred years or so, four M8-plus earthquakes have struck different sections of the Himalaya (see map, above). A segment which has just suffered such a tremor is relatively secure for centuries to come.

What to do

During an earthquake

If you are inside:

- Stand in a doorway, or crouch under a sturdy desk or table.
- Get away from windows that could shatter.
- If on the ground floor near an exit, leave the building quickly and calmly.
- Never jump from windows.

If you are outside:

- Move away from power lines and buildings.
- Move away from glass windows.
- If the street is narrow and the buildings tall, stand in the doorway of a nearby building.
- If driving, pull off the road and stop in a safe place.

After an earthquake

- Immediately after the shaking stops, leave the building. Be prepared to take cover in case of aftershocks.
- Provide first aid if necessary.
- Control fire.
- Turn off gas and electricity mains.
- Listen to the radio for reports and instructions.
- Do not enter any building unless you are sure they are safe.
- Do not use the telephone—leave it for emergency professionals.
- Gather in an open space.

(National Society for Earthquake Technology-Nepal)

greater use of synthetic materials means fires will spread easily. There will be practically no way to control the fires that have started. The Valley’s fire brigades are hopelessly unprepared to tackle any emergency situation. The three main cities have a total of seven fire tenders, and most of the water storage tanks they rely on are empty. There are fire hydrants still standing in a handful of areas of the cities, but the mains do not have water in them most of the time. Even if fire-fighting equipment were ready, the narrow streets of the inner cities and new settlements will be quite impassable due to fallen debris after an earthquake.

In the longer aftermath of the upcoming earthquake, large parts of the Valley would be without water and power supply. Sixty percent of the telephone lines would be down. Hospitals would be unable to take care of a large portion of the injured. Most likely, because of landslides on the mountain highways, the Valley would be cut off from the plains. There is not much the government will be able to do: there is a Central Disaster Relief Committee under the Home Minister that is to be activated in the event of an earthquake. But that is the problem: the committee will be active only in the event of disaster, when the damage has been done.

“The main focus will be to save the ‘life-line’,” says Min Bahadur Poudel, chief of the Disaster Relief Section at the Home Ministry. That will be difficult, with the Valley roads blocked, bridges down, and highways unusable. Kathmandu will be forced to rely on airborne supplies. Provided, that is, the single runaway at the Tribhuvan

International Airport is usable. There will be shortages of food and supplies, and warm clothing will be at a premium if the earthquake hits during mid-winter.

The capacity of government hospitals in the Valley is 2,200 beds (provided they all remain standing after the quake). Another 3,500 of the earthquake-injured could be accommodated in the corridors, but that would still fall far short of the facilities needed. Even the uninjured would have difficulty finding space to stay in. In 1934, a city of tents went up at Tundikhel to shelter the homeless. Today, Tundikhel is a fraction of its former area, and there is hardly any open space left for the residents of the city centres of the Valley. Hundreds of thousands will be left without shelter. “It will be very difficult,” admits Poudel.

What, building code? Government initiatives have so far been restricted to creating awareness—such as the week-long programme to begin on 15 January, which has been designated the National Earthquake Day in memory of that tragic day in 1934. Together with organisations such as the National Society for Earthquake Technology-Nepal, workshops are being organised at different levels to educate people. However, the sense of urgency has yet to be transferred to public mind.

The least the government could do is to make an assessment of existing government buildings (they could begin with hospitals) and begin strengthening (retro-fitting, as it is called) them. That way the public would get a clear message that the authorities are taking the earthquake threat seriously and

they could also begin making their own preparations.

Far from being active, the government has over the years chosen to sit on the one action that could save thousands of lives—implementing a building code. A Building Act was passed in 1998, which would make it mandatory for new constructions to follow the building code that has already been prepared. But a clause within it says that the code will be enforced only after notification in the gazette. That has yet to be done. While the question remains what good is a code if it cannot be implemented, in the absence of building codes and zoning laws, the unplanned growth of Kathmandu continues unabated. There are death traps in every neighbourhood.

In a report titled *Kathmandu Valley’s Earthquake Scenario* produced by the Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Risk Management Project the scene a year after a future earthquake is envisaged. “The earthquake has taught many lessons to the residents and leaders of Kathmandu Valley... Lessons on natural disasters and safety drills have been added to school curriculum. The army, police and other government and non-government groups are developing plans to work together to respond efficiently the next time a disaster strikes... The city is being rebuilt in a much more earthquake-resistant fashion.”

The report is prescient. In all likelihood, we will begin to take real precautionary measures only after The Big One arrives. As it will. This year (or decade) or the next. ♦

(With reporting by Salil Subedi)

Building disaster

JITENDRA BOTHARA

All around us are examples of how exactly one should not build in a seismic zone.

Studies shows that on a world average more than 75 percent casualties due to earthquakes are because of building collapse. That figure could be as high as 95 percent in the case of Nepal. The risk from earthquakes in Nepal, and in the Kathmandu Valley in particular, has increased because of urbanisation and the consequent rise in population density, unplanned development of new settlements, and settlement in high-risk areas.

Traditional masonry buildings are generally defective for a number of reasons: height (four- or five-storied buildings in mud mortar are common in the valley core area), weak construction material (brick or stone in mud mortar), lack of connection at wall junctions (making do with either a false joint or just a vertical joint), and no connection between wall and floor and wall and roof.

Since the 1960s modern materials (cement, reinforcing steel) began to be increasingly used in buildings but the inherent weakness of buildings remained pretty much the same. Besides the fact that construction quality has gone down over time (such as no wetting of brick before laying in cement mortar, leaving joints of masonry units unpacked, no/very little curing of cement work), new building practices have also contributed to making buildings as prone to earthquake damage as traditional structures: irregular shape of houses, increased heights of buildings and individual floors, wall-to-wall windows, and prominent use of cantilevers.

Then there is the faith people have in the typical Nepali framed (pillar) buildings, believing they can even pierce the sky with such buildings. Framed buildings are preferred in seismically active regions like Nepal because of their ductile (‘flexible’) behaviour and light weight. But the typical Nepali framed buildings severely lack both strength (because of very small columns on disproportionately small foundations, very little reinforcing steel, virtually no quality control, height irrespective of strength) and ductility (because of wrong reinforcing steel placing, wrong ring shape, many times undefined load path). Moreover, walls in frame structures are not anchored to the main frame and that makes them susceptible to collapse; walls above cantilevers are particularly dangerous. Such buildings will not be able to tackle shaking and are expected to behave no better than masonry buildings, and in many cases even worse.

Earthquake-resistant construction is the only solution against earthquake risks. Technology exists for such construction. And it is not very expensive either, since it involves an extra cost of 5-10 percent more if modern materials are used and up to 20 percent in the case of traditional materials. Existing buildings can also be ‘retrofitted’ against future earthquake risk, although obviously this will cost more than implementing seismic strengthening features during construction.

(Jitendra Bothara is a structural engineer with the National Society for Earthquake Technology.)



MIN BAIRACHARYA

Safe building

General

- Make building shape as regular as possible, maintaining a vertical load path (i.e. walls should always be on top of another wall)
- Height should not be more than three times the width.
- Avoid extended wings.

Masonry Buildings

- Control number and size of openings. Openings in opposite sides of wall should be same.
- Wall junctions should be ‘stitched’ together.
- Provide vertical steel bars from foundation to roof at wall junctions.
- DPC/sill/lintel bands needed on all walls.
- Connect wall and floor, wall and roof
- Provide bracing to floors and roofs if made of timber/steel.

Reinforced concrete frame buildings

- Make pillar stronger than beam (prevailing practice is contrary) by using more steel in pillars than is generally used now and making them wider than beams.
- Use rings of proper shape and at closer spacing.
- Overlapping of bars should not be less than 56 times the bar diameter.
- Walls should be integrated with the frame. Frame buildings require very stringent quality control

JITENDRA BOTHARA

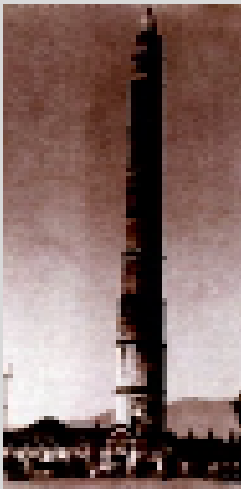


MIN BAIRACHARYA



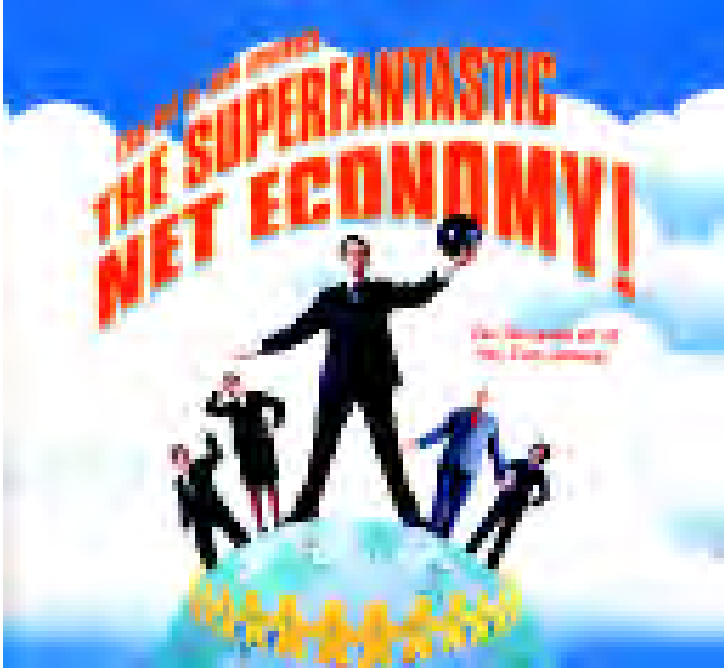
Two ways of retrofitting masonry buildings: ‘left, ‘splint and bandage’, and right, ‘column beam’.

NEPALKO MAHAHUKAMPA



Clockwise from top left: Ghantaghar before the ‘34 earthquake, and after; the destruction in Patan Darbar Square; Dharahara before, and after; the Tundikhel tent city for the shelterless.

The big con



Newsweek magazine marked the passing of the 20th century with the bokey cultural populism Americans love. Staffer Kenneth Auchincloss looked back at the “people’s century” and opined that for once in human experience “ordinary folks changed history”. He singled out a succession of heroes: suffragettes, feminists, anti-war and civil rights movements, and, finally, “the entrepreneurs”, illustrated with a drawing of Bill Gates. The labour movement wasn’t mentioned at all.

Entrepreneurs in the 90s occupied the ideological space once filled by the noble sons of toil. In all media businessmen sounded off against the arrogance of elites, the

privilege of old money and false expertise, and waging relentless war on the principle of hierarchy. From Deadheads to Nobel-laureate economists, from palaeo-conservatives to New Democrats, American leaders in the 90s came to believe that markets were a popular system, far more democratic than (democratically elected) governments. This is the central premise of what I call “market populism”: that in addition to being mediums of exchange, markets are mediums of consent. With their mechanisms of supply and demand, poll and focus group, superstore and internet, markets supposedly expressed popular will more articulately, meaningfully than did

As the US cuts interest rates in a bid to stave off recession, Thomas Frank explains how the “New Economy” was always based on a dangerous myth

mere elections. They conferred democratic legitimacy and looked out for the interests of the little guy.

One reason market populism prospered so fantastically in the 90s was that it was an extremely useful doctrine. Business leaders melded themselves with common people and discovered powerful new weapons to use against their traditional enemies in government and organised labour. Since markets expressed popular will, any criticism of business was “elitism”. According to market populism, elitists were not those who watch sporting events from a private box, or fire half their workforce and ship the factory south. Elitists were trade unionists and Keynesians who believed society could be organised any way other than the market way. What the market did was the Will of the People, so any scheme to operate outside its auspices or control its ravages was the hubris of false expertise.

This fantasy of the market as an anti-elitist machine made most sense when it was couched in the language of social class. The scions of ancient banking families were supposedly being wiped out by the streetwise know-how of some kid with a goatee; arrogant stockbrokers of old were being humiliated by e-trade masses; Wasps were getting their asses kicked by the women, Asians, Africans,

Hispanics. A thousand populist revolts shook the office blocks of the nation. Market populism could explain nearly any social phenomenon. Asian “tiger economies” collapsed, market populists told us, because they had relied on the expertise of elites rather than the infinite wisdom of the people. Western European economies were stagnant because the arrogant aristocrats who run them were clinging to welfare-state theories.

More important, market populism proved astonishingly versatile as a defence of any business beset by critics in government, unions or the environmental movement. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page wheeled out market populism to defend the advertising and auto industries, to support demands that the software industry be permitted to import more workers, to hail stock options as the people’s currency and, remarkably, to defend Microsoft from its antitrust pursuers. Since a company’s size (like a billionaire’s pile) was simply a reflection of the people’s love, antitrust was fundamentally illegitimate, a device used by elitist politicians, “to promote the interests of the few at the expense of the many”. Even after the Microsoft verdict, the paper asserted the company “should have argued that we have a monopoly because our customers want us to have one”. And when Al Gore began his feeble attacks on big business, the paper suggested Gore was “attacking you and me.”

Market populism proved particularly useful in the workplace. Whether you toiled for a great American corporation, a zesty startup, or on an assembly line, class power was lopsided as never before. Management held all the cards, and CEOs could work their will without much organised resistance. The corporation “delayed”, throwing off entire levels of white-collar workers; it “disaggregated”, ridding itself of its extraneous operations; embraced “flexibility”, replacing career employees with zero-benefits temps; it “outsourced” every possible piece of work to the lowest bidder; it “re-engineered” its various processes in a less labour-intensive way; it “disintermediated”, used new technology to cut out middlemen and move some jobs to the lowest-paid climes on earth. Unions shrank and, in the US, organised workers slipped below 10 percent of the private sector workforce. Meanwhile, in 1999, American corporate chiefs were paid, on average, some 475 times what their blue-collar employees took home. Management literature claimed



this was democratisation. 90s management gurus insisted their larger project was liberation, “empowering” the individual and striking blows against hierarchy. The problems of the corporation weren’t its refusal to bargain with its workers collectively or the massive disparities between bosses and bossed. The real problems were moral ones: “elitism”, “arrogance”, “certainty.” And the solution was embracing the Jacobin forces of the market ever more closely and throwing out such relics as loyalty and lifetime employment. Understood this way, entrepreneurs, by virtue of their close relationship to the market, were the true bearers of populist humility and the true heroes of the common man. Bill Gates’s money is thought to endow him with the approval of the people, to establish him as vicar of the general will.

By insisting that bosses were the real commoners, that outsourcing was an act of humility, that downsizing was an opportunity to pursue your authenticity, that corporations because of their attunement to market forces were bearers of a soulfulness that government and union could never touch, management theory brought an unprecedented degree of workplace quiescence. Many of the downsized agreed that what had happened to them was right, was necessary and talked about their impending careers as “free agents”. Even more tellingly, in a decade when unemployment got as low as 4 percent —making management vulnerable to demands for increased wages—unionising and strike activity remained at their lowest since the 1920s. The US was able to endure the wrenching upward redistribution of wealth in the 90s with small, localised outbreaks of social unrest.

Market populism did equally valuable service in the passionately, stridently optimistic rhetoric of the rising stock market. The 90s saw Wall Street’s “democratisation”. The great bull market of the 1990s was of the people, a powerful tool for economic democracy, the final victory of the common people over their former masters. It was said that the market itself had worked these great changes to humiliate the suits and enrich proletarians. Sometimes it was described as a demographic phenomenon, a reflection of the vast percentage of the nation’s population entrusting their savings to the market. The common people, we were told, understood this market.

In the late 90s we were deluged with tales of average people prospering

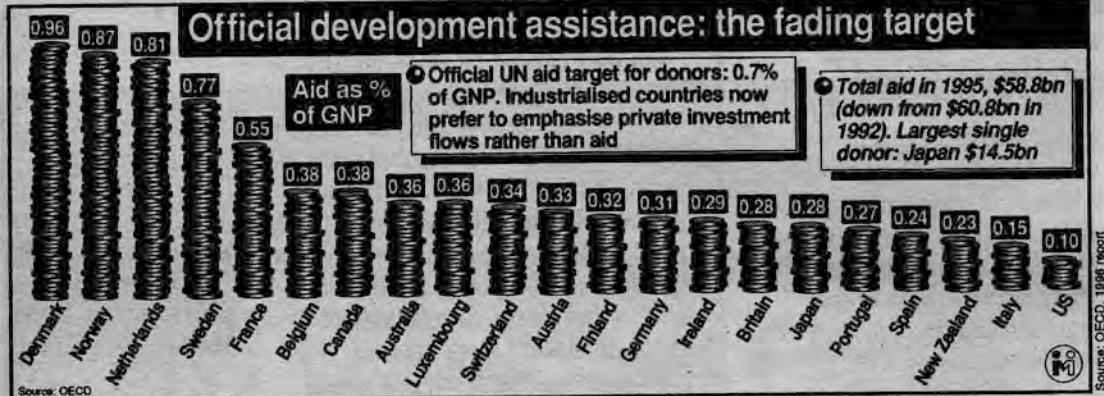
hugely by investing in hi-tech stocks: secretaries turned into millionaires by the grace of Microsoft. The fantastic appreciation in Internet shares in 1998 and 1999 was said to be a special sort of boom, only comprehensible to the unpretentious. While the old money looked at the numbers and sold short, We, the People, got it. None of it really worked out as promised. All the overheated talk about the infinite democracy of cyberspace turned out to be concerted puffery of an industry whose real source of optimism was its discovery that it could palm off one overpriced flotation after another on the most credulous market in decades. As the Nasdaq fell some 50 percent from its high in March 2000, we learned the appalling price of Wall Street’s phoney populism. But it may have been too late. In the political sphere, Wall Street was able to parlay what seemed to be overwhelming public support into victory after victory over its traditional antagonists in government. Antitrust enforcement was allowed to go slack (Microsoft notwithstanding), the Glass-Steagall banking act was repealed, and—glory of glories—a Republican president was elected promising to “privatise” social security, to turn over to Wall Street public funds that secure the nation’s retirement.

Nor was this confined to the US. Wherever the “New Economy” touched its magic finger, the same perverse cultural logic appeared, recasting economic discussion along these oddly inverted democratic lines. In Britain it informs the work of political theorists like Charles Leadbeater whose 1999 “New Economy” book *Living on Thin Air* asserts that democracy and the dawning “knowledge economy” are somehow intrinsically linked, since the “New Economy” thrives on “a culture of dissent, dispute, disrespect for authority, diversity and experimentation”. He suggests that to fully swallow the ways of the “New Economy”, Britain had to adopt a new “narrative”, an “engaging and compelling account of [the] future that captures the popular imagination, and which people can buy into, endorsing and enacting it in their everyday lives.” And it was as a narrative of social legitimacy that market populism proved most useful. During the most lopsided prosperity in our lifetimes, market populism told us all was well, that with the demise of the welfare state and the crushing of union power a newer, more extreme form of economic democracy was being born. Because our billionaires were so cool, because our websites were so very interactive, this was the most democratic of all possible worlds. ♦ (*Guardian*)

This article is based on Thomas Frank’s *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy*, Secker & Warburg, 2001, £17.99. Frank is editor of the *Baffler* magazine (www.thebaffler.com), a journal of cultural criticism.

Pepsi ad

Supermiser Superpower



MARTIN A LEE SAN FRANCISCO

When it comes to providing economic aid to the world's poorest countries, Uncle Sam has been behaving more like Uncle Scrooge. The World Bank calculates that 1.2 billion residents of low income nations live on less than a dollar a day. In South Asia alone, an estimated 522 million people, or 40 percent of the population, eked by on less than one dollar per day in 1998. The same was true for 291 million people, or 46 percent of the population, in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, nearly 800 million people living in so-called developing nations are undernourished, which means that their food intake does not provide

enough calories to meet their basic health needs. As a result of malnutrition, an estimated two of every five children in poor countries are physically stunted, and one in three is significantly underweight.

But these grim figures don't seem to bother Uncle Scrooge. Economic assistance provided by the US government to the world's poorest countries has dropped sharply in recent years. A report by the Washington-based Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities indicates that US development aid comprised just three-fifths of one percent of the federal budget in 2000—a much smaller portion than in previous years. During the 1980s, spending on economic assistance for impoverished countries averaged 0.2 percent of the US Gross National Product (GNP), about twice the current rate. From 1962 to 1969,

foreign aid for the poor vacillated between 0.37 percent and 0.58 percent of the US GNP. In 2000, the figure was a mere 0.12 percent of GNP—11.1 billion dollars.

A recent survey by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that the US ranks dead last among its 21 wealthy industrialised member states in terms of the share of national resources allocated to assist poor countries. On average, the twenty other OECD members contributed more than three times the share of economic resources that Uncle Scrooge did. While American foreign aid equalled 29 dollars per US citizen in 1998, assistance from the other industrialised countries that year averaged 70 dollars. (Denmark tipped the scales at 316 dollars

The US economy is booming, but American overseas aid is at its lowest level since World War II.

per person.)

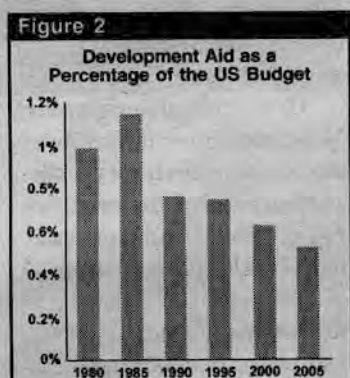
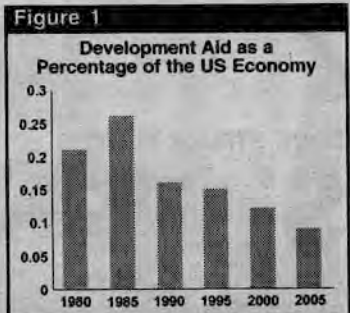
Uncle Scrooge may be tight-fisted, but he says not to worry: let the free market work its magic and poor countries will benefit along with everyone else. Unfortunately, it's not working out that way. Forum Syd, a Stockholm-based non-governmental organisation, compiled a list of 27 studies, all of which show that free trade policies are damaging the poor and enriching the wealthy. Between 1960 and 1980, before trade liberalisation, per capita income in Africa grew by a third—since 1980 it has fallen by a quarter. In Latin America, average incomes grew by 73 percent from 1960 to 1980—since then, they have increased by less than six percent.

Only in parts of Asia— notably Indonesia, South Korea, China, and Taiwan—has there been a significant decrease in poverty during the last 20 years, and these countries have made extensive use of trade restrictions. By contrast, the governments of low-income countries caught in

the net of neo-liberal policies cannot take measures to alleviate poverty if those measures impede free trade.

Uncle Scrooge may not want to admit it, but the devastating consequences of free trade are evident close to home. Today, nearly 45 percent of all Americans south of the Rio Grande—that is, Latin Americans—live in miserable, destitute conditions. According to the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development, more than 220 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean are mired in poverty—a 20 percent increase over the last four years.

Throughout the 1990s, Latin American governments went to great lengths to implement economic prescriptions favoured by Uncle Scrooge. Under the watchful eye of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, policies that reflected neo-liberal dogma were introduced at a pace never seen before. Painful austerity measures were imposed to cut budget deficits and inflation, and financial, trade, and labour



laws were liberalised in order to stimulate economic growth. Yet despite—or because of—these remedies, unemployment and poverty in Latin America are more widespread than ever. The combined Latin American debt has tripled to around 900 billion dollars since the 1982 debt crisis, and the gap between rich and poor has widened considerably.

In the Charles Dickens story, old curmudgeon Scrooge belatedly sees the light and changes his selfish ways. Not so the US. Aid to poor nations for fiscal 2001 is at the lowest level, relative to the size of the US economy, since World War II. ♦ (IPS)

Say you want a revolution

KAREN LEE WALD IN HAVANA

Twenty years after his death by an assassin's bullet, and over 30 years since the days when The Beatles' music was considered part of the ill-wind blowing in from the English-speaking imperial powers, John Lennon has been welcomed home in socialist Cuba. It was a long time coming.

Back in the 60s, when young Cuban revolutionaries were making a brave bid to recover their history and culture having thrown out the old dictatorship, there was no room for a British pop group whose music was blasted into Cuba over Miami-based radio stations. So when the icon of that revolution, President Fidel Castro made an unannounced appearance at the unveiling of a bronze statue of John Lennon at a Havana park last month the sizeable foreign press corps jumped up in delight.

Castro did not disappoint. He told reporters he was sorry he had never had the opportunity to meet the singer. In effect he was saying he was sorry that it had taken Cuba so long to recognise the greatness of this man who now sat quietly and pensively on a bronze bench in Havana's Vedado area. Asked what he would say to Lennon if he could speak to him now, Castro said, "I would tell him: 'I am sorry I never got to know you.'"

There were many parallels drawn between Lennon's life and that of Cuba, which burst upon the world scene with its triumphant revolution in 1959. Ricardo Alarcon, Speaker of the National Assembly, picked out examples of Lennon's defiance in his speech:



Lennon comes home to Cuba, unveiled in bronze by Castro himself.

- "That memorable concert in 1963," when Lennon said the front row audience, instead of applauding, could just rattle their jewellery;
- The time he returned the Order of the British Empire in 1969 to protest the Vietnam war and colonial intervention in Africa;
- His refusal to perform before an exclusively white public in Florida in 1966, or in apartheid South Africa; and
- His calls for peace in the Middle East and support for the Irish struggle.

"The FBI, CIA and the Immigration Service, instigated directly by Richard Nixon, the trickiest tenant the White House has ever had, spied on him and harassed him and tried to expel him from the United States," said Alarcon. Noting that these agencies still refuse to release many of their dossiers on Lennon, he said that in just a year—between 1971 and 1972—intelligence files on Lennon totalled over 300 pages and weighed 26 pounds.

variations of The Beatles' music, and the youngest and least-known musicians performed the best reproductions of that sound. This time around, the event was bigger, and political.

When journalists asked Castro to sit on the bench next to the life-like Lennon bronze for a photo-call, he demurred, saying it would be a "demagogic" thing to do. Now 74, the aging leader said he had heard about The Beatles at the height of their success, but didn't listen to their music back then. "I really didn't have much time... we had so much going on here," he said. He went beyond this, explaining that they were very ignorant about music and many other subjects at that time. "We had a lot to learn," Castro admitted.

That they have learned was evident by the presence of Cuba's top political leadership at the unveiling of the statue. For instance, it was unveiled by both Castro and Silvio Rodriguez, a well-known Cuban musician. Although Castro himself never ordered his zealous followers to ban US and British music, styles and culture, his followers nevertheless did so. The leadership, busy with other things, never stopped them.

And Rodriguez, a rising star in the contemporary New Song Movement at the time, was one of those buffeted by that zealotry, fed by a strong dose of intolerance. So when Castro made his appearance, along with other leaders of the Cuban revolution, it was a way of saying: "We were wrong then, and we are making up for it now." ♦ (Geminis)

Dumping the queen

Australia's Republican Movement is banking on an upcoming general election to usher in a new national leadership to pave the way for a fresh bid to dump Britain's Queen Elizabeth as the nation's head of state.

With federal elections expected later this year, political pundits say the rule of monarchist Prime Minister John Howard may be ending, which Republicans hope will create fresh opportunities to sever ties with London and appoint an Australian President. James Terrie, national director of the Australian Republican Movement, said last week his group would not make republicanism an election issue, but it hoped to keep the subject alive during the 100th anniversary of Australia's federation. "An English Protestant queen is not the right person to symbolise the modern democratic nature of our continent," Terrie said. "It's not necessary for the (ruling) Liberal Party to be defeated. What's important is when Prime Minister John Howard himself is gone."

Settled by Britain as a penal colony in 1788, Australia effectively freed itself of British rule in 1901 when six colonies united to form a federation. However, the country remains a constitutional monarchy with Britain's Queen Elizabeth as head of state. Australia's 19 million people, in a referendum November 1999, rejected a chance to throw off the colonial legacy, but political analysts and republicans say the "No" vote reflected doubts over the way the government proposed a president should be elected.

Republicans say the referendum showed up to 67 per cent of Australians were actually in favour of ditching the monarch. Opinion polls since then have shown just over half of the vast island-continent's people back a republic. Prime Minister Howard, who heads a Liberal-National coalition, is a staunch monarchist and is expected to lead his government into this year's general election, widely expected in October or November.

Many political commentators expect Howard to hand over the Prime Minister's post to current Treasurer Peter Costello, a well-known republican, within 12 to 18 months of any coalition election victory. Opinion polls put the opposition Labour Party, under leader Kim Beazley, marginally ahead. Beazley is a republican and could be expected to promote a new referendum. The Australian Republican Movement will distribute a petition around Australia during 2001 which it will later present to both houses of Parliament. ♦ (Asian Age)



Japanese justice on trial

DOUG STRUCK IN TOKYO

She was a career woman by day, a respected economist in a big utility company. By night, a streetwalker driven by her own demons to methodically service four customers each evening, offering herself cheaply to foreign labourers in the neighbourhood.

He was an illegal immigrant from Nepal, working in an Indian curry shop to send money home to a wife and two children. On occasion, they met for a transaction that met their mutual needs. But when Yasuko Watanabe was found strangled in a shabby vacant room in March 1997, police arrested Govinda Prasad Mainali for the 'office lady murder'. Some say too quickly—the evidence seemed far from certain and he vehemently declared his innocence.

The case became a major cause for human rights groups after the Tokyo District Court acquitted Mainali in April, holding that the circumstantial evidence was flimsy. But he was not released. Instead, he was jailed to prevent his leaving the country, an extraordinary act that legal critics say could not have happened to a Japanese citizen. Prosecutors appealed the acquittal, and on 22 December the Tokyo High Court summarily reversed the verdict without explanation and sentenced him to life in prison. Mainali, 34, who had cleared out his jail cell expecting to leave for Nepal, was stunned. "I didn't do it," he cried. "God, help me."

Mainali's case has unleashed criticism of the entire Japanese criminal justice system. Defence lawyers note that over 99 percent of criminal cases brought to court result in convictions, that judges ignore the presumption of innocence for the defendant that is part of Japanese criminal law. Furthermore, police operate with few safeguards against abuse—physical and mental pressure to confess are routine and poor suspects often do not get a lawyer until they get to court.



A Nepali man is sentenced for life in Tokyo amid allegations of racism and a raging debate about the Japanese criminal justice system.

"The criminal courts are comatose. They do what prosecutors tell them," said Katsuhiko Tsukuda, one of five lawyers who represented Mainali. Lawyers raised complaints from the start, including a civil suit to protest non-access to their client. They won a rare judgement and a \$3,300 award against the government. "Even though we don't have faith in the judges, I was shocked by this [the verdict]," said Mainali's attorney, Hiroshi Kamiyama. The lawyers plan to appeal to the Supreme Court, but say the system is stacked against them. "Defendants have to be acquitted in lower court, then in the appeals court, and then acquitted in the Supreme Court before they are freed," Kamiyama said.

Mainali's supporters say police were under pressure to make an arrest because the victim's unusual background attracted intense public interest. Watanabe, 39, had graduated near the top of her class in the tough economics school of Keio University and had a promising career path as an economist at Tokyo Electric Power Co. But after work, she went to a sleazy district in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward of "love hotels" and bars. Her regular customers paid as much as \$500, but she also serviced foreigners who did construction work or menial jobs, often illegally. She charged them as little as \$30 according to Shinichi Sano, an author who says he conducted hundreds of interviews for a book about the murder. She wasn't

picky about her workplace, he said, and had sex in abandoned buildings such as the one in which she was killed and robbed of \$357.

Five days after, police arrested Mainali who shared a nearby room with other Nepalis. They had no evidence to connect him directly but said he had a key to the room where the murder occurred, that a condom was found there with semen that matched his and that a hair found at the scene matched his DNA.

Mainali initially denied knowing her, but eventually told police that he had the key because they had had sex previously, and that the condom was from an earlier visit. Prosecutors couldn't prove when the condom was used and admitted finding hairs from at least one other unidentified person near the body. They also could not explain how a train pass belonging to her was later found in a neighbourhood far from Mainali's haunts. "Because he first said he didn't know her, the police concluded Mainali was a liar and made him a prime suspect," Sano said. "They would never do this to Japanese, or a Caucasian. There is an element of racism against Nepalis because they are coloured." Sano went to Nepal to interview workers who were deported from Japan after the inquiry. He said they told him they were physically abused, and threatened to give statements against Mainali. Sano asserts that one worker said Mainali was with him the night of the murder.

Toyo Atsumi, a law professor at Chuo University, said: "I think this decision is bad for the image of Japan's legal system. This case vacates the whole protection against double jeopardy." The Tokyo prosecutors' office refused to discuss the case. Deputy chief prosecutor, Kunitaro Saida, issued a statement that read: "The verdict confirmed the assertion of the prosecutor and had fully clarified the truth of the case. We regard this as a fully justified and appropriate verdict." ♦ (Washington Post)

Powerless in India

NEW DELHI - When a massive power failure hit north India affecting over 200 million people last week, state-owned electricity utility managers rushed for help to a big power plant run by a leading global energy company.

But they backed off when the US-based Enron Corporation demanded three times the normal rate for supplying power from its Dabhol thermal plant in western India, to re-start the stalled electricity stations. Electricity was finally sourced from the government's own units to partially restore power to north India the next day, but losses of hundreds of millions of dollars were caused.

This was perhaps biggest power failure in the country so far, and has added urgency to the demand that India's inefficient state-controlled power utilities be privatised soon. But it has also shown the costs of rushing headlong into privatisation, say critics of Enron, which runs the world's largest private power project in Maharashtra.

Enron was forced to renegotiate an earlier power sale deal with the state government, scrapped following a sustained campaign by people's groups and protests by opposition parties. But the new contract threatens to bankrupt the state's electricity utility, Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB), and the state exchequer itself. Under the 1995 deal, the MSEB can ask Enron to cut production only if it picks up the bill for capital costs and interest. It must pay Dabhol a minimum of \$220 million a year whether it needs the power produced or not. The deal also passes on effects of currency devaluation and hikes in international petroleum prices to the MSEB. Over the past year, both things happened, pushing the cost of DPC power to two cents a unit, thrice the 1995 rate.

Says Grish Sant, researcher of the people's group Prayas: "The project was negotiated in a non-transparent, non-competitive manner and the MSEB highly inflated its power demand projections." The MSEB's hydro-electricity plants in the state produce power at a third of what Dhabol charges. But the state utility has been forced to back down production and even shut down some of its units as a result of the Enron deal, says Sant. MSEB tariffs are so high that many energy-intensive industries in Maharashtra have switched to captive power plants, causing a glut of expensive power in the state.

Experts argue it would be far cheaper in the long run to make state-run utilities more efficient than to bring in foreign investors who have little understanding of India's power system. Ashok Rao, a top executive at the Bharat Heavy Electrical Limited (BHEL), says affordable electricity has been recognised as a major ingredient in India's food self-sufficiency because it is used to power irrigation pumps. State-run utilities have raised power production in India from 1,362 MW 50 years ago to some 86,000 MW today. Rao blames pro-liberalisation policies followed by successive governments in the last decade for starving the government power utilities of funds. ♦ (IPS)



Thai "Genghis Khan"

BANGKOK - Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's next Prime Minister and reputed to be one of its richest, once likened himself to Genghis Khan, the Mongol leader who conquered China. "I'm the Genghis Khan type of manager," Thaksin reportedly told Asian Business Magazine during an interview in 1995.

"When you start a company, you need someone to propel it, to set a vision and force everyone to work like barbarians. But after a certain point you need a builder, who must be professional, so they don't need someone like me anymore, who might push too hard," he explained. The statement fits the man who must always have his way, is impatient and has the utmost confidence in himself. These are some of the qualities of the Prime Minister-elect, who received overwhelming voter support with his pledge to move the country forward. But many warn that he can't run the country the same way he has managed his Shin Corps business empire, for it is "an entirely different ballgame".

But many of his other CEO qualities will prove useful in

administering the country. People close to Thaksin say he has a good eye for recognising who is suitable for what job. He delegates well, but still doesn't easily trust people, and has become sensitive and reacted excessively to perceived criticism lately, because of anxiety over the election.

His wife Pojamarn looks after Shin Corps and Thaksin's finances, and she, more than anyone, has always trusted Thaksin's business instincts, and has been supportive, though she initially opposed his political ambitions. His other close confidantes include the secretary-general of the Thai Rak Thai Party, a key economic adviser, and an ex-Finance Minister and former president of the Thai Military Bank.

Politics wasn't his first love, but his business empire was built on it. He entered politics because "spending in setting up my own party would be better than to give money to the political parties." Thaksin is never afraid of making decisions, although caution is not one of his strong points. In the past, he was seen as politically

naïve because he talked on all subjects, including those about which he knew little. But he's a fast learner and now talks more cautiously, though he still pushes issues he is passionate about.

Many of these leadership qualities are undermined by his tendency to think that money solves all problems, and his occasional inability to control his temper. These two aspects and the National Counter Corruption Commission's indictment of him reflect badly on him. Foreign institutional investors and the foreign press have expressed strong reservations about Thaksin. The foreign community is sceptical about Thai Rak Thai's policies, which amount to a populist spending spree. For the sake of stability, an immediate challenge for Thaksin, even before he takes office, will be to win back the confidence of the foreign community. He and Thai Rak Thai have a group of foreigners advising them on political and public relations strategies.

But among Thais there's a strong belief that he should be given a chance to lead the country. Many are

mesmerised by his vision and business success, seeing him as a sort of Thai Bill Gates. They're now waiting to see how he handles coalition politics. Between 1987 and 1994, 51 year-old Thaksin built Shin Corps, now the country's leading telecommunications group. The swiftly constructed empire has reportedly made him the country's richest man, with a family fortune estimated at Bt60 billion (\$1.4 billion).

Not bad for a civil servant who started out as a police lieutenant colonel in 1973. Thaksin, who earned a doctorate in criminal justice at Sam Houston State University in the United States, left the police force in 1987 to become an IBM distributor, mainly targeted government offices and state enterprises. His big business break came shortly thereafter, when he won the first government concession to set up a pager service and mobile phone network for Bangkok. He later won a concession to operate the country's sole satellite system.



What kind of prime minister will Thaksin Shinawatra be?

In 1994, leaving his businesses operations to professional "builder" types, Thaksin jumped into the dynamic world of national politics. Under the Palang Dharma party he became foreign minister between November 1994 and February 1995, and thereafter led the now-virtually-defunct party. In July 1995, Thaksin became deputy Prime Minister in the government of Banharn Silapa-archa on the campaign boast that he'd solve Bangkok's traffic nightmare in six months. He threw money at it, by offering traffic police special bonuses for keeping their sections unclogged and providing them with

2,000 wheel clamps for illegally parked cars.

Six months later Bangkok's traffic was as bad as ever. It took the country's economic collapse in 1997 to really improve the situation, because people couldn't afford to drive their cars. In late 1997 Thaksin was called in to act as deputy Prime Minister again, this time by the then Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. The job lasted three months, until Chavalit was forced to resign in November, paving the way for a takeover by the Democrat Party, the leading party of the incumbent government coalition. ♦ (The Nation)

Can a Nepali live in Nepal or not?

Front page editorial by Shree Acharya (who has since been replaced) in Spacetime Dainik, 2 January.

“Mr Jamim Shah
Managing Director
Space Time Dainik
Panipokhari, Lazimpat, Kathmandu

This is to inform you that we have some questions to ask you, so please contact this office at 10 am on 1 January 2001.” This was the signed notice sent to our office on 31 December by the Assistant Chief District Officer of Kathmandu, Ek Mani Nepal. It was a holiday, and we received this letter on the same day at about 4 pm in the evening. As soon as I received that letter, I rang up the CDO’s office and spoke to the Assistant CDO and informed him that our managing director was not present in the office. Since that day was the last day of Eid, he must be busy meeting his relatives and friends. “If the managing director cannot be reached today, should I come or is it possible that he, the MD, present himself sometime tomorrow or the day after tomorrow?” I asked.

“You should not come, it won’t help. He himself must come, tomorrow at 10 am. Please inform him about it anyhow,” was the answer I got. Therefore the next day, our MD, our lawyer, Hari Neupane, and I went to the CDO office. Nepal was not in his office at that time. Neither was CDO Tulsi Bhattarai. After some time Nepal came. Around 10.15 am I met him and informed him that we had come and were ready for any discussion. He asked which one of us was Jamim Shah. We introduced ourselves and after some small talk, he indicated that our MD was to move into another room for questioning. I said: “If a statement is to be taken, then our lawyer, who is with us, would also like to be present.” He replied that it was normal and ordinary questioning and therefore the presence of the lawyer was not necessary.

The questioning went from 10.30 am to 1.30 pm. They took a written statement and it concerned the Hritihik Roshan incident, which our newspaper had reported. They asked him about all the issues concerning this incident—where the news came from, how it came about, how it was printed, what was the basis and origin of the news, the source and so on. Meanwhile we got clear indications that the CDO was calling up regularly and giving directions. In the end the CDO himself gave instructions over the telephone and asked that Jamim Shah present himself again at the CDO’s office the following Monday.

Then we were handed a legal notice regarding the same.

Why did all this take place and for what reason, is what we ask. All we did was print reports of incidents that had taken place. The news that the Nepali media printed was collected from places where the events took place or were collected from different agencies or organisations. For example, we printed the news on 25 December, one that concerned the Thali Youth Federation. Under the leadership of the chairman of that federation, Yogendra Shrestha, cassettes of Hritihik Roshan were burnt. In another case, the statement of the ANNFSU, Morang District Committee, was printed. We did not create this, we printed it on the basis of events taking place or on the basis of statements issued.

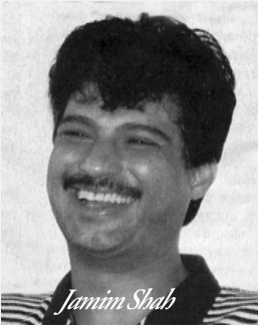
It is the responsibility and duty of the government to find out where the news originated, to separate facts from fiction and to make public the truth. All we did was report different events as they took place. On 15 December, a local paper from Chitwan reported that effigies of Hritihik were burnt and then it was reported that this ritual took place daily in Chitwan. Is there no government agency in Chitwan? Isn’t it the duty and responsibility of the government to find out the truth, and explain to the people protesting what in fact was the truth? Why did the government stay quiet till 25 December? What wrong did the media do by just reporting events that happened?

Children lost their lives when protestors were fired upon by the police. Hritihik himself released statements countering what had been attributed to him and stated that he was hurt by all the violence and destruction that had taken place. All our respectable information minister did was pass a directive that Hritihik’s movies should not be screened. On what basis did he ban Hritihik’s movies? If anyone is to be faulted for the mess, it can only be the government, the information minister and no one else.

Those who should be held responsible are not shouldering that responsibility, the accused are being set free and all the blame is being directed towards the media. This is the start of a new conspiracy and the first target is our paper, Spacetime Dainik. The letter sent to us and the interrogation is a prime example of this conspiracy. On the one hand, they say it is a simple questioning and then conduct an interrogation in a closed room. They take signed statements and announce it with great fanfare in the official government media. The official news agency, RSS, released a statement stating that Jamim Shah had been arrested and released in the name of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ). What had happened was that the general secretary of the FNJ, Tara Nath Dahal, issued a personal statement on an event that had taken place. Zee News of India also picked up this statement of the government and sensationalised it.

The President of FNJ, Suresh Acharya, called us up and said that the FNJ had not given any such statement. He stated that none of these events took place and that if the government tries to harm the FNJ or the press in any way, then the FNJ and other press people will protest. So why did Dahal issue the statement in the first place?

We have realised that some people are benefiting from all this in some way and they are being directed by the government to raise and create trouble. Does this then mean that a Nepali cannot live in Nepal? Some people are becoming jealous of Spacetime Dainik, which has become very popular among Nepalis in a short time. They are out to tarnish our reputation and this is what worries us. Everyone should ask one question and that is, what was our fault in the Hritihik incident and where did we go wrong? Why is this conspiracy being hatched against us? Why is the government conspiring against us? It is upto the government and the information minister to provide answers.



Jamim Shah

Bandhs and the Nine Left

CPN(UML) spokesman Pradip Nepal, in Nepal Samacharpatra, 5 January

Three kinds of people really benefitted from the recent bandhs—the bandh organisers, government employees, and black marketeers out to make a profit. The organisers rested



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Pradip Nepal

peacefully in their homes or lazed around in the sun at party offices. They could be easily contacted at their homes or their offices. The government employees too were under no tension. Those who wanted to report to work came in and those who did not want to stayed put at home. There would be no cuts in their salaries for being absent during a bandh.

The police are the ones who suffer the most during bandhs, although the recent bandh did not give them any trouble. They did not have to fire bullets or lathi-charge protestors and could be seen at the crossings engrossed in deep conversation. They had to go hungry the whole day, but this is because of the inefficiency of the government and not due to the bandh. Yet, they were enjoying themselves.

Black marketeers had a field day. They made huge profits in a short time and are ready with donations that they normally give to different political parties. Apart from the three categories of people mentioned above, everyone else was frustrated and angry with the bandhs. Some were so angry that they were prepared to even denounce their being Nepalis.

Bandhs in themselves are not good or bad. They are just a means for people to show their feelings and frustrations, and take place because of the circumstances at a particular moment. The bandhs called in the Panchayat regime were to topple the Panchayat system. It was used to secure the democratic rights of the people and therefore those bandhs used to be very successful and effective. That is why people used to

participate in great numbers and with much enthusiasm. The bandhs of 1980 played an important part in that process and their role was appreciated.

After the restoration of democracy, bandhs started to play many roles but not one has been used to bring democracy. Therefore bandhs called after 1990 have not been that effective or bloody. Calling bandhs on the smallest pretext has proved to be counterproductive, and they seem to have lost their meaning.

Those in the Nine Left will now have to analyse their mode of functioning. It seems that their programmes are either helping pro-India parties, or the extremists. It has been proved twice that some unseen power is controlling them. The calling off of the bandh called during the rise in prices of petroleum products raised questions. The recent meaningless bandhs have further supported that view. The Nine Left will now have to question their existence and also the way they think.

Case against Maoist leaders

Saptabik Nepalipatra, 5 January

A case of dacoity has been filed in the Parbat district court against 10 Maoists, including Baburam Bhattarai



Baburam Bhattarai

and Prachanda, leaders of the insurgency. According to sources, the Maoists are accused of looting the Phalebas branch of the Rastriya Banijya Bank one year back. They had looted money and goods worth almost Rs 6.5 million.

UML is irrelevant

Comrade Prachanda in Spacetime Dainik, 4 January

We do not see the infighting in the Congress on the basis of any new

philosophy. This is a personal and opportunistic battle, one that is being fought for power and position. Therefore we do not attach much major importance to it. From whatever we know, we can conclude that the Bhattarai-Deuba camp is the forward-looking and progressive camp, while the Koirala camp is more conservative.

If you want to fulfil your objectives, you must have some new and forward-looking philosophy. For this, you must move away from the feudal, class-ridden, and the commission-eating stratum of society and defeat those people ideologically. Only in this way will they be able to fight the Koirala camp. Otherwise there is no political justification for this battle. The Deuba camp has not given any sign that it is moving in that direction. Otherwise the Koirala camp will not be defeated and it seems that the Koirala camp is representing the progressives and reactionaries.

We support the agitation carried out by the Nine Left against the fascist and anti-nationalist government and hope that this type of struggle will always be carried forth. As for the issue and decision taken by the UML standing committee, we find that it has been rendered irrelevant by its loss of national esteem, the race for positions and power, and recent incidents. In the present situation it seems that the UML is standing between the people’s expectations, their feelings and wants, and this is going to prove detrimental to the UML. By acting as a tool of the present fascist government it has not only rendered itself useless but had also shocked its supporters.

Forget about providing any direction to the country, the UML of today has not been able to play its part as a responsible opposition in Parliament properly. By surrendering to rightist parties and capitalists it has played an evil game with its supporters. It has come to represent all the anti-nationalist and anti-people parties. It has proved that it indeed is a little brother of the Nepali Congress.

This decision has proved that those people who make palatial houses and drive Pajeros in Kathmandu have betrayed the people’s expectations and the revolution. Even then we ask the honest, hard-working nationalists left in that party to pressure the leadership and stop the leaders from taking decisions in such a manner. We should not, at the present moment, help the Koirala camp, but get together and work for the revolution and the country. We should work and find ways to provide a new direction to this country.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

The parliament is meeting in a month. There was no discussion on the topic in the previous sessions and neither has the government showed any interest in discussing the bill this time round. To promulgate an ordinance just before a parliamentary session is not only disregarding the parliament but also a tactic to by-pass it.

—Madhav Kumar Nepal, General Secretary of Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), commenting on the recent ordinance to raise an armed police force in Budhabar, 10 January.

So this is how democracy is strengthened in the Congress party!

गतिविधि Gatibidhi, 6 January 2001

ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES

Movie ticket bookings online at <www.nepalshop.com>

EXHIBITION

❖ **Angkor**—A black and white photography exhibition by Jaro Poncar from Prague. The focus of the exhibition is the temple complex Angkor Wat regarded as one of the architectural wonders of the world. December 20—20 January. 8 am to 6 pm. Indigo Gallery, Naxal.

MUSIC

❖ **Gazal** An evening with Jagjit Singh presented by L'achievers in aid of Nepali journalists, Kathmandu District Committee. Banquet Hall, Hotel Yak & Yeti. 6:00 pm onwards. Rs 2500. 416 698

❖ **Jazz** Jazz by Cadenza at Upstairs Restaurant, Lazimpat. Every Saturday 7:30pm—10pm. Rs 200

❖ **Rock and Blues** Robin 'n' Looza play rock, blues, soul, and Nepali tunes at The Bamboo Club, Thamel. Every Friday evening.

❖ **Live Shows** Various bands at The Red Onion Bar, Lazimpat. Every evening. 416071

❖ **Chakra** The Piano Lounge at Hotel Yak & Yeti. Every evening 7 pm onwards. 248999

❖ **Unplugged** Syabru Lama plays guitar at the Coffee Shop, Hotel De l' Annapurna. Everyday 7:30pm – 10pm. 221711

❖ **Classical Guitar** Kishor Gurung plays classical favourites at the Chimney, Hotel Yak & Yeti. Everyday 8pm onwards. 248999

❖ **Classical** Musicians from Nepal and abroad at the Kiratishwor Mahadev temple, Pashupatinath. January 9 from 4pm—8pm. Free entrance, but charges may apply for special guest appearances. Organised by Kirateswore Sangeet Ashram. 492139

DANCE

❖ **Classical Nepali Dances** based on Buddhist and Hindu epics and the Tantric pantheon at the Great Pagoda, Hotel Vajra. Every Tuesday, 7pm onwards. Rs 300. 271545

❖ **Ballads and Dances of Old Tibet** performed by Tsering Gurmey and Tsering Paljor at the Naga Theatre, Hotel Vajra. Every Thursday, 7pm onwards. Rs 400. 271545

EVENTS

❖ **Earthquake Safety**—Five-day-long exhibition on earthquake safety, including earthquake-resistant construction and relief/rescue methods. Live demonstration using scaled down models of strengthened and unstrengthened buildings in a simulated earthquake. Organised by the National Society for Earthquake Technology-Nepal. 15-19 January. 10am-5pm. Exhibition Hall, Bhrikuti Mandap. 474192

❖ **Farewell**—Farewell to Nepali world-touring cyclist Pushkar Shah cycling around the world promoting Nepal and spreading the message of peace and harmony. Shah started the first phase of his tour on 29 November 1998 and has already cycled through 21 countries in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Organised by the Nepal Tourism Board. 12 January, 11.00 am. Tourist Service Centre, Bhrikuti Mandap. Help and advice can be extended to the cyclist at <nepalcyclist@yahoo.com> or 492553/431765

FESTIVAL

❖ **Swasthani Fasting.** The annual festival of Nepali Hindus, *Swasthani Barta*, which began on Tuesday, 9 January and will go on till Thursday, 8 February. All pious Hindus gather and listen to the story of Shiva and Parvati while a family member reads the story of Swasthani in their homes. While silently listening to the story, devotees make offerings of flowers and food to the holy book.

❖ **Maghe Sankranti** marks the beginning of the holy month of *Magh* in the Nepali calendar bringing an end to the ill-omened month of Poush (mid-December) when all religious ceremonies are forbidden. This is an important day to bathe at the union of sacred rivers and streams. Sankhamul, on the banks of the Bagmati river, north of Patan, is among the most sacred sites for this day. People go in the wee hours to sprinkle themselves with the holy water, polluted or not, and pay homage to the temple of *Rato Machhindranath* and *Ajimata*. The *Til Madhev* idol is worshipped for an abundance of food and wealth in the Bhadgaon community.

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



RAMYATA LIMBU

So you're a regular at Thamel. You've guzzled beer at the Irish Pub, feasted on the garlic steak at Rum Doodle Restaurant and Bar, gazed on passers-by from the terrace garden at Le Bistro, sipped cocktails at Sam's and played a set of backgammon at Full Moon. But wait a minute, have you been to The Cave? The Momo Cave?

Probably Thamel's best-kept secret, Thamelites swear by the Cave's non-vegetarian delights. Vegetarian dishes are available—the vegetable pakodas are sublime. But everyone drools over the juicy meat momos and the spicy tomato pickle, the fried sukuti (dried meat) and jibro bhuteko (fried tongue). There's more on the menu—especially for those of you who want more than your money's worth of local cuisine. The cave's one and only waiter—a smiling young man—makes sure the service is great.

Two plates of piping hot, juicy momos, a plate of fried sukuti and a plate of fried jibro all washed down with some local liquor is guaranteed not to make a dent in your wallet. It will cost you some Rs 200, the price of a meal for one without drinks at an up-market Thamel restaurant. You get pink paper napkins and tooth-picks, too.

Closeted away in the warm, dimly-lit confines of the Cave, warmed by glasses of different local liquors (bottled brands are also available), the Cave's ambience is likely to prompt you to share your innermost secrets with friends. Once patronised by the late Narayan Gopal (some say he even composed many a song here) the cave is the favorite haunt of local entrepreneurs who want to chill out after a long hard day.

As you turn left from the police post at Thamel Chowk and walk a couple of hundred yards down the street, you might just miss the little gate to your left. Sandwiched between buildings displaying colourful tourist-wear and

Momo Crave

If you haven't eaten momos at The Cave, you haven't eaten many.



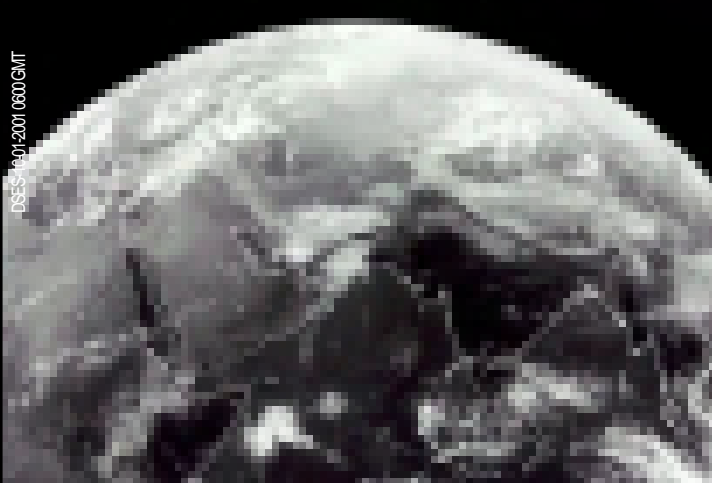
brightly-painted advertisements, this is one place you'll find that remains untouched by the commercialism of Nepal's tourist hub. One place you

are not likely to find mentioned in tourist brochures. Nor will you find anything close to The Cave's momos anyplace else. ♦



NEPALI WEATHER

byNGAMINDRA DAHAL

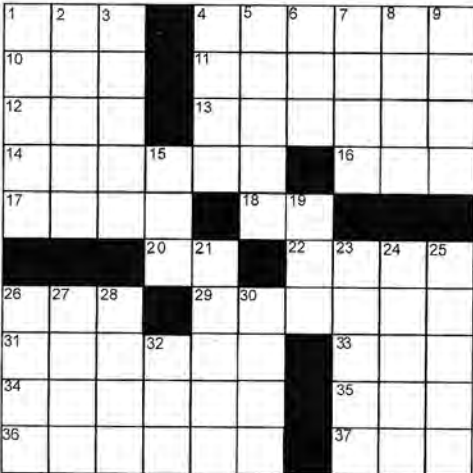


There will be some respite from the recent chill due to a high pressure zone developing over the Himalaya. The cyclone over the south-east Indian coast swept away the haze over the tarai, but the plains and river valleys will continue to see heavy fog in the mornings. Unless the clouds looming over the northern Himalaya and Central Asia head towards Nepal attracted by the cyclone in the south, the skies will remain clear. This means no further drop in daytime temperatures, although nights may get even colder as evening winds persist.

KATHMANDU

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
18-01	19-00	19-00	18-01	19-01

QUICKWORD 15



Across

- Muzzled quip (3)
- Put books on hold (6)
- Americans speak with hands (3)
- PENZOIL IS THIS (2 WORDS)
- El Dorado, or Big Bully? (3)
- What one does with services (6)
- Summerhouse with a view (6)
- Go have a look (3)
- Bunuel and Kubrick's dark vision (4)
- Noxious company (2)
- Magician's computer (2)
- British Duke, informally (4)
- A fox, a mink, or a down-market ? (3)
- Raiment (6)
- Spanish on the high seas (6)
- Tease the scrap (3)
- Who brings in the fish? (6)
- When the Basques will arrive (3)
- Lady-like Spanish fish (6)
- Erase the latter letters (3)

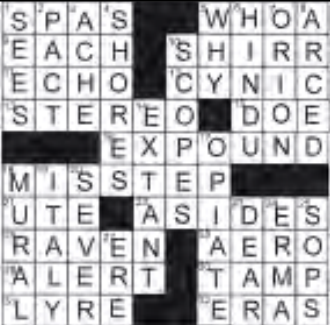
Down

- Test, measure, scale (5)
- Try it, I say (5)
- Shine on, pots and soufflés (5)
- Strikebreaker's protective cover (4)
- Wreak it! (5)
- Not just a time, an age (3)
- Clark's better half (4)
- Not quite evil (4)
- Otherwise like a Nordic name (4)
- Use to detect ET (3)
- Partly visual choice (3)
- Officer-in-training (5)
- Goon, hand, mercenary (5)
- Web-critic says, "I surf and _ _" (1,4)
- Professional eagle (5)
- Snide poke (4)
- Dunk a doughnut or an _ (4)
- Thank god (4)
- Eastern consort, in two colours (4)
- Rumble in the Jungle, part 2 (3)

Terms and conditions

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

QUICKWORD ANSWER 14



Out of six correct entries the lucky winner is **Namash Deuja**



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.....

SAVING FAITH

by DESMOND DOIG

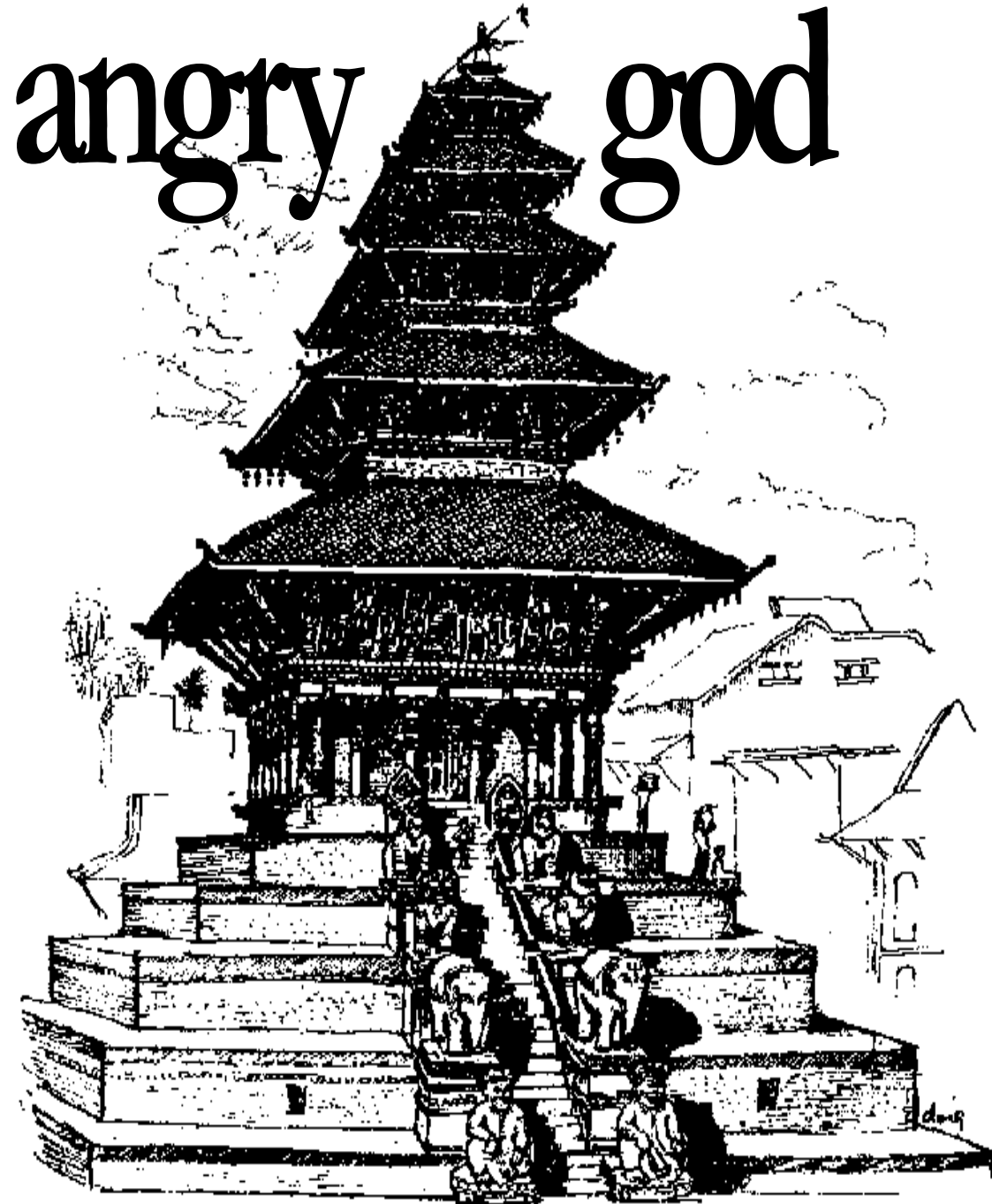
A monument to an angry god

Bhaktapur's greatest patron of the arts, King Bhupatindra Malla, probably had it built as a culminating edifice, a pagoda-type temple to outshine all others, a monument worthy of the goddess Siddhi Lakshmi and incidentally himself. So in the heart of ancient Bhaktapur in 1702, he had the towering Nyatapola built. Then it must have been a wonder of the times. Its five elegantly soaring tiers are set upon five ascending plinths, a masterpiece of proportion and artistry that gives to the massive building an impression of gem-like delicacy. The wood carving is superb, each one of the 108 struts illustrating the numerous forms of Bhagwati Mahishamardini and lesser deities. Doors, windows, recesses, are all lavishly carved and painted. Every tier is hung with wind bells. A golden finial crowns the temple.

Even the people of Bhaktapur are uncertain about the main deity of the temple. To many she is so powerful, so secret, she is nameless and without form. To most she is Siddhi Lakshmi, to others Bhairabi, the consort of Bhairab, Lord of Terror. There is known to be a beautiful sculpture of Mahishamardini in the inner sanctum but the temple is seldom open and only select priests are permitted inside.

Leading to the main door of the temple is a steep flight of stairs flanked by pairs of massive stone figures. In ascending order they are powerful human wrestlers, armed with bludgeons and shields, elephants, lions, griffins and the deities Simhini and Byaghrini. Each is considered to be ten times as powerful as the other, and as the wrestlers have the strength of ten ordinary men the culminating protective force is that of one hundred thousand men, or several armies of the time.

But all this pales before the legend. King Bhupatindra Malla, who



When one sits and dreams in the shadow of the Nyatapola temple a coffee or Coke can be the slowest drink on earth.

was forever building and beautifying his city, had the important but not impressive temple to Bhairab largely extended. To the existing rectangular shrine he had two floors added, crowning the lot with a gilded roof and a row of golden finials. Rather than being grateful, the fierce god flew into a tremendous rage at being disturbed and caused, calamities unending to visit the land. There was drought and pestilence, earthquake and war. In great anguish, the king

consulted his priests and astrologers who came up with an answer that must have gladdened the artistic king's heart. He must build without delay a temple to Bhairab's consort so beautiful that it would have no equal in the land.

From the forests about Bhaktapur were brought especially selected trees to which the proper sacrifices had been made. Kilns to produce the slender rose coloured bricks and the small russet tiles for the temple mushroomed about the city. Wood carvers, workers in metal and stone, craftsmen adept in fusing gold to copper, artists, thousands of labourers were kept constantly at work, the king striding among them, praising and coaxing, even lending a hand. It is said that to hasten the work, the king himself led processions of workmen, carrying bricks. The temple grew. It soared. Long before it was complete its stunning beauty became legendary. More wonderful, the rain fell, the restless earth grew calm, and the plagues and catastrophes that had bedeviled Bhaktapur ceased. The god Bhairab in his temple nearby was obviously satisfied.

Another version of this story has Bhairab angry, not because of being disturbed but because he resented a higher, more magnificent temple being built than his own. So he appeared to the king one night in a dream, demanding to know for whom the temple was being raised. If it was for any deity of lesser importance than himself, then he would destroy not only the temple but the town. So the king's advisers had him dedicate the

impressive new temple to the all-powerful Siddhi Lakshmi, and Bhairab was content.

Ironically, a temple so impressive, so legendary, is never the cause for celebration. No great processions climb its guarded stairs, no worshipful crowds throng its plinths. It stands aloof, deservedly proud, very much the lovely woman of legend ordained by a god and perfected by a king. But there is hardly a festival in Bhaktapur that does not fill the square above which the temple soars. Religious processions, dancers, musicians, *raths*, funerals, marriages, they all pass by. Sometimes the square is an arena for impromptu bullfights. Crowds collect suddenly from nowhere. Children ride the temple's guardian beasts for a better view. At the festival of cows, a Bhairab made of straw dances before his temple. And now the tourists come, taking endless photographs and browsing in the small curio shops that stand about the square.

German restorers have built a cafe in the square from the remains of an ancient pilgrim's rest house. It is a work of art in itself, its carvings faithfully reproduced, its furniture adapted from old Newari styles. From its verandahs one can watch the city go by or romanticise that one sails a galley into centuries past. Even the young proprietor is understanding. When one sits and dreams in the shadow of the Nyatapola temple a coffee or Coke can be the slowest drink on earth. ♦

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

NEPALITERATURE

by MANJUSHREE THAPA

WORDS OF DISLOCATION: Sarubhakta



Poet and novelist Sarubhakta seems at home in a world out of kilter: he writes evocatively on disorientation, de-centredness, dislocation and madness. Based in Pokhara, he is one of the growing numbers of regional writers in Nepal—writers whose literary identities are based, in some way, upon the place they write from. However, there is no nostalgia for the rustic life in Sarubhakta's work. His literature is decidedly contemporary: fragmented, collaged, often odd and jarring, and always suited to the shattered landscape of today's Nepal. When fond clichés do appear—about Nepal, or about Nepali tradition and culture—they do so with ironic intent, often in quotes.

The first poem below, originally from his 1993 collection *Kabi, Premi ra Paagal* (The Poet, the Lover and the Madman), shows the poet's ability to let a simple, everyday matter spiral out of control and veer unimpeded towards philosophical mayhem:

DECENTRALISATION

'May my small sufferings instruct
not just a nation of leaders, but everyone...'

These days my daughter memorises
ka kha ga—the alphabets of national devotion
Question: 'Father, why do we strive
for supreme faith?'

'The reason'—I teach her the science of the Nepali mind
'Daughter! We all correspond to
the physical science of atoms and molecules

in which there is innate motion
in which there is infinite power

Daughter! Even now
Nepali atoms encircle faith—
the way the celestial bodies
of brahma's creation spin!

Daughter! We are faith-centred atoms
and from the nucleus-centre of faith
we are also decentred atoms of gravity
from Mechi to Mahakali!
Decentralisation—this isn't just for Nepalis
It's the first law of brahma's creation, Daughter!

Why are we decentralised
from faith to faith?
Can you tell me, Daughter?'

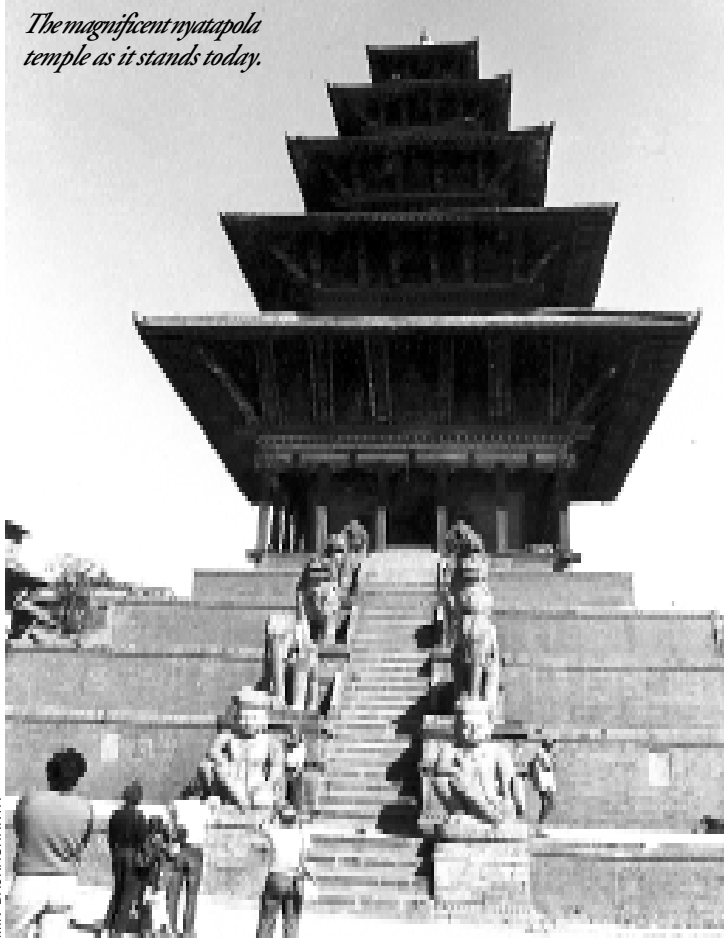
The second poem translated below is, in many ways, simpler: an expression of frustration at our tangled, futile attempts to break free of national myths and fabrications. Yet the poem contains the experimental language and play, the contradictions, and the layered connotations that make Sarubhakta's work speak with so much truth about Nepal's contemporary dilemmas.

AN OFFERING OF ALMS

A ritual chant—'An offering of alms!'
Today the sunrise will take place at, our total population is:
...'

Let's talk about the present, this time around
The history of our independence is near Gosainkunda
And the blue sky is filled with symbols of peace
I beg you: this time, let's leave things as they are!
For just one moment let's not claim to be brave soldiers
Nor, from time to time, to be products of Swayambhu
We're only hungry—it's not true
We're yetis from the Himalayan region—that's also wrong
Believe me,
We're burgeoning like germs—that's also wrong
Please let's leave these things as they are
At the time of the sunrise, now
At the auspicious time for soul-rising, now
When we count, identifying ourselves as 'we'
Let's not just talk of the battlefield and the Buddhafield
But mention new sacrifices—the present
All right, let's start with eyes half closed in serenity
A ritual chant—'An offering of alms!'
Let's leave things as they are, please!

Sarubhakta's poems can also be read in the collections *Banda Khambhitra*, *Boksiko Awhan ra Ghosanapatra*, *Kurup Masiha*, and *Jyanmaya*. He is the author of the Madan Puraskar prize-winning novel *Paagal Basti*, and the editor of several poetry compilations, including *Saraswat*. He has been active in encouraging literature for nature conservation. ♦



MIN BAURACHARYA

Fiscal fitness

MUKUL HUMAGAIN

After a four-month delay, employees at the National Sports Council (NSC) will finally receive their salaries. The NSC was in a severe financial crisis as the Finance Ministry had blocked its regular budget and it wasn't able to provide salaries to its staff. It was only after the NSC agreed to downsize that the Finance Ministry cleared its regular budget.

For employees at the NSC it has become regular to receive salaries after a delay of three or four months, particularly in the last year. The NSC, which has been forced to use its development budget to pay salaries as its regular budget was just not enough, received a further blow when the budget for the current fiscal year was announced: it was allotted a total budget of Rs 100 million, Rs 32 million less than last year. To make matters worse, the Finance Ministry directed the NSC to stop using its development budget to pay salaries.

The present crisis at the NSC goes back a long way. It has to do with corruption and nepotism that have plagued the country's top sports body, in particular the massive recruitment of staff in the last seven years. Every time a new sports minister or member-secretary came to power, their cronies were appointed to the NSC. It all began when Keshav Sthapit, the current mayor of Kathmandu, was member-secretary at the Sports Council. Four hundred new jobs were created at the Council during his tenure. This tradition continued during the tenure of Bal Bahadur KC at the sports ministry. KC, who has the distinction of being the first sports minister of the country, appointed an additional 274 staff to the Council. But the Council never thought it



The Finance Ministry forces a monstrously large National Sports Council to downsize.

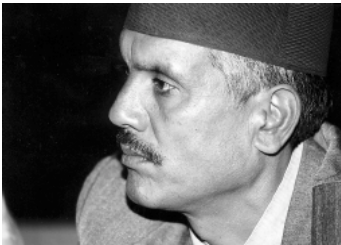
necessary to inform the finance ministry about the increased workforce. Until the present crisis crippled the Council, the finance ministry had been allocating the regular budget for the 370 staff that the NSC reported in 1992.

The crisis did not present itself earlier as there was enough money at the NSC from preparations for the eighth SAF Games. It also had money coming from "lotto", a lottery scheme that was started by casino magnate RD Tuttle to help the SAF games, and a 0.5 percent sales tax that was levied on goods coming into the country prior to the SAF games. Revenue from these sources provided salaries, but after the SAF Games concluded, the Council finally faced a severe financial crunch.

To increase its regular budget the NSC then began lobbying for its 1376 employees by meeting the Prime Minister, and the ministers for education, and sports. But the Finance Ministry remained firm in their demand that NSC staff be retrenched before it would clear even the Council's regular budget. When recruitments were

made during Sthapit's and KC's time, the NSC said that it would provide salaries for its new recruits from its own resources. But that was just big talk. Finally, a committee comprising representatives of the NSC, the Finance Ministry and the Ministry of Education and Sports was formed to solve the matter. The NSC was advised to cut staff. But differences remained between the NSC and the Finance Ministry over the number of staff to be retrenched.

Before Dasain, the NSC sent a proposal to the Finance Ministry stating that the number of staff would be reduced to around 1100, and sacked 158 permanent staff. In December, it fired another 100 staff of which 40 were permanent. But the Finance Ministry was not satisfied and it once again asked the Council to reduce the number to 900. The NSC is now preparing to axe another 143 staff in order to get its money. Though the NSC has been forced to obey orders from the Finance Ministry it is facing a legal challenge from retrenched employees. Those who have been axed have filed a petition challenging the decision.



Clockwise from left: A largely inactive NSC headquarters, former sports minister Bal Bahadur KC (top); and present day Kathmandu mayor and former NSC member-secretary Keshav Sthapit.

The NSC, especially in the past decade, has been a victim of politicisation. Each government that came to power in the last ten years installed their people as the Council's top men. Those in charge of the NSC never tried to run the institution professionally and democratically. It was only due to pressure from the Finance Ministry that the NSC was finally forced to downsize. As Kamal Khanal, administrative chief, NSC says: "We have no option, other than to agree with the Finance Ministry."

For now, it seems that the financial crisis has passed but it is still unclear whether the Finance Ministry will increase the regular budget next year. The Finance Ministry has also stated that there are massive irregularities in the budget at the NSC. The Council's budget may not be enough to pay salaries, or promote sports, but it sure is lining some pockets. ♦

Penitent Cronje wants in

CAPE TOWN-Disgraced former South African captain Hansie Cronje is asking the high court to overturn his life ban from cricket, saying it has curtailed his work with underprivileged children. Cronje, who was banned from all activities of the United Cricket Board of South Africa (UCBSA) and its affiliates last year, has filed papers at the Pretoria High Court in which he says he wants to make amends by resuming coaching underprivileged children.

Cronje said he accepted that the board would not employ him as a professional cricketer but felt they had no power to regulate his playing of the game or control his participation in other matters related to cricket.

"I am anxious to make amends for my conduct which has led to the termination of my cricket career," Cronje said.

"The best way in which I can do that is to use the talents, skills and expertise which I have acquired in cricket and promote the game in the field of coaching and developing, particularly in the coaching of underprivileged players."

Cronje said he had donated cricket kits to Geelhoutboom Primary School. The school is in a poor area close to his home at Fancourt, an exclusive golf estate. Cronje said he had been invited to a match but had been unable to go because of the severity of his ban.

Before the ban, Cronje said, he had always been involved with the wider cricket community. "All these activities were undertaken on a purely voluntary basis, without remuneration," Cronje said. "I very much wish to continue with these activities... If I obtain the relief I seek in these proceedings, it is my intention to extend my activities along these lines." The South African Cricket Board has until 15 January to submit an answering affidavit.



Savon hangs up his gloves

HAVANA-Three-time Olympic heavyweight boxing champion Felix Savon announced his retirement from the ring but he will help train Cuba's fighters for the 2004 Athens Olympics, Cuban television reported last week.

Savon was already obliged by international amateur boxing rules to stop competing in September when he turns 34 years old, but the official announcement means he will not take part in the next world championships in Ireland in June. The six-time world champion had originally intended to fight in Ireland in a final appearance of a glittering career that transformed him into a popular hero at home and one of the world's boxing legends. Cuban television did not say why Savon decided to cut short his remaining



active career by several months. But, it said, he would join the national boxing squad as a coach. Cuba's sports authorities had unsuccessfully lobbied the International Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) to raise the competitive age limit in the heavyweight categories to 40.

In another surprise announcement, Cuban television said that long-time national boxing coach Alcides Sagarra, who trained the Olympic squad for three decades, was being replaced by Sarvelio Fuentes, another experienced teacher. Sagarra was being put forward to represent Cuba in the IABA, the report said. Savon, a staunch supporter of President Fidel Castro's government, was hailed as a national hero, not only for his success on the world stage but for repeatedly rejecting lucrative offers to abandon his country's amateur-only sports system and turn professional. Prior to Savon's success at the recent Sydney Games, only Teofilo Stevenson, another Cuban boxing legend, had won three Olympic golds in the same weight category when he dominated the division in the 1972, 1976 and 1980 Games. Savon's previous Olympic gold medals came in Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996. In a prolific amateur career, Savon boasted a record of 358 wins and only 17 defeats.

Cuban television also announced that three other Olympic boxing medallists—Juan Hernandez Sierra, Enrique Carrion and Hector Vinent—were ending their active careers.

The best boss in the world

BRIAN WOOLNOUGH

Sven Goran Eriksson starts his new £3million job as England's coach, with FA boss Adam Crozier hailing him the best in the world. Swede Eriksson, 52, quit as Lazio manager this week to become the nation's first foreign national coach.

A jubilant FA Chief Executive Crozier said: "We went for the best and got the best. We are relieved and excited that he is about to start. This is it for us. England have had six managers in the last 10 years. We have got to get away from that. That is an extraordinary record, but now we must have continuity. This is long term. We are planning for the next six to 10 years. In Sven, Tord Grip, Peter Taylor and Steve McClaren we have as good a coaching team as you will find in the world."

"It is a fantastic new team. I have spoken to them all today and they can't wait to get started. Let's get everyone united behind them. The

The arrival of Sven Eriksson as England's first foreign coach has the FA jubilant, and some others sceptical.

country wants England to do well. Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger have welcomed the appointment and every manager is offering support. To give yourself a chance you have to have a world-class backroom team and that is what we have got now," said Crozier.

Eriksson finally quit yesterday morning after weeks of unrest in Rome culminated in last week's home defeat by lowly Napoli. He made up his mind in his car on the way to training and told Lazio's players first. Then he broke the news to Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti and rang Crozier. His first match is the friendly against Spain on 28 February at Villa Park. Then comes the World Cup double header, at home against Finland and away in Albania.

Eriksson has signed a five-year contract with a two-year option and he will be given control of all England sides. Bookies William

Hill are already taking money at 7-1 that he will be gone by the end of the year. But Crozier added: "This is not an easy job, nor an easy situation for Sven. Let's get things straight—this is not an easy job, nor an easy situation for Sven. We are bottom of our World Cup group and that has had nothing to do with him."

We have not looked like winning a championship for a long time and the first job is to qualify for this World Cup."

Crozier has been in constant touch with Eriksson and Lazio since he agreed to join England on 31 October and is glad to finally have his man. He said: "It was a relief. The uncertainty has not been good for anyone. His stock hasn't fallen just because he has resigned from Lazio. A failure? Oh, come on! Sven has won titles in Portugal, Spain and Italy. And Lazio are fifth



in the Italian League, are in the second phase of the Champions League and are holders of the Italian League title. But what we are buying into is the last 15 years of Sven. Anyone who thinks only of the last nine weeks is pretty daft.

"It is fair to say we have been a part of destabilising the Lazio situation. That atmosphere was created from the moment we went for him. It is part and parcel of the England job. We all know England is different. Extra pressure comes from the job," he added. ♦ (Sun)

OFF THE BEATEN TREK

Independent cycling through 150 countries over 11 years—Pushkar Shah is one determined man.

31-year-old Nepali cyclist Pushkar Shah is taking off again on 13 January to start the next leg of his 150-country bicycle tour after a month-long break in Nepal. When Shah left his home, Charikot, in August 1998, many conflicting thoughts crossed his mind as he peddled towards the border. “But I remained very determined. I confronted all my doubts about whether I could do it or not. One of the things that kept me focused was the unseen challenge that lay on the roads ahead,” recalls Shah.

After reaching Kathmandu, he headed towards Pokhara and then on to the sacred Buddhist site Lumbini. “I collected Buddha’s soil from there and kept it with me as a talisman,” he says. As the journey unfolded—hot, humid, dry, sweaty, breezy and sometimes pure Zen—it was that very soil that helped him connect with all sorts of people. Little by little, he gifted it away. Shah hit upon the idea of a bicycle-tour because he wanted to spread the message of “peace and love from the Himalayan country of Nepal”.

The combination of Buddha’s spirit and the sheer will to pedal carried him afar, starting from India then to Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, China, Honk Kong, Korea, Japan, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia,

Singapore, Indonesia, even East Timor, and finally, Australia, from where he flew back home to take a break. In all, Shah crossed 28,500 km in 21 countries on his mountain bike.

“I took a break to rest and plan my future trip. I’ve had no official sponsors from Nepal and some Nepali embassies had been very unfriendly,” he says sadly. “In China they rudely told me—‘We don’t have any obligation to help you, please go away.’” Shah gets encouragement and many positive vibes from a growing number of young fans who read his monthly updates in Wave magazine, which has carried details of Shah’s tour from day one. Financial support has been hard to come by, although Shah considers himself a professional cyclist.

For the upcoming leg of his journey through Australia, New Zealand and the US, the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) has agreed to help out. “We have provided cycling gear like track suits (with the NTB logo) and Rs 40,000 for miscellaneous expenses,” says Diwakar Rana, Assistant Manager of the NTB. “We have also prepared a formal letter establishing him as a promoter of Nepali culture and world peace. The letter will be a bona fide for Shah during his travels.” However Shah had also asked for a daily travelling



allowance, which the NTB declined to give him, saying it would be too long-term a commitment—Shah plans, if all goes well, to cover 150 countries over 11 years.

Shah cycles 10 hours on average daily when on tour, consuming some 10 litres of water and covering about 100 km. The intrepid cyclist holds a Master’s degree in education and was



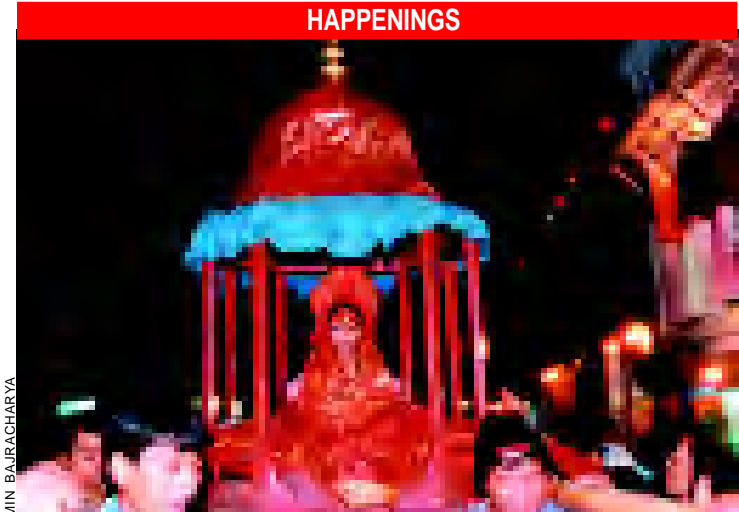
Pushkar Shah poses with peasants in SE Asia, the people he loves to meet most.

active during the 1990 People’s Movement. 10 years from now, Shah would have cycled more than 330,000 km and had incredible experiences. “I have two missions in life. Cycling and

preaching peace,” smiles Shah. ♦ To support Pushkar Shah and learn more about his dream, email nepalcyclist@yahoo.com, or call 492553, 431765.

sharp

Khukuri rum



LIVING GODDESS: Kumari heading home in her special palanquin after attending the bathing ceremony of Lord Machhendranath, 6 January.



FEEDING FRENZY: Victorious Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala hounded by the press after defeating his challenger Sher Bahadur Deuba 69-41 in a no-trust motion in his parliamentary party, 4 January.



PEACEMAKING: Teachers at the universities leading a peace march calling for restoration of communal harmony and national unity, 6 January.



Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

Let me say right at the outset that I love Mongolia and Mongolians. In fact, both Inner and Outer Mongolias are my favourite places in the entire Eastern Hemisphere. Nepal and Mongolia have a lot in common: they are both landlocked yams sandwiched between two large stones, both countries have a vibrant vodka industry (the most popular Mongolian brand is called Genghis Khan, and ours should be called Jung Bahadur, but for some reason no one has thought of it yet), both Nepalis and Mongolians love yak noodle soup, and we both share a glorious tradition of bringing everyday life in Ulaan Bataar and Kathmandu to a standstill as a token of our delight that foreign dignitaries have decided to pay us a visit. After all, it is not every day that the President of

Very, Very, Very, Very Important Person

Mongolia decides to visit Nepal to declare a chukka jam and temporarily shut down civil aviation. One useful indicator of the importance of a visiting dignitary is the number of hours that the Ring Road on Tin Kunay is gridlocked. Anything below two hours and you can be sure it is just a Very Important Person (VIP) passing through, for example the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister or the Prime Minister of Togo. But really Big Guys will block the Koteswor intersection for a minimum of four hours, or more. This usually means that it is a Very, Very, Very, Very Important Person (VVVVIP), flying all the way here to receive Kathmandu's Keys from our

Mayor. Now, I'd think twice about giving the keys of my town to complete strangers. Never know what they'll do with it. Anyway, a V4IP arrival is a signal to get the hell out of this city and that is what we tried to do, but it was too late. The whole city was already grinding to a halt. Going by the bumper-to-bumper traffic jam on Sunday that stretched from the Saat Dobato to the airport, our preliminary assessment was that the State Visit of the Mongolian President could be classified as a moderate intensity visit. The really Big Ones are Magnitude Ten disruptions reserved for SAARC Summits, Greek Foreign Ministers and US First Ladies—that is when the entire Ring Road and the airways come to a standstill for the duration of the visit as a mark of respect for the presence in our city of the distinguished visitors. Anyway, to cut a long story short, by the time we got to the airport we found out we needn't have been worried because all flights were running late: air traffic had been affected for the same reason that ground traffic was at a standstill. As I write this, we have finally taken off, and before long we are already into our second Jung Bahadurs with tomato juice, and we have raised a toast to the age-old ties of friendship and goodwill between Nepalis and the good people of Outer Mongolia. The flight attendant comes on the intercom to ask us to stow our baggage in the oval head rockers, and to inform us that the pleasure in the cabin is automatically controlled and that in the unlikely event of the pleasure falling, oxygen masks will drop, and we should then clobber our nose and mouth and bleed normally. ♦

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ambassador
whisky

NEPALI SOCIETY

Hira means gem



SALIL SUBEDI

Like many, King Birendra visited Dwarika's Hotel and was greatly impressed with the restoration work. Invariably, the management calls in Hira Kaji Bramhacharya to explain the intricacies of the woodcarvings. After all, he is the senior-most artisan working on the hotel's heritage conservation project. Everyday for 26 years, 61-year old Hira Kaji has been cycling two-and-half hours from his home in Bungamati, south of Lalitpur, to his work place in Kathmandu Gaushala at Dwarika's Hotel. Humble and cheerful Hira Kaji is in his element when faced with his traditional wood carving instruments *jyawal*, *chupahancha* and *lyahacha*. Time has compelled him to use reading-glasses, but his hands are still firm and accurate and have withstood the test of advancing years and technology. "Electric machines help save time, of course, but the patterns and your carving style come from skills sharpened over the years," he says. Before joining Dwarika's for their Nepali Heritage Architecture Conservation Project, Hira worked in places like Bungamati,



SALIL SUBEDI

Dhapakhel, Sunakothi and Khokana making elaborate wooden frames for doors and windows for new houses. "There's a booming international market for such crafts nowadays if quality is maintained," says Hira Kaji. "But the thing is, these things are not appreciated where they're supposed to be used—in Nepal," he says. "But then wood is very expensive and there are very few carvers left, so not many Nepalis can afford it," he says, pointing to an carved pillar from an old Newari house in Banepa. The largest woodcarving he and his team have made is a 10ft x 6ft three-faced window, which would take a lone worker four months to finish. Hira has the memories of a lifetime in traditional Newari patterns including the chain-like *sikha* and leaf-like *polo*. Earlier sal wood was commonly used. "But nowadays wood like eucalyptus, sisam and even pine are much more readily available," he says. "These skills were passed down from our ancestors," says Hira Kaji whose elder son Hira Ratna joined his *buttakarmi* crew 17 years ago. "He learned this ancient skill playfully, like I did. I used to spend a lot of time with my grandfather

and uncles," reminisces Hira Kaji. In addition to his son, Hira Kaji has long been working with two artisans—40 year-old Shanta Muni Shakya and 36 year-old Gyani Raj Shakya. "The interest has to arise naturally. We shouldn't force ourselves to do things that we know we won't be able to do," he says. "Wood carving needs a lot of patience and focus." "I pray to lord Bishwokarma. And he's been good to me," he says. Bishwokarma, the god of craftsmanship, is a favourite deity of artisans. Every year during Bishwokarma Puja, Hira Kaji also takes a well-deserved break from all his obligations. "I really enjoy this festival. It's good to be with friends and make merry... sometimes you have to do that," he smiles. Hira's only complaint is that his salary is very low. "In the last year, kerosene prices have increased three times. And I've been working here for quite long—it's high time I got a raise," he says. Lord Bishwokarma and Dwarika's willing, this last complaint of one of Nepal's gems will also disappear. ♦

mayos