

EXCLUSIVE

More Talk

There has been progress in preparing for government-Maoist negotiations. "Everything is going smoothly, we are finalising the when, who and where," one senior minister told us. The Maoists named their negotiators on Wednesday.

In a televised speech in parliament on Thursday Sher Bahadur Deuba announced a social game-plan aimed mainly at taking the air out of the Maoist agenda. But Maoists are also switching gears and focus: the women are pressing for an alcohol ban, industry unions want raises and an end to foreign employees, and hotel workers have submitted a 12-point demand, which includes a 10 percent service charge.

Deuba is expected to scrap the Public Security Regulations to placate the Maoists, but will proceed with the paramilitary, which has got the nod from parliament.

The prime minister is keeping his cards close to his chest and no one knows who's advising him. Perhaps Deuba knows something we don't. That, at least, is the hope.


Things have not been going terribly well between India and Nepal in the run-up to the visit by the Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh on Friday.

There has been hostile coverage in Nepali media of the Uttar Pradesh state government's construction of an embankment that has submerged parts of Nepal.

The preferential Indo-Nepal trade treaty of 1996 which allows unrestricted access for Nepali goods in the Indian market has come under blistering attack from Indian business. Indian media has given prominent coverage over the past six months to cheap Chinese goods allegedly flooding the Indian market via Nepal, of a "surge" in Nepali exports which have undermined Indian manufacturing.

After the latest round of secretary-level talks two weeks ago broke down, India on Tuesday asked for a revision of that treaty which would have been automatically renewed in December. India is effectively rolling back the soft-on-neighbours Gujral Doctrine which made the 1996 treaty possible.

The best Nepal can now hope for is a more restrictive treaty like the one India signed with Sri Lanka in 1998, which requires up to 35 percent value addition and quantitative restrictions and exclusions. The India-Sri Lanka



MIN. JASWANT SINGH

treaty is also a free trade agreement, which would require parties to mete out reciprocal treatment. The worst case would be MFN (Most Favoured Nation) status.

If the treaty had been automati-

ally renewed, Nepali goods—except alcohol, tobacco, and cosmetics—would have continued to enjoy duty free access to the Indian market for another five years. That would have given Nepal time to intensify industrialisation before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules go into effect.

After the 1996 treaty, Nepal's exports to India rose seven-fold to Rs 22.6 billion, and the trade deficit narrowed by about two billion rupees. India also gained: its already very high annual exports to Nepal doubled in five years.

In the talks earlier this month, the Indian delegation gave the example of 46 out of 146 vanaspati units in Uttar Pradesh allegedly shutting down because Nepal's refundable duty on raw material and low export tax was no match against India's 75 percent duty on palm oil imports—a measure taken to protect growers in Andhra

Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Another Indian allegation is that Nepal had become a conduit for re-routing semi-finished goods imported from third countries. Indian officials had suggested going for MFN treatment for the five "problem products"—vanaspati, acrylic yarns, copper wires, steel pipes and zinc oxide.

Nepali officialdom could offer no valid counter-arguments, only reiterate the "spirit" of the 1996 treaty. Nepali and Indian businessmen had been meeting over the past months precisely to avert this standoff. One FNCCI-CII recommendation was to offer to introduce stricter internal controls on origin certification and value addition in Nepal. "Maybe that could have helped build confidence and avoided re-opening the treaty," a business source told us. "But the opportunity is now gone."

Nepali officials admit they

understood India was not happy but were confident that another round of talks could have untangled the problem. "Introducing MFN for the only products we sell in some substantial amount defeats the very purpose of preferential trade, so how could we accept that?" a Nepali official asked. "They wanted stricter manufacturing controls and we introduced a one-digit change in the four-digit harmonised code." Nepal has approved 250 products for export to India of which only 50 have actually been exported, of the 50 only 10 products have significant sales.

No one has much hope that Jaswant Singh's goodwill visit is going to resolve the trade issue. Bonhomie between Indian and Nepali politicians does not always translate into goodwill at the ground level. But it could at least clear the air for a compromise at the next round of talks on keeping the treaty. ♦

Can he do it?

Jaswant has a lot to iron out.

BINOD BHATTARAI

It looks like divesting in Nepal is almost as difficult as investing. That is what Credit Agricole is finding as it tries to sell off its shares in Nepal Indosuez Bank. How that happens, and who takes over the bank will be a test case for future investments in Nepal and how serious the government is about its liberalisation drive.

Indosuez was one of the first foreign banks to invest in Nepal 15 years ago, and it is one of only two that have international standing (the other is Standard Chartered). Indosuez's exit is already a red signal to potential investors. But how the government handles the handover to new owners will send an even stronger message.

Will Indosuez's French promoters be allowed to sell and leave without hassles, or will the sale be staggered? How transparent will the transfer of ownership be? How much political interference and lobbying by Nepal's rival business houses will be involved? And for Nepalis, the main question will be: will the country benefit because capable hands take over or will it just be a few individuals with money and clout?

Nepal Indosuez's owner, Credit Agricole, made up its mind to divest sometime in March after trying for three years to convince the government to increase its ownership. Finance minister Ram Sharan Mahat made one last ditch attempt in his budget speech last month to convince Indosuez to stay by increasing the foreign share. But Credit Agricole had already decided that the pussy-footing on decisions was not worth all the trouble, given it had already closed shop in larger financial markets such as Malaysia as part of consolidating to service large corporate clients. Now, the bank is negotiating with potential private Nepali investors.

"The best I as central bank can do as central bank is ask them to reconsider the decision," Tilak Rawal, Governor, Nepal Rastra Bank told us. "At this point of time, we have no business to poke our nose into what we hear about the sale, or with who Indosuez is talking."

The scramble for Indosuez

How the government handles divestment of Indosuez shares will send a strong signal to future investors in Nepal.

Rawal is referring to allegations that the central bank and government, by not waiving an earlier ownership requirement, is helping one party that is trying to acquire Indosuez. The 1995 rule bars individuals or institutions to own more than 10 percent stock—excluding two Nepali promoters Rastriya Baniya Bank (RBB) and Rastriya Beema Sansthan (RBS), which own 15 percent each, from buying more stocks.

The backdrop to this debate is the financial health of RBB and the state-owned insurance company, RBS and the government's avowed policy to promote free enterprise and divest from state-run firms. RBB is nearly bankrupt (it has a negative net worth of up to Rs 10 billion) and RBS hasn't audited its books for the past six years. Even if the central bank waived the rule on ownership in the "national interest" it is



not clear where they are going to get the money to buy out Indosuez or guarantee that they can run the bank.

The uncertainty and delay is already putting off some prospective private buyers. "The issue is more than a one-time sale, why can't any business deal in Nepal be clean?" asked one business source trying to buy Indosuez stock. "If this is how we do business, then God help us."

Naturally Indosuez officials are fuming: "Once a decision has been taken it is not good for shareholders, the staffs, and clients to linger on for long," Marc Dumetz, Chief Executive Director, told us. "Selling is not an extraordinarily complicated task and should be done as soon as possible, in business you make a decision and implement it fast."

Indosuez is also turning out to be a final test of the government's liberalisation policy. Indecisiveness could make Indoesuez another botched sell-off like Butwal Power Company, which it has been unable to privatise for three years. Senior government sources told us there is no way RBB and RBS will be allowed to buy the remaining shares from Indosuez—as some have suggested. "The government is just not interested to go back on its larger policy of divestment." ♦

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WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

One of the most dramatic political accomplishments of the past five years slipped by relatively unnoticed last week. This was the all-party conference on Friday during which prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba obtained multi-partisan support for his efforts to sit down and talk with the Maoists.

Here was the strongest indication yet that parties across the political spectrum believe in the present constitution and in parliamentary democracy. And they have given the prime minister the mandate to talk to those who don't. This changes the whole scenario: this is the national consensus everyone (including us) have been harping on about throughout the past year.

It is intriguing to ask: why now? It wasn't for want of trying that Girija Prasad Koirala could never attain this sort of a consensus. And yet Deuba has managed it deftly and smoothly within weeks of taking office. The truce has held so far, Maoists have been released in exchange for police captives, the Armed Police Force bill has sailed through the House—the ordinance that Girija had to fight tooth and nail to get approval for, and partly because of which parliament was stalled for two months. What is happening behind the scenes that makes life so easy for Deuba?

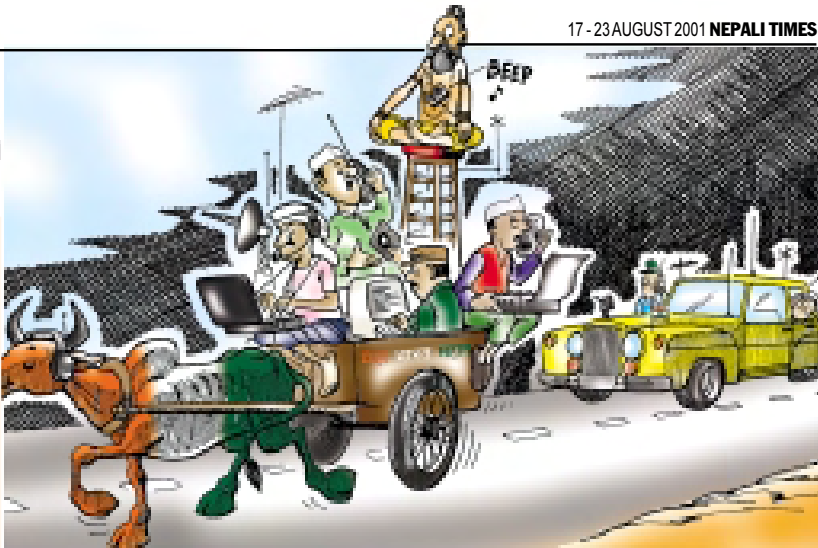
Wish we knew for sure. But we can make some educated guesses. Besides the Maoist-government truce, there has been another ceasefire: within the Nepali Congress. This has had direct repercussion on the main opposition UML which has responded with moves towards reuniting with the rump ML. The prospect of a greater left front has also exerted a gravitational pull on satellite communists, and even to some extent on the Maoist political leadership.

There have also been deliberate and dramatic changes in the stance of political forces since the ascension to the throne of King Gyanendra. With Koirala out of the way, there appears to be a new unity of purpose between the Singha and Narayanhiti Durbars. And we see an emerging carrot-and-stick strategy to address the insurgency: give the Maoist leadership a face-saving way to join the political mainstream through an all-party consensus. And if they don't bite the bait, prepare to crush them militarily. And despite the painting of pro-republic slogans in broad daylight along the capital's streets by Maoist students in the past week and the show of strength in mass meetings, these activities appear to be aimed more at allaying fears among the Maoist rank and file of a sellout by the leadership at future talks. Even the semantics of the formal Maoist demand on republicanism is couched in escape clauses: "Begin the institutional process towards a peoples' republic."

It could be that the top Maoist leadership is concerned that it is losing some of its grip on the party machinery. The rapid spread of their network has meant decentralisation, and this has left the cells open to infiltration by ideologically impure criminal extortionists and ultra-extremists. Some big business houses paying Maoist "tax" over the past years are now being threatened by five different platoon commanders. Front organisations are forcing an alcohol ban which may backfire. As Baburam Bhattarai himself says, the war should be against alcoholism.

It is now becoming clear that the insurgency may not be solved by merely meeting Maoist demands when Deuba secretly sees the rebel leadership in the next few days. If talks are going to be held, they should not just be about giving the comrades a safe-landing, but also begin to address the socio-economic roots of the insurgency which are all contained in Comrade Baburam's 40-point agenda.

The next all-party meeting should move beyond just giving a mandate to Deuba to resolve the insurgency. Deuba must strike while the iron is hot and get all parties to agree on accelerating development, implementing the self-governance act, passing the Citizenship Bill, not competing in India-bashing, pushing indigenous rights and languages, stopping forest encroachment, and all the other issues that paralyses governance and keeps the nation from moving ahead. For once, we have started doing something right. Let us not give up half-way.



STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL

Tunak tunak tun...tarara

India has moved on from the Nehru-Gandhis and even the Singh-Vajpayees. Nepal better learn to deal with a new brat pack of post-liberalisation Indians.

Fifty-four years ago, Jawaharlal Nehru heralded the independence of India with a soul stirring "tryst with destiny" address to his newborn nation. Nehru's courtiers were from a class that shared his dreams and believed in its grand illusions. People like Krishna Menon could boldly face the United Nations on a falsehood about Kashmir, and even a lowly official Govinda Narayan felt emboldened enough to challenge the authority of a revolutionary leader like BP Koirala in post-Rana Nepal. Nepal's inability to deal with the arrogant Indians of that generation resulted in the untimely death of democracy in this country in 1960.

Born from Nehru's ideological seed, Salman Rushdie's midnight's children grew up with the authoritarian designs of Indira Gandhi. The generation of Jug Suraiya's "destiny-nation" dreamt about changing India and challenging the world with its IIT and IIM degrees. Driving around in stately Ambassadors, midnight's children hoped for a new dawn, but all they got was trains running on time during Indira Gandhi's dreaded Emergency. With authoritarianism installed in both countries, relationship between India and Nepal during this period was formalised to such an extent that we were reduced to being distant neighbours with deep suspicion towards each other.

Then it was the turn of *India Today's* Puppies (Professional, Upwardly mobile Punjabis). None symbolised this class as distinctly as the editor-publisher of that magazine empire, Anun Poonie himself. Feasting on the bumper harvest of India's Green Revolution, Puppies went about town in blood red Marutis with bumper stickers that proudly proclaimed that their next car would be a Rolls Royce. It was this brash and boorish generation that foisted an undeclared economic blockade upon Nepal in the late eighties. Our diplomatic trouble-shooters of that period, Shailendra Kumar Upadhyaya, Ramesh Nath Pandey and Brinda Shah belonged to the stone age, and it showed in their bearing.

Today, the bad news for Nepal's diplomatic establishment is that it is getting much more complicated down there in New Delhi. Bhesh Bahadur Thapa is soon to complete his term at the stately Barakhamba Road mansion, and the one stepping in his shoes is likely to find an India completely different from those of Nehru-Gandhis, or even Singh-Vajpayees. New Delhi is increasingly being dominated by the brat pack of youngsters that *India Today* named "The Luckies".

This is the Jockey Generation of post-

liberalisation Indians, and it has no heart for Nehru's ideology, no mind for Indira Gandhi's global posturing, and no brains for Rajiv Gandhi's regional muscle-flexing. Ambassador G Parthasarthy warned me in June in New Delhi in his usual patronising manner: "Why don't you Nepalis realise that now you have to deal with a generation of Indians that has no respect for the history of Gurkhas, and no understanding of the concept of a buffer state? Indians of this generation know where their interests are, and have no qualms about getting there at any cost."

Jug Suraiya echoes similar thoughts in a recent article in *The Times of India* in his mock-serious tone: "Cosmologically, Nehruvian agnosticism has yielded to a quick-fix nationalist religiosity which brooks no dissent nor admits any echo of the profound resonance of doubt."

The Marutis have now given way to Benzes. The Luckies in their Nike sneakers, Benetton shorts, Cartier watches and Rayban glasses are walking advertisements of triumphant global capitalism. This generation of "me, myself" has more interest in Naples than in Nepal. That much was brought home to me once again during the anniversary reception of this paper. To remain politically correct, I must refrain from naming the bright young diplomat from the Indian Embassy who gave me a private lesson on Indo-Nepal relations. Suffice it to say that she has impeccable credentials: a graduate from New Delhi's elite St Stephen's College in 1987, she was Deputy Chief of Protocol in India's Ministry of External Affairs. She represents the class of New Indians that "brooks no dissent, nor admits doubts".

It was her considered opinion that it was India that was doing Nepal a favour by employing Gorkhas in the Indian army. Her



government is kind enough to employ poor Nepalis, when it can get enough Gurkhas from the territory of its own country. Was she admitting that her government was sending mercenaries to fight Pakistan in Siachen?

For a Nepali, it's tempting to dismiss *India Today's* fictional Nepal Gameplan, Ferzand Ahmed's fanciful report from Patna about ISI-dominated *madrassas* in the tarai, Binny Sharma's disparaging reports on Zee TV about Nepali hijackers abroad IC-814, or Star TV's framed audience responses from Durbar Marg in the wake of Narayanhiti massacre as aberrations. But they aren't. The mainstream media in India is openly hostile towards Nepal, and we better accept that reality and learn to manage damage control.

It is not the reasoned analyses of P Sainath that forms public opinion in New Delhi. The swash-buckling patriotism of Swapan Das Gupta carries more weight in South Block. Shankarshan Thakur may be refreshingly reflective about Indo-Nepal affairs (see p. 3), but it's Ferzand Ahmed who has committed followers in the corridors of power in Lucknow and Patna. Erudite Jaswant Singh may show the diplomatic equivalent of noblesse oblige when he visits Nepal this weekend. But his deputy at the external affairs ministry is Cub-e-Kashmir Omar Abdullah. All of 31, and all alone in Room Number 142 of South Block, forgive Abdullah if he gets swayed by the garished accounts of Hritikh Roshan riots fed to him from his listening post in Kathmandu.

Even on the opposition benches of Indian parliament, Nepal now has very few friends. Maharaja Karan Singh of Kashmir and Maharaja Madhav Rao Scindia of Gwalior have multiple relationship with Shahs and Ranas of Nepal. But Karan Singh is now a political has-been, and the influence of Madhav Rao Scindia on Madam Sonia Gandhi—the uncrowned Empress of Congress (I)—is on the wane. Scindia was granted an audience with King Gyanendra this week. It's unlikely that the brother-in-law of Pashupati Shamsheer had much to say. Madhav Rao is not of the Jockey Generation, but at least his designer labels are original.

Plato agrees that when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state change with them. In India, it's now the age of a pop diva Alisha and pop-patriot AR Rehman with his *Made in India* and *Mera Bharat Mahan*. Poetry spouting Vajpayee may have an ocean of goodwill in his heart towards the only Hindu kingdom of the world, but the question formulators of *Kaun Banga Crorepati* still believe Nepal's parliament is called Rastriya Panchayat. To understand this new India, Sher Bahadur Deuba will do well to listen to pop *bhangra* by Daler Mehndi: *Tunak tunak tun...tarara*.

◆

The ugly Indian

Of the many things India and Nepal have in common the most significant is perhaps our common frontier: we are two sovereignties.

Nepal is our own little Orient in the sense Edward Said has spoken of. We employ in relation to Nepal and Nepal is an abstract imperialism of ideas and practice that, to quote Said on the Oriental-Occidental relationship, "gives the Westerner positional superiority and puts him in a whole series of relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand".

We take them for granted, quite unthinkingly and quite completely. So much so that if a Nepali acts as a Nepali we are wont to construe it as an act of treason against India. This baffling mindset echoed through some of the Indian reaction to *Kanripureditor*

Yubraj Ghimire publishing that now notorious piece by underground Maoist Baburam Bhattarai in which he blamed India, among others, for conspiring to plot the Narayanhiti Palace massacre. Ghimire was labelled anti-Indian and charged with betrayal of a cause he is never known to have espoused, of a country he has never belonged to. Ghimire is a

Nepali. He owes no loyalty to the Indian flag and cannot possibly be charged with betraying it, however real or ridiculous the grounds for making such a charge. True, he learnt and practised the essentials of his craft for long years in India, like thousands of other Nepalis, but must that mean he has to mortgage his nationality? Would we accept our own professionals trained in the West reserving first loyalty to the Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes?

AN UNEQUAL AFFAIR

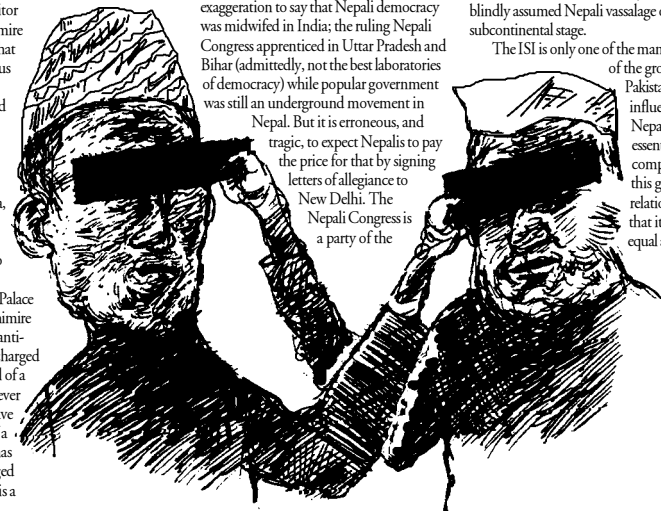
India is alma mater to a whole spectrum of Nepalis—doctors, engineers, technicians, teachers, even politicians. It would be no exaggeration to say that Nepali democracy was midwifed in India; the ruling Nepali Congress apprenticed in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (admittedly, not the best laboratories of democracy) while popular government was still an underground movement in Nepal. But it is erroneous, and

tragic, to expect Nepalis to pay the price for that by signing letters of allegiance to New Delhi. The Nepali Congress is a party of the

Nepali people. Just because many of its leaders, once found support and refuge in India they cannot be expected to function as the overt arm of the RAW in Nepal, as many expect.

The Nepali Congress is there to protect the interests of Nepal, a job it does not do terribly well, but that is quite another matter. It is not there to protect the interests of India. Of the many reasons Nepalis have developed an aversion towards India, the chief one is our consistent treatment of Nepal as a docile Hindu adjunct, which it has long ceased to be. The growing presence of Islamic Pakistan in Hindu Nepal is partly a conscious reaction to the way India has blindly assumed Nepali vassalage on the subcontinental stage.

The ISI is only one of the manifestations of the growing Pakistani influence in Nepal; the essential component of this growing relationship is that it is an equal affair.



LETTERS

INDIA MEDIA

I am not writing this letter to pick up the gauntlet thrown by Pratyoush Onta "What to do when Big Brother knocks" (#55) about foreign direct investment (FDI) in Nepal media. If one is to assume that a paper established with FDI in Nepal will adulterate people's *bichar* adversely, then quite a lot of *bichar* of many intellectuals have been getting adulterated because many dailies and weeklies from across the border have been avidly subscribed, bought and read by Nepali intelligentsia. Conversely, if one is to infer that this has had no significant impact in Nepal, then FDI will also not succeed in doing any harm to our *bichar*. Indian investment is already having a field day in Nepal with the gullible and greedy ready to act as dummies for Indian investors. I would like to think that this has not made a dent in indigenous *bichar*. I hope somebody will take up Onta on his challenge.

Ratna Sansar Shrestha
Kathmandu

EDUCATION

Thanks to Artha Beed for his thoughtful piece "Whither education" (#53). I agree that the problems with school education in Nepal go beyond the private/public debate. The government's investment in education does

not include support for essential inputs like teacher training programs in the face of over 60% untrained teachers at the primary level and over 40% at the secondary level. The SLC system has also failed to regulate massive recruitment of untrained and underqualified teachers who impose bad teaching on a large scale. Secondly, there is a good deal of mismanagement, administrative and financial, in evaluating students in SLC examinations. The SLC system does not teach students to think for themselves, to express opinions or judgments, and assessments are made on textbook knowledge rather than on critical thinking or originality.

As a teacher at the University level, I have been very depressed by the inability of students to communicate in academic situations—basic failure to cultivate good reading habits, understand lectures, discuss and write correctly and effectively, and poor study habits. Any attempt by the university to filter out deficient, sub-standard students is challenged by the people, the government and crippling student protests. We have to get out of this cycle.

Tej R Kansakar, PhD
Tokyo University
of Foreign Studies

PYRAMIDS

Manisha Aryal in "Scheme/scam" (#54) has shown considerable courage to reveal the truth. Something can never come from nothing, and the write-up about pyramid schemes is timely. Simple accounting calculations prove they are nothing more than a trick to cheat ordinary Nepalis on a vast scale. More such articles should be encouraged to prevent the dirty hands of our fraudulent elite from reaching into the pockets of fellow Nepalis.

Tilak Lama
Lainchaur

Manish Aryal's article does a commendable job to point out the flaws, and she has given credible account of the defects of pyramid schemes. It is amazing how people can be lured by the concept of easy money. Everybody wants to make money quick and fast and when this scheme came up, people jumped into it without thinking of its consequences. A lot of people tried to sell the scheme to me and I tried to convince others of the dangers. There are people who are forced into

this scheme due to social constraints. From the start, I clearly saw that \$30 per participant was going out of Nepal for just a piece of paper. When Samrakchhan came along I thought it was better because no money actually went out of the country. But when no worthwhile economic production is taking place, how can there be any profit at all? If someone is earning someone must be losing. If this is for charity, then Samrakchhan should be doing social service with its own money and not embezzling the public.

Robin Tuladhar
Kathmandu

Manisha Aryal points out that PC City came into existence before Samrakchhan did and others would have followed suit. So why blame Samrakchhan which at least doesn't have evil and profit intentions?

Sarita Maskey
Jhamsikhel

It seems Samrakchhan has been ahead of its time in Nepal. In times of high inflation, money

games tend to be popular and are played by people in more than 130 countries. We are talking about free trade and open market but do not understand money games. This business is already operating in Nepal (although Samrakchhan has been singled out for some reason) the government should accept this and take appropriate laws to regulate them.

"Hanson"
Lazimpat

Minor fluctuations in the international stock markets can make or break the lives of thousands. Yet playing the stock market is not illegal because systems and procedures have been put into place. Shouldn't this be equally unethical to our moral puritanists? Monetary schemes are new concepts in Nepal, what is needed are better guidelines and regulations to monitor them. And if they are being run for a social cause (like Samrakchhan) then they should be allowed to register as a not-for-profit company.

Piyush Chatterjee
Tripureswor

NEW BATTLEGROUND

My friend Major General Ashok Mehta in "The new battleground" (#55) perpetuates a historical error when he writes about the 'British Indian Army'. There has

never been an entity named 'British Indian Army'. The pre-partition Indian Army was manned by both Indian and British officers (and a handful of Warrant Officers in such units as the Grass Farms Department). After partition it was India who paid (and may still pay) the pensions of the British officer component of the Indian Army.

The General makes a point about non-payment of £10,000 to those who were Japanese POW. Like it or not, those men were then in the Indian Army, not the British Army, and no Government would want to pay a substantial amount of money to those who included some who, for what ever reasons, betrayed their oath of salt on enlistment.

J P Cross
Pokhara

JIVAN

"Jivan's Humla" (#55) was a breath of fresh air in these days of tedious bad news. It was really good to finally read some good news. I hope the young Nepali readers residing outside Nepal, after reading the column will get the message: return to Nepal and contribute at least what you have taken from her. May others follow Jivan's footsteps to come back to serve the motherland.

Sudha Parajuli
Baneswor

On Kathmandu streets,

SALIL SUBEDI

Come rain, fog or shine, at the dawn of every new day in Kathmandu Valley, a small army of people armed with brooms and cans comes out on to the streets. They are mostly women, they wear clean clothes, look smart and many carry babies strapped to their backs. They are Kathmandu's kuchikars who have organised and struggle for better working conditions and have lifted their community out of their "untouchable" status out of sheer hard work. Despite official apathy and society's traditional stigma against the "lower" castes, kuchikars have through hard work and determination raised the quality of their lives. "We are used to the heat, the cold, rain. It's our job and we do it," says one sweeper at Rani Pokhari, who asks shyly that her name not be used. "It's an okay job, really. But you people might not feel like doing it because you were not born in our situation."

Most people employed as sweepers in the Valley are from an underprivileged caste traditionally deemed to be untouchable. There are over 3,000 men and women who work for the municipality, daily-wage cleaners, or as sweepers at big hotels, offices and even at the airport to clean airliners.

"Every person in our community thinks it is their birthright to become a sweeper and get a job at the municipality," Krishna Pujari from the Dhalko says wryly. The Valley's kuchikars have undertaken to empower themselves, says Pujari who is a founding member of the Indrayani Park managed by



the Shoba Bhagwati kuchikars. The community has now earned enough assets to move on to other enterprises.

The sweepers employed by the municipality work in two shifts, 6am-9am and 1pm-4pm, which means, they say, that

they can take up a second job. The municipality pays a sweeper Rs 3,100 a month, and provides two sets of clothes and footwear, and a bonus annually. And after a long battle, says Ram Prasad Poda, chairman of the Cleaning Employees

Welfare Fund at Teku, the municipality agreed to pay the premiums for a Rs 200,000 insurance policy for each sweeper. So strongly ingrained is the vocation in the community, that the fund, started and sustained through donations by

the sweepers themselves provides members loans and disaster-relief grants—and brooms.

All the progress the community has seen has been through its own efforts. The government has done little to improve

the standing of kuchikars in society, leave alone helping raise awareness of their rights in the community itself. A few have been slowly working to raise consciousness in the community. They decided to begin at the beginning—they have opened their own schools, and are conducting community programmes on basic health and hygiene.

The three biggest kuchikar settlements, Dhalko, Sabal Bahal and Tilganga, display clearly how the community, or at least sections of it, has improved its standard of living to match the modern lifestyle of the city. On average a sweeper manages to pull in about Rs 6,000 a month, working two or even three jobs. Some even earn Rs 10,000 a month.

But the money is only one part of the story. Most kuchikars will mention in the same breath that despite this, they are still discriminated against as "untouchables". That is why they are reluctant to take up other professions. The vigour with which many in the community embrace modernity and its trappings is merely one reflection of the psychological battles they are forced to fight regularly with the so-called higher castes. The welfare fund even provides attractive loans to buy television sets, refrigerators, computers, motorcycles and cars. "But so far nobody has taken a loan to buy a car," says Ram Prasad Poda, the chairperson of the fund. "We have earned enough money and adopted lots of modern amenities in our daily life. But there's a deep-rooted psychological trauma that we are still treated as a 'lower caste'," says

NATION

sweeping changes



Chakra Babu Pujari.

The story of how the primary school at Sabal Bahal started will anger and move even the apolitical. Back in mid-1980s, Basu Nepali, now in her early 40s, was deeply disturbed by the fact that children from her community were being openly discriminated against at a high school in the neighbourhood. "The kids were complaining about how unfairly they were treated at school. It really depressed me. I felt like the doors to their future were

being slammed shut. I was oppressed—almost claustrophobic—at the thought that they would become just like us, without access to proper education," she remembers.

One day in 1985, Basu gathered all the children in her neighbourhood and asked their parents to pay Rs 2 every month for pencils, paper, sweets and some books. Some were sceptical, but most people in the community helped out. Opening the school formally was difficult. For some time,

Jagadish Poda let the school run for four years free in his house. "Maybe that's why god has been kind to me. My daughter is the most educated in our community," Jagadish tells us proudly that his daughter is wrapping up her BBS degree. Although the family had to lie about their daughter's caste at school, they are past resentment, and simply happy that she has managed to do well despite all this.

Eventually, in 1989, a Danish group helped set up a

'proper' school in Sabal Bahal in 1989 on guthi land. But five years ago, the organisation stepped out and the school was handed over to the Ministry of Education. "Since then we've had to face a lot of problems," says Poonam Rana, principal of the school, who has the usual complaints of an inadequate budget and books arriving late.

The Sabal Bahal has 150 students from the primary level to fifth grade. Ironically, only about half are from the Poda community. Some lucky students have shifted to better schools, while others often skip out to take their parents' place at municipality jobs. Another school in Dhalko was established some time later where two members of the community take classes after they have finished their cleaning duties.

Basu's efforts are emblematic of the community's refusal to sit by and do nothing as government and most non-governmental efforts pass them by. The Cleaning Employees Welfare Fund, an independent organisation, was set up in 1987 by Ram Prasad Poda in memory of his son, who was born with a chronic form of anaemia and lived nine years in intensive care. "I was lucky, my community helped with blood transfusions for my son. After he died, I wondered what people in my community do when they face other, less easily solvable problems. Who would help them? After all, municipal officers have been even known to ask for bribes to grant us sick leave! And then I began to realise how far our combined resources could go," he recalls. The fund, started with the small contribution of Rs 2 from each member, aids in many financial matters, but Ram Prasad is proudest of the fact that over 800 people have received blood collected by the fund.

The fund is also giving back to a community that has done little to help it—it is funding a landscaping project outside the Kathmandu municipality office. "This is our way of shaming the municipal authorities who talk big but can't take care of their own small set-up," says Poda. When the community needed a day care centre four years ago the municipality set one up, but let conditions deteriorate to the point where parents preferred to strap their babies to their backs while they cleaned the city.

Such efforts, like the school are commendable. They are independent, community-driven initiatives that raise self-confidence and produce results. But if Kathmandu's kuchikar community is to realise its full potential then other efforts are required from society at large. Only that will give younger kuchikars the luxury of the choice of staying with their traditional profession or moving out into the wide world. ♦

You've got mail

Kathmandu residents may soon be actually receiving mail in their homes, and faster than they ever dreamt. City postal workers are being trained to understand the Metric Addressing System, recently introduced by Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC). The system gives each house a number and every road a name, which means postal workers and emergency services like ambulances and fire engines will finally have real city addresses. The KMC, under its Kathmandu Valley Mapping Programme (KVMP), is implementing the system in Naxal, Hadigaon, Darbar Marg, Bagh Bazar, Dilli Bazar and Gyaneswor. Surveys are underway in Kalanki, Kalimati, Kuleswor and Swayambhu.

And, if you have an appropriate name for your street, you can suggest it to your ward office.

23.2 million Nepalis

It's official. Preliminary results of the Census 2001 say Nepal's population is 23.2 million and growing at a rate of 2.27 percent. Kathmandu Valley's population is growing at more than six percent a year due to urbanisation, and at this rate the population will double in 15 years. Women outnumber men in Nepal by 400,000. The census, which enumerators say is Nepal's most scientific to date, also found that 15 percent of Nepal's population lives in urban areas.

Officials of the Central Bureau of Statistics, which conducted the survey, say the census has been affected in Maoist-hit districts, particularly Salyan and Kalikot, and to a lesser degree Jhapa, Surkhet, Sindhupalchowk, Mugu, Jumla and Dolpa. As a result, they say, it will take at least four more months to announce the final, final results.

Food for thought

Nepal's food crisis is worsening. We went from being a food exporting country in the 1960s, to importing Rs 5.57 billion worth of food in 1997. Fifty-five of Nepal's 75 districts—16 mountain districts, 33 hill districts and 6 tarai districts—suffer from chronic food shortage, which agriculture sector analysts say is caused by an unbalanced and inefficient production and distribution system, growth in population, destruction and fragmentation of agricultural land, and simply difficult terrain. But grain harvests have also come down because farmers have diversified to cash crops like cotton, tea, sugarcane and jute. The Agriculture Department's Market Development Directorate statistics indicate that Nepal's annual four million tonnes of foodgrain production falls short of the requirement by 200,000 tonnes. The result is food shortages in four of the country's five development regions.

Devout MP

While his parliamentary peers were discussing the controversial Armed Police Force and Regional Administration Bills in the Lower House this week, Shanker Pandey, the barefoot MP from Syangja, was spotted on the shores of Lake Tilicho in Manang, listening to Sant Shri Babu Murari from Gujarat recite and analyse the seventh chapter of the Ramayana. Devout Hindus believe Tilicho is the lake where the crow recited the holy book to Garuda. The devout MP was probably taking a break from sometimes-fractious parliament. And praying for much-needed peace in Nepal. (See also page 10-11.)

No business, no beauties

There is bad news for Nepal's hopeful beauties. Organisers of the annual Miss Nepal Beauty Pageant are reluctant to hold the event this year. They say that as public security is uncertain and business is at an all-time low, companies that would normally jump at the chance of sponsoring the seven-year-old event—major breweries, for the most part are shying away. With the Maoists threatening a ban on alcohol and "immodest" clothing, the organisers' reluctance is understandable. Women activists who've been trying to get the pageant banned since it began in 1994 without success may be inspired to try the Maoists' intimidation tactics in future.

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



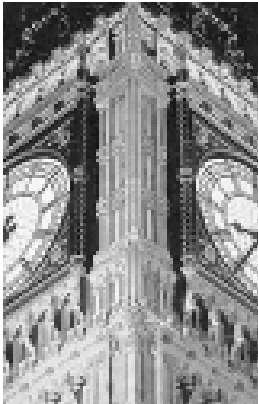
London's melting pot

LONDON — The great lexicographer and wit, Samuel Johnson, once wrote "when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life". Now, on the surface, that's a rather vain and self-absorbed line—the sort of thing you'd expect from the effete classes of New York or Paris. But Dr Johnson wasn't being self-serving or vain about his hometown. He was simply telling the truth.

For this is a city of endless bounty and variety, and thus it has ever been. The British (by which I mean the English, Scots and others of these isles) founded a worldwide empire on the simple notion of making as much money as possible. "A nation of shopkeepers" sniffed a Frenchman once. Perhaps, but the commercial imperative has kept this city alive and reinventing itself for countless generations, even as places like Paris became tourist theme parks and platforms for political ambition. In the process, they lost much of their soul. That hasn't happened here.

Right now, London is busy reinventing itself as a city in the Middle East. The streets throng with Arabs, Somalis, Bedouin and Levantines of every description. The mighty shops of Oxford Street seethe with black-clad women, their heads wrapped in the chador and bead-clicking husbands in tow. The wonderful mix of mellifluous tones and abrupt, tonsil-twisting glottal stops that is Arabic is the lingua franca of the retail trade in a London summer. So too in the casinos of Belgravia, Mayfair and Bayswater, the croupiers call for bets in finest idiomatic Arabic as well as French and English.

It should be said that none of this is new. Lebanese, Egyptian and Gulf Arabs have been spending summers in London since the oil began to flow from newly free countries (freed, of course, from British colonial yokes). In fact, the descendants of Muslim sailors of the Royal Navy known as Lascars have lived in London's East End for hundreds of years. Islam is Britain's fastest growing religion: the first mosque here dates back to the 18th century.



London also mocks at the xenophobic scepticism about European integration that plagues British politics. For this is unmistakably a European city, much more so than any other on the Continent. I was awakened this morning by the bells of a Greek Orthodox church behind my hotel. Every Sunday, hundreds of worshippers mix—native Greek Londoners mixing with Athenians and others from the motherland—troop into the pews, clouds of incense billowing out the door. Little Portugal is a stone's throw away, a line of bakeries and smoky cafés

sitting under the baleful shadow of a high-rise block of flats. There's an area of north London where the signs are written in Basque and the old men in the pubs put coins into collection boxes for the separatist movement, ETA. Poles, Russians, Spaniards, Italians, Scandinavians and even the world's most culturally proud race, the French, live and work in London these days.

I asked a French man at coffee yesterday what brought him here. Gazing at me through the pungent smoke of a Gitanes cigarette, he pointed out—in perfect English but with more than a hint of Gallic disdain for stupid questions—that as an investment analyst for a giant American bank, he had little choice. "Besides," he said, turning back to his Starbucks coffee, "These days, France is two hours away by train, through the Channel tunnel. I go home every weekend."

Yes, there will be those who remain aloof to London's charms. But I'm not one of them. Like Dr Johnson, I live in dread of the day when a visit to this sprawling, ugly yet charming metropolis doesn't fill me with joy, even as it extracts money from my pocket. I suspect that living here, being perpetually in debt, watching public services crumble, hearing the trivia that passes for news, would make me somewhat less of a fan of Johnson's aphorism. But for now, I'm tired of neither London nor life. ♦

There is a little of everything in London: Little Portugal, Little Greece, Little Lebanon. Even Little England.

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King Birendra's legacy



MIN. B.S. BISHNARYA

What better way to honour the late king and his family than to bequeath his assets to improving public education in Nepal.

by the Maoists. Both these events are interrelated. If the majority middle class, alert and result-oriented, patronise private schools in South Asia's urban and semi-urban centers, government schools are bound to fail because these have neither the resources nor the driven manpower to produce results. Yet public schools constitute the backbone of democracies everywhere.

To offset these institutional vagaries of Nepal's educational infrastructure whose malaise is too deep to be cured through school reform alone, the formation of a public library system in the over 4000 Village Development Committees is the call of the

hour. Associated with the administrative structures of the VDCs and schools, and funded both locally and centrally, these libraries would prove an independent source of learning for young and old alike. The young will go there to whet their appetite for learning, as I would have done if I had access, escaping from the limitations of their classrooms and teachers. The old will go there to fruitfully spend their leisure away from the card table and the bottle.

The equitable distribution of material wealth cannot be achieved without an equitable distribution of intellectual wealth, come communism or capitalism. If a nation has to remain ill-fed,

it is worse off ill-read. King Birendra's property could be utilised, like the Carnegie Corporation in the US, to upgrade schools and form a network of public libraries all over Nepal. Nepal's then will be touched by King Birendra's legacy at every door and his presence in every library building and every book in ways that would truly help us honour him and his family. This will also bring together in one guaranteed institutional form his legacy of peace, democracy and education. ♦

Pramod Mishra teaches English Literature at Duke University in the United States.

As Nepal is poised to begin a serious discussion over peace, war, the constitution, and monarchy, the significance of the debate over King Birendra's property and legacy is relevant. He presided over almost two decades of the autocratic Panchayat system, saw the rise of Maoist people's war over the issues of poverty and illiteracy, and lost his entire family in probably the most bizarre episode in all Nepali history. But Birendra will most likely be known as the king who gave Nepal peace, democracy, and education as his bequest.

Therefore, the question about King Birendra's property is not whether the new king would get it by the conventional law of inheritance. A more pertinent question is: how is this inheritance going to relate to King Birendra's legacy of peace, democracy, and education? Especially at a time when these three words are on everyone's lips.

Long-term peace for prosperity is not something that is going to come from the hocus-pocus wizardry of the Maoists and the government alone. In a land riven by illiteracy, ignorance, misinformation, where civil society is weak for want of empowering education, even the best attempt to herald peace through negotiation can only be a precursor. Peace and democracy cannot succeed when imposed from the top alone, they have to emerge from the grassroots. And unless people in Nepal's villages and towns do not feel empowered through resources available to them for education, independent from the failed, colonial school and college educational system, threats to peace and democracy will always be there. In today's globalized world, therefore, public education through a joint venture between public schools and public libraries is one of the major ways to empower people. The question of eastern or western, communist or capitalist values doesn't arise here.

Growing up in a Rajbanshi village in Morang, we never knew what books meant outside of Mahendra Mala, and such

second-hand textbooks as were barely available to us. While the poor worked their hearts out in the fields from dawn to dusk, the landed gentry spent its leisure in drunken stupor or at card tables in the village bazaar. In our spare time, we just played in the village dirt and mud, if not pressed to work as field hands and cowherds.

Later, the small library we put together with funds raised by the singing and dancing we staged in the fervent days of the 1979 referendum closed down.

How can democracy function in a society where people do not have access to knowledge? If peaceful prosperity is the ideal and democracy a means to achieve it, then the ability of common people to access knowledge is its fundamental prerequisite. Without systematic dissemination of evaluated knowledge and information, peace, democracy and healthy nationalism become mere rhetorical terms.

Political instability, violence, and illiteracy form a vicious circle that breeds an endless cycle of poverty. Only when people are able to make informed personal judgment to choose and evaluate public officials, can democracy be prevented from turning into a circular game of corrupt politicians and idle bureaucrats working overtime behind doors to grab and misuse power—and people can be dissuaded from voting in the name of caste, clan, uncritical party affiliation and personal loyalty rather than on policies and performance.

But how is Nepal going to educate its wards? While higher education reels under the mimicry of the Indian colonial model, producing and reproducing colonial subjects rather than critical thinkers and knowledge makers, the disaster of the secondary and primary level education has been irrefutably highlighted by two recent events: the failure of a large number of students to get through the SLC exams and the forced closure of private schools



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MIN. B.S. BISHNARYA

HEMLATA RAI

Rama (not her real name) was forced to spend seven "hellish" years in the Central Jail for a mental disorder that could have been alleviated if she had received medical help in time. The trauma of trying to conceive for 23 years, and putting up with mockery from society for this "failure" eventually took their toll, and Rama collapsed, emotionally and mentally.

But more than any of that suffering, it is the recollection of life in the Central Jail that sends shivers down her spine now. "Even now, I am terrified when I think of what I suffered there," says the gentle, soft-spoken woman.

It is common practice in this country to imprison mentally ill people. The general public is told little about neuroses, and the few psychiatric institutions there are little-known. That is why, instead of seeking psychiatric assistance, Rama's family took her to the Central Jail where she was locked up for more than seven years. And she was lucky—the recent fire in a southern Indian asylum, which killed over 20 inmates who were chained to their beds, is a shocking reminder that the trauma of institutionalised people is often not "in the head."

Instead of ensuring the human rights of the ill and their right to treatment, existing laws legitimate such inhuman treatment. Local administration laws grant chief district officers (CDO) the right to put mentally ill people into jail for their own safety or for the safety of the community upon the recommendation of a doctor. But CDOs are not given a concomitant responsibility to protect the rights of disturbed people. And there is no legal provision to reverse this "mentally sick" certification, even

if the person's condition improves.

A person's mental health is mainly determined by genetics, environment (like family and work atmosphere), and individual factors like susceptibility to tension or depression. Everyone has their own breaking point, and when this point is reached, a person develops a mental disturbance.

There is no official study on prevalence, but researchers estimate that about 12 percent of Nepal's suffer from some form or degree of mental illness at any given time, and at least two percent suffer from severe but

treatable mental illness. Even the presence of four million suffering people has failed to instil a sense of urgency among policymakers and public health officials. Though a National Mental Health Policy was announced in 1997, the issue is still treated as separate from other human development endeavours. Only 0.14 percent of the national health budget was allocated to mental health programmes in fiscal 2000.

The general perception about mental sickness is perhaps reflected in the policies. Here too, the issue remains a taboo subject, and

Disturbed care

Mentally ill people hardly ever receive adequate or even humane care in Nepal. The costs to the country are enormous.

the ailment, one that only affects "the poor, uneducated, underprivileged and downtrodden." But researchers the world over have been saying for some time now that the prevalence rate for mental illness is similar everywhere—in developed and underdeveloped countries, in cities and in villages. The difference lies on the types of disorders, which often depends on the environment the patients work and live in.

But there are some factors that pose a greater threat to the mental well-being of people. In countries like Nepal, for example, city dwellers are considered more likely to suffer from the kind of stress that precipitates mental disorders. Changing lifestyles, like the spread of the nuclear family, and pressure to keep up with the neighbours, test the strength of protective cultural mechanisms available to earlier generations—think yoga, meditation, puja—and children and young adults in particular are finding it difficult to cope with the resultant stress and depression.

The Department for Mental Health at the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital says that close to 25 of every one hundred patients who seek medical help at the hospital are there with a mental disorder. They usually come seeking treatment for physical ailments, which turn out to be the physical manifestation of mental illnesses. And, they belong

to all social and economic classes and caste groups.

But, mental health professionals stress, it is logical that some people are more at risk for certain mental illnesses. "Due to their disadvantaged position, rural women in Nepal are more vulnerable to depression," said Rajja Kiljunen, a clinical psychologist with the Mental Health Programme of the United Mission to Nepal.

Unfortunately, women are again on the losing end when it comes to treatment—very few can actually get medical attention. Patan Mental Hospital shows that while the number of people using mental health services has doubled in the last ten years, male patients outnumber female patients by almost 16 percent. Often, women's families are simply unwilling to seek medical help, and health workers do not realise that the needs of men and women patients are different.

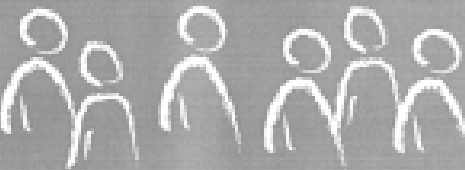
"Medical care and emotional support both play an equally important role in the treatment of mentally disturbed people," said Kedar Subedi, a social worker with Asha Deep, a non-governmental rehabilitation centre for mentally disturbed people. But such is the stigma attached to people who suffer from mental disorders, that they receive exactly the opposite. Sometimes even people who have completely recovered are not welcomed back into their homes. Hema, a high school graduate,

was not allowed back into her husband's home even though the psychiatrist at Asha Deep assured them that she was perfectly alright. "I was forced to go back to my parents' house and I have been cruelly separated from my young sons," said a tearful Hema.

Where only one person was suffering, now an entire family has been traumatised. Patan Mental Hospital's Dr Dhruva Shrestha says the loss from such behaviour—and the dangerous domino effect it can have, triggering more illnesses or disorders—is incalculable. The 1993 World Development Report estimated that the world loses more productivity due to mental disorders than diseases like tuberculosis, cancer or heart disease. Similarly, the World Health Organisation in 1998 estimated that more working days are lost from mental illness than physical illness. Leave aside the burden on patients' families due to the cost of treatment and care, the social losses due to uncared-for mentally disturbed people like interrupted education, inability to work to their fullest potential, violence, family and marital disharmony are extremely worrying.

A health worker put it like this: "Until we are unafraid of looking mentally ill people in the eye, and until we can guarantee them care, we can forget about checking the social costs of mental illness." ♦

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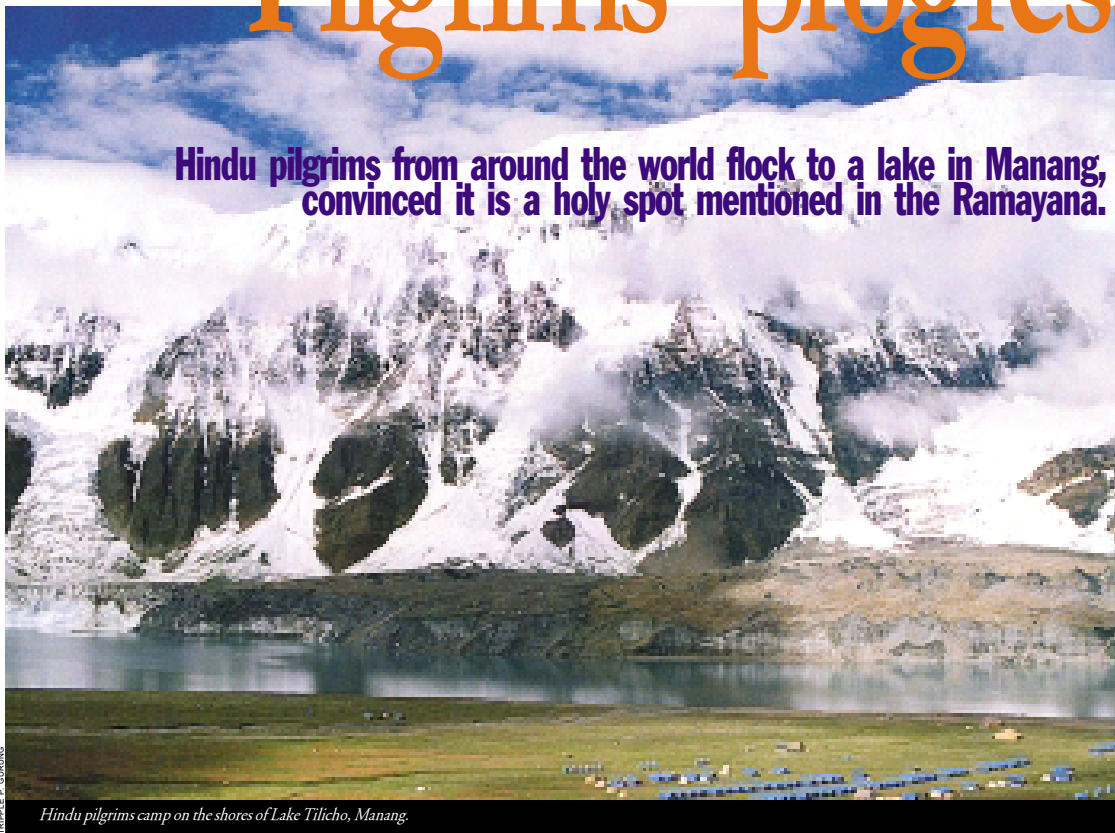
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Pilgrims' progress on

Hindu pilgrims from around the world flock to a lake in Manang, convinced it is a holy spot mentioned in the Ramayana.



Hindu pilgrims camp on the shores of Lake Tilicho, Manang.

RAMYATA LIMBU

Lake Tilicho, Manang - There is a strange sight on the shores of the world's highest lake these days. Up here at nearly 5,000 metres above sea level, pilgrims from sea level are camped out on a religious retreat. Dozens of identical blue tents dot the shores of this idyllic lake, and right by the icy waters is a yellow pandal. That is where a famous Indian guru is reading the seventh chapter of the Ramayana and 250 pilgrims have flown in by helicopter to listen.

Nepal is full of religious sites holy for Hindus all over the world. There is Pashupatinath, Gosainkunda, Muktinath, Janakpur and just across our northern border are Mt Kailash and Mansarovar. But Lake Tilicho is a new phenomenon and devotees think they are sure there is a reference to it in the Ramayana. And that is why they are here.

But up in Nepal's scenic Manang Valley, the temporal meets the mundane. Caring and catering to 250 pilgrims and their support staff inside a nature sanctuary and an altitude at which bio-degradability is almost zero is a constant worry. Local Manangi herders rarely venture up to the lake, except sometimes to look for straying yak. Some way

Tilicho

from the lake, conservation officials, local villagers and trekking leaders are looking down at the tents and strategising how to dispose of the waste generated by the group over a course of two weeks. They finally agree that human waste deposited in tented toilets will be transported by Sherpas to a pit dug a distance away from the lake—a tiring task in the oxygen-deprived atmosphere. Plastic and tin will be flown out to Pokhara, and paper and wood will be buried or burnt.

"At present, everyone is more focussed on making the Ramayana reading a success, and satisfying the clients. But before they leave, they have to ensure the area is left clean," says Krishna Gurung, one of four Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) liaison officers accompanying the group. Since early August, Hindu pilgrims from around the world have set up camp here and they have gathered to listen to Sant Shri Murari Bapu (regularly featured on cable television) to recite and reflect on the seventh chapter of the Ramayana.

Their presence has triggered a flurry of activity among villagers. Manangi elder Kyung Tsering is up at the lake for the first time. He's hiked up with a cow that supplies Bapu Murari with a daily supply of fresh milk. Volunteers help collect garbage and ask pilgrims to refrain from bathing in the lake. They hope the this visit will attract more tourists and that the relatively good track from Manang to Tilicho, and the track being planned from Tilicho to Jomsom, will encourage more tourist traffic between the neighbouring mountain districts of Manang and Mustang.

The faith of the pilgrims from India, Canada, US, England, and South Africa—many in their sixties—seems to be standing them in good stead in the cold thin air at this altitude. The temperature is below zero in the mornings, and the sun plays hide-and-seek with monsoon clouds that storm over the Manang Valley by mid-morning. Oxygen cylinders are set up in the four-person tents which have cots and four-inch mattresses. This is the middle of the monsoon, and few choose this time of year to venture this high. Even the

pilgrims did not walk, they were ferried in on fixed wing flights from Pokhara to Jomsom (2754m) and by a Mi-17 helicopter from Jomsom to Tilicho.

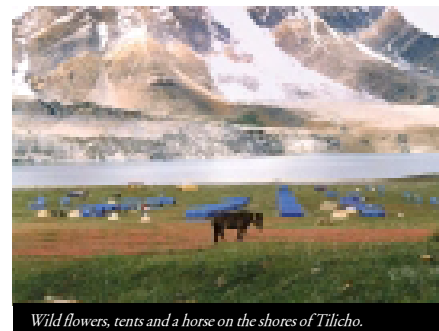
"You've got to give them credit for taking the initiative to come here at such a time," says Samanta Tuladhar, general manager of the Jomsom Mountain Resort. The resort, normally quiet at this time of year, has had a good month. Unfazed pilgrims sang bhajans and chanted prayers as they waited out the weather in Jomsom. It is just a 10-minute shuttle to the lake from Jomsom, but with the monsoon clouds, craggy terrain and altitude, it is a challenging flight for the pilots. The heavy chopper waits for a break in the clouds and flies off, rotors whirring and gulping for air to generate lift. This is the future for off-season tourism in Nepal: Hindu pilgrims who want to come to holy lakes in Nepal during the auspicious month of Srawan. Says Tuladhar: "Most people just talk about off-season tourism, these people are doing the homework for us."

The pilgrims believe that this is the lake that is referred to in the Ramayana where the crow recited the Ramayana to Garuda and where Shiva found solace after the death of Sati. Organisers of the Tilicho Lake Pilgrimage Tour 2001 say they cannot prove it scientifically, but they are convinced this is indeed the Kak Bhusundi Sarovar mentioned in the Ramayana. The Ramayana gives some clues, and says the lake is "at the base of the Annapurnas and north of the Nilgiris." Indeed, south of Tilicho loom the icy ramparts of the Annapurna, carved by glaciers which plunge down to the lake itself. In fact Tilicho Lake is the collected glacial melt of the entire northern slopes of Annapurna and Thorung Peak. Scouts came to the area last spring on a reconnaissance mission to check whether this indeed was the holy lake, and were convinced it was. Water samples proved the lake was cleaner than Mansarovar where a similar group of pilgrims had gone for a prayer vigil for world peace in 1997. That trip paved the way for this one.

It's a nice story, but when pilgrims who are not trekkers decide to organise a trip here, it is a logistical nightmare. Organisers



Local volunteers help load garbage onto a helicopter.



Wild flowers, tents and a horse on the shores of Tilicho.

Highland Excursion say that more than 30,000 kgs of food, tents, the pandal, generators, gas cylinders, water pumps, and a portable prefabricated kuti for Bapu Murari had to be flown in by helicopter. About 100 oxygen bottles, 13 Gamow bags for those suffering from altitude sickness, and two doctors are on standby if anyone develops health problems.

Underneath the portable pandal at Tilicho, devotees listen intently as the bespectacled Bapu Murari says he's neither an aastik (believer), nor a naastik (non-believer), but a waastawik (realist). Bapu has been urging pilgrims who

cannot deal with the altitude to return home. "Without health, one can't do bhakti," he says.

"This is the first and probably the last time we'll deal with such a large group," says a harassed-looking Uma Khakurel, marketing director for Highland Excursions. "In terms of management, safety, and sheer logistics, it has been enormously challenging but a big headache, too."

Tilicho is not a prohibited area but by virtue of its remoteness and altitude, few tourists take off the popular Annapurna circuit to hike up to the lake. But it does lie within the

Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) which has very strict rules about littering, firewood burning and carrying capacity. The motivation in this case was different than the usual desire to walk new routes. Even though everything was planned with military precision, in between doses of Diamox, Khakurel's patience is running thin. She not only has to deal with the demands of moneyed clients, but also local village politics, eagle-eyed inspectors from ACAP and the weather so the helicopter ferries go smoothly.

The group still has to solve the problem with Bapu Murari's prefabricated kuti (holy hut)—equipped with a compact kitchenette, a bedroom and a bathroom. Flown in from India especially for this occasion, pilgrims would like the kuti (advertised as environment-friendly and weather-proof) to remain at Tilicho for future trekkers and pilgrims to use. Villagers would like the same. But ACAP rules are unbending: the structure should be carted out and the shores of Lake Tilicho should be left in as pristine a state as before the pilgrims got here. ♦

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Sant Shri Murari Bapu arrives at the lake with the Ramayana.

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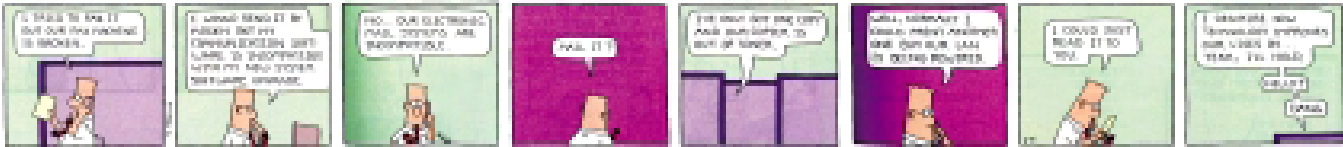
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The Digital Provide?

IT is, and should not be a priority. Later yes, at this point, no.



Robert Jensen and Richard Zeckhauser ("The digital provide" #54) argue for a positive reappraisal of information technology (IT) as and when applied to the contexts of developing countries.

Put briefly, in well-functioning economies, when there aren't enough eggs to meet demand, their price increases. Farmers, seeing profitable opportunities, breed more hens to produce more eggs. People want more eggs and like magic, more eggs appear. Just as important, farmers earn more income and consumers pay less for eggs. But, in developing countries farmers typically know only the local price and so cannot send their eggs to a market that commands a higher price for them. Unless for example, they have cellular phones and can then send their eggs to where they are valued most. Hence IT can help bridge the divide between a developing economy and a well-functioning economy.

The difficulties with their standpoint are numerous:

1. The basic law of supply and demand states that for goods such as eggs, demand rises as price lowers, and vice versa as eggs become more expensive people will buy less and less of them. Common experience for all of us confirms this. It also states that supply directly affects price in that if the market becomes saturated each supplier will lower their price in an effort to sell their produce. So, if all the farmers in a particular area use their phones to get "reliable" information on the best price, and then all head off to that market to sell, their arrival will swamp the market and the price will lower as they try to undercut one another.
2. Eggs are extremely fragile which makes their transportation difficult, slow and expensive. Outside of the tarai, most of Nepal is extremely difficult terrain for transportation. When it takes a day to cover a small distance without damaging your eggs, are you going to be encouraged to still head further to a particular market? Will it be financially viable without improved infrastructure?
3. To which "well-functioning economies" are we referring to here? It is well known that the farming industry in so-called developed countries is heavily subsidised by their respective governments. In order to gain economies of scale, price cartels control market prices and market supply so that they can ensure themselves against the vagaries of the so-called "free market," and thereby maximise profits. CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) in Europe, for example, has resulted in widespread unemployment and bankruptcy among small farmers as they have been priced out of the market. Those who have worked on Food For Work Programs have received the poor quality rice that is held in enormous warehouses by these cartels in order to keep market prices high. In Asia, rice, in Africa, wheat.

The economic arguments aside, introducing IT to developing countries is extremely problematic for the following reasons:

1. Both hardware and software costs are well in excess of the common man's monthly salary if not annual salary.
2. IT is not maintenance free, who's going to do the installation, train the users, fix or make adjustments when they malfunction? And what to do when the network doesn't cover your phone, or when there's no electricity?
3. Most of your target population are illiterate and IT illiterate. Symbol based software has been developed, converting text to speech that is then read out to the user, but even with the widespread dissemination of such software users still need to be trained in IT. Should this be a priority over literacy?

Finally, Jensen and Zeckhauser argue that "many public health problems can be prevented or treated through information dissemination, often at a lower cost than treating the problem afterwards. IT is the best way to deliver such information rapidly and at low cost."

This is the crunch. Anyone who has used IT, especially the Internet, will know that is full of information. Loads of information, just like a library, but most of it is completely irrelevant and of no use to you. To find what you want needs skill and knowledge.

In the context of health provision and IT, (1) you will need existing health services to cooperate in the information that is to be provided on these "sites" (manuals and books already perform this function); (2) You will need to train local staff to understand this information and be able to apply it or communicate it, (schools and women's groups perform this function); (3) You will then have to provide the sites with supplies and equipment to deal with health issues as and when they arise.

Now, it is our experience in Nepal, that people do not access existing health services more frequently, because they cannot afford to travel the distance to get there and because they cannot afford the medication that is prescribed. Now, we've gone

some way to overcoming the first, by introducing an IT literate and trained health worker at our sites (Who's paying?), but we still haven't addressed the other main cause, namely how are these people going to pay for their medication?

In summary, IT in itself is a great tool and will continue to shape the way of the world as dramatically as it has done over the past half a century, but for anyone who has any experience of working in development in so-called developing countries, the application of IT as described by Jensen and Zeckhauser is patently absurd. When governments cannot provide adequate health and education services and its people cannot adequately feed themselves, the introduction of IT is and should not be a priority. Later yes, at this point, no.

When Peace Corps proposes to offload thousands of American computers that cannot be sold in its existing markets, we should take Bill Gates's comments regarding their development potential much more seriously. ♦

Racism in the rainbow nation



THEMBA MATHE IN JOHANNESBURG

When Lucas Ndlovu, a wealthy black entrepreneur, moved his family last summer into a luxury home in an up-market suburb in Brakpan – south of Johannesburg – he immediately felt out of place.

All his neighbours were white, and nobody made him feel welcome.

A few weeks later, he began receiving hate mail with racist remarks scribbled in red ink. These he ignored.

Months later, he received a threatening telephone call, followed by another and another, until he had had enough. Fearing for his family's safety and afraid to report this matter to the police, Ndlovu moved. The street was all-white again.

Despite many positive moves in recent years, South Africa, the world's seven-year-old rainbow nation, is still grappling with the issue of racism.

During his most recent New Year's message, President Thabo Mbeki said a national conference on racism, held in Johannesburg last year, had laid the foundation for ending racism in the country once and for all.

"Now this year we will be hosting the United Nations World Conference Against Racism with the expectation by the people of the world that we will make an important contribution to the international struggle against racism," he said.

An estimated 12,000 delegates are expected to turn up for the mammoth 31 Aug.-7 Sept. meet in Durban, where they will condemn racism and other forms of discrimination.

Even in post-apartheid South Africa, experts say, racism is still manifesting itself in many ways.

The findings of the first major survey of social change in South Africa since the end of apartheid, released in early August, shows that despite many improvements, black Africans, who were the most disadvantaged racial group under apartheid, are yet to catch up with whites in a number of areas.

The government report, titled *South Africa in Transition: Changes between 1995 and 1999*, says the highest proportion of illiterate South Africans are to be found among the 4.5 million rural black African women aged 20 years or more.

Blacks continue to work as migrant labourers and suffer from lack of access to clean water in rural areas (10 per cent of the population uses river water as their main source of water). In contrast, the proportion of employed whites working in managerial, professional and

Post-apartheid South Africa prepares for the World Conference against Racism.

technical jobs rose from 41.8 per cent in 1995 to 51 per cent in 1999.

The South African National Non-Government Coalition (Sangoco) has identified poverty and poor access to resources as the leading causes of racism in the country. It said recently that racism could be eradicated by redistributing wealth.

Sangoco's view is strongly supported by the influential Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). "There will be no successful South African reconstruction and development if it is surrounded by a sea of poverty," said Siphiwe Mgcina, Cosatu spokesman.

But Cosatu also points to other issues that need to be urgently addressed, particularly xenophobia. "Like racism and tribalism, xenophobia must be defeated lest we slowly turn into a fascist society that will grow into a new polecat of the world," Mgcina said in February 2000 following reports that migrants of African origin were facing racism.

Mbeki last year admitted that, "the social and economic structure of our society is such that the distribution of wealth, income, poverty, disease, land, skills, occupations, intellectual resources and opportunities for personal advancement, as well as the patterns of human settlement, are determined by the criteria of race and colour." ♦ (GEMINI NEWS)

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Whither the Dollar?

RUDI DORNBUSCH

America's current account deficit is ballooning, making the US the world's largest external debtor (in absolute terms—the US is hardly the worst performer if trade deficit is measured as a share of GDP). Yet despite huge, growing deficits, the dollar soars. We don't worry much anymore about falling stock markets, but should we worry about the trade deficit and the almighty dollar? Is the dollar poised to sink due to its own bloated weight?

Two things bring the dollar down: loose talk from America's Secretary of the Treasury, or a sharp deterioration in America's economic performance compared to the rest of the world. Both have been tested this year and the dollar has vacillated. Both risks are now coming under control and so continuing strength for the dollar must be anticipated.

There are two kinds of US Treasury Secretaries. The first, like Robert Rubin, understands that a strong dollar helps secure low interest rates, which makes for a long and broad boom. The other, like current US Treasury Secretary, Paul O'Neill, thinks too much about competitiveness and knows too little about capital markets. This kind likes intervention, industrial cartels, target zones for currencies and other such gimmicks that got a bad name in Jimmy Carter's woeful economic era. O'Neill comes from the world of manufacturing and manufacturers look at the economy from the rabbit hole up. They think a weak dollar is good for exports and a hard dollar hurts sales and market share. O'Neill has been ambivalent about the dollar from day one. Instead of looking journalists in the eye and pronouncing Robert Rubin's reassuring mantra—a strong dollar serves the US well—he wavered! In no time, the dollar started wobbling and even went down momentarily.

That situation was repaired when President Bush, presumably encouraged by Federal Reserve Bank Chairman Alan Greenspan, reiterated that the US seeks a market-determined value for the dollar, so forget about intervention to force down the dollar's value. And so the road remains open for more interest rate cuts from Greenspan to help restore economic expansion. Such a stance serves the US—including manufacturing—better than talking down the dollar's value to boost demand for American goods.

A second possible cause for dollar weakness is poor performance by the

There's little out there that can beat the dollar. For some time, at least.

US economy relative to other countries. But a major collapse is no longer possible and an upswing is coming in the fourth quarter, underpinned by tax cuts and lower interest rates. The coming year is likely to deliver three percent growth, the most to be expected in a fully employed economy.

Can Europe and Japan do as well? Surely not Japan now, perhaps never. Europe will not grow quickly any time soon either. Our prognosis: a strong dollar for the coming year. Argentina's debt problems may weaken the dollar a little and Turkey's difficulties may hurt the Euro, but they will only affect those currencies at the margins. Not long ago the newly created Euro seemed to pose a serious threat to the dollar. The Euro's price has since crashed; exaggerated expectations for it have unravelled.

Yet the Euro idea remains sound and the economic benefits will arrive one day. A sound valuation of a currency demands a close look at the policies that support it. European policymakers are ambivalent about the use of markets and so their economies cannot stand up to comparison with America's dynamism, not any time soon. That limits the upside of the Euro. True, the US cannot borrow abroad forever and one day the dollar and the current account will turn. But not soon. A substantial workout has been underway in the US to correct the excesses of the Internet boom. Major investments in employment, tightened budgets and improved human capital have strengthened the economy, raising both its medium-term potential for growth and its stability.

America's "New Economy" was no house of cards. Beyond the hype we see high employment and a stable economy. Capital will keep going to the US because it offers the best profit prospects, which keep it the world economic's leader. There is no rival yet to or the US or the dollar. ♦ (Project Syndicate)

Rudi Dornbusch is Ford Professor of economics at MIT and a former chief economic advisor to both the World Bank and IMF.

Malaysians re-think bumiputra



ANIL NETTO IN PENANG . . .
As political ferment brews in Malaysia, people are again grappling with a decades-old debate: Should a nation where affirmative action has been official policy for three decades give meritocracy a try?

Normally, questioning Malaysia's quota system, which favours the majority *bumiputras* (ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups), is a no-no—a 'sensitive issue' in a multi-ethnic country of 22 million people. But on 27 July Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad himself proposed that meritocracy be the basis of university admissions, at least for a spell. He said this would shock ethnic Malay students out of what he calls their complacency and tendency to immerse themselves in politics, neglecting studies. The remarks come in the wake of growing student activism against abuse of power and corruption. Once-docile students, mainly Malays, have demonstrated against the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows indefinite detention without trial. Two student activists were detained under the ISA in July,

though both have since been released. After years of receiving benefits from affirmation action, some Malays feel quotas are their lifeline. "It is our right," says Johar Zam (not his real name), a low-income Malay factory worker. His opinion appears less to do with any sense of a proud birthright, than a painful admission that for all its advances, the bumiputra community is still lagging behind. Bumiputras comprise some 60 percent of the population, Chinese Malaysians 25 percent, and Indian Malaysians and other groups the rest.

Johar says Malays need assistance because many come from poor families of plantation workers and farmers. Poverty is found in urban squatter settlements, plantations, farming and fishing communities, the Orang Asli community and indigenous communities in north Borneo. Students from poorer families do not even make it to secondary school. And many who do, drop out, so university quotas and scholarships are of little help to them. On the economic front, Malays complain that government

assistance largely benefits a small coterie of favoured bumiputra (and non-Malay) businessman—part of the official policy of creating successful Malay billionaire tycoons under the privatisation policy. When the government recently bought back a stake in ailing Malaysia Airlines at double the market price from a debt-ridden firm owned by a bumiputra tycoon, Malays were the deal's chief critics.

Ethnic-based affirmative action quotas were made state policy after bloody race riots in 1969 left scores dead. Quotas were the cornerstone of the 1971 New Economic Policy to wipe out poverty and raise the stake of the bumiputras. The NEP's benefits include ethnic-based quotas for university admissions (55:45 in favour of bumiputras), preferential treatment for government contracts and licences, and cheaper loans.

But after 30 years, the civil service, the army, and the police remain predominantly Malay, while the ethnic Chinese maintain an influential presence in the economy despite Malay inroads. But bumiputras have made significant professional advances and a new

Will Malaysia try out meritocracy?

middle-class has emerged—this is often called the successful part of Malaysia's race-based policies. Other minorities like Indians complain they are now being marginalised. The NEP expired in 1990 with bumiputras still short of its targets. The policy initially left many non-bumiputras disgruntled. But with liberalisation in higher education in the 1990s and the setting up of local private colleges offering 'twinning programmes' with foreign universities, much of their resentment evaporated. Since 1990, there has been discussion on policies to succeed the NEP. Increasingly analysts are calling for needs-based rather than ethnic-based affirmative action.

But the political costs of implementing a meritocracy may be high. With the World Conference Against Racism in South Africa later this month, activists have the delicate task of coming up with a position paper on racism in Malaysia. In March, ethnic attacks targeting ethnic Indians in a neglected squatter area near Kuala Lumpur left six dead and many injured. Activists will likely opt for a non-racial line in the final paper. "People agree that policies should be based on need rather than along racial lines," says Yap Swee Seng, a secretariat member of the Joint Action Committee against Racism. "There should be affirmative action against poverty and the poor should be assisted regardless of racial background." ♦ (IPS)

Room to swing

WASHINGTON — Asia's only great ape—the threatened orangutan—will gain from an international ban on the export of an Indonesian wood. The Indonesian government imposed its own ban in April amid concern about illegal logging of the valuable hardwood called ramin. After heavy lobbying, the international ban was put in place by the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Ramin, used for furniture, flooring, wood panels, toys and other products, is found in Malaysia, where it is called Malaysian beech, and within several of Indonesia's national parks—where orangutans live. The species, found mostly on Sumatra and Borneo, are highly dependent on ramin trees for food and nesting and to move through the forest using their vine and branch. The US, one of the world's largest importers of ramin timber and products, brought in \$12 million worth of the wood last year.

Orangutan numbers in the wild have declined by 50 percent in the last 20 years and the WWF estimates their population has fallen by over 90 percent in the past century. Today, fewer than 25,000 orangutans remain in the wild, 80 percent in Indonesia, primate researchers estimate. Logging and forest fires are destroying as much as 80 percent of Indonesia's orangutan habitat. In 1999 after five months of undercover investigations, the US/UK-based Environmental Investigation Agency and Telapak, an Indonesian environmental group, released a report saying corrupt officials allowed illegal logging to escalate in two of Indonesia's most important national parks, Tanjung Puting and Gunung Leuser. About 500 orangutans live in Tanjung Park in Kalimantan on Borneo island, and both parks are havens for other endangered species as well, including the Sumatran rhino, Asian elephant, clouded leopard, and Sumatran tiger. (IPS)



'Thais' and hilltribes

CHIANG MAI, Thailand - For Thailand's ethnic minorities, an April report in *Nakorn Chiang Rai* newspaper about their secessionist ambitions was a continuation of increasingly racist and unfounded attacks by the mainstream media. The article claimed the Hmong community, Thailand's second largest hilltribe group after the Karen, planned to declare autonomy in northern Thailand within 20 years. Incensed, the Hmong decided to file charges against the paper at a local police station, and asked that the province's governor look into the matter. But few expect anything to come out of the case—controversial and difficult to digest, it will fade away.

Thailand's 900,000 ethnic hilltribes have for years been looked down upon and attacked by mainstream society and media as opium cultivators, drug peddlers and forest destroyers, illiterate and 'uncivilised'. Such representations run parallel to official discriminatory policies, say critics. Less than a third of hilltribe people in this country of 70 million have not received Thai citizenship, despite having lived in the country for centuries. Without that, they have no right to land, to vote, or to basic social services. Dr Chayan Vaddanaputti, a political scientist specialising in ethnic studies, says this wasn't always the case. "Earlier, hilltribes were seen by lowlanders as 'friends', trading partners." But growing environmental problems after Thailand's national social and economic development plans took off in the late 60s and early 70s, and an influx of Vietnamese refugees from the war, changed this forever, he adds.

Activists who met in Bangkok recently ahead of the World Conference Against Racism this month listed Thailand's treatment of ethnic minorities and hilltribes as an example of how "racism, racial discrimination and intolerance continue to be practised in various countries in South-east Asia." ♦ (IPS)



Japanese transnationals' overseas networks have made the country's industrial base shrink worryingly.

relative importance of Japan's core domestic industrial base. Japan's large transnationals use their offshore affiliates as a direct substitute for production and increasingly for research and development. Japan's international competitiveness and domestic productivity growth fell precipitously. This de-industrialisation means once-prosperous manufacturing regions in Japan are now experiencing long-term social and economic decline.

The "hollowing out" of Japanese industry has implications for macro-economic policy. An expansionary policy is unlikely to work in the long-term because increases in aggregate demand are likely to be met by Japanese corporations producing more overseas, rather than at domestic plants. Further, small firm confidence is weak and the lack of profitable opportunities within Japan is unlikely to raise business investment.

To return to long-term growth, Japan must address the structural impact of globalisation. This will require an appropriate policy response that moves the Japanese economy away from dominance by large transnational corporations. It should favour industrial policies to strengthen Japan's small firm base, with a specific focus on nurturing networks of interdependent small firm entities rather than subsidising a small firm base subservient to the interests of the large-scale transnationals. An example of such networks may be the Italian industrial districts of Emilia-Romagna. Here, co-operative clusters of small firms engage in flexible specialisation, where they are able to innovate, diversify and compete with larger corporate giants. For Japan's declining manufacturing industry, the creation of similar industrial districts may provide the basis for sustainable economic development. ♦ (Project Syndicate)

Keith Cowling is professor of economics at the University of Warwick, UK; Philip R. Tomlinson is lecturer in business economics, University of Bath, UK.

MAOIST PRIMER



Lila Mani Pokhrel of the Samyukta Jana Morcha in 1991, the massacre of police at Naumule, militia on warpath in Achham.

Chhhalpal, 12 August



Genesis

There was a division of the Communist Party of Nepal (Fourth Convention) sometime in 1983-one rallied around Nirmal Lama and another Mohan Bikram Singh. The Singh group then advocated a policy of preparing for a "people's war" and tried to put together an armed unit. Around 1985 it launched a campaign to smear black paint on the statue of the king and attack police booths in Kathmandu-which was known as the Sector Programme. The programme became controversial after it became evident that the party's secrets had leaked, which led to the change of its leadership. Sometime in 1987, Puspa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) was elected general secretary. In 1987 the NCP (4th Convention), NCP (Masal) and other smaller factions merged to form the Ekata Kendra (Unity Centre). After the faction led by Mohan Bikram Singh boycotted the general election, a splinter of the party led by Baburam Bhattarai joined the Ekata Kendra.

The Unity Centre participated in the elections and won nine parliamentary seats to emerge as the 3rd largest party. The party held its National Convention the same year where Prachanda's policy of having a people's war is adopted and Nirmal Lama's policy to have a mass uprising was rejected. The party participated in the local elections in 1992 and failing to win the expected number of positions, a rift between Dahal and Lama began and eventually caused the party to split. Then in 1994, under directions of the Revolutionary International Movement, Prachanda named his party the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist).

Armed struggle

The Maoists started their armed struggle during the winter of 1995. In the first week of February 1996 they presented a list of 40 demands to the then government led by Sher Bahadur Deuba.

They gave him an ultimatum of two weeks for the demands to be fulfilled. The start of the people's war was to coincide with the date of the beginning of the pro-democracy movement of 1990, but due to some changes in plan, it was launched on Falgun 1, even before the time given to government to fulfil their demands had expired. Both the government of the day and the Jan Morcha that had submitted its demands did not seem very serious about the issues. It is only now that the 40 demands have become important.

The Maoists issued a statement of February 13th 1996, the day they launched the people's war calling for the end of constitutional monarchy and the setting up on a communist republic. The people's war is divided into three stages: strategic defence, strategic stalemate and strategic offence, they are still said to be

in the strategic defence stage...

Present party status

Since the Maoists were underground from the beginning not much is known about their organisation and structure. Although it is underground, its organisation is similar to that of any political party. At the present moment, Prachanda is the supreme leader, there is a politburo consisting of seven members and a central committee consisting of roughly 40 to 50 members. It also has an advisory committee of 9-11 members. The Maoists have divided the country into three geographical regions, each overseen by assigned politburo members. Kathmandu Valley activities are sometimes placed under the Central Regional activities and sometimes as a special region. Its activities in India come under a special region.

Mechi, Kosi, Sagarmatha and Janakpur zones and some parts of Bagmati and Narayani come under its eastern region. The remaining parts of Narayani and Bagmati, Gandaki, Lumbini and Dhaulagiri zones come under the central region. Its western sector comprises of Raptri, Bheri, Karnali, Seti and Mahakali zones. Each region is further divided into three-sub divisions.

Fraternal organisations

The Maoists have many fraternal or frontal organisations. The Samyukta Jana Morcha used to be its political arm. After the party went into war, it can be assumed that the political activities are overseen by the Jana Andolan Sanyojak Samiti, but this organisation has not been very effective. The Maoists are also backing organisations such as the Prajatantra Bachau (Save Democracy) movement. The Maoists have emphasised formation of regional and ethnic organisations. They have formed 10 such organisations, which are being used as first shelters to leftists headed to join the Maoist party.

Fraternal organisations have played an important role in the growth and strengthening of the Maoist movement. Some organisations affiliated to the Maoists are the All Nepal Farmers Association (Revolutionary), All Nepal Women's Association (Revolutionary), All Nepal Students Association (Revolutionary), All Nepal Teachers' Association (Revolutionary) and All Nepal Trade Union (revolutionary). There are about 15 such organisations. Nepalis in India are another major Maoist organising ground, handled by the All India Nepali Unity Society. Others are the All India Nepalese Students Association, All India Nepalese Transporters' Association and the All India Nepalese Youth Association. The Maoists also have direct contact with other leftist organisations in India.

Military might

At the start of the peoples' war, the Maoists seemed to have no organised armed unit.

Later they started developing it along the lines of the police force. Now they are developing the armed units as a proper army.

The Central Military Commission oversees the armed wings and Prachanda heads this commission. The different regional military commissions are under the central command. Efforts are being made to develop armed units that will be mobilised by the regional commands. They form people's militias and volunteer groups in the villages. There seems to be a tussle for the leadership of the armed units.

Ram Bahadur Thapa was very instrumental in helping the Maoists become very powerful in the western region. But after disciplinary action was taken against him Posta Bahadur Bogati replaced Thapa. It still is not very clear as to who controls the armed units, which is reason for constant tussle within. The Maoists have formed three companies and are said to have reached the stage of forming temporary battalions. In the Dunai attack it had used its temporary battalion which is now to be made permanent. The Maoists had used companies to attack Rukumkot and Naumule also. The Maoists have used

higher military units in the western region but only platoons have been used in the central and eastern regions. It is estimated that the Maoists have an armed force of 2,000 people, and an armed militia of 3,000. This means they have a 5000-strong fighting force.

People's governments

The Maoists have formed local governments in many areas where they are in control. They have formed district level governments in some areas also. They claim to have district people's governments in Rukum, Salyan, Jajarkot, Rolpa, Bajura, Accham and Dailakh. In the central region, such a district level unit exists in Dolakha. They are said to be in the process of forming such a government in Lamjung and many other districts. But all the institutions have not been very effective because they are just old wine in new bottles. The Maoists have stopped all development activities in villages, which are done by other organisations and not affiliated with them, especially in areas where they are very powerful...

See p. 16 ➡

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

If dialogue is carried out just for the heck of it, that will simply give rise to useless, episode after episode of talks. This has to be done with political foresight and without any preconditions.

Jhalanath Khanal, CPN-UML politburo member, on the government's efforts to initiate dialogue with the Maoists. *Himalaya Times*, 15 August, 2001



Prachanda: "Deubaji where are you?"
Deuba: "Prachandaji where are you?"

राजधानी *Rajdhani*, 10 August

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from p. 15 ⇨

The implications of dialogue

- Excerpts from an interview with Govind Neupane



Jana Aastha, August 8

Dialogue

The subject of government–Maoist dialogue has become of interest to everyone. There are three kinds of people trying to get talks started. First, those who want peace to return to Nepal and feel dialogue will help. Then there are those affected by the insurgency who want it to end. And finally there are people in the business of conducting dialogue, whose profession is to talk about talks. The first kind genuinely wants peace and also some changes in society in general and the country as a whole, changes they hope will have a positive impact on their lives. Despite this, nothing seems to be happening, mainly due to a lack of trust. But the ceasefire and the release of detained Maoists is a positive step and allows for the hope that a dialogue will take place some time in the future. If this happens, the next step will be an all-party meeting which, again, I believe will happen. **Everyone wins** Many people will benefit from a dialogue. Deuba has definitely profited from the possibility of talks. The Maoists too have benefited—the government has released their cadres. The UML and ML stand to gain, as the present situation makes the possibility of their reunification very real. All parties must be honest when the dialogue is underway. Everyone will have to prepare for tomorrow and the possibility of dialogue allows them to do just that. The government is also getting ready. It has painted a rosy picture of the possibility of dialogue, but it

tional monarchy.

Loopholes in the Maoists' analysis

If, as Maoist leader Matrika Yadav says, the Maoists are interested in holding a referendum on the issue of a republic, and if the monarchy is itself interested, a very interesting situation will crop up. The Maoists' demands may be fulfilled, but their analysis of the 1 June massacre will be off the mark. Right after the incident they said the monarchy was finished. You say a republic has already been born, but then you participate in referendum on the subject. A referendum will give the government a breather, and cause other problems for the Maoists.

Communists and democracy

I do not think that the Maoists will join the present political system. Although in his statement Prachanda says he does not advocate one-party authoritarianism, if you look at communist history, you'll realise that their greatest weakness is not being able to remain within the control of the people. "We know the wishes of the people, what we know the party's central committee knows, the wishes of the central committee are known to the politburo and the politburo's wishes is known to the supreme leader. So, the supreme leader knows the wish of the masses." This is classic communist thought. They [the Nepali Maoists] did not try to analyse such thinking, or gauge it against public opinion. It was wrong of the communists to want to exist outside the controls or limits set by the people. This has weakened communist movements. China tried to correct this and even today there are eight communist parties there... that could be one reason for the change in the Maoists. But the competitive politics the Maoists talk about is different from that of the other communist parties, for example the UML, because the UML's competition is under the parliamentary umbrella. I don't think the guerrilla activities of the Maoists will stop until the new constitution is made.

The Republic of Nepal

There are two schools of thought about how to deal with this. One is through the election of a constituent assembly to decide on whether we should have a republic or a constitutional monarchy. Or, since this is a sensitive matter, through a referendum. This can be held with elections for the constituent assembly. One election can take care of all these questions. Voters can be asked first, who they choose as their representative, and second, whether they want a republic or a constitu-



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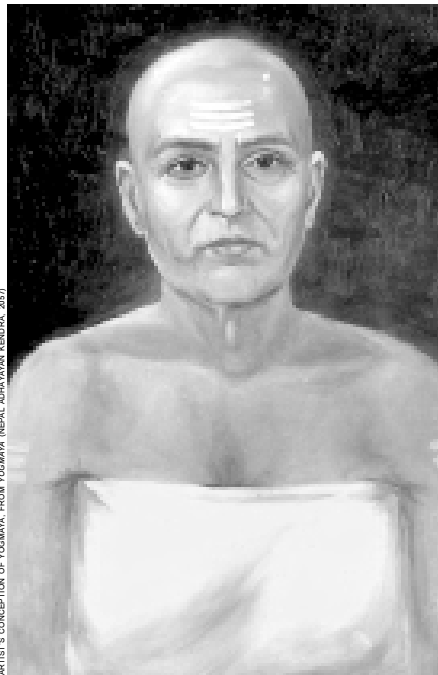
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The ascetic of the Arun



ARTIST'S CONCEPTION OF YOGMAYA, FROM 'YOGMAYA' (NEPALI, JHANA YAN KENDRA, 2001)

A new study looks at a Rana-era woman activist through the lens of a global political agenda.

In the upper reaches of the Arun Valley, back in the days of Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumshere and up to the reign of Juddha Shumshere, there lived a woman ascetic of extraordinary vision and social drive. A child widow who disappeared into India for three decades and returned with a daughter in tow, this woman went on to challenge Kathmandu's feudocrats, and run an ashram by the banks of the Arun. Feeling threatened by the revolutionary message of Yogmaya, who called for an end to corruption by the powerful, protested child marriage, and called for 'Dharma Rajya' the Rana regime kept an eye on Yogmaya and her followers. When they threatened self-immolation, the badahakim (governor) of Dhankuta sent troops over to arrest the ashramites, and imprisoned them in the jails of Chainpur and Dhankuta. Upon release, Yogmaya returned to Majhuwabi, which lies on the banks of the great river near Tumlingtar. This time, to

signify their deeply held beliefs against the social system prevalent, Yogmaya and 68 followers drowned themselves in the river, an act of *jal samadhi* possibly unprecedented in Nepali history.

In essence, this is the story of Yogmaya. A book on her was produced in Nepali a year ago (Yogmaya, Nepal Adhyayan Kendra, 2000), and now we have American-Arab anthropologist-turned-journalist Barbara Aziz recounting the story in English for us in a work published by the Tribhuvan University's Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies.

While the essential focus of *Heir to a Silent Song* is Yogmaya, there is also a section in this book on a legal activist, Durga Devi, who fought for the rights of widows, orphans and oppressed women in the courts of Chainpur. There are also large segments devoted to the author's analysis of Nepali society and politics, as well three chapters which narrate the travails of a hill porter, a carpet-weaving child and a blind village girl. Next, there is a large appendix containing the songs of Yogmaya in the original Nepali. Other than the last, these segments do not really fit together to make the 230-page book a symbiotic whole, and they certainly distract from the story of Yogmaya that is clearly the author's primary focus.

Using the terms 'political dissident' and even 'insurgent' to describe Yogmaya, the author seeks to impute deeply-held political motivations to the

ascetic's words and actions. This was probably there, but the discussions that Aziz has with the surviving followers of Yogmaya and her romanticised interpretations of Yogmaya's verses in English do not help us complete the picture. The author refers to her own agenda, when she writes how her informants "may have worried that my primary interest was shifting from their master to a larger political movement." (It is interesting that Aziz and other hagiographers do not seem to consider the question of morality – did Yogmaya have the right to lead so many men, women and children to their death?)

In her own words, the search for Yogmaya's past is part of Aziz's own fight against the patriarchal abuse of power worldwide. The book also marks the author's departure from the study of Himalayan anthropology to become more of a social critic and journalist, following her discovery of Yogmaya's followers at the Manakamana ashram by the Arun river in 1981. The presentation on Yogmaya essentially concerns Barbara Aziz's interpretation of the Yoghvani, the sayings of Yogmaya that were left behind in printed form, or orally transmitted by the followers still remaining in the ashram. Then there is a recap of Yogmaya's life based on the recollections of the ashramites who still remain. Aziz does not really seek out other informants, and has not taken advantage of the information available in the Nepali work published a year ago, with contributions by many Nepali writers and scholars.

Thus, there is not enough material presented, nor analysis done, to build up the story of Yogmaya as the political person she probably was. Having relied almost exclusively on the ascetics at the ashram and deliberately eschewed anthropological study (Aziz decides to jettison all the academic 'scepticism' she was taught in college), the author is unable to do full justice to the historical persona of Yogmaya (and Durga Devi). The picture is thus incomplete, and Yogmaya fails to come at us in flesh and blood. Some amount of polemical prose by the author tends to cloud the image the reader tries to create of this firebrand Bahun woman of the eastern hills, a radical who advocated women's rights and identity, despised caste restrictions, railed against corruption, and fought for equal treatment of all by the feudocrats who ruled the country.

The author believes that there has been a deliberate mission to keep women out of Nepali history, which is obvious enough. But whether in the case of Yogmaya there has been an active conspiracy of silence promoted by successive governments (and regimes) or whether

it is a general lapse relating to gender-insensitivity in historical research is an open question. Aziz is clearly convinced of the former, and she finds evidence in the reluctance she encounters among menfolk who refuse to talk about Yogmaya till this day. She also reports on the mysterious disappearance of papers relating to Yogmaya as she seeks them.

There are disconcerting references to the feminist processes in the West, particularly in Aziz's native United States, and attempts to juxtapose Yogmaya's thoughts and actions with larger movements elsewhere. The story then becomes part and parcel of the author's own awakening as an Arab woman of North America, who tries to read her understanding of the complexities of gender oppression and reaction into the late Rana-period format and setting of Nepal. The slightly romanticised portrayal of the 1990 Peoples' Movement, and the less-than-careful exaggerations such as claiming that 3000 people were killed by the military (with many dumped into mass graves) shows a lack of care that does injustice to the reader.

Whether Yogmaya was deliberately expunged from the historical record as a deliberate act of government, as the author claims, or whether her eclipse from public memory is more a matter of societal proclivities to disregard women's activism is something that can be discussed. This reviewer believes Aziz is overstating the case when she claims that the tragedy of Yogmaya's death will "remain a stain on the government", for here she is conflating the Rana regime, the Panchayat regime as well as the present-day political system into one.

The country needs women reformers, but the sad fact is that the feminist movement in Nepal has been hijacked. Like so many other subjects deserving of politicised activism, this has happened through the hand of well-meaning 'fundlers' who end up converting would-be activists into NGO-executives. We must encourage a return to basic activism, where women organise against men, across the thresholds of caste, ethnicity, region and political leanings. And for such a group, it may be that Yogmaya will provide the rallying point, a progressive woman from the Rana years, who may yet stand up as a beacon for the women of today who continue the fight against male oppression and misogyny. Barbara Aziz's work, as well as the earlier Nepali publication, may be the stepping-stones for a fuller understanding of Yogmaya the ascetic of the Arun. But now, we need some more works to help us understand Yogmaya better. ♦

(*Heir to a Silent Song: Two Rebel Women of Nepal, Barbara Nimri Aziz, Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, TU, Kathmandu, 2001, Rs 500*)

Ishwar Ballabh's HUMAN COMPLEXITY

Poet Ishwar Ballabh is also a prodigious columnist who has, in the past few years, pricked the thin skins of many literary figures in his *Kantipur* column. Memorably, he engaged in some gamely sparring over Mohan Koirala's nomination as Vice Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy. He himself had wanted the post, he wrote, and had done much to court it. Now, if after all his effort, he didn't get the post, imagine how hard Koirala had campaigned, he said. (Koirala did not dignify this article with a response). Another memorable article appeared approximately six months back, when Ballabh accused an "English mafia" of being partial in the translation of Nepali literature. This article did draw a response from an irate Dr Abhi Subedi, who squarely denounced the notion of any such mafia. Ballabh continues undaunted with his articles.

In his long career as a poet, Ballabh is perhaps best known as one of the members of the 1960's third dimension or "*tesro aayaam*" literary movement. Along with fiction writer Indra Bahadur Rai and poet Bairagi Kainla, he launched on a search for more complex and multi-faceted forms of expression than was found in the literature of the time. Michael Hutt's *Himalayan Voices* quotes from a statement made by Kainla: "The bland sentimentalism (of earlier writers) is not simply driven; it is also an escape from a sense of responsibility and therefore an escape from the realities of life. In dimensional terms, this kind of writing is "flat" because it lacks a third dimension (depth, and thought or vision) and has no faith in life. Such literature cannot satisfy the needs of the modern intellect."

This call to put an end to stale, clichéd and mawkish writing may just as well be made today. Ballabh's poem translated below eschews bland generalisations or hackneyed usage, and opts instead for a tone that is at once both sombre and optimistic. His work embraces the complexity of the human psyche.

I LOOK SOMETIMES TO THE PLANT, SOMETIMES TO THE TREE

A kind of darkness sometimes falls over the heart and the descendants of dark begin clawing at me
Despite this I say—no need to be terrorised
my skies
Brightness may yet emerge somewhere
one might discover the way to a path
Manifold concerns take shape stringing
garlands of distance layer on layer
It's not that they haven't terrorised me
It's not that they haven't terrorised you
It's not that these offspring of darkness haven't
stung their sharp fangs in the ground
Despite this I say—this poison will be expunged
when somewhere so much as a tiny insect
peers out
when by way of some path a parade of light
arrives
from the horizon
It's enough that it come slowly
No need for fanfare,
no need for it to come in commotion
amid dust clouds kicked up by horsemen
no need to attack as a war or
to raise its voice to a lion's roar
no need to come playing the *nagaras* and *dhol* instruments
When it comes it won't scare anyone
as would a terror
It's simply light—it can come at its own slow pace
Without a single word myriad
palaces of darkness will topple
Caves and towers incubated for aeons and aeons
will chuckle
Rivers will start to flow
glittering brilliance in their small and large surges and
touching the banks slowly, with an uninterrupted tune
the water will feel out the traits of the plants and
begin a course
These terrifying structures erected without meaning will
vanish
The birds in the bushes will start to
shake out their wings
as though they are shrugging off darkness
and they will begin a morning song
It's enough for it just to come
It's enough for it just to touch us
No need to spill blood or harm anyone
—no need to put anyone to death
—no need to dig any graves
no need for it to announce after coming that it has arrived
no need to speak any language
It will come and I await its arrival
That's why I look sometimes to the plant and
sometimes to the tree

This and other poems by Ishwar Ballabh may be read in *Samaantar* (Sajha Prakashan, Kathmandu: 2038).

Radisson

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A person burns only a minimal amount of calories with daily activities such as sitting. Any physical activities in addition to what you normally do will burn extra calories. Below are the average calories spent per hour by a 150 lb person. (A lighter person burns fewer calories; a heavier person burns more.) Since precise calorie figures are not available for most activities, the figures below are the average, and show the relative intensity of different activities.

Activity	Calories burned
Bicycling 6 mph	240
Bicycling 12 mph	410
Cross-country skiing per hour	700
Jogging 5.5 mph	740
Jogging 7 mph	920
Jumping rope per hour	750
Running in place per hour	650
Running 10 mph	1,280
Swimming 25 yds/min per hour	275
Swimming 50 yds/min per hour	500
Tennis—singles per hour	400
Walking 2 mph	240
Walking 3 mph	320
Walking 4.5 mph	440

The calories spent in a particular activity vary in proportion to one's body weight. For example, for a 100 lb person, reduce the calories by one-third, for a 200 lb person, increase the number by one-and-one-third.

Exercising harder or faster for a given activity will only slightly increase the calories spent. A better way to burn calories is exercising longer and/or covering more distance



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ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES

❖ **West Beirut** A cheerful, touching story of three Beirut youths and their Super-8 film camera. Russian Cultural Centre, 5pm, 19 August. Inter Cultural Film Society

EATING OUT

❖ **Breakfast with birds** Lunch with butterflies and dinner with fireflies. Nepali, Indian, and Chinese cuisine. Farm House Café, Park Village Hotel, Buddhanikantha. 373935
❖ **Saturday Splash 5+2=7 deal** Swimming and buffet lunch. Until 1 September, one adult free with a group of five adults Hotel Everest. 488100
❖ **Juicy Steaks, Chilled Beer** Mexican cuisine Sundays and Wednesdays 6.30pm—10pm. Other days, steaks and beer. K2 Beer and Steak House, Thamel. 433043
❖ **Patan Museum Café** Mixed menu, garden seating. Lunch only, 11am—2pm. 25 percent off with Summit Card. 526271
❖ **Naachghar** New menu with kababs and biryani daily. 7pm—10.30pm. Hotel Yak & Yeti. 248999
❖ **Nepali dance and food** Over 40 traditional delicacies, and Indian favourites. Newari cuisine in August. Himalchuli, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 273999
❖ **Friday Night Sekuwa (BBQ)** Appetisers, momos, salad, main courses and desserts, one complimentary beer. Rs 699 per head. Dwarika's Hotel. 479488
❖ **Saturday lunch** at Restaurant Kantipur, Club Himalaya, Nagarkot. BBQ buffet Rs 500 per head. 410432, 414432
❖ **Wet and Wild Summer** Swimming and buffet lunch. Saturday, Sunday at Godavari Village Resort. Adults Rs 600, children Rs 350. Taxes extra. 560675, 560775
❖ **Saturdays at the Malla** Swimming and French chef's barbecue lunch. 11am—5pm. The Malla Hotel. 418385, 410966
❖ **Vegetarian Specialities** and fresh clay-oven pizzas. Stupa View Restaurant and Terrace. Boudhnnath. 11am—8.30pm
❖ **Pasta August** Homemade pasta like ravioli, tortellini, gnocchi. The Olive Garden, Radisson Hotel. 423888

MUSIC

❖ **Jammin Hell!** DJ Tangri every Saturday, all August. 2pm. Hotel De L' Annapurna. Rs 500 per couple, with welcome drink. Tickets: Nanglo, Hotel De L' Annapurna, The Club—Bhatbhateni, Bakery Café outlets, Kathmandu Guest House.
❖ **Live Acoustic Music** Fridays 9pm at Himalatte Café, Thamel. 9pm 491234
❖ **DJ Neil/ Live Bands** Every Friday and weekends. Daily happy hour. Rox Bar. Hyatt Regency. 6pm—9pm. 491234
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GETAWAYS

❖ **August Affair in Pokhara** Two-night weekend package includes meals, live music, extra bed for children under 12, meals, airport transfers, mango festival. Hotel Shangri La. Pokhara 412999
❖ **Dwarika's Anytime Escape** Overnight accommodation with afternoon tea, cocktail, dinner, breakfast and massage. \$130 net per couple. Dwarika's Hotel. 479488
❖ **Chiso Chiso Hawama** Summer B&B package for Nepalis and expats. Rs 1,250 per head. Club Himalaya Nagarkot Resort. 410432, 414432
❖ **Stress Free Weekends** Overnight at the Hyatt, dinner for two at the Rox Restaurant, use of pool, health club, spa and outdoor jacuzzi, ayurvedic massage for two, weekend brunch, late check out Sunday. Rs 9000 plus tax. Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 491234
❖ **Nagarkot Escape** Weekends in cottages, views of the Himalayas, valleys and forests. Special rates for Nepalis and resident expats. Hotel Keyman Chautari. keyman@wlink.com.np 436850

EVENTS

❖ **Annual Book Fair and Exhibition** including IUCN, Himal Association, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation/ HMG Nepal with the Park-People Programme, WWF, The Mountain Institute, ICIMOD. 16-18 August at ICIMOD, Jawalakhel. icimod@icimod.org.np. 525313
❖ **Haritalika Teej** Two days of feasting and fasting for Hindu women as they pray for marital bliss, the well-being of their families and self-purification. On the first day, *Dar khaane din*, women assemble in their maternal homes, dressed in finery for a day of celebration that ends with a feast heralding the start of a 24-hour fast. The next day, 21 August, women in red saris sing and dance their way to Pashupatinath and other Shiva temples. This night, after praying to Shiva, they break their fast. 20-21 August.

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

NEPALI WEATHER

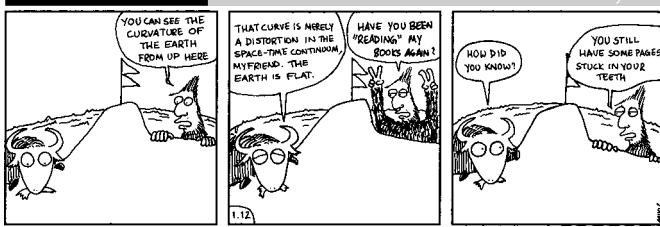
by NGAMINDRA

This monsoon has been contradictory: 24 people were killed in Okhaldhunga by a landslide triggered by a cloudburst, but the district actually got below normal rainfall this year. Northern Bihar, Sikkim, and eastern Nepal have received below-normal rainfall this year and this appears to be a serious drought. The little rain that has fallen has come down in the form of localised cloudbursts. In the western and central regions including Kathmandu rainfall was above normal. This week's satellite image shows central and eastern Himalaya under thick clouds, which may produce heavy showers for a few days early this week. Being the location of low-pressure belt close to Nepal's southern border, chances of more localised showers in the eastern and central hills are high. The variation of maximum and minimum temperature will further decrease by 1 degree due to the effect of high humidity.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
28-20	27-19	27-18	28-20	28-20

YAK YETI YAK



BOOKWORM

Bhutan Political Problem: Opinions, Viewpoints and Critical Analyses RB Basnet and DNS Dhakal, eds
Bhutan National Democratic Party, 2001
Rs 100
A collection of essays on refugee verification and the history of Bhtanese refugees as victims of state policies. The authors explore third party involvement in the verification process, illegal land ownership in Bhutan, the problem of assimilation in southern Bhutan, the kingdom's legal system and land-ownership regulations, and finally, the possibilities of democracy in Bhutan and Gross National Happiness.

Democracy in Nepal: Challenges and Prospects Rabindra Khanal
Smriti Books, Kathmandu, 2001
Rs 200
Rabindra Khanal looks at the challenges presented by political parties to democracy, and the institutions and culture of Nepali politics. He explores the role of civil society in Nepali democracy and good governance in democracy at the local level. Finally, Khanal considers the role that instruments of civil society, particularly media, play in the country's politics.

Quest for Peace Prakash Shrestha, ed
South Asia Partnership-Nepal, Kathmandu, 2001
Rs 500
A collection of essays that focus on the Maoist issue from the perspectives of development, society and economics, human rights, gender, politics and civil society. The contributors discuss the crisis in governance, poverty, the 'feminine faces' of the conflict, community participation in managing the insurgency, and the role of the Nepali press.

Courtesy Mandala Book Point, Kantipath, 227711, mandala@ccsl.com.np

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CONSERVATION

KANAK MANI DIXIT

The muddy brown-green waters of the monsoon-laden Bagmati were host to a unique flotilla last Saturday. A convoy of half a dozen big-sized rafts, with a flotilla of kayakers for company, as they traversed the section of the river from Tilganga (just below Pashupati) to Sankhamul (the ghats of Patan).

This was not white water—it was the silt-and-sewage laden Bagmati. And the adventure, the brainchild of Nepal's white water guru, Megh Ale.

"In the monsoon season most of our rafting guides are off duty, and so we thought it was a good idea to involve them in trying to raise awareness about how bad the Bagmati is," says Ale, founder of the Nepal River Conservation Society. "This would be a beautiful river if it were to be cleaned up, an asset for the city-dwellers and the environment."

The day began with the kayakers shooting the rapids at Sundarijal, where the still-pristine Bagmati tumbles from the Shivapuri mountains down to the Valley floor. Completing this first-ever adventure, the kayakers came down via Gokarna gorge, Gujeswori (where the river begins to take on sewage and to stink) and through the Pashupati gorge to Tilganga. There they met up with the rafters.

On the rafts were a host of environmentalists, journalists and some celebrities. Said the satirist Madan Krishna Shrestha, "I always wanted to go rafting, but how could I know the first time would be along the Bagmati and not the Trisuli?" His colleague Hari Bangsha Acharya added, "I

can imagine a time when this river will be clear, and we can catch fish in it."

That day will require some hard sensitisation, as became clear as the rafts drifted downstream with their kayak consorts. The Bagmati has lost its sand bed in its entirety to the construction industry, and so rather than meander as it used to, the river today flows along muddy clay canyons. All along, untreated sewage joins the river in cascades of dirty fluid.

Then there are the poorest of migrant communities who have also colonised nearly the entire stretch. Hundreds of latrines dot the riverside from Tilganga to Sankhamul. The river-side is also used for dumping everything from offal to industrial byproducts, carpet industry sludge, and the generic garbage of the city.

Only where the Bagmati joins the Manahara (which bring water from the entire east of the Valley), just before the Sankhamul ghats, does the watercourse begin to look like a river rather than a sewer. And remember, this was during the peak monsoon period. The later stretch is a carrier of highly concentrated fluid with very little water content.

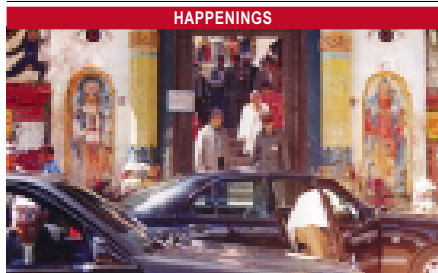
As he steered his celebrity raft containing the Maha Jodi through the dirty water, Megh Ale was smiling. "It can be done, we can clean this river. The first job is to look at the problem from the river's perspective, and that we do by rafting on it."

Some day, it may be possible to white water on the Bagmati. ♦



Safe landing at Sankhamul for Haribangsha.

Placid flows the Bagmati, but dirty. Megh Ale of the Nepal River Conservation Society, who does not mind the stench.



AT GUJESWORI: The king and queen on their way out of the Gujeswori Temple after a prayer visit on Wednesday morning.



PILGRIM'S PROGRESS: Patan's Bhimsen Puja is an all-day affair, and pilgrims walked through the town visiting and worshipping in each temple of Bhimsen on Monday.



LUCKY WINNERS: Proud winners from Mahendranagar, Hetauda and Patan of the lucky number contest organised by Pepsi pose for the camera on Sunday.

Brown water rafting



Safe landing at Sankhamul for Haribangsha.

Placid flows the Bagmati, but dirty. Megh Ale of the Nepal River Conservation Society, who does not mind the stench.

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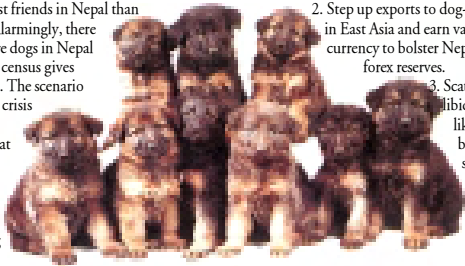
by Kunda Dixit

The Valley of the Dogs

It's that time of year again when every he- columnist gets an involuntary urge to lift his hind legs when he sees a lamp-post. Yes, it is time for the mandatory annual dog column. And this year we shall turn our full and undivided attention to the threats to our demographic way of life from the overpopulation of dogs in the Valley which as we all know has already exceeded the carrying capacity of our garbage dumps. This is not an issue to be brushed aside, we all have to be dogmatic.

In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that given the wild and carefree manner in which dog copulation is going on, Nepal is sitting on top of a ticking volcano. The question is: what are the concerned higher-up authorities doing about it? I put this question to the municipality's Chief Dogman, and he said the official policy on the canine question has not changed from last year, it is still: "Let Sleeping Dogs Lie". And sure enough, a random sample survey of dogs in our immediate neighbourhood revealed this week that very few of them were actually awake, and of those that were, none were telling the truth.

That is why we have grounds to question the veracity of the recently conducted Nepal Dog Census 2001 which showed that there will soon be more man's best friends in Nepal than man himself. Alarmingly, there may be far more dogs in Nepal today than the census gives them credit for. The scenario takes on added crisis proportions because we are at the cusp of the Annual Dogmandu Mating Season (which is being



marketed in India this year by the Nepal Tourism Board under the slogan: "Festival of Life") when dogs and their female counterparts from various walks of life court arrest to tie the nuptial knots of holy matrimony in broad daylight along the capital's main thoroughfares smack in front of large slogans proclaiming that a Peoples' Republic has been born. The by-products of these interactions will be evident several months hence, when the streets will be littered with sons of bitches. So cute.

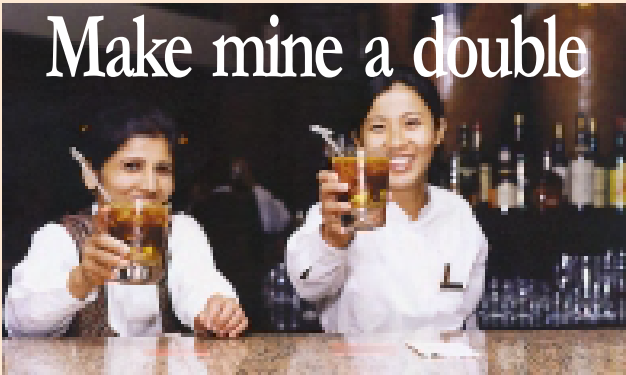
What we must remember about these fur balls is that today's coochie-coochie-coos are tomorrow's snarling dingos. And the thing that worries civil society is this: what will happen when this baby boomer generation reaches adulthood, how are we going to create enough garbage dumps to feed and shelter the exponential growth of snarling dingos? This must be a question that perturbs every human Nepali at this juncture in our nation's history.

There are three options open before us, and these must be undertaken on a war footing:

1. Walk-in laparoscopy and vasectomy camps to be opened at all major dance restaurants (with cabins) frequented by the canine set.
2. Step up exports to dog-loving nations in East Asia and earn valuable hard currency to bolster Nepal's sagging forex reserves.
3. Scatter permanent libido suppressants like arsenic-laced buff momos at strategic garbage dumps in and around the Valley. ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

Make mine a double



Chitra and Anu, two young bartenders at the Taragaon Hyatt Regency, are the other face of contemporary Nepali women. They aren't trying to shut down the liquor industry, but are quite happy to serve alcohol "in a regulated manner". After all, this is their job.

Chitra and Anu tend bar at the increasingly popular Rox Bar at the Hyatt. The duo, possibly the only Nepali women tending bar at a five-star property in this part of the world, are happiest working the busiest nights, Fridays and Saturdays, when they say they barely have time to breathe, let alone chit-chat. Not that they are unsociable—how could bartenders possibly be—but they get a nice adrenaline rush from the challenging multi-tasking the shifts demand.

"I was always interested in being a bartender. Even during my training period in the Crowne Plaza in Delhi, I especially requested the Food and Beverage Department to relax their usual prohibitions on women bartenders, and allow me to work the bar," says Anu, as she effortlessly mixes a perfect Caprioschka, the Rox's most popular cocktail, and beams at the punters sitting at the bar. Anu went to New Delhi to earn her Diploma in Hotel Management from South Delhi Polytechnic.

Chitra's love affair with the other side of the bar began similarly. "I always knew I wanted to become a bartender. There is a sort of happiness in being able to serve a good drink to a tired customer," she tells us. The move to the Hyatt after completing a food and beverage

training course from the Nepal Association of Tourism and Hotel Management was a natural one, she says, as "it has the highest quality bar equipment of any hotel in Nepal."

Both these young women are doing what they love, and marking new trails for women here to choose from. But it isn't easy. They get a fair amount of the standard criticism for being 'women bartenders' (they'd like nothing better than to be just 'bartenders') working late. It doesn't get them down, though. "It doesn't really matter what other people say, this is our job and we love it. There is nothing wrong with working in a bar, and we are at one of the top international hotel chains. We're proud to be Nepalis doing unusual things." Keep stirring it up, Chitra and Anu. ♦

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