

Slavery and freedom in Nepal 8-9

UNDER MY HAT NOODLE NATION 16



EXCLUSIVE

No news

The law banning publication and broadcasting "interviews, write-ups, news, information and reading material" that would help the Maoists will be effective till mid-May. In parliament last week Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba promised to issue necessary orders to lift restrictions on the press. Are we the only ones who see some contradiction here?



Angry Americans

US ambassador to Nepal, Mike Malinowski, is an old Nepal hand, having served here in the early 1990s. An even older Nepal hand is Peter Burtleigh who was a Peace Corps volunteer near Nepalgunj in the 1960s. Both went west last week to tour Mangalsen and Shitalpati, scenes of Maoist massacres of security forces. Burtleigh was shocked to see that the policemen had been mutilated after being killed. Malinowski was visibly moved while addressing a regional peacekeeping conference the next day in Kathmandu. He departed from his prepared text to recount his trip and said the Maoists are no different than the Shining Path, Abu Sayaf, Al Qaeda or the Khmer Rouge. (See also p 5)

# Cashless cow

The government needs to divest from Royal Nepal Airlines, and quickly.

**BINOD BHATTARAI**  
A high-level committee to look into the rot at Royal Nepal Airlines has just submitted its report. There is bad news and worse news. The bad news is that the airline is losing Rs 200 million a year and is on the verge of collapse. Worse news: the government has no more money to bail it out. Royal Nepal Airlines has always been a homebody for the state of the nation, so it is no great surprise that a perfectly good airline has in the past 12 years been brought down to its knees through political interference, mismanagement and corruption. That in a nutshell is also the high-level committee's findings, and in that sense it is nothing new. But the report has sent a clear message to the government that it better divest, fast.

"There has been just too much political interference, it has problems with ownership and there is widespread mismanagement," says Narayan Singh Pun, member of parliament and member of the committee. "Reorganising it as a company and inviting private partners is the only way to change all that." (See interview, page 7).

Royal Nepal Airlines has not had an audit since 1998, but you don't need an auditor to hear the tall warnings going off. Senior executives at the airline tell you privately they have never seen it so bad: losses averaging Rs 500,000 a day, inconvertible tales of loot, political intervention, and corruption. Pains are grieved every time the airline has hired jets, sent engines for overhauling, or appointed sales agents.

"Privatise RNAC" asks one disgusted employee sarcastically, "this is already a private airline of politicians." The most glaring example of graft was the hiring of a General Sales Agent for Europe in 1995 under pressure from politicians which caused the airline losses worth nearly Rs 400 million. These and other anomalies are emerging as auditors try to finish off with a backlog in book-keeping. Insiders tell us the official losses to the airline due to politically-motivated decisions adds up to over Rs 1 billion. "And we are not even talking about kickbacks," one senior executive told us. The airline's loans and disputed liabilities add to another Rs 2.6 billion.

If the airline goes belly up, which is now a distinct possibility if action is taken quickly, then these liabilities need to be picked up by the government. The tourism ministry which handles Royal Nepal Airlines knows it's got a hot potato in its hands. Joint secretary Nagendra P Ghimire told us: "We have very few options left. We have a plan, we are serious about putting it into action."

This plan, which is awaiting cabinet endorsement, is for the government to divest a part of its share to a strategic partner and overhaul management. But that will take at least a year.

The government needs to immediately inject Rs 2 billion to keep the airline flying. Not only does it not have that kind of money, but, given the level of mismanagement and corruption within the airline, may fear the money could just disappear without result.

The high-level committee recommends that the government should give up one-third of its shares to an appropriate foreign airline, retain a portion, sell the rest to private tourism entrepreneurs, banks, staff and the general public. A government source told us: "We are now so frantic we may even agree to give more than one-third control to a strategic partner."

That would be a Sri Lankan Airlines type of solution: government sells 49 percent of its share to a major international airline (Emirates in the case of Sri Lankan) and hands over full managerial control and autonomy, including personnel. The last part would be difficult for the government which has used Royal Nepal Airlines as an employment agency for party activists.

The cabinet may find it difficult to endorse privatisation because the airline has been a cash cow for political cash funds. A decision to divest control would therefore be a test of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's commitment to root out corruption. Tourism minister Bal Bahadur KC kept a post-democracy tradition of replacing the airline's chief executive and directors with cronies as soon as he became minister. The airline has had 17 CEOs and its directors have been shuffled 23 times since 1990.

There are silver linings: despite the huge liabilities the airline has assets worth up to Rs 7 billion with its two 757s, seven Twin Otters, equipment, real estate and buildings. With a proper management and less political meddling the airline could be



Interview p7 Narayan Singh Pun

turned around relatively rapidly. The other spin-off hope is that during his first term as prime minister, Deuba had actually come close to approving the airline's privatisation. He was stopped just days before the decision. But not everyone in the airline is optimistic that even the divestment will be handled honestly. The reason, as one senior manager told us: "This airline is run by remote control from Singha Darbar." ♦

**Times** [nepalnews.com](http://nepalnews.com)  
Weekly internet Poll P23  
Q. Can there be a military solution to the Maoist insurgency?  
Total votes: 1873  
See [www.nepalnews.com](http://www.nepalnews.com) for details.  
Q. Does the constitution need tinkering, or should it be left alone?

## Have constitution, will tinker

Some say it will bring back political stability and peace. Others say there is no need. But is it really the constitution at fault here, or the politicians who have worked against its spirit?

The main opposition UML, in particular, has made changing the statute its main agenda. It is especially concerned that elections will never be free or fair unless there are all-party interim governments to oversee them. It also says reforms would be a way to bring people back from the Maoist fold.

The UML threat is clear: it will not go along with another emergency extension in mid-May unless the government agrees to the reforms. Last week Madhav Kumar Nepal actually waited until the very end to hear the government capitulate on the reform demand before standing up to vote with the ruling party. The centre-right RPP hasn't made its position official, but it favours tinkering. Sadbhavana wants changes to accompany its citizenship demands.

The Nepal Congress also has a position on constitutional changes, but party president Girija Prasad Koirala hasn't told anyone what it is. Prime Minister Deuba doesn't seem to have any strong opinions either way, but may have to go along with his president.

Meanwhile, sections of the Congress are already saying no to any changes. Most vociferous among them is former foreign minister Chakra Bastola. "Any attempt to change the constitution for the purpose of sharing power is unacceptable, as that goes against the Westminster system where the majority rules," he says.

It looks like this is what the ruling party may say when it comes to clause-by-clause bargaining with the UML in the days ahead: Add Bastola: "If you say you want a national government to manage a crisis, there is a danger of that being a recipe for perpetual instability and crises." But don't we have that already?

**Editorial** p2  
Anybody home?

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**In 2000, what is now called the Kamaiya movement broke out in far-western Nepal and swiftly moved to the capital. Photographer Peter Lowe documented many of the protests, and the lives of kamaiya families, and this year, with Mandala Book Point and the Danish Association for International Cooperation, published a collection of these photographs in an excellently-produced large-format book. The book contains background information on the kamaiyas, first-person testimonies, and an exhaustive timeline of the events, both in English and Nepali.**

In 1990, when the new constitution was drafted in the wake of the People's Movement, all kinds of slavery and serfdom were banned in the kingdom. But no law against such practices accompanied the ban. This wasn't anything new for the 100,000 kamaiya family members—95 percent of them Tharu—in far-western Nepal. After all, they were unaffected when Chandra Shumsher banned slavery in 1926, and Nepal's signing of the UN convention against slavery in 1956 made no difference to their lives either.

Most often, kamaiyas work to pay off loans, sometimes working for two, even three generations, to repay loans that often amount to no more than a few thousand rupees. In the mid-1980s, awareness about the plight of these virtual slaves began spreading, and the Backward Society Education, BASE, was formed to organize kamaiyas and other Tharu people in the far-west.

But nothing concrete happened until January 2000. The Kanchanpur District Development Committee, empowered by the Local Governance Act, fixed a minimum wage of Rs 80 per day

for agricultural workers, and Nepal Chaudhary, a kamaiya in Laxmapur VDC, petitioned the local administration, demanding that he be paid the minimum wage for all the years he had worked for his landlord. The landlord refused, but granted him his freedom and waived his debt. Four days later, on 18 January, the Kanchanpur DDC reached an agreement with local landlords that all kamaiyas with a *sauki*—debt—of less than Rs 15,000 would be released, and 22 families were freed.

That was all it needed. From March through August, kamaiya all over Kanchanpur and neighbouring Kailali began filing petitions and in May, after the CDO of Kailali refused twice to register a case against landlord and former minister in Geta VDC, Shiva Raj Pant, kamaiya activists began a sit-in in his office. That case, after being pushed back and forth between the District Labour Office, the VDC and the CDO office, was taken to Kathmandu. Meanwhile in Kanchanpur, 48 kamaiyas filed separate petitions demanding freedom. One, Bahadur Rana, was issued a freedom certificate from Parasan VDC.

# Slavery and freedom in Nepal



Free kamaiya Maya Ram Chaudhary and his daughter with a scarecrow he made from a dress to protect his vegetable garden in Kailali



When the kamaiyas of landlord and former minister Shiva Raj Pant filed a petition for better working condition in Kailali, they started a movement that freed all kamaiyas in western Nepal. Said Pant: 'Kamaiyas are not slaves. They are simply people who work on the land—agricultural labourers.'



Twelve-year-old Suman Kumari sits next to landlady Parbat Chaudhary in her home in Bardia. Bakeshi, wife of kamaiyas, are forced to work for their husband's landlords. Says Parbat: 'I couldn't manage without my ten *bukhari*. ... [but] I have to remind them all the time of their duties.'



Freed kamaiyas blocked the national highway in Kailali and four other districts in western Nepal to demand land.



Kali Ram, a kamaiya since he was six, says he was very sad when he came home from hospital and found that the landlord had forced his son to take his place.



Free kamaiya Tuli Ram Chaudhary hopes his worn identity paper will help him get land—when the government decides to distribute some.

In May, in Dhangadi 10,000 people protested government apathy, prompting three UML leaders in Kailali to free their kamaiyas. Close to 700 kamaiyas from five districts soon filed petitions with their CDOs demanding freedom from debt bondage, resettlement and government protection from their landlords. In Kanchanpur local government, NGOs, landlords and kamaiyas agreed on a formula to emancipate bonded labourers in the district. Meanwhile, kamaiyas from five districts staged mass protests in Kathmandu to press the government to put an end to the system.

In August, Minister for Land Reforms and Management, Siddha Raj Ojha, announced that bonded labour had been made illegal and anyone practising it was punishable by law. 16,000 kamaiyas attended a victory rally, but the government, unprepared for the task of resettling 20,000 kamaiyas, appealed to them to cooperate with their former landlords and go back to work. Angry landlords began evicting kamaiyas from their houses. Some were beaten and asked to repay their *sauki*. Makeshift camps for displaced kamaiyas were erected overnight in five districts. The landlords—*kisan*, as they

are inconspicuously called—began to enlist high-level support. The chairman of Kailali DDC, Narayan Datta Mishra, said publicly that he disagreed with the rescinding of kamaiyas' debts to their landlords, and the newly-formed Forum for the Protection of Farmer's Rights filed a writ with the Supreme Court demanding compensation for the landlords in return for the debts of their freed kamaiyas.

In September, finally, the government made a commitment on land allocation for displaced kamaiyas, by now living in 37 camps in Kanchanpur and Kailali. The Ministry of Land Reform and Management said the government planned to provide at least one *katha* of land for each family of freed kamaiyas, but NGOs demanded a minimum of 10 *kathas* (0.3 hectare). (Ten *kathas* of irrigated land is considered a minimum landholding for a small family to have enough food, and many landlords own 200-300 *kathas*, 10-15 *ghajra* legally.)

A manifesto, drafted by the lack of progress, the Kamaiya Liberation Struggle Mobilisation Committee (KLSMC) and the Kamaiya Liberation Action Committee (KLAC) decided to launch a new agitation, and 7,000 kamaiyas from seven districts undertook a protest rally and sit-in in government offices in Dhangadi to demand 10 *kathas* for each family. At the end of 2000, a large group of kamaiyas and their supporters blocked the highway in five south-western districts demanding land.

In the new year, Kanchanpur district officials decided to provide 10 *kathas* to kamaiya families with over five members, and 5 *kathas* to families of under five. But the actual allocation throughout the far-west was not progressing, and over 2,000 freed kamaiyas occupied undesignated forest land, criticising the government for not moving fast enough. The riot police cracked down in Bardia, evicting 7,000 freed kamaiyas from the huts they had erected.

About 14,000 kamaiya families are now living in Bardia, Dang, Banke, Kailali,

and Kanchanpur districts. In the last year, a land registration committee formed under the Land Reform and Management Ministry distributed over 1,580 hectares of land to more than 11,000 kamaiya families. But most freed kamaiyas spent last monsoon without a roof over their heads. If things might not be a little closer to having shelter. Just last week, a year after these developments, the Finance Ministry allocated Rs 88 million to the Ministry of Land Reform and Management to hand out roughly Rs 10,000 to each family of freed kamaiyas. They

are to receive Rs 8,000 before they build a shelter, and the rest on the completion of their huts or buildings.

For Nepali Times' coverage, see "Freedom," #2; "Free to suffer," #7; "Civil disobedience in the west," #27; and "After 10 years, ex-kamaiyas find strength in numbers," #45.

Kamaiya Slavery and Freedom in Nepal, Peter Lowe, introduction and afterword by Tim Whyte, Nepali editor Vinaya Kasajoo. New social documentary. Mandala Book Point and MS Nepal, Kathmandu, 2001. Rs 700

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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITION

Archaeology and Restoration Exhibition, video documentaries, slide shows, conferences 1-3 March. Organised by the Alliance Française, the Department of Archaeology and Sanday Kentro Associates. Free entry and open to all. Alliance Française, Thapathali, 241163

EVENTS

Asman Spring Mela Annual charity fundraiser of the Association of St Mary's Alumnae Society, this year to benefit the girl child. Games, stalls and food. Also, door and raffle prizes including air tickets to Amsterdam, packages at hotels in Nepal and Philips products. 2 March, 10AM-6.30PM, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. Entry Rs 25.  
Nepal classical dance and folk music at Hotel Vajra. Dances of Hindu and Buddhist gods Tuesdays and Fridays, 7PM onwards, the Great Pagoda Hall. Ticket and tea Rs 400. Nepal folk tunes Wednesdays and Saturdays, 6.30PM onwards, hotel restaurant. Hotel Vajra, 271545

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Singaporean and Malaysian food Satay, rice, soy milk dishes, curry puffs and more. Between Jawalkhel fire station and St Mary's School, Sing Ma, the Food Court. Foodcourt@wlink.com.np, 520004  
Steak weekends at the Olive Garden Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and strawberries and cream everyday. Radisson Hotel, 411818  
Oriental lunchtime Special lunch menu, Rs 350 per head everyday 12 noon-3PM, China Garden, Hotel Soatsee Crown Plaza, 273999  
Italian passion Pasta and pizza from wood fired ovens, all-you-can-eat salads and desserts, and complimentary entrance to the Rox Bar at Rs 950 plus tax per head. Rox Restaurant, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, 401234  
Variable chef's specials Lunch for office-goers 12 noon-3PM, Dwarika's Hotel, 479488.  
Sandwiches Over the Rainbow American Diner has reopened. Fifth Avenue sandwiches, full meals at backpacker prices. Opposite Pilgrims Book House, Thamel.  
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Taste the difference Cosy Nepal-style house on an organic farm in Garcha, south of Thimi. Up to Rs 1,200 per person per night including meals. aaa@wlink.com.np.  
Heritage Package Two-night package with six-course Nepali dinner, massage, breakfast, \$155 per couple, Dwarika's Hotel, 479486

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

NEPALI WEATHER by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

0825702002@0101

That was the wettest winter we have had in the past eight years. Last week's rains helped clear the skies and raised afternoon temperatures, brought the snowline down to 3,000 m. All trekking passes have up to a metre of snow. For the coming week, the satellite picture taken on Wednesday at noon shows mainly clear skies, and an approaching frontal wave from the west is expected to be deflected northwards by the high pressure over north India. Winds will come from the southwest, bringing in the Gangetic haze over Nepal. Expect light high clouds over the weekend.

KATHMANDU VALLEY				
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
25-07	25-06	25-06	25-05	26-04



BOOKWORM

On Top of the World: Five Women Explorers in Tibet Lure Mike Miller  
The Mountaineers Books, Seattle, 2000  
Rs 1050  
In the late 1800s, when women were still bound by strict Victorian mores and cumbersome clothing, and Tibet was the ultimate in exploration, some women cracked the adventurous life. Nina Manzheli, Isabella Bird Bishop, Alexandra David-Neel, Fanny Bullock Workman and Annie Taylor all performed remarkable feats and their pioneering spirit continues to be an inspiration every day.

Imperial Gurkhas: Britain and the Gurkhas Tony Gould  
Granta Books, London, 1999  
Rs 1,250  
This volume tells of a military reality more remarkable than the myth through unforgettable tales of conflict, all with a sensitivity to the racial and political undertones of a unique military relationship. Gould shows how successive Nepali rulers were captivated into supplying troops to the Raj and how the more astute of them managed the relationship for their own benefit.

Nepal: Tharu and Tharu Neighbours Harold O Skar, ed.  
Bhikodeba Himalaya, Kathmandu, 1999  
Rs 995  
This volume deals first with national and minority issues of inclusion and exclusion: labour practices such as kamaiya, the role of NGOs, citizenship, migration and cultural dynamics within groups. It then addresses local issues with reference to the impact of outside influence on local identities: Tharu self-identification, being modernising materials, the concept of becoming Kura, and changes in marriage and other cultural customs.

For a Pagan Song: Travels in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan Jonny Beally  
Anrow Books, London, 1999  
Rs 445  
Jonny Beally follows the footsteps of his two literary heroes, Peachey Carmonah and Daniel Defoe from The Man Who Would Be King, travelling across remote parts of India and Pakistan and into war-torn Afghanistan. Picturing himself by a roaring fire, listening to the songs of a pagan chief, Beally set out to discover the ancient tribes of Kalistan, and in the meantime discovered himself.

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CITY



Anshika Bista watches over the children as they take their informal lessons

ALOK TUMBHAHANGPHEY  
Dr Shadhi Ranjyar had just finished a long day at his homeopathic clinic in Makhani Tole near Indrachowk on Bhanu Jayanti, 12 July 1999. As he left the building, his gaze fell upon three children huddled together on the sidewalk, fast asleep. A few seconds later, a fourth child joined the trio. A sudden impulse made Dr Ranjyar doctor ask the child whether he'd had dinner. He hadn't, so the good doctor nipped over to a nearby shop and bought him an egg and some bread. But the child desperately wanted dal, dhau, and tarkari.  
Now here was a problem—where could one find a full Nepali meal at 10PM? As it turned out, the child, who did little other than roam the streets of old Kathmandu all day, knew a place tucked away



KING AND CROWN PRINCE: King Gyanendra and Crown Prince Pratin pose for a photograph on Education Day, 24 February with award-winning students.

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# Food for thought

hard times, started lining up for the two free meals everyday.  
Dr Ranjyar was happy, but realised that only feeding the body was not enough. So, he and his team decided they would use a carrot and stick approach that would also nurture the children's minds. They arranged informal education classes in the mornings, and told the children that attendance was compulsory if they wanted the free morning meal. This worked, but not as well as they'd hoped—the number of street children attending the morning *shiksha* dwindled to about 50. Still, the classes are going on. Everyday, Anshika Bista, a teacher at Bigh Bighain Secondary School in Machehgan, Champdevi, gives the kids an hour-long lesson at the Bal Sewa Kendra in Dhoka Tole. "These are children with an uncertain future. We may not be able to provide them with the well-rounded education that school-going children get, but at least they become literate, they have a little more knowledge," she says. The morning meal requires attendance at the classes, but the evening meal is free, and any penniless person, young or old with an empty stomach can dig right in.

The going has been hard and long for the Children's Food Programme, but it has been a success. When the mobile food distribution programme was begun Dr Ranjyar tells how to be well to all the major hotels in the capital, asking them to sponsor meal packets at Rs 5,000 per day. There was not one positive response. "Except for one hotel, no one had the manners to even reply

to my mail, and even they didn't agree. Just think of how much food goes to waste in these places. It would've been nothing for them to sponsor a day's meals." And so the board came up with a clever idea—they not ask more privileged individuals who have something to contribute, to spend Rs 1,000 to sponsor one meal. This found more generous patrons and today the team runs the mobile food programme that distributes 400 packages of food every weekend.

In addition, the board of the Children's Food Programme also runs the Village School-College Students Scholarship Programme.

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by Kunda Dixit

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The more perceptive among you will have realised by now that Nepal has at long last attained the status of a Regional Noodle Superpower. We can now say with considerable degree of certainty that no other country on earth can kick us around when it comes to noodles. Nope. In the realm of ramen, Nepal is now right up there with Japan, Korea and other East Asian tigers. It is an indication of the rapid strides we have taken in the sphere of industrialisation while preparing for our membership of the WTO that besides becoming a major exporter of zinc oxide, and one of the highest per capita producers of acrylic yarn, we are now well on our way to ensuring that Nepal can accord a Most Favored Nation (MFN) status to all friendly countries by the year 2003.

To keep our lead in this

sectors like carpet, pashmina, garment, yarchagomba, and tiger bones. We must therefore, come up with a National Noodle Policy prepared by a high-level Instant Noodle Task Force to ensure that a new brand hits the shops every two days or so. There is a slight chance that we may run out of brand names, but this is a risk we have to take in order to keep our market leadership.

As any ramen aficionado will tell you, the noodle is a flexible food and there are endless permutations and combinations of what you can do with the stuff. That is why we in the business are confident that we will never run out of new noodles to spring on the nation. There is no hard-and-fast rule that noodle brands have to carry names that sound like South Pacific islands, like "Bora Bora", "Mia Mia" or "Wa Wa". They can take the names of places that have recently been in the news, like:

"Tora Bora" Noodle Crispies. Designed to be eaten Nepali-style like pokko makai bhajmas. No need to cook, and especially useful during times of acute water crisis.

"Hone-Haine" Noodles. Garnished with pulverised yarchagomba larvae in plastic sachet. May have powerful aphrodisiac side-effects, or your money back. One helping gives you a fulfilled feeling.

"Ram Ram" Ramen. Absorbent granulated scorplings, comes in edible styrofoam cup, completely biodegradable in 2,000 years (the cup, I mean, not the ramen, which is non-biodegradable).

Glow Job Phosphorescent Noodles. Since they glow in the dark, you do not need night vision equipment to eat it. Ideal nutritious food while in hot pursuit of baddies.

"Noodle" Noodle. Your dogs will also love it. Formerly marketed under the brand name "Bow-wow Chow Chow".

important area of national endeavour, it is important to be innovative and keep churning out chowchow. But there is a

real danger that we will be overcome with smugness and fatalism (an unintended side-effect of the monosodium glutamate in your Miao-Miao Teriyaki-flavoured Instant Noodle pack). If we are not careful we may actually be overtaken in the manufacture and export of noodles by countries that want to get ahead through unfair trade practices like illegally dumping dumpings on unsuspecting developing countries.

That is why it is important for us to be eternally watchful so that we do not have a noodle glut, and this important export does not go the way of once-prosperous



Main News Page 1 | Potpourri Page 2 | Capital Page 3 | National Page 4 | Variety Page 5-8 | Neighbours Page 9 | International Page 10 | Business Page 11 | Sports Page 12

**The Himalayan**

Weather: Very Sunny  
Max: 25-30°C Min: 5-7°C  
Sunrise: 5:15, 23, 2001 Sunset: Never

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