Deep, personal distrust that King Gyanendra harbours against politicians lies at the root of the standoff between Naryanjheel and the parties agitating at Rama Park.

Suspicion holds the populace in limbo, even as the poetry dips into a tailspin: the economy, state activity and development work lie in tatters. The major road arteries are blocked, Kathmandu Valley and the business centres cut off and the army and Maoists prepare for a confrontation that will extend far beyond the coming monsoon.

The political solution that could provide a nakawari to the insurges, which can only come from an all-party government coupled with the revival of the parliament, seems to be remote as the king keeps the parties at arm’s length.

The origin of the royal distrust is unclear, but it is obvious that King Gyanendra regards the parties as dens of venal politicians, both corrupt and inept. This belief saves with the conviction of certain sections of Kathmandu society, that the politicians run the country to the ground after 1990.

Is the king focusing on well-publicised malfeasance of a few to tar the rank and file of the political parties? Does one detect in this a trace of self-interest, the king having expressed his intention of being constructive? Is there a fear that revival of parliament will wrest away too much power?

Whether there was failure of democracy under parliamentary rule remains a matter for debate and not the basis on which an untested entity can take decisions for the people. In the sliding scale of corruption and mal-governance, the politicians are asking where the parties stand in relation to the three-decade-long Panchayat system, as well as the 19 months of the king’s rule-by-nomination (during which period there has been no accounting of public expenditure).

“If the king means what he says about seeking a prime minister without corrupt associations, what does he have against me, say, Amik Sherchan (of the United People’s Front)?” asked Madhab Kumar Nepal, seeking to call the bluff.

On Wednesday, the king did finally meet the leaders of the five-party alliance but, while asking them to play their hand, as the principal player, he chose not to show his cards. He thanked them for coming but a date for the next rendezvous was not set. At press time Thursday, rumours were rife on what the palace might do next, the majority opinion being, that it would ignore the five parties yet again in selecting a prime minister.

The monarchical distaste for political parties has short-term ramifications with regard to who is going to head the next government. In the long run, will such excessive animosity allow King Gyanendra to serve as facilitator between the parties in times of crisis? That would have been the hope.
EMERGENCY SURGERY

It has been nearly two weeks since the prime minister resigned and WFP press time no replacement has been found. The country sits along, trailing blood. A visitor to Nepal this week asked: who is in charge of your country? We were stumped for an answer. The king seized power one-and-half years ago, we explained, and he has been working through a list of recycled politicians. Every morning, we read another list of luminaries the king met the previous day. There seems to be no prospect of anyone finding a representative prime minister. So far, we have done without a legislature, without local bodies, without an elected executive and without a government. Wonder how it has worked out?

Meanwhile, the Maoists make full use of this confusion, bringing the entire country to a halt for weeks on end with border blockades and forcible strikes. The people have had enough of the limit of what they can endure. It is time to end this uncertainty, and rush the country into emergency surgery.

The king and the parties seem to agree that the first order of business is to set up a multiparty interim government (it just disagree on who should do the setting up) that commands the stature to negotiate with the Maoists and persuade them to take up the future polls.

Even for long-term rehabilitation, there is scant disagreement on the kind of polity we need. For a multiethnic, multireligious and polyglottic country like ours, there is really no other way than political pluralism that will allow representation to the diversity. The mechanics of implementing pluralism is also clear: a federal structure built on genuinely decentralised governance.

It is in all our self-interests to support democracy at the local and national levels. There is no pluralism without democracy, and there is no democracy without participation. It may sound like a cliché, but participation is also needed to make democracy deliver developmental outcomes. In fact, we had seen that very clearly in the mid-1990s as grassroots democracy empowered people across Nepal to demand basic services from their elected representatives.

No matter how rosy their rhetoric, neither a dictator nor a princess of the right nor totalitarianism of the left can ensure a system inclusive enough to lift us out of poverty and war. Only by giving a voice and visibility to the marginalised and left-out and by including them in representative decision-making will we be able to craft a polity that addresses the inequities that are at the root of the conflict.

There is a consensus on most of what we have said above. The disagreement is only about who should be in charge to see through it. But even on that, the answer is plain: the people should be in charge. Not an autocratic elite, not the military, not the extremists, not demagogues. Let’s use a scalpel, not an axe.

REMEMBERING MADAN BHANDARI

What would he have done?

W

ould Nepal of 2001 BS have been any different had Bishnu Babu Dhakal not happened? Maybe.

On the whole, the great man theory of history might not carry much analytical weight since socioeconomic and political factors generally explain political trajectories better. However, some commitment to a progressive agenda, and making a formidable political force, despite the fact that the fanatically wedded to Communist dogma would term the translation Khushvichha. He subscribed to the notion that a genuine revolution need not be violent. Indeed, blood need not be spilled liberally as it is chauvinist nonsense. Fundamental socio-political changes can be achieved without dirching basic manabicip samudraendu if one can efficiently mobilise public opinion in pursuit of a noble cause. Bhandari had the requisite capabilities to do precisely that.

He possessed the halo of a prophet, the fitness of a statesman, the oratorical prowess of Churchill, the pragmatic touch of a seasoned politician. Most importantly, he displayed unyielding commitment to a more egalitarian and prosperous Nepal. He was the best thing to emerge out of the quas-revolution of 2046.

“It’s not political, it’s emotional,” said Rahul Gandhi in a recent interview with Times. He was referring to the bond he (more aply, the Gandhi dynasty) shared with the people of Amethi, his electoral constituency. The same could be said of Bhandari’s bonds with the people of the Mechi district and its people.

WGU}

AG Chhetri

characteristic figures play pivotal roles in shaping the political environment of their times. As the towering figure of Nepali politics in the first few years of the post-1960 democratic era, Madan Bhandari played a pivotal role in shaping the contours of political parties of the time. CPN (UML) had the Namasthe-inspired Jhapa Andolan as a part of its history. Engaging its transformation to a social democratic party was no mean feat. Bhandari deserves praise for steering the UML to the mainstream, without reverting its...
with the Nepali janta. He connected with the average Nepali citizen; his words struck a chord in the people. Unlike most of today’s political leaders, he was admired and adored by ordinary Nepalis.

Sadly, that spontaneous of talent and integrity passed away before he could lead Nepal’s march to a new dawn. It is a pity that the UML could not preserve his true legacy and degenerated, just like the other political parties, into a cult of deceit, pettiness and corruption after his demise. The march to dawn never came. Instead, the country entered a vortex of violence and uncertainty.

Would his continued presence in Nepali politics have steered off the country’s descent into chaos? It is reasonable to assume that it might have. He had the qualities needed to fire up the imagination of the youth and serve as a rallying figure for the whole nation. Young people needed a figure to rally around, a political icon to look up to. In the absence of a charismatic leader, the younger generation can go astray, especially when opportunities are limited. It is plausible to argue that Bhandari’s leadership could have channelized the youth’s restlessness and impatience towards the more constructive projects of development and relatively peaceful change.

As an increasing number of fellow Nepalis become more statistics in the country’s battlefields and the country is locked into an excruciatingly painful war of attrition, we winnowly remember Madan Bhandari, lambert his premature death and wait for a new leader of his calibre to emerge.

We can’t help wondering: what would the visionary leftist leader have done to untangle the nation’s crises were he alive today? ●

(AG Chhetri is a graduate student at Columbia University in New York)

Lessons from India Inc

Bihar has Lalu, Brazil has Lula, what has Nepal?

The assumption that India’s foreign policy is affected by the changing of the guard in New Delhi is probably true, but in our exaggerated sense of self-worth, we often forget that Nepal is not a priority to New Delhi.

On the foreign policy front, Narwar Singh and JN Dixit have much more pressing concerns to address: calm the nerves of international investors, recalibrate Indo-American cooperation, reconfigure relationship with China, fine-tune the peace process, prepare for a future search for a more effective role in Sri Lanka.

In all probability, South Bloc’s Nepal policy will continue to be dominated by its babushkas, who somehow continue to determine that our country stew in its own juice for a while longer. Rather than debate the impact of the Indian electorate’s dramatic turnaround, it may be more important for us to pick tips from a maturing democracy.

The poor, the marginalised, and the oppressed of Bharat have delivered a powerful knock to the Shining India elite. There is a lesson for our own free-market fundamentalists: growth without justice is inherently unsustainable.

Telangana’s destitute cotton farmers gave a crushing blow to CEO Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh. Voters in Karnataka fired their digital neta, SM Krishna just as they had shown the door to Digvijay Singh in Madhya Pradesh earlier.

King Gyanendra needs to be wary of those who suggested him in Gokarna on Monday that he can run this kingdom like a business enterprise with hand-picked technocrats reporting directly to him. The king can learn a lot from Sonia’s chauvinism but the COC model isn’t one of them.

In the badlands of Bihar and West Bengal, ruling coalitions of Lalu Yadav and Jyoti Basu romped home comfortably, proving the old adage of politics that it’s neither reality nor possibility that wins on the day of reckoning. Factors that swing the voters in electoral politics are identity and hope. The UML must get some more madness in its politiburo and the Nepal Congress needs to re-invent itself socialist past if these political parties want to have a fighting chance at the polls that King Gyanendra’s loyalists may conduct in future.

The impressive show of the Sonia Congress in India and the better-than-average performance of various left parties extends Brazil’s Lula phenomenon. The colour of the 21st century is going to be pink with state policies veering towards left of centre. All the more reason for a mainstream party like the UML in Nepal to break itself from its Stalinist past and pursue the path of Bahuddhaya Janabari pioneered by Madan Bhandari, whose 10th death anniversary we mark this week (see P5).

Here, too, political lions Prakash Man Singh, Bimalendra Nidhi, and Sagar Sharma and intellectuals Minendra Rijal, Prakash Sharan Mahat and Narayan Khadka of Sheh Bahadur Deuba’s political outfit need to venture out into the hinterland if they want to resume their roles as policymakers.

The widely held view is that opinion polls in the Indian media give all wrong. In reality, the Indian media simply host the game by imposing their wishes upon the masses. India Inc’s new media is unabashedly capitalist. It had a vested interest in designing a right-wing victory. The Indian electorate saw through their game and beat them at it. All these worthies are now eating their words sheepishly, trying to prove that they were leaves and fools.

Consumers of the Nepali media shouldn’t be too taken in by self-proclaimed neutral journalists. A media-person who professes not to have a mission is probably on a commission to serve the status quo. So take the opinions of talking heads, including this one, with a pinch of salt. We all have our biases. It just that some of us are rather poor in hiding them. ●
Peacekeeping away from home

Can Nepal afford to keep peace elsewhere when there is no peace at home?

NARESH NEWAR

NUWAKOT – On Kanaki, paramilitary troops of the Armed Police Force (APF) are going through grading training: they walk for miles with heavy guns, work their minds at rigorous academic sessions and sometimes even learn a smattering of Serbo-Croat or Swahili. This is all part of Nepal’s tradition of joining UN peacekeeping forces in the world’s conflict zones.

But today, the question is: how practical is it to train for international peacekeeping when Nepal itself has become a hotpot? Nepali troops have earned international appreciation for the caliber of its peacekeepers in the Middle East.

More than 40,000 officers and soldiers have served in peacekeeping operations abroad since 1958. At present, there are about 2,300 Nepali soldiers serving in Sierra Leone and Congo and the figure includes observer groups of army officers in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Israel, Egypt and several other countries. Another battalion between 600-800 troops will probably be dispatched soon to Burma. In addition, there are police officers serving in Kosovo.

But Kanaki is where it begins with 120 officers and junior rank police selected out of more than 15,000 APF hopefuls to qualify for a UN mission to Liberia, the second longest mission for the force. The first batch was sent to Kosovo in 2002. The new team is waiting for UN officials to inspect them before they leave on 29 June.

"Many join the army with a dream of participating in peacekeeping. In six months they earn more than what they would make in 10 years of service at home," says an ex-army officer who asked not to be named. For the Royal Nepali Army, money from peacekeeping is an important source of income for its welfare fund. It is an equally lucrative posting for the Nepali Police and the APF as the pay is several times their salary at home.

"We use international peacekeeping as a reward for our troops," one senior army general told us. "And, yes, it is an important source of revenue for the army as well."

The UN salary is about $1,000 a month. There was a time when 80 percent of this was deducted for the army’s welfare fund, but today less than 50 percent is taken. "Missions are like prizes," says an army officer.

Travel advisory

If the State Department upgraded its travel advisory for the United States, even Americans would have to leave America because it is too unsafe

If the warning issued this week, the US State Department ordered all non-essential staff and dependents of Nepalis to depart America immediately. All other US citizens are advised to leave as soon as possible. "America is such a dangerous place," said State Department spokesperson Lan Ego, "that we can’t in good conscience advise US citizens to remain."

The warning advises Americans that dangers in the US include random shootings, mass shootings, and armed robbery. "Because the US refuses to control the spread of guns, Americans are at very high risk," according to the statement, which says that more than 90,000 Americans are killed or injured by guns in the US each year.

The statement reports that acts of violence against Americans residing or traveling in the US are common, and that the random nature of the violence in America creates a risk of US citizens being in the wrong place at the wrong time during a violent incident. The warning adds that US citizens who visit or reside in America should factor the potential for violence into their plans and maintain a low profile while in America. The statement advises American citizens to avoid public places, to watch their valuables at all times and to maintain a high state of alert while in the US.

"There is a continuing high volume of reports of threats, harassment, robbery and extortion against Americans in the countryside, cities and tourist areas in the US,“ spokesperson Ego continued. He said that criminal gangs are common and continue to prey on Americans in the US despite decades of government attempts to subdue them.

Terrorism continues to be a major danger for US citizens in America, according to the report. "Terrorist groups continue to publish anti-American rhetoric and to threaten US-associated organizations," it says. The warning points to major attacks in Oklahoma City, Atlanta, New York and Washington DC and warns that, "More such attacks are possible without warning in any part of the country.

Travel in the US poses major hazards for Americans, according to the State Department. The warning says that there is "a shockingly high risk of murder or death on American highways," and quotes a US government source that states more than 43,000 Americans were killed while traveling by motor vehicle in the US last year. "We urge US citizens who choose to remain in America to avoid non-essential road travel," Ego said.

The statement cautions Americans that the control of major US media outlets by a handful of corporate conglomerates can result in censorship of unpopular political expression. When asked to elaborate, Ego pointed to attempts to quash recent films about Fidel Castro and Ronald Reagan and said that the Disney Corporation was blocking distribution of Michael Moore’s latest project, a critical examination of the US war on terrorism and occupation of Iraq. "We are gravely concerned about the erosion of freedom of expression in America," he said.

Ego went on to say that other civil rights that Americans in the US take for granted are in jeopardy as well. Quoting from the statement, he said, "Recently-enacted legislation allows the government to monitor anyone in the United States without his or her knowledge and without a court order." He noted that American citizens in the US were detained for long periods without access to counsel by declaring them terrorism suspects or material witnesses. "Without basic legal protections," he said, "American citizens’ freedom and liberty cannot be guaranteed while they are in the US."

While the warning was pessimistic in tone, it also expressed hope that conditions in America would soon permit US citizens to return. "Perhaps after the elections scheduled for November," Ego said. "We are confident that once there is a popularly-elected government in America, conditions will improve."

Nitish Thapa
on his second international stint. “It is the best way to boost our morale and earn money.”

But there are critics who question the army being busy elsewhere when they are needed at home, and also crossing the self-imposed 2,000 limit for troops abroad at any given time. “The RNA promises to send even more, and this is surprising considering the insecurity in our own country,” remarks a retired army officer. The RNA dismisses this. “It is a small portion of the army, and doesn’t affect our full operational strength,” says army spokesperson Brig Gen Rajendra Thapa, who was a peacekeeper in Lebanon 1978.

The army’s strength has grown and is now approaching 80,000, which means more soldiers can be sent. “We have a larger force today, enough to spare for non-military activities like maintenance, disaster relief and Maoist rehabilitation programs,” adds Thapa.

The UN’s demand for Nepal’s contribution to international missions has grown also because developed countries prefer the involvement of nations like Bangladesh, Kenya, Fiji, Pakistan and Ghana in Third World peacekeeping. In 2002, Nepal was among the top 10 troop contributing nations. It costs the UN $4 billion for the upkeep of an estimated 50,000 soldiers and police personnel from all around the world. There are plans to raise 70,000 additional troops by year end—more soldiers are needed as conflicts crop up.

“The international community is keen on Nepal because we are a non-Muslim country and can be perfectly neutral, especially in the Palestine-Israel conflict,” says a military analyst. “Israel would never accept troops from Muslim countries as they may harbour sympathies towards Islamic militants.”

This could be why the UN has not followed the Europeans in coming down hard on the RNA’s human rights record. At the 60th session of UN Human Rights Commission in March, the Swiss government sponsored a harsh resolution against Nepal citing secret detentions, torture, harassment of civilians and inadmissable arrests.

There was fear that this would tarnish Nepal’s image and affect the RNA’s involvement in UN peacekeeping. But Nepal seems to have benefited from the UN’s own bureaucracy, which has separate departments for peacekeeping missions, political affairs and policing of human rights. It usually takes the UN a long time to address a common agenda and agree on similar grounds, say analysts.

Nepal also received strong backing in Geneva from the US and India, which helped soften the resolution. “Nepal would be in big trouble if the Geneva Convention had been approved at the UN,” says a former senior army officer. “Former UN Ambassador Michael Malinowski played a key role too.”

Critics, however, believe that future international peacekeeping missions by the RNA will be affected if reports of human rights abuses continue. But as long as there is great financial benefits from peacekeeping, it will probably also help the army be more conscious of respecting the Geneva Convention back home.

**Nepali knights**

Two Nepalis have been honored with the prestigious Finnish award of Knight First Class, the Order of Lion of Finland in recognition of their contribution towards promoting biodiversity conservation in Nepal. Chandra Gurung (right) and Mohan Man Sainju (left) received the award on 17 May. Founded in 1842, the Order of the Lion of Finland has been awarded to a large number of foreign diplomats and top industrialists around the world. Nepal is one of the few South Asian countries to receive the honor.

“This is such a great honor and inspires us to do more,” says conservationist Chandra Gurung, the architect of the world-class conservation project Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). The country representative of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature Conservation (WWF) Nepal, Gurung also works at King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation. Economist Mohan Man Sainju heads the Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIID) a national think tank. A former Royal Nepali Ambassador to the US and Canada, Sainju was also the vice chairman of the National Planning Commission, Nepal.
The army sweeps into the Maoist heartland

RAMESWOR BOHARA in RUKUM

After a two-week special operation, the army has entered the Maoist base areas of Rukum, occupying the home village of the Maoist guerrilla chief, Nandakishore Pun (Pasang). Described as the first offensive of its type, the operation aims at minimising the influence of the Maoists and demonising their strongholds.

The focus of the first phase of the operation is to dismantle the rebel-dominated areas and to prevent the Maoists from launching offensives. Lt Col Yogeswar Bajracharya of the Western Division headquarters of the Royal Nepali Army told us: “The plan is to destroy their so-called bases, strongholds, model areas, refuges and training areas. We also intend to ensure security for the people and create a climate that allows rebels to surrender.”

The rebels decided not to confront the army head on and have dissolved into the surrounding mountains from where they try to harass the army camps with occasional long-range mortar barrages. This has prompted the army to declare that the Maoists’ claim of a base area is a myth and that their strength has been greatly reduced.

“It was only an illusion,” says Maj Gen Rukmangat Karunwal, chief of the Western Division. “There is no rebel base or stronghold. We will prove it once we reach the villages.” But Rukum’s villagers, who have lived under Maoist control, know that the relative peace of the past four years is now going to be shattered. The army is only passing through and once they go, the Maoists will return and punish anyone they suspect of aiding the army.

This is temporary, once they leave it will be the same old story and we will suffer again,” says a newly vested villager in Rukumkes.

The army has been busy uncovering rebel arms caches, explosives and uncovering training areas deep in the forests. The army has also brought along its hearts and minds unit and is distributing relief and offering medical care to the villagers.

With a combination of surface and helicopter-born activity, the government has mobilised the Armed Police Force and Nepal Police under the command of the army.

Asked about the duration of the operation, army officials guess it will go on till the monsoon, but added it will depend on how much resistance they face from the Maoists.

The Maoists’ attitude suggests they have made a tactical retreat before they organise counter attacks. They have spread rumours of an imminent attack on the Rukum district headquarters in Maiyakot to force the army to halt its operation. The Maoists sent letters to businessmen and civil servants to leave Maiyakot if they value their lives. The threats had remarkable effect: shops closed and many have gone.

At the checkpoint outside this district headquarters of Argakhanchi, the security forces notice that our car has a tape player. They have a strange request: could we play a cassette they have just seized from the bag of a teenager? It turns out not to be a revolutionary song, just a tape of bhajans. Sorry, sir, we don’t have a player so we had to use yours,” says one soldier politely and hands the tape back to the boy.

It is one o’clock in the afternoon when we reach Sandikharkha, where some of the government buildings destroyed during a massive Maoist attack on 8 September 2002 have still not been rebuilt. Fifty policemen and some 70 Maoists were killed in that night-long battle. Sandikharkha is still tense. There are reports of a fierce battle raging 10km to the southwest. By evening, we hear that 12 Maoists attending a cultural program have been killed, and that the senior-most Maoist leader in the area, Binendra Chhetri, escaped.

The people here take the news stoically. They wonder how many of those killed were real Maoists and how many were commanded by the rebels to be the audience. The day before, the army did kill Comrade Saife, a commander of No 3 area during a search operation in Dhakabang Village. Eight others were captured, but were reported to have been killed “when they tried to escape”.

Sandikharkha is the district headquarters, but except for the security forces and the post office there is no sign of the government anywhere. The political parties have all been hounded out, or shut shop. Pashupati Sharma, district president of Nepal Congress, rules in his party has no base left. “The Maoists killed four of our leaders, the rest have fled to the cities or gone to India. If they had stayed, they would have been killed either by the Maoists or the army, both sides accusing them of being informers,” he says.

The UML and the Janamarcha are still active in some villages, and both parties organised a peace campaign in the district. Prem Narayan Adhikari, a human rights activist, is worried about extra-judicial killings and disappearances.

And, as elsewhere in Nepal, the problem of internally displaced people is reaching crisis proportions. The town and its scenic surroundings look desolate, and people are left to do things look all right here,” Adhikari tells us, “but just walk out into the hills and you will get the real picture. There are only old people left in Argakhanchi.”

Bijaya Lal Kayastha is in charge of the district police and confirms the outmigration has become a serious problem. “There are many villages where there are no young people at all,” he says.

With 70 percent literacy, Argakhanchi always placed a strong emphasis on education. But the insurgency has hit schools hard. Dipak Tandon, a local teacher, says schools were closed for 64 extra days last year besides regular holidays. Now, private schools are being forced to close. For the new academic year, more than 4,000 people—most of them school and college children—have been taken away for various durations in midwestern and eastern Nepal in the past month. Human rights activists say abduction may be too strong a word, since most are released unharmed.

“Abduction connotes terror and unless we witness something of that sort, we can’t just casually use the word,” says Tarak Dhitai from the child warfare group, CWIN. But Dhitai does not dispute the fact that forced recruitment of children and adults in military training still continues. The Maoists are forcing large groups of people to attend their cultural programs, communist events and training in ‘revolutionary education’.

About 30 teachers from Sindulpur returned home after they were taken by the Maoists to attend a lecture on teaching guidelines according to Maoist ideology. A delegation of activists is now planning to visit Maoist areas to investigate what the students and teachers are forced to do. “As of now, we don’t know their methods and to what extent they are forced,” says Dhitai. The Maoists maintain that the people attend mass meetings out of their own free will, and have blamed the media for distorting facts.

Whether it is forced or voluntary, the people, especially children, are vulnerable and could be caught in the crossfire especially when the security forces use helicopters to strafe Maoist positions. And whether one calls it ‘abduction’ or something else, many have raised their voices against compulsory mass attendance. News reports from villages indicate that locals including children are constantly under pressure to attend Maoist activities.

The presence of civilians affords some degree of protection to Maoist leaders attending these programs in case of a government attack.

Children’s rights groups have repeatedly called on Maoists to observe the Geneva Convention and leave civilians out of the conflict. The Maoists have carried out high-profile release of captured security personnel, but continue to force villagers to march with them.

This practice has already ended in tragedy, including the death of four children at the Sharada High School in Mubhara on 13 October 2003 when teachers were forced to allow a Maoist cultural program in the school compound. When the army opened fire on the crowd, four school children were killed and a dozen others injured.

Following the Mubhara incident, activists met with local Maoist leaders not to use school children as shields. But the practice goes on. “In fact, the frequency of such activities has increased,” says Subodh Pyakurel from human rights organisation INSEC. “You can’t force political education on anyone. We strongly condemn such acts, it is a crime.”

The pond built by Sandikharkha’s ancient kings gave an ambience of deceptive calm last week

The scars are still raw in Argakhanchi

KISHORE NEPAL in SANDIKHARKHA

The pond built by Sandikharkha’s ancient kings gave an ambience of deceptive calm last week and the scars are still raw in Argakhanchi, a district in the western Terai plains in Nepal.

The army enters Argakhanchi in response to a Maoist attack on 8 September 2002 in which more than 70 Maoists were killed. More than 4,000 people were taken away for various durations in midwestern and eastern Nepal in the past month. Human rights activists say abduction may be too strong a word, since most are released unharmed.

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The scars are still raw in Argakhanchi.
And desperation

year, the Maoists have forced everyone to adhere to their new academic calendar, replacing the government’s list of holidays. The Maoists’ revolutionary education replaces national holidays with their own martyr’s days, celebrates the anniversary of the start of the ‘people’s war’ and the birthdays of Mao and Lenin. A Marxism-Leninism course in Marxism-Leninism has been added.

“So tell us the truth, we follow the new calendar, we don’t want to be killed,” admits a teacher from an outlying village.

The telecom tower that was destroyed in the attack two years ago was rebuilt, but the Maoists destroyed it again after six months. There is no communication to the rest of the world outside. “We used to be a thriving business, now we are ruined,” says hotelier Bhaweshwar Shrestha. His two jeeps used to run a profitable business plying the road between Sandikharka to Delhi. Now, it is a one-way trip: everyone is leaving Delhi and no one is coming back.

Argakhanchi is the home of two senior Maoists: Top Bahadur Rayamajhi and Pampha Bhusal, who were arrested and reported to have taken part in the September 2002 attack. The main motive seems to have been to halt the bank, as the Maoists took away Rs 70 million and several kg of gold. Since the ceasefire, 700 people have left until fighting in the district, 30 so far this year.

Ramhari Bhusal, a trader at the main bazar tells us with mixed emotion: “This used to be a peaceful place, we were raising children, hoping they would have a better future than us. Now, we fear for the worst.”

Grief in Ghandruk

SRADHNA BASNYAT in POKHARA

handra’s villagers relied on DI Man Gurung for everything. His balanced judgement, his worldly-wise ways and as a respected elder, it was an inspiration to them. DI Man could be trusted with years of service to his community. By all accounts he was a simple man, even-tempered, fair and frank. And he had a vision of making this spectacularly beautiful village at the lap of the Annapurnas a tourism attraction locals could benefit from.

On Monday, 10 May, DI Man was among five Ghandruk hotel owners abducted by the Maoists. The body of 65-year-old DI Man Gurung and 31-year-old lama Gurung were found the next morning near the village. Ghandruk is still gripped by shock, grief and fear. Telephone lines are down, no one dares leave the village or return there because of a Maoist blockade.

"Ghandruk has lost its soul" laments Prakash Gurung, former assistant minister and twos son’s father. Prakash’s father was the uncompromised prachanda prachan for 17 years during the Panchayat era, until DI Man ran for the same post in 1985 and won. “It was no small feat to beat my father at that time. We held the majority for years and were sure we'd win again,” recalls Prakash. “DI Man Gurung worked hard and won the people's trust.”

This is a leader that Ghandruk adored. He was born in 1939, and although he was fluent in both Nepali and English, he had no formal education. Following what had virtually become a Gurung tradition, in his early 20s DI Man joined the British Gurkhas. Home on holiday, he joined Min Kumari Gurung and the two travelled together to DI Man's various postings. His 15-year career took him to Hong Kong, Malaysia, the UK, Brunei and Singapore. It was time to travel in ski-glut Gurung communities in barracks abroad that probably nurtured his vision to develop something similar. Ghandruk. So, after he retired, he came home to Nepal with his wife and three children.

DI Man enjoyed retirement, raised his family and tilled his fields. After a short stint in politics, he focused all his energy on community development. He recognised Ghandruk’s tourist potential and established the Snow Land Lodge. For 13 years after the 1980 Movement, DI Man worked with the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) and campaigned for Ghandruk to get drinking water, electricity, roads and bridges. His greatest ambition was to have a cable car service up to Ghandruk and a road till Phedi. He worked best outside the bureaucracy and refused to join the VCP.

DI Man was a born leader, one who believed in working with the people. “He got along with everybody,” recalls Chandra Man Gurung, his younger brother. “But he had no desire to hold office.” Although DI Man aligned himself with the RPP after 1989, he was unconcerned by recent party politics and infighting. But there was no doubt he felt democracy was the only way forward. “He believed one man or one party could not solve problems and that all individuals and political parties must work together,” says Prakash.

In the past few years, Prakash advised him not to return to Ghandruk. But he used to go back to check on his hotel and his friends. DI Man was a contented man. Both his daughters and his son were married. His 55-year-old wife, although ailing, was still his loving companion.

DI Man was not a hardliner about anything. He certainly wasn’t an informant for the army, as rumours have it. “One thing my brother spoke out against was the army coming to Ghandruk,” says his brother Chandra Man. “He believed the military presence would suck us into the fighting.” In a tragic way, those words became a prophecy for his own death. DI Man Gurung was the victim of a war he wanted no part of. Like thousands of other Nepalis who have been killed, and no one knows why.

People forced on long marches

UMID BAGCHAN in MAHENDRANAGAR

There are no official figures, but an estimated 30,000 people in the western region have been forced to join Maoist programs in the past year. The regional education directorate in Dipayal says the rebels took away 7,500 people from Duti alone. The majority were students, the rest teachers, all of whom were kept for an average of 15 days and forced to watch cultural programs, listen to speeches and learn ‘revolutionary education’ methods.

Bajura and Baitadi top the list of districts where Maoist rebels have taken people forcibly. More than 2,000 students in Achham were forced to join Maoist marches. Upon return, locals say they were made to listen to political speeches about the revolution and were released on condition that they pledged to help the Maoist party “whenever necessary”.

Villagers are forced to join Maoist mass meetings like the one when the ‘people’s government’ of Achham was declared three months ago. More than 7,000 people were present: teachers, students and villagers from surrounding areas. The involvement of locals seems to be as much to ensure protection from army attacks as to show that there is popular support. A program attended by 4,000 people in Bajural recently, security forces launched an attack from helicopters.

Earlier this month, the rebels announced that every family in Kanchanpur’s southern areas had to send at least one member and the rebel strength swelled by more than 2,000 young men and women.

But 4,000 others—women, children and elderly citizens—fled to Basahi on the Indian border. When they came back home a few days later, they formed a citizen security committee. When the Maoists came back, they killed seven of them. After the incident, some rebels tried to negotiate with the locals but clashes broke out again and another Maoist was killed. Now the rebels have issued death threats against 13 members of the citizen security committee. As we go to press, 55-year-old Durga Ramakar has been kidnapped and Sher Bahadur Tamang seriously injured.

Recently, 250 students between grades four and nine were forced to follow the Maoists’ march from villages in Darchula. Two weeks ago, the rebels arrived at Satur Dharma Higher Secondary School in Baitadi to find recruits. Most students managed to escape, but 24 were taken. Their parents petitioned human rights activists and after the media picked up the story, the Maoists returned the students after a few days. Terrified parents across the west aren’t sending their children to school. More than 15 schools in 20 villages in Baitadi have closed down.

"Comrade Prabhakar leads the Maoists’ Jharkot regional bureau, and told us in the past they mustered 10,000 people for the ‘people’s marches’ and their participation is entirely voluntary. ‘When other political parties gather people in their programs, that is taken as a voluntary participation but when we do the same it is called abduction and kidnapping’,” he said. "Even the media does this and we feel very sad about it."

Asked about Prabhakar’s argument, one angry parent in Darchula said her children were taken away at gunpoint. She asks: “If that is not kidnapping, tell me what is!”
The Melamchi mirage
This project is going nowhere

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

A s Kathmandu Valley reels under an unprecedented water shortage this dry season, there is more bad news: the project that was supposed to solve this problem once and for all is going nowhere. The Melamchi Water Supply Project (MWSP) is supposed to bring glacier melt through a 28km tunnel to Kathmandu, but delays are threatening the scheme. The government and some donors who were backing the design appear to be shifting their priority to smaller-scale projects.

Two decades after it was first proposed, Melamchi continues to be a mirage. Meanwhile, the Nepal Water Supply Corporation (NWSC) recently augmented its supply by 35 million litres of water per day through a network of wells, by tapping sources and modifying water treatment systems in Kathmandu. As a result, the city gets 95 million litres a day for the dry season. It is not enough to meet the huge rise in demand, but at least it has made the situation less dire.

Two huge tanks have been built—one of them, the biggest in the country, with a storage capacity of three million litres—with the assistance from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The NWSC is also building the Manahara and Sainbhu projects from which Kathmandu should get another 30 million litres of water per day. “We are testing them now and soon they will be linked with the supply system,” says the corporation’s general manager Kaushal Nath Bhattarai.

Were these smaller schemes delayed because of Melamchi? “Yes, it was a big mistake on our part,” admits Bhattarai. “If only we had implemented these augmentation plans earlier, we could have used them as stop gap measures.” But even with such additions, almost half of Kathmandu’s daily demand for more than 200 million litres of water will remain unmet. Add to that the over seven percent annual increase in demand due to the Valley’s booming population, and it is clear there is a serious shortfall.

Melamchi could make a significant difference because it is estimated to supply 170 million litres of water per day. Work on the 28km tunnel has not even started, the access roads have not been completed and the project is in deep trouble due to Maoist threats. The Korean civil contractor left after the government refused to pay out the compensation it demanded. That is not the only hitch in the project.

Water and Energy Users’ Federation Nepal (WAFED), an NGO, has challenged the justification for Melamchi. Along with other local groups, it lodged a complaint at the Asian Development Bank (ADB) headquarters in Manila that questions the relevance of the scheme. “We are sure our complaint will reach the review panel,” said WAFED’s coordinator Gopin Sivakoti Chintan. “We argued that Kathmandu’s water demand can be met with the supply from within the Valley. Melamchi was brought in without considering other viable options.”

A special project facilitator from the bank will be here next month to try to resolve issues. If the complainant is still not satisfied, the matter will reach the Complaint Review Panel at the bank. Once the Melamchi file reaches this panel, even small pace work will come to a halt because the ADB does not allow work to continue during reviews. The bank is the major donor and has committed $120 million for the project. Other donors are Norway, Japan, Bank of International Cooperation, Nordic Development Fund, OPEC and the Swedish International Development Agency.

A report prepared by Japan Bank of International Cooperation last year noted that resources in Kathmandu could be utilised optimally. It also mentioned improving distribution network and harvesting rain and groundwater. At present, Kathmandu’s distribution network has leakage of around 40 percent. Another ADB report, “Water optimisation in Kathmandu Valley” also adopted similar lines. But neither report dismissed the need for MWSP, especially considering the rapid growth of Kathmandu’s population. Even while talking about optimising Kathmandu’s water supply as a fallback option for Melamchi, experts point out that there is no proper data of water resources in the capital. “There are so many catchment areas, but their flow is something we don’t know yet,” says water expert B Ronta.

NWSC’s study found some feasible water sources in the foothills around the Valley but they are yet to be tapped. “In places like Mata Tirtha and Gwama I Jhala, local politicians have not allowed us to work,” says Bhattarai of the NWSC. That may be a short-term problem. In the future, these sources must be used and that is exactly what the government has finally begun to do. More so, now that the fate of Melamchi remains undecided...
Beyond Kathmandu
An eye-opening road trip across Nepal

It’s had enough being handicapped with a Nepali passport while travelling abroad, but we could all do without being dogged by fear and insecurity within our own country. In the past, charred hulls of torched buses line the road, vehicles try to move in convoys, vegetables dumped by farmers angry at bandau and blockades obstruct the highways.

Nepal’s fabled GDP increase is fuelled by what is left of the economic activity in Kathmandu and remittances from abroad. What happens outside the capital has less impact on the overall national numbers, which is why the Maoist movement was able to gather steam.

While the bands grind on, everything comes to a standstill, and people protest by remaining mobile. The popular Nepali band Nepartya is on a 15-city tour across the nation. On the same day they performed in Damaul, Joms Pradhan, Dipesh Bhurani and others had their concert in Biratnagar. Fun in the time of fear. It is also interesting to note the boom in the construction industry at urban centres. With more people moving to towns and cities from the mid-hills, land prices are soaring, rents are exorbitant, jobs scarce and there’s more demand than supply. People, it seems, always find ways to profit. There are also more private boarding schools and private clinics, proving that social service delivery is moving towards private hands because the government is non-functional. While there are risks in the transportation business these days, Nepalis still have to get places so entrepreneurs are venturing into new territory, even if it means airlifting vehicles and spare parts. The private airline, Yeti, has expanded, buying bigger planes.

Kathmandu is not Nepal. Never has that been truer. Outside Kathmandu, it is a completely different world. There is lot to learn and to do. The most important first step is to move out of the current political impasse.

Across the border in India, there is a different insecurity. The people are not sure about India Shining, and from the recent Indian poll results, that indecision has cost the Vaigaye government dearly. The Indian elections were fought on the economic agenda by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), but they’ve found that if the benefits are not equitably distributed it doesn’t matter to most people. Perhaps that could influence future political trends in Nepal, if we ever get to holding elections.

Banking on expansion
Having limited itself to commercial investment in the past, the Himalayan Bank recently began lending in non-commercial areas including four hydropower projects and home loans. The bank introduced ATM services and has plans to expand into school and fuel investments. The new chairman, Manoj Bahadur Shenista, is positive about the changes: “The bank should make longterm investments on service-oriented programs and productions.”

Despite the downturn in economics because of the political environment, Himalayan Bank claims it is the top bank in the country in terms of deposits and lending portfolios.

Lux sensation
Nepal Lever is finalising preparations for its ‘Lux Beauty & Style Sensation’ and reaching the climax of its Lux Beauty Star 2004 pageant on 21 May at the Hyatt Ball Room. The pageant will present 20 of Nepal’s most glamorous girls who have reached the finals after gruelling elimination rounds over the past week and choose the winner who will model Nepal Lever’s products. “We are hoping to make it an evening of glamour, beauty, fashion and style,” says managing director of Nepal Lever, Rakesh Mohan.

Bussing it
The mentally-challenged children of Nirmal Bal Bikash Bidyalaya got a brand new school bus last month courtesy of the Khatri Group’s Himalayan Snacks and Noodles company, Rajendra Khatri, chairman of the group, said that he was happy to contribute in any small way to the well-being of the children and encouraged private sector businesses to help the less fortunate.

Beemer style
Fashion website eCrowdStyle.com selected the BMW 530i as one of the most stylish 2004 Model Year cars out of a field of 100 luxury models. The 530i was chosen as one of five winners for its ‘impeccable looks, innovative details, fun-to-drive factor, product exclusivity and the car’s overall enviable quotient.’

Harvest the wind
The cool winds in Nagarkot not only make it an excellent getaway from the muggy Valley but also an ideal spot for wind harvesting. Club Himalay Nagarkot does just this, turning wind power into electricity to light up their walkways. It is a novel, environment-friendly concept that should sit well with city dwellers who are welcome to sample the breeze with the resort’s Chisso Chisso Haswana Package.
I was 1949 when Robert Fleming, Carl Taylor, Robert Bergsaker and Harold Bergsaker first came to Nepal. It wasn’t a missionary zeal that brought them here, but Fleming’s love for birds. A noted ornithologist, he arrived in Nepal during a period of great political unrest and discovered a new focus: the obvious development needs of the Nepali people. When the group returned to India, where they were affiliated with Woodstock School at Mussorie, they shared their experiences. Nepal was still closed to foreigners then, but Ernest Oliver and Trevor Strong received permission to come to Kathmandu for two days. They hoped it would be enough time to get consent for working in Nepal.

By December 1951, there was a second expedition to Nepal, ostensibly to watch birds again but this time the group was asked for more than just their feathered friends. The trip was a family affair, as Fleming was accompanied by his American wife, Bette, and their son and daughter. With them were Carl, also a doctor, and Betty Ann Friedleins, and their three children — the youngest who was only two months old.

Over six weeks, more than 1,500 people flocked to Kathmandu when the group held medical camps. Back in India, it became clear that this was the beginning of something big, and so Bob Fleming sent a letter to the Nepal government requesting permission to start a hospital in Tansen. Fifteen months later, a reply arrived. They were to be allowed to establish a hospital and women’s welfare clinics on the conditions that all treatment be free and that the Nepali staff be trained to take over the hospital and clinics in five years.

Although permission was originally given to Bob Fleming’s Methodist mission, the invitation was passed on to other Christian missions working along the Nepal border. As a result, members of various churches came together, and with many Nepali Christians living in Darjeeling, entered Nepal.

Following the establishment of maternity clinics in Bhaktapur, Gokarna, Kirtipur, Banepa, Thimi, Sanga, Bungmati and the maternity hospital in Kathmandu, United Mission to Nepal (UMN) was officially founded on 5 March 1954. Initially, the focus was on health services, as the slowly-growing team worked to train local Tansen staff as lab assistants and health workers. During this time, Ernest Oliver handled administration as executive secretary, working from India until the Kathmandu headquarters were set up in 1959.

UMN spread out a few years after it first started working in 1957, work started on Jonathan Lindell’s Community Service Project in Gorakha, which most notably included the Amp Pipal School where selected students were trained as teachers. However, the project also included a dispensary and agriculture and animal health work. At about the same time, Elizabeth Franklin moved to Kathmandu to start a school for girls. In 1958, the first full academic year was underway at Maharaja Bhawan Girls School, with 12 students, six classes and seven teachers.

Other projects followed, including Odd Hof ton’s efforts with Burwal Power Company, Gandaki Boarding School, Shanta Bhawan Hospital (now Patan Hospital) and many more. Over the years, some of these projects have been handed over to local governments completely, while UMN’s association with others continues.

Looking back, UMN’s impact is evident in so many of the little developments we take for granted: basic health, education and infrastructure. Celebrations and fanfare are in order to honour a group that has dedicated itself more single-mindedly than anyone else (some would argue, even more than successive governments in Kathmandu) to the health, education and wellbeing of Nepal.

Odd Hof ton came to Nepal in 1958 at the age of 30 to help build the Tansen Hospital and later set up the Butwal Technical Institute. As a hydropower engineer, Hof ton could have had many other jobs or a lucrative career in the power industry in his native Norway. Yet he chose to travel to a little-known landlocked kingdom in the Himalaya, which at that time, had just thrown its doors open to the outside world. Why?

“I guess I’m just different,” Hof ton, now 76, “It was my calling.” Today, the legacy of UMN and engineers like Hof ton is a generation of Nepali engineers and technicians capable of designing and implementing hydropower projects that are appropriate for Nepali conditions.

“Our philosophy was always to start small, get trained on the job, and try bigger and bigger things,” says Hof ton. And that was thinking behind the UMN-initiated Butwal Power Project and its Achhokho and Jehimuk projects in central Nepal which have now been passed on to the private sector. This kind of foreign aid was much more cost-effective than the bilateral projects and maimon multi-national schemes. It built local capacity, making it less likely for Nepal to be dependent on foreign aid for outsized projects that we could not build and maintain sustainably ourselves. ‘And had to be on a scale that could be copied and replicated locally by locals,” says Hof ton.

The Hof tons had two sons, both born in Nepal who went to local schools and spoke fluent Nepali. One of them, Martin, was working on his PhD thesis on the 1980 People’s Movement when he was killed in a plane crash near Kathmandu in 1982. The family was devastated, and they decided to honour their son’s affection for Nepal by setting up the Martin Chautari Trust.

“The idea was to have an independent forum that could hold multi-disciplinary discussions on issues of national importance so as to strengthen the public sphere and the country’s young democracy,” says Odd Hof ton. Martin Hof ton’s book on the 1980 movement, Spring Awakening, has become a classic work on the pro-democracy uprising and has lessons for the current street agitation as well. The elder Hof ton is sad about how things are going downhill in Nepal, but he sees a silver lining: “It seems the press is still free to discuss issues, there is no visible clampdown, and as long as there is freedom, there is hope.” — (Kunda Dixit)
While the parties carry on their pro-democracy movement, efforts to find a replacement for Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa have been unsuccessful for two weeks. At fault is a prime minister who resigned without lining up a leadership, a palace that accepted that resignation without doing any homework about its next move and political parties which can’t seem to find a way out and offer solutions to the current impasse. All this has given the Maoists ample opportunity to carry on with their campaign of mayhem and violence nationwide. With their blockades and three-day bandha this week, instead of winning friends among the other political forces, the Maoists have further distanced themselves from the people. Apart from making basic necessities more expensive, these disruptive activities do not really achieve much. The risks do not feel any effect. The only ones who really suffer are those who were already suffering. What the Nepali people need are not more blockades and bandas, but open highways, open markets and an open political environment. Bandas are a poison for ordinary people. If the intention of the Maoists is to put pressure on the government, bandas are not going to achieve that—they have to win the people’s trust. They should stop punishing the people and start extending the hand for negotiations and ending this war.

Abhie climber

Samaipathana, 17 May

When Nawang Sherpa stood atop Mount Everest on the morning of 16 May, he almost forgot that he was physically disabled. He was on the highest point on earth and became the first Nepali with an artificial leg to climb the world’s highest peak. An American climber, also with an artificial leg, beat him to a world record, but Sherpa was elated by his achievement. “I feel so blessed to see the world from here. Above all, I feel that I am not physically disabled because I made it here,” said Sherpa via satellite phone from the top of the world.

School’s out

Annapurna Post, 17 May

In the course of a campaign that initially targeted private schools, the Maoist rebels have locked up 10 government schools in Baglung on the charge of commercialising education and importing standard knowledge. The rebels have also locked more than two dozen private schools in the district. Some of them tried to defy the Maoists, continuing classes for a few days, but they stopped after one high school was bombed and a principal kidnapped from another. The rebels confirmed that Bhumi Raj Acharya, headmaster of Prabhav High School at Bohara, was with them.

The Maoists’ student wing, All Nepal National Free Students Union (Revoluntary), issued a statement saying that the schools would be allowed to reopen only if they agreed to slash tuition fees and gradually replace the current curriculum with a ‘people’s educational system’. Shuwal Oli, district chairman of the Maoists’ student wing, said the schools were locked because the agreement between the Education Ministry and his organization on education policy was not implemented. He issued a statement banning all private schools from running in Baglung, also demanding a ‘people’s education system’ in all government schools.

A transcript of the official was just started and parents are worried that their children are forced to stay home. “The government must do something about it,” said a parent in Burnhung village. “Either the government resumes classes or the Maoists should begin their system.”

Kamaiyas in peril

Annapurna Post, 15 May

DHANGADI – Nearly 30,000 freed kamaiyas face major problems after two foreign development partners halted their programs recently in the far-western development region because of constant Maoist threats. This suspension has left 187 unemployed and the kamaiyas, who relied on GTZ’s food security program, badly affected.

GTZ was forced to take this step after recent rebel attacks on their Dhangadi offices. Similarly, after warnings from the Maoists, Britain’s Department for International Development (DfID) also postponed its development programs in the area. Citing security reasons, donor agencies, including GTZ and DfID, issued a public notice on the halting of their development programs in five western districts.

According to the statistics provided by the federation of NGOs in Kaal, donors provided financial assistance worth more than Rs 1 billion by conducting various programs for freed kamaiyas and rural infrastructure development in the region. It also said that GTZ had allocated Rs 53.8 million for development programs for the current fiscal year. Dinesh Bhandari, coordinator of programs for the kamaiyas, said that the Maoists activities hindered development and had a negative impact on financial assistance derived from foreign aid.

Meanwhile, the Maoists reiterated that they would not allow any NGOs to work in the area without their permission. Donor agencies from the US and the UK are barred from running any programs. (Nepalnews.com)
“Meeting the needs of Nepalis”

Jennie Collins has been executive director of United Mission to Nepal (UMN) for the past four years. She talked to Nepali Times about her faith in UMN’s work over the last half century and the future for this remarkable organisation.

Nepali Times: How has UMN evolved over the last 50 years?
Jennie Collins: Nepal has changed and the needs of the country and the Nepali people have changed. UMN is here to serve and over these 50 years, this was done in very different ways because the needs were different.

We’ve always tried to work in difficult places where other organisations have not wanted to work or communications were difficult. As the infrastructure of Nepal developed, the places where UMN worked also changed. Fifty years ago, Tansen was a long way from anywhere, now you can get there by road. Now we’re working in places like Mugu.

What do you see as some of the biggest, most successful contributions UMN has made to Nepal?
That’s a really difficult question because I think UMN made contributions on all sorts of different levels: individuals, families, communities, to whole areas of Nepal and even at the national level. There are people who went to school because of UMN, others whose lives were saved—very individual things. In the communities we’ve worked in, there are enormous changes in access to water, changes brought by rural electrification, the way they work the land and how they organise themselves to get things done. I also think we’ve made contributions at a national level. Some policies have changed with HMG. There are other national level changes, for example, like fluoride is now in toothpaste, that have the potential to affect the whole nation. So there are people who know the sort of work the UMN has done, but also know what UMN stands for in terms of our Christian values.

What is UMN doing at present?
Most of the things we’re dealing with we’ve now been involved with for many years. But our main thrust at this time is to build the capacity of projects, institutions and organisations we’re working with so we can hand them over to Nepali ownership. We see ourselves not in an implementing role, but much more in supporting and capacity building.

And challenges?
UMN has always faced a number of challenges, mainly with what it is as an organisation and the infrastructure of Nepal. Now the insecure situation of the country and the political instability are major challenges at every level of our work.

In hindsight, what perhaps should UMN have done differently?
We’ve talked a lot about handing over our work to Nepali organisations, and we’ve done a lot of that. But in some of our institutions we’ve never really followed through. Maybe some of the difficulties we’re facing at this time might not be here if we followed through on some of those right and good intentions.

There are allegations of your missionary agenda as a Christian organisation.
We are here at the invitation of the government, and we have an agreement that says we will not be involved in proselytisation. We could define that by saying that we would not give inducements to people to become Christians, we will not give them jobs, education and other such things. I believe, as an organisation, we have kept to that. But we are here as a Christian organisation, and when asked why we’re here, and why we do the things that we do, we want to give account of our reasons. We need to be sure of what is meant by proselytisation because it is very easy for people to make assumptions that are not really correct. Although we are an international Christian organisation, we serve regardless of any of those affiliations.

Where do you see UMN in the next 50 years?
We believe that as we go into the next 10, 25 or even 50 years, there will be amazing opportunities. We are looking into the future and saying: with all of the opportunities, public relations and goodwill we earned from our work in the past, we want to use them to meet the real needs of the Nepali people, now and in the years to come. (JS)
The ‘Good Doctor’ is in
Mannohan Singh is India’s new designated driver

RANJIT DEVRAJ in NEW DELHI

The image that most residents of New Delhi have of Mannohan Singh is that of a diminutive, tubercular man often seen dodging gawping pedestrians on the pavement, usually with a newspaper tucked under one arm. But Singh, who was once a chief minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh, has now been named to lead the Indian government.

There are several reasons why Singh was chosen for the post. For one, he is a long-time ally of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has been in power for almost a decade. Singh is also known for his moderate and pragmatic approach to politics, which is likely to be an asset in the current political climate.

However, there are also concerns about Singh’s appointments to key positions in the Cabinet. Some observers have expressed reservations about his ability to handle the complex challenges facing the country, including economic growth, inflation, and poverty.

Despite these concerns, Singh’s nomination is likely to be welcomed by many in India, who see him as a moderate and pragmatic leader. His appointment is also seen as a sign of stability and continuity in Indian politics, which is likely to be important in the current political climate.

In conclusion, Singh’s nomination is a significant development in Indian politics, and will be closely watched by observers both at home and abroad. His ability to navigate the complex challenges facing the country will be crucial to the success of his tenure as India’s new designated driver.
Nightmare begins
Samacharpatra, 16 May

PARBAT - The people of Dhaagali face long hikes in the scorching summer heat after the Maoists blocked the Baglung-Pokhara highway for eight days. Fifteen years after this artery opened, locals are once again forced to walk more than 40km to get to Pokhara. “It’s the same nightmare I experienced years ago, travelling on foot to Kuama,” says Dhan Kumar Thapa, a Baglung native who works in India’s Gujarat. Thapa had to hire a taxi to Lumle and then walk seven hours to reach his destination. Buses ply up to Lumle. From this point people can be seen trudging along, burdened with heavy luggage. Children fare much worse in the heat. The Maoists threaten taxi and bus drivers who dare to bring the people this far. Some even have their keys taken.

Each step is misery. Those who are unable to walk beyond Kuama, the district headquarters, have to stay in a lodge, biding their time until they can get through safely between the battling rebels and the security forces. Woot of all shops are closed and food supplies are dipping low. The schools have been shut for the past six days because the students are afraid to attend classes.

Trekker tax
Kantipur, 16 May

SOLUKHUMBU - Maoists have been collecting their ‘people’s government tax’ from tourists visiting the Solukhumbu region more strictly. They are charging Rs 1,000 from each tourist, and more from American trekkers.

“We are charging the Americans more,” said Rajendra, district chief of the Maoists in Solukhumbu. He added the amount charged from Americans would depend on whatever demands the Maoists feel like making. There are no taxes for Nepalis, although trekking groups have to pay Rs 250 per porter they employ.

The tourists get receipts so they are not taxed twice along the trails by other Maoists. Any national or international non-government organisation has to keep up with the Maoists’ terms and conditions to conduct development programs in the region, which has been declared a ‘people’s government zone’. They said that Maoist approval is a must for working in these regions and the organisations would be allowed to work only if they agree to pay royalties to the Maoists. Though the Maoists do not have any problems with United Nations mediation in the peace process, Maoist activists in Solukhumbu do not view the UN positively.

“We have demanded a royalty of 15 percent for every Rs 100,000 and will spend the money on development activities for the villages,” said Rajendra. A team that had gone to the region this week for tourism promotion was challenged by Maoists, who said: “Give us Rs 5,000 out of every Rs 200,000. You spend the rest and compete with us in the promotional activities.” Rajendra said that details on amount collected from tourists and NGOs would be made public. He said that money is being collected from the NGOs because they have high overheads. For the moment, the decree is valid in the lower regions of Solukhumbu in Jibling, Beri, Garma, Kaku, Wasa, Kagel, Tingla, Kerung, Tapling, Patia, Jumbesi and Surkhan.

One of the projects affected is UNDP’s Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP) in 12 VDCs. TRPAP’s five-year plan of developing physical infrastructure in the region has been affected. More than 10,000 people were to benefit from the program.

“Since we will not be able to provide 15 percent tax as demanded by the Maoists, it seems that we will have to close down the program,” said a TRPAP official. Don Pokhrel, the CDO said development will lag behind due to Maoist activities. (Nepalnews.com)
No room for fear

This is a condensed version of Ganju Lama’s testimony, based on the Sikkimese winner of the Victoria Cross’ interview with Radio Sagarmatha in 1999. His story appears with those of other Gurkha soldiers in Lahurey ka Katha, translated by Dev Bahadur Thapa for Nepali Times.

I enlisted in the British Army in 1942 at Ghoom, Darjeeling. In March 1943 we were sent to Burma. We joined our regiment in village called Dadakora where we were divided into companies. Mines had 180 men and we were sent to the frontline every day. We fought for a year in Burma. Once we plunged into war, there was no room for fear. The only thought that haunted us was whether we would be able to return home.

Occasional misadventures took place. Sometimes the enemy surrounded us and we had to fight our way out. At one point we were forced to retreat. We were to reach Manipur to wipe out Manipur for a week, after which, we were assigned to defend the brigade. Another regiment was stationed six miles ahead of us. Their orders were to check enemy advancements. One day, six Japanese tankers wiped out a company of Agam Singh Rai’s regiment. We were told the second regiment was in trouble, and had to attack and reverse the situation.

This was not easy. We walked in the scorching sun and planes bombed us. There was artillery fire and tanks too. All we could do was hide in the hills and attack because we had no tanks.

Then we had the chance to lead an offensive against six Japanese tanks. It was dangerous because they were advancing in an open field and could crush anything. Then they came to a slate. On one side was a river and a bog on the other—if a tank sank in the bog, it was impossible to get out. I crawled along the path, barely bigger than a mute track, and blew up the first tank with a six-pounder ball. The second met the same fate. I attempted to clear the way, but it took me a lot of time. It was then that I realised that I was a sitting duck out in the open too. The Japanese opened fire from machine guns and I was hit on my left leg, left and right hands. I was forced to drop my gun. I needed to take cover. Since my legs were broken, I dragged myself to safety in a shallow ditch. Six enemy soldiers came towards me, my booties shining in the sunlight. I thought it was going to be my last fight. Then I remembered I had hand grenades. With one finger almost severed and my hand slippery with blood, I removed the pins with my teeth and threw the grenades in the direction of the enemy. It kept them at bay and luckily, the debris from the continuous blasts covered me. The tank’s crew passed me by without seeing me.

Shortly afterwards, my platoon arrived and I was taken to the regimental first aid post on a stretcher. From there it was the brigade hospital and then an overnight journey to the military hospital at Manipur where I was operated. I slept for four days and woke up in bed surrounded by a crowd of 医院 patients. I was forced to stay in the hospital for nearly two weeks. After the recuperation period, I was taken to Dhanak by plane where I heard that I was awarded the Victoria Cross. I didn’t know quite what to think because I did not know how important it was.

When I enlisted, I was called Ganju instead of my proper name of Gyanmicho, and it stuck. The government in Delhi informed my village that Ganju Lama received an award and inquired about my family so they could be there at the investiture. My father flatly denied having a son with the name Ganju. They made enquiries in Nepal and the Nepalis supposed they tried in Sikkim again. The King of Sikkim too was confused till he figured it out and my father was informed. Sikkim’s prestige was at stake so they coached my father and brother on how to behave at the Dholi durbar. The King made them bhadkas of Chinese silk and traditional caps for the ceremony. After I was awarded, my father returned to Sikkim. I went back to my regiment. (Concluded)

Skiing down Cho Oyu

Climbing the 8,000m Cho Oyu is hard enough, but for some people getting to the top is not enough. They insist on skiing down.

Like 22-year-old Dutch climber, Greg Nieuwenhuys, who climbed and then skied down the world’s sixth highest mountain on 28 April. This year is the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Cho Oyu by a Swiss expedition, but it is not getting as much worldwide media attention as the Everest anniversary did last year. Only 15km away from Everest, Cho Oyu is overshadowed by the world’s highest mountain in more ways than one.

Nieuwenhuys was out to change all that. He wanted to prove that Cho Oyu is a strong mountain with its own personality and wanted to test his own limit. Two weeks later, he still looks completely washed out. Having climbed without oxygen, and racked by a cough on the mountain, he returned a rib.

Together with his climbing partner Joost Schreve, 29, and doctor Herman Firma, 29, the trio spent seven months preparing for the expedition. Starting with getting $100,000 in sponsorships, they went to the Alps for a ski and climbing training session and spent a month acclimatising and skiing in Langtang down some 46 degree couloirs. Back in the Netherlands there isn’t anywhere to practice since the highest mountain there is 321m high. “It is difficult to define a successful ski descent,” says mountainering chronicler Elizabeth Hawley. “It’s a very rare person who is crazy enough to try.”

The team set out to base camp from the Tibet side on 23 March. It took a herd of yaks to carry up the 1,500kg of gear and food, including 1,000m of rope, 130kg of rice and communications equipment. The team was overcome with stomach ailments and effects of altitude, and had to descend to base camp. They set off again on 26 April and reached the highest point of 8,022m two days later. This time Nieuwenhuys was able to carry on. Everest came in view. He had reached the summit.

“To be honest, I did not really enjoy the moment,” Nieuwenhuys says. “I was so extremely tired. We took a couple of pictures and clicked into my ski and pointed them towards base camp. It was a descent I will never forget.” The real adventure had just begun.

Nieuwenhuys started to feel better and better as he raced down in his skis (see pic). “It’s difficult and you have to be very careful, a mistake can be fatal, but it is an amazing feeling to make your own tracks in such high altitude and to ski down difficult steep ridges, passing climbers who are on their way up.”

Nieuwenhuys had to replace his skis with crampons twice. The first time was after 100 vertical meters of skiing, because the weather deteriorated quickly. After a night in camp 3, he continued the ski descent from 7,441m to an ice cliff at 6,800m. A short abseil, and he climbed into his skin again. Asked what he’ll do next, Nieuwenhuys says: “I imagine I’ll be back.” (Maarten Post)

Heavy traffic on Everest

A total of 33 climbers, 14 of them Sherpas, climbed the world’s highest peak this week during a break in the weather on 15 -16 May. All were climbing up the classic southeast ridge. The climbers belonged to four different expeditions. Among those on top was the legendary Apa Sherpa who got to the top for a record 14th time on Monday morning.

The other climbers were from South Korea, New Zealand, Mexico, Scotland and the US.
Terror vs Liberty

There are limits to tolerance

The terrorism that we have come to associate with al-Qaeda is special in many ways. It is global, technologically sophisticated, but, above all, it is not about an achievable political objective. It is aimed at what used to be called the West, that is, a liberal order of things, a free world.

COMMENT
Ralf Dahrendorf

Because the United States is the most visible and powerful representative of that free world, it is aimed against America and its closest allies in Europe and elsewhere.

This is a critical fact to remember. What we describe under the heading of al-Qaeda is an essentially negative, destructive movement. It does not offer an alternative vision of the modern world other than the implicit claim that modernity is neither necessary nor desirable.

Violence born from such sources is difficult to fight. Signs of frustration with modernity are never hard to find. They are present in highly developed countries, but above all in many regions of the world that are suspended between a yesterday that no longer exists and a tomorrow that has not yet come into being. How, then, do free countries deal with terrorist expressions of organised frustration?

Without doubt, the first priority for any free country must be to protect its citizens and users against acts of terrorism violence. Given a globalised movement of fury, this is not simple. It requires measures that do not come easily to citizens, groups and authorities steeped in a tradition of liberalism and tolerance.

We must accept that there are limits to tolerance. Non-aggressive demonstrations of determination— including Islamic headscarves worn by students or teachers in largely Christian countries—should be bearable. But violence should never be tolerated.

The monopoly on the use of violence exercised by democratic states must be preserved, which may involve expelling non-citizens who choose violence or advocate its use, and the detention of citizens who have practiced or threatened it. However, it is of critical importance that the treatment of terrorists and those suspected of terrorist acts remains strict within the rule of law. The status of the prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay and the recent incidents of possibly systematic humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners cast doubt on the very values on which a liberal order is based.

Terrorism aimed at the destruction of the liberal order is a test of that order. This is particularly so if one accepts—as I do—intervention in the internal affairs of countries in order to prevent genocide or the murderous suppression of minorities and opposition groups. But intervention must never borrow methods from those against whom it is undertaken.

This applies also to the intervening powers’ objectives. Terrorism of the al-Qaeda type is basically destructive. Any response must be basically constructive. The frustration of many in the economically developed countries is, like the frustration of entire countries in developing regions, a challenge. This challenge cannot really be met by simply promising unlimited opportunities, as they uniquely exist in America. It requires a sense of social responsibility that accompanies and cushions the painful process of modernisation. People who are suspended between a lost past and a future not yet gained need help. Such assistance will not yield immediate results, but awareness of the medium-term— which means readiness to face it by delaying immediate gratification—is also a sign of a liberal order.

The fighting al-Qaeda is not a war. It is partly self-defence, partly an assertion of the rule of law in difficult circumstances and partly a brave effort to redress the causes of frustrations.

(© Project Syndicate)

Ralf Dahrendorf, author and a former European Commissioner from Germany, is a former Rector of the London School of Economics.

Corruption drain

The World Bank has lost about $100 billion dollars slated for development in the world’s poorest nations to corruption since 1946, nearly 20 percent of its total lending portfolio, according to a US Senate committee. Experts estimate that between five and 25 percent of the $525 billion the Bank has lent since 1946 has been misused. This amounts to $26-130 billion.

The estimates emerged at the first in a series of oversight hearings into the anti-corruption efforts of the World Bank and other multilateral development banks (MDBs), which include the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Asian Development Bank, the African Development Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Corruption has become a global issue as developing countries, watching groups and some economists complain that poor nations lose huge funds from MDBs like the World Bank because of misuse of money. Yet taxpayers in those borrowing countries still have to repay the banks. Corruption also undermines the development impact of the banks’ projects, for example, if contractors use diluted cement in civil works like road-building, officials permit illegal timber harvesting in restricted forest areas or grant profitable public contracts go to well-connected cronies of government officials.

Resurrection

GENEVA – The 11th sessions of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), to take place next month in Sao Paulo, will be a political event that could help get international trade talks back on track. The negotiations of the Doha Round, launched in November 2001 in the Qatari capital, are being promoted by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to liberalise world trade and encourage development. The organisation’s ministers set a deadline of 1 January 2005 to wrap up the talks. But the course of the negotiations has come practically to a standstill because of the failure to meet the intermediate deadlines set by the WTO members and especially because of the debate in December 2003 at the ministerial conference held in the Mexican resort of Cancun.

The tensions mostly revolve around the liberalisation of agricultural trade, and particularly the market access of farm products, which the industrialised countries limit with their high import tariffs—and developing countries aim to eliminate or at least cut drastically. The stagnation of the talks is one of the key elements of the economic context in which the UNCTAD sessions will take place 13-18 June. Representatives from all of the UN countries, including non-WTO members will take part in the Sao Paulo meeting, which will also be the UN’s only economic conference this year.

Vulnerable to AIDS

BRUSSELS – HIV/AIDS is the greatest threat to development in African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. European interest groups are warning. More than 13.4 million children under the age of 15 have lost their mother, father or both parents to AIDS, according to UNICEF, an NGO-umbrella network of more than 2,000 European development agencies. The human rights group says that 80 percent of these orphans live in sub-Saharan Africa. Civil society highlighted the need to tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic in a presentation at the 28th session of the ACAP-council of ministers meeting in Gaberone, Botswana last weekend.

The meeting identified children as the most vulnerable group. There is little appreciation of the magnitude of the problems related to orphans and children made vulnerable by the disease in many countries, UNICEF says, adding that “children’s lack of political influence and an audible voice” is one of the major hurdles in protecting their interests. The European Union (EU) and ACP countries have signed up to a number of commitments to address the issue of HIV/AIDS and their wider impact. These measures include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed in 2000 to halve world poverty and improve education and health by 2015.
FESTIVAL AND EXHIBITIONS
- Utopian Introspection Multimedia exhibition by Sujan Chitrakar till 29 May at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited. 4218048
- Nepal in Nepal Art exhibition till 29 May at Gallery Mekhut, Pulchok.
- 8th Nepal Education & Book Fair 2004 22-30 May at Bhrikuti Mandap.
- Mega Live Concert with Sabin Rai, Deepesh Shaltari and Jem Pradhan 2PM on 22 May at BICC. Tickets Rs 100
- Fun and Food Carnival 22 May at Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 449124
- Lux Star Beauty 2004 Final 7PM on 22 May at Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 449124
- Ani Choying’s Concert for the Nuns’ Welfare 2PM on 22 May at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu.

MUSIC
- Full Circle 7PM Fridays at Bakery Café, Jawalakhel. 4434545
- Dee at Not Just The Jazz Bar 20 May at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu.
- JCS Trio at Fusion every Friday, Dwarika’s Hotel. 4479488

FOOD
- Wraps and dips till 23 May at the Coffee Shop, Hotel de Tahapuna. 4259856
- Summit’s Barbecue Dinner with vegetarian specials. Summit Hotel. 5521810
- Vegetarian Creations at Stupa View Restaurant. 4480262
- Splash Spring BBQ Wednesday and Friday evenings. Radisson Hotel Kathmandu.
- Executive Lunch at Toran Restaurant, Dwarika’s. 4479488
- Sunny Side Up Weekend BBQ at Saatfee Crowne Plaza Kathmandu. 4279389
- The Beer Garden at Vajrayantha, Godavari Village Resort. 5506675

GETAWAYS
- Wet & Wild Summer Splash at the Godavari Village Resort. 01 4361500
- Jungle Base Camp. junglebascamp@yahoo.com
- Golf at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa. 4451212
- Weekend Special at Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha. 4375280
- Early Bird discounts at Shangri-La Hotel & Resort. 4412999
- Summer at Shivapuri Heights. steve@escape2nepal.com

KATHMANDU VALLEY

NEPALI WEATHER
by MAUSAM BEED
Early this week, dry and hot days changed to wet and cool. The rains, however, were just pre-humid showers, a dress rehearsal for the wet season. This year, the real monsoon is expected to begin a week earlier than the usual 19 June date. This sadistic picture shows a cloud mass over the Himalayas, extending all the way to the southern tarai. With a steady downpour in the Bay of Bengal, it will bring light to heavy rains over the weekend and into early next week. Keep an umbrella handy because surprise showers will interrupt our bright sunny days.

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY
Although the two day Nepal budai on Tuesday and Wednesday brought down the concentration of PM10 (particles that are smaller than 10 micron in diameter) in Kathmandu’s air by about 25 percent, the pollution level remained high. In areas like Katalbandi, the PM10 level was more than twice the national standard of 125 micrometers per cubic meter. With the rains and the three-day bandha this week, the air quality may improve marginally but it is still far from national and international standards.

Pepsi Blue
Fanta
Red Bull
Diet Coke
Himalaya
Unhealthy

9-15 May in micrometers per cubic meter

Himalayan, the only national daily in the country, is the property of Times Group.

Festival of Colors: Divided We Stand
Patanjali Golu Thakuru, Shankar Raghuvaran
Sage, 2004
Rs 560

This topical and absorbing book, written by two eminent journalists, convincingly argues against commonly held beliefs concerning Indian politics. The authors say coalitions are here to stay and the polity is not essentially bipolar. They advance that coalition governments are better equipped to deal with the tensions of a divided society.

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Golf at 70+
Still going strong after half century of golf

If you asked to tell golf in Nepal that the regular player in the country was probably Devinder Chaudhry, they would be excused for being a bit confused. However, if I said that, religiously, in the cold of winter, whether rain or shine, early every morning DC Khanna can be found at Gokarna Golf Club, they may well smile with fascination, just as I do. I must admit I am quite taken and inspired by his dedication, knowledge and love for the game.

At the age of 74, Khanna plays from the championship tee, has a handicap of 18 and still takes lessons from us pros, striving to ever improve. He believes “if a thing is worth doing, it must be done well”. He is so knowledgeable about the game that most golfers, including myself, are reverently impressed. Always seen helping golfers with insightful tips, he has inducted a fair number in Nepal into the game.

I note some time from the busy schedule of the CEO of Siddhartha Bank and gleaned some reflections from his half century of golfing experience.

Golf in Bhutan

Tee Break
Deepak Acharya

How long have you been playing and what drove you to start the game?
I’ve been playing since 1952. It all started in Kolkata. At that time I was working with Lloyds Bank and most officers had to join a club. I joined Royal Kolkata Golf Club in 1953.

Do you take golf as a hobby or something more? To me, golf is much more than a hobby. It’s a way of life. The game imparts discipline and much needed exercise, both of mind and body.

Do you play golf as a hobby or something more? To me, golf is much more than a hobby. It’s a way of life. The game imparts discipline and much needed exercise, both of mind and body.

What advice would you like to give to your corporate colleagues about golf? I would say, “Don’t hesitate and waste time.” Start playing this game and keep it up. Golf will keep you away from trouble and mischief. There is no doubt that you can win over business by interacting with people you meet through golf.

What golfing positions have you held and what has been your best score in a competition? I served as Captain of Kolkata Golf Club, Kolkata in 1981 / 82. I was the treasurer of the Indian Golf Union around the same time. My best performance was 44 points playing in the Ducan Cup, Kolkata in 1973. Back then I was a 15 handicap and played 4 over for the day.

Who is your favorite golfer? I am very fond of Ben Hogan.

Rick Lipsy covers golf for Sports Illustrated www.golfbhutan.com
I could almost be a trick question: what do soldiers and poets have in common? Their sensitivities are equally strong," says Brig Gen Rajendra Thapa, the newly-appointed spokesperson of the Royal Nepali Army. His unique experience in both fields gives him firsthand experience. "I am a strong soldier, therefore I am a strong poet, and vice-versa."

The 'sensitivities' Rajendra talks about include the way he fell in love with nature when he was 10. It also includes the sight of soldiers willing to sacrifice their lives for their country. That, he says, is how the poet in him adjusted to the rigours of military life. The son of a policeman, he feels he knows his fellow Nepalis because he grew up living wherever his father's job took him. "All Nepalis have the same way of living, it is just the styles that are different and that is what I use in my work," he says.

Rajendra’s most famous lines are the lyrics put to music by Aruna Lama: "Pohor sala maya phatyo". As a self-made soldier he climbed his way up the hierarchy with hard work. As a poet, Rajendra knew better than to ignore his inner voice. A prolific writer, he is choosy about sharing his work or allowing it to be put to music. His lyrics 'Mer Khukuri ko naulo katha' is already a musical hit and is quite timely considering that Nepalis aren't using their khukuriis against outside enemies anymore, but against each other. "We already have Nepali blood and a Nepali mind, what we need now is Nepali sight," go the words of the song.

Rajendra’s new job doesn’t allow him much time to write. But sometimes the goddess of knowledge inspires him. "When Saraswati comes to me, I become most creative no matter how occupied I am with other work." He has written several gazals in Hindi that even singer Ghulam Ali has complimented. Rajendra is waiting for the right channel to distribute them to the Indian market. So, what inspires this man in combat fatigue to wax lyrical? It is the simple things: words of wisdom from an old woman working her land in a remote part of Nepal, or the dove cooing from a tree branch on a clear morning. "Philosophy is not in the books," he says. "It is what the average person says.

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Rajendra thought dealing with the media would be messy and a potential minefield. ‘Then the poet stepped in. He quips with feigned surprise: ‘I began to discover that press people too are like other human beings.’’

Min Bahadur
very time human beings find themselves in a different cultural milieu than the one they are familiar with, they suffer from a phenomenon known as culture shock and need expert guidance in local customs and etiquette. This is especially true of countries like Nepal where the habits of easy-going natives may not be familiar to first-time visitors: like the tradition of taking a forced three-day nationwide holiday twice a month. The rules of the road are fairly simple: Two Legs Good, Four Wheels Bad, Three Legs Bad Unless It Is Three Wheels And Has Wings. Rollerblades Are OK, Cablecars Are Not. Rickshaws Are Fine, Autorickshaws Are Not.

See, if you didn’t know these quaint local customs you would be completely lost in Nepal. That is why we have taken the liberty of presenting a list of simple do’s and don’ts and the general rule of thumb which is: while in Nepal, be as disgusting as us.

Public Grooming
Nepalis love to nippick and can be seen doing this in public on the sidewalks, on terraces and balconies at all times of day and night. Usually anyone can nippick anyone else, but since looking for lice on someone else’s hair is an indication of some degree of mutual intimacy it is frowned upon if it involves two or more individuals of the same sex. It is perfectly acceptable, however, to approach a stranger sitting next to you in a long-distance bus and after necessary introductions start looking for nits in each others’ hair. Besides being a great way to pass the time, it is also mutually hygienic.

Toothpicking is another favourite past-time and, luckily in Nepal, there are no rules governing how people with advanced halitosis should pick their teeth in polite company. This is why many foreigners opt to make Nepal their home because they don’t have to worry about exhuming items of food from their molars within earshot of guests sitting around the table. We are proud to say that there is complete freedom within Nepal’s territorial waters as far as self-exploration of the oral cavity is concerned.

The nose is another orifice that we Nepalis are proud to call our own. Thanks to our ancestors who risked life and limb to explore its uncharted upper reaches, the terrain map has been handed from generation to generation through word of mouth so that today we modern Nepalis are quite familiar with our nooks and crannies. The probe of choice for nasal expeditions is the pinkie with a nail that is designed to grow into the shape of a tiny shovel that can efficiently mine nuggets of precious body deep inside our snouts.

Because of space constraints we can’t go into the conventions of etiquette governing the grooming of other body parts. Suffice to say that Nepal also has a laissez faire attitude about expelling body fluids. A visitor to Nepal need not be unduly concerned about clearing the throat in public. It is done with a quick intake of breath to dislodge the primary target area in the oesophagus, pneumatically roll it into an aerodynamically stable glob, and then with the same technology used in shoulder-fired heatseeking missiles expectorate this biological warhead at an innocent bystander.

Next week we will be looking at the endearing Nepali passion of rummaging through the toolbox in public.