Nepal’s conflict enters its ninth year this weekend. In that time, besides the cost in human lives the war has set the country back between 20 to 30 years, depending on who you talk to.

In the absence of reliable data, it is difficult to measure the slippage. But most experts agree that development parameters like infant mortality, literacy and life expectancy that had shown marked improvement in the 1990s are sliding again.

“Development has come to a halt,” says academic Pitambar Sharma, “The figures show improvement but that flies in the face of logic.”

Nepal’s Health Management Information System (HMIS) used to be one of the most reliable and comprehensive in the developing world, with every village recording vital statistics like birth, causes of death, migration. VDC chairmen used to be able to rattle off the main childhood killer diseases in their village, they had literacy and fertility statistics at their fingertips.

Not any more. Even local officials now admit figures are doctored. Village councils have not existed for five years and officials usually send data showing steady progress.

“The impact of conflict should be reflected in the figures but they aren’t,” says an assistant health worker based in a midwestern district. She estimates that maternal mortality must have gone back to pre-1990 levels because of the lack of mobility: many mothers die because they can’t be taken to hospitals at childbirth due to blocked roads.

The 2002 figures for infant mortality in the latest UNDP Human Development Report is 68.5 per 1,000 live births, but many have doubts about the accuracy of this figure and estimate that in the three years since infant mortality must have gone down even further.

The health posts don’t have assistant health workers or simple antibiotics to treat pneumonia in children. But in Kathmandu, a UN official while admitting that the conflict has impacted adversely says there may be mitigating factors. Displacement has eased pressure on land and food, and remittances have improved income levels.

“Health posts were not doing much for public health anyway,” she said, “female health workers were the ones providing real service.” Indeed, there are now an estimated 40,000 female health volunteers who provide basic health care all over the country. Because they are all locals, their work continues despite the conflict.

Still, school enrollment is down. Boys have fled fearing Maoist abduction and many girls have stopped going to school because they have to help at home. Most teachers have run away except where rebels have forced them to stay. All this is impacting literacy levels, says an INGO field officer in western Nepal.

Infrastructure has been hard hit, the roads department can’t even spend 10 percent of its budget earmarked for national level projects. The only ones still being built are the those with local participation. There have been serious reversals in telephone coverage, civil aviation and administrative infrastructure.

Even though it is hard to measure the impact of the conflict on the health and education of Nepalis, experts extrapolate the charts and say if there hadn’t been an insurgency adult literacy would have increased, infant and maternal mortality would be reduced and fertility rate would have come down.

...the insurgency has pushed Nepal back at least 20 years

KUNDA DIXIT
Righting wrongs

 Failure to engage in democratic debate will revive authoritarian fantasies of the past

T
wenty-five years ago, only Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela were reasonably stable Latin American democracies. Today, what might be considered electoral democracies are found throughout the region. Indeed, at no time since independence has there been such a proliferation of democracy in Latin America. But what has been gained is never guaranteed. A military coup is not the only way to destroy a free society. The political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell observed, democracy’s flame can also be extinguished gradually when the promise of justice, social progress fails to materialise. During the 25 years of the spectacular rise of Latin American democracy, per capita income has increased by a mere $300. Even in Chile, which enjoyed high economic growth and cut poverty in half, and Brazil which lowered the percentage of citizens living below the poverty line by a third during the 1980s, the concentration of wealth has increased.

This isn’t for lack of structural changes. Political changes helped spread democracy in Latin America, structural economic reforms were strengthened. But profound economic and political transformation masked a deep disparity between reform and reality. Although this gap endangers the future of Latin American democracy, many leaders consider it apathy to admit that living standards are little better today than they were during the era of dictators. Their first inclination is to defend electoral democracies on the grounds they no longer engage in torture or killings. But consider this: Amnesty International and the US State Department have three basic indicators of human rights—the right to life, the right to physical safety and the right to freedom from political persecution. They use a scale of one to five, with one representing an optimal level of human rights and five indicating conditions of general terror. During 1977, the worst year for human rights violations, the average Latin American rate of terror stood at 3.0. In 2003, after two decades of democracy, it was 2.6. By contrast, the terror index for Western Europe was 1.1. Still, to insist that Latin American democracy has been a major disappointment would not merely be pessimistic; it would fail to recognise that the most important values of a free society include the capacity to change, to rectify and to improve. The problem does not lie with our shortcomings but with the way we choose to resolve them. The role of the state, the market and the region’s place in the global economy all need urgent attention and discussion. Yet our leaders consider these subjects taboo. Our first challenge is to recognise that electoral government has failed to lead to a true democracy of the people. Our second challenge is to find the keys to open that door. Latin America seems to lack the will to establish a true people’s democracy and it has tied itself to a narrow market economy whose bad outcomes are apparent to everyone. But government has a crucial role to play in the debate over the creation of democracy. Merely returning to big government will not reverse anything because it is inefficient and generates the opposite but equivalent imbalance. Indeed, it may be that the framework for a state that can provide over a true democracy has yet to be created. The Washington Consensus does not forecast increase in CPA or eliminate poverty. It does, however, increase inequality. Do we abandon market economy? No, political liberty cannot be separated from economic liberty.

Failure to engage in critical debates about democracy will provide fertile ground for reviving the authoritarian fantasies of the past. If political leaders lose their fear of debating important issues, Latin America can move forward. Having won some of their freedoms, the people should not be forced to pay the high price implied by their leaders’ failure to open forbidden issues to debate.

Project Syndicate

Dante Caputo, a former Foreign Minister of Argentina, was director of the UN Development Program’s Project on Democratic Development in Latin America.
As per Article 127 of the 1990 constitution, King Gyanendra has formed a new cabinet under his chairmanship. The King appointed 10 ministers from different ethnic backgrounds: Newar, Brahmin-Chetri, Thakali who hail from the hills, tarai and Kathmandu Valley. Seven of the ministers are new faces in the public arena: Shobhit Koirala, Minister for Home; Ramesh Pandey, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Baburam Bhattarai, Minister for Defence; Bhandari, Minister for Agriculture; Dura Whip, Minister for Home Affairs; Negi, Minister for Health; Devkota, Minister for Law; and Shrestha, Minister for Tourism.

The new ministers have been appointed to start a dual band based mobile system with the 'Mero Mobile' trademark. Spice Telecom plans to launch with GSM 900 and 1,800 bands from Nokia, Siemens, Ericsson and three others. Negotiations are being conducted with these companies under the leadership of Khagendra Bahadur GC, Local Development from the Maoist-afflicted Pyuthan district, served as general manager and is known as a hardliner. Begun in politics with the leftist students' union.

Buddh Narayan Chaudhary, Minister for Finance, served as public prosecutor. Khagendra Bahadur GC, Local Development from the Maoist-afflicted Pyuthan district, served as general manager and is known as a hardliner. Begun in politics with the leftist students' union.

The Fuldibright & The West-East Center 2005 Scholarship Competition

The Fulbright & The West-East Center 2005 Scholarship Competition is scheduled to begin on 8 Feburary 2005. The competition provides a unique opportunity for Master degree students to study in the United States and Nepal. The competition is open to all qualified students from the United States and Nepal who hold a Bachelor's degree or equivalent and who have a minimum GPA of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale). Students must be citizens of the United States or Nepal. The Fulbright & The West-East Center 2005 Scholarship Competition is open to all qualified students from the United States and Nepal who hold a Bachelor's degree or equivalent and who have a minimum GPA of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale). Students must be citizens of the United States or Nepal.

The application process is competitive and involves several stages: submission of application materials, interview, and visa requirements. Students are encouraged to thoroughly review the application guidelines and requirements before submitting their applications. The application deadline is 30 April, 2005. Successful applicants will be notified by 30 June, 2005.

All applicants must:

1. Possess a Bachelor's degree in an academic discipline.
2. Have completed at least two years of study at a recognized institution of higher learning.
3. Have a minimum GPA of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale).
4. Submit a completed application form, which includes an essay, transcript(s), two letters of recommendation, and a personal statement.
5. Attend an interview with the Fulbright & The West-East Center 2005 Scholarship Selection Committee.

General Requirements for Entering the Competition:

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Reason over reaction

What should be the prescribed course of action for the international community?

With the royal proclamation of February First, Nepal has once again been thrust into the international limelight. The question at hand is not whether to support or oppose King Gyanendra’s actions. What is lacking is a range of perspectives emanating from those to whom political developments in Nepal matter most: Nepali citizens. And what should be the prescribed course of action for the international community? Let’s dispense with some of the more common misperceptions that mainstream media has capitalised on.

First, media reports have been rife with official statements from foreign governments which have bluntly demanded the immediate restoration of previously established democracy in Nepal. Those who subscribe to the underlying ideals of democracy (and comprehend not only democratic freedoms but also associated responsibilities) can’t seriously insist on the re-establishment of a set of principles that ceased to exist years before February First.

What Nepal had was a judiciary with the power to indict parties with the ability to incite violence but not be held accountable, security forces with a broad mandate to protect but no clear objectives which to execute. Surely, when responsible world leaders call for the restoration of Nepal’s system of ‘multiparty democracy’, one would hope that they are not implying a move towards the status quo ante, s.o.m.e?

Second, the right to assemble, freedom of speech, and the right against preventative detention (while extremely important) are not the only principles enshrined under the broader democratic umbrella. The right to peaceful co-existence (without fear of intimidation), the right to education (without political disruption), the right to a proper childhood (without being subject to indoctrination), the right to freedom of speech and association, basic human freedoms, the right to property, are all also enshrined under the broader democratic umbrella.

Third, it would be misleading for the international community to formulate its course of action based on the assumption that a minority two percent (representative of Nepal’s relatively educated and politically savvy elite) accounts for the collective views of a nation at the same time. It is especially true when no consensus exists within that two percent itself.

Alors enfin is the underlying assumption that the ‘representative elite’ is guided purely by populist concerns. No more need be said on this except to note their self-serving nature and absolute unwillingness to even begin to look at the root problems of the country. And although it is unfair to group all Nepali politicians in this inept category, it would also be a great disservice to imply that there are more than a handful of respectable leaders.

While the prospect of non-authoritarian rule (for the interim) is alarming, one must take into account the alternative.

BOB MARLEY

It is with great interest that I read Annap Pandey’s article on Bob Marley (‘Rasta of rasta and reggae’, #238). I am a professor of mathematics here in California as well as a reggae DJ and historian on the side for the last 12 years. I am afraid that Bob Marley has never been to Nepal or India. I am good friends with Roger Steffens (Marley’s archivist and historian) Him and I have had countless hours of discussion on Bob Marley’s life. We have concluded that he has never been to Nepal. Bob’s music touched us in the 1970s and I was very pleased to see that his music is just as strong today in Nepal. I was there only a month ago and left many rambles of Bob Marley CDs with some of my friends and also some bars around Lajimpat and Thamel. Also, there has been quite a discussion on sadhus vs rastas but there is yet to be any link between them other than the few similarities.

Sanjay Dev, California

• Thank you for that excellent curtain-raiser on the Bob Marley 60th anniversary. Bob Marley was not just a musical prophet; he was also a messiah for the Third World and decades ahead of his time. What he did for African pride and for the self-esteem of the ‘two-thirds world’ through his music is incalculable. Perhaps the reason for his popularity in Nepal is that the Nepali people feel downtrodden and want to sing his redemption song?

Kumar Pradhan, Kathmandu

TREES

Thank you very much for the editorial. There are readers around and across the world who can measure the depth of an article. Thank you for being loyal to your profession as well as your country at the same time.

Anup Kapilie, Westminster City Council, UK

• I think your editorial was extremely good. At first, I was taken aback by the simplicity and irrelevance of the material, but I was forced to read between the lines. If I am thinking what you are thinking then this is an excellent piece of journalism. Well done and keep up the good work.

Buddha Shrestha, email

• Once more the Nepal media has shown that it will rise up to the occasion and that show will not be meek and compliant. When will the authorities realise that curbing information makes it worse for them because it spreads negative rumours, provokes panic and paranoia? And when they finally end up telling the truth no one will believe them. As usual your editorial is a vivid example of shooting oneself in the foot that we in the outside world get information from Nepal except from underground groups. Such a ban on Nepal-based causes affected also the government’s own homepage!

Tashi Namgyal, Seattle, USA

• Your editorial on tree felling represented a welcome if perhaps
Maoist totalitarianism. Clearly, endorsing Maoism is not a viable option by national or international standards. This is even more the case when considering theIndian position that has not swerved from its declaration of the Maoists as terrorists and the US government’s addition of the Maoists to its terrorist watch list.

India simply can’t afford to alienate Nepal at this critical juncture. If New Delhi was to abandon Kathmandu, all bets would be off including certain arms procurement covenants between the two countries, which may then leave Nepal with no option but to deal with the Chinese, a nightmare for both India and the US.

More seriously, disengaging Nepal now would open the door to the Maoists’ long-sought Compact Revolutionary Zone through which Indian and Nepali Maoists function across national and state boundaries to much the manner of the communists in Southeast Asia in their fight against the Americans during the 1970s.

All of Nepal’s well-wishers want genuine multi-party democracy in Nepal. There is no ambiguity or ulterior motive. But the time to forward this agenda will undoubtedly come and will be accomplished with support, but not direct involvement from the international community.

That time is never now. And lobbying to force the king to reverse his decision, threatening to cut off foreign aid to Nepal, and alternating the new government are not means with which to ensure a democratic future for Nepal. If we can’t unite to guarantee the sovereign integrity of our nation, there is no honor, no pride in calling ourselves Nepalis.

Ashwini Nepal gave birth to this baby girl at 11:00 AM on 1 February at Patan Hospital.
The media has always argued that such "soft" stories don’t interest the public as much as juicy political ones. This could be true but only because the public wasn’t given a choice. This could be the time to start doing news that is relevant to people’s lives, raise their awareness and even spread optimism and motivation. In the past years, with the escalation of conflict there have been unending talk shops. On a typical day there would be simultaneous workshops covered in extracurricular detail by TV, radio and print. Good-patrikari dominated coverage with visuals of inaugurations, chief guests speaking from the podiums, cameras panning across the self-conscious audience and journalists then scooting off across town to cover another series of talking heads. Today, media has fewer conscious audience and journalists than scooting off across town to watch one TV channel or listening to one radio station, never giving the whole story.

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The government finally terminated the contract with Koneko last year, seized its performance guarantee of Rs 50 million and called for new bids.

The China Civil Engineering Corporation (CCEC) was chosen over five Chinese, Indian and Japanese bidders.

The controversy even dragged MWSP officials to the corruption watchdog, CAA and the National Vigilance Centre which began an investigation.

“We think we have been able to convince the commission and the centre that everything is above board,” one MWSP official told us.

The project and its main contractor, the ADB, seem happy with the selection of the Chinese company and say its Rs 1 billion bid is “quite reasonable”. Koneko, they say, had quoted an artificially low amount to be selected with the intention of “padding it up”.

One MWSP official said they are preparing to invite tender for the appointment of the contractors of tunnel construction. “We will call for the tender by August,” said Dhruba Balchuck, executive director of MWSP.

Since the first 20 km of the tunnel construction is being funded by Norwegian and Swedish governments in grant and mixed credit, contractors of only those two countries will be allowed to bid. With the Asian Development Bank funding the last seven km of the tunnel construction, international bidding will be allowed for that part.

The government is not able to meet even half the current demand for 200 million litres a day in Kathmandu Valley. However, critics say the Melamchi project is too expensive and cheaper alternatives, such as the building of storage reservoirs inside the Valley, have not been adequately explored.
Kofi warns child soldier recruiters

In his final report submitted to the Security Council, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has not missed out Nepal while referring to child soldiers across the world. The other countries mentioned in his report are Burundi, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Sudan, Colombia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Uganda. “In Nepal, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist recruited underage soldiers and killed children, including more than 50 in the first half of last year,” the report said. In the report, Annan has recommended sanctions against groups who use child soldiers. “These sanctions could include travel bans on leaders, arms embargoes and a restriction on the flow of financial resources to the parties concerned,” he said. The UN Security Council is to debate Annan’s report on 23 February. The UN special representative for children in armed conflict, Olara Otunnu, said Annan’s report marked a turning point for “transforming words into deeds”. Some 54 groups, including state and rebel forces, use children as soldiers.

ARV costs

Even though the price of the anti-retroviral drugs to treat AIDS patients have come down to Rs 33 per person a day, only 25 out of 5,000 infected people in Nepal are getting it. Those who have access to the drugs pay Rs420 per year. “The common minimum price that was discussed was $200 per person a year,” said Rajib Kafle, an activist who himself has HIV. Kafle said that the price of anti-retrovirals came down because of generic drugs that ended the monopoly of multinationals. Though brand manufacturers claim that their investment on research and development has added to the high cost of their drugs, generic manufacturers disagree. Kafle says ARV drugs can be made cheaper in Nepal. Says Kafle: “China is the largest producer of the active ingredients, India is the biggest exporter of the generic anti-retrovirals and Nepal lies between the two.”

Tour operators all smiles

Despite series of booking cancellations due to the disrupted telephones and Internet last week, tourism entrepreneurs are all smiles now about business prospects. “The cancellations should be no problem at all,” says Pritha Thapa of President Travel. “What matters for us now is that the situation is improving and soon we will see boom in travel trade.”

Tour operators have seen massive cancellations in the wake of the disruption in telecommunication. But they believe that the situation, at least in Kathmandu, is fast improving and they are spreading the word. “We do not know what is happening outside Kathmandu but in the capital we have seen that things have changed tremendously and we are informing our international travel agents about it,” said Ravi Poudel of the Nepal Association of Tour and Travel Agents.

NEW PRODUCTS

JASTAPATA: Rajesh Metal Crafts has introduced RMC Jastapata, a new brand of corrugated metal sheets in the Nepali market. The company, which has been manufacturing and distributing construction materials for more than a decade, is following up on the significant success of RMC pipes.

Bottom of the pyramid

How to eradicate poverty through profit

With phones lines down, the omnipresent Internet disconnected and news channels off the air, this Beed enjoyed getting back to basics—reading. And the pick of the season is CK Prahlad’s Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid.

ECOLOGIC SENSE

Artha Beed

This book surely has a lot of insight for us Nepalis who are at the junction of events that will direct our nation’s future. As your columnist has often repeated, Nepal’s problems are economic and not political. Therefore, irrespective of the state of politics, the economics should surely move on. And what better platform for the new finance minister than to take on this challenge.

Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid provides an interesting analysis of the people who are at the bottom (what else?) of the pyramid. Those marginalized by all, especially the private sector. The billions that comprise more than 60 percent of the global population are yet to be served and therefore present a tremendous opportunity for business.

The poor are in fact brand conscious and willing to pay. For instance, they pay astronomical rates of interest to moneylenders. Banks can surely gain by servicing these markets. The poor consume a lot, that’s why product development and packaging have to be innovative. The success of one-rupee shampoo sachets in India and the success of Casas Bahia a retail chain in Brazil and Cemex, a construction service provider in Mexico. All case analyses lead to a single message: there is growth potential if one focuses on the bottom of the pyramid which most companies, especially multinationals ignore. Nepal can surely replicate these successes. There is much more for the private sector to do than seek protection or lobby against punitive actions for willful defaulters. This book is also a must-read for people working in development who think that the private sector is always manipulative and anti-poor.

Rather than run more ‘social security programs’ and use conflict management in all aspects of life, donors would find many answers to their questions here. Students and corporate executives should be motivated to find more ways to ‘compete for the future’. Surely, as the book says, our search for economic sustainability is never ending. Insights like those that ‘enable dignity and choice through markets’ are always welcome.

www.arthabeed.com
It is a new crop of popular artistes that the Nepali music scene has turned to, not hip-hop, rap or sappy romantic songs but soothing melodies with simple lyrics. When Ani Choying Dolma’s debut album Moments of Bliss topped the charts for months, it came as no surprise for her record company Opal International. Now, they have come out with another album of the same genre: Dharma Dhwani by Dhilyag Subchu Rinpoche.

“I don’t expect to become a phenomenon, I just want to share my prayers through music,” says the Rinpoche who adores Pandit Jasraj and Karna Das as musicians. “Technology is a big platform, we can use it to share and inspire peace of mind.”

Dhilyag Subchu Rinpoche, 21, became a monk at the age of six, growing up in Swayambhu which he says was also his home in his first life. Chanting for nearly 30 minutes each morning is the only musical training he has had but his voice has an energy that is quiet and soothing. Dharma Dhwani, his first album, comprises of prayers and chants in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Nepali. Initially, it was meant to be distributed only among fellow Buddhists and disciples but Opal International approached him and proposed to market it for a wider audience.

“Usually, this sort of music is targeted at the international market but we wanted to share it with Nepali listeners also. These are turbulent times and such soothing music restores our zest for life, giving us a positive attitude,” says Anand Tuladhar, of Opal. “We expected the older generation of listeners to like it. When, to our surprise, the young Nepali audience took to Ani’s album also, we realised that right now prayers are what we need.”

The lyrics in all the eight tracks of the album Dharma Dhwani are simple. Some are one-line prayers, pure and beautiful. For the title song Dharma Ko Dhwani, Nhyoo Bajracharya and Durga Lal Shrestha, famous for their work in Phool Ko Aankha Ma have teamed up again. And again, it is geared to be a hit with its unobtrusive soothing melody. As cliché as it might have sounded, the lyrics with Bajracharya’s music gives the words new meaning that it is hard to imagine any other voice singing it.

With the mesmerising sound of the sarangi and the flute, the music itself is a prayer. The musical experiment represents the essence of Buddhism with peace not only as its essential ingredient but also as the desired result. The album was released in Maitreya Gumba, Swayambhu where the singing Rinpoche learnt to chant. Proceeds from the sale of the album will go to the restoration of the Gumba. Swayambhu, one of the eight cultural World Heritage Sites in Nepal, needs restoration work and better facilities. The butter lamps also need to be improved as a year ago, an accidental fire destroyed the ancient Pratapur temple. Two people were killed in a landslide on the northern side, and the eastern side remains in danger of collapse.

Dharma Dhwani is available in music stores for Rs 250.
Hole after hole
Management of emotions on the golf course can make it easier

Very often, we hear golfers say, “After a triple bogey in the beginning, I lost my cool” or “I got angry and over tried, and ended up dropping a few more strokes”. Golfers, especially amateurs, get easily frustrated after a bad shot or a bad hole inviting more bad shots and ruining their game. Why does anger and frustration adversely affect a golfer’s game? Let’s find out.

When a player swings the club, his entire body moves in unison to make the swing. The ideal swing aims to follow the same swing path each time at an identical speed to make identical contact with the ball. These elements result in the ball receiving an identical amount of energy, direction and launch angle leading to identical shots.

However, when a player gets angry or tries harder to produce better shots, his thought starts to vary. This results in the pre-shot routine changes in muscle tension leading to minor variations in the club head speed, direction of swing path and ball contact. Changes in the state of mind ultimately change the overall ball strike, hitting it in the wrong direction.

If you watch top players in action, they seem unperturbed after bad shots or bad holes. With experience, I reckon, they are convinced that good shots will also follow bad ones. They realise they have many more holes to play and bad shots holes are as much a reality of golf as good shots. This way, professionals are always able to balance their scores in each round.

So what do you need to do to maintain an identical state of mind and tension level? The answer is simple: switch off interfering thoughts or better still, support the process by training yourself to think identically. Positive visualisation can help it further. The bottom line for consistency is follow an identical routine during shot making, which gives each swing the best possible chance of success. Coupled with patience, it will result in the highest probability of a player optimising his skills.

In this era of golf, we hear about top players doing yoga and meditation to compete at the highest levels. These practices help maintain the tension levels of the mind and body while executing shots on the golf course. As they say, golf is for those who have patience and can keep their cool. Trust me, with routine, faith and patience, existing abilities can produce better results. In the end, it is about putting your belief to practice over a period of time.

Deepak Acharya is a Golf Instructor and Golf Director at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa, Kathmandu. prodeepak@hotmail.com

LUCIA DE VRIES

When Pabitra Tamang’s parents found out she was suffering from a life-threatening disease called a-plastic anaemia, they took a desperate decision: they left their jobs as daily labourers to take care of five-year-old Pabitra and her two sisters.

With no money to pay the rent, the landlord threatened to throw them out of their tiny Bhaktapur room. All three children left school and moved into the hospital, much to the chagrin of the medical staff. Only Pabitra kept smiling; she loved the extra attention and her chance to visit the hospital’s playroom.

While Pabitra received regular blood transfusions and medication, the hospital bills increased. The small plot of land back in Makawanpur district was put up for sale but the Macisits stopped them from selling it. A loan was taken and the parents started visiting churches to ask for contributions. The doctors said even with the best care Pabitra would not survive long unless she was taken to India for bone marrow transplant or immunosuppressive treatment. Average costs for which was Rs 700,000. The parents were bewildered. At the rate things were going they could no longer feed their children, let alone travel to India.

Due to the armed conflict, the number of destitute children suffering from serious diseases is increasing everyday. Especially in the hills, village health facilities have been seriously affected as general health conditions deteriorate. In 20 VDCs in Mugu for instance, there is no health care to be found. Mobility has been hampered as a result of which, an increasing number of sick children arrive in the capital with chronic medical conditions. Treatment tends to be difficult and costly. With no proper government support system in place, a growing number of parents are left with only one option: take their sick child home to die. In some ways, destitute Nepali families facing severe health problems are worse off than tsunami survivors in other parts of Asia.

Some hospitals run some sort of a welfare scheme. Social Action Volunteers, started by Father Eugene Watrin 20 years ago, conducts programs in villages in Kathmandu Valley as well as in Ramni Children’s Hospital. Food, clothes and lodging are provided if needed, as well as blood and some financial support. Thanks to the large number of student volunteers in the program, each year over 300 sick children are supported in one way or the other.

Jayanti Foundation, established by Princess Helen Shah in the memory of her daughter Jayanti, donates the income of Pokhara’s Fishtail Lodge to support heart patients. Each year some 120 patients undergo open heart surgery, 60 percent of whom are children. The organisation is supported by Nepal Youth Opportunity Foundation and a number of hospitals, which provide 30 percent of treatment costs. Unfortunately, due to reduced incomes and mounting threats to close down Fishtail Lodge, support is gradually dwindling.

Ganjala Outreach was established last year in the memory of eight-year-old Raja Blaneti, who died from unrelated a-plastic anaemia in September 2004. A group of concerned individuals got together to create a pool of blood donors and establish a support system for children such as Raju. Ganjala’s founder Netup Lama dreams of establishing a nation-wide fund for ill and destitute children.

“The suffering of these children in the hospitals of Kathmandu is shocking. No child should ever be sent home without treatment, simply because of lack of money or information,” says Netup Lama, who feels such a fund should be initiated and managed by a committed network of welfare and business organisations. Pabitra was lucky. Ganjala Outreach requested the All India Heroes at 1905, Kantipath to raise funds for ill and destitute children. Contact: 9841-330008, info@gchnepal.org

On Saturday, 12 February, Ganjala Outreach organised Night for Little Heroes at 1905, Kantipath to raise awareness of funds for sick destitute children. Contact: 9841-330008, info@gchnepal.org

Pabitra Tamang on the phone at the hospital.
Thirty years ago, when textile engineer John Finlay was involved in constructing a biogas plant for a private household in Bhairawa, the last thing he expected was that the technology would transform Nepal.

Finlay was a young and ambitious engineer at the Butwal Technical Institute set up by the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) in 1974. He was looking forward to create small-is-beautiful technologies that would help Nepali farmers.

One day he met the Belgian Jesuit, Bertrand Saubolle at St Xavier’s School in Godawari who boilled water from a oil drum was constructed on his balcony. You mixed cow dung and water, put it inside the drum and out came methane gas: dung and water, put it inside the drum and out came methane gas.

He went to Ajitmal across the border in Uttar Pradesh in 1974 and met Ram Baux Singh of Gobar Gas Research Station, the Indian biogas pioneer. Together with Nepali engineers, the first plant from an oil drum was constructed and exhibited at an agricultural fair during the coronation of King Birendra in 1975.

The government was so much impressed that it launched a gobar gas program and backed it up with interest-free loans for farmers to install plants. The United Nations stepped in with subsidies and the project took off. UMN helped set up the private sector Gobar Gas Company (GGC) in 1976 which started building affordable biogas plants with indigenously designed underground digesters that did not need maintenance like the Indian drum model.

With the UMN, Agricultural Development Bank and Fuel Corporation as three major shareholders, GGC built 10,000 plants in 10 years.

The Nepali biogas design was so cheap and efficient that it spread like a tarai grass fire. The technology has existed for 100 years. They also had incredible lifespans, some of the plants that Finlay helped build 25 years ago are still going strong. “Unlike in India, over 95 percent of gobar gas stations in Nepal have continued to work,” explains Finlay.

By 1992, the Dutch aid group SNV introduced a comprehensive Biogas Support Program (BSP) and Nepal’s biogas program was poised for another big leap forward. Financed with microcredit hundreds of thousands of new plants were built across Nepal. Subsidised loans made the plants affordable, the farmers saved on firewood and forests were conserved. Kitchens became smokeless and children didn’t fall ill. In addition, the effluent slurry could be made into rich fertiliser.

“Nepal is now the highest per capita user of biogas in the world,” boasts Sundar Bajgain of BSP-Nepal which has now spun off from an SNV project into an autonomous group. There are more than 140,000 biogas plants all over Nepal. The basic underground dome design and the credit subsidy model has been replicated in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia where about 1.3 million people have access to biogas.

Biogas users in Nepal have been reaping benefits for decades. All it takes is an investment of Rs 11,000 but the rate of return is 35 percent and the investment is recouped in three years. It is a cheap alternative to LPG, kerosene, firewood and electricity. “The returns keep coming throughout their life,” explains Bajgain. According to Alternative Promotion Energy Centre, one biogas plant can save two tons of fuelwood, 0.8 tonnes of agricultural waste, 0.45 tonnes of cooking cake and 50 litres of kerosene per household. And women make up 90 percent of the beneficiaries of gobar gas because it saves them drudgery and provides smokeless kitchens. The organic fertiliser of the spent slurry saves farmers money because they don’t have to use chemicals.

Biogas is now also going to benefit the country because we can claim compensation from the International Clean Development Mechanism (ICDM) project for saving carbon emissions into the atmosphere. With the Kyoto Protocol going into effect on 16 February, it is possible for Nepal to actually trade the carbon dioxide not emitted by using biogas and earn up to $5 million per year. Unfortunately, Nepal has yet to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which was an opportunity missed during the Sher Bahadur Deuba time when there was lack of decision and parliamentary mandate. Many are now pinning their hope on the new government which can make this possible through a Royal Ordinance.

“If we reach the target of building 200,000 plants by 2009, Nepal can claim $30 million every year from the CDM,” says Finlay for whom the success of Nepal’s biogas program is also his crowning achievement in Nepal.
Irishman John Finlay has been in Nepal for the last 30 years promoting biogas technology. A self-taught engineer who never went to university, Finlay started as an intern in a factory. Now nearing retirement, 66-year-old Finlay spoke to us about Nepal's manure wealth.

What is your overall impression about biogas development in Nepal?

All we did was try to show the way, I never thought it would be such a big hit. Nepal's biogas program is now an international model. It is amazing to see how a little project we started in Butwal has now turned Nepal into a global rural development phenomenon. I'm so proud of Nepal and the BSP and SNV have done a great job.

What was the reason for this success?

To start with, Nepal has quality designs. Around 1978, we were trying to find out how to build a market and commercialise biogas on a large scale. We prioritised the technical and engineering aspects trying out 10 different designs to find the cheapest and best option that suited Nepal, requiring minimum maintenance. We worked on appliances, stoves, gas stops which were all manufactured here.

Who has benefited the most?

Rural Nepal, and I feel especially happy for the women and children who are now less burdened with gathering firewood. They save a lot of money from medical checkups because they used to work in smoke-filled kitchens before. They used to suffer from eye sores and lung problems. But not anymore.

Has it also helped the people financially?

They have saved money by using biogas. And a lot of jobs have been generated for villagers. Many are working as masons and technicians to install as well as maintain the plants.

And the future? What is there left to do?

There are still tens of thousands of gobar gas plants to be built. The gobar gas worked so well that the country now has scope in applying the renewable energy technology in electricity generation and solar energy.
Just couldn't take it anymore

In the wake of the latest developments in Nepal, the Indian government is preparing to appoint a special envoy in order to establish direct contact with King Gyanendra. A source at the Indian prime ministry in Kathmandu said the incumbent Indian Ambassador Shiva Shankar Mukherjee would continue but India's plan is appointing someone else as special envoy considering the new developments in the country. The source added that the security committee of the Indian cabinet had recently held a meeting under the chairmanship of the Indian Prime Minister Mmamohan Singh to discuss the appointment of the special envoy. No name has been finalized yet. To coordinate with the international community on Nepal, Britain appointed Sir John Brockhurst as special envoy to Nepal. The Hindustan Times has also mentioned the special envoy proposal and says three possible candidates are Chakraverty, KV Rajan and Deb Mukherjee. Were discussed during the meeting of the Prime Minister's security committee. All three were former Indian ambassadors to Nepal. The Nepal Foreign Ministry however is unaware of any such move. A ministry official said India had not informed the ministry officially yet. Perhaps they have not informed us about it because the name has not been decided," said the official.

A micro hydropower project under construction in Solukhumbu district's Lukla Bajar will save forests in Sagarmatha National Park. The 100 kW micro hydropower plant will be built in a village during a stream in partnership with the Rural Energy Development Program (REDP). The buffer zone council and the park chipped in Rs 1 million and RNDP contributed Rs 1.3 million. Local people volunteered labour for construction. Surya Bahadur Pandey of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation said, "This is an example of how national park authority and the local people can work together. Local people are happy the hydroelectric power project will help them conserve rhododendron forests. "Now development will stop," said the buffer zone council's vice chairman Dawa Sherpa. "Without electricity people don't need to cut trees for fuel. " The project will benefit 150 families in and around Lukla and boost tourism.

For adventurers in foreign lands, acquiring permission to mountaineering in Nepal is now only a click away. The Tourism Ministry declared that it would soon introduce a system through which mountaineers can apply for expedition permission on the Internet. The Ministry will scan the online application and let the applicant know, also through the Internet, if permission has been granted.

Himal Khabarpatna, 29 January-11 February

Extermination by the Maoists has terrorised not just businessmen and civil servants but also the poor who cannot even afford a square meal. This fear is stark in Nawalparasi, Rupandehi and Kapilbastu. Dirgha Narayan Kewat is an ordinary wage labourer in Butwal but the Maoists have demanded Rs 60,000 and 10 quintals of rice from him. To save himself, he took a loan of Rs 10,000 and some rice to pay the rebels. Murari Pahalman from Nawalparasi was abducted in Rupandehi. He was released 22 days later on condition that he pay Rs 140,000. "I sold my land and paid the amount to save my life," said Pahalman, who joined a group of Nawalparasi village warriors urging an armed retaliation against the Maoists. He sent his wife and children to India for security. Mohammed Slim of Rupandehi fled to India with his 10-member family after the Maoists demanded Rs 200,000. Unable to endure the constant pressure for donations from the Maoists. He sent his wife and children to India for security. Mohammed Slim of Rupandehi fled to India with his 10-member family after the Maoists demanded Rs 200,000. Unable to endure the constant pressure for donations from the Maoists.

Many villagers from Pakhawa of Nawalparasi have begun a fight against the Maoists. It has spread to over six-dozen villages. Dipendra Yadav, who is working with the Armed Police Force, has also joined them. The rebels tried to kill him while he was visiting his parents at Pakhawa. Till date, more than a dozen villagers have lost their lives in encounters with the Maoists. They have so far managed to capture and handover five Maoists to the local police. A few weeks ago, while the Maoists were playing carom, the villagers attacked seven of them in Ratnagar. They also killed the Nawalparasi section commander after the Maoists asked for Rs 30,000 from a farmer and handed Gita Poudel, area member, over to the administration on the same day. The villagers beat five Maoists to death in Parasauri and Bedauli the next day and set fire to several rebel shelters.

According to the village retaliation committee, Suresh Yadav and Rakesh were among the five Maoists killed, who had come on motorcycles to ask for donations. On 9 January, they killed a Maoist sympathiser in Bedauli. The Maoists avenged by killing Ramprakash Gupta, former chairman of the committee. "We have asked the Maoists and their supporters to surrender and join our team. Those whom it down have fled," said Manu Khan, the committee chief. Around 22 Maoists have surrendered so far and are working with the villagers. "They feed us confidential information," said Khan. Today, nobody can enter the villages without Khan's permission, not even journalists and human rights workers. The committee has blacklisted over two dozen rights workers and journalists who visited the village during an observational tour. The people who have to walk through these villages are frisked and interrogated by the retaliation team members.

quoted of the week

“No individual in the current council of ministry is a decision-maker. The decision maker now is the king who also has the prime minister’s portfolio.”

- Radha Krishna Mainali, Education and Sports Minister 9 February in interview in Jana Astha

Media and communications

Hydro power

Radio news

Dry news

Just couldn’t take it anymore

Special envoy

Nepal Samacharpatra, 7 February

By a decision in the Bay of Bengal, the Ministry of External Affairs has announced that an inundation in the South China Sea, which resulted in the life of 150 families, is a source of information for the government. The news is already becoming a major news item.

SELECTED MATERIAL TRANSLATED EVERY WEEK FROM THE NEPALI PRESS
Jump-starting freedom
Just like you can’t be half-pregnant, you can’t be half-free

Democracy is supposedly on the march in the Middle East. But Arab dictators are afraid of true democracy with its civil liberties and competitive elections, so they conjure up notions that protect the status quo by selecting bits of Western political models and adding some religious interpretation to ensure a patina of Islamic legitimacy. Saudi Arabia fits this description to a tee. Its rulers—some of the most autocratic in the world—say that democracy is incompatible with Islam. So they prefer the term ‘participatory government’. But a majority of Muslim scholars, including such prominent Muslim scholars as the Sheikh of Al Azhar in Cairo and the influential Qatar-based Sheikh Qaradawi, believe that Islam is compatible with democracy, at least as they define it: respect for the rule of law, equality between citizens, a fair distribution of wealth, justice and freedom of expression and assembly. What remains debatable and contentious is the right of citizens to choose their leaders. Yet pressure for democracy is mounting, in part due to the smaller Gulf States, which compete with each other in democratic reforms. Qatar and Oman have elected consultative councils and encouraged women. Parliamentary elections are to take place in Kuwait and Bahrain, and at the end of last year, Sheikh Mohammad Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, suggested Arab leaders must reform or sink. Iraq’s elections turned up the pressure even more.

So, as threatened by the regional hegemonies, Saudi Arabia has joined the reform movement by announcing partial municipal elections to consultative bodies in which the royal family already appoints half the members. The first election was held in the capital of Riyadh on 10 February, followed by the oil rich eastern region and the southern Asir region on 2 March, and Mecca and Medina in the western Hijaz region and al Juf, in the northern Region, on 21 April. The government describes this as a ‘new political era’. But women remained excluded from the vote—despite attempts by several to participate in areas that the Wahhabists believe are ‘outside the nature of women’. Moreover, in accordance with Saudi tradition, the ruling family appoints a prince as chairman of the general committee overseeing elections—a sign not of wider political participation but of business as usual.

Despite efforts led by Crown Prince Abdullah to urge participation, voter registration is low, which suits the government as high turnout could lead to the development of an electoral culture. Low turnout, by contrast, could convince Western officials that despite the Saudi state’s best efforts to jump-start democracy, its people are satisfied with the status quo. Saudi intellectuals attribute the lack of voter interest to the absence of free expression and assembly, which frustrates the general participation. Moreover, leading reformers have been jailed since last March for signing a petition asking for a constitutional monarchy, which has reinforced the general lack of trust in the government’s agenda.

If Saudi Arabia’s rulers were serious about ‘participatory government’, they would ensure women’s participation. Instead, they reprose, censor, silence and even imprison the moderates and appease the religious radicals. The authorities have killed some of the more vocal activists who in their ‘war against terrorism’ but they fear that a wider crackdown could provoke some important tribes and clans.

Despite cynicism, apathy, frustration, despair and violence, some will still hope for the emergence of a prince on a white horse who will place the kingdom on the path of reform. But there is no such prince; there are only the old ones, clinging to power without legitimacy and toying grotesquely with their people’s aspirations.

In a Black mood
A movie that provides some solace in troubled times

The late Kathmandu winter has turned dreary, creativity is stifled and so is time to visit the Jai Nepal theatre and take in Bollywood’s latest offering. Though it is a goofy tale of pain and loss and despite some loose ends which will certainly depict it of an anticipated Oscar, the movie Black has the ingredients to uplift the spirit. Bollywood is finally waking up to the desire for good cinema and the sensibilities that benefit reach out across Indian frontiers. Hindi films have always been a Southeasian phenomenon, since when the turn of the wheel will also hopefully and at long last bring back regional cinema to the north of the Subcontinent, emulating what has happened in the south. If celluloid is to bring quality entertainment to the thirsty masses, beyond Hindi and its dialects, cinema has to be (re)discovered by Bengali and Punjabi Oria, Asamiya, Sindhi and Nepali.

While we await this utopian future, it is a good idea to go see Black, as a motion picture that provides some solace in troubled times and as a harbinger better things ahead.
“Lata ko desha ma gaundo tundari.” (%u2014a land of fools, even a man with a bad goatee can be a hero%) – as translated by UNACO, the United Nation's Action for Cartoonists.

ABOUT TOWN

FESTIVAL AND EXHIBITIONS

- Saraswati Puja on 13 February.
- Baber Mahal Revisited. Until 18 February.
- Peaceful Breathing. Exhibition of ceramic works by Jung Mosques at Buddha Gallery, Thamel. Until 15 February.
- Exhibition of Japanese Kitses and Tops at Nepal Art Council, 8-17 February. 9.30 to 4.30 PM.
- Sama Theatre Festival at Gunauli, Madheshi, 4.30 PM onwards. 13 March.

MUSIC

- The God Dance of Kathmandu Valley.
- Jatra Happening live jazz in town.
- Farm House Café. Delicious barbecue dinner. New delicacies.
- Barbecue Dinner. Seasons Special.
- Taste of Thailand at Jungle Base Camp. Junglebasecamp@yahoo.com
- Night For Little Heroes at Gurukul, Maitidebi. 4.30 PM onwards. 13 February.

EVENTS

- Night For Little Heroes on 12 February at 1905, Kantipath. Proceeds go to Gurukul Outreach for kids, destitute children. 4255572, 4215568
- Peentrade Dixhati Long live democracy on 18 February.
- Taudaha Jambore on 12 February. Emry Rs. 75(Students), Rs 100(Nepalis) and Rs. 200(forponomites. 449770, info@devika.com
- Kathmandu Chhreela Rehearsals. 7.10 PM at The British School, Jivan Bhavan.
- Sanislam Mara Every Saturday at the Dashakanya Bakery Café,12AM-5PM.
- 3rd Annual Wave Web Winner 2004 Website designing contest. Entry deadline 15 February. waveweb.com.np
- The God Dance of Kathmandu Valley Tuesdays at Hotel Vaja. 4271545

FOOD

- Last Waltz at Naka. Pulish, on 11 February, 6PM onwards. Jam session with Full Circle, 1974AD, McTwisters and Lab. 528703
- Good Times Blues Band at Ram Doodle every Friday. 5PM to 7PM. 4701209, 4701107, rdu_doodle@gomilaya.com
- Classical vocals and instruments. 7PM onwards, every Friday at Hotel Vaja. 4271545
- Jukebox experience with Pooja Gurung and The Cloud Walkers every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at Ros Bar. 4401234
- Happening live jazz in town at Ustcerate, Jazz Bar, Laajpati. Every Wednesday and Saturday. 7.45 PM onwards.

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Festive excitement in the valley has brought an improvement in the air quality. Due to the winds change from the west, Nepal got precipitation well above the monthly normal in December and January. This is expected to continue this month also as the westerly jet stream is still intact over the Himalaya. This satellite image from Thursday morning shows a fresh wave of cold air, cold is expected to reach us over the valley. The good news is that this frosty weather could dissipate faster due to warmer afternoon sun. In February, the valley normally receives 18 mm rainfall when mercury level fluctuates between two to 20 degrees in average. This weekend will see intervals with the possibility of light rains. The days will be warmer while the nights will be less frosty, but still chilly.

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Guitarrista de Nepal

Mukti (left, first row) and his several bands of brothers have consistently kept the blues alive in Nepal for more than 20 years. He has transformed from a boy dreaming of being in a rock band to forming some of Kathmandu’s most happening groups, from becoming a father and businessman in Spain to returning to the music scene here time and again.

Mukti grew up listening to everything: from ethnic Newari music to his older brother’s strumming and singing. “My brother would leave the guitar in the room after he was done and then I’d pick it up and have a go at it,” recalls Mukti. In 1979, as a teenager, he formed a band called Radium in which he was the bassist. He got himself a custom-made guitar from India and soon life was swinging. “For a while it was what we’d dream of,” he says of fame, parties and money, but creative differences cropped up and the band split.

In 1982, Elegance was launched with Mukti as lead guitarist. The members shared their vision of writing Nepali originals to playing western covers. It was difficult making ends meet. “Now I hear of singers making money, buying bikes and cars after releasing an album,” says Mukti, “Things were different back then.”

Mukti moved to Spain with his Spanish wife, Maria. The blues man turned into a businessman, shuttling back and forth for three years before he packed up his ventures and returned to music, doing everything from busking on streets to jamming with bands. In 1996, the first Mukti and Revival performed their last show together in Basantapur. Their opening act Newaz impressed Mukti and they later morphed into the new Revival with Roshan, Upendra, Rabindra and now Maria. In 2000, Mukti and Revival released its hit debut album Kaalanki Ko Jam. The second album Bujhai Deu was released in 2003.

This time, Mukti has come to Nepal not for music but for the Samyak Mahadan, a Buddhist festival that takes place every 12 years at Swayambhu. Mukti’s father has chaired the organising committee for 48 years now and this is the second time Mukti has worked as the festival’s chief co-ordinator.

“I came for a different reason altogether, I wasn’t planning on recording anything,” he says. But Roshan had arranged for a concert in Shillong on 6 February so Mukti’s stay in Nepal has been extended. “I figured the band might as well record a few songs since I’m going to be here for awhile,” he adds.

Mukti also fronts a blues trio called Mn’M in Spain and says with a grin on his face: “We’re not that famous in Spain but most people around our town know me as that guitarrista from Nepal.”

Kiran Panday
UNDER MY HAT
Kunda Dixit

All the news that is fit to print

Statutory Notice: An official Fact-finding Committee has pre-tested this column on lab animals and certified that it contains permitted synthetic dyes and preservatives and has declared it fit for human consumption provided the childproof seal is not broken at the time of purchase. However, one can’t be too careful during these perilous times so readers are advised to exercise individual caution on a case-by-case basis. Management is not responsible for the consequences, especially if perpetrators are apprehended perusing this in broad daylight, charged with indecent exposure and sentenced to 36 lashes with a wet rattan cane on each hind cheek.

Now that we have those legal niceties out of the way, we can get down to what you have all been impatiently waiting for with barely-concealed boredom, which is a roundup of this week’s main events:

Togo Felicitated

HMG has congratulated the Democratic People’s Republic of Togo on the smooth transition to a new government.

A free email SMS was sent to the new leader of Togo, Dr Sir Tyrone George Baboonga Wala-wala, MBE, wishing him personal happiness and prosperity and the ‘Togolese people continued progress in their relentless march towards being a pariah state.’

“We know what it is like to be one of the poorest countries in the world and it heartens us to see that you are doing a great job maintaining that position and being reviled by the international community,” the message read, adding, “one has to do what one has to do.”

In another congratulatory message the Chairman of the Nepal-Togo Friendship Society expressed the hope that bilateral relations between the two countries would expand in the years to come in the spirit of panchashila and mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. He added: “I am glad to note that there are no major bilateral irritants between Togo and Nepal, and we hope that will change in the not-too-distant future.”

Nation Already in Ballantine’s Day Mood

Every country in the world marks the International Day of Love on 14 February in its own quaint way and Nepal is no exception.

This year’s Ballantine’s Day will be celebrated for three days nationwide in a grand manner under the slogan ‘Make Love Not War’. Most people will stay at home to implement it (but only in groups of five people or less) nursing scotch on the rocks and drinking themselves silly, according to a press release issued by the Chairman of the Publicity sub-Committee of the All-Nepal Ballantine’s Day Commemoration Main Committee.

“You’ll all be pleased to know, hic, that at the present time advansh shelebrations have already shtarted,” said the sub-Chairman of the Nursing Committee at a pre-launch press conference, denying rumours that he was sloshed. “My speech may be slurred, but I am not plastered,” he added, instructing journalists to exercise restraint and only report “the tooth and nothing but the tooth.”