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What intervention? Fashionable anti-Americanism finally meets reality

The two chairmen are mirror images of each other. It’s impossible to simplify the narratives so that they can grab that flight to Nepalganj to see for themselves if the Maoists say and do as theirCss actions as our compass. And an important component of Marxist ideology bears repeating even when volumes have been written on this subject. The Maoists have a complete lack of control of state. Alison isn’t the underlying motive nor are the Maoists interested in joining the national army more transparent, subordinate to civilian leadership and representative (even as the RANA’s recruits and senior officers are becoming more diverse and professional).

The Maoist goal rather is to wield the very power of the state in the name of the proletariat, to achieve an anti-disasterous result. Such ‘people’s liberation armies’ have more blood on their hands than all of the kings since their civilisations.

Second, the Maoists have cherished the fabric of Nepali society by hook or by crook in 1996. Everyone hates feudalism, poverty and oppression and when the Maoists bring legitimacy, we all scratch our heads and thought that maybe they were justified in bringing attention to the state of affairs in the villages. But their sudden and massive attempts at reengineering have brought more misery than anyone bargained for.

Despite all their rhetoric against royal and imperial armies and aristocracy, the Maoists seem to have turned out to be an army of mercenaries. They do not leave free space for the break of their battles but even more oppressed, destitute, displaced and terrorised victims. They say they have sympathy for Nepalis but in actuality they are faced with the tough demands of working as a servant in the Middle East, while they extort two months pay from this same cohort on their return from duty. Despite endless double-speak, debate and intellectual inquiry amongst the public have been more than necessary for democracy, availing of concepts in their culture.

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MORIARTY
I think we are giving a bit more emphasis than necessary to Ambassador Moriarty’s speech (‘Professor Moriarity strikes again’, #287). First we should understand that US war against terror. For him it is easy to vouch for such a war because for the US war against terror is just against some foreigners in Iraq and Afghanistan. Few innocent people are actually killed thousands of others have been killed and there doesn’t seem to matter to the US. But here a single hand killed on the other side is a Nepal and as CK Lal writes, a Nepali will silently weep whenever does in this meaningless conflict. Second, what Moriarty says: does not always have to be true. It is his personal or may be he is government’s viewpoint. He just have to look into the claim of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to show how off the mark that be. Third, even if his US views are correct, we don’t have to follow that doctrine if it does not suit us. Cuba has been doing pretty well ignoring the Americans. Let’s just remember that if we were able to keep our right hands in order then we’d not have to be listening to these lectures from foreign diplomat and then make such a big deal out of it.

Sagar Sharma, email

CK Lal’s piece on James Moriarty was interesting. It seemed to me US doesn’t really want a stable Nepal. With the end of the Cold War, a unipolar system has emerged with Washington dictating most world affairs at will. However, China and India are rapidly emerging and will play a pivotal role in world affairs in coming decades. The US fears this change and US should realize that better way to foil the Asian powers is not to back the Bangladeshis to wipe off the crust and hopefully ‘non-upper’ caste of the society’s ill. However, to a majority of young blood this is far off and this could be reduced. Mrs Lal on his downright demeaning address on the Academy had embarked upon a mission to continue the legacy of Ganesh Man Singh to safeguard democracy and sovereignty of the Nepal in the best of its resources. Has Mr Lal ever visited the Academy or kept up to date with its inception in 1997? The Academy may not have similar access to journalistic ethics can Mr Lal label the Academy as tightest on this score. It is an infra dig of an ‘advocate’ of free media as Mr Lal to pen such irresponsible comments.

Nabindra Raj Joshi, President, Ganesh Man Singh Academy

TRAVEL ADVISORIES
It’s helpfully provocative to have M. Marceau’s views (Letters, #287) in which he says: “The embassies don’t issue these advisories on a whim but as a last resort”. There is now a website www nepaltraveladvice com dedicated to this issue receiving scores of views of quite the opposite persuasion, namely that the western governments are indeed whimsical about how they judge the need for ‘negative travel advice’. No views such as M. Marceau’s have been posted on the website so it is good to see from your newspaper that there is debate on this issue. He is wrong about not being able to obtain insurance but, sadly, closer to the mark when he speaks of irresponsible tour operators and (mishandling) tourism being a missed opportunity. Our website’s central role is that, if the British negative travel advice were not whimsical, why then there have now removed that lethal phase advising ‘against all but essential travel to Nepal?’ Is the situation here suddenly so improved or, more likely, was the case for the ‘travel ban’ proved to be so insufficient in the first place? The website also concerns itself with how the FO gazts such a paranoid picture of the risks to tourists here and about the possible re-imposition of the negative travel advice for reasons no better than those that proved so unwarranted earlier.

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I’d grown so used to the masks. Why has Kunda Dixit reverted back to wearing those outrageous hats again?

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L E T T E R S

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Just another Nepali, email

In ‘Professor Moriarity strikes again’ (#287), CK Lal writes: ‘The venue was Ganesh Man Singh Adhyan Pratishthan, a pseudo- academic body known for its right wing sympathies…’ The Ambassador’s address has proven to be a public relation coup staged on a shoe string budget’. This Academy has embarked upon a mission to continue the legacy of Ganesh Man Singh to safeguard democracy and sovereignty of the Nepal to the best of its resources. Has Mr Lal ever visited the Academy or kept up to date with its inception in 1997? The Academy may not have similar access to journalistic ethics can Mr Lal label the Academy as tightest on this score. It is an infra dig of an ‘advocate’ of free media as Mr Lal to pen such irresponsible comments.

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KILLING MINISTERS
As always, Kanak Dixit’s outburst in his Southasia Beat column (Why not to kill the minister, #287) comes with sense and rational arguments. Having watched the movie, I could not even for a moment concur with the idea of how they were trying to draw the analogy to Bhagat Singh by showing what this actor was supposedly forced upon (the violent path) to wipe off society’s ills. However, to a majority of young blood this might seem appealing, which I fear most. No doubt this is far off from reality and does not involve creativity. I wonder why people have completely neglected the correct route of eliminating society’s ills. Have we really abandoned our belief and conviction to resolve issues with opportune and discredit violence? Isn’t it high time we all believe in a system to cure and do away the dream of resorting to violence?

Anjan Pandey, email

REALTY
I have rarely seen a non-Nepali who has understood Nepal’s nuances so deeply as Sam Cowan in his Guest column (Nepal: the two wars, #287). It shows that some foreigners really care about Nepal while others, like the US ambassador, have their own vested and sighted interests at heart.

Ranjan Thapa, email

Nepal’s political parties are like a pack of dogs. Right now they all claim to be working together but if the fate of the nation was back in their hands, they’d turn on each other. To prove my point, they should be challenged to put forth an interim government of their choice to guide the nation to peace. They will show their true colours by fighting amongst themselves, the same in-fighting that led the murderous Maoists got to glory. The shocking part is how they have spun things around to make His Majesty the bad guy when he’s the one man who can and will save this nation.

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Bilaterals vs multilateral aid

Donors in row over continuing development aid to royal regime

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Most aid is frozen, development projects are grinding to a halt, but Nepal’s bilateral donors are preoccupied with something much more earth-shattering: squabbling over whether continued development aid lets the royal regime off the hook.

After King Gyanendra took over on 3 February 2005, most bilateral donors (representing individual countries) suspended new aid and froze other assistance. They also accused multilateral institutions (like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank) of being soft on the royal regime by not stopping aid. Budgetary support from multilateral banks, they said, would ultimately fund security expenses.

Since February First, the World Bank has made commitments on two projects worth $35 million and is now set to provide $90 million in grants for higher education and the Poverty Alleviation Fund.

The Asian Development Bank said it made no new commitments in 2005 but approved two loans of $90 million that were committed earlier. Bank officials say two other projects worth $40 million have also been signed but they were committed earlier.

"Assistance like this shows that these institutions care least about the present situation in Nepal," said a visibly annoyed chief of a bilateral donor agency, "by continuing its assistance programs it is endorsing this regime.

The multilateral donors have so far ignored the criticism. But now even they are firing back accusing the bilaterals of double standards and hypocrisy. Bilateral donors have committed $356 million to the government in the last year but they don’t want this to be known for political reasons.

"They have asked us to take over some of their projects, but in public they paint us as villains while posing as heroes," one agency official told us privately, "our charter requires us to stick to development, we can’t play politics with aid."

A senior Finance Ministry official confirmed that some bilateral donors are asking multilateral institutions to include them in projects. "They wish to spend their money but they don’t want to be seen as helping the government directly," the official confirmed. But the ministry is now involved in a potentially bruising row with the Swiss and the British aid agencies which now want to directly fund political parties in their pro-democracy struggle.

Despite their disagreement, both bilaterals and multilaterals are critical of the palace and want the king to roll back his takeover. The last formal meeting Nepal’s donors had was in January 2005. There is no preparation of holding the Nepal Development Forum, the annual meeting of the consortium of donors. State Minister for Finance Roop Jyoti is meeting donors for the first time on 6 March, three months since he was appointed.

"This is becoming a real problem for the development sector," said a senior diplomat with one of Nepal’s biggest bilateral donors.

To be sure, the government did feel an easing of pressure when multilaterals resumed aid in the middle of last year but the regime shut itself in the foot with its controversial guidelines for NGOs. And when the government failed to respond to the unilateral Maoist ceasefire in September and announced municipal elections, relations with bilateral donors soured further. The last straw was the arrest of political leaders last month which was slammed by even a restrained bilateral donor like Japan.

"We have been instructed to closely monitor the situation to decide on our future assistance plan for Nepal," Koji Tomita, First Secretary at the Japanese Embassy, told us.

The government’s last line of defence is to invoke aid in the name of the people, and its argument now is that donors should not punish the people by holding back aid. “We have told the donors that if they discontinue their assistance to Nepal, it will be the people who will suffer," says one senior official, "in that sense they would be no different from the Maoists who are using the people for their causes.”

Some multilateral officials in Kathmandu agree. "Even if we oppose the political changes, we don’t want the people to suffer and that is why we have not stopped our assistance,” said one. •
Economic alert

It’s not just Nepali politics that is in a mess, warns a new report

MARTY LOGAN

Aakash Shrestha has watched business at his Camera Mart in Thamel plummet about 60 percent in the last nine years. “I didn’t sell a camera yesterday and I probably won’t sell one today,” the young man said early one recent evening. “Maybe tomorrow,” he added with a smile and a slight shrug.

Such an attitude might work for a retail business, but when you are managing Nepal’s economy, should do much more than happen count the $1 billion sent home every year. The growing number of overseas workers, says a recent report. In fact, if the government’s growth is below its potential, then it will lead to a sharp decline in remittances, economists predict.

Moreover, the trade deficit is widening and draining reserves of Indian currency. "We are not trying to criticise the government," IMF Finance and Economic Director Raghav D Pant told us, “we are just trying to point out the potential implications of the current economic policies that are being targeted at the country’s GDP.

Inflation, the trade deficit widening and draining reserves of Indian currency, the fear is that the problem could get out of control and ignite social anarchy. "If the available information is any guide, it will lead to a sharp decline in remittances," economists predict.

More bad news is that a Ru 4 billion surplus predicted in the current budget (excluding development spending) will actually be a Ru 3.6 billion deficit, thanks to a tariff cut announced in January. The government is expected to release a supplemental budget, economic activity since July and based on the accuracy of the Ministry of Finance’s past forecasts, adds the report.

As the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have decided not to release additional resources under the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility, the government (will have) no independent resources at its disposal, says the IMF report, and will have no choice but to borrow from the private sector. With inflation soaring, the trade deficit widening and draining reserves of Indian currency, the fear is that the problem could get out of control and ignite social anarchy. "We are not trying to criticise the government," IMF Finance and Economic Director Raghav D Pant told us, “we are just trying to point out the potential implications of the current economic policies that are being targeted at the country’s GDP.

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Between two extremisms

Senior advocate Ganesh Raj Shama in Kantipur TV and transcribed by Jana Satta, 25 February

At present, one type of extremism in Nepal is providing fertile land for another type. This has resulted into deepening of mistrust. This situation is favourable neither to the people nor to the king. One type of extremism has been inspiring the king to be an active monarch which in turn is indirectly helping the anti-monarchist extremism. The two extremisms have combined to yield the same result: elections have been delayed and there is no reconciliation. Even foreigners have been saying that all forces should get together to solve our problem.

The environment for reconciliation should have been made by both the sides. The king and the political parties need to use appropriate language for resolution. If the two sides are really willing to patch up, the last speech of the king on the occasion of democracy day can be a basis for such reconciliation. Of course, if you don’t want reconciliation then you can find many faults with the speech. The king is under pressure to find a way out. For dialogue, the two sides need to focus on activating the constitution. In the past, we used to hear arguments that a conducive environment had to be made for elections or that the House of Representatives had to be restored briefly. But now the issue of the house restoration has simply fizzled out. Now that we only hear declaration of a decisive fight, the situation is becoming more and more complicated.

There are hints that the king realises the need for dialogue. In the last one year, there has been a sea of change in the situation. Even if you need a democracy with the king, the constitution has to be activated. Of course, if you are for democracy without the king then there is really nothing to be said.

Under the present politiy, how far can we constrain the king? How much of the illusions about traditional powers of the king can be gradually removed? We have the power to address these issues through parliament. If the king continues to be a hurdle even then, we can have a public discussion. But is absence of the parliament, how would the discussion about the relevance of monarchy achieve any result?

We can go on talking intellectually but that is a luxury. The understanding of Nepal’s geopolitical realities also shows support for the monarchy. For constituent a assembly or referendum, or even the restoration of the House, it is the king who has to be the medium. In a peaceful political course, one may choose to accept the king or reject him. But the king remains the life line of the present geopolitical reality.

Who’s welfare? Nepal, 5 March

The UN pays all soldiers in its peacekeeping forces the same rate: $1,350 in monthly salary and $770 for exceptionallow during the six months of their service. But riflemen of the RNA take home only $720 every month while officers draw $3,000 as monthly salary. Most of the lower ranked soldiers do not even know how much is deducted from their salary, with the major chunk of it going to the military welfare fund chaired by the Chief of the Army Staff.

Today, 3,027 Nepali soldiers are on UN peacekeeping stints. The fund, aimed at the welfare of serving and retired military personnel and their families, has collected over Rs 1 billion a year from the UN peacekeeping agreement. Official records show that last fiscal year it earned more than $13 million from the UN. The money that goes to the Military Welfare Fund is disbursed by nine committees. They spend Rs 40 million on the Birjendra Military Higher Secondary School every year and also run the Birjendra Military Hospital, Swayambhunath Arsenal and an explosives manufacturing plant in Makawanpur. The fund also bears all expenses incurred in sending Nepali troops as UN peacekeepers. In the last four fiscal years, the fund has also provided Rs 10 million annually to the Army Officers’ Nurses Association, which has disgruntled many former army officers.

In addition, the Tribhuvan Army Officers’ Club has used the fund to run two petrol pumps and to establish the Basundhara canteen, which provides goods to soldiers at discounted prices. But the financial records of the committees have not been audited for the last 22 years. The Auditor General’s report of 2004 noted that it had repeatedly reminded the army that it was unnecessary because the canteen was not run from the national budget. Ex-general Prakash Shari says the fund has established residences and clubs for serving officers but has done nothing for retired ones. “There is not even a single guesthouse for army officers who come to Kathmandu on duty tour,” he says.

Why foreigners? Nepal Samacharpatra, 20 February

Direct foreign intervention in Nepal is growing. Now it is not just suggesting and advising but they are directing, commanding and in some instances have even started telling us what to do. We Nepalis ourselves play a big role in encouraging such intervention and this has increased after the seven parties started their movement towards restoration of democracy and called on foreigners for help. In response, the regime too has started learning on its allies. The international community is happy to be a part of this tug of war and that is the reason why they have been getting away with making statements that are a direct threat to our sovereignty and independence.

This comes more from the US, UK, India and EU. As well-wishers there is a way to express concern, instead their involvement has reached a level where it is starting to create rifts within society. Word is out that the UK and Switzerland have promised to provide Rs 350 million to Nepal to promote democracy. The amount is going to the seven parties but it is also said that the government is going to react by increasing its own repression. It is the people who will suffer. So far the seven parties have said they will continue their movement without help from external sources but if the foreigners are willing to help they will not refuse the offer.

When King Gyaneyendra was on his walkabout in Lalitpur, he mentioned that the movement was ‘being fuelled by foreign money’. At that time seven parties criticised the king but it is now proving to be true. So, foreign money is being used to burn tyres and pelt stones and foreign money is also being used to buy construction materials.

Dangerously dry

Himal, 26 February-13 March

Low rainfall in winter is not unusual in a country with geography like Nepal’s. But what seems extraordinary, and cause for serious concern, is the absence of rain for more than four months now. The 2005 drought was the country’s worst for nearly 100 years. The last time Kathmandu saw rain was on 22 October and there is still no sign of spring showers. By the time of writing, 14 per cent of rain should have fallen on average. The drought has also affected India and Bangladesh. The lack of snow in our mountains, especially in the centre and east has affected power generation and irrigation downstream. This is a trend: precipitation has been diminishing every year for the past decade. The same change in weather pattern that has cut rainfall is probably the reason for the growing cold wave in the tropics, which was deeper and more widespread last winter than in many recent years. Most shocking was when the temperature in alpine Jumla was warmer than usual tropical Nepal. Drought manifests itself in three phases—dryness, food shortage and famine. At present, Nepal is entering the second phase. Nepal’s agriculture is predominantly rainfed, and even where there is irrigation there is no water because streams and springs have dried up. There is a real danger of the water shortage turning into a crisis in coming days and a crucial need to look for alternative water sources. We all know that Nepal is a water rich country but that will seem meaningless if no rain reaches our fields and as we see more and more the effect of climate change and variability.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"All the ministers do is preach—they don’t work.

- BFP (Nationalist) President Rajivwor Debkota after his audience with King Gyaneendra in Pokhara in Rajdhani, 2 March"
Capital plan

Jane Aastha, 1 March

As the 6 April deadline given by Prachanda for a decisive hit on Kathmandu nears, the army is getting intelligence reports that Maoist forces are amassing in and around the Valley as well as Biratnagar, Pokhara, Helambu, Butwal and Nepalgunj. According to these reports, a Maoist special force directly under the redhead special central commander Barshaman Pun (Ananta) is already in the Valley. Going by past patterns of Maoist attacks and recent battles it is easy to predict what will happen next. Till last year Maoist forces were scattered across the country making sporadic attacks from place to place to prove that they had a nationwide reach. But the Maoists have now withdrawn from the rural heartland and are concentrating their eastern and western forces to the centre of the country. That is why the midwestern districts are quiet and recent skirmishes happened along the highways or in the vicinity of the midwestern districts. The four divisions of the Maoist western command are now concentrated in the Nepal-Butwal-Bhairawa area. The eastern divisions are adding to the special central command in charge of the valley to focus on the entry points to the capital as seen in recent attacks in Thankot, Dashkot and Kabre. In recent speeches, Prachanda has also spoken of simultaneous attacks on three big army barracks and even if only one of the attacks is successful it will spread such panic that soldiers will run flee or surrender in subsequent attacks. In case all the attacks are successful, the survivors will regroup and continue attacks. The Maoist strategy seems to be to prepare for their big attacks with the announced blockade of Kathmandu from 14 March and an indefinite nationwide banda from 3 April. The rebels have perfected the strategy through a dozen or so attacks in the past two years on district capitals by pinning down army bases so they don’t have to be distracted by attacking police stations, CCD offices and government buildings. Based on these intelligence reports, the Home Ministry has sent circulars to all police and government units in the Valley to be on maximum alert.

teasers and rubber bullets. Foreigners think of this as something to be happy about but this kind of polarization will not solve Nepal’s crisis.

Condition critical

Kantipur, 21 February

KHOTANG—With its doctor absent, the district hospital has been unable to treat people for the past two weeks. Out of the three designated posts, the doctor has left for a workshop in Biratnagar and the hospital does not have a single-trained medical professional. There are no doctors in Ainselukhar or Chisapani since the establishment of health centres—instead, health assistants are running health centres. Four of the district’s health centres, posts are vacant. The vacant posts include one medical supervisor, one medical assistant, nine health assistants, five staff nurses, two lab technicians, nine auxiliary health workers, five auxiliary nurse/midwife, eight rural health workers and 15 maternal child health worker.

PALPA—He hasn’t studied radiography or any other profession and has never worked in any government office all he gets is a pittance salary. But since July 2004, Dinesh Karki has been working as the radiographer, dark room assistant and has even been taking x-rays. Karki, who continues to do what he does because he is interested in radiography for the past seven years. “I used to observe how the x-rays were done and then they would answer my questions in simple language so that I understood how it is done,” he explains.

SALYAN—Ever since the x-ray machine in the district hospital broke down, locals have faced a problem—they must go to Nepalgunj for x-rays. The hospital called in an engineer from Delhi but he was unable to fix it and said it could only be repaired in India. This will cost Rs 80,000, money that the hospital does not have.

Maoist mistakes

Kathmandu, 1 March

Although the Maoists have time and again reaffirmed their commitment to not harm the general public, their promises always turned out empty. Last Saturday when they detonated a bomb near the busy Charpautan intersection in Bhaktapur, 13 civilians were injured. A dayLabourer died in Dang when a bomb left by the Maoists exploded, a taxi driver in Dolkha was in Thana was murdered and nine oil tankers were injured. A dayLabourer died in Dang when a bomb left by the Maoists exploded, a taxi driver in Dolkha in Thana was murdered and nine oil tankers were injured. The rebels were praised for their humaneness and crew were abducted in Banke. Six crew members were clearly professional and between the Maoists’ words and actions and benefit no one. They will further worsen the rebels’ tenuous relationship with the seven-party alliance, a partnership that has given the Maoists, who were a long-term target of international criticism, a chance to return to mainstream politics. The rebels were praised for their four-month unilateral ceasefire, which gave rise to a slight hope that they might abandon armed struggle for peaceful polities. But there is no doubt that they have returned to their old path there is reason to doubt their commitment. They must renounce violence at once.

APPOINTMENTS TO DFD’S ADVISORY TEAM IN NEPAL - HEALTH ADVISER

DFD is a major bilateral development agency in Nepal. Our commitment is to support the Government of Nepal and others to reduce poverty. To do this effectively we require experienced and able professional staff to join our team.

DFD gives priority to support for economic opportunities and essential services to poor and disadvantaged communities, including those currently affected by conflict, and to social justice and governance reforms. We are committed to delivering assistance transparently and with full accountability locally.

The DFD Programme in Nepal is designed and supervised by a team of advisers including specialists in infrastructure, governance, rural livelihoods, social development, economics, health and conflict studies.

We want to further diversify our team to include Nepalese expertise covering Health.

Applications should be able to demonstrate they have the expertise in these fields and who have a successful record of achievement working as a professional in a national or international development agency. Applicants must be able to demonstrate strong competencies in relation to working with others; leading and managing; forward thinking; communicating and influencing; and analytical thinking and judgement (more details or will be given with the application form). Applicants must have a relevant post-graduate degree or equivalent and be fluent in both English and Nepali.

Located in the DFD office in Kathmandu, the positions are based in a fast paced multi-cultural environment that places a high premium on inclusive team working. You will have opportunities to work closely with all levels of Government and non-governmental agencies, and interact with Nepal’s from all walks of life and from all over the country. The position offers significant opportunities for professional and career growth. Though based in Kathmandu, some in-country and international travel will be required.

There will be an attractive and competitive local salary and benefits package. The successful candidate will be awarded a permanent contract.

DFD is an Equal Opportunities employer and appoints on merit by open competition. Nepalese citizens and women are encouraged to apply for an application form and more information, including Terms of Reference, please e-mail r-rai@dfd.gov.uk
It is 10:30 PM in Thamel and things are heating up in the most entertaining and possibly the most dangerous, corner of Kathmandu. The latest Bollywood hits blare from dance bars competing with live bands playing rock n roll covers. The music adds to the cacophony of a traffic jam as irate drivers lean hard on horns.

The air smells of exhaust and food from hawkers selling momos, chiya and bread omelettes. Drug dealers, some from as far away as Africa, peddle their wares. “Hash, you want marijuana, pot?” Transvestites and eunuchs flirt with groups of Nepali men looking for a cheap thrill. Street children try to make eye contact with customers spilling out of restaurants.

Just 50 years ago, this hot spot was the back of beyond. “No one wanted to come here,” recalls long-time Thamel resident Rajendra Man Sherchan, “it was so isolated that people were scared to go out at night and it was very dirty too—we had to roll up our trousers to keep them clean while walking.”

The golden years began in 1967 when Karna Shakya took an old Rana palace and turned it into Kathmandu Guest House. With the drop in popularity of Freak Street among tourists on the Hippie Trail because of frequent police raids to curb drugs and lawlessness, news spread by word of mouth of a wholesome place for backpackers.

Those in search of nirvana found that Thamel was closer to the Swayambunath Stupa than Jocche. Those in search of the next big high were delighted to find cheap cannabis from Nuwakot and Dhading. House owners along the filthy alleys of Bhagwan Bahal, Chakshibari and Paknajol recognised the opportunity and slowly started converting their properties into guest houses, restaurants and pubs.

The 1980s saw a different kind of tourist arriving. RNAC and other major carriers were connecting Kathmandu to the world. New trekking and rafting routes were being opened and the exchange rate meant that the exotic Shangri-la experience could be a relatively cheap vacation. Thamel was often a tourist’s first point of contact with Nepal and by then it had cleaned up enough to serve as a cultural buffer between the East and the West.

For Nepalis quick to identify a good thing coming, land prices were still affordable and rent even cheaper. Single-room travel agencies, trekking and rafting operators popped up to fill the gap between the do-it-yourselfers and the ritzy agents in Darbar Marg. “That was the best time,” remembers Sunil Shrestha, who has been a travel agent, restaurateur and today manages a cyber cafe. “Those days it seemed like everyone wanted to come to Thamel. We were, well at least I was, minting money.”

It seemed simple enough to let the area grow but unchecked growth can be disastrous. Today, there are almost 500 lodges and guest houses, nearly double that number of restaurants, bars, shops and agencies crammed into the Thamel area. With land now at a premium, there is only one way to grow skywards and buildings are violating seismic safety standards.

Traffic frequently grinds to a standstill because the narrow alleyways were never designed to squeeze a dump truck past a police van on a one-way street. There are potholes that could swallow a whole car. “We contribute to the economy and we pay our taxes so the least the authorities can do is repair the roads and provide better security,” says Pemba Ghale who runs a dance restaurant. He, like all business owners in Thamel, also shells out hefty monthly ‘protection fees’ to the various quarters that demand it.

Dark shadows loom in the neon lights of Thamel. The road into Thamel becomes a meat market every night. The legalisation of prostitution is a hot potato that no one wants to touch and so sex workers put themselves at risk with each encounter. This could well be the biggest breeding ground for AIDS, despite the sight of discarded condoms that litter the narrow side alleys.

Lean and mean in Thamel

Kathmandu’s tourist hub is waiting for a rebound

KIRAN PANDAY

PANKAJ RAYAMAJHI
The downturn in tourism has battered many businesses. Lodge owners wait for walk-in guests after bookings are cancelled at the last minute because of embassy advisories. Shopkeepers still open their shutters and dust their goods and travel agents prop up boards advertising the next budget trek.

In some ways Thamel is a good metaphor for the nation—while lawlessness, economic desperation and uncertainty prevail, it is not too late to turn things around. Thamel just needs to learn from places and people doing it right. Lake Side in Pokhara is a good example. Pokhara Tourism organizes events to engage foreign and domestic tourists, Pokhrelis take pride in their lake and despite temptations, controls have been placed on development of this most lucrative strip of real estate.

Ganesh Bhattarai of Pokhara Tourism knows what the problem with Thamel is: “Everybody is just waiting for the guy next door to take that first step. Well, it’s not going to work that way.”

The Nepal Tourism Board, the Thamel Tourism Development Board, HAN, REBAN, NATA, NARA and all others involved must now reassess Thamel’s state in order to start planning its future. Sherchan sums it up with cautious optimism: “It has an identity of its own and as long as budget tourism is around, this place will be around. Thamel won’t die.”

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CRAFTED IN NEPAL. INSPIRATION FOR THE WORLD.
Pico makes an ass of himself

In a reversal of roles, Pico Iyer goes from hero travel writer to zero commentator

“…one of the most revered travel writers… Born in England, raised in California, educated at Eton, Oxford and Harvard, his essays and other writings have appeared in Condé Nast Traveler, the New Yorker… His books include Video Night in Kathmandu, Falling off the Map…”

Google Pico Iyer and this is what comes up: an immediate applause for his worldliness, erudition and accomplishments. So it was no surprise that when I saw his article Tale of Two Kingdoms in Time I thought, at last, someone who can put an intelligent handle on this silly Bhutan vs Nepal thing into proper perspective. I should have paid more attention to the subtitle. Reading it, I got into one of those situations where one feels so insulted, invectives and murderous thoughts flow senselessly.

Iyer has obviously cobbled together one of his periodic essays for Time, his former employer of four years, with little respect for history or reality. His puerile attempt at comparing Nepal and Bhutan was irritating; the destruction of his usual clever language bemusing, his commentary clichéd and the conclusions specious.

Let’s get one thing straight: Himalayan Kingdoms both might be but that is where the similarity ends. He regurgitated the oft-quoted litany of quirks that is supposed to confirm Bhutan as the new Shangri-La. All sentient souls this corner of the Indian sub-continent know that Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness sags with sadness when 100,000 of its ethnically-cleansed population languishing in the eastern plains of Nepal for the last 15 years are taken into account.

A few boutique hotels and a promise to relinquish the throne in 2008 make not a magic kingdom or a noble king. The Bhutani subjects’ attachment to their medieval costumes rapidly wears off in the shopping malls of Delhi, go-go bars of Bangkok and, one might add, Casino Tara of Boudha. And, pray, why drag in religion? The practice of Christianity is now constitutionally allowed in Nepal, but it is a recent import largely spread by unspiritual promises of economic advancement.

Nepal is slowly coming to terms with the implications of democracy, instituted as recently as 1990. The going has not been comfortable or even certain, compounded by the 10-year-long Maoist insurgency. However, Nepal continues to remain a vibrant country full of appealing anomalies. Nepal may have welcomed tourists in the 70s with the easy promise of hashish and hedonism but the natural beauty and the curious charm of its pluralistic peoples have always been the real attractions. Even Bhutani citizens are welcome here but it has always puzzled me why we are not allowed to enter Bhutan freely.

We have never closed our doors on visitors: western governments have with their alarmist travel advisories. Its foreign, defence and economic policies all but governed by India, Bhutan can ill-afford to sneer at Nepal’s present misfortunes with righteous sniggering. My suspicion is that Bhutan’s widely-advertised disdain for Nepal is actually a perfectly-pitched but delusional ploy to mask fear and envy. Nepal represents all that Bhutan can’t be due to its geographical and international insignificance, its myopic vision that confines self-preservation with seclusion and the ruling clutch’s realisation that its hold on power (royal and political chicanery notwithstanding) is finite.

To quote Iyer “…the first law of modern life is that everything is as impermanent as an image on a screen; the only form of continuity is change.” Deep within, Bhutan knows that it can’t stop the clock from ticking and controlling the time it will inevitably tell.

Finally, by coining linguistically-challenged words such as ‘Nepalmed’ with its non-Nepal connotations, clumsy stabs at promiscuous semantics and scurrilous second-hand comments about Nepal and, especially, Nepali women, Iyer has made an utter ass of himself. By criticising Nepal while romanticising Bhutan, he has merely followed trend, missing a chance to correct it. He once said that the most important challenge in the writing process for him was clarity. Since clarity was clearly lacking in his article, perhaps it is he who should be listening to the King of Bhutan, deposing himself of all literary and analytical responsibilities in 2008. Or, better, sooner.

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SURYA

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STADYATORY DIRECTIVE: SMOKING IS INJURIOUS TO HEALTH

Surya

Perspectives
A taste of Tibet

Tee Dee, also popularly known as “Chung town” among the Delhi University crowd, is situated along the Outer Ring Road near Majnu ka Tila. Inviting Chinese noodles and tempting Taiwanese pastries, Tee Dee is a way to go for those who want to take a break from the usual routine of tea, coffee, or even Indian thalis that are quite common in this part of Delhi. A visit to Tee Dee is a must if you are a fan of Asian cuisine.

For the more adventurous, the ‘chele fried’ is an excellent experiment. Chele fried is a combination of assorted vegetables cooked in a batter mix. For the health-conscious, there are various soups, salads, and rice dishes available. The menu also includes a variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian options to suit every palate.

The ambience of the place is unobtrusive. The huge picture of the Dalai Lama in the background adds to the atmosphere. The Sun is in the constellation of Aquarius at the start of March, and remember—dangerous to look directly at the Sun is the only thing you need to remember. Other highlights in the March sky:

- **Saturn** reaches its greatest eastern elongation from the Sun on 25 March, meaning it can be seen in the early evening sky.
- **Venus** is high in the western sky at dusk and sets in the early hours of the morning.
- **Mars** is in the western sky at dusk and sets in the early hours of the morning.
- **Mercury** is at inferior conjunction (between Earth and the Sun) on 12 March.
- **Venus** is at its brightest and can be seen in the eastern sky.
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The Sun is in the constellation of Aquarius at the start of March, moving into Pisces on the 12th. The Spring Equinox falls on 21 March at 00:11 when the Sun crosses the celestial equator from south to north, marking the length of the day equal to the night.

**Mercury** is at inferior conjunction (between Earth and the Sun) on 12 March. We are very unlikely to see this elusive little planet this month.

**Venus** is a brilliant “morning Star”, visible in the east at dawn each day. It reaches its greatest western elongation from the Sun on 26 March.

**Mars** is high in the western sky at dusk and sets in the early hours of the morning. It moves steadily eastward, right-night by right-night, against the stars of Taurus.

**Jupiter** is in Libra, rises later in the evening and is at its highest at around 3AM. You’ll see it as a very bright, steady star—only visible from 6:20 to 9:00.

**Saturn** is in the eastern sky at dusk. It moves slowly north-west in Cancer, well below and to the left of the “twins” stars of Gemini.

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Bush talks to India about Nepal

US anxiety over Nepal’s troubles figure in George W Bush’s talks with Indian leaders

The visit comes amidst growing US anxiety over Nepal’s troubles figure in George W Bush’s talks with Indian leaders. US officials say that unless a turnaround is engineered in six to eight months, Nepal will collapse into Maoist hands. Besides bringing more instability to South Asia, that would enhance ties between the Maoists in Nepal and anti-government insurgents in northern India and provide a new haven for terrorists.

The visit of the leader of the US Pacific Command to Nepal took only 24 hours but it spoke volumes about US concern over the fate of that increasingly troubled nation. Over the past year, Nepal has experienced a three-way struggle for power. US officials say that unless a political party leaders and senior military officers. He was the highest-ranking US military officer to visit Nepal in recent times and his message was stark: “I can’t help you until you take steps to establish participatory democracy.”

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DEEPTI GURUNG
in POKHARA

I sounds like something out of a movie. Steve met Emiko 17 years ago in Australia. She was a 23-year-old Japanese and he was a six-year-old Australian. They think it was destiny that brought them together and their mutual interest in travel. This week they were in Pokhara, racing ultramarathons, taking in the scenery and talking to locals. Their eyes still sparkle when they talk to each other as if they’d just met.

Emiko is a daughter of a single mother who had to support herself and her siblings. They helped their mother clean, cook and take care of their youngest brother.

Even while young, Emi had a dream of going out to see the world. Steve also grew up in a working-class family who loved bicycling. After they met, they pedalled across Australia, then around Emi’s home in Osaka. For 11 years since 1989 they cycled around the world. Steve also grew up in a working-class family who loved bicycling. After they met, they pedalled across Australia, then around Emi’s home in Osaka. For 11 years since 1989 they cycled around the world. They all enjoyed the format tremendously, as did the professionals I could give both professionals and amateurs a chance to play together and have fun doing something new. Each team included an amateur with a low, middle and high handicap as well as a professional. I could see that the amateurs really enjoyed the experience of hitting second shots from lies where before they could only dream of playing and seeing just how well shots can be struck. Humble thanks to the RNGC executive committee for realising the need to develop golf in Nepal and special thanks to executive committee member Deepak Acharya for conceiving of and successfully conducting last weekend’s event. Thank you also to the diehard golfers of the corporate world who sponsored teams—without them the event wouldn’t have been a success. I met Dorjee Sherpa a few days before the scramble and found him in high spirits and full of advice. “It’s high time that the amateurs appreciate the golf lessons they receive from professionals and started to give something back to help the growth of golf in the country.”

A re you aware of the Golf ‘scramble’? It’s a team event where players count only the best shots made by all members (eg, they tee off their second shots from the place where the best drive landed) to compile their score. Although I was familiar with the format, I never played it during my two decades of golfing—until last weekend.

The Royal Nepal Golf Club (RNGC) organised the scramble to give both professionals and amateurs a chance to play together and have fun trying something new. Each team included an amateur with a low, middle and high handicap as well as a professional. I could see that the amateurs really enjoyed the experience of hitting second shots from lies where before they could only dream of playing and seeing just how well shots can be struck. Humble thanks to the RNGC executive committee for realising the need to develop golf in Nepal and special thanks to executive committee member Deepak Acharya for conceiving of and successfully conducting last weekend’s event. Thank you also to the diehard golfers of the corporate world who sponsored teams—without them the event wouldn’t have been a success. I met Dorjee Sherpa a few days before the scramble and found him in high spirits and full of advice. “It’s high time that the amateurs appreciate the golf lessons they receive from professionals and started to give something back to help the growth of golf in the country.”

I know that the whole golfing fraternity supports Sherpa’s sentiments to support and reinvigorate our professional golf. For the scramble I was paired up with three seniors—Pradeep Rana, KB Shah and Vinod Rana—representing St Peters Hospital (England). They all enjoyed the format tremendously, as did the other participants I spoke to, most of whom were making their maiden appearances in the scramble. Undoubtedly the team of pro Deepak Thapa Magar and amateurs Niraj Rana, Kundan Rana and Anur Chandra were simply delighted with their victory.

Like other professional golfers in Nepal, I see this event as a boost to the local pro game. Everyone in the golfing community is aware that professionals need more of these 72-hole stroke-play events to improve their standards and an event like the scramble is a welcome addition to their tour schedule. I am happy that the professionals and amateurs alike will go for a walk every day and be happy. “I’m sure we can make it to the top of Mount Everest. We both go for a walk every day and keep ourselves very fit,” Mary said this week, just before setting out for Nepal.

The expedition has no sponsors, mainly because it didn’t get any. The expedition website (www.mary-woodbridge.co.uk/) has videos and photos of the rigorous training that Mary and Daisy’s training and ideas on how to train. Mary’s website is now filling up with well wishes and also mattering sceptics like this one.

“I know that the whole golfing fraternity supports Sherpa’s sentiments to support and reinvigorate our professional golf. For the scramble I was paired up with three seniors—Pradeep Rana, KB Shah and Vinod Rana—representing St Peters Hospital (England). They all enjoyed the format tremendously, as did the other participants I spoke to, most of whom were making their maiden appearances in the scramble. Undoubtedly the team of pro Deepak Thapa Magar and amateurs Niraj Rana, Kundan Rana and Anur Chandra were simply delighted with their victory.

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**Performance Blowing up The Balls**

**EXHIBITIONS**
- Painting Exhibition by Ed Bartlett 10 March. 5.30PM. Indigo Gallery
- Waves of Echo on Rice Paper (Fish Series) by Gajendra Man Shrestha.
- Siddartha Art Gallery, 5 March

**EVENTS**
- Pre-Cleaning Day
- Conferences at Godavari Resort
- Himalayan healing stones and crystals
- Possibility of Bird Flu in Nepal

**MUSIC**
- Heartbreakers
- Best of Jazz
- Unplugged
- Live Music
- Uncork the Good Times
- BBQ Ban Bhoj with swimming

**DINING**
- Breakfast
- Maki Newa Bhutu
- Stupa View
- Strawberry Time
- Mexican and Italian
- Great Dining
- The Shangri-La Express
- Wonderful Wednesdays
- BBQ Dinner at Summit Hotel every Friday. 6:30PM - 9:30PM.

**GETAWAYS**
- Go Double, Pay Single
- Club Himalaya Chiso Chiso Hawama
- Junglewalks, rafting, elephant rides at Jungle Base Camp

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**About Town**

**EXHIBITIONS**
- Indian Film Festival from 3 March. Jai Nepal Cinema.
- Pre-Cleaning Day Chobar Village. 4 March. 8AM. 4335555.
- Fifth Annual Coca cola Ride Nepal from 12-15 March.
- Himalayan healings stones and crystals sales & Work Shop.
- Great American Films from 6 March. The American Library

**MUSIC**
- Manose Singh bamboo flute player. 6PM.
- Strawberry Time at Soaltee Crowne Plaza.
- Fusion Bar at Dwarika’s presents Ciney
- Food at Fuzone Café.
- Summertime Sessions with Strings. Jatra Saturday nights.
- Fusion Bar at Dwarika’s presents Ciney
- Food at Fuzone Café.

**DINING**
- Breakfast
- Maki Newa Bhutu for Newari cuisine at Hotel Royal Singh.
- Soups, make your own sandwiches and
- Garden Terrace restaurants, Soaltee Crowne Plaza.
- 11AM - 3PM. The Shambala Garden
- 9PM.
- Next available. Rs. 999 onwards. The Shambala Garden.

**GETAWAYS**
- Go Double, Pay Single
- Club Himalaya Chiso Chiso Hawama
- Junglewalks, rafting, elephant rides at Jungle Base Camp

**NEPALI WEATHER**

The change in wind direction this week from southwest to northwest brought fresh cooler air from the Tibetan plateau which cleared the haze, raised maximum temperatures. However, it also brought air saturated with moisture which really need at a time when we haven’t had rain for nearly five months now.

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POKHARA. NOT BAGHDAD: Chipledhunga in Pokhara soon after a Maoist bomb exploded leaving 11 people injured on Tuesday.

MADE IN NEPAL: Models showcase local fashions at the 7th Handicraft Trade Fair at Soaltee Crowne Plaza on Tuesday.

AFTER THE GLORY: Elated students at Padma Kanya Campus in Bagbajar pose for a picture after the results of the Free Student Union elections were announced on Tuesday.

POKHARA, NOT BAGHDAD: A soldier blows the shankha during Army Day celebrations at Tundhikel on Sunday.

WITH ALL HIS MIGHT: A soldier blows the shankha during Army Day celebrations at Tundhikel on Sunday.

FREEDOM CALLS: NC leaders pose after their release from prison on 27 February following one month in detention. Bhim D Pradhan, Dr Shekhar Koirala, Lakshman Ghimire, Nanda Joshi and Tirtha R Dorgel.

Number one by design

Swapnil Acharya’s story is a lesson for those who think the only way to learn the tricks of a trade is to attend a professional school. Until 2000, Swapnil did not even have a computer of his own and the only tool at his disposal as he set out to learn website design was his own curiosity.

Initially a friend helped him figure out the basics and then he was on his own. Working his way up by studying the source codes of existing websites and doing research on the internet, Swapnil, who had his A-levels at Kathmandu Academy, started designing his own site, putting extra care into Flash, the technology for animation.

The quality of this 20-year-old’s work impressed his friends, who advised him to turn professional. Swapnil turned to the internet once again, this time to find professional contacts, which in turn got him his first job: building the website of a motor workshop for a friend’s father. That was only the beginning. Swapnil is a do-it-yourself guy and has since built websites for foreign companies and organisations: all by working online.

Swapnil’s own website www.himmasters.net/nepali, won two awards—for best technical qualities and best overall in Wave Web Winner 2005, the website designing contest of Himalmedia’s Wave magazine. Said a beaming Swapnil: “Web designing is an art. It involves creativity.”

Already swamped with work, Swapnil has no time to go to university just now. “Maybe later,” he says. A man of few words is Swapnil but what a designer!

Alok Tumbahangphey

Freedom from Dandruff

Anti-Dandruff hair oil with 0.25% A.C.E. (Vitamin B.C.E.) Nourishment

New Clear Shampoo from Nepali Vicks-Ace fights dandruff gently and effectively. It also nourishes and strengthens hair from the scalp, keeping your hair totally dandruff-free and healthy.
Complain, complain, complain

It is an age-old custom in this part of the world to have Complaints and Suggestions Boxes located at convenient intervals throughout the kingdom. We don’t know if these boxes are ever opened, or if anyone actually reads the recommendations therein, but that is not the point. The point is that the boxes prove that the citizens’ right to complain is still intact despite the royal takeover. As a last resort if nothing else works, they can always vent their frustrations and pour out their anger by making droppings in the box and relieve themselves. So what if we don’t have ballot boxes, at least we have Complaints Boxes.

However, it has come to our notice that there are some units of His Majestic Government that still haven’t installed Suggestion Boxes in their premises. This is intolerable. If this is the state of affairs, how on earth is the ordinary man on the street ever going to lodge a complaint that there isn’t a Complaint Box? By unburdening himself in broad daylight right there on the perimeter wall of the Ministry of Hygiene and Insanity to make his/her point?

However, going by the sight of the overstuffed Complaint and Suggestion Box at the airport these days (sign on box: ‘Not To Be Used As Spitoon Except During State Of Emergency’) it is clear that Nepal is a vibrant democracy where all adults have franchises and an avenue exists for everyone to bring pet peeves to the notice of the highest authoritarian in the land. Since we journalists have access to Complaint Boxes under the Freedom of Information Act we have sampled the outpourings, and here are the highlights:

To Whosoever It May Concern

My flight to Dhaka has been delayed by another four months due to late arrival of aircraft. The airline says it has been rescheduled for the post-monsoon season. I checked in about this time last year and I really feel at home here in the departure hall. I’m not writing to complain it’s just that I’m bored stiff. Would it be too much to ask the concerned airline staff please let me know if I can expect a flight during my present incarnation or whether I can reasonably expect to get to Dhaka in my afterlife so I can notify my family and plan accordingly? Thank you for your kind attention.

Yours etc,
Phanindra

You Majesty,

I am writing to apprise you of the fact that your airport security disrespectfully just stopped me from boarding my flight to Biratnagar just now. Don’t they know who I am? This is a premeditated attack on the democratic process, and I’m going to declare a nationwide strike tomorrow. We will throw a brick at anything that moves.

Girija Prasad Koirala, 27 August 2004
P.S.: How come I’m not invited to Pokhara?

Hi,

I am writing to complain about the 12-point agreement between the Maoists and the parties. As I told Vijay the other day, I can’t allow this to happen. Since all the interviews and letters to the editors I have written in the past month don’t seem to be making any impact at all, though I might as well drop this note while I wait for my plane. Let’s hope it creates some ripples.

Jim Moriarty