A cross the country, ordinary Nepalis told us this week about their hopes and aspirations for 2064. The overwhelming desire is for the government to get over its obsession with politics so there will be peace and an improvement in their lives.

Just because we can travel around freely now, that doesn’t mean our country is at peace. Peace comes when the smiles return to the faces of Nepalis. Peace comes when innocent women still have husbands who are alive.

Ambika Timilsina, Chitwan

The interim government should fulfill the wishes of the people for peace. Let the two armies start reforming themselves. Let’s see real peace in 2064.

Dambar Biswakarma, Ilam

Nepali fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters are finally experiencing the end of conflict. Let’s protect this peace so there is development.

Hemlata Chemjong, Panchthar

Let’s hope the new year will see the political will to steer the country towards peace and progress.

Puskar Kharel, Gulmi

Let’s hope us students can now get on with our studies again. Let us pray that the country will never see war again. Most of all, let us all work together to build a truly new Nepal which we can all call our own.

Kalpana Baral, Jhapa

In this region of Nepal, the war is still going on. There hasn’t been a ceasefire. What is the point having a home if there is no family? What is the point having a country if citizens aren’t treated equally? Let’s work together for peace so our country Nepal can move forward.

Ram Bilas Yadav, Siraha

There will be peace only with justice, and if there is justice no one has to take up arms.

Shyam Chaudhary, Saptari

Let no force try to provoke innocent Nepalis to take up arms against each other again.

Lt Bhan Bahadur Airi, Sindhupalchok

The country is trying to breathe again, let’s make sure the conflict doesn’t re-ignite.

Hridaya Sharma, Gorkha

We have no more tears to cry. We have to protect peace so Nepalis can live decent lives.

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Pragya Shrestha, Dolakha
An even more fatal year

Sometimes, instinctive rather than analytical readings point the way ahead

A popular Nepali proverb says that “despite every effort to return to the normal course of things, it has taken exactly twelve years for the Maoists to return to the stage that they were at in 1988 when they were overthrown.” In 1989, they abandoned parliament after being denied their rightful place there by the two big parties of the day.

The Maoist insurgency was violent, but the popular Nepali proverb says that “A hero holding his ground against those determined to block the way.” And that was precisely what the Maoist movement has done. For exactly one year - from April 1990 to April 1991 - the country was in a state of chaos and uncertainty. The political parties were hell-bent on holding the constituent assembly election by June, and it was the only way to prevent the crisis from escalating. The political parties themselves have not been able to take the issue to the grassroots.

The political parties are hell-bent on holding the constituent assembly election by June because for them it is a face-saving way to appease the people. But it is pointless to conduct elections just for the sake of elections. The government should aim at the interim constitution and call for a referendum on the question of monarchy instead of leaving the matter to the political parties. The people will then have a chance to decide on the question of monarchy, and it will be carried out in the current timeframe.

The question of monarch is not decided prior to the constituent assembly elections, what would be the political parties take to the people during the election campaign? It is obvious that the bottomline will be whether to retain the monarchy or not. And that will be disastrous because the main issue of the constituent assembly will be on the back burner during the election campaign. The election will be a de facto referendum on the question of monarchy and overthrow of the main agenda of restructuring the state.

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UNDEMOCRATIC

Apparently, all parties other than the eight in the eight-party alliance are required to collect 10,000 signatures to register their party with the election commission. It is undemocratic to have different rules for different parties. It shows that the EPA does not want other parties to contest the elections. Small, mostly nationalist, parties can’t go conduct political programs in the villages and so are having a hard time collecting the signatures. Saurav Sharma, email

- The government has failed. Their main objective—free and fair elections in 20 June—is held to be impossible by the election commission, the general public, the UN, and others. There are no rules about how to run such an election. The JTMM says it won’t allow elections in the tarai. Most importantly, people don’t know about the constituent assembly. Given all this, why would anyone want elections now?

Name withheld, email

- US Ambassador James F Moriarty is right when he repeatedly says that the Maoists should completely stop their violent and extortionist activities and abide by the comprehensive peace agreement and international norms, return the property they seized, and make a living. The only way to do that is by providing the grounds for genuine peace.

Sradhanjali Dhungana, email

SLANDEROUS

If I were Pradip Gyawali, I’d be tempted to sue your paper for slander for implying that I worked hard during the peace process because I was expecting a ministerial position (‘In the interim’, Eyes Wide Shut, #343). The rest of the column is typical of our sarcastic culture. Of Ram Chandra Paudel’s nomination as Peace and Reconstruction Minister, Kumar asks whether it is ‘the attraction of reconstruction funds’. With my sarcastic hat on, I think Kumar is angry Gyawali was not made minister because he, Kumar, personally was in line for a good government position if that happened.

I would be sad to see your paper turn into one of those weekly newspapers that are affiliated with political parties. I am no fan of politicians but I don’t like yellow journalism either. Please, no baseless political finger pointing, and no name picking—any minister can be accused of being incompetent and wanting ministries for power or money.

Anup Pathak, USA

UNSTABLE ELEMENTS

I think what Daniel Lak talks about so casually in ‘Unstable elements’ (Here and there, #343) needs to be taken very seriously here in Nepal. As a teacher, I see the connection to our educational system, which teaches children to listen and imitate rather than to think and discover, turning them into young people who are easily indoctrinated and misled. With so many mis-educated, unemployed, unskilled youth, we are setting ourselves up for a disaster in the future.

Pratibha Dangol, Hetauda

Getting the economy going and giving jobs to youth is easier said than done. How do you get the economy moving in the first place, especially with the situation Nepal is in right now? Stability and security come to mind, but then, to achieve stability and security, like you mention, the young hotheads must be provided with means to make a living. The only way to do that is by creating jobs for them, and for jobs to be created the economy has to be in a good shape. To get the economy going, security and stability must be achieved. To achieve security and stability... Oops, there I go again repeating myself, just like all those experts.

S Pal, email

HONEST ASS

The Ass on Backside does a good job of (satirically) summarizing what is going on in Nepal and might be the last person who stands firm when it comes pointing out Maoist excesses. The Maoists have hijacked this government. Home Minister Sitaula apologises for every mistake the Maoists make. Not one political leader visited Mad when 38 innocent Nepalis were killed by the Maoists. But Ram Chandra Poudel rushed to pay tribute to the 28 Maoists killed in Gaur, possibly because he needed Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s support to be appointed to the peace and reconstruction committee. Madhab Nepal is the classic flipfopper. Keep writing about all this, eventually there will be payback.

Tara Nepal, email

LETTERS

Nepal Times welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms can be accepted, writers who provide their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format without attachments with ‘letter to the editor’ in the subject line.

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Vote confusion

Public ignorance of the constituent assembly reflects political confusion

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

For consumption, the eight party politicians are holding firm to their line of elections in June. What they aren’t discussing is public education.

The coalition parties are not doing much themselves to educate the general public about Nepal’s first elections to a constituent assembly, they are also keeping the election commission from launching its own voter education program. In large part this is because the parties themselves are not yet clear about what kind of elections these will be.

‘Since there is no legal clarity on what kind of election procedures we will be following and how the polls will be held, we are unable to conduct any education program for voters,’ said chief election commissioner Bha Raj Pokhrel. ‘The problem specifically is that no one knows what kind of procedures we will adopt for a proportional electoral system.’

Lawmakers agree that this is a crucial issue that needs to be resolved and there is discussion in parliament about the constituent assembly member election bill that is to decide on the details of the proportional system.

Speaker Subash Nembang says the bill is the most important legislation relating to constituent assembly elections and that parliament should not be blamed for the delay. ‘In the first place, the entry of the bill in parliament was delayed. We’ve been prodding the government and the election commission to table such important legislations in a timely manner.’

Foreign aid meant to support public awareness on constituent assembly elections has come in, but the funds have not yet reached where they should. The recently established Nepal Peace Trust Fund, for instance, has received close to $4 million as foreign assistance and the pending programme will provide the necessary support about the upcoming elections. But not a single penny has been spent for that purpose.

Nepal’s transition phase will be ‘interim strategy note’, says British Assistant Minister for International Development Gareth Thomas. ‘But obviously this is something which the government has got to lead on.’

For public education, donor governments like the UK, Norway, and Switzerland have been coordinating with the UNDP, which is also not very optimistic. Matthew Kahane, resident representative, says that even local leaders and activists in the countryside understood little about the elections. ‘When they don’t understand much, how can we expect ordinary voters to know?’

Several recent surveys have pointed to poor voter awareness of what a constituent assembly is. In February, the Kathmandu-based Interdisciplinary Analysts showed that although 70 percent of respondents had heard about the constituent assembly, only a third claimed knowledge (accurate or otherwise) of what it means (‘Big questions’, #337).

Few politicians are talking about how they expect Nepal to elect a body that will write a constitution for the future of Nepal. Nepali Congress leader Arjun KC admits that public education is seriously lacking, but says that it is expected. ‘At a time when the parties and the government have not been able to do enough to maintain law and order, what can they do about voter education?’

‘No surprise, perhaps, that his party boss and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala said recently that “in abnormal times like these, you will have elections in abnormal ways.”’

An interim economic plan to deal with the challenges of political transition

After peace, perhaps development

The 10th five-year plan ends in June this year. The interim government is working towards an ‘interim plan’, rather than the 11th plan. ‘The interim plan is because Nepal’s transition phase will present new challenges,’ says Jagdish Chandra Pokhrel, vice chairman of the National Planning Commission. ‘The interim plan will follow the guidelines set by the five-year plans, which means there will be no changes in the areas of spending, monitoring, and other basic procedures. We are told that the plan will be politically inclusive, and will focus on reconciliation, reconstruction of infrastructure and society. This is the first time since five-year planning was started half-a-century ago that the country has not had one.

The government plans to invest in its infrastructure to create employment opportunities, pump cash into the economy, and spur the market. The plan will focus on areas like agriculture and tourism to increase investment, paying extra attention to roads, irrigation, electricity, drinking water, education, and health services. ‘The private sector is still reluctant to invest, so we have to do as much as we can,’ explains Pokhrel. ‘Hopefully this will create a favourable environment for the private sector to also invest soon.’

Investment in roads, microhydro, and drinking water schemes is to increase by 50-60 percent. A fast track highway linking Kathmandu to the tarai and roads to district headquarters are to be prioritised, as are irrigation programs.

Commission officials say it will take more time to quantify investment in education, health, and other social sectors, because it is proving difficult to evaluate how much damage the ten years of war has done to these sectors.

The investment target of the Rs 500 billion interim plan is Rs 170 billion. It takes into consideration the inflation, which is at six percent and increasing, and other social sectors, because it is proving difficult to evaluate how much damage the ten years of war has done to these sectors.

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The World Bank, which provides aid that is not program specific—that is, the government can spend it as it needs to—is already discussing conditional support. It has changed its country strategy to ‘interim strategy note’, echoing the government’s interim economic plan. The note says that Nepal’s period of transition will be ‘interim strategy note’, echoing the government’s interim economic plan. The note says that Nepal’s period of transition will be as evaluative, interrupted by deadlock, and deteriorating. Aid for an ‘easy environment’ will be $200 million for the period of transition, going to $100 million for a deadlocked process, and nothing if the situation deteriorates. The Bank is asking the government to focus on roads, big irrigation and hydro-power projects.

Distinct from the interim economic plan is the Nepal Peace Trust Fund, emergency aid provided by the international community. The government says the fund, which is under the auspices of new Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction and other institutions monitoring the peace accord, is directed towards rehabilitation of displaced and Maoist fighters, reconstruction of infrastructure, constituent assembly elections, law and order, civic education, and maintenance of the Maoist cantonments. The fund is expected to dispense money as it sees fit without going through the normal approval process. Financial analysts say that the Rs 7 billion planned for the three-year fund has been underutilised by as much as 100 percent.

The interim government has signed a separate joint financial agreement with the UK and Norway for assistance to the three-year fund. The dates of the all-important Nepal Development Forum, where appeals for aid will be evaluated, will only be announced after the dates of the constituent assembly election.

Meanwhile, the UN is proposing a Nepal Trust Fund similar to the interim government’s peace trust fund. The UN says the fund is to support UNMIN and the peace process in general. Finance Ministry sources argue that there is a risk that the UN Peace Trust Fund can aid UNMIN if it requires more funds.”
Information-seeking
Lessons in telecoms from Bangladesh

The recently concluded 14th SAARC Summit stressed the importance of connectivity among South Asian member countries. Defined to include transport, electronic, and telecom networks, connectivity is crucial for a flow of people, goods, and ideas from one part of South Asia to another. Easier flows lead to more interactions and exchanges, which reduce distrust and make further cooperation feasible.

Building upon this broader SAARC spirit, it is instructive to look at one example in Bangladesh, where GrameenPhone—a Norway-Bangladesh private-sector company with 10 million plus subscribers—uses mobile phone technology to connect rural villagers to the internet. For the past one year, on a pilot basis, GrameenPhone (GP) has been setting up village-based Community Information Centres (CIC) in some locations across Bangladesh.

The model works like this: GP identifies a particular location as the site for an information centre. It asks its employees from that location to recommend the names of a few potential entrepreneurs. These recommended people could be the employees’ cousins or other relatives.

From experience, GP has learnt the selection of the entrepreneur is the most important criterion for the commercial success of any CIC. Instead of looking only at technical skills or higher educational qualifications, GP looks for qualities such as reliability, an eagerness to learn continuously, and an interest in sharing information and services with others. Once such an entrepreneur is selected, he is sent for training, where he will meet other CIC entrepreneurs. He gets to understand the daily nuts and bolts of running a small service-oriented communication business in places that have hitherto fallen on the unlit side of the digital divide.

To the entrepreneur, GP then provides a desktop computer, and a GSM EDGE-compatible mobile sim card, which doubles up as a modem to the internet. Assuming that he doesn’t have his own resources, the entrepreneur may borrow money from a local Grameen Bank to pay for basic marketing, rent, mobile phone expenses, and for purchasing additional equipments such as a printer, a webcam and a digital camera.

Soon, the entrepreneur’s CIC will be up and running, providing fee-based web-enabled services in places where villagers and children gather for school, transport, and daily trade. As a result, villagers can now access services such as downloading of music and videos, checking vegetable prices in Dhaka’s markets, looking up national exam results, and even chatting online or sharing photos with relatives working as migrant labourers in Malaysia.

Depending on the demand, some CICs have become both photo and recording studios—in places untouched by both electricity and internet service providers. One could argue that these Bangladeshi CICs are similar to the privately-run cybercafes that dot Nepal’s urban landscape. But there are differences.

While Nepali cybercafes are set up individually, Bangladesh’s CICs have emerged out of a particular business ecosystem that brings together technology, credit, solar-powered cells, market-related know-how, technical backstopping, and a unified social agenda for the benefit of all members. Facilitated loosely by a profit-seeking telecom operator, such an ecosystem is more responsive to addressing mistakes and spreading what works. Besides, Grameen's universally applauded pro-poor brand makes it easier for the CICs to develop a sense of rural ICT community, helping most centres to earn money to pay for and profit from their daily operations.

Bypassed by the success so far, GP, which competes with four other telecom companies in Bangladesh, plans to launch up to 500 CICs this year. That’s a lesson in connectivity that Nepal, with one-sixth of Bangladesh’s population, can learn from its SAARC brother...
“A crisis if elections are delayed”

Interview with Pushpa Kamal Dahal, CPN-M chairman, in Nepal, 8 April

Nepal: Is Prime Minister Koizala realistic in saying elections will be held on 20 June?

Pushpa Kamal Dahal: All the agreements between the eight parties are based on the premise that CA elections have to happen. The country will face a crisis if elections don’t happen. Senior leaders of the parties came to an agreement about the date, but Girija babu and I haven’t talked about it yet.

And if they don’t happen?

Whether or not elections happen depends on the present government’s willpower. It will be a challenge to go to polls as planned. Law and order, the security situation, and technical issues have to be dealt with first. Look at what is happening in madhes, such incidents will delay the process. I recently spoke with the UN’s Ian Martin, and he said Nepal is not ready to hold elections in June, and that if the elections were to happen, the results would be questionable.

So are you preparing to push the elections back?

No, no. I was just briefing you on the situation. If elections don’t happen, the unity between the eight parties might not hold. We may decide not to be a part of the government. If there are forces hatching conspiracies against the elections, what’s the point in our being part of the government? Even if we drop out, we will support what’s the point in our being part of the government. If there are forces pushing to make the interim period as short as possible, Disagreements within the other parties have to be dealt with first. Look at what is happening in the forest and we have to be careful when we sleep. We are living like squatters,” says Abiral.

Are there forces that want to break the eight-party alliance?

I don’t want to say that. However, the parties have been lacking the urgency on some issues. Take the alliance?

Disagreements within the other parties have to be dealt with first. Look at what is happening in the forest and we have to be careful when we sleep. We are living like squatters,” says Abiral.

Are there forces that want to break the eight-party alliance?

I don’t want to say that. However, the parties have been lacking the urgency on some issues. Take the temporary camps (pictured above, chitwan cantonment) where 31,000 of our friends are living in very difficult conditions. If their concerns continue to be ignored, the eight-party unity may break. But we are very hopeful, and I will talk to the UN and the prime minister soon about temporary camps and the possibility of elections.

There were disagreements in deciding on the council of ministers, though. There were objections to us being a part of the government right from the start. On 16 June 2006 when I went to Baluwatar to sign the eight-point agreement, it was the NC. When the comprehensive peace treaty was signed in November, the UML wrote a note of dissent. When the interim constitution was agreed upon, the Sadbhawana Party objected and Nepalganj happened. We are pushing to make the interim period as short as possible. Disagreements within the other parties caused the deadlock.

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Camp life

Bagmati, Chitwan, 11 April

SHAKTHIHR – The secretary of the cantonment for Maoist fighters in Chitwan (pictured left) Comrade Abiral is used to questions from journalists about problems he faces. “Ask me what problems I don’t have,” he says. It seems natural that he is cynical with visiting reporters and human rights monitors. Shaktikhor faces problems with water, food, and shelter. “There isn’t enough food, it is hot inside the tents, and there is no drinking water. There are scorpions here in the forest and we have to be careful when we sleep. We are living like squatters,” says Abiral.

“We’re tolerating it for the sake of peace.” Shaktikhor is among seven temporary camps set up for Maoists all over the country. There are some 6,000 inmates here, but the temporary huts haven’t yet been built and most of the former fighters sleep in tents. “When we left the camps recently there was speculation, but it was only because we’d run out of food,” Abiral adds. The government promised Rs 30 per day per inmate, but they haven’t received it. Abiral says the camp owes Rs 60 million to local traders.

Villagers in Shaktikhor have their own grievances. They say the camp was set up without their consent in the Udaypur Community Forest region. “We have been protecting this forest since long before the conflict,” says 63-year-old Tirtha Raj Gauli, “now we aren’t allowed to go in. We want control over our forest returned.” The forest is the main source of livelihood for most villagers here. Their source of water is also inside the camp, and villagers therefore also have to contend with a water shortage.

The children in the village, however, are excited about the helicopters that frequently fly in and land at the camp, and they run outside to watch them come and go, even during class hours.

The Maoists in the camps get up at 5AM, have their morning meal at 10AM, drill and walk around till 2PM, and then go to school inside the camp where they learn about political philosophy, among other things. The teachers and students are all Maoists. The camp now has a hospital with eight beds, and 110 of the fighters inside are trained health workers, but there isn’t the money to buy the medicines needed.

Tarai blunder

Editorial in Purbasaptahik, Laban, 6 April

At a time when the muthe problem shows signs of getting more complicated, the key question facing the new government is how the Maoists will deal with it. So far, they have not been able to counter the...
negative publicity and propaganda against them in the tarai. They haven't even been able to use the fallout of the Gaur massacre. A party that has joined the mainstream to transform Nepali society must begin by making another damage control tour of the plains.

Those who don't understand history are obliterated by it. The Maoists understood history and joined the mainstream. That is why they not only still exist, but also form a powerful part of the new government.

But so far, the government's commitment to fulfilling the mandate of last year’s People Power movement is insufficient.

Several areas of the tarai are still unstable. Without bringing these areas also back to normality the constituent assembly election will be a farce.

Budget fiasco

Editorial in Kantipur, 12 April

The eight parties should be embarrassed that only 15 percent of this year’s VDC budget has been spent. Minister of Local Development Deb Gurung has admitted this, and says the Rs 900 million spent so far has been for “administrative purposes”. The new democratic government ambitiously allocated the 4,000 VDC Rs 1 million each, more than twice the amount normally earmarked for local development programs, and said that the local administration had the authority to implement the plans. But the Local Self Governance Act says that the budget can only be spent after approval from the village and district councils. VDCs and DDCs did not meet because of disagreement between the parties.

In the three months left in this fiscal year, perhaps the parties could decide on how to spend a small part of the big budget. The Maoists are running the ministry, let’s hope they will revolutionise the process.

Tortoise: Interim government
Arrow: Road to parliament
Destination: Republic
Winding road: Constituent assembly

Girija Prasad: “Run faster! We have to take this route to the republic!”

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“The entire nation knows whether Girija babu brought us into mainstream politics, or if we made him into a hero. What credibility did the seven-parties have until we came?”

CPN-M chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal quoted in Kantipur, 8 April.
Our 4WD juddered over pits and bumps on the untarmaced road up the hillside to Mai Pokhari. Our driver took each twist with bravado. Some of us hung on to our seats, but young conservationist Kamal Rai, oblivious to the dangers and dropping temperature, was enthusiastically pointing out the flowering apple and plum trees by the wayside.

The ride was forgotten a few minutes later as we stood looking at the dark green forest reflected serenely in the lake. Rai, though, was just warming up to his job. He was quick to point out exotic fish in the lake, left behind by British Army folks. These (the fish, not British Army personnel), now indiscriminately gobble up eggs of a rare salamander species found only in this region.

We moved farther up and into the forest, beyond the government-run herbarium, to a clearing from where the hills of Ilam bordering those of India are visible. From here, Rai pointed out the Singhali ridge where he will spend a large part of next year, observing the use of forest resources by local communities, and exploring ways for these communities to make a living without abusing their natural environment.

This part of the massive eastern Himalaya, ranging across spread across Ilam, Panchthar, and Taplejung in east Nepal, northeast India, and Bhutan, is less-studied and understood than other biodiverse regions of the country like the tarai and Khumbu. It even looks mysterious, with its hidden valleys and impenetrable forest clouded with mist, dripping richly with moisture all year round. The green is broken by thick clumps of scarlet and white rhododendron and still unidentified orchids clinging to mossy trees. The foxy-bandit-like red panda and the rarely-spotted snow leopard are natives.

Rai works with the Ilam-based Namshaling Community Development Centre, part of a new initiative supported by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, to document local knowledge of the environment and use it as the basis of community-driven conservation efforts that benefit local people. This year, five organisations have received grants ranging from $30,000 to $80,000 for projects to strengthen civil society participation in management of forest resources, develop networks to conserve areas of rich biodiversity, and inventory plant species and their habitats.
There's a lot to learn about the lush landscapes and exotic plants and animals of the eastern Himalaya in east Nepal. The other grant winners are the Ilam Co-operation Council, the Ethnobotanical Society of Nepal, Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN), and Environmental Camps for Conservation Awareness.

Because the terrain is rugged and often inaccessible, biological surveys are difficult. As a result, most of the information available is on larger vertebrates that are relatively easy to identify and observe. The smaller mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish have been neglected. The most abundant animal group here— insects—has been virtually ignored. The Kangchenjunga-Singalila forests house about 35 species of birds considered at risk.

Scientists say the true extent of the region's biodiversity is vastly underestimated. Professionally and personally, they say, it is one of the most rewarding areas to work in. Hem Sagar Bairal, head of Bird Conservation Nepal, believes his work here could also help fulfill a personal goal every birder has—to identify new species. Ethnobotanist Krishna Shrestha hopes to have luck with unidentified plants.

Sarala Khaling, co-ordinator for the grants in the eastern Himalaya, says this is just the beginning. As annual grantees become more diverse, they will help design innovative conservation efforts and strengthen the relationship between people and their environment. Khaling says she particularly hopes that local women's and media groups will join in the efforts, instead of leaving the field to Kathmandu-based organisations. There is a strong feeling out here in Ilam of possibility and hope that there are good days ahead for the area's rich, pristine environment.

Grants were made possible by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), a joint initiative of Conservation International, the Global Environment Facility, the government of Japan, the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, and the World Bank.

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Follow the money
Hints to Nepal's future lie in its business prospects

As a Jew, Oppenheimer understood oppression and he had been quietly funding anti-apartheid efforts for years, even while appearing in public as a pillar of South African capitalism and the most important economic player in the nation. He remained close to Mandela before and after he became South Africa's first freely elected president, and was instrumental in ensuring that the once-Marxist and anti-business ANC did little to disrupt South Africa's lucrative mining industry, once it came to power.

Could a version of this be going on in Nepal? Could international business be courting comrades and Kandagiri alike in an effort to unleash the Himalayan tiger economy, while they earn themselves and their shareholders and marketing giant.

It's hard to tell. On the surface, Nepal has one of the world's most left-wing political parties, the Maoists, Etaile, peasants parties, left fronts, and other oppositional agitators are hugely influential forces in political life. They all talk a powerful anti-capitalist game. At the Maoist end of things, they follow up their words with actions. Even the Nepali Congress has leftist, egalitarian leanings that lead it to trade unionism and even membership in that old dinosaur, Socialist International.

Yet there appears to be an unspoken consensus among the parties in power that Nepal's water potential needs to be harnessed by private investment, and soon. Even the Maoists seem to be part of this, and there are more than a few people out there who think India's powerful thirst has much to do with New Delhi's enthusiasm for the peace process—any peace process—with or without mutually inclusive twin pillars of diplomatic mantras past.

The oil exploration in the tarai could be part of this too. Again, India is the most obvious customer for any hydrocarbons that lurk beneath the Nepal plains and I dare say Indian expertise in extraction, refining, shipping, pipelines, and marketing wouldn't go amiss either, given the disastrous record of the Nepal Oil Corporation.

A meeting in Kathmandu beginning on 16 April, followed by a major oil company to prospect for petroleum in the tarai, the utter lack of serious debate in the otherwise fractious newspaper, of a major oil company to prospect for petroleum in the tarai, the utter lack of serious debate in the otherwise fractious newspaper, of a major oil company to prospect for petroleum in the tarai, the utter lack of serious debate in the otherwise fractious newspaper.

But what business will certainly open up the trade in tiger parts.

China, are detected and seized in Thailand as they pass through from Malaysia and other countries.

If the ban on trading in tiger parts is lifted, parts from wild tigers killed in the wild for a handful of babb, rings, or royce will certainly be laundered through legal channels. Tiger parts and products are already competitively and sometimes openly traded out of these farms. And farmed tigers will always be more expensive than poached ones, doing little to deter the profitability of poaching.

China's 1993 ban was crucial in ensuring that tigers still exist in the wild today, albeit in very small numbers. It is estimated that there are possibly a little over 5,000 tigers left today in the forests of Asia. Most are in India which possibly has close to 2,000.

Thailand has around 400.

China has been lobbying international opinion to get the ban lifted. Securing the approval of key tiger range countries like India, Russia, Thailand, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Malaysia, is important to China. In all these countries the tiger is clinging to the edge of extinction. India's populations are small and isolated.

Indian tiger expert Valmik Thapar estimates that of India's 30 tiger reserves, at least five may have no tigers at all. A sixth is proven to have none left; they were all wiped out by poachers in 2004. Over the past two months, 13 Asian lions have been killed by poachers in their last refuge in India's Gir National Park. The poachers, caught last week, said they were sending lion parts to China, where they would be

Ganesh-tantra
Comic relief in the lull between storms

A flaire of state in the teetering kingdom shifted from blood sport to participatory democracy last week as the long-awaited interim government convened in Singha Durbar. The welcome sight of bitter enemies boring each other silly with long-winded speeches brought a wave of nostalgia for the pre-war era, when politics was simply a harmless exercise in buffoonery. Ministerial antics and scandals of yore came to mind while watching this new crock of perks and privileges. TheＯver the past two months, 13 Asian lions have been killed by poachers in their last refuge in India's Gir National Park. The poachers, caught last week, said they were sending lion parts to China, where they would be

MOVING TARGET
Foreign Hand
This week, a showdown in Kathmandu between conservationists and market enthusiasts

heartbeat away (his) from the top job. Watching him out-maneuver all players was world class entertainment, and his ploy of abolishing the post rather than seeing it occupied by a nemesis was a Machiavellian masterstroke. Despite rumours that the comrades wouldn’t settle for anything less than the Home Ministry, this key post was somehow retained by the man who, according to Corbett Foundation in India. He runs the website http://www.indianjungles.com and can be contacted at tigerfire@yahoo.com.

He’s a firm believer in the ‘anything for a laugh’ philosophy, the Hand was grateful for the generous minister, from all important meetings proved that his depart for the SAARC meeting in Delhi. His petty efforts while there to exclude Sahana Pradhan, the prime minister an ideal excuse to immediately resignation.

But conservationists and trade experts believe opening up the trade in tiger parts will flood the market, bringing down prices and hence reducing the incentive for poachers to kill wild tigers. Despite rumours that the comrades wouldn’t settle for anything less than the Home Ministry, this key post was somehow retained by the man who, last we looked, had millions baying for his resignation. His petty efforts while there to exclude Sahana Pradhan, the newly appointed United Marxist-Leninist foreign minister, from all important meetings proved that something new never change.

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Comrade Mahan initiated his tenure as Minister for Information and Communications with a virulent attack on Miss Nepal and all she stands for, while Supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal pledged that while Supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal pledged that the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama would never be allowed to establish an office in Nepal, together disposing of beauty queens and Nobel Peace Prize laureates during their very first week in office. A showdown in Kathmandu between conservationists and market enthusiasts.

**economy**

China has secured the support of a New Delhi-based economist, Barun Mitra, who has visited China on invitation from state agencies several times. His argument is seductive opening up the trade in tiger parts will flood the market, bringing down prices and hence reducing the incentive for poachers to kill wild tigers. Despite rumours that the comrades wouldn’t settle for anything less than the Home Ministry, this key post was somehow retained by the man who, last we looked, had millions baying for his resignation.

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Parijat wrote like no one else about loss, sadness, and the intensity of a solitary life

Life, lived through art

SHRADHA GAHALE

Parijat’s memoirs flow with the poetic current that characterises the best of her writings. No one tells her story as compellingly as she does herself. Regular readers such as I could bypass all the self-appointed authorities and pick up her Atmasamsmaran instead.

Parijat, born Bishnu Kumari Waiba, grew up in Darjeeling under the shade of a hardheaded, militantly atheist father. “He has read Marx, read Engels, read Gandhi, read lots more, but reading alone does nothing to a person. He has read, read he has, that’s all!” writes Parijat in the first part of Atmasamsmaran which is dedicated to the memory of her father.

A sickly child with an indomitable spirit, she realised early on that she resembled no one. “A world has formed inside me but I am silent.” She wanted to be sociable and vivacious like her friends whose love letters she grappled with are embodied in her Parijat arrived in Kathmandu as a young woman and felt an instant connection with the city. “Wide streets, big houses, a city in motion—this is Kathmandu!” Though according to her brother, there were ways to preserve one’s dignity in Kathmandu: don’t go to public lat (toilet), don’t fall in the window, try to speak English in public, don’t let slip you’re a Tamang and so on. Given her social identity, her physical condition and her untrained spirit, one can imagine the challenges Parijat must have faced in this society. Yet her narrative, even at its most passionate, betrays neither self pity nor courage. And her personal relations reveal her ability to seek out the humanity of individuals.

Occasionally, as Parijat fell into a frenzy of burning manuscripts, Sukanya hid them away. “My heart aches when I see you, sister,” she explained, “you write in torturous conditions. ‘Through infirmity, destitution, and suicidal phases, Parijat wrote because writing alone sustained her. Her Atmasamsmaran illuminates her remarkable gift and courage.”

Parijat, was born in 1937 and died in April 1992.

Painting the town RED

Leonhard Stramitz and Nepal go back a long way—back to 1968. His trajectory as an artist, designer and restorer since has had a little to do with the great friends he made among Nepal’s artisan community. The 61-year-old returned home, trained as a gold smith, and attended Vienna’s Academy of Applied Arts to study painting, graphics, and metal resturation.

He’s since given back to the artistic community he loves—Stramitz worked part of the restoration team of the Golden Door and 400 other exhibits at Patan Museum. Back in Austria, he has worked in the restoration of the Habsburg sarcophaguses at the Imperial Crypt of St. Kapuzine since 1976.

An exhibition at Patan Handicraft Centre showcases some of Stramitz’s most accessible photographs, paintings, and jewellery. The pictures, taken during his visits last year, are mostly of religious symbols—street idols, lingams, statues. “Red is so prominent, whether it is in pooja, or the saris women wear in Kathmandu, it is a powerful colour,” says Stramitz of the show titled ‘Red is the Colour of Power and Love’. He didn’t go looking for red, he explains: “When I was developing my pictures I just saw that it was everywhere.”

The joy in much of Stramitz’s work lies in the details—red abir nest in a broken old diyo, an eye in a wheel of the Machhindranath chariot, little roadside stone idols covered in red. Sketches of idols, drawn on earlier visits, display the same understanding of a whole composed of many key elements. Every crag, every joint, little broken off pieces, the intricate designs worked into objects of worship are all in these sketches.

The silver jewellery on display is refreshingly geometric and composed of many tiny elements. Every crack, every joint, little broken off pieces, the intricate designs worked into objects of worship are all in these sketches.
Riding through history

The current retrospective of the work of Shashi Bikram Shah is a reminder, if one was needed, that art is not meant to be easy. The show is a grim narrative of mankind’s mistakes, often through depictions of the cycles of time in the Hindu cosmos, the ten incarnations of Vishnu, and the portrayal of global happenings and human suffering. For enthusiasts of Nepali contemporary art, the 107 pieces at the Siddhartha Art Gallery—pen and ink drawings, watercolour paintings, etchings, life-size acrylic on canvas, paper-mâché sculptures—are a rare chance to view the oeuvre of one of the country’s most influential modern artists.

Shah’s trademark horses are everywhere, adding the hope of uplift to his darkest works. He says they represent peace, war, courage, determination, hope, and spiritual strength. Often, flying white horses appear in a devastated landscape at the end of time as savours in scenes where men and women are small, hunched, helpless, and crying out in pain, dwarfed by large graceful horses. The horses in the sculptures seem resurrected from a nuclear battlefield, but strong and ready to fight for the world. “Perhaps I love the image because the horse in mythology draws the chariot of the sun god Surya, or maybe because the horse is also interpreted as Kalki, the last avatar of Vishnu,” he explains.

The show gradually comes together as a comment on acts of violence, some recent—the insurgency, September 11, and the reaction to the 12 Nepalis killed in Iraq. Crippled men and women with their faces distorted by pain fly around, while scattered chess pieces symbolise our confused politics. “Shah’s paintings are so strong and dark, you can see that he pours his heart and soul into the canvas to tell his story to the world,” says Sujan Chitrakar, himself an artist and principal of Bhaktapur Fine Arts School.

Sanjesta Thupa of Siddhartha, who curated the exhibition, agrees. “Shah grieves in his paintings. They are social commentary, they make people question.” Shah says he works for peace and will continue painting as he has been. “If there are more bad incidents, my paintings will be dark to reflect the mood of the world and if there is peace, I will continue to paint white horses.”

Malika Aryal

‘Retrospective’, a show by Shashi Shah, until 20 April, 11AM-6PM at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited. 4218046

CULTURE
EVENTS

- Yuya Chaffal Shrinkhala on women involved in community forestry, 13 April 3-5PM at Martin Chaudhuri, 4107599
- The Killing Fields at Lazimpat Gallery Café, 13 April, 6:30 PM.
- One day program poetry recitation, painting workshop, photo exhibition, documentary screening at Ritam Theatre, Gurukul, Old Baneswar, 13 April, 11AM, 4466956
- New Year’s Eve with Channel V’s Aasma band at Ros Bar and garden, Rs 1,299 per person.
- Rockin’ Himalaya lavish dinner at The Garden Rs 999 per person at Hotel Himalaya, 14 April, 7PM, 5532903
- Party at the Red Onion Bar on New Year’s Eve 8PM, cover charge Rs 1,500 for single and Rs 2,500 for a couple, unlimited drinks, snacks and dinner.
- Party at Moksh Live to celebrate Nepali New Year, cocktails, live music and more, 13 April, 8:30 PM onwards, 5552812
- Saistriya Sankranti of Baisakh 2064
- Yoga camp
- Toastmasters

MUSIC

- Live Music at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yarki and Zigmie Lepcha.
- DJ Raju and the Cloudwalkers live at the Ros Bar, Hyatt Regency, every Friday and Saturday.
- Yala Maya Classic classic music series at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 5PM onwards on the second of every Nepali month, Rs 100 entrance. 5553716
- Fusion and classical Nepali music by Rudra live at the Courtyard, Le Meriden, Gokarna every Thursday, 7PM onwards. Rs 800. 4457512

DINING

- Special Authentic Nepali Gourmet at The Café, Hyatt Regency, elaborate New Year’s Eve special buffet for Rs 1,000 plus tax. 4491254
- Nepali Barbecue Brunch with swimming and unlimited beer on 14 April 12:30 PM for Rs 1,500 at Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- North Indian kebabs, curries, rotis and biryani at The Dhaba, Thapathali. 9840290619
- Light nouvelle snacks and elaborate connoisseur’s Spice Brunch at Ambassador Garden House, Lajumpati, 5.30 PM onwards. 4417008
- Continental cuisine and wine by the fire place at Kilroy’s, Thamel. 4250540
- Smorgasbord lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4376280
- Trendy martins and appetizers at the Ros Bar, Hyatt Regency. 4491254
- Gujarati lunch and dinner at the Shimla Shimla Gahani Café, Hotel Shangri-La, minimum of four guests at Rs 450 per person, every Friday from 12PM to 3PM. 4491254
- Retro brunch barbecue with the Crossfire Band at The Poolside, Dwarika’s, Gokarna, from 12-4PM, Rs 1,000 inclusive of swimming and complimentary drink. 4491212
- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4425519
- Seasonal and Margaritas Inner Groove live at Fusion—the bar at Dwarika’s, Rs 599 includes a Mezze platter and a Margarita pitcher. 4479488

GETAWAYS

- New Year’s Eve 2064 overnight package at Dwarika’s Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, Dhulikhel, including accommodation, one evening ‘Himalayan Hour’ with snacks and dinner, and New Year’s day’s brunch. 4479488
- Weekend package at Le Meriden Kathmandu Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa, two nights three days at Rs 8,888 and one night two days at Rs 4,444. 4451212

ABOUT TOWN

- Flowers in the Garden of Dreams an exhibition of photos by Leonhard Stramitz at Kaiser Mahal, 10AM-6PM, except Mondays, until 20 April.
- Retroscopic an exhibition of paintings by Shashi Shah, until 20 April, 11AM-6PM at Siddhartha Art Babar Mahal Revisited. 4218048
- Landmarks of New York photography exhibition at Tribhuvan University Central Library until 3 May.
- Focus paintings by Rashish Manahdar, Bipin Raj Shrestha at Baryo Fiesta, Naalo until 5 May.

IN THE NEWS

- In Shakalaka Boom Boom, Bobby Deol and Upen Patel play two rival music stars AJ and Reggie. AJ is a musical icon while Reggie is a gifted musical genius but is also brash, arrogant, and rude by nature. Reggie not only threatens AJ’s position in the music industry but also falls for Ruhi, the girl AJ loves. What follows is a series of events that will lead to the downfall of one of these superstars.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com
BRING OUT THE CAVALRY: Prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala returns to Kathmandu on Friday after attending the 14th SAARC summit in New Delhi. In the background on this runway at Tribhuvan International Airport is a disused Cosmic Air Fokker 100.

INNER BEAUTY: CPN-M MP from Dolakha Devi Khadka leads the protests against Dabur Vatika Miss Nepal 2007 demanding that women’s rights be ‘guaranteed’, outside the Birendra International Convention Centre on Saturday.

SCARIER THAN THOU: Members of Kathmandu’s Gurung community performing the traditional tahon ten ritual to drive away evil spirits at the Mallighar Mandala on Tuesday.
One giant leap for assdom

After years of conducting war on a war-footing the comrades have now promised elections on a war-footing. That’s according to the newly-appointed government spokesperson during his first press conference. The affable Mr Mahara was so hassled by hacks pestering him about the Maoist stand on this, that, or the other, that he uncharacteristically lost his cool and reminded reporters he was now government spokesman. “Kina Maobadi le ke garchha matrai sodhne?” asked Mahara babu, “Sarkar le ke garchha pani sodhnus na.”

What a relief to see members of the formerly subterranean party now sounding like every other government minister and side-stepping questions on the government’s stance on the demand by Nepal’s transgender community for proportional representation in the forthcoming elections.

The republican wave continues space with the Loktantrick Karate Championships being held in the capital. Also, the First Republican Ascent of Everest has decided to take along with it the flags of the human rights groups HERPES and INSECT to affix atop the summit. The expedition is going up the Tibetan side of the mountain and the Ass wonders what the Chinese think of all these human rights flags fluttering all over the place and going up the North Face in the year of the Olympics?

Meanwhile, the Republican Artistes Ensemble held its first ever gathering with revolutionary dignitaries including Comrade Kiran all wearing wide-brim red hats that made the whole thing resemble an Annual Convention of Friar Tuck Lookalikes. As the troupe launched lustily into golden oldie revolutionary numbers, the Ass spotted the singer Raamesh (now, there is one revolutionary who actually has some musical talent) cringing at the back, head in his hand.

Now that the Maoist Code of Conduct for its ministers has come out we don’t see any mention in it of a moratorium on ministers wearing large billas and giving away awards, officiating as chief guests, doing book launches, and delivering soporific keynote addresses from the podium. Don’t they have anything better to do out there in Singh Darbar?

Also, don’t Kathmandu-based ambassadors have anything better to do than to troop off to the airport every time Sri Tin Girija decides to skip town? We understand the envoys had to do that during the feudal days of the royal regime or risk not being invited to Narayanhiti soirees. But in New Nepal? This is probably the only country in the world where plenipotentiaries have to all line up at the airport to say “Bye” and “Hi”. Next time, don’t go and see what happens.

The Ass learns that as the fate of his kingdom hangs increasingly in the balance, KingG is relying more and more on soothsayers, voodoo, the occult, and tea-leaf reading godmen and godwomen. They usually tell him what he wants to hear, which is that the monarchy has a bright and glorious future. And that may be the reason why the palace sent out New Year’s greeting cards this year: a thrice-folded thingie with a family portrait of the royal family pasted on one side and a picture of Narayanhiti on the other. The king is in casual pants, with the much talked about Nabayubaraj also in the group pic.

Now that the Ass’ cousins in Tehrathum have, after a long hard struggle, finally won the right to have the weekend off, it is celebration time among us underdog donkeys of Nepal. It’s a giant leap for Assdom in general and this Ass in particular.