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New year's wishes

MIN BAJRACHARYA

Across 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 fulfil 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.

Pragya Shrestha, Dolakha

Editorial p2 New year, old habits

Times nepalnews.com
Weekly Internet Poll # 344

Q. What should be the top priority of the interim government?

Total votes: 4,057

Elections	21.1%
Law and order	56.6%
Business environment	3.2%
Corruption	6.7%
Madhesi issues	9.3%
Inclusion	2.2%
Supplies	0.9%

Weekly Internet Poll # 345. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Will elections to the constituent assembly be held in June?

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Horse before the cart

Let a referendum on the monarchy precede constituent assembly elections

This time last year, the people's Spring Uprising was being met with intense suppression. One year down the line the ground reality has not changed much. We see the same brash behaviour of the political leadership, the bureaucracy, the private sector. In all areas where the ruling elite have their pervasive domain, things remain the same.



GUEST COLUMN
Maital Gurung

Nepali society did not transform itself. As in 1950 and in 1990, the knees of the political leadership buckled in 2006 and it all ended in a compromise. History has repeated itself.

When winds of change sweep through any revolution the old order must crumble to give way to an emergent force with total control to lead the new nation. This has not happened. How can we call it a revolution if the status quo persists? Just like the Mallik Commission, the

Rayamajhi Commission has been shelved. Is the military really under government control?

Another spring, another sense of foreboding as the unrest in the tarai unfolds. Hill indigenous peoples are also restive. The interim constitution has been amended, but the unrest is intensifying. The political leadership is steering the nation towards another collision.

The spirit of the April Uprising had to do with the monarchy, not re-instatement of parliament. The people were misled by the political parties on the question of republic and constituent assembly and they merged *ganatantra* and *sambidhan sabha* to make them synonymous.

The constituent assembly is an elected body to draft a new constitution. The question of monarchy must be delinked from it and addressed by a referendum. The question of monarchy is not a debatable agenda, it is a choice decided by a 'yes' or 'no'. This right to choose should be taken directly to the people so that the constituent assembly can act on that decision.

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

the nation.

The interim constitution has already been amended once to include federalism. A second amendment is being considered to accommodate the contending parties. It is not precise enough just to state 'federalism' but to categorically decide on the kind of federalism. The Election Commission has expressed doubts about the elections being held in the current timeframe. The international community seems to agree. Recent public opinion surveys prove most Nepalis do not know what the constituent assembly entails. 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 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 amend the interim constitution and call for a referendum on the question of monarchy in June instead of leaving the matter for the constituent assembly. This will allow the government to buy time to prepare for genuine elections while offering the people an alternative.

By sticking to the plan of holding the constituent assembly election in June, the parties could spark off another spring uprising. The political leadership should heed to wise counsel and not put the people through another sacrificial ordeal. ●

Maital Gurung is founding member of the Green Nepal Party (Hariyali).

NEW YEAR, OLD HABITS

It's a new year in New Nepal. But our politicians are behaving as they always have: with opportunism and blaming everyone else but themselves. Within a week of getting into government, Maoists are also exhibiting these time-honoured traits.

Until as recently as three months ago, Ian Martin was hailed as a hero holding his ground against those determined to block the Maoists' entry into government. He has suddenly become a villain for taking his job seriously. All he did was question the possibility of holding elections in June and the UML and the CPN-M went ballistic. Over-reaction at media interactions is the hallmark of both these play-acting parties.

Fear-mongering about postponement of polls is at fever pitch. Pushpa Kamal Dahal smells a conspiracy. Madhab Nepal expects a "difficult situation" as he carries on with what he does best: blame the government of which he is a part.

We think they protest too much. In fact, the intensity of their opposition to a later date gives us a sneaking suspicion they don't really want elections in June but can't afford to say so up front.

Meanwhile, the new government needs to get down to work on delivery before the usual paralysis sets in. After a decade of insurgency and almost four years of dictatorship the bureaucracy badly needs a sense of direction. The police needs to get serious about law enforcement. There is no reason why the people of Dailekh still have to risk death crossing a bridge bombed by Maoists which has still not been repaired. Telecom towers across the country were destroyed, but even after a year of ceasefire many districts are still phoneless.

Improving security and service delivery should be this government's main mantra. Yet, we see the negative nabobs hemming and hawing, blaming others, playing victim, threatening the country with dire consequences just because they can't get their own act together.

The common minimum program is a good start. But let's not make it a case of getting away with doing the minimum. The proposed amendments to the constitution are not enough. To be taken seriously by the people our political talking heads should do what they say and say only those things that they can do.

Make that your new year resolution.

STAMP OF APPROVAL:
Maoist central committee member Dinanath Sharma at the Election Commission as the CPN-M formally registers as a political party contesting elections.



KIRAN PANDAY

An even more fateful year

Sometimes, instinctive rather than analytical readings point the way ahead

A popular Nepali proverb says that even rivers return to their original course after twelve years. It has taken exactly twelve years for the Maoists to return to electoral politics. In 1995, they abandoned parliament after being denied their rightful place there by the two big parties of the day.



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

After the registration of the CPN-Maoist at the Election Commission, the politicians-turned-extremists of the former Samyukta Jan Morcha have come full circle in other ways: they were the third largest party in the parliament of 1991 after Nepali Congress and UML. The numbers have changed; but all the three parties retain their relative positions in the interim parliament of 2007. But the challenges of change have become much more complex in the intervening period.

The Maoist insurgency was violent, but it created an opportunity for what Franz Fanon called collective catharsis: "a

channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released". Had Nepal been a truly unified entity, the violence could have worked as shock therapy to treat the sick state. As it happens, Maoist insurgency has ended up dividing the already fragmented society.

2063 BS belonged to Girija Prasad Koirala in every sense of the term. He rightfully claimed the credit of bringing terrorists into the political mainstream. His leadership proved crucial for the success of the April Uprising against the monarchy. But the next phase of the peace process will require more active participation of the Maoists. Elections to the constituent assembly may be the principal agenda of the interim government, but that government has to first deal with the forces that Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his fellow-travellers unleashed for strategic advantage during their decade-long war with the state.

Preceding elections, the government will have to anticipate and prepare for dealing with the dissatisfaction—if not more—of Maoist cadres interned at makeshift camps. These disillusioned youths must be going through what

rehabilitation psychologists term post-revolutionary trauma: a sequential mental agony of confusion, boredom, hopelessness, uncertainty, insecurity, and frustration that may lead to either withdrawal or agitation. Their gods have failed, and the government better be prepared for the day this realisation begins to sink and create ripples in the camps.

The leaders of the seven-party alliance can't even comprehend the enormity of the second biggest hurdle to free, fair, and impartial elections to the constituent assembly. This will stem from the post-conflict adjustment of their own rank and file. Fears of being hanged separately forced party workers to hang together during the insurgency. With calm returning to the countryside, the danger of relapse into chronic internal squabbles is real for the UML. The Nepali Congress is now even more at risk for nepotism and cronyism, pathologies that almost destroyed the party in the mid-nineties.

Last winter's Madhes Uprising exposed definitively the vulnerabilities of the SPA-Maoist alliance. The state machinery seems to still not be under the total control of the government. The communal mindset

of most mainstream actors at the helm of government persists. The 'inclusion' agenda is mostly superficial. All this create a fertile ground for recruitment by any demagogue with a handful of armed followers.

Jai Krishna Goit, Jwala Singh, and Upendra Yadav have been conditioned in conventional politics. They are as angry with themselves for their failure as with any other leader, and so hesitate even when they agitate. But should the madhesi leadership fall into the hands of any egoistic upper-caste politician without scruples, its impact on national unity will be horrific. And conducting constituent assembly polls without first seriously engaging with marginalised groups will delegitimise the elections before they are even held.

At a recent astrologers' convention, a fortune-teller predicted that the year to come will be more momentous for Nepal than the year past. This is the tragedy of this country: analyses turn out to be false, instinctive responses invariably true. Reason may give reassurance, but emotion breeds anxiety. The price, perhaps, for living in interesting times. ●

LETTERS

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 un-democratic 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 help create the grounds for genuine peace.

Someone has to speak the truth. It is true that we can't have too much interference in internal political matters. But the international community should be strong on some issues. They should encourage all



SAGAR SHRESTHA

parties to work on democratic principles, better economic, and development packages and so on.

Nishesh 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.

It 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 mislead. 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) summarising 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 Madi 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 flipflop. Keep writing about all this, eventually there will be payback.

Tara Nepal, email

LETTERS

Nepali 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 public 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 partners 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 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 Bhoj 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 money is also meant for educating people about the upcoming elections. But not a single penny has been spent for that purpose.

Rameshwor Khanal, secretary at the Finance Ministry, which works with the fund, explains: "No educational work has been started because no date has been fixed for the elections. Once the dates are announced, the election commission will go for publicity among people and then the peace fund will provide the necessary support."

If the earliest election date being banded about, 20 June, were announced today, educating all the voters would almost be impossible, in some parts due to the staggering rate of illiteracy, as well as the need to educate voters through multiple languages and local dialects.

Donor community members say they realise the urgency and have taken whatever initiatives they can, but that voter education remains first and foremost the job of the government. "Civic education is one



of the things we will look at with other donors to see what we can do to help," said 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 of them claimed knowledge (accurate or otherwise) of what it means ("Big questions", #337).

Few politicians are talking about how they expect Nepalis 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 is to be 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." ●

Navin Singh Khadka is a journalist with BBC Nepali Service.

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

After peace, perhaps development



WAR WOUNDS: This bridge across the Bheri in Surkhet was destroyed by the Maoists three years ago.

SAGAR SHRESTHA

KIRAN NEPAL

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 methods of spending, monitoring, and other basic procedures. We are told that the plan will be geographically 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 infrastructure to generate 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, which is why we have the state investing," 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 officers 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, and takes into consideration the inflation, which is at six percent and purchasing power, which is estimated to increase by 15 percent this year.

Implementation will, as

always, be a challenge. Nine months into this fiscal year, only 15 percent of the VDCs' local development budget has been spent, though it was ambitiously doubled to Rs 1 million per VDC last year.

Planning Commission sources tell us that some donors, including the US, indicate that their continued assistance to Nepal will depend on how the Maoists conduct themselves in the coming months. Other donor countries, including the UK, Denmark, and Switzerland have resumed or announced new aid packages after the Maoists joined the interim government less than two weeks ago.

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 evaluated as easy, interrupted by deadlocks, 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, and big irrigation and hydropower 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 aegis of the new Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction and other institutions monitoring the peace accord, is to be directed towards rehabilitation of the displaced and Maoist fighters, reconstruction of infrastructure, constituent assembly elections, law and order support, and maintenance of the Maoist cantonments. The fund is empowered to dispense money as it sees fit without going through the longer normal approval process. Financial analysts say that the Rs 7 billion planned for the three-year fund has been underestimated 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 peace 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.

Meantime, 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 conflict of interest here, and the Nepal Peace Trust Fund can aid UNMIN if it requires more funds. ●

Blood camp

As a part of its Corporate Social Responsibility Everest Bank organised a blood donation camp last Sunday, called 'Give Blood Save Life'. Fifty donors, including bank staff, participated in the event. The bank organised a similar camp for corporate employees on 14 June, World Blood Donation Day, last year.



Test drive

Cosmic, first motorcycle made in Nepal, organised test rides for riding enthusiasts in Kathmandu last week. Member of 1974 AD were in attendance, and test riders received CDs of the band's new album. The company also organised a dinner for its customers at Moksh in Pulchok. Cosmic has also introduced a new scheme—financing with a down payment of just Rs 7,999—for New Year 2064.

NEW PRODUCTS

KRISTAL BIKE - Bajaj Auto has launched the four-stroke Bajaj Kristal DTS-I which boasts a 95cc DTS-i unit with ExhaustEC that improves fuel efficiency. The scooter comes equipped with SNS (Spring-in-Spring) suspension for a better riding experience. The Kristal weighs 99kg, has ground clearance of 131mm, and a wheelbase of 1250mm. There is 22 l under-seat storage with an open/close beeper and glovebox space in the front. The Kristal is available in red, black, blue, and silver, and is distributed by Hansraj Hulaschand & Company.



PRE-MIXED CONCRETE - The Panchakanya Group has started producing Ready Mix Concrete. The raw materials are mixed at a centrally-located computer controlled plant that monitors the weight, water-cement ratio, dosage of mixture, and moisture content. The Ready Mix is transported to construction site in transit mixers that are fitted with rotating drums, and the mix is pumped out with the help of concrete pumps that can pump up to 100m horizontally and 20m vertically at the rate of 30cu/m/hr of concrete.



CRUNCHY SNACKS - Dugar Spices and Food Products have launched the Kurmure snack in plain, cheese, and chicken flavours. The product is available in 25g and 60g packs priced at Rs 8 and Rs 15 respectively.

Information-seeking Lessons in telecoms from Bangladesh

The recently concluded 14th SAARC Summit stressed the importance of connectivity among the eight 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



STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari

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 with others. Once such an entrepreneur is selected, he (usually a 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 desk-top 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 government forms, finding out about bird flu, 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 cybercafés that dot Nepal's urban landscape. But



there are differences.

While Nepali cybercafés 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.

Buoyed 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. ●

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"A crisis if elections are delayed"

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

नेपाल

Nepal: Is Prime Minister Koirala 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 the 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 the government from the outside and the peace process will continue—it is stronger than all this. We might push the government to conduct the elections, but we will not go back to war.



NARESH NEWAR

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 Baluwater 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.

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.

Camp life

Bargikrit, Chitwan, 11 April

पर्वीकृत

SHAKTIKHOR—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. Shaktikhori 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."

Shaktikhori 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 Shaktikhori 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*, Lahan, 6 April

पूर्वसाप्ताहिक

At a time when the madhes 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

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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 normalcy the constituent assembly election will be a farce.

Budget fisaco

Editorial in *Kantipur*, 12 April

कान्तिपुर

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!"

राजधानी Uttam Nepal in *Rajdhani*, 12 April

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.

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GENEPOOL IN THE MIST:
The mountaintop lake of Mai Pokhari shrouded in clouds after a thunderstorm on Sunday. This biodiversity reserve has several indigenous species, including rare herbs and the warted newt.



TIM LOSEBY LR

Rising

The
pla

SAMPREETHI AIPANJIGULY in ILAM

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 warning 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 further 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 Singalila 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 Namsaling 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 \$30-80,000 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

HIMAL April 2007 issue is now on stands!

Cover section:
Tibet, the mundane
Nine stories on Tibet's evolving relationships – with China, with Southasia, and with itself.

Also:
SAARC's third decade – Nihal Rodrigo, et al
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Dhaka's purge – Mahtab Haider
Gujarat's isolated education – Deepa A
Uranium contamination in Jaduguda – Lina Krishnan
On cracking the Indus script – Iravatham Mahadevan

Coming up in the May issue, we take a long look at the simmering crisis in **Balochistan**, Pakistan's largest and poorest province.

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KIRAN KRISHNA SHRESTHA

in the east



There's a lot to learn about the lush landscapes and exotic plants and animals of the eastern Himalaya



PETER PROKOSCH/WWF

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 Baral, head of Bird Conservation Nepal, believes that his work here could also help fulfil 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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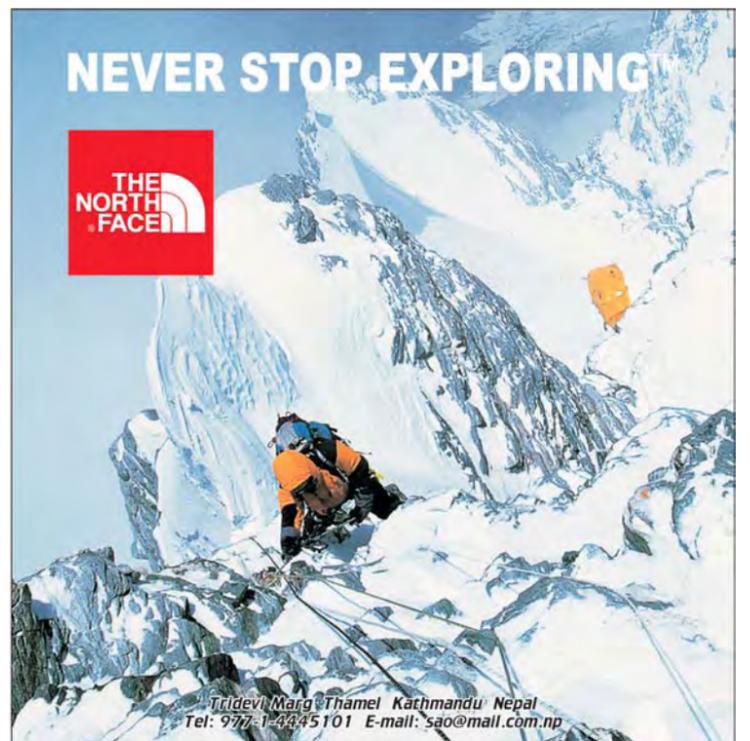
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Follow the money

Hints to Nepal's future lie in its business prospects

A few interesting developments point towards medium term prospects for Nepal that are not predicted by any viable voice. These are the decision, reported last week in this newspaper, of a major oil company to prospect for petroleum in the tarai, the utter lack of serious debate in the otherwise fractious government about water resources, and talk of trains between India and Tibet shooting through Nepal on their way north.

It brings to mind a key development in the unravelling of apartheid in South Africa. This wasn't the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, or the 'unbanning' of the African National Congress by its sworn enemies in the racist National Party. Rather, it was the burgeoning friendship between Mandela and Harry Oppenheimer, head of South Africa's most important corporation, Anglo American, which controlled De Beers, the diamond mining and marketing giant.

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.



HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak



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

It's hard to tell. On the surface, Nepal has one of the world's most left-wing polities. Maoists, Emale, peasants parties, left fronts, and other assorted 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 Nepali 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.

Putative Lhasa-Lucknow train lines are a bit more far fetched. But still, one can see the attractions for politicians in large scale infrastructure development—both types of attraction, under and over the table.

Now nations and politicians should be free to choose their economic course and heaven knows Nepal could benefit from establishing a market economy for all its anti-capitalists to oppose. Right now, so nascent is the above ground private sector here, that comrades have to conjure up international conspiracies to give them their raison d'être, especially since feudalism seems to be going down.

But it would be nice to have some openness and debate, perhaps beginning with decent media coverage, of all the options for Nepal's future economic growth. If leftists want a peoples' republic, let them explain how it finances itself in the global economy, how it creates jobs and prosperity. If business wants a hydro-powered capitalist dynamo, then what do the people get, and how is this guaranteed. Memo to media, a little more business journalism please, a little less 'he said, she said' political coverage.

Let's start by identifying this region's version of Harry Oppenheimer and find out just who he's been talking to. ●

NIRMAL GHOSH in BANGKOK

A meeting in Kathmandu beginning on 16 April, will see many of the world's top conservationists and wildlife trade specialists discussing China's new, persistent effort to open up the trade in tiger parts.

China's government is close to lifting the 1993 ban on the trade to appease influential businessmen who have been breeding tigers in 'farms' regardless of the ban and now find themselves saddled with thousands of animals.

There is talk that Thailand—which has its own vested interests in controversial 'tiger farms'—may quietly support China's effort to open up the trade.

After visiting conservationists recently disagreed publicly with economists who support Beijing's pro-trade line, several of China's tiger farmers came out in the open with a press conference demanding that the ban be lifted. China's other argument is that millions stand to gain from the medicinal properties of tiger bone.

This comes despite a significant proportion of Chinese traditional medicine practitioners moving away from prescribing tiger bone. Tests in China have proven that tiger bone is not much different to the bones of pigs, dogs or goats—and is almost identical in composition to a high altitude rodent found in plenty in China.

The trade in endangered wildlife is ranked third after arms and drugs. It is run by powerful international criminal syndicates. Thailand is one of the centres of the trade—both as a source for species and as a conduit; almost every other month shipments of endangered species bound for

Asia's tiger

MORE THE SUM OF ITS PARTS: Legalising the trade in products derived from farmed tigers will only fuel illegal poaching.



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 baht, ringgit, or rupees will certainly be laundered through legal channels. Tiger parts and products are already surreptitiously and sometimes openly traded out of these farms. And farmed tigers will always be more expensive than poached ones, doing little to dampen 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 Asiatic 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



Affairs 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



MOVING TARGET
Foreign Hand

simply a harmless exercise in buffoonery. Ministerial antics and scandals of

yore came to mind while watching this new crop angle for perks and privilege.

The intense eight party bickering for ministry posts set a familiar tone of high drama and low comedy, while reminding us the spoils of power is all they really crave.

Our prime minister's reputation for wily infighting and devious manipulation was reinforced by his adept deflection of Maoist demands for the seat of deputy pm that would have put them only a

economy

This week, a showdown in Kathmandu between conservationists and market enthusiasts



MARTIN HARVEY/WWF

passed off as tiger parts.

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.

But conservationists and trade experts believe opening up the



heartbeat away (his) from the top job. Watching him out-manoeuvre 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, last we looked, had millions paying for his resignation.

Happenstance weighed in with an extra giggle as parliament convened on April Fool's, and provided the prime minister an ideal excuse to immediately depart for the SAARC meeting in Delhi. His petty efforts while there to exclude Sahana Pradhan, the newly anointed United Marxist-Leninist foreign minister, from all important meetings proved that some things never change.

Being a firm believer in the 'anything for a laugh' philosophy, the Hand was grateful for the generous contributions from the newly-democratic Maoists to the flow of national level gaffes. Their alleged metamorphosis from law-breakers to law-makers may still leave much to be desired, considering behavioural quirks like extortion, abduction and coercion continue apace, but the rationale that even these characters won't wage war on their own government lends comfort. The novel opportunity to hold them publicly accountable for their statements and actions is unprecedented and a

trade even in a limited experiment, will only stimulate demand in a market where years of effort at curbing it have to some extent worked.

China says if tiger range countries do not want the ban on tiger parts lifted, they should pay the farmers. After all, Chinese officials say, millions of dollars are raised worldwide to conserve the tiger, but China gets no credit.

Hardly any conservationist believes farming is the way to save endangered species. Crocodiles are not a good example, because they are far cheaper to breed than tigers. Besides breeding crocodiles has not helped the species in the wild. Thailand breeds crocodiles but the Siamese crocodile remains endangered. Neither does farming, say, pork, stop hunters from going after wild boar.

Ullas Karanth of the New-York based Wildlife Conservation Society and one of the world's foremost experts on tigers, cautions that the trade issue does not address the drivers of the tiger's steady extermination: killing of the tiger's prey base, and the conversion of its habitat to different land uses. Over the last 300 years, tiger range has shrunk by 93 percent. "Enforcement on the ground is critical," says Karanth. "Unless a culture of enforcement is brought in, we will lose the tiger."

Just as Indian and south east Asian authorities have been short on political commitment to enforcement, so expecting China to be able to strictly regulate an open market in tiger products is unrealistic. (counterpunch.com) ●

Nirmal Ghosh is the Thailand correspondent of The Straits Times and a trustee of The Corbett Foundation in India. He runs the website <http://www.indianjungles.com> and can be contacted at tigerfire@yahoo.com.

distinct improvement over the impunity they have always enjoyed. Watching the comrades struggle to mollify their abrasive behaviour patterns and join the ranks of statesmen, like teenagers in a new suit, comes as a welcome source of amusement.

Comrade Mahara 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 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.

Awarding the Ministry of Physical Planning and Works to the party that has spent a decade destroying the country's infrastructure was good for a laugh and shows a subtle sense of irony and justice. When a journalist asked whether the Maoists now regret wrecking so many bridges and police posts, Minister Yami snapped that this would mean regretting the whole civil war. I couldn't have put it better myself.

The years of strife took all the fun out of politics, but if the past week is any indication we're in for a couple of hilarious months ahead. With a wink and a prayer to the god of new ventures, the Hand plans on banking a few laughs while he can, and advises the reader to do the same, as humour is likely to be in short supply come election time.' ●

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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 GHALE

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 *Atmasamsaran* instead.

Parijat, born Bishnu Kumari Waiba, grew up in Darjeeling under the shade of a hardheaded, militantly atheist father. "[H]e 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 *Atmasamsaran* 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 Sukanya, her younger sister, but admits "[u]nnecessary pride and tenacity takes hold of me... For some reason, I can't be happy." What stirred Parijat was her surroundings. "River, looks like a blue serpent... I want to wrap the whole river



round my neck." She felt an urge to write the smell of a flower. "I tell my friend I want to write this. What? She looks confused."

Unlike her friends whose love letters

she wrote, Parijat experienced love only as pain. "At night I grow full of love for him, by dawn love sheds its petals one by one, like a withering flower, and I'm done for, empty! In daytime, I have nothing left to offer him except platitudes." It's as though her overpowering sense of aloneness ruled out the possibility of romantic happiness. Such happiness grew ever more elusive when, at the age of 26, Parijat was bedridden with rheumatoid arthritis. In her memoirs, she describes the realm of illness with wrenching clarity. "I was confined to bed, and all my wishes, my dreams to play in nature, my freedoms piled up one by one before my eyes, like birds with broken wings."

Physical powerlessness, loss of love, and innate sorrow threw Parijat into an abyss of loneliness that heightened her sense of god. "I have come to accept I have an inherent faith... though I have never blamed god for my unfulfilled dreams and desires." Without god, she asks, how could man persist in this dizzying emptiness? The questions she grappled with are embodied in her best-known novel *Shirish ko Phool*, which departs wonderfully from familiar social realist themes.

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 tap for water, don't sit near 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 untamed 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 rancour. 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 *Atmasamsaran* illuminates her remarkable gift and courage. ●

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

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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 not a little to do with the great friends he made among Patan's artisan community. The 61-year-old returned home, trained as a gold and silversmith, and attended Vienna's Academy of Applied Arts to study painting, graphics, and metal restoration.

He's since given back to the artistic community he loves—Stramitz worked part of the the restoration team of the Golden Door and 400 other exhibits at Patan Museum. Back in Austria, he has worked on 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 visit 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 such 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* next to a broken old diyo, an eye on 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 tiny elements. Every crack, 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 architectural.

"In architecture, circles, squares, and triangles are very important forms, and my jewellery is influenced by these forms." Stramitz says he wants to move away from the use of big stones. Back in Vienna, the indefatigable artist is working on jewellery made from steel, and in Kathmandu is

experimenting with screen painting.

Red is the Colour of Power and Love, sketches, photographs and jewellery by Leonhard Stramitz, Patan Handicraft Centre. 5533871

Reality cinema

Eric Valli, writer, photographer, and filmmaker, is a regular visitor to Nepal in connection with his many projects. Valli's abiding interest in the relationship that people in different parts of Nepal have with nature form the basis of his most famous works, *The Honey Hunters of Nepal* and *Caravan*. Valli is in Nepal this time around not for a project, but to support Thinley Lhondup, the much-loved star of *Caravan*, who is suffering from cancer of the stomach. *Nepali Times* met Valli in Jiri, where he and Thinley were part of the large crowd watching their film under the stars.

Nepali Times: How do you make your movies?

Eric Valli: I completely become a student and dive into the reality. I live with people to become like them. For some time, I act as a fly on the wall—trying to forget everything else and learn what I need to learn. In doing so, characters automatically emerge. Then, I follow a certain storyline to make it a film.

Why have you never revealed where Honey Hunters was shot? What's the story?

I read a few lines about honey hunters in *Seven Years in Tibet*, and that was enough to intrigue me. I set out to find them. It took me about a year-and-a-half to meet Manilal, who became the protagonist of the film. It was amazing to see how much their lives depended on beehives. Making the film was difficult—scale a cliff and hold on to a rope with a camera, all while being stung by hundreds of bees.

I only had \$20,000 and that was seriously not enough. I just shot it, and then showed it to *National Geographic*. They agreed to buy it and did the post production. Royalties from the film go to Manilal's community for their betterment.

The location is a secret. In many of my books, you won't find names of the places. As a responsible writer, it's my duty to preserve those places from being affected by a lot of commercial tourists who would go there to make money, spoiling their naturalness.

How did Thinley come to be in Caravan?

I first heard about Nepal in 1972 in Varanasi—that it's the country of mountains, adventure, and great culture. I came to Kathmandu that same year as a traveller, and went to remote places like Dolpo, where I met Thinley in 1981. He was the village head and had a great sense of humour. We've been friends since then.

I wrote a book on the Dolpo region called *Caravans of the Himalaya* in 1994; there are pictures of Thinley leading a caravan in the book too.



YOPESH PRADHAN

One fine day, he said: "why don't you make a film about us?" I liked the idea, and had already dreamed about it. I wanted to show real stories with real people, and Thinley fit in there.

What are you most concerned with in your books and films?

I've written almost 20 books on Nepal. Most show the courage and tolerance of Nepali people, and the relationship they have with nature. In the west, it is impossible to find such bonding. *Honey Hunters* sold more than 100,000 copies. I've also written about Raji, the little-known tribe who are fishermen and who also hunt for honey. People like them have incredible knowledge of nature, and that inspires me to write.

How do you feel about Nepal 35 years after your first visit? You speak Nepali fluently, have travelled all over, seen its ups and downs.

If I were a poor Nepali starving to death (like many I've met in the west) and the government and the ministers were doing nothing for me, I'd have become a Maoist. The seeds for the insurgency were sown by nothing but weak governance. Like in *Caravan*, the two groups didn't want to negotiate for a decade, and the situation worsened. Now that these groups have given up their stubbornness, I think things will start to improve. And if the situation really improves, I'll live in Nepal again.

How does it feel, being famous in Nepal?

It feels great. Now, it's easier for me to work in Nepal because I do not need to introduce myself, and no one needs to fear that I'm a smuggler, a CIA agent, or a crook. The late King Birendra once said to me: "You're making me discover my own country." That's one of the best compliments I have received.

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, papier-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 saviours 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 Sujana Chitrakar, himself an artist and principal of Bhaktapur Fine Arts School.

Sangeeta Thapa 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." ●

Mallika Aryal

'Retrospective', a show by Shashi Shah, until 20 April, 11AM-6PM at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited. 4218048



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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

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

EVENTS

- ❖ **Yuva Chalfal Shrinkhala** on women involved in community forestry, 13 April 3-5PM at Martin Chautari. 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 Rimal Theatre, Gurukul, Old Baneshwor, 13 April, 11AM. 4466956
- ❖ **New Year's Eve** with Channel V's Aasma band at Rox Bar and garden, Rs 1299 per person. 4491234
- ❖ **Rockin' Himalaya** lavish dinner at The Garden Rs 999 per person at Hotel Himalaya, 13 April, 7PM. 5523900
- ❖ **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. 4416071
- ❖ **Party at Moksh Live** to celebrate Nepali New Year, cocktails, live music and more, 13 April, 8.30 PM onwards. 5526212
- ❖ **Sastriya Sankranti of Baisakh 2064** classical music performances by Durga Prasad Khatiwada (on flute) and Jiban Rai (on tabala), 14 April at Gurukul, Old Baneshwor.
- ❖ **Scope Entrepreneur Promotion Fair**, near Ashok Hall, until 15 April, 10AM-6PM.
- ❖ **The Sprit of Golf** methods to control the mind and practice techniques on the golf course, 19-23 April, Le Meridian, Kathmandu Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa. 4451212
- ❖ **Sun Dance Festival** at The Last Resort featuring Nepali and international musicians 28-29 April. 4700525
- ❖ **Yoga camp** at Shivapuri Heights Cottage, 27-29 April. 9841371927
- ❖ **The Spirit(s) of Cricket** at Hotel Yak & Yeti live cricket in a widescreen projection and a World Cup special cocktail selection at The Pub, until 28 April. 4248999
- ❖ **Toastmasters** communication and leadership program, every Wednesday 6PM at the Institute of Environmental Management, Tripureswor.

MUSIC

- ❖ **Live Music** at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yanki and Zigme Lepcha. 4416071
- ❖ **DJ Raju and the Cloudwalkers** live at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency, every Friday and Saturday. 4491234
- ❖ **Yala Maya Classic** classical music series at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 5PM onwards on the second of every Nepali month, Rs 100 entrance. 5553767
- ❖ **Fusion and classical Nepali music** by Rudra live at the Courtyard, Le Meridien, Gokarna every Friday, 7PM onwards, Rs 800. 4451212

DINING

- ❖ **Special Authentic Nepali Gourmet** at The Café, Hyatt Regency, elaborate New Year's Eve special buffet for Rs 1,000 plus tax. 4491234
- ❖ **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
- ❖ **Weekend special** with sekuwa, bara, barbeque, Fridays at Ambassador Garden House, Lajimpat, 5.30 PM onwards. 4411706
- ❖ **Light nouvelle snacks** and elaborate cordon bleu meals at La'Soon, Pulchok, behind the Egyptian embassy. 5537166
- ❖ **Continental cuisine** and wine by the fire place at Kilroy's, Thamel. 4250440.
- ❖ **Smorgasbord** lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4375280
- ❖ **Trendy martinis** and appetizers at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- ❖ **Gyakok** lunch and dinner at the Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-La, minimum of four guests at Rs 450 per person, two hours order in advance.
- ❖ **Retro brunch barbecue** with the Crossfire Band at The Poolside, Le Meridien, Gokarna from 12-4PM, Rs 1,000 inclusive of swimming and complimentary drink. 4451212
- ❖ **Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519
- ❖ **Senoritas & Margaritas** Inner Groove live at Fusion—the bar at Dwarika's, Rs 599 includes a Mezza 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, dinner, and New Year's day brunch. 4479488
- ❖ **Weekend package** at Le Meridien 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

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



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NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL



The hailstorms and pesky rains this past week came as no surprise. Head-on collisions between cold westerly jet streams and warm southerly fronts over the Himalaya continue to dominate. Thursday afternoon's satellite picture shows clear skies over India where the warm current is prevailing, a fresh westerly being reluctantly pushed towards the Himalaya, and messy clouds floating over Tibet. Over the weekend, these clouds could sneak over the skies of Nepal, causing low pressure pockets that give rise to rain or hailstorms. For this weekend, Valley residents can expect sunny intervals, no significant rise in temperatures and, as in the past week, evening showers.

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KIRAN PANDAY

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.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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.



KIRAN PANDAY

SCARIER THAN THOU: Members of Kathmandu's Gurung community performing the traditional *tahon ten* ritual to drive away evil spirits at the Maitighar Mandala on Tuesday.

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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 apace 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 Singha Darbar?



Also, don't Kathmandu-based ambassadors have anything better to do than to troop off to the airport everytime **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.

ass@nepalitimes.com



A PEOPLE WAR
Images of the Nepal conflict 1996-2006

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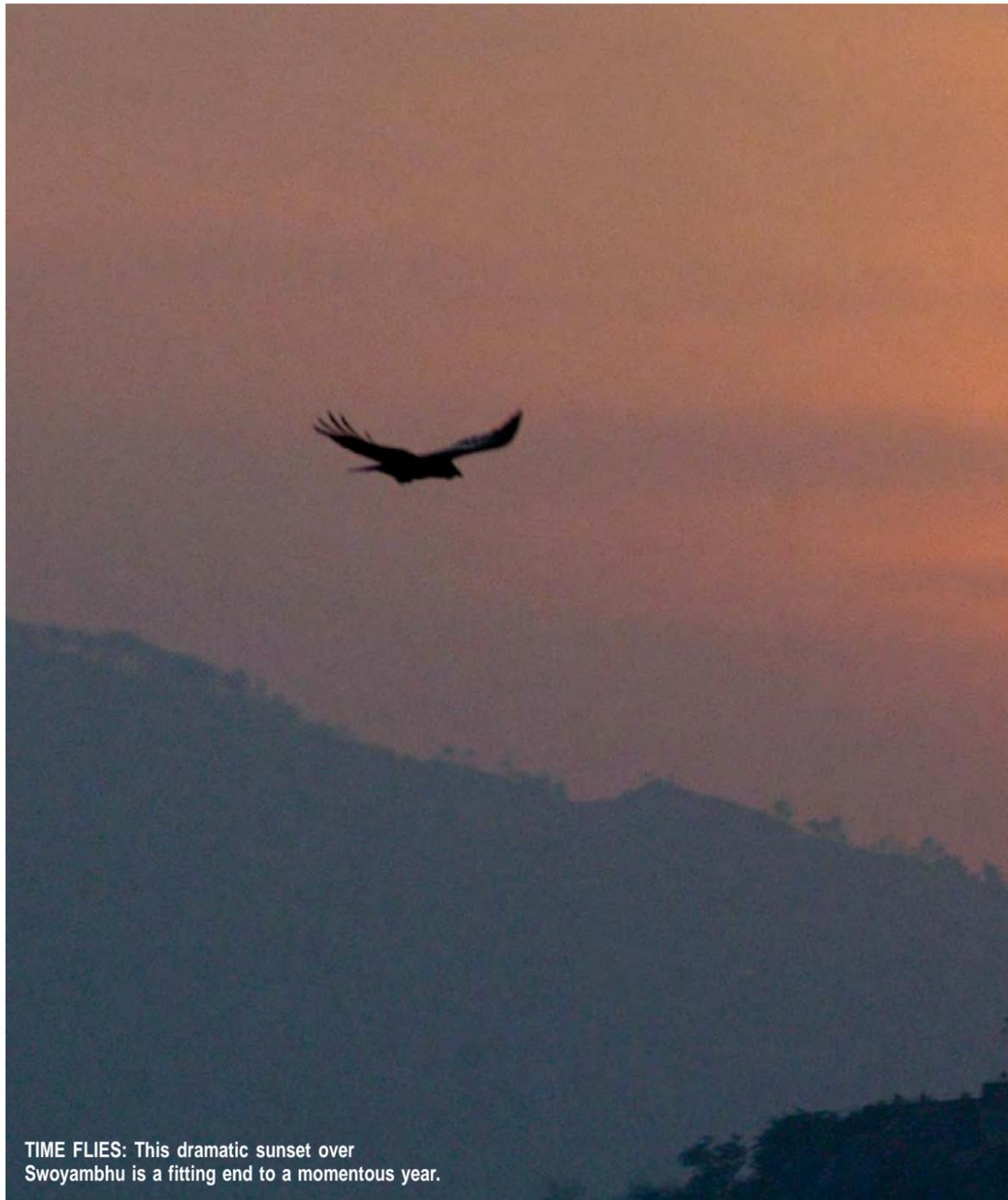
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