Closed for business?

Election-related political action mustn’t destroy tourism

NARESH NEWAR

Tourism bookings for the autumn season have never been healthier. Airlines and hotels are booked solid till November. Trekking agencies report record reservations. Yet, hotel and airline owners, trekking agents and those employed in the tourism industry are downcast. They see a dark cloud behind the silver lining because of threats from Maoist unions as well as the possibility of bandas smack at the start of the tourist season in September.

The Trekking Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN) has been trying to sort out demands laid down by a Maoist trade union before the season starts. “We are ready to do everything for the welfare of employees, but we are running out of time,” explains TAAN president Narendra BC.

After two months of talks, there has still been no agreement on two of the 13 demands of the Maoists: a Rs 600 increase in porter wages, better facilities, and permanent status to those working more than 240 days in a year.

TAAN says it has nothing against these demands but can’t fulfil them till the next season since the tariffs have been set. A local tourism entrepreneur says the Maoist demands are unrealistic, and will kill the industry, and the porters will lose even the jobs they have.

The government fixed the minimum wages of porters two years ago at Rs 350 per day for those going above 3,500m altitude and Rs 250 for those below that. But most of the porters who work for established companies make more than Rs 500 excluding tips. It is usually the porters associated with illegal unregistered companies who get exploited, and TAAN says it is trying to control these fly-by-nights.

But Maoist unions are threatening porters, and last week even sent back some porters who were not members of their union from Lukla. Enforcing the union’s demands on permanent staffing and benefits means established trekking agencies can only hire half the number of porters they currently employ, says one trekking agent.

With the restoration of peace and positive travel advisories, there was a lot of hope. But there is despondency again. Said one travel agent: “We have invested so much promoting this season; we will be ruined if there are strikes and cancellations.”

Which means the Nepalis who need these jobs the most won’t have any.
The difficulty in ensuring unity with the NC and Sher Bahadur Deuba is their excuse to proclaim elections can’t be held prove that the kangreis are only fighting for a favourable outcome, failing which they will try to sabotage the peace process. But the long and short of it is that the NC is also not that keen on elections. The NC has its shares of internal problems, and is going the same way as it has always to hide the chronic internal rift between hardliners and pragmatists in its party.

And what of the buffaloes? The leaders are busy headbutting in Kathmandu fighting over political crumbs while the tarai crisis continues to rage. As he always has to hide the chronic internal rift between hardliners and pragmatists in his party, Dahal is doing then there is no chance for a Maoist constituent assembly. If Dahal actually believes he can stave off elections through staged street action he is sadly mistaken. But he could also be playing it both ways as he always has to hide the chronic internal rift between hardliners and pragmatists in his party.

Whatever it is, our honourable members of the interim parliament better prorogue the house and get out to start campaigning for votes like they mean it.
Disrupt polls to have polls

War is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength.

The dual speakeasy is getting so thick you now need a khukuri to cut through it. Pushpa Kamal Dahal says that the 22-point preconditions put forward by his party are intended to ensure timely, free and fair constituent assembly elections. He promises to prepare the groundwork for polls by street agitation, forced shutdowns, and mass action. And Comrade Avesanow wants us to believe that his new-fangled instruments of electioneering are harmless.

Yes indeed. In the newspeak of Prachandapath war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance of Prachandpath war is peace, elections that were deferred earlier is strength. Clearly, the comrades of Prachandpath are harmless. Therefore the army on the ground for polls by street agitation, forced shutdowns, and mass action. And Comrade Avesanow wants us to believe that his new-fangled instruments of electioneering are harmless.

There are now hardly 90 days to polling date. Minus a month of Dasain-Tihar-Chhath slack in to polling date. Minus a month of hemming and hawing. The cue, the other parties are also from June to November. Right on elections that were deferred earlier is strength. Clearly, the comrades of Prachandpath are harmless.

Uncollected garbage, not the first time in Kathmandu, reflects the uncolvised mindset of the people. The government banned strikes functions (Happenings, #362). But he must realise that the YCL is not legalised and cannot, by the contents of law, perform such actions on civilians. Nevertheless the army on the other hand have the law in their hands, yes but it was wrong to humiliate you back then. The difference lies in the matter of legality, and ethics. If you look into this then you will surely find Guvrendapath a little better.

B K Shrestha, email

STATE OF THE STATE

C K Lal

There is a mistake in Diwas’s Critical Cinema column reviewing Michael Moore’s Sicko (‘Sick of it’, #361). Moore didn’t get an Oscar for Fahrenheit 9/11. Instead of proroguing parliament it was prolonged. Dahal’s 22-point list is a compendium of Maoist slogans covering everything from declaration of republic to democratisation of the Nepal Army and control over “progressive foreign forces” to the release of stifpends for cadres in cantonments. Then there are contradictory tides that inevitably emerge when competing groups within the party are bent upon having their say. If the monarchy is to be abolished forthwith, Ram Babhu Thapa shouldn’t worry too much about the army at Narayanhiti and the security detail of Gyanendra’s family. Through a vocal sector of Kathmandu high society has been quick to pounce upon planned protests by Maoists, perhaps it’s too early to fear a re-enactment of the October Revolution. Without a mutiny in the ranks of the security forces, perhaps Moscow wouldn’t have collapsed the way it did in 1917 and there was no internet nor global monitoring of peace processes in the days of Lenin, Trotsky, and Bukharin. Besides, it’s facile to assume that

Moesr Dahal and Bhattarai are unaware of the consequences of armed adventures at this stage. It’s not that Maoists fear the electorate more than any other party in the government. Compared to the discredited UML and the divided NC, the Maoists have retained their core base support among the dalits and the marginalised section of janjatis. Despite the anti-Maoist tone of the Madhes Uprising, economic disparity in tami is conducive to the brand of leftwing radicalism espoused by ideologue Baburam Bhattarai. With its middle-class support base, the MJP will offer a political challenge to Rambaran Yadav and Mahendra Thakur rather than to Matrika Yadav and Prabhuj Sah. It’s just that the Maoists want to go to the electorate on their terms and keep their cadres engaged in the interim. Postponement of polls is important for Maoists for exactly the same reasons the international community wants it to be held as soon as possible.

Once the polls weren’t held in June as agreed the Maoists lost face. Only an election can give them the legitimacy they so crave. Without popular mandate, the US terror tag is still there. The bureaucracy continues to be dismissive of Maoists out in the districts. To re-establish their political credentials, Maoists probably want to have a fresh accord, something that can’t be achieved without painful agitation. Hence the antics aimed at their partner parties in legislature, government and district headquarters. The international community wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about polls in the steaming heat of June. November is different matter altogether. It’s peak tourist season, and every probable international monitor is looking forward to election tourism in the Himalaya in autumn. The Maoists will have all hell to pay for disappointing some very high-profile monitors. The consequences of cancelled working vacation of UN bigwigs will be a lot harder to handle than complaints of contract employees held up at the BCC.

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The view from New Delhi

India is getting increasingly impatient with the drift in Kathmandu

PRASHANT JHA in NEW DELHI

T he Indian establishment doesn’t try to hide its chagrin at the drift with the Nepali political parties trying to dodge elections and endanger the peace process that it helped broker and micro-manage for the past two years.

In a series of interviews in New Delhi this week, Indian politicians and policymakers said they would like to see the peace process come to its logical conclusion with elections in November.

“Remember we were the only ones pushing for June elections and the last few months have been proven right,” one diplomat here told us, “problems have only increased since then. Missing the November date can have extremely destabilising consequences.”

Delhi believes that the polls can lock the Maoists irreversibly into the mainstream, pave the way for stability, provide a platform to address other grievances and demands, and limit the role of the internationals, especially the UN.

South Block has been taking public positions on polls and sent strong messages privately to leaders. In Kathmandu, a new invitation by Shankar Mulkherjee has told Prime Minister Koirala that the government would face a severe legitimacy crisis if elections do not take place.

Former Indian intelligence officers met Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently in Siliguri passing on a similar message from New Delhi. External Affairs Minister Prafulla Mulkheerjee is reported to have personally shot down the proposal by Koirala and Dahal of comverting the present interim legislature into a constituent assembly and instead pushing for polls.

At the same time, New Delhi realises the limits of its leverage in Kathmandu. “We can push, we can threaten, we can use different channels to communicate the message but it finally boils down to the political will of the major parties and whether they want polls,” an MEA source said.

What is new in foreign policy-making circles here is the past few months is a sense of pessimism, and a belief that the peace process has become shaken.

Delhi diplomats and analysts are satisfied with UMIN’s performance so far, but they want it to pack up and go as soon as possible. Even so, irrespective of the polls they admit UMIN may have to stay on in some form for another six months to complete arms management. Although India may accept a limited extension of UMIN’s mandate is out of the question. But what roles officials here is their belief that UMIN is angling for a political role in the tani, and even guiding madhesi groups to talk for international mediation. “This goes beyond what was decided when India let the UN in and Ian Martin should tell his officials to be restrained,” one influential Nepal analyst said.

New Delhi also blames Koirala for delaying elections to appease madhesi groups while the crisis was still manageable. They have tried to get the message across to the prime minister, but say when it comes to the tani Koirala refuses to listen to the officials say they don’t want a further proliferation of madhesi groups and reportedly discouraged mainstream madhesi politicians, including NC and CP and this was formed into a separate party. There have been allegations that India is supporting madhesi armed groups because Goit and Jwala Singh live in Bihar.

When asked about this, a former ambassador to Nepal testily posed his own question: “Look, who is in charge of India of this? The Maoists. Where did they stay all along? Does it mean we were supporting them? Get your house in order instead of blaming and expecting us to come and clean the mess.”

Indian policymakers seem more sanguine about the Nepal Army’s intentions. As long as the government does not tamper with the army’s structure with security sector reform, they feel the generals will play along. “There is no point messing with the army right now,” said a retired Indian Army general, “it remains the bulwark against the Maoists and is the only back-up if everything falls apart.”

There has been a change of guard at the Nepal desk of the MEA, and the new occupant has just returned from a fam tour of Kathmandu. Although India looms large in Kathmandu, here Nepal is overshadowed by some global crisis or other and this week it is the fallout from the US-Iran nuclear deal.

Hindu righteousness

Not this king, but India’s religious right still wants the monarchy

India’s Hindu right which has been traditionally sympathetic to the monarchy and opposed to Nepal going secular is split about Nepal policy.

There are differences in approach between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), about the political approach to Nepal. The RSS is reasserting its past policy on the future of the monarchy and say putting all their eggs in the royal basket was not a wise move. Besides being a Hindu king, they believed only the king could fight the Maoists.

Now, senior RSS leaders admit the erosion of the king’s credibility in Nepal has damaged them as well. “We depended on proximity with the king for our influence, now with the king gone we have lost our strength on the ground,” one senior RSS leader told us.

Despite this, the RSS would like the institution of monarchy to remain. While more radical groups like the Rastriya Hindu Parishad still hope for an active monarchy, most in the Hindu right in India know that the days of an assertive king are gone.

“We would be quite happy if the institution remains, it is a symbol of unity and is the only Hindu monarchy in the world. We know Goynader and Parsas are unacceptable but then the grand scheme could work,” says an RSS leader who has tangled Nepal for decades.

BJP leaders, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee, have said they will not actively push for retention of monarchy, and will decide on their stance based on the public mood in Nepal. The rightwing in India has kept the channels of communication open with king Gyanendra who has met three intermediaries in the past few months: a former minister from Tamil Nadu close to the RSS, a journalist with a Delhi-based pro-BJP paper, and a former intelligence official.

All have returned with the impression that the king is relatively calm but at a loss about what steps to take. It appears he has been advised that a four month retreat, possibly a pilgrimage to India, would be in the realm of wishes. “This is a new face of the Maoists. We were not sure if they would come back, but now we know they are a force to be reckoned with,” one influential Nepal analyst said.

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Anti-banda travel agents
The Nepal Association of Tour Operators (NATO) has requested all parties to hold off all protests, demonstrations, and mass assemblies until the constituent assembly elections slated for November. Such programs will only send negative signals to the international market and media and can lead to cancellation or deferment of trips planned by tourists for the upcoming peak tourist season that begins from mid-September. The recent peace process has sent tourist arrivals soaring.

Powder plant
Under the banner of the Lakshmi Group, Sujal Foods is setting up a powder milk plant in Pokhara. The plant is expected to be operational by mid October and will cost about Rs 250 million, according to the company’s acting executive director Anjan Shrestha. The plant is being built on Swedish and Danish technology and will be able to process 5,000 kilograms of powder milk per day and later it is expected go up to 7,500 kilograms.

Nokia advisory
Nokia has issued a product advisory for users of the Nokia-branded BL-5C battery manufactured by Matsushita Battery Industrial. In rare cases, a short circuit while charging can cause the battery to overheat and dislodge. This applies to the 46 million batteries manufactured by Matsushita between December 2005 and November 2006. Concerned consumers can request a replacement for the BL-5C battery.

NEW PRODUCTS
SPARK: The Chevrolet Spark is now available in Nepal through Vijaya Motors. The 1,000cc hatchback comes with a three year or 100,000km warranty with a service interval of 5000km or six months, and claims a mileage of 17.85kpl with a top speed of 156km/hr. The Spark is manufactured by General Motors India.

HANG TEN: The international Hang Ten brand of clothing is now available in Nepal through Aniruddh International. Initially, only men’s casual range has been launched at an exclusive outlet at the Bluebird Mall in Kathmandu and at Naha Stores in Pokhara. The products are imported into Nepal from Hang Ten factories in Pakistan, and are all made of 100 percent Pakistani cotton. There are plans to also introduce the ladies and kids range.

MOBILE: A new range of Philips mobile phones have been launched by Syakar Corporation, the sole authorised distributor for Philips in Nepal. The ten new models are available in prices ranging from Rs 2,990-15,690. Among them is the Philips Xenium range of phones that boasts the longest battery life of 1000 hours on standby and 10 hours of talk time. The new brands are available at all Philips retail showrooms and dealer outlets.

www.nepalbandh.com
Necessity is the mother of innovation

This week viewers couldn’t watch Nepali channels on tv as agitating cable operators shut them off to pressure the government to meet their demands. And demands? Reduction of taxes and royalty.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

The standard operating procedures for tax issues with grievances is to park on the Ring Road to obstruct all traffic in and out of the airport. Garbage is piling on the streets because someone in the rubbish chain is protesting about something.

The Ministries who last week announced they wouldn’t close down newspapers anymore to press for their demands announced an indefinite nationwide school closure from Monday. Good for them they will at least have their drastics action otherwise there’d be all hell to pay.

The issue then becomes, should a parent as a ‘consumer’ be able to get a refund on the fee or should the school be able to adjust teacher’s pay for the days the school’s revenue is affected? Wednesday was supposed to be a banda, no one knew who was calling it or why, but that wasn’t important. What was important was that the rumours had spread so everything remained closed.

Now, there is even a website www.nepalbandh.com where one can check out future bandas so one can plan one’s life around them. “Necessity is the mother of innovation,” noted one wag.

A consumer who subscribes to cable television has entered into a contract with the cable operator for the number of channels 24 hours a day for the duration of the contract. The price one pays is for the service for that whole duration. Therefore, if the operator decides to not broadcast a channel then the price should be reduced. Parents should stop paying for every day that a school is closed, or school buses are not plying. If a restaurant is closed on a particular day there should be a discount on the days when it is open.

Let’s start looking at these closures from a consumer’s perspective. If there are three hours of load-shedding a day, we should be compensated through a tariff rebate during periods when there is electricity. And how about variable salaries where the existing salary is broken down into fixed and variable components depending on the days businesses remain open.

Why should an employer pay for the days that an employee stays at home outside stipulated holidays? Perhaps this is the only way to make sure people will struggle against bandas, teachers will ensure schools remain open, parents will demand schools not be closed, and employers will raise their voices against forced closures.

Nokia has just spent millions of dollars to recall their phone batteries. Ford withdrew a vehicle with faulty suspension. Fischer Price has taken out toys with excessive lead. They aren’t stupid, they spend millions of dollars to avoid legal costs and damages that may ensue from faulty products.

The problem in Nepal is that contracting law is weak and there is no protection for the consumer. We can sue the cable operator, but nothing will happen. The time has come to really look at a firmer legal framework between service providers like schools, hospitals, cable networks, to enforce their legal options against forced closures.

www.arthabeed.com
Interview with Pushpa Kamal Dahal, American ambassador Moriarty’s speech.

To dictate Nepal and Nepalis. Somewhat it smacks of former
The language he used is objectionable. It seems as if India is trying
on CA elections?
What’s your take on Indian ambassador Mukherjee’s recent comment
our influence. This is not right.
we haven’t done that. In the tarai, India played a role to marginalise
them to extend positive support as a good neighbor. But maybe India
agreements on that basis. During this transitional period we want
A relation based on equality. We want to evaluate past treaties and
So what does India want from you? And what do you want from India?
Congress, we also developed a relationship with India.
India’s guest. India did play a role in the agreement. Through
that this was being done without India’s knowledge. Girijababu was
used to come to us after evading the Indians. But we never believed
12-point agreement in Rolpa, but Girijababu suggested Delhi. He
an alliance with the parliamentary parties. We wanted to discuss the
turn after the royal takeover. We then accepted Delhi’s help to forge
the palace before 2 February 2005 but the situation took a nasty
planned to fight a tunnel war against India. I had prepared a proposal
on this after reading about Vietnam’s tunnel warfare. We were talking
proposed to fight a tunnel war against India. I had prepared a proposal
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so how much to wear is an

Hearty Condolence

Dear Colleagues,

With great sadness we inform you that our dear friend
Mathias Hoyerssen, Director SNV Nepal and Honorary Consul for the Netherlands,
has passed away on 22 August 2007 in his home in Belgium. Mathias was only 42 years old. He came to Nepal on 1 February 2004.
With his vibrant, ambitious and intelligent attitude he became Director of SNV Nepal on 1 February 2005. He brought a new change and dynamism in the organisation. He was a caring family man, a great friend, energetic and entertaining professional. He loved Nepal
and its people and it hurt him not to be able to return to say goodbye. He, until the very last moment, continued to mobilize additional resources for a SNV supported project in Nepal he strongly believed in. Through this project, young, disadvantaged women and men in a remote, post conflict society can benefit from leadership support for building capacity to fight poverty. He always wanted to bring new hope and a better future for the people of Nepal something he wishes us to continue.

Our thoughts are with his spouse Dominique, their children Sebastian, Carla and Arthur, his parents, other family members and friends.

Tom Derksen, Director
SNV Nepal
SNV Nepal
Bakhundole, Lalitpur
Phone # 5523444

NOTE: A book of condolences will be kept open at SNV: Netherlands Consulate premises at Bakhundole, Lalitpur on August 27, 28, 29 from 09:00 – 17:00 hrs.
imitating the foreigners we should see what is culturally acceptable.

Amrit Bhandari, Kirtipur

Bidhata Singh’s, in her response, has rightly criticised Sushma Manadhar’s provocative dress. One would do well to pick up trash lying around and throw them in containers rather than ogling at panties. Is it right to undress oneself in the name of fashion and development? Do they know the problems of the countryside where women can’t even afford clothes to cover themselves? Young people have tremendous sexual desire. He says provocative dresses will add fuel to the burning fire among the youngsters. It may even lead to rape cases. To walk around semi-naked in public in the name of fashion is to be insecure.

K S Lohrung

Tycoons

Jawalakhel, 21 August

Media owners have started panicking after a Maoist Minister passed the Working Journalists’ Act, and have started badmouthing the Maoists. But they have been silent about HBC FM’s decision to lock up the studio and deny the journalists their right to work. Even various other organisations that have been speaking for the owners have been silent on the HBC scandal. Last week, owners of the big media houses who formed Nepal Media Society and the ‘big’ editors from the Editors Alliance said the situation of press freedom now has become even worse than during the king’s rule. To say that the state of press freedom was better during the royal regime based on few incidents of journalists demanding their rights is unfortunate, say analysts. The military was censoring every line at gunpoint, how was that better? This indicates that the biggest editors are lackeys of feudal and foreign elements. Only recently, some editors of big media houses secretly met palace and army officials, according to sources.

Manpower

Abhijyan, 13-19 August

Last year alone manpower cheated Rs 400 million from young Nepalis going abroad, says the Labour and Employment Promotion Department. Laxmi Narayan Sharma at the department says 377 individuals and 332 companies were involved. After complaints, some Rs 40 million was recovered from manpower companies and various individuals. Over 100 people have been sued and 117 companies had their licenses cancelled last year. Last year, the High Himalayan Manpower company was in the headlines for their high number of fraudulent activities. One of the executives, Om Gurung, is in police custody.

Badi Group Struggle Committee chairperson Umadevi Badi in Nayakathipatra, 23 August

We will expose everyone who slept with us.

Kiran Panday

SELECTED MATERIAL TRANSLATED EVERY WEEK FROM THE NEPALI PRESS
The woman who took the seat next to me had something suspicious under her billowy red shawl. She had one hand tucked underneath as the Swayambhu Yatayat lurched and swayed along the Ring Road. Suddenly there was a clucking sound from under the shawl and I found myself face to face with a huge chicken. Its deep red comb pulsating, sharp beak inches from my nose and beady little eyes staring unblinkingly into mine, I let off a shriek.

That is the beauty of Kathmandu’s public transportation network: it’s a free for all and you never know what drama you’re going to encounter when you get on. Sometimes it is an instant chukka jam at Kalanki, at others a major fist fight between the conductor and a bunch of forty-year-olds who want a student discount, and just the other day there was commotion when the bus driver drove away even before an alighting passenger could take down a goat he had stowed on the roof.

But despite the chaotic impression it gives, Kathmandu’s public transportation system is efficient and fast. There is an entire array of vehicles: the big blue ones that circle the Ring Road half of them clockwise and the other half counter clockwise, the microbuses that will pack you in like gundruk or sardines (take your pick), the 1970s vintage Munich Bakery Bus that ply to the suburbs and then the electric three wheelers which have by default become the favourite of women commuters. There are few bus numbers, the routes are flexible, no organised bus stops (you can stop and get on anywhere). A bus from Budanilkanta to Godavari, Sundarjal to Khojama one way won’t cost you more than Rs. 20, 33 percent less if you can produce a student ID. A great way to sightsee...
Kathmandu’s urban squalor is to spend Rs 10 to circumnavigate the Ring Road on the blue bus in a little over one hour.

Then there are the microbuses that also circle the Ring Road. With white plates, these road demons will get you wherever in half the time but often charge double of what the blue buses do. Public transport in the inner city is chaotic. Microbus routes go from everywhere to everywhere and back but even after four years of commuting I haven’t figured them out. There are little-known tempo routes that use the gullies, which is a great way to go during chukka jams on the main roads. Micros are the fastest, but it’s a bit unnerving because the drivers think they’re in the Formula One.

“We have to compete with other microbuses,” says Raja Ram Thapa, a micro driver on the Ratna Park-Chabahil route, “we cannot afford to waste time on the road.” It’s a race against time, and it’s a race to haul in as many passengers as possible to maximise daily earnings for the driver and conductor. Woe to any passenger unlucky enough to get stuck in one of these contests.

Some micros and buses have numbers. Ignore them. The numbers are irrelevant and routes change from day to day. For example, route 5 is supposed to take you from RNAC (yes, still called that) to Ratna Park, Lazimpat, Jamal, Bambhatapur, but sometimes it goes to Basundhara without warning. It pays to be alert about any change of plans en route. “We’ve had the same number for years, even though we’ve changed routes at least five times,” says Bishnu, a conductor on the Ratna Park-Kalanki route with pride.

For the best value ride in town use the trolley bus, almost no one rides on it and it causes no pollution. The only problem is that this near-defunct state-run electric transport runs only between Baneshwor and Tripureswor and once every half-hour.

An upside to using public transportation is that you meet all kinds of interesting people. I personally have met former teachers, made friends with an Australian woman, sat face-to-face with a rooster, talked to a sadhu on the benefits of marijuana, got a college girl’s number, and even have had my thigh molested.

Yup, it’s not just girls. If someone tries to get touchy feely make a hue and cry. People almost always come to the rescue of a damsel in distress.

“A man once tried to feel me up on a bus, but I yelled and other people immediately started to tell the person off,” says Shilpa Shrestha, a 12th grade student who commutes to school and back every day.

If you want to see the real Kathmandu, take the bus. Travel with the masses. What you lose in time, you make up in money, and experience.

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Micro tips

Electric tempos have become the transport of choice for young girls and women in Kathmandu.

Exactly when women started opting for the zero-emission three-wheelers is not clear. But most women prefer the less-crowded, slower paced, and environment-friendly three-wheelers. And unlike the gas tempos, the electric ones don’t smell. If a groper does get into a tempo, you can be sure the woman driver will stop the vehicle and personally throw the pervert out.

If you do have to take the micro because you are in a rush, here are a few tips:

- No low-slung shirts, no low-rise jeans, no saris.
- Carry a big bag, more difficult to snatch and can be used as a weapon if someone gets too close
- Choose a seat near the window (polluted outside air is better than indoor pollution)
- Sit towards the front to make it easier to get in and out
- Never sit on the small seat near the door unless you want your nose stuck inside the conductor’s armpit
- Best seat is up ahead in business class next to the driver
- Have your fare ready (in small change) so you don’t reveal the location of your wallet
- If the sleazebag next to you starts to get physical, scream. Jab the guy with your elbow or tell him you’re YCL.
No truth, some

Warring sides in government are trying to forgive themselves for atrocities

Purna Basnet

The months after the comprehensive peace accord was signed and a year-and-a-half since the ceasefire, families of civilians killed or disappeared by both sides are losing hope that they will ever see justice done.

A government made up of the opposing sides in the war is now setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that will actually allow amnesty to those accused of committing atrocities during the 10 years of conflict.

A draft bill drawn up by the Peace and Reconstruction Ministry says in paragraph 25: “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission can recommend to the government that amnesty be given to persons who are found to have committed serious violations of human rights based on their political beliefs in the line of duty.”

Peace Minister Ram Chandra Poudel defends the provision, saying the priority now is to move forward with reconciliation. “The former rebels and we are both in government...we cannot jeopardise the peace process in the name of enduring impunity,” Poudel told us.

Masist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai is equally uncompromising. “At a time when the peace process is itself in danger, there is no point getting sidetracked...the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is not going to be able to investigate anything even if it is set up.”

But human rights activists say experience from other countries shows that the peace process is undermined if victims don’t get justice and impunity goes unpunished. “This is called the justice of the victors, both sides want to bury their secrets,” says Subash Pyakurel, former member of National Human Rights Commission.

At a seminar on transitional justice and setting up a truth commission last week, in Kathmandu, experts from Peru and South Africa shared their experiences. “Politics must be kept out of the process,” says Yasmin Sooka, who was Truth Commissioner in South Africa after apartheid, “there must be a series of nationwide consultations with the relatives of victims to ensure that their demands and rights are addressed.” (See interview). Sophia Macher, who headed the former Truth Commission in South Africa, says: “Politics must be kept out of the process.”

Purna Basnet

Justice is a pre-requisite for peace

Yasmin Sooka, commissioner in the post-apartheid South African Truth Commission, was in Kathmandu last week to attend a conference on transitional justice. She spoke to Dipendra Jha about the lessons Nepal could learn.

Nepali Times: Why have efforts at truth and reconciliation failed in many post-conflict situations?

Yasmin Sooka: It depends on what you mean by success, in many countries these efforts have uncovered the truth creating accountability of past atrocities and recommended effective reparation.

Nepal’s challenge is to balance peace with justice. How does one do that?

Peace and justice are the same. There can be no sustainable peace in the absence of justice. Restorative justice is also important during the reconciliation process. The justice system must hold those who committed crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide accountable for their actions. Justice, accountability and reparation are the important factors that help a country move from conflict to democracy and peace.

Nepal’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission draft bill has a provision for amnesty. Will this work?

Amnesty is superficial, it covers up and moves too quickly. Amnesty should only be granted for actions with a political goal and which were not of an excessive nature, it must not be granted by the government or political leaders, rather it should be based on the will of the victims. The state can’t force victims to forget and forgive. But this doesn’t mean that all tortures, rapes, disappearances, killings, and other unspeakable horrors should be pardoned.

How will the amnesty provision affect elections?

Actually a Truth and Reconciliation Commission must be formed only after wide consultation around the country. It takes time. It must not be formed in a hurry otherwise victims will not feel that they are included in the process.

Can the interim parliament give amnesty?

Neither parliament nor the government, not even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, can be entitled to grant amnesty on behalf of the victims. That can only come after the perpetrators of serious human rights violations are brought to justice, and it should be based on the will of the victims.

And reconciliation? When does that come in?

Reconciliation is necessary on the path to peace. The question here is not just peace, but long-term sustainable peace. And it is impossible to establish this without full justice. Unjust peace is always ad hoc which can bring a different side-effect in society. Reconciliation without justice has been done, but it is only with the immediate objective of ending violence of what we call negative peace.

Nepali activists are proposing a ‘hybrid model’ of a truth commission including international members. Do you think that is suitable?

In South Africa, the people wanted commissioners from their own country. There is a need for international experience, technical support, and international lobbying but it is not necessary that they be members of the commission itself. Every country should try to do this by itself.
Undervalued grief

Narita Chand was at home in her village in Banke that night in May 2001. A group of armed guerrillas surrounded the house, dragged her husband Bhoj Bahadur out and killed him. Since then, it has been a struggle for Narita to raise her four young children. No one has an answer about where he is now, but no one will even tell her. She may have to wait much longer for that answer.
The box that changed the world

Cheap container transport has brought about the end of geography

I t is 40ft long, 8.5 or 9.5ft high, and 8ft wide. It carries up to 29 tons in its 2,000 cubic feet of recommended available space, goods worth roughly $500,000 when sold at retail. It, and what it carries, can be transported in a month anywhere in the world where there are suitable harbors, railways, locomotives, flatcars, truck tractors, diesel fuel, and roads. It is the modern cargo container, and it is able to move non-fragile, non-perishable goods from any modern factory with a loading dock to any modern warehouse anywhere in the world for about 1 percent of retail value. Indeed, it can be transported for a marginal cost of perhaps $5,000, less than the price of a first-class airplane ticket, as Marc Levinson, author of The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger, puts it.

All of this has happened since 1960. Back then, costs of international trans-ocean shipment for most commodities could easily amount to 20 percent of retail value. The cargo container has changed everything.

The container has made the world much smaller in an economic sense for non-perishable, non-fragile goods. Yet it is not the whole world that is so small, but only that part of it that is attached to the global container-handling network. Areas that lack the necessary infrastructure are still far away from the global trading system that carries high-end German washing machines from to California warehouses for just a penny a pound. For example, if your electricity is unreliable, so that you can’t count on being able to pump the diesel into the truck tractor, you are not attached to the network. If the volume of your production is too small to fill 2,000 cubic feet of space headed for a single country, you are not attached to the network.

For any poor segment of the world economy, getting attached to the global container network is an immense opportunity. But it is an opportunity that requires that everything—infrastructure, scale, public administration, governance, and foreign knowledge of your production capabilities—work just right. And if you have not first built up the social networks that enable your workers and their bosses to know what kinds of manufactured goods would generate high demand in the rich post-industrial core of the world economy, it doesn’t matter even if you are attached to the global container network.

Many have written about how telecommunications technology is bringing about the ‘death of distance’. Indeed, nowadays, you can talk to anybody, anywhere. But it is the cargo container that appears to have brought about a more effective and more significant ‘end of geography’.
Honorary consuls based in Kathmandu form their own association

Flag carriers

MALIKKA ARYAL

In early 1980s when tourism was booming in Nepal, some European and Latin American embassies in New Delhi started receiving an overwhelming number of inquiries from citizens of those countries about having problems in Nepal. Since they had no missions on the ground in Kathmandu, it became difficult to help them. They thought it was time to share their responsibility by setting up honorary consulates in Nepal. It was a win-win for everyone: the embassies got an inexpensive way to have a presence in Kathmandu and people from the countries who were frequent visitors to Nepal got to wave the flag of exotic countries like Mexico, Brazil, and even Iceland.

Today there are 27 honorary consuls general, most of them Nepalis representing various countries around the world in Kathmandu. Panceep Kumar Shrestha was the president of FNCO in Kathmandu until mid 1990s. When it moved, the Italian government decided to appoint an honorary consul in Kathmandu in 1997 and they chose another businessman, Ravi Bhakta Shrestha. About 8,000 Italians come to Nepal annually, and Shrestha has to help them when they get into trouble or fall sick while trekking. “The work as an honorary consul involves business, social and diplomatic work, all the areas I am passionate about,” says Ravi Bhakta Shrestha.

“But today, it goes beyond trade. Nepal can learn so much about peace and reconciliation from South Africa’s success,” says Panceep Kumar Shrestha, who is also managing director of the Panchakanya Group.

Nepal used to have an Italian Embassy in Kathmandu until mid 1990s. When it moved, the Italian government decided to appoint an honorary consul in Kathmandu in 1997 and they chose another businessman, Ravi Bhakta Shrestha. About 8,000 Italians come to Nepal annually, and Shrestha has to help them when they get into trouble or fall sick while trekking. “The work as an honorary consul involves business, social and diplomatic work, all the areas I am passionate about,” says Ravi Bhakta Shrestha.

One would think that Brazil wouldn’t have much to do with Nepal, but over 25 Brazilians visited Nepal last year and the number is expected to grow. Brazilian companies are also interested in hydropower and that is how Binu Mani Shrestha got appointed the consul general for Brazil since he was involved in the hydro power sector in 1985 when he was appointed.

It probably just a coincidence but many of the honorary consul generals here are Shresthas. The consuls have now set up their own association, the Honorary Consular Corps, and will soon be affiliated to the World Federation of Consuls.

“HCC is a good will organisation and a place for honorary consuls to come together, exchange ideas, and information,” says Deena of HCC Nepal Geojentu Bhusan Shrestha who is the honorary consul general of Sweden.

The government has recently allowed honorary consulates to carry blue plated cars besides the flags of the countries that they already fly when they are on official duty. Aside from that, there is no real salary or benefits for being an honorary consul, although all expenses incurred in helping nationals is reimbursed.

Even tiny Luxembourg has an honorary consulate. Tourism entrepreneur Shwe Ram Lamichiene was appointed in 1996. The tourism entrepreneur says there are limited exchanges between Luxembourg and Nepal, but the number of tourists is increasing. “Exports of Nepali paper and handicrafts are increasing and have great potential,” says Lamichiene, who runs Luxembourg House, a centre in Kakani which has a Luxembourg-funded culture centre.

My wife is a gangster, too

This Korean sequel tramples the egos of male gangsters across East Asia

Oh, the travails of watching films in Kathmandu! I had planned to review Hairspray, only to discover that the content of the DVD was an action-comedy from another nation. But what a welcome surprise! So what if I don’t get to report how good John Travolta was in drag. Korean film My Wife is a Gangster 3 supplies gender role reversals in abundance, and perhaps in a kinker vein than Hollywood’s Hairspray.

Yes, kinky, once again. I had thought that the sadomasochist humour of My Sassy Girl was an anomaly. Instead, it seems, as- kicking dominatrices are the norm for Korean cinema. God knows what kind of hell was raised by the heroines in the previous two instalments, but in Gangster 3 Aryong (Shu) gets to trample the egos of male gangsters all over Hong Kong and Korea. An oddly self-preserved and menacingly stubborn gangster princess, she is above the niceties of her father’s criminal court and above the foolishness of her custodians. She batters men with the back of a finger and routs mobs in a jiffy.

The story begins when Aryong is accused of decapitating a lieutenant of her father’s rival gang and has to be evicted from Hong Kong. Choosing exile, she falls into the care of a petty henchman Ki-Cul (Lee) and his boys, whose hopeless attempts to impress her only get them into more trouble.

In a way Gangster 3 is a flippant nod to the Yakuza films of neighboring Japan. The brooding soundtrack that accompanies Aryong during the action scenes may even weirdly remind you of Kill Bill (Tarantino’s tribute to Yakuza). Gangster 3, however, never gets as gory or as grave. There is enough action to warn you never to mess with hot, mopey chicks. But, really, the fight scenes are barely satisfactory.

What you will find to your heart’s content is humour. Just the shenanigans of translation provides so much farce, it is incredible that director Jin-gyu Cho keeps the running gag for so long without cloying. Year-hee (Hyeon) has too much fun as the translator that director Jin-gyu Cho keeps the running gag for so long without cloying. Year-hee (Hyeon) has too much fun as the translator...
ABOUT TOWN

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EVENTS
- Caravan a film by Eric Vall, 24 July, 6.45 PM at Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4458549
- Shastrantra on sustainable development by Arjun Dhakal, 25 August, 4-6PM at Maran Chautari. 4238050
- Ayur Expo 2007 an exhibition of Ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy and medicinal plants by the Nepal Ayurveda Medical Students’ Society. 24-26 August at Ayurveda Campus, TU, Kirtipur.
- CSWN monthly lecture on changing faces in Nepal, transforming lives through diet and palate and surgery by Susan Stenson, 31 August, 9.30 AM at the Shankar Hotel, Lazimpat.

DIYAN
- Soul of Raga live classical and fusion music, every Friday night at Nihutie’s Kitchen, The Organic Bistro. 4429093.
- Open mic night at Via Via Café, every Friday, 8PM onwards.
- Live music at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yanki and Zigme Lepcha. 4416071
- Ciney Gurung every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408

DINING
- Pear and berry etagere taste pear and blackberry crepes, strawberry tart with vanilla sauce and freshly cut pear with pomegranate at The Lounge, Hyatt Regency. 4.30-6.30 PM. 4497234
- Jazz in Patan with coffee, food, drinks, and dessert at the New Orleans Café, Jawalakhel, 11.30 AM-10PM. 5522708
- Starry night BBQ with live music by Ciney Gurung at The Shambhala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-La, every Friday 7PM. Rs 666 inclusive of a beer. 4412999
- BBQ Unlimited at Splash Bar & Grill Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, every Friday 6.30 PM, Rs 899 nett.
- 6th Annual Monsoon Wine Festival 16 wines at Rs 150 a glass and Rs 600 a bottle, at Kirky’s of Kathmandu, Thamel. 4250404
- Monsoon Magic live jazz by Inner Grove and a variety of cocktails from the summer special menu, every Wednesday, Rs 599 at Fusion Bar at Dwarika’s. 4979408
- Lajawab lunch at Shiva’s Vivana Heights Cottage. 9841371827
- Shangri-La’s pasta, pizza, pie, and pool a special swimming package with a complimentary beer, Rs 650 nett per person, every Saturday and Sunday at Shangri-La Hotel. 4412999
- Kebabs and curries at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841371927
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Weekend Weather by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

Incessant rain persistently from 1. Bhadra, the monsoon turned from saune jhari to bhadaure jhari. The characteristic of the second half of the monsoon in Nepal’s mountains is that the incessant rain is replaced by short, sharp, and localised bursts of lightning and thunder. This satellite picture taken on Thursday morning shows the monsoon’s rain system has moved out of the way to be replaced by the localised cells fed by moisture riding updrafts along the mountains. A low pressure system over northern India shows that this monsoon still has plenty of life left in it and will be dragging in more moist warm air from the bay. But expect these to fall as evening or night rain for the most part. Expect hot and humid sunny intervals through the weekend and then it’ll back to more rain early next week.

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HELL’S ANGELS: Photojournalists covering Wednesday’s banda find strength in numbers as they cruise the deserted avenue in front of Singha Darbar.

CIVIL MILITARY: Chief of Army Staff General Rukmangat Katuwal with Minister for Peace and Reconstruction Ram Chandra Poudel at the inaugural ceremony of a workshop on Democratic Transition and Nepalese Army Reform on Thursday. This is the first seminar of its kind, and part of the army’s effort to make a break with its royal past.

PARROT GREEN: The visiting UN Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, Lynn Pascoe, arrives at Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s residence. Dahal is reportedly moving out to a more modest accommodation.

WOMAN TO WOMAN: UNICEF’s Nepal representative Gillian Mellsop on Wednesday in Nepalgunj comforts Tarjun Darji and her six-week-old baby girl who was born during the devastating Banke floods last month. UNICEF provided families with flood relief kits.
Final blow

After warning of “physical action” on reactionaries in their fiery post-plenum speeches, the Maoists are furiously back-pedalling, especially while talking to internationals.

The comrades are not just under pressure from hardline dissidents within the party but also international revolutionaries who have accused them of abandoning the cause when victory was within reach. That is why the party’s delegation to a CCOMPOSA conference somewhere in the Eastern Sector recently had to grovel and whine. “We are using this transitional phase to spread our mass base and consolidate it… to bring disintegration to the enemy’s camp so that we can give a final blow and usher into the country a new democracy,” our comrades told their comrades. Ass’ italics.

Now, wonder what the Swiss and Nordics who have been the firmest believers in reformed Maoism think of that. The problem with the international solidarity movement is that some people want revolutions everywhere else but in their own country.

The criticism of YCL high-handedness has put the leadership on the defensive. Awesome One is now on a charm offensive to try to convince donors, activists, media bosses and others that he means well. On Friday, Kathmandu’s self-described intelligentsia was invited to the Hyatt for a roundtable. The partyline now is: “physical action” doesn’t mean what it used to during the conflict. Metaphysical?

Even Maoist party bosses have their movements curtailed when fraternal and maternal outfits call for chukker jams. Wednesday’s bund was wildly “successful” because even bicycles were not allowed and in Thamel rickshaws that were normally exempt were demolished. Why don’t these guys show the same thoroughness in community social work?

Anyway, even Comrade Awesome couldn’t travel to an prior engagement he had with the newly-formed Editors’ Alliance because of the bund called by his own cadre. It is apparently due to criticism he faced about living it up that Chairman Dahal is moving house again from his pistachio-coloured villa in Sora Khutte to something more modest.

No Ass column is complete without an update on UNMIN. We hear local recruits at the BICC are unionising and will soon launch a phasewise agitation for the extension of UNMIN’s mandate. If their demands of extension till April ’08 is not met, they have threatened to burn tyres at Baneshwor. And why do UNMIN SUVs (nicknamed “White Rhinos” in the tarai) have English number plates? Devnagari not good enough for you guys?

Given UNMIN’s strained relations with the Indians, the last thing it needed was for flight UN310 to stray into Indian air space last week on a flight from Simra to Nepalganj. Ass NOTAM to pilot of Charlie Foxtrot Whiskey Yankee Uniform: Kathmandu FIR is only 34 DME from KTM VOR on radial 300 so can’t fly on a straight line between SMR and NPJ unless you want the Indian Air Force scrambling interceptors with heat-seeking missiles from Gorakhpur AFB.

It looks like UNDP is getting more pie in its face for gifting $2 million from a fund earmarked for peace building in Nepal to the BBC Trust. For an organisation that makes “capacity building” its motto, it is hilarious that UNDP has been excelling in taking away capacity from Nepal’s radio producers and poaching scriptwriters, producers and radio journalists. Meanwhile, some kuire experts have spent the last six months “learning about Nepal” so they can hit the ground running. The FM radio network has gone radioactive, not to mention ballistic, and have taken delegations to UNHQ in Pulchok to register their protest. This ill-conceived project is also being asked some tough questions by Kathmandu-based donors. P.S.: Please send John back when you’re finished with him.