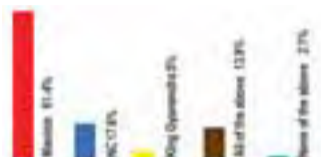


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JANUARY 2007
The tarai ignites. UNMIN begins work in cantonments.

FEBRUARY
Kathmandu dithers on the madhes.
People wait for the peace dividend
that never arrives.

MARCH
Gaur massacre. The June date for elections looks doubtful.

APRIL
First anniversary of the April Uprising marked by continued political deadlock.

MAY
Gas, water, electricity shortages highlight state incompetence.

The collage features several newspaper front pages. The most prominent is the 'Times' (likely The New York Times) with the headline 'Still undecided' in large, bold letters. Below the headline, there is a large bar chart with multiple colored bars (red, blue, yellow, green) representing data. To the right of the chart, there is a column of text. Other smaller newspaper snippets are visible on the left and top right, showing various headlines and images.

JUNE
Support for monarchy at all time low. The Maoists aren't much popular either.

JULY
YCL excesses intensify, Maoists
get unions to close down
newspapers.

AUGUST
Maoist plenum puts pressure on
leaders to delay elections.

SEPTEMBER

Maoists walk out of government, peace process in disarray.

OCTOBER

EC gears up for polls again, but politicians get cold feet.

NOVEMBER
NC and Maoists still can't find
a compromise.

DECEMBER

Maoists back in government, elections in April. Public skeptical.



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PEACE TRAIN

Nepali lefties have always had a flair for pompous rhetoric. Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Babu Ram Bhattarai insist on using a paragraph to say what they can in one sentence.

So we have a 23-point agreement among the seven parties in which the communists commit themselves, once again, to constituent assembly elections.

Nepal has been declared a republic, but it will only take formal effect sometime in the middle of next year after it is ratified by the constituent assembly. But the king is in his palace, still paid a salary by taxpayers money.

The mixed election system has been slightly modified as a face-saving device for the Maoists, but the essence of the earlier arithmetic remains in place. The 23-point agreement is what is already in the interim constitution and in previous accords.

Let's not go into why it took them so long. It's like asking why does the sun set in the west. The important thing is that the peace train which had stopped at a siding (not derailed as some cynics insisted in October when the Maoists left the government) is now on the move again. Essentially, it was never a problem between the leadership of the Maoists and the NC, it was a problem within their parties between the hardliners and moderates. The radicals, of course, are still not satisfied.

Janajatis have also gone along saying the elections are more important for now. Madhesi militant factions have denounced it, but the Forum will take part. The rightwing RJP and RPP dubbed the deal undemocratic. China, India and UNMIN cautiously welcomed the new agreement. The scepticism is understandable because by their past behaviours the seven parties give us no reason to trust them this time.

Polls have been postponed twice. This time, if they fail to have elections by April, the leaders don't just lose face, they lose all legitimacy.

Still, from now till April there are three spoilers. Monarchists will try their damndest to not allow elections to happen, an escalation in madesh violence would be a problem, and the wild followers of the Maoists will have to be defanged.

The YCL has harmed the prospects of its own parent party in elections, but the risk is that their excesses will be used by the hard right to wreck elections. Together, the six-party alliance and Maoists must finally prove they are capable of governing.

A government that can't ensure supply of essential commodities, arrange garbage disposal in the capital, guarantee freedom of movement and can't check crime is susceptible to sabotage by society's malcontents.

Nepalis don't want to hear any more speeches. The leaders must see elections as a chance to mend ways and improve their tarnished reputation among the public.



BILASH RAI

The year of the madhes

2007 transformed the tarai, Nepal will never be the same again

The last week of 2007 marks the first anniversary of the onset of madhesi protests. It was exactly a year ago that madhesi groups began to rally opinion against the interim constitution not addressing the issue of federalism and an unfair electoral system.



TARAI EYE
Prashant Jha

The Nepalganj riots of December 2007 exposed the state's partisan handling of the issue and fuelled anger across the tarai, culminating into the movement.

One year later, the climate of pessimism that engulfs Kathmandu is contagious, and disillusionment is widespread. But from the perspective of the madhes, 2007 has been transformative. Nepal is not the same country anymore. Nepal can never be described anymore as just a country of mountains, even in a tourist brochure. Any party that ignores madhesi sentiments cannot remain a national entity for long. Any politician, who thinks he can take the madhesi vote for

granted, commits political suicide. Never again will Kathmandu be able to tell a madhesi politician not to wear a dhoti to parliament or speak in his own language.

All government departments have been forced to at least appear sensitive about the need to include madhesis. Even the insular mafia of international organisations in the capital has had to wake up. The World Bank is adding a chapter to a major study on exclusion in which they had originally forgotten all about madhesis.

But any Nepali who derisively dismisses a madhesi as "dhoti" can't get away with it anymore. A madhesi friend who lives in Kupondole reports that he used to look down and walk away when abused. Today, there are no more insults. If this is happening in the capital, where madhesis are relatively insecure, think about their level of confidence in the tarai.

A lot more needs to be done. The state needs to be transformed in systemic terms and redefining who a Nepali is will be a long process. But an irreversible process of political and social change is underway that will alter the relationship between the state and madhesis, between hill-origin people and madhesis, and among madhesis themselves.

But precisely because of the enormity of this change, the madhesi political leadership and society at large needs to sit back and answer some difficult questions. Is the end goal a secessionist movement or a struggle for rights within Nepal? If it is the latter, madhesi leaders need to stop throwing the independence card

even as a bargaining chip as Hridayesh Tripathi, Upendra Yadav and Rajendra Mahato have done in public in recent weeks and others do in private conversations.

If this is a struggle for rights, why is the madhesi leadership and civil society a part of the conspiracy of silence against the attack on pahadis in the tarai? This breakdown of social fabric must rank as among the most unfortunate aspects of the past year.

Where do the dalits fit in vis-a-vis the movement, or is the aim to replace one form of discrimination with another? How will madhesi leaders deal with the Tharus and Muslims who often want to assert an independent identity and are skeptical of exclusivist rhetoric?

Do the madhesi activists want a quick election so they can fight for rights within the elected assembly? Or do they want certain pre-conditions fulfilled before polls? How can there possibly be immediate proportionate inclusion of madhesis in state structures? Is the Madhes as one federal unit from east to west viable or even desirable? Why are moderate leaders winking at the armed groups and abetting the criminalisation of politics? And why are madhesi leaders fighting over the share of a cake that doesn't even exist yet?

Last week's editorial in this paper called 2007 the 'lost year'. The description is apt in many respects: a myopic political class, a peace process that appears to be in permanent crisis, no polls, no development. But if there is one achievement for which this year will be remembered, it will be because the madhesis found their voice. ●

Happy new Nepal

This is the end of a year, and the end of an era

Some years rush past so fast that before you know it, it's gone. Events this year unfolded in agonising slow motion. Militant YCL cadre made their debut in open politics with a spate of extortions, abductions, ransom demands and other strong-arm methods of intimidation.



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

Politicians added fuel to the fire of the Madhes Uprising. Their intention may have been to weaken the Maoists in the tarai before polls. But it was misguided and counter-productive. The tarai tornado blew away not just the Maoists, but also the mainstream parties.

The resulting confusion caused the

cancellation of constituent assembly elections twice within 2007. The 6+1 parties have finally committed themselves to elections by April next year.

Despite widespread clamour for his crown, Gyanendra continued his search for a cultural role. Girija Prasad Koirala tried his best to establish the idea of ceremonial monarchy and ended up becoming a ritual premier in the process. The credibility of Pushpa Kamal Dahal has eroded to such a degree that Maoist apparatchiks have begun to openly discuss an alternative leadership. On every crucial issue—federalism, republicanism and electoral system—the UML has flip-flopped so often that no one takes Madhab Nepal seriously anymore.

Then there are the wild cards. Mohan Baidya and CP Gajurel talk like promoters

of a CPN (Monarchist). Chitra Bahadur KC of the People's Front opposes not just republicanism but federalism as well. The NC's own Chiranjibi Wagley, Gobinda Raj Joshi, Khum Bahadur Khadka and Taranath Rana Bhat came out openly to support a 'constitutional monarchy'. Everyone, even monarchists, are entitled to their views in a democracy. With supporters like these, the Shah Dynasty doesn't need enemies. But if there is one figure who deserves Person of the Year, it must be Sujata Koirala for advocating the resurrection of the 1990 constitution.

In 2007, the country would have got record remittances from abroad had it not been for the dollar fall. But no one counted capital flight in 2008. No one is counting but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed,

but the airport remained as decrepit and corrupt as ever. Nepal Airlines was grounded by corruption and mismanagement.

Highway travel in Nepal was so uncertain that a businessman from Biratnagar flew to Kathmandu to travel to Janakapur for his cousin's marriage because Lahan was closed for weeks.

There were happy moments when Mahabir Pun won the Magasaysay Award or when Indian Idol Prashant Tamang of Darjeeling emerged as the icon for alienated urban youths. But overall, it was a lousy year and glad it's over. The year fits in the pattern of 1960, 1972, 1984 and 1996, periods of extreme ambiguity and volatility, when political parasites ruled the country by proxy. Let's hope 2008 will be different. ●

LETTERS

MELAMCHI

After decades of planning and designing, there is contemplation once again about sending the project back to the drawing board ('Revisiting a multi-purpose Melamchi', #379). My first question is: How long will the residents of Kathmandu Valley have to wait for regular water supply to their homes? With the way the project is advancing, the answer may be: another century. All we want is water for domestic use, to boost the tourism industry and for better health of Valley residents.

Don't even get into redesigning the project because it will never happen. We have to learn our lessons from projects like the Arun III. The idea of irrigating the tarai with a Melamchi-augmented Bagmati is too far-fetched. And we have lots of other sites for hydropower, don't mix it up with Melamchi. The project is in trouble as it is, expanding Melamchi will mean it will never happen.

Dinesh Malla, email

HINDSIGHT

The editorial 'Ceremonial prime minister' (#378) is a scathing attack on Girija Koirala and the Maoist leaders about their delays in holding elections. But I disagree with your point that polls should be held even without the Maoists if necessary. First of all, they won't let polls happen without them and second, even if it does happen, what kind of

constitution and government will that make? This won't solve the problem.

Samyam Waglê, email

What do they say about not counting your chickens before they hatch? Not too long ago, everyone was gushing about what a great leader Girija was in achieving peace with the Maoists. Everyone made such a big fuss and someone even wanted to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Now you say that 'he has been found wanting'. Have to give you full marks for such wonderful 20/20 hindsight.

Subodh Pal, email

LOST 2007

Thanks a lot for your editorial 'The lost year' (#379). I am relieved to know that development is not a forgotten issue. In the past year, politics dominated the headlines and development was forgotten. Who was responsible for the year for 'non-development'? I won't be surprised if civil society and the political parties blame the king or royalists for that too.

K Kishor, email

ECHO CHAMBER

After wasting much of his valuable time and some of ours, CK Lal has returned to his witty best ('Voices in the echo chamber', #379). It's nice to have Mr Lal back to what he is better at and instead of torturing us with his endless political homilies.

Swagat Raj Pyakurel, Biratnagar

It was nice reading CK Lal

after a long time ('Voices in the echo chamber' #379). In a few simple sentences he opens up the world for us. 'With such weighty matters to talk about, there is no time to actually do anything.' This concluding line hits the bull's eye. The delay on the part of our leaders to conduct elections has betrayed the people.

Shankar Tiwari, Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus



'Shock and subterfuge' (State of the state, #378) was an interesting observation by CK Lal. He summed up everything about Nepali politics and its players: bad culture, incompetent leaders, clueless followers, and no vision at all. Thanks CKji.

Pashupati Neupane, Syangja

CK Lal writes well, but his assessment of the situation of the country in 'Shock and subterfuge' (#378) couldn't be more off the mark. Makes me wonder whether Mr Lal is doing this on purpose, or whether he is way out of his

league in trying to make any sense of Nepali politics. Probably the latter.

A Tanny, email

HOME COMING

Well said, Ashutosh Tiwari in your Strictly Business column ('Coming home', #379). There are many Nepalis who wish to return after many years overseas and this is always a major topic of discussion whenever there is a Nepali gathering. Most of our friends want to go back home but are concerned about the political situation and the lack of opportunities. If there is any organisation, network or advice for us, I am sure everyone will greatly appreciate it. Hope to hear more on this topic.

G Yurme, email

I am a visitor to Nepal from New Delhi and have fallen in love with the place. Nepalis have been tremendously resilient in the recent past. I do hope, as Ashutosh Tiwari does, that your best and brightest now return to help rebuild this beautiful country. And yet, I could not help but find Tiwari's profile of recent homecomers (those that are 'bored' with life abroad, wealthy and braced to put up with quick fame acquired in 'easy going' Kathmandu) rather self-centred. No hard-working, service-oriented idealists? If these are the only types intending to return, then god help Nepal.

Anita Kumar, Kathmandu

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A real state developer



If there is one sector of the economy that is truly booming in Nepal today, it is the housing industry.

Construction can't keep up with demand fuelled by remittance and urbanisation. Needless to say, most of this growth is haphazard and malignant.

Yet, there was one group of engineers and investors who felt there was a need for a paradigm shift: provide quality housing at affordable prices while at the same time steer city's living spaces towards planned growth and create jobs. Om Rajbhandari and his friends got together in 2001 to start Comfort Housing with this vision and launched a 76-unit development in Sitapaila.

"A developer is a contractor,

consultant and client all rolled into one," replies Rajbhandari when asked to describe his job. As the CEO of Comfort Housing, he has to deal with everyone. The biggest challenge was to overcome the Nepali tradition of building one's own house.

"We don't want to live in a house made by others because we don't trust builders," says Rajbhandari. But Comfort has managed to build trust. People took well to the idea of living together because it reminded them of their ancestral bahals and choks in the old city. And because of the hassles of finding cement, steel rods, getting the water and electricity supply, builders realised it was much more convenient to let someone else worry about all that.

After Sitapaila, Rajbhandari launched the even more ambitious Comfort Housing estates in Budhanilkantha, Sitapaila and Dharan. Rajbhandari says he'd be challenged by developing more housing areas outside Kathmandu to ease the pressure on the capital, but most clients

Comfort Housing shows the way in managing urbanisation and creating jobs

want to buy in Kathmandu.

Comfort Housing recently ventured into a vertical living project with The Comfort Housing Tower II at Lazimpat. It was so successful that the company is building three more apartment complexes in Bijeswori, Panipokhari and Sitapaila. It was inevitable; as Kathmandu runs out of space, there is nowhere to go but up.

We ask Rajbhandari the secret behind the success of his projects besides having the right idea at the right time. "It is the trust from our customers about our product," he replies with conviction. "Most Nepalis save their entire lives to build a house in Kathmandu, which is why they are so attached to the property. I am lucky that people trust me to build their homes for them."

Unlike many developers who take short cuts to make a fast buck, Rajbhandari says he owes his success entirely to customer

satisfaction. What he hopes is that other developers also take his approach of customer-first, because if they are satisfied, it also helps the community and the nation.

As he surveys the Kathmandu skyline with us from a vantage point in the city, Rajbhandari is proud to point out his projects and how they are inducing other developers to follow the model.

"One of the areas with huge untapped potential is budget housing because that's where most customers are," says Rajbhandari, "there's urgent need for new entrepreneurs and investors."

Living in the complex he built in Sitapaila, Rajbhandari has observed changes in the sociological aspects of Nepali family life. He says those who were not into sports are getting into it, and many are fitter and healthier. Children and adults who could not swim have learnt to, the community gets together during festivals and celebrations.

"There is a new sense of community, and I feel proud to be a part of that revival," says Rajbhandari. He says there is enough profit in the housing business and plenty of land still left in Kathmandu for planned development.

The government benefits from housing business because it gets revenue during land procurement, and ownership transfer. Seventy-five percent of construction materials are locally made which pumps the money into the domestic economy through employment and taxes. A project worth Rs 400 million takes three years to build and the downstream benefits are spread out over time as well.

Rajbhandari's only gripe is that for all its potential and contribution to the economy, the



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

government hasn't yet given the housing industry the importance it deserves; for example allowing foreign investment in construction and housing.

"Nepalis won't have to go abroad in search of work, the construction boom will provide enough employment here at home," says Rajbhandari. For that to happen, the government has to treat housing as a national priority, he adds, which is not possible unless the political leadership understands its importance. ●

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New year revolutions

Fingers crossed that 2008 will see an economic turnaround

One Big Lesson of 2007 for us was that a country doesn't necessary get its economy back on track just because a conflict is over.

The peace dividend is a mirage if mal-governance persists as it has here. Our political mess, the reason for the conflict in the first place, is still there. The



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

established political parties just got back to pre-2002 business-as-usual.

The only thing different this time is that the Maoists have joined the lot and they have just demonstrated they are no less short-sighted and narrow-minded than the other six parties.

Power brokering in 2007 was at its peak and briefcase trading

was SOP to get government jobs as well as juicy contracts. Perhaps, the parties should agree that they can disagree all they want about power, but they should all agree on the economy. Whoever comes to power has to grapple with that as a priority, after all. Learn from the victory of Narendra Modi in Gujarat that long term political future is about giving the people an economic environment of growth.

Yes, the year did have its good sides. The Nepal Stock Exchange went on a bull run, and let's just hope the bull doesn't gore too many people when it runs amok because of insider trading. The Nepali lotto mentality is at the fore once again as people have started to visit the stock exchange to bet on shares rather than go TO the casinos even though there is a

law against allowing Nepalis in there. So even by going to the casino we are breaking the law.

Real estate prices, already high, have gone ballistic as pahadis from the tarai sell their land and move up to Kathmandu and Pokhara. In the absence of strong regulation of apartment buildings and housing projects, real estate developers are mushrooming. The oversupply of commercial space in Kathmandu will surely see some banks getting into trouble in 2008.

Tourism and the airlines are doing well and let's hope NAC's demise when it comes won't be too painful. The trouble is that the credibility of Nepali international operators are at par with NAC.

Manpower companies made good money in 2007 and will continue to do so. The educational consultancy

businesses that even find placements in Liberia for Nepali students will make more fast bucks in the year to come. So will embassies issuing visas and consultants who can broker visa issuance.

The serpentine queues at gas stations demonstrate the mood of the Nepali economy: no one cares. The government doesn't care and the public accepts this incompetence. In any other country there would be fuel riots by now.

Hydropower licenses have been marking time for over a year, and many prospective investors have got tired of waiting and lost interest. The other important issue would remain how to rein the psuedo-militiant workforce that is continuously used by political parties for their own ends. The intent of the Maoist to really see

a prosperous Nepal can only be demonstrated if they let enterprises function and workers work without being coerced, threatened or brainwashed. If Nepal wants to see foreign investment, then apart from the rhetoric of nationalist capitalist and other nebulous terminology, the labour issue needs to be seriously resolved.

The donor and development community have remained mere spectators in 2007. They have ensured that Nepal still remains the highest per-capita seminar and workshop country in the world.

The private sector has not been able to capitalise on opportunities presented to itself in the transition probably due to lack of good leadership. It should look for innovative ways to intervene in policy building and economic activities. There are enough banks and finance companies, we have only promoters but few ideas for new investments to create jobs. ●

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Not again

.....
Editorial in *Annapurna Post*,
25 December

अन्नपूर्ण पोस्ट

After a long discussion, the seven political parties have come up with foundation for a new alliance. The main points of the new 23-point agreement include the official declaration of Nepal as a federal republic in the constitution and the constituent assembly elections in April. There are also changes in the election procedure. Instead of 240 seats, there will be 335 seats for proportional representation. The council of ministers will nominate 26 people instead of 17 and janajatis who do not have representation will be given space. Investigation of those disappeared, truth and

forward. But the government should change its operating style. The Maoists also need to stop anti-social activities. In the past year, YCL has been detrimental to the Maoists. We have come a long way since the twelve-point agreement two years ago.

Welcome move

.....
Editorial in *Drishti*, 25 December

दृष्टि

After intense discussions the seven parties have finally signed a 23-point agreement, and have said they are committed to holding elections in April. There was political uncertainty in the country because the Maoists would keep changing their mind and put forward different conditions. The fact that the parties have signed shows that



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

MEDIA DARLING: Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal gets hounded by the press after the signing of the 23-point agreement on Sunday.

reconciliation, restructuring of the state, scientific land reforms and implementation of the points in the comprehensive peace accord are all notable points. The deal has dispelled doubt and effectively ended the five-month long debate within the seven-party alliance and now there is hope that elections will happen. We have already lost two previous opportunities, one in mid-June and the other on 22 November. The NC's unwillingness to go to elections was the cause for postponement of the first date and the second time, it was the Maoists. The new agreement takes all of these conditions into account. For the parties to themselves unite in such a way is a great leap

the parties understand that unless the groups agree, the culture of democracy cannot be established. The agreement came at a time when the Maoists were demanding that there be unity between the seven parties. It is important to note that this new agreement makes it easier for the Maoists, who left the government and took to the streets, to rejoin the government. We have to commend UML and other parties for their commitment in dealing with political uncertainty and obstacles. The parties need to understand that many agreements may be signed, if they are not implemented, they are of no use.

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MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA at 25,000FT

As Nepal's tourism bounces back, the sector that has benefited the most is domestic aviation.

There aren't enough planes, or enough hours in the day, to take tourists on an aerial sight-seeing trip to Chomolungma. On 31 August this year, airlines set a record with 31 mountain flights by Buddha Air and 12 by Yeti Airlines. Right through the autumn season, the two airlines reaped a windfall of tourism traffic.

This is one of the few flights in the world that takes off and lands from the same airport and at \$140 per passenger, the margins are high (Nepalis and Indians pay Rs 7,000).

But as winter sets in, tourist volumes

drop and poor visibility at Kathmandu airport due to fog restricts the number of flights. One recent morning, the fog closed the airport after five mountain flights had already taken off. The planes were diverted to Simara, Pokhara and one to Bhairawa.

Early morning at Kathmandu airport looks like the deck of an aircraft carrier with a dozen twin turboprop planes lining up to take off. Captain Ang Ghelu Sherpa lines up his Beechcraft on the runway and guns the throttle. Soon we are taking a wide climbing turn over Kathmandu Valley. Ganesh, Langtang and Dorje Lakpa immediately swing into view.

In other airlines, flight attendants are usually busy with safety drills or handing out food and drinks, but on this

flight, stewardess T W Lama looks more like a school teacher as she points out various mountains to passengers.

However many times one has been on a mountain flight, every trip is different. Since this was early morning, there wasn't much turbulence over the mountains so Captain Sherpa was flying right past Numbur and as we banked, there was Lukla right below us with its inclined runway.

Through the tilted cockpit window, Chomolungma moved from left to right. We were so close, you could see the wavy yellow limestone band on the south face of Lhotse. On the return leg, the passengers on the righthand side got their chance. They see right into the arid pastel mountains of Tibet and magnificent border peaks like Melungtse and

Sishapangma. Abreast of Gauri Shankhar, we begin our descent, but Captain Sherpa informs us that Kathmandu airport is closed due to poor visibility.

Usually, such an announcement from the cockpit would be met by a collective groan from passengers. But inside this plane, there was jubilation. As we circled over Kathmandu waiting for the fog to clear, passengers got an extra hour of mountain flight for free.

Below, the fog draped Kathmandu like a quilt. The Himalaya stretched on to the west towards Himalchuli, Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. After finally getting his clearance, Captain Sherpa swooped down through the murky mist for a landing.

Was what we'd been through just a dream? Couldn't be, there are photographs to prove we actually saw what we did. ●





UP WHERE THE AIR IS CLEAR: (Clockwise from top left).

Captain Ang Ghelu Sherpa welcomes passengers to the cockpit as his plane flies past Chomolungma.

The mountains are on the left side on the flight out and on the right side on inbound, and flight attendant T W Lama is busy pointing out the peaks.

Kathmandu Valley is shrouded in fog, giving passengers an extra hour of sightseeing for free, as the plane waits for visibility to improve.

Khumbu, with the Dudh Kosi Valley, Lukla, Namche, Khumjung, Chomolungma and Cho Oyu.



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Chemo or yeti?

HELLA BINNENDIJK in LHASA

An American TV crew searching for yeti footprints found some in Khumbu on 24 November, just four days into their search.

Amazingly, the Destination Truth team spotted the 12-inch footprints only half a day's walk from the airstrip at Lukla, near the lively village of Monjo and at an altitude of just 2,850m. Even more remarkable was that the find was close to Khumbu's most travelled trekking route and occurred at the end of one the busiest trekking seasons for years. It was nothing short of miraculous.

My husband Dennis and I were equally lucky. On 22 September, while enjoying a trek in Khumbu, we stumbled upon a footprint in the Renjo Khola valley. We took photographs and Dennis joked about us having discovered a yeti footprint. I laughed but I had to admit that, at an altitude of 5,100m, the remote valley just below Renjo La looked the perfect habitat for a mythical creature that for decades has successfully avoided encounters with humans. The late monsoon rain and the freshly fallen snow on the pass had kept other trekkers out of the area.

We showed the pictures to Sherpa friends and compared the shape and size of our footprint with those photographed and published by other mountaineers. We came to the conclusion that our footprint might indeed belong to a yeti.

In his book, *My Quest for the Yeti*, Reinhold Messner suggests the legend of the yeti may be based on the existence of the chemo, a hairy Himalayan bear. Coincidentally, I went to Tibet after finding the footprint. In Lhasa I visited the zoo, the only place in the world where one can see a caged chemo.

In a bare cement hollow, like an empty swimming pool, I found this beautiful creature with a magnificent thick brown coat of fur. His head was mostly white and around his chest was a white collar that extended to his belly. I spent the afternoon watching him, while he stared back with sad eyes. He and his female companion spent their day pacing in circles or hiding from the sun in their concrete shelter. The enclosure was totally devoid of grass, bushes, trees or even rocks. These bears, naturally omnivorous, were fed a diet of tsampa.



HELLA BINNENDIJK

Yeti hunters would do better to look after endangered Himalayan bears

I left the zoo feeling frustrated. The living conditions of these bears are horrendous. While pseudo-scientists continue their expensive, glory-seeking searches for the mysterious yeti, here is an endangered mammal, within reach of every visitor to Tibet, that is pleading for immediate help.

Couldn't those people at Destination Truth widen their focus beyond the apparently successful yeti-hunting expedition to give some attention to the welfare of the beautiful chemo? Surely it would be worth highlighting the plight of this remarkable creature, which might disappear altogether if its conservation is not taken seriously. ●

Hella Binnendijk is a Dutch mountaineer and journalist. [hellabinnendijk\(at\)planet.nl](mailto:hellabinnendijk(at)planet.nl)

In search of

Peace is the highest common denominator for former warriors



TEXT AND PICTURES BY NAYANTARA GURUNG KAKSHAPATI

It was no ordinary gathering. There were three ex-People's Liberation Army soldiers, three ex-Nepal Army soldiers, one Madhesi Student Front leader, one United Tharu National Front leader, a bunch of poets, musicians and community peace workers. What they had in common was a commitment to peace.

They were gathered to address issues of truth, justice, mercy and peace and craft it into a song. For three days, they camped, ate and sang together. They shared stories of their childhood and diverse backgrounds. They narrated personal accounts of trauma caused by violence. They threw hard questions at each other. Are

you a Tharu, or are you a madhesi? Why did you join the PLA? Who would you vote for?

Amidst differences, they found common ground. Everyone wanted security, food, shelter, clothing and education for their children. Everyone wanted respect and dignity as a Nepali citizen, despite ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation.

The retreat was organised by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) which works towards transforming the way people deal with conflict in various parts of the world. In Burundi, the group played a key role in breaking down ethnic fears and hatred. In Macedonia, its popular children's television

series helped change the attitude of children towards those of other ethnic groups.

In Nepal SFCG's activities are aimed at fostering conditions in which armed conflict can be resolved in a way that addresses root causes of conflict and leads to sustainable peace.

Transforming conflict can be as simple as reframing a situation,

Ajeet K.L. Karna (pictured right) is the General Secretary of the Madhesi Student Front. He says his political awakening came when he was severely beaten up in Kathmandu during the Hrithik Roshan kanda because he "looked Indian". Ajeet is from Siraha but grew up in Tanahu.



reconciliation



creating a new context in which people attack problems, rather than each other.

At this time of critical political and social polarisation, some may find reconciliation naïve. After a week of working together, wouldn't participants find themselves back at square one? A week after the gathering, participant Ajeet K L Karna, the General Secretary of the Madhesi Student Front, was in Biratnagar for an important unification meeting of three madhesi student organisations. "My perception of the Tharu issue has completely changed," he says, "so far we have

Ex-army soldier Raman (above, left) and former Maoist fighter Raju participate in a trust building exercise. Both have left their armies and work as human rights advocates in their respective communities.

Kumar (left) takes a trust fall, to be caught by co-participants. He joined the Maoists in 1993 and served in the PLA for one-and-half years. He recently returned home to get married and then left for India to look for work. Kumar is 16 and his wife 15. He is back home now and does not wish to return to the cantonment. Many youngsters like Kumar are returning home from the conflict to marry early and migrating abroad for work in the hope that they don't have to be guerrillas again.

responded to problems emotionally. I realise now we must be practical and there must be dialogue." Karna says singing the jhijya song made him feel positive about the Tharus. Ex-PLA soldier Kumar wonders: "If we could sit together like this more often and really listen to each other would things be different? I realize that we all want the same things." ●



We complete another circle around the sun and 2007 is over

Staring into space

Astronomers around the world celebrated 2007 as International Heliophysical Year. Some remarkable events took place in the past year. Comet McNaught surprised us all by showing up in broad daylight in the beginning of the year. It was the most brilliant comet seen in 40 years. Comet Holmes made a brilliant display in October. We also enjoyed one solar and two lunar eclipses.

In 2007, the students of Balmiki and Trichandra colleges formed Nepal Astronomical Society (NASO) and are organising star parties in Kathmandu with support from senior astronomers (see picture of one such event in October).

2008 is shaping up to be another great year for staring into space. Viewing kicks off quickly with one of the best showings of the red planet Mars in several years. Make sure to see Saturn this year as the ringed planet will hide its brilliant rings during 2009. The end of February will be one of the best times for viewing Saturn. Want to see the only total solar eclipse in 2008? Your best bet for a view on solid ground involves a journey to rendezvous with the moon's shadow as it crosses Canada, Greenland, Siberia and northern China on 1 August.

There will be some great meteor showers and comets to entertain us during the year. A good deal of these sights can be seen without any expensive equipment; just have a pair of decent binoculars. Astronomy is a great hobby make a new year resolution to take it up. All you need is to step outside and look up.

The United Nations has announced that 2009 will be the International Year of Astronomy (IYA). The year coincides with 400 years since Galileo Galilei first pointed his telescope towards the heavens. He then went on to discover mountains and craters on the Moon, and the four major moons of Jupiter. There'll be a concerted effort around the world to increase awareness about astronomy, and give people access to tools, techniques and knowledge. International Astronomical Union (IAU) has nominated Prof Jayanta Acharya of Balmiki Campus as the contact person for Nepal for IYA celebrations.

January 2008 Highlights:

Locate Mercury, a tiny star-like point in the south-west shortly after sunset between 19-25 January. Use Binoculars. Venus is a brilliant Morning Star, low in the south-east at dawn. Mars, in Taurus, comes up earlier in the evening. Jupiter may just start emerging into the dawn sky at the end of January. Saturn in Leo, is rising in the east at 9PM. The Quadrantid meteor-shower produces a good display in the morning hours of 3-4 January, producing about 120 shooting stars an hour. Look towards the bright star Vega and the Saptarishi (Big Dipper).

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Man or monster?

It has taken Cambodia 30 years to address truth and reconciliation



TORTURE CHAMBER: This school classroom at Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh was turned into a Khmer Rouge prison and interrogation centre in which thousands were killed in 1975-79. Duch (above) kept meticulous details of inmates, whose pictures are now part of the Cambodian holocaust museum.



KUNDA DIXIT

Kaing Guek Eav, commonly known as Duch, presided over the deaths of more than 14,000 people at S-21, a former Phnom Penh high school turned into a torture center. He is one of five former senior Khmer Rouge leaders who will be made to answer for their roles during Pol Pot's genocide, in which an estimated

detention, but the question they are now considering belongs as much to the people of Cambodia as it does to the court. Should mass murderers be afforded the same rights as everyone else?

One of my aunts has a strong opinion on the matter. Khmer Rouge soldiers beat her father to death, and she remembers being shot at for sport by communist cadres as she and dozens of other peasants scuttled up a mountainside. She now lives one block from S-21. "Human rights are for humans," she said emphatically when I asked her about Duch's case. "He is a monster."

I once believed that, too. When I first visited Duch's house of horrors in 1990, I was 15 and full of wonder about the country where I was born but had never lived. My family escaped the Khmer Rouge

on 17 April, 1975, the day they claimed victory. When my mother and I journeyed home to reunite with relatives who had survived the genocide, S-21 (also known as Tuol Sleng) was among our first stops.

I remember feeling claustrophobic as I walked down its narrow halls and into classrooms turned into crude cellblocks. The air was stale but heavy with the stench of death in interrogation chambers, barren save for a single bed frame, shackles, and a chair. Flecks of dried blood peeled up from the floor.

Mostly, I remember the hundreds of black and white mug shots of prisoners and victims that covered every inch of the walls—a ghastly montage of human suffering that haunts me to this day. I couldn't help but think: this was somebody's daughter, somebody's son.

This was somebody's mother or sister or brother.

Back then, I thought: What monster could do such things?

Now, that monster was sitting in a courtroom, looking scared and meek as prosecutors catalogued his alleged war crimes. Sitting in the packed auditorium where snatches of Duch's face flash by on a movie screen, I'm struck by what I see: a face that belongs to someone. This alleged perpetrator of unspeakable misdeeds is, like his victims, someone's son, someone's brother, someone's father.

Outside the courtroom and in the community, most of the Khmers I talked to were, like my aunt, quick to categorise Duch as something other than human. Duch must have thought much the same thing about his victims when he ordered them to their deaths. When we start to see each other as less than human, we respond with inhuman acts.

It is this narrow, black-and-white view of humanity that has perpetuated a cycle of violence in Cambodia, where raging mobs beat to death robbery suspects and young mistresses suffer acid attacks by jealous wives. To say that Duch is a monster who does not deserve rights ignores the gray area between good and evil, between man and monster, where anything is possible.

There is no dispute that Duch violated the rights of thousands of Khmers. But if the basic premise of these trials is to uphold human rights, then we are obliged to extend that same principle to Duch. What does it say to the country and the world if a court convened to mete out justice flouts the law? Isn't lawlessness the plague we are finally trying to eradicate in Cambodia?

The judges have offered no indication when they will make a decision. And no one would blame them for taking their time to consider their options. This is, after all, the court's first test of fairness before the trials of Duch and four of Pol Pot's other henchmen begin next year.

We all want justice, but that justice should not come at the cost of our humanity. ● Project Syndicate

Putsata Reang is a fellow of The Asia Society.



COMMENT
Putsata Reang

1.7 million Cambodians perished. Until recently, Duch was the only one imprisoned.

The five red-robed judges who preside over the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (the tribunal's official name) are the final arbiters of Duch's



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FREE



KANAK DIXIT

Forgiving, but not forgetting

The investigations on Shivapuri and a new documentary force us to remember the disappeareds

MEGAN GREELY

In the hills of Shivapuri National Park north of Kathmandu lies a suspected mass grave or cremation site where the bodies of 49 alleged Maoist supporters who went missing in 2003 and are believed to have been buried.

The inmates were taken in trucks from the Army's detention centre at the Bhairabnath Battalion in Lazimpat (see: *Nepali Times*#351, www.nepalitimes.com/issue/351/Headline/13579). The National Human Rights Commission along with a team of forensic experts began excavating the Shivapuri site last week. Results of the Shivapuri investigation will help answer lingering questions for the families of the Bhairabnath detainees.

A glimpse of the reality of Bhairabnath Battalion is seen in Pranay Limbu's extraordinary documentary *Forgive! Forget Not!* screened at the 5th annual Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival earlier this month. The majority of the film is told through journalist Bhai Kaji's blindfolded eyes as he miraculously survives 15 horrific months of excruciating torture at the hands of security forces who are convinced he is a Maoist supporter.

At the end of the film, Limbu asked Kaji if he seeks revenge for the atrocities he suffered. Kaji explains that revenge is never-ending. He would rather stop the cycle of violence by forgiving his torturers and helping expose the whereabouts of other detainees who have disappeared into secret detention centers run by the security forces or taken by the Maoists.

Kaji's decision to choose forgiveness over vengeance and to work toward social justice is a lesson the political parties should take to heart. A Nepali Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could lead to forgiveness and social justice if



STILL LOOKING: A group of human rights activists at the site in Shivapuri National Park on Tuesday. Forty-nine of the disappeareds from Bhairabnath are suspected to have been buried or cremated here during the war. Journalist Bhai Kaji (left) who recounts his ordeal inside Bhairabnath in the documentary, *Forgive, Forget Not*.

the political parties, who are authorised by the interim constitution to create a TRC, do not construct one simply for legal prosecutions and blanket amnesties.

As in Peru and South Africa, a TRC that goes beyond mere legal justice and that is driven by the victims and their communities will achieve a more genuine and holistic sense of justice, a social justice. In turn, this kind of Nepali TRC can lead to reconciliation at the local and national levels, as well as immense gratitude to the political parties for fulfilling their promise to address the injustices inflicted on the Nepali people.

As the political parties begin creating a Nepali TRC, they should listen to what the Nepali people want. High on their list of wants is for the political parties to follow through with a promise they made a year ago. Days after signing the comprehensive peace accord in November 2006, both the Maoists and the seven political parties pledged to disclose the names and whereabouts of the disappeared who were taken by either the Maoists or the Security Forces within 60 days of signing the accord. It has now been a year and the Shivapuri excavation is the closest the families of the disappeared have come to receiving information on their loved one's whereabouts.

Over the course of the 11 year

'people's war', there have been anywhere from 600-3,000 cases of disappeared persons. The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) lists 1,042 disappeared persons whose whereabouts are currently unknown, including the 49 Bhairabnath detainees. The psychological, emotional, and economic toll on the families is unimaginably high, especially for the wives of the disappeared who must fill the economic void left by their disappeared husbands. This month, at a public testimonial wives of the disappeared told their stories of life after the husbands were taken away and their daily struggle for survival.

The political parties need to hear the stories of these women and also listen to Kaji's words of forgiveness and social justice. They would then feel compelled to give all the families of the disappeared at least partial information on their loved one's whereabouts. The Shivapuri investigation is a positive step toward fulfilling the political parties' year old promise. An even bigger step would be to disclose all the names and whereabouts of the disappeared and to create a TRC that is centered on social justice. It could very well translate into votes during the upcoming election as well as safeguard the peace process in 2008. ●

Megan Greely is with the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution George Mason University in the United States.

Outside the box

Nachle and Taare speak the language of value and whimsy

Amidst all the masala, item numbers, and commodity fetishism, it is sometimes difficult to think of Bollywood as having anything to do with art. Around here, 'art' always means something more serious, something that Smita Patel used to do, something that doesn't involve the conventional frolicking. Bollywood may be the biggest hub in South Asia for art and culture, but its perception is neither artful nor 'cultured'.

In the last month, however, we saw a couple of Bollywood's biggest and scarcest stars come out with films that insist on art's power. First there was Madhuri Dixit, breaking her five-year hiatus for *Aaja Nachle* by cinematographer-turned-director Anil Mehta, a project that must have seemed very close to her heart. And then last week there was Aamir Khan making his directorial debut with *Taare Zameen Par*.

CRITICAL CINEMA
Diwas Kc

Nachle is a story of Dia (Madhuri Dixit), who, in youthful bohemianism, has lost her family and town for theatre, dance, music, love, pleasure and passion. She has returned to her hometown Shamli to stop an old amphitheatre from being converted into a shopping mall and to remind the locals of the value of art. *Taare*, on the other hand, depicts the world of a dyslexic but inventive moppet, Ishaan, played by Darsheel Safary, whose painterly talent is almost failed by the standardised education system and its nefarious corpus of teachers (that is, until Aamir Khan shows up with his lily-white virtues).



The two films actually have very little in common, but seen together a new kind of cultural theory springs up from them. Well, perhaps not so new because *Nachle* and *Taare* also speak, like those who deal with art and culture, the language of value instead of price, of whimsy instead of utility. But with massive socioeconomic shifts on the

ground, that typically blind insistence of 'capitalism-eats-tradition' no longer suffices. In critiquing India's modern middle-class ideologies, these films have had to be more nuanced about asserting the unrecompensed pursuit of art and human cultivation in a society obsessed with measuring proceeds.

Unfortunately, these lessons on art do make serious artistic blunders. A film about inspiration, *Nachle* is itself utterly uninspired. With Madhuri around, you expect at least some matchless dancing; but choreographer Vaibhavi Merchant produces the most hackneyed moves. *Taare* has some brilliant moments but Khan's filmmaking lacks subtlety and his characters are mere caricatures.

But if allowed, both the films will have you thinking about the place of art in our over-commercialised societies. And thankfully, it's not the kind of art that you venerate demurely. Here, the world of art is the same as the world of fun; and the world of fun is the same as the world of subversion. So you have in *Nachle* the seditious love affair of Laila-Majnu performed flippantly by Konkona Sen Sharma and Kunal Kapoor. And in the most beautiful sequence of *Taare*, insubordinate Ishaan skips school to explore the streets of Mumbai, in order having the most visual and tactile experience of the city's enamoring textures.

When art classes are the first to be cut from schools and art columns the most dispensable to newspapers, it is nice to be reminded how great it is sometimes to linger outside the box, out of the boundaries. ●



ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Serve Build a new Nepal** exhibition of 52 paintings from the Rotary Art Competition 2007, 28-30 December at Nepal Art Council Gallery, Babar Mahal, 10.30 AM-4.30 PM.
- ❖ **Larger than Life** panoramas by Kishor Kayastha, exhibition and sale, until 15 January, 8AM-6PM at the Indigo Gallery, Naxal. 4413580
- ❖ **Enchanting Life with Light** photo show by Rocky Prajapati at The Bakery Café, Pulchowk until 10 January. 9851014930

NEW YEAR

- ❖ **Mukti and Revival** at Jatra New Year warm-up party, 29 December.
- ❖ **Be a celebrity** at Hotel Shangri-La, with Coyote Ugly dancers from Europe and DJ Elgin from Turkey, 31 December. 4412999
- ❖ **Sinners in Heaven** Hotel Yak and Yeti, 31 December, 8PM onwards, Rs 1,799, inclusive of unlimited drinks and dinner.
- ❖ **Soulful Melodeviation** with 1974AD, Time Machine and DJ Rocky, with champagne, snacks and buffet dinner at Nepa-Dhuku / Waterfall Garden, Radisson Hotel, Rs 3,999.
- ❖ **Special buffet New Year's Eve** dinner with a glass of champagne, 31 December at The Café, Hyatt Regency, Rs 3,000 per person.
- ❖ **New Year's at Dwarika's** with a welcome drink at Fusion, along with classical fusion music by Triveni and Side B at the Toran Restaurant, Rs 3,000. 4479488
- ❖ **Fiery Night** with Connection and Suniti at Hotel Himalaya, 31 December, 7PM onwards, Rs 4,999 for couples with free flow of drinks and dinner.
- ❖ **New Year's Dinner Party** with Asian vibe and lounge music at New Orleans Cafe, Thamel. 4700736
- ❖ **New Year's** in a heated dining room with party favours, free Irish coffee and traditional turkey dinner, at K-too!, Thamel. 4700043
- ❖ **New Year's at Moksh** with Sufi, Nepali and Latin music with Sfatc, Baja Gaja and Funky Sisters, 31 December, 8.30 PM onwards, Rs 500.



EVENTS

- ❖ **Hope For Education a** Fundraiser for Gramin Janata High School, Namje, Dhankuta with Kutumba featuring Kunti Muktan, Tulsiparajuli, Mica Sundari and Barta Gandharva, 29 December, 6 PM at The Sundhara Bakery Café, Rs. 500. **animalNEPAL community meeting** to discuss the street dogs of Patan, 4PM on 6 January at the Summit Hotel. 9841334537
- ❖ **Children Expo 2007** at the Direction Exhibition and Convention Centre, UWTC, until 30 December from 11AM-5PM. 4117101

MUSIC

- ❖ **Ciney Gurung** every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408
- ❖ **Licz** live folk acoustic music at New Orleans Cafe, Thamel, 7.30 PM, 28 December. 4700736

DINING

- ❖ **Illy espresso coffee** at the Galleria cafe, Thamel with contemporary Art exhibition at the Galleria lounge, every Friday espresso coffee cocktails.
- ❖ **Saturday special** barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- ❖ **Dice-licious brunch** at Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30PM. 4273999
- ❖ **Vegetarian alternative** at Stupa View restaurant and café, Boudha Stupa. 4480262
- ❖ **Enjoy the new menu** at Roadhouse Cafe Pulchok, Bhatbateni and Thamel. 5521755, 4426587, 4262768.
- ❖ **Christmas dinner** with turkey and pork chops at the New Orleans Café, Thamel. 4700736
- ❖ **Cocktails and jazz** with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion – the Bar at Dwarika's. 4479448
- ❖ **Kebabs and curries** at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- ❖ **Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs** Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- ❖ **Rediscover fine Italian** cuisine at La Dolce Vita, Thamel, 4700612
- ❖ **Little Britain coffee shop** fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4496207
- ❖ **Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

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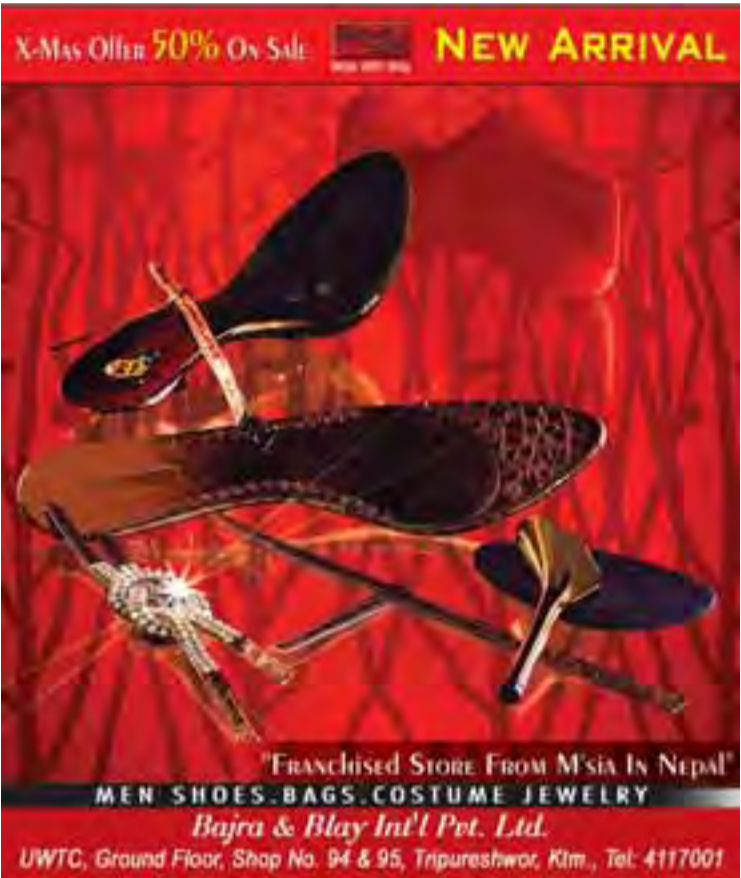


Tare Zameen Par is a movie that revolves around the life of a child Ishaan (Darsheel Safary), who suffers from dyslexia. When Ishaan is whisked off to a boarding school to be disciplined, he is traumatized by the separation from his family. Things around seem to change, when a new art teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh (Aamir Khan) appears on the screen. He transforms the whole scenario, bringing joy and optimism in the lives of the students. All the kids in the school are excited by the flight of freedom except Ishaan. The movie tells a story of a teacher who tries to help his student discover his real world.

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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

The wind has shifted again from the southwest, hence the haze. The added moisture has blanketed Kathmandu in a thick inversion layer of smog. There are no major westerly fronts in sight, so we should continue to have hazy afternoon sunshine and clear weather into new year. Some high-altitude cirrus riding the jetstream will flash by, this will raise the minimum temperature somewhat over the weekend. but nothing to worry about. This satellite picture taken on Thursday shows clear skies across the subcontinent, but a low-pressure building up over Pamir. Any moisture that this brings us will dissipate by the time it reaches us early next week.



Happy new ears

So Nepal is now a **quasi-republic**, a **pseudo-monarchy** and an **ersatz democracy** all rolled into one. We still have a king, but we don't have a president. In fact we are a kingdom masquerading as a republic. A **counterfeit realm**, just like the adulterated diesel we get at the pumps when our turn comes in the line.

Foreigners often wonder about how all this is possible. How, for example, can you pass off a 23-point agreement as new when it is just a rehash of the nine-point covenant and the 22-point accord and entire chunks of the Interim Constitution? But for us Nepalis this is all normal and natural. We are the ultimate **fudgemasters**, leaving sensitive issues to get resolved by themselves. When confronted with form or content, we always choose form. That is the Nepali way. It takes more time, but thanks to Lord Pashupatinath, our problems all get sorted out by themselves in the end.

Just as well these dramatic developments happened right before Christmas and New Year when most of Nepal's donor and diplomatic community was on holiday in **Krabi**. Otherwise we'd have had more unsolicited advice from sundry dips than we did. Shital Nibas should exchange notes with the Afghans and see how they managed to expel EU and UN observers for clandestinely meeting with the Taliban. Anyone here also want to be declared **persona non grata**? It can be arranged, and it'll look really good in your cv.

To give credit where it is due, one notable exception to the mass outbound Christmas exodus this week was Comrade Martin who was actually at his desk on Chirstmas Day. Much appreciated, Ian.

So Comrade Yummy, Comrade God, Comrade Krishna and Comrade Scimitar are back at their ministerial berths next week. Bravo. The odd man out is Matrikababu, whom the High Command wanted to replace with Prabhu Sah but the chap is so unpopular the Maoists may have to put a surrogate in the **Bun Mantralaya**. This is a very critical ministry as we all know, and has to be led by a madhesi since the remaining hardwood forests are all in the tarai and they need to be logged to raise \$\$\$\$ for election financing.

The other critical one is the Ministry of Propaganda and Disinformation in which Maharabau did such a grand job in his last tenure turning Gorkhe Patra into a red rag. Comrade Awesome reportedly wanted to appease the hardliners by offering Matrika's slot to a member of the extreme left of Nepal's most extreme left party. But Comrade Cloud, smart fellow that he is, refused and so did Messrs Baidya, Gajurel & Chand. We all know the man is biding his time to be **President Badal**.

But if you thought the baddie ministers were bad, just look at what the Minister of Resupply did last week: instead of resolving the petrol shortage, he made his army bodyguard and hired goons kidnap fellow madhesi politico Anil Jha. We are seeing some unprecedented drama in this New Nepal Loktantra, a sitting minister taking someone **hostage** at **gunpoint**.

Here in a simplified format is the state of the play in the madhesi movement: Jha is from the Anandadebi faction of the **Sad Bhabana**, which is where Hridyesh Tripathi defected to after leaving the NC, but all are now in the Rajendra Mahato faction of the MJF which saw the induction of Jayparakash Gupta this week. Meanwhile, Kishor Biswas, vice president of the (MJF-Gupta) has called the 23-point agreement a sham a move that can only benefit the endangered monarchy. The MJF-Upendra Yadab has said he will contest elections while at the same time agitating against it. We'll keep you posted on latest developments.

All companies that are currently paralysed by Maoist trade union strikes should take a **tip or two** from the 26-or-so Chinese-owned restaurants in Kathmandu which are doing booming business and have no labour problems at all. Maybe taking a Chinese business partner is the best antidote to Maoist stoppages.



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His master's voice

The Maoists are returning to the Information Ministry that controls the state media



VOICE OF THE REVOLUTION: Maoist cadre, Khil Bahadur Bhandari, has been running the talk show *Bichar Manthan* on NTV since the Maoists took over the Ministry of Information.

DHRUBA SIMKHADA

It's been three months since Information Minister Krishna Bahadur Mahara resigned from government along with his Maoists colleagues. But even without him, state-owned Nepal Television and Radio Nepal have become mouthpieces of the Maoists.

Now, as Mahara prepares to return to his old office in Singha Darbar, many in his ministry fear the use of state media for pro-

Maoist propaganda in elections could be even more blatant.

Since Mahara took over, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television have begun to regularly use loaded words like "the defeated army of the old regime" to describe the Nepal Army, "Indian expansionists and American imperialists" when alluding to New Delhi and Washington's policies towards Nepal and broadcast revolutionary music videos extolling the sacrifices of 'martyrs'.

Jargon that used to be confined to Maoist political literature and speeches of leaders have found their way to news and current affairs programs and studio debates like Radio Nepal's *Ghatana ra Bichar* and *Samaya Prabaha*, and on NTV on *Asta ka Swor Haru* and *Bichar Manthan*.

"This shouldn't be happening, it's unfortunate," says a Radio Nepal employee, who requested anonymity. But others are not shy to speak out. Says Radio Nepal journalist Pramod Dahal: "They run some of the programs like they do in their own FM stations."

To be sure, there is nothing new about political interference in state media. During the Panchayat years, criticism of the regime was strictly out of bounds. But even after 1990, successive elected governments used Radio Nepal and NTV shamelessly for partisan views and as recruitment centres for cadres. Ministers regularly called the newsroom to complain about being given less prominence. State media staff admit that at least Mahara never did that during his tenure.

But the Maoists have systematically tried to suppress negative news about their party by vetting studio guests and even warning comedian Dipak Raj Giri of the popular satire show *Tito Satya* recently not to poke too much fun at Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal. At NTV, talk show hosts have to get the guest name list cleared

beforehand from their Maoist bosses. Raju Thapa of the program *Aba Ke Hunchha* says he tried for three weeks to get RPP leader Surya Bahadur Thapa on the show, but couldn't get permission.

The Maoist-installed chairman of NTV, Rishiraj Baral makes no apologies. "We don't accept the old regime, there is no reason why our programs should look at their activities. We are oriented towards the new regime."

This could be politically counter-productive for the Maoists at election time. It's not just the editorial departments that are worried, NTV's marketing managers say the station's ratings have dropped since news started carrying a pro-Maoist slant.

Nepal's highest rated tv program used to be the evening news on NTV, now it is Kantipur TV. This has translated into falling revenues from commercials in the evening news slot at NTV.

Former Maoist journalist Mumaram Khanal is critical of the way the Maoists have handled state media. "The comrades said they wanted to destroy the old and bring in the new, but they are treating the state media exactly the way the old regime did."

Journalists in Radio Nepal and NTV are speaking out openly against Maoist controls. NTV's news coordinator Rajendra Deb Acharya says media can be considered democratic only if they are free, objective and professional. "The state must stop using us as a propaganda arm," he adds.

Across the street at Radio Nepal, Sushil Koirala says state ownership of media must not be taken to mean state control, otherwise, every new government will keep on misusing the media.

Even in *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal*, the daily newspapers that are also under state control, priority is given to Maoist-oriented news. ●

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RAMESWOR BOHARA

RIVER OF SORROW: Relatives of those missing from Monday’s Bheri bridge disaster look down from another bridge 15km downstream in the hope that they may find them. The casualty figure may climb as 55 people are still unaccounted for.



DEEPENDRA BAJRACHARYA

ROYAL SIGNS: Despite the decision to go for a republic, royal emblems still adorn the immigration office at Kakarbita on Nepal’s eastern border with India.



KIRAN PANDY

THE ART OF PEACE: Performance artists of the Shilpee Theatre Group end their month-long tour to 29 districts in the tarai by staging their play *Madhes Tarai* at Martin Chautari on Sunday.



KIRAN PANDY

ROUND TABLE: Members of the interim parliament take a break to enjoy the sun on the lawn outside the house the day after the 23-point agreement was signed.

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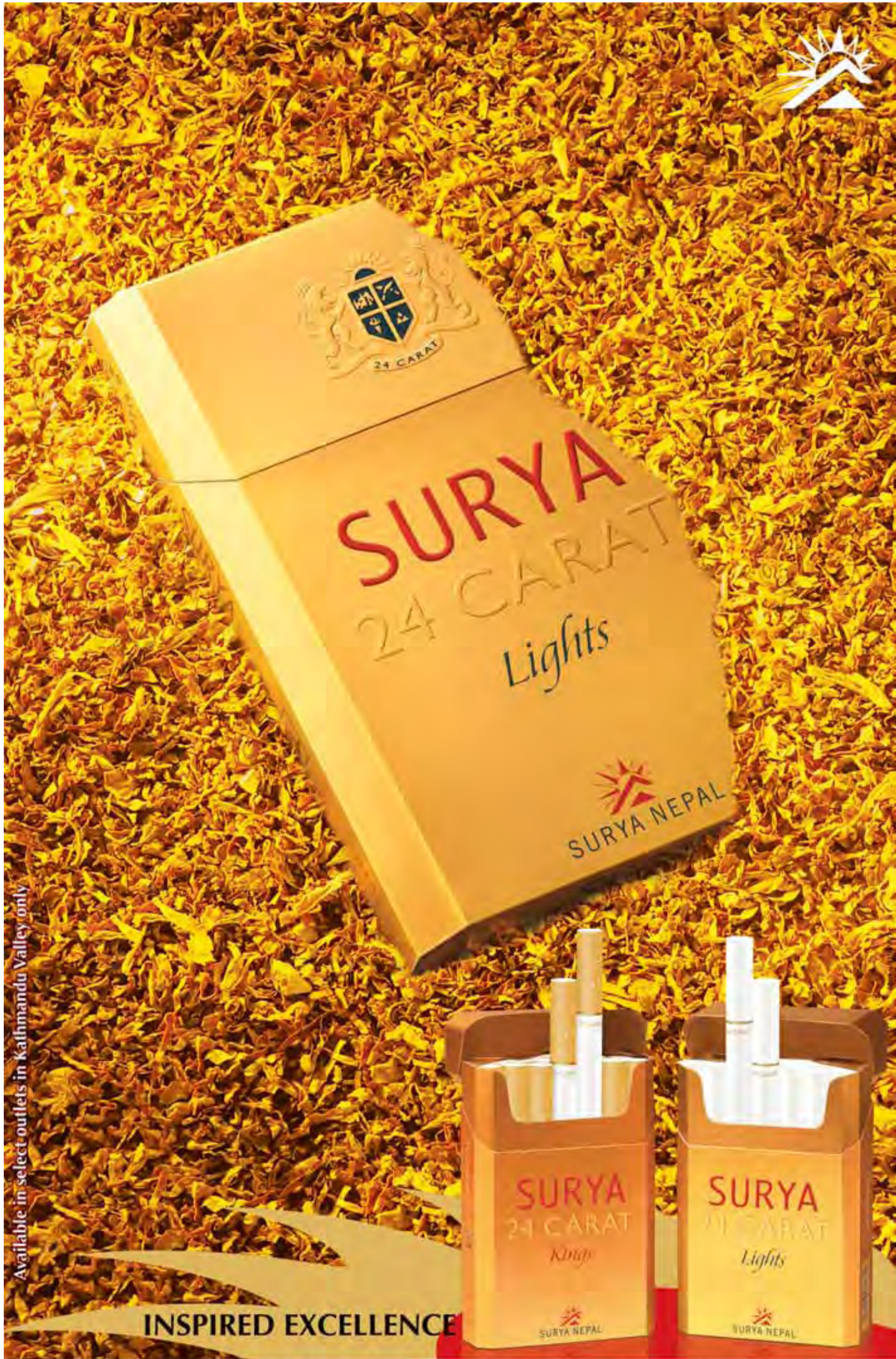
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