Will 2008 be any different?

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.

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.
The year of the madhes

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

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The Nepal government is a 23-point agreement among the seven parties in power. Despite widespread clamour for him to step down and walk away when abused. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. Tourism boomed, but more money probably went out of the country than came in. 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MEELAMCHI
After decades of planning and designing, there is a 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 descending the project because it will never happen. We have to learn our lessons from projects like the Koshi. 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 Malha, email

HINDSIGHT
The editorial ‘Ceremonial prime minister’ (#376) is a scathing attack on Girija Koirala and the Maoist leaders about their delays in holding elections. But I disagree with your point that delays in holding elections. But I disagree with your point that delays in holding elections will make them and second, even if it doesn’t happen, what kind of constitution and government will that make? This won’t solve the problem.

Samyam Wagle, 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’ (10/12). 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 royals for that too.

Kishor, email

ECHO CHAMBER
After wasting much of his valuable time and some of ours, OK Lal has returned to his wily 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, Biranagar

● 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

● OK 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

20 DECEMBER 2007 - 3 JANUARY 2008 #380
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 fueled by remittance and urbanisation. Needless to say, most of this growth is unplanned 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 was one of them.

He and his friends got together in 2001 to start Comfort Housing and create jobs. Om Rajbhandari says he’d be 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.

Rajbhandari says there is urgent need for new entrepreneurs and investors. “There is a new sense of community, and I feel proud to be a part of that revival,” says Rajbhandari. “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 my customers 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.

“He says there is enough profit in the housing business because it gets 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 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 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.

Comfort Housing shows the way in managing urbanisation and creating jobs.
New year revolutions

Fingers crossed that 2008 will see an economic turnaround

On Big Lesson of 2007 for us was that a country doesn’t necessarily 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 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 bribe saw 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.

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 issuances.

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 pseudo-militant 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.

(A blog has been added to www.arthabeed.com)
“The royal massacre was a conspiracy”

Excerpts of interview with Bibeck Bikram Shah, Military Secretary at Narayanhiti during the royal massacre of 1 June 2001 in Nepal.

Nepal: How do you look at the massacre?
Bibeck Bikram Shah: Two ways. When the massacre happened, Crown Prince Dipendra’s psychological state had reached an extreme state. Then there is the political conspiracy with the possible involvement of domestic and foreign intelligence agencies. Back then, I had asked His Majesty (Gyanendra) that this be investigated.

Was it?
No. There was no investigation about who could have instigated Dipendra to carry out the killings or which foreign intelligence agencies could be involved.

Why do you think King Gyanendra didn’t want an investigation?
I don’t want to get into that now.

You were head of security at the palace. Why wasn’t there a proper investigation?
A commission of inquiry was formed at the hospital library at Chhauni after the killings which included the prime minister, speaker of the house and other ministers. A commission was formed, but there was no effort to find the motive.

Why do you suspect that it was a conspiracy?
I can’t categorically say there was a conspiracy. But there are too many puzzles and grounds to suspect that there was, in time, they will come out.

When?
In a few years.

So the conspiracists exploited Dipendra’s frustrations? Hundred percent. They could have dangled the kingship and tempted him. It had got so bad within the family that we heard Hundred percent. They could have dangled the kingship and tempted him. It had got so bad within the family that we heard hundred percent. They could have dangled the kingship and tempted him.

Devivary he would be stripped of his crown prince title and it would be given to this brother) Narayan. So someone close to Dipendra who understood his deep dissatisfaction provoked him.

To kill his father and mother and become king?
My analysis is that he only wanted to kill the king (Birendra) and become king. He didn’t want to harm anyone else. He thought that after he became king he’d have immunity from prosecution and the laws wouldn’t apply. That is the point on which others incited him.

So why did he shoot the others?
The first burst of gunfire was aimed at the ceiling to draw attention to himself, then he lets off a burst at the king. When Chhiendra tried to jump him, Dipendra killed his uncle. Then he shot the king again. All this happened in a matter of seconds. After that there was chaos and indiscriminate firing.

If Dipendra did it, why would he kill himself?
He committed suicide.

If he was so drunk and stoned, how could he have done it?
It is not true that he was drunk. He was perfectly sober, and just pretended to be drunk. After killing everyone his sixth sense told him everything was finished. He shot himself in his left temple and the bullet came out of his right temple.

What would the conspiracists have gained from the massacre?
Kign Birendra was about to make a move, the country's situation was deteriorating. Maybe some people didn't want him to take the step he was planning. No one in Nepal benefited from the massacre. Foreigners who wanted instability in Nepal certainly benefited.

What was Birendra planning?
A political move.

Like King Gyanendra’s February First?
Hard to say, we don’t know what the blueprint was. But King Birendra was worried about the damage being done to the country by the Maoist insurgency. We understood he wanted to bring the Maoists into the political arena.

Airport attack
Letter to Kantipur: 21 December, 2007

My first trip to Nepal as a tour conductor went very well, and I was able to get a lot more Japanese people interested in visiting Nepal.

This time, my experience was unfortunate. We arrived on the night of 7 December from Hong Kong on the Dragonair flight. There were many people outside, some were pestering us about taxis, others would try to snatch the luggage of tourists. One group started fighting over our bags. Then a group of young people between the ages of 12-17 attacked me. I tried to protect myself, but they kept up their physical sexual harassment for 3-5 minutes. I tried to call my tour guide, but by the time he came my attackers had fled. We were shocked and frightening. During our entire stay in Nepal we would remember what happened to us at the airport and remind the tour guide about it.

I would like to draw the attention of the airport security officials to this situation. The government must regulate the taxi drivers, porters and others at the airport arrival area who are preying on tourists and giving them a very poor first impression of Nepal.

Don’t destroy the reputation of this beautiful country. I would like to ask the concerned authorities to make Nepal a secure destination for tourists.

Akiko Tanaka
Tour Conductor, Hankyu Express International, Tokyo
Not again
Editorial in Annapurna Post, 25 December
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 reconciliation, restructuring of the state, scientific land reforms and implementation of the points in the comprehensive peace accord are all notable points.

Welcome move
Editorial in Drishti, 25 December
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 were keeping changing their mind and put forward different conditions. The fact that the parties have signed shows that the parties understand that unless the groups agree, the culture of democracy cannot be established.

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 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.

For the parties to themselves unite in such a way is a great leap 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.

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

January Issue Now on the Stands!
Cover Section:
The general has no clothes
A naked power-play by Gen (Retd) Mahendra
Get on to our website and download your own copy of Himal's May/June poster

Also:
Special coverage of Sinimandir/ Nirmala Rodriguez
Counting Muslim votes in Modi's Gujarat
Cracks in Relion Maitri
The Bengali urban middle-class psyche
No showgirl!
Photo Feature: Last days of Sids

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Mike Kalpana Mishra
St. Mary's, Gorkha
Last day of VL-CC
Tourism

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 Ghebu 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 Dharje 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 TW Lama looks more like a school teacher as she points out various mountains to passengers.

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 wavey 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 Sichapangma.

Welcome the new year by flying past the highest mountains in the world

Everest by air

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA at 25,000FT

A

ALL PICS: MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA
UP WHERE THE AIR IS CLEAR: (Clockwise from top left).

Captain Ang Gelu 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.
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 of 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 on 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. I told Dennis that it was the same area where one can see a caged chemo.

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.

I don’t think that the yetis were fed a diet of tsampa. Bears are omnivorous, were fed a diet of grass, bushes, trees or even rocks. These bears, naturally proud of their strength, are now escaping from their concrete shelter. The enclosure was totally devoid of their natural habitat.

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.

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 named 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 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, addressing issues of truth, justice, mercy and peace in a meaningful way.

Ajeet K.L. Karna (pictured right) is the General Secretary of the Madhesi Student Front. He wants respect and dignity as a Nepali citizen, despite ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation. He is the General Secretary of the Madhesi Student Front. Ajeet Karna is 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.

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Ajeet 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 kands because he “looked Indian”. Ajeet is from Siraha but grew up in Tanahu.

Hella Binnendijk is a Dutch mountaineer and journalist. hella@binndijk.at@planet.nl
Staring into space

Astronomers around the world celebrated 2007 as International Helio-physical 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.

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).

We complete another circle around the sun and 2007 is over
It has taken Cambodia 30 years to address truth and reconciliation

Man or monster?

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 unpeachable 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, 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.

K

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 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, somebody’s mother, somebody’s sister.

It has taken Cambodia 30 years to address truth and reconciliation

COMMENT

Putsata Reang

Putsata Reang is a fellow of The Asia Society.

KUNDA DIXIT

Kinaki Aantari Shaktiiko...

Jaruri Chhai!

Debar Chyawanprash

Debar Chyawanprash empowers your family with the natural goodness of Amr, Kesar and 47 other trusted ingredients - giving you protection from cold and cough by strengthening you from within. What’s more? You get a 45gm Pack of Debar Honey free with every 1 kg pack of Debar Chyawanprash.
Forgiving, but not forgetting

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

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: Nepal Times #351, www.nepalitimes.com/special/351/HumanRights.html). The National Human Rights Commission along with a team of forensic experts will help excavate the 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 Forgave, Forget Not screened at the 5th annual Nepal 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 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 humane 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 is 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 not 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 conflict, 13,000 people have been killed, thousands more injured, and an estimated 60,000 people have disappeared. The investigation on Shivapuri will help with a team of forensic experts from the Human Rights Commission along with forensic experts from the Netherlands and the United States.

The political parties for fulfilling the Maoists and the seven political parties’ year old promise. An even bigger step toward fulfilling the political parties’ year old promise is to disclose all the names and whereabouts of the disappeared and to create a TRC that is centered on social justice.

Outside the box

Nachle and Taare speak the language of value and whimsy

A

midst 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 Smrita 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 ‘cultural’.

In the last month, however, we saw a couple of Bollywood’s biggest and scariest 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.

The two films actually have very little in common, but seen together they make a new kind of cultural theory sprout 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. By using 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 uncompensated pursuit of art and human culture 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 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

CRITICAL CINEMA

Diwas KC

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NEW YEAR

Rediscover fine Italian cocktails and jazz at Little Britain coffee shop. Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs at Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara.

Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu, with classical fusion music by Triveni and Side B at the Toran Restaurant. Rs. 3,000, 4479488.

Fiery Night with Connection and Sunil 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 at Moksh with Sufi, Nepali and Latin music with Static, Baja Gals and Funky Sisters, 31 December, 8.30 PM onwards. Rs 500.

Vegetarian alternative live folk acoustic music at New Orleans Cafe, Thamel, 7.30 PM, 28 December. 4700736.

Mukti and Revival at Jatra New Year warm-up party, 29 December. Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal www.jainepal.com

ottes and dinner.

Soufflul Melodivation with 1974AD, Time Machine and DJ Roxy, 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 Cafe, Hyatt Regency. Rs 3,000 per person.

New Year’s at Dwarika’s with a welcome drink at Fusion, along with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails.

New Year’s at Moksh with Sufi, Nepali and Latin music with Static, Baja Gals and Funky Sisters, 31 December, 8.30 PM onwards. Rs 500.

Events

Hope For Education a fundraiser for Gramin Janata High School, Namje, Dhanusa with Kulamba featuring Kunti Muktan, Tulsi Parajuli, 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. 9841344537.

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.

Illy espresso coffee at the Galleria café, Thamel with contemporary Art exhibition at the Galleria lounge, every Friday espresso coffee cocktails.

Saturday special barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea Inn, the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519.

Dining

Dinner Saturday special at Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, roll the dice at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408.

Enjoy the new menu at Roadhouse Cafe Pulchok, Bhattabeni and Thamel. 5251775, 4428878, 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. 4479488.

Kebabs and curries at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619.

Calcutta’s rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741007735.

Rediscover fine Italian cuisine at La Dolce Vila, 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.

Getaways

Pokhari Resort and Spa, Pokhara Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, $219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.

Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu, Rs 4444 and Two Nights Package Rs 8888. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com
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. Shitall 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 I’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 Christmas 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 Nepali 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 Jayprakash 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 Yadav 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.
His master’s voice

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

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.

Jargon that used to be confined to Maoist political literature and speeches of leaders has 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’s Asta ka Swar 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. Raj Thapa of the program Aka Ko Hunchha says he tried for three weeks to get RPP leader Sarja Bahadur Thapa on the show, but couldn’t.

“The Maoist-installed chairman of NTV, Rishikrit Banal 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 Rajesh Din 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.

DHRUBA SIMKHADA

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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.

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

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.

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.
STATUTORY DIRECTIVE: SMOKING IS INJURIOUS TO HEALTH