FLAME OF TRUTH

KANAK MANI DIXIT in JANAKPUR

It was only in death that one got to know what a fine journalist Nepal had lost in Uma Singh.

Working in the most lawless part of Nepal, Uma Singh was fearless with her written and spoken word. She reported in particular against violence and discrimination against women. She did this with a sense of immediacy and professionalism in radio and print and in three languages.

Uma Singh was committed to bring to book the Sinhala-based Maoist cadres who had disappeared her father and brother during the war. She wrote the truth and she named names. Her tenacity all around her in the past years seemed to make her all the more fearless.

Someone decided that she could not be allowed to live and on Sunday night a gang of barbarians entered her one-room den and hacked her to death. Ground-level journalism, especially in the lawless middle-eastern Tarai, takes guts these days. At the frontlines are reporters and editors who wage a daily struggle against ruthless political instability. Our nation-wide FM radio revolution has filled the airwaves with energetic discourse, their print colleagues constantly push the envelope.

Uma Singh was one of the best among them, a journalist who understood her calling intuitively and deeply. Singh’s murder must push us to oppose the infrastructure of violence and impunity in Nepal, which has put innocent citizens in the line of fire. By extinguishing a journalist, the criminals have violated the public’s right to know.

The Maoist leadership, it has to be said, set a sad example by serving as a role model for opportunists who seek to use violence to various ends, by having given violence a cruel sheen of political respectability. We must demand from those who lead the government today that they transform into practitioners of democratic politics. We ask them to publicly renounce violence as a political tool.

And yet, an elected prime minister threatens armed revolt. Against whom? The death of Uma Singh will inspire more young women and men to take up journalism because Nepalis now know the vital need for free media. The pull of good journalism has become irresistible, because free media can assure the public that the future can be better than our past by enabling an accountable government.

In the other direction, in the meek submission to violence and the appeasement of those who continue to use it to get their way, lies statis, silence and the feudalocratic state.

After we emerge from mourning the circumstance of her passing, Uma Singh will shine like a beacon to those who will become tomorrow’s committed young journalists.

She is the true exemplar.

STOP PRESS
Prime Minister Dahal has postponed his trip to Norway and Finland that was to begin on Saturday, citing crises at home. The editorial on page 2 (‘Happy holidays’) had already gone to press when the announcement was made.

STATE OF THE STATE
CK Lal

PLAIN TRUTH
‘Why’ Frashant Jha

COMMENT
Uma Singh
Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is jetting off again, this time to Norway and Finland.

We can’t see the purpose of this visit at this time, unless with the visit Prime Minister Dahal needs a quick crash course in democracy and security.

The army may have some flaws but its virility in translation. He told the party unification ceremony, just look at where the solidarity situation is getting worse, business owners are treated like cattle and the role of the media as a check and balance to authority, and about delivering services then the visit may just be the trouble and expediency.

We hope Norwegian and Finnish diplomats here have briefed their home governments about what this elected leader has been up to back home saying one thing and doing another. Happy holidays, Mr Prime Minister. The country will wait your return in pitch darkness.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is getting off again, this time to Norway and Finland.

We can’t see the purpose of this visit at this time, unless with the visit Prime Minister Dahal needs a quick crash course in democracy and security.
In between 30 years of royal authoritarianism and 15 years of Maoist insurgency and counter-insurgency, the Nepali media exercised unfettered freedom for hardly five years in the early 1990s. Journalism has always been a dangerous field, attracting only the committed, obsessed and the occasional desperado. A career in the Nepali media usually implies a lifetime of hardships, journalists are accustomed to threats and physical assaults especially if they are rural reporters or editors. But the gruesome murder of Uma Singh in Janakpur this week was shocking by all standards.

By all accounts, Uma was an exceptional person. She stuck to the calling despite repeated threats to her life. Uma was an editor, commentator, and newsreader all rolled into one, grinding the wheels of a local FM radio station in a town where moneybags and musclemen are inextricably intertwined. Terrorists normally don’t mess with females for the fear of losing their ‘saviour’ image. Even criminals who have little hesitation in abducting children for ransom mostly stay clear of women. When Maoists abducted Uma’s father, mother and brother from Siraha three years ago, they released her mother. Women are considered too weak to be worth killing. It is inconceivable that either Maoists, or any of their offshoots masquerading as messiahs of Madhesi freedom, considered a radio journalist a threat worthy of physical elimination. The lack of apparent motive and the brutality of her murder has shaken every media person in the mofussil.

Fortunately, the search for a political solution seems to have begun with the formation of a unified political front of Jaikrishna Goit and Jwala Singh who have come together again to form the Tarai Jantantrik Party. They could establish their credentials by first helping to track down Uma’s killers.

Nothing debases a movement like the blood of the defenseless and nothing degrades politics like needless violence. Jaikrishna and Jwala need to junk Mao and go back to Marx to save Mithila, Uma’s homeland as much as theirs.
Uma Singh’s last word

JANAKPUR—It was impossible to believe that Uma Singh at Garga Sagar Ghat on Tuesday morning, an FNJ flag draped over her still body, face bandaged, a cut on the head visible, was the same Uma I had met two months ago.

Uma’s looks were deceptive, her tiny frame contained abundant energy. By the time I stroked into Radio Today’s studio at 6AM in mid-November, Uma had wrapped up her morning bulletin. She was running around the office and passing instructions in a matter-of-fact, professional way.

She briefed me on the format of Janakpur’s most popular Maitrihi political discussion show, Garna garam chat. Uma said that her co-anchor and me—“Please avoid English words. The program is meant for people in the villages.” I nodded, a little ashamed my Maitrihi was not as fluent.

“If they had been arrested, this would never have happened. No one is scared here,” her close friend and Siraha colleague, Rajesh Verma told us. We know Uma wrote critically of the Maoists. She may have been the target of political violence.

We do not know who killed Uma, but we believe her murder was different. Most groups in the Tarai, including Maoists, prefer to use local pistols, available across the border for Rs 1,100. Why did 15 men have to attack Uma at her hotel, stab her, muddy her body and leave her recognizable? Was the manner of the murder a message in itself?

We know Uma’s father and brother were disappeared and killed by Maoists when their family resisted Maoist attempts to grab their property. She wanted to pursue the case, but the culture of impunity has meant that those killers remain scot-free.

Yet, political instability remains elusive. What does this do to the investment climate?

It is something to talk about encouraging foreign investment, but much needs to be done to create a conducive investment environment. Political stability is a key factor for this.

As the Australian ambassador, I have been pleased to support the Australian Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation (SMEC), in trying to take forward the West Seti Hydro-power project. This project will show other foreign investors that a large scale engineering project of this scale is feasible in Nepal. It will also open up the development of Nepal’s rich hydropower potential and help Nepal earn revenue and better address its long term power needs. I am proud that an Australian company is acting as a catalyst in bringing Nepal together in a cooperative venture with its two neighbours, India and China.

Yet, the project is still stuck. It has indeed been a long and tortuous process to get the West Seti project up and running. I am very hopeful that following a meeting with the Asian Development Bank board in March, the way will be opened for commencement of the project later in 2009.

Looking back, what were some of the highlights of your Nepal posting? There are a number of things that have given me great professional satisfaction. Perhaps the most significant was, in my former capacity as convenor of the Kathmandu-based representatives of the Core Group of Bhutanese refugees, being able to play a role in helping with the Bhutanese refugees hope after 17 years of languishing in refugee camps.

Others also played key roles, including Canak Mali Dixit in helping to demonstrate to key government officials that this country resettlement was a thoroughly viable humanitarian solution at the present time.

I have been pleased to maintain Australia’s close links with the Tilting Eye Centre, including officiating at a ceremony making Dr Sanduk Ruit an honorary Member of the Order of Australia. Other satisfying memories include the Embassy’s role in launching the cervical cancer vaccine campaign in Nepal, support for the Kathmandu Model Hospital in improving nursing expertise and support for the first of an Australian doctor in opening the way for kidney transplants in Nepal.

And regrets? My biggest regret is that as my assignment is soon ending I will not be in Nepal to see the commencement of the West Seti project. My successors will have that honour.

Australia has become a major destination for Nepali students. What can be done to regulate this so unscrupulous recruiters don’t dupe students? I welcome the growth of Nepal’s students’ interest in going to Australia, which offers quality education and a quality lifestyle. I want to see this interest continue. However, I have been concerned at the proliferation of new education agents and the increase in misleading information and document fraud.

I have commenced working with the Australian government to stop these activities. Education agents can better regulate themselves by working with the Australian government. Self regulation will stop the proliferation of information and document fraud.

Any chance that Nepal will get their Australian visas in Kathmandu itself and not have to apply in India? The current immigration arrangement through a service delivery partner is working well, both in Nepal and in India, where VFS collects visa applications for Australia in nine locations, including New Delhi. Currently, there are no plans to re-establish an immigration processing office in Kathmandu. The Australian immigration team in New Delhi visits regularly to monitor the service and is always receptive to feedback about how services might be improved.

"Why?""Stability is key to investment"
The truth of Satyam

The lesson is that governance is important in the private sector too

KOLKATA—This is not the best city to talk about governance. The West Bengal capital has been ruled by a communist left front for the past 30 years and they created governance codes that are acceptable only in this bastion of the left.

According to the offer, customers get a scratch card on every purchase of a Nokia phone with a cash prize offer and inclusion in the lucky draw. The second lucky draw will be conducted in a month.

Two people have won Nokia’s lucky draw competition organised by the distributors of Nokia phones in Nepal. They won a Nokia N 70 each.

Lucky scratch

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Branching out

Himalayan Bank, Nepal’s oldest private bank, inaugurated a new branch at Itahari on 4 January. The new branch is already running with all standard services.

Ringtones

Latest bollywood ringtones are now available for both NTC and Mero Mobile users from Digitainment and Music Nepal. The ringtones can be downloaded through SMS and the list of songs is available online at www.digitainment.com.np.

ECONOMIC SENSE

Artha Beed

Kolkata and Kathmandu are getting indistinguishable. Kathmandu is reeling under power cuts that are similar to_calculation in the 1980s. The city area where we are better is at least 72.5 per cent when the power will be cut. Similarly, and right is a suggestion for the traffic to stop just as in KTM. The gradual induction of distributive economic policies have created a state that will still love to limp while the rest of India wants to run. And, of course, such comparisons are misleading because power cuts that are similar to___KTM had no major impact while the rest of India was reeling under power cuts that were hit with the scam, a banking sector collapse in Nepal would result in a breakdown of society.

The Satyam auditors

PricewaterhouseCoopers in India may go the Andersen way in post-Enron USA. The Satyam debacle should also be a wake up call for chartered accountants in Nepal who have till now lobbied hard to get the government not to open the audit sector for international firms. No CA has ever been found guilty in Nepal though numerous complaints are filed against them with the Disciplinary Committee. The fraternity has one good opportunity to introspect and mend their ways.

There are always lessons to be learnt in every crisis that hits the market. The global markets have matured with successful crises and the law of nature suggests that one can’t avoid an Enron or Satyam. But the key issue is to ensure that the circumstances in which these firms duped the investors will not be repeated in Nepal.

www.artha.beed.com
A minister out of control

Matrka Yadav loves making headlines—sometimes by participating in rowdy sandalwars and others by locking up MOs in the toilet. He is in the news again, this time for the seizure of land belonging to Birendra Sah of Mirchaiya, Siraha. If he thinks he can get away with it, he’s mistaken.

This recent action by Yadav has led to souring of relations between him and his party chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The Maoists apologised on his behalf and Yadav was made to resign from the cabinet and as a minister. After being relieved from his ministerial responsibilities, Yadav is busy participating in programs organised by his party’s sister organisation, Madhesi National Liberation Front in various parts of Siraha and Sarlahi districts.

Matrka Yadav seized the land belonging to 75 locals including Sah with the help of local YCL on 14 September, 2008. He has distributed 7.15 hectares and a house with 16 rooms to two of his party’s 200 Dalit cadres.

However, it was captured again within less than 24 hours under the direct order of ex-Maoist chairman and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Some 729 hectares of land belonging to Birendra Sah of Mirchaiya, Siraha. If he thinks he can get away with it, he’s mistaken.

The motive behind the seizure of the land and the house of Birendra Sah is extortion. When Sah failed to pay up an additional Rs 1 million as demanded by the Maoists, they seized this property. However, he maintains that he had already handed over Rs 4 million, and this has been confirmed by former Maoist district secretary Abinash Ajina.

Such activities by former minister Yadav have put his credibility on the line. His move has strained his relationship with the Home Ministry and even his party chair, Dahal, as they take actions against him.

The Maoist have not returned the seized land in Siraha district even three months after Maoist chairman and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal directed his party cadres to do so. Some 729 hectares of land captured during the war is still under Maoist control.

The 2005 agreement and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, both pledge to create conducive environment for the returns of the displaced to their home and to return the land and houses would be handed back to their rightful owners and a committee would be formed for that purpose.

But the committee has not taken shape yet due to political bickering among major parties. During the war, 229 people were displaced from the district. According to Inser, Maoists seized land belonging to 80 families here. Maoist Coordinator in Siraha, Dilip Sah, claimed the Maoist party has so far not issued any instruction regarding returning the seized land to the rightful owners. Sah says the seized land would be returned only after the government forms a Land Reform Commission. ●

This column by Uma Singh was published in the October 2008 edition of Nepali Sarokar, and translated in myrepubca.com from which it was excerpted.

Hunt them down

On Sunday, reporter Uma Singh who worked in Janakpur Today FM was killed in her rented house. Threats, intimidation and terror against journalists have become common in recent years. In the eastern Tarai, the threats are the most serious yet the government has failed to take any action to address it. It is well known that the press has been targeted by those who have waged an armed conflict with political agenda and have adopted criminal activities as a livelihood. They see press freedom as a direct threat. But, standing up for press freedom has exposed the media to attacks. The government shouldn’t limit this investigation to finding the culprits of the incident, but to finding the source of the criminal network that has engulfed the Tarai so that in the future no one will ever think of killing media person.

The government has to give priority to the investigation and hunt down those murderers not only to protect journalism but also to safeguard democracy.

Tarai terror

Editorial, Kanpur, 13 January

They’re still reading there that Uma Singh was murdered, another unidentified group shot dead

Poisonous imports

Nepal, 18 January

Nepal imported 82,832 litres and 383 tons of pesticides in 2005. In 2006, that figure had jumped to 104,816 litres. These figures do not include the pesticides that enter the country illegally across the Indian border. Pesticides are in high demand in Nepal. But the government is busy with other issues. The principal agents are the Tarai districts and the vegetable-growing areas around Kathmandu.

Whose fault?

Jana Aasha, 31 January

Whose fault is it that we have 16-hour power cuts? Is it the fault of past government or the Maoists who are now in lead? The Maoists say it is the fault of past government and they are not responsible. But, the Maoists are also to blame. The NEA has sent a report to the cabinet secretariat with the power plants that the Maoists destroyed and damaged during the war with the cost of rebuilding.

Sankhuwasabha Small Hydro

Rs 4.3 million

Bhujpur Small Hydro

Rs 4.1 million

Pithar Small Hydro

Rs 3.5 million

Chunauta Substation

Rs 2.5 million

Razaura 100kVA

Rs 29,135

Gorahi Branch

Rs 3.8 million

16 - 22 JANUARY 2009
Centralised politics of Madhesi parties and their publicised agreement with the government has done little to stabilise unlawful activities in the Tarai by armed groups. Security is absent here, but locals are still enthusiastic about the constitution although most arguments remain unresolved. Himal Khabarpatrika talked to a group of politically aware and involved participants at Sapahi, Dhanusa.

A Mithila state

Madhesi parties have demanded a united Madhes. However, people here are still uncertain even though Sapahi is just two hours away from Janakpur, where a majority of the population speaks Mati and Hindi.

Most participants argued against a Mithila as a sub-province. According to them, division on the basis of culture would break national unity. “If divisions have to be made, they should be on a regional basis,” says one, “they should be a regional basis.”

The MJF’s Satyadeb Yadav argues that the idea of a united Tarai was central to his party’s doctrine and that division would benefit both the Tarai and the country as a whole. TMLP’s Bindeshor Yadav envisioned a united Tarai from Chure to the Indian border, with one government and one chief minister.

For Kangresi Jagan Narayan Yadav, the country would be in trouble if it was to be divided the way the Madhesi parties claimed. He says, “If the hills are the head, the Tarai is the womb. One cannot be separated from the other.”

He added that we should focus on improving the lay person’s life and strengthening the constitution instead of being stuck on race and language politics.

Another member of the NC says: “It would be wrong to demand that people ignore someone they meet everyday and go to the same school with, but be expected to feel unity with someone in Nepalgunj whom he has never seen.”

He argues that another civil war would break out if there was no fair allocation of resources. Geographer Surendra Shah said that the Maoists’ emphasis on race-based divisions was the backdrop for separatists. He added that how the demand for a united Madhes came about must be probed, and the problem addressed at the source. “If we don’t think about how to make these separate states economically independent now, there will be problems later on,” he says.

Land reform

Rajendra Yadav, a farmer in Sapahi, says, “Our rights should not be limited to only the Madhes, but should cover the entire country.” Two years after the people’s assembly, he feels there has been no tangible improvement in the lives of farmers. “We need land,” he says. Each family needs at least two katras of land. Land reform should be addressed in the assembly.

Those present weren’t clear about the government’s stance on land reform. “If they plan to push it in a hurry it could be dangerous,” says Surendra Shah. He advised that the government first address land reform in the constitution after consulting experts and creating a legal method to distribute land. “Questions like how land will be used, how much of it will be leased to farm and how it’s going to contribute to national income needs to be addressed,” he says.

The NC’s Jagan Narayan argued, “The Maoists introduced the agenda of land reform in the constitution in order to create conflict between different segments.” The MJF’s Satyadeb Yadav says: “There is no land left in the Tarai, what are we going to reform?” Others felt there was a symbiosis between the Tarai and the hills with their agriculture produce which could be exchanged. Some said land should go to the tiller so that productive farms would not lie fallow.

Inclusive constitution

Surya Narayan Yadav says: “Unless there is proportionate representation of all groups at every policy-making level, positive change is not possible.” Most of the participants felt that the constitution must be inclusive in terms of race, ethnic group, language, region, religion and culture, and that there must be equal rights for men and women. Rajendra Yadav suggests constitutional members to go to the people and ask disadvantaged groups about their needs. “We need to be asked,” he says.

14 committee chairs

1. Constitutional Committee: Madak Kumar Nepal (UML)
2. State Restructuring and Resource Allocation Committee: Lokendra Bista Magar (Maoist)
3. Fundamental Right and Directive Principle Committee: Binda Pardey (UML)
4. Minorities and Marginalised Communities Rights Protection Committee: Lal Bahadur Pandit (UML)
5. Legislative Organs Delineation Committee: Ramesh Rijal (NC)
6. State Rules Delineation Committee: Shambhu Hajara (NC)
7. Judiciary Committee: Praful Shah (Maoist)
8. Constitutional Body Delineation Committee: Gobind Chaudhary (TMLP)
9. Natural Resource, Economic Rights and Revenue Allocation Committee: Amrit Thapa Magar (Maoist)
10. Cultural and Social Solidarity Delineation Committee: Nawodita Chaudhary (RPP)
11. National Interests Protection Committee: Amik Sherchan (Maoist)
12. Civil Relationship Committee: Mina Pandey (NC)
13. Public Opinion Collection and Coordination Committee: Pramod Prasad Gupta (MJP)
NATION

partners across caste and ethnic lines increasingly meeting and marrying Nepali men and women are making it twice as difficult.

When cultural differences enter the equation it is difficult and when political changes have all accelerated the trend of mixed marriages. "With globalization and increased mobility, inter-ethnic marriages are bound to happen," says Sanjeevani. Social anthropology professor at Tribhuvan University, Suresh Dhakal, says the caste system has less meaning and the choice of a life partner becomes a personal choice as joint families fragment into nuclear ones. "With greater independence and earning power, young Nepalis tend to stay away from their parents and created distinct value systems and identities," he says.

The boundaries of social hierarchy blur rapidly as inter-ethnic marriages catch on.

Caste no bar

TEXT and PICTURES by KONG YEN LIN

When wildlife activist Sanjeevani Yonzon Shrestha got married last year to Abhijeet Shrestha, a Chhetri and Akansi Sonal Shrestha, a Newar, it was a colourful fusion of three cultures: Hindu rituals, Lama rites and Newari ceremonies. When the 29-year-old Tamang married a Newar, she had to overcome not just a long distance courtship that lasted eight years but also obstacles of a traditional society. But all went well in the end, and on their wedding day, Abhijeet’s elder brother also wedded a Brahmin girl. "Both of our families under went countless meetings to decide on a common ground for wedding preparations," Sanjeevani recalls. "Marriage itself is difficult and when cultural differences enter the equation it makes it twice as difficult."

A new generation of young Nepali men and women are increasingly meeting and marrying partners across caste and ethnic boundaries. Cosmopolitan, well educated and widely-travelled, they are radically redefining traditional institutions of marriage and family and forging new social norms of inclusion.

Sanjeevani recalls, "Marriage itself is difficult and when cultural differences enter the equation it makes it twice as difficult."

Abhijeet Shrestha, a Newar, overcame courtship when they wedded last year. Sanjeevani Yonzon Shrestha, a Tamang, and Abhijeet Shrestha, a Newar, overcame challenges of an inter-ethnic and long distance courtship when they wedded last year.

CROSSING HURDLES: High school sweethearts Sanjeevani Yonzon Shrestha, a Tamang, and Abhijeet Shrestha, a Newar, have been married for almost 30 years and live in Kathmandu with their two sons and a daughter.

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The boundaries of social hierarchy blur rapidly as inter-ethnic marriages catch on.
Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Hisila Yami gained exposure to village life after she, a Newar, married Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai, a Brahmin from Gorkha. They met as students in Delhi and when Bhattarai went underground in 1996, so did she. The war years were difficult as the couple traveled incognito across Nepal and across the Indian border.

“I’ve gained from our marriage not only in terms of knowing each other’s cultural mindsets but also geographically we are so different. Being a Newar I feel more enriched now knowing about Brahmin society,” says Yami.

Their daughter, 22-year-old Manushi, says she enjoys the best of both worlds growing up in an inter-ethnic family. “I never get sandwiched between caste sentiments of Brahminism and Newarism,” she explains, “my family became more open to ethnic differences.” Manushi, who is doing her masters in political science at Tribhuvan University, lives with her aunt because both her parents are too busy. But the whole family does get together whenever they find the time. Bhattarai and Yami don’t just have ethnic differences: they also have opposite personalities. “This is probably why we have had such a smooth marriage, because we are so different,” Bhattarai told Nepali Times.

While inter-ethnic and inter-caste marriages are on the rise in the cities. Traditional mores are harder to dislodge in rural areas. In fact, prejudices and customs are so entrenched that even the supposedly progressive Maoists have been reluctant to accept inter-ethnic marriages. Rajkumar Sada’s (pictured) decision to marry a Janajati girl ended up in violence in his village of Katari was attacked by her community. The Dalit wanted to file a case with the local administration but was uncertain if any action would be taken at all.

The price was higher to pay for Laxman Dhami in Sindhuli who wed a girl from a lower caste. According to him, the Maoists extorted Rs 80,000 from his family in return for allowing him to return and allowed to “retain” his caste purity. The couple could only afford to pay one quarter of the sum to keep their home intact.

Ever since the abolishment of the Muluki Ain in 1963, there have been at least 40 constitutional codes banning untouchability and outlawing caste-based discrimination. But in reality, these traditions may take some more time before they disappear altogether.
There are no figures on Nepali women working abroad.

The invisible

INTERESTING TIMES
Malika Aryal

Fleeing for dear life

New report looks at the push factors of migration to India

When Lil Bahadur Chhetri wrote the classic Nepali novel, Basain, in 1958 Nepal's population was only 5.5 million, and the country was a landlocked nation. Now, Nepal is engaging India in a search of work.

Today the country's population is touching 30 million and hundreds of thousands of Nepalis still migrate to India for the same reasons as Basain's protagonist: lack of food and indebtedness. For centuries, out-migration has been the way Nepalis have coped with poverty, injustice and lack of opportunities back home.

And when the war came in 1996, it was just another hardship that became part of their daily life.

Nearly 15 per cent of Nepal's population is now working abroad and this represents more than a quarter of the country's young adult male population. The vast majority of them work in the Gulf, Malaysia and East Asia and get all the attention on the media because of the remittances they send home. But there are an estimated two million Nepali migrant workers in India, and many more who migrated before that.

Meanwhile, the 2007 policy made a gross mistake in not including migration to India under the category of foreign employment. The government's logic was that if you don't need a passport and visa, you don't need it really.

But there are hundreds of thousands of Nepali men and women working in India who send millions of rupees home to their families. In a country where 78 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, the economy.

Their rights are not protected, there is no one to speak for them if they are raped, brutalised, murdered or killed. They have been forgotten by Nepal's law and have become invisible citizens.

Migration to India is the cheapest destination, and it is a mystery why the Nepali government has not taken advantage of it.几何

The invisible

There are no figures on Nepali women working abroad.
Nepali permanent residents of Hong Kong marched this week through the centre of the city, obstructing traffic and shouting slogans demanding an end to discrimination.

As curious passengers peered out of the top of double-decker trams, Nepalis in daura suruwal marched with placards that read: "Nepali Language is Hong Kong's Language", "Respect Nepali Culture" and "End Discrimination Against Minorities".

Ever since Nepalis born in Hong Kong before 1983 got permanent residence rights 15 years ago, the number of Nepalis who have settled down here has swelled to 30,000. But there are an estimated 10,000 others without proper papers and in 2005, the Hong Kong authorities stopped issuing student and work permits to Nepalis.

The Hong Kong Nepalis' Foundation wants Nepalis to be treated like other Hong Kong citizens under the Basic Law, Bill of Rights and Hong Kong's obligations towards the protection of the language and culture of minorities under international law.

The Foundation's Ekraj Rai handed over a petition to Hong Kong government head, Donald Tsang on 11 January and says he has got an immediate and positive response from the government that it will look into the demands. "There is no question that our demands will not be fulfilled, since the government is legally required to fulfil them," Rai told Nepali Times. From this month, some Hong Kong public libraries have started stocking Nepali language books and government parks, zoos and hospitals will soon have notice boards also in Nepali. Nearly 20 schools where Nepali students are enrolled have started compulsory Nepali language classes.

However, Nepalis without proper papers are facing a different kind of problem. Some 10,000 Nepalis are in limbo after the Hong Kong government cancelled work permits in 2005. Maya Rai of the Domestic Workers' Union of Hong Kong says: "Many Nepalis have been forced to return to Nepal because their permits were not renewed."

Rai joined forces with the Asian Workers' Union to hold rallies, but so far the government hasn't changed its mind. Local Nepali businessmen say Kathmandu has to raise the issue of the workers as well as the visa hassles for Nepalis visiting Hong Kong at the highest diplomatic level.
Encroachment, not poaching, is the big threat at Sukla Phanta

LAKHMAN TIWARI in KANCHANPUR

Last month, the Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve published a notice in a local newspaper stating that all the people who were illegally inhabiting the world heritage site had to vacate within a week. But by the time the deadline was reached villagers had published their own warning, “We will resort to any form of protest if we are evicted by force.” After that, the authorities backed down because it is common knowledge that the squatters have protection from political bigwigs.

The reserve is unique among nature reserves in Nepal because it has a grassland ecosystem that is home to dozens of species of deer, chital and antelopes. So far, 23 commissions have been set up to look into the issue of those who were displaced when the park was expanded in the late 1990s. Many of those evicted in 2001 say they were told to wait for alternative land to farm and have come back to their settlements. They have also encroached into community forests and the park proper. So far, 1,355 hectares of Sukla Phanta’s 30,500 hectares have been occupied by about 2,500 households of settlers.

Jana March leader Lokendra Lamal says it is all the government’s fault. “They should have given them land to cultivate after evicting them from the park when it was expanded in 2001. The only way to resolve this is by providing them with an alternative.”

Jaya Roka is with the Victim Struggle Committee and says 10,000 people were evicted eight years ago. He says, “We aren’t going to leave this place.” The committee demands none of the hectares of land per household equal to what they have occupied now after clearing forests. They say they should be declared conflict victims and given compensation.

Kanchanpur CDO Kaladhara Deuja admits that there has been a dramatic rise in encroachment in the reserve and that it has political colour. “But the commission will resolve the problem by deciding on alternatives,” he told us. The matter has gone back-and-forth to policy-makers in Kathmandu and Rs 22 million have been spent on various task forces to investigate.

Independent observers here say all the needs is a cabinet decision to decide on where to move the estimated 32,000 people involved and what kind of compensation package they should get. There is a discrepancy in the numbers because a previous commission had only identified 21,000 people.

Conservationists say Sukla Phanta needs a critical mass of native forest to support the biodiversity in its eco-system, but admit that the pressures on the land in the Tarai is now so intense that they are fighting a losing battle.

People vs park

Not-so-charismatic mammals

The fact that the Nepal word bagh is used fairly interchangeably to mean both tiger and leopard across Nepal shows just how disinterested we have traditionally been in wildlife taxonomy. Just as we couldn’t be bothered to remember all the names of Himalayan peaks, we lump them all together as bagh, even though there is a different word in our own language for leopard, chitwan.

Hopefully, this lack of interest and a more general interest in mammal conservation will to some extent be addressed by a new book, Wild Mammals of Nepal. The bilingual listings of names of Himalayan peaks, we lump them all together as bagh, even though there is a different word in our own language for leopard, chitwan.

Did you know that bats are the most numerous mammal species in Nepal?

There are at least five books on Nepal’s diverse birdlife, there are numerous volumes on butterflies and plants but somehow our mammals have fallen between the cracks. Naturalists Hem Sagar Baral and Karan Bahadur Shah have therefore not done a great service by bringing out just this one volume, but also by producing it in Nepal. As has so often been the problem, environmental awareness has been the domain of the educated elite, and conservation has followed a top-down approach.

But more and more, awareness about conservation in the buffer areas of national parks, nature clubs set by youth in rural areas and programs on the FM radio network have made people across Nepal much more aware of the importance of mammals in the food chain. They presence shows us that the rest of the species are there.

Besides celebrity mammals like tigers (found only below 2,000m) and snow leopards (found at higher, above 5,600m), there are the less charismatic but rare ones like the Dhole wild dog that has been all but wiped out. And the rest of them all, the Ganges River Dolphin, the only fresh water cetacean in Nepal of which there are only a handful left in the Karnali and Kosi (the barrage made them disappear on the Gandaki). The wild water buffalo, Ara, with the largest horns of any animal in the world, is also endangered in its last native habitat in the Kosi Tappu reserve.

Baral and Shah have a long patience in which they cite the importance of mammals in the ecosystem and how their presence shows us that the rest of the food chain is intact. They explain in simple Nepal, the threats to these habitats from poaching, encroachment and the disappearance of migratory corridors.

A must-read for all who should be interested in conservation in Nepal and aren’t, and also for school libraries across the country.

Kunda Dixit

Not-so-charismatic mammals

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Besides poaching and human encroachment on habitats, there is a new threat to the remaining jungles in the Tarai. Just as the banmara weed decimated forests in the midhills in the 1980s onwards, a new alien species of Mycyna is spreading across the plains. The banmara seeds are originally Mexican and entered the country with American wheat aid in the 1970s and have since spread wildly across the country.

The Mycyna is also called ‘A Mile a Minute’ weed for the speed at which it spreads. It is said to have come from India with the first sighting in Kosi Tappu about five years ago where it decimated the forests in the buffer zone. Today, Mycyna is spreading westwards and has crossed Chitwan. Naturalists at the national parks in Bardiya and Sukla Phanta are bracing themselves for the onslaught. They are scrambling to find antidotes to the weeds that destroy the undergrowth and ascend trees like creepers and essentially strangle them.

The roads in Kathmandu may be getting too narrow for the increasing number of vehicles and it now takes over an hour to cross Bagmati Bridge, but this hasn’t dampened the appetite for new cars and new models.

Streetwise, nippy and surprisingly spacious, Hyundai’s i10 has finally made its debut in Nepal after collecting numerous awards worldwide. Birita Pradhan of AVCO International says her phones are ringing off the hook in Nepal from potential buyers. AVCO International is the sole distributor in Nepal of the Korean car company, Hyundai, and has been in the business for 13 years. “A car is no longer a luxury for a selected few like it used to be. Owning a vehicle has now become a necessity,” explains Pradhan. While Hyundai is fighting the global stagnation in car sales worldwide, local sales in Nepal are on the rise.

Pradhan says the i10 is perfect for the consumer who can’t afford a luxury car but wants something a notch above the compact cars available. AVCO has brought in three models of i10—D-lite, Era and Magna—but higher-end models Sportz and Esta are also available by order.

Paavan Mathema

How many tigers?

These tigers were caught on a digital trip camera in Chitwan during the nationwide tiger census currently being undertaken by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. The tigers in the picture have been identified as Dibya Pothi and her cub last month in Chitwan National Park as they went hunting together at night. Over the next two months, tiger experts will count the number of different tigers caught on candid camera in Chitwan, Bardiya, Sukla and come up with a total figure for the endangered cats in the country.

“So far, it looks like the numbers are not as seriously down as we thought,” says Conservation Officer Naresh Subedi from the National Trust for Nature Conservation, “we are very excited and hope that the decline in numbers is not too dramatic.” It was previously thought that poaching in the lawless period after 2006 decimated tiger and rhino populations in the parks.

DNPWC
Chandrachowk to China, is a Bollywood Kung fu comedy that takes Sidhu (Akhay Kumar), a vegetable seller on a journey from the by-lanes of Chand anchowk in Delhi, to Shanghai, the Great Wall and rural China. Sidhu longs to escape his dreary existence and looks for shortcuts with astrologers, tarot readers and fake fakirs, despite his father figure Dada’s (Mithun Chakraborty) best efforts. His luck finally starts to change when two strangers from China claim him as a reincarnation of a war hero in the past and take him to China. Along the way, he meets Sakhi (Deepika Padukone), who has embarked on her own journey to pay homage to the land of her birth and her dead father and twin.

Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal
www.jainepal.com

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**MUSIC**

- **Wednesday Melody** at Jazzball Café. Happy hour 6-8PM. 2114075
- **74 Twister** playing live every Tuesday at Moko, Pulchowk. 5526212
- **Robin and the New Revolution** playing live every Tuesday, 7PM onwards at Bamboo Club restaurant, Thamel. 4710157
- **Some like it hot** every Friday BBQ and live music by Dinesh Rai and the Sound Minds, 7PM onwards, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarika’s Hotel. 4473448
- **HyJazz** club every Friday from 8.30PM onwards, Hyatt Regency. 4482341
- **Dance and Cocktails** at Tube Bar, Kamaladi, 4438017
- **Live Sensation**, live performance by Varkey, every Saturday, 9PM, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- **Nhuchhe goes Thai** at Nhuchhe’s Thai Kitchen.Baluwatar. 5521408
- **Fu-Ji** by HyJazz Club every Friday, fusion and classical Nepali music by Shyam Nepal and friends, every Friday, 7PM at Le Meridien.Gokarna. 4451212
- **Sufi music** by Hemanta Rana, every Friday at 7.30 PM at Jazzabell Café, Happy hour 6-8PM.

**DINING**

- **Nhuchhe goes Thai** at Nhuchhe’s Thai Kitchen.Bakwater. 4429903
- **Organic Salad Bar and Steak** at Jalan Jalan restaurant every Friday from 8PM. Rs 650.
- **Fusion** of Marcela Regan’s new menu and Mannie’s new bar at Chokkaima Cafe. 5522113
- **تيتير فيلي** at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- **Pizza & Pasta** every Monday and Tuesday at Ritz Restaurant. Hyatt Regency. 448636
- **Pastra pesto passion** at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- **Steak special** with free Irish coffee at Kico’s Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel. 4700043
- **Continental and cafè items** with Live band every Friday at Vintage Cafe and Pub, Woodland Complex, Durbarmarg.
- **Unlimited wine offer** for Rs 990 at La Maison wine and cigar lounge. 9841333628
- **Home made pasta** at Alfresco, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- **Reality Bites**, The Kaiser Café, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- **Strawberry Etagere** at The Lounge from 4.30 PM- 6.30 PM.
- **Steak escape** with Kathmandu’s premier steaks at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4411818
- **Cooktail, mocktails and liqueurs** at the Asahi Lounge, opening hours 1-7PM above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- **Retro Brunch Barbeque** with live acoustic music by Sound Chemistry, every Saturday, 12-3PM at LeMeridien-Kathmandu, Gokarna. 4451212
- **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs. 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday, 7PM onwards.
- **Kebabs and curries** at the Dhaba, Thapathali.
- **Illy Expresson Coffee** at Hotel Shangri-la, Lazimpat and Mandap Hotel, Thamel.
- **Socially Responsible coffee** at Himalayan Java, Thamel.

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HAPPENINGS

AWESOME: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal inaugurates CAN Info Tech fair on Wednesday at Bhrikutimandap where he was presented with a Solar Tuki.

COME TOGETHER: CPN (Maoist) and Unity Centre (Masal) unite at a formal ceremony in Khula Manch on Tuesday where Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal threatened revolt if his government is overthrown.

DISEMPowered: Operators of electric three-wheelers Safa Tempos protest near Ratna Park on Monday demanding end to power cuts as eight hours of electricity is not enough to charge their batteries and is affecting their business.

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Against the current

It’s astounding that there are some of you out there still complaining about load shedding. You’d have thought people would have got used to it by now. And, after a while it doesn’t matter anymore whether the power cuts are 12 hours a day or 16 hours.

Tourist Minister Comrade Yummy is on the right track. She told a meeting of NATO leaders over the weekend that Nepal should promote its darkness and market romantic candle-lit dinners to attract tourists to this medieval country.

To aid this new promo effort, the Ass is contributing gratis the following slogans so the NTB can start making posters: ‘Get Back to the Pre-electric Age’, ‘Naturally Nepal Where the Nights Are So Dark You Can See The Andromeda Galaxy With Your Naked Eye’, ‘Once Is Not Enough If You’re Against the Current’.

However, Comrade Parbati’s plans to sell our darkness may be sabotaged by her own boss, Prime Minister Pukada who promised on Wednesday to “end load-shedding by next week”. Awesome was taking “only” 15 people in his delegation and it didn’t include his Computer Assistant progeny, Prakash, and a travelling secretariat made up of assorted family members. But he had dropped Nepal’s ambassador to Norway from the official entourage to Norway because she had made space for two bodyguards.

PDK’s visit to Scandinavia to inspect windfarms was postponed after he had a stormy meeting with BRB on Thursday morning. Comrade Laldhoj was totally miffed that PDK photocopy Naryankaji has nudged himself into his (BRB’s) #2 position in the party after unifying with Unity Centre. The unity of the Unity Centre with the Maoaddies is not going to stop until it unites with the Unified CPN-M. From what a,wesome has been saying in private to confidantes, the idea is to form a monolithic leftist party with an even bigger central committee. The Politburo already has 175 members, and this includes at least six Mr & Ms, almost the entire top brass of the PLA including the accused in the Ram Hari murder case, Comrade Bibid.

Now that Makunay has been inducted nicely into the CA and even plunked as chair of constitution drafting, unity would at least end the endless squabbles between the comrades in the three parties about appointments. The three-way tug-o-war has intensified between the Forumwallahs, UML and Baddies over empty ambassadorial berths. The Maoists thought they had a deal with the UML on carving out the NPC and Rastra Bank, and are ready to appoint a new governor like they appointed Pashupati high priests. But the UML is refusing to budge on its candidate, Dr Khatiwada.

The good citizens of Bhaktapur have the right idea. They are not taking all this darkness lying down anymore on Wednesday they vandalised six government buildings, ransacked the post office and gheraoed the NEA demanding that Bhaktapur be declared a load-shedding free district so that its young people could cram for their exams. All this would have been a fine display of spontaneous people power had Bhaktapur not been the district with the highest electricity theft rate in the country, being far ahead of even stalwarts like Rupendehi and Rautahat. So let me get this right: Bhaktapurians want power 24 hours a day but they don’t want to pay for it. We should hand over the government to Nemakipa.