End on a high

A rollercoaster week of recriminations and reconciliations began with a three-day Maoist bandh marked by violence and intimidation across the country. It peaked with a massive Maoist assembly in New Baneshwor. Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal then delivered a fiery anti-Indian tirade during which he labelled the rest of the political leadership ‘remote-controlled robots’ who he would bypass to hold direct talks with Delhi. Amidst widespread condemnation, the Maoist supremo weakly argued the following day that his comments were meant to be a ‘satire’ on the shape of things in Nepali politics. Soon after, the Maoists announced they were lifting the six-month obstruction of the House, raising (yet again) hopes that a political settlement would finally be reached that would pave the way towards the completion of the constitution-writing process. But with the hardliners within the Maoist party still resurgent, the prospect of an indefinite strike looms large.

2000-2009

It’s the end of the Nepali noughties, and we’ve come further than most. Before you protest, we’d like to remind you it’s not been downhill all the way. The war’s over, we’re no longer a kingdom, and we’re waiting for a constitution. But there’s much more to the decade we’ve lived through. Check out our back pages for a trip down memory lane, 2000-2009.
DEALING WITH DELHI

Kathmandu’s talkfest is all abuzz with Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s farty anti-Indian trade on Tuesday, followed by the sudden retraction of his statement with the explanation that he was just joking.

Everyone knows India is always the elephant in the room of Nepal’s domestic politics, but Dahal’s public utterance was inflammatory, provocative and irresponsible. The chairman, as is his wont, has tried to distance himself from his original statements by first saying he was quoted out of context, by blaming the messenger. And now, by issuing a hastily written ‘apology’ letter, and then saying he was just being ‘sarcastic’.

A few hours after calling Prime Minister Madhav Das a ‘puny-minded bureaucrat’, Dahal is said to have said in some kind of a deal, Nepalis have reason to be confused by these contradictory words and deeds.

Some have taken all this as a sign of Maoist desperation, others as the hard-core of the Maoists raising the ante within the party. Whatever the reason, the outcome has been inexplicably positive because it paved the way for the resignation of the House. We lost six months in pointless boycotts and street protests, and there is a lot of catching up to do. But at least the supremacy of parliament has been reinstated.

Populist ultra-nationalism in Nepal has always been the recourse of scoundrels. We saw it during the 1990s when the NC and UML, just couldn’t resist the temptation of stoking anti-Indian nationalism to garner votes. When the UML won the elections in 1994 and Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari went to India on a state visit, he was quick to point out about his party’s anti-India platform. His reply in Hind was: “Kap log samajh hai, mein to aisa karna padh hai.”

Dahal’s speech on Tuesday was not as innocent as all that. His incendiary words risked igniting a re-enactment of the so-called ‘Himal Roshan riots’ of December 2000. That ugly episode should be a warning to the Maoists of how quickly ultra-nationalism can escalate into a pogrom. All the six people who were killed in two days of riots were Nepalese.

Surely, with the Maoists’ support of the dozen of NP_Maoist protests that is supposed to culminate in an indefinite strike next month is to ‘expose’ India. The Maoist central committee decided on a one-month course, and a significant moderate factor was outwitted. By first declaring parallel ethnic provinces and now stoking anti-Indian feelings, the Maoists are playing with fire on several fronts.

Also to blame is a resurgent right wing within the NC and UML that wants to roll back the peace process and are cornering the Maoists by giving them no face-saving exit. This is extremely ominous because it is sure to drive the Maoist party into the hands of an extreme faction that isn’t happy about the peace process.

One can understand Dahal’s frustration with sections of the Indian establishment. But he has done much to make the Maoist party itself seem to be on a roll. The leadership defuses the Maoist cadre, and judge what must be done to keep the majority of the other leaders on this side. With three rounds of agitation on not delivering govt, there was restlessness. Kiran and company, who want to sacrifice any deal that would bring the recent unrest, were eager to raise the stakes. Prachanda decided he had to play along, and certainly they did here on India?

Firstly, there is an element of truth in this. There is no talk of a Maoist insurrection. The trust deficit between Delhi and the Maoists is the most important reason for the present impasse. But Prachanda’s list of five bilateral issues is hogwash – the India-Maoist relationship did not go sour because of Kalapani or Susta, nor will it become so with the resolution of those issues. But his point about there being no solution without a deal with India is spot on. The rest of the political class and the mainstream media are anyway with him. For his part, the fiction of independence in the Kathmandu establishment has assiduously cultivated. Nepal has been an arrogant and apathy sovereign country. Going public only reveals that privy Indian-Maoist negotiations are no more than a circus. And many feel India is squarely to blame. Nepal is a federation, but it is the anti-India card that will win them the support of the hardliners and create space to work on the second. What is certain is that Prachanda’s public stance will not win him friends in Delhi. There is a clear indication that the Kathmandu establishment that Prachanda has failed to become a mature leader once again, and succumbed to the hardliner–proving the Maoists cannot be trusted.

Prachanda’s analysis may have been partially correct. But it is unhelpful in resolving the present impasse and could descend to mindless bigotry on the streets.
ack in 1986 at a meeting of the CPN-ML, I proposed that representatives of ethnic groups be members of the central committee. My colleagues rejected this, saying it was ‘communal’. At the time the only criteria for being in the central committee was having spent time in jail. If they had listened to me then, the country would not have drifted into the extreme ethnic chauvinism you see now.

I have always felt ethnic extremism should never lead to the fragmentation of the Nepali nation. Which is why we have always tried to ensure progress towards a proportional representation of ethnicities through elections. The marginalisation of these groups can be redressed peacefully through elections. But the Maoists hijacked this agenda during the war and made the ethnic groups carry guns. Ethnic groups that were moving ahead in a peaceful manner were sidetracked into violence.

The Maoists are being dishonest towards the Janajati movement. For example, they are saying: where are our autonomous councils? It looks like the councils will have hereditary chief ministers from only the ethnic group represented. Limbus and Magars are majorities in their areas, but following the Maoists to declare Limbuwan and Magarat shows an insecure minority mindset. Limbus will not liberate their people by asking for Limbuwan. Magars will not be autonomous in a Magarat. The kind of emancipation we want is one which can bring together all 30 million Nepalis. We don’t want a territorial liberation because that would mean expulsion of those not belonging to a particular group. The Maoists are lighting an ethnic bush fire that they will not be able to control.

Many say a federal state structure is the first priority for ethnic liberation. For me it is only number two. If federalism is for decentralised development, it may still have some uses, but it is not enough reason to carve up the country along ethnic lines. The people of Nepal should address the problem of discrimination and inequality in a non-violent manner, we haven’t exhausted peaceful options.

The proportional representation in the legislature is the first step towards redressing the marginalised groups. But the struggle for liberation will turn violent. There is still time to address the problem of discrimination and inequality in a non-violent manner, we haven’t exhausted peaceful options.

The important thing is for one group not to behave like the others do not exist. By not dividing up opportunities equally, there is a danger that the struggle for liberation will turn violent. We should address societal inequalities before they turn violent. We cannot address the problem of discrimination and inequality in a non-violent manner, we haven’t exhausted peaceful options.

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I hope never to have to witness an ethnic war in this country.
Janakpur has a formidable political legacy, but the Maoists could be knocked out by the opiate of the masses
Green customs

Customs and police officials from India and Nepal met this week in Sravasti of India near the Nepal border in the first dialogue of its kind to address the challenges of illegal trade in environmentally sensitive commodities across the open border. The illegal international trade in wildlife contraband and ozone depleting substances, harmful chemicals and hazardous wastes is a substantial and increasingly lucrative business across the India-Nepal border. India and Nepal will now cooperate in a Green Customs Initiative facilitated by UNEP, a new partnership of international organisations and governments. UNEP says that based on the history of ozone-depleting chemicals in South Asia, there is an urgent need to strengthen collaboration to monitor the trade and curb illegal movement of such commodities.

Dabur day

Dabur Nepal is organising one-day events such as the ‘Dabur Fun Day Out’ at various housing complexes within the Valley. The event aims to entertain, promote healthy living and introduce the public to Dabur products. Aptitude, the official agency of Dabur, is also coordinating the event.

Moneymaker

Himalayan Bank announced its achievements in the last fiscal year: total deposits of Rs 34.681 billion, total loans and advances of Rs 25.519 billion, operating profits of Rs 1.159 billion and reduction of NPA to 2.16 per cent.

Concrete plans

British Council Climate Champions, Kanchan Shrestha and Anita Thapa Magar from Kathmandu, reached Copenhagen to make their voice heard as world leaders gathered for the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Two hundred Climate Champions from more than forty countries attended the COP15 in Denmark from 7-18 December.

Fly high

Flydubai, whose local promotion partner is Universal Tours & Travels, inaugurated its flights from TIA on 15 December. The airline is operating four days a week.

Hurry up!

Morang Auto Works, the sole distributor of Yamaha motorcycles in Nepal, has launched a scheme for Gladiator SS motorcycle customers, offering a 0% finance scheme on purchases and a Rs 10,000 discount for customers making cash purchases. Offer valid till 15 January only.

The new Activa

Syakar Company has released a modified version of Honda Activa. It now comes with CBS (Combined Braking System), a system that automatically applies front braking force when the rear brake is applied. This prevents slipping and skidding. The new Activa also gives 15 per cent more mileage.

Perfect six

The Cricket Association of Nepal proudly announced Pepsi (Varun Beverages) as its co-sponsor and Standard Chartered Bank as the co-sponsor of the senior national cricket team for one day and 2020 national tournaments. The Nepali cricket team is expected to benefit greatly from this association.

O on the web www.nepalitimes.com

Is affirmative action the way to correct caste-based discrimination? Our readers said:

The power structures are quite clear and transparent. Any person or group that want to be in power or part of the political process can form political parties, persuade people to vote for them, get elected and into positions of power. No one is excluded, either by law or by convention. What more is needed? Favouring one group, by any criteria, means discriminating against the rest. - jange

It is not fair to blame all Bahuns and Chhetris for past discrimination. That was perpetrated by elites that contained many people from other castes who were within the royal circle. To be precise, people in Kathmandu of all castes were the ones who committed the grossest violations of human rights and dignity. If we all know that the caste system is immoral, but why continue using the phrases ‘high-caste’ and ‘low-caste’ to denote only certain groups? To me, non-Brahmins or Chhetris could just as easily, and with dignity, call themselves high caste. What stops them? - Bibek Paudel

- Sanjay Thapa

O on the blogs www.nepalitimes.com/blogs

The Brief: Provides news in a nutshell. Visit the blog everyday for a summary of all the headlines. My City: A look at 2000-2009, the most dramatic decade in our history, in photos.
KUNDA DIXIT in ILAM

While the rest of the country is a political cesspool, Ilam shows visitors that the Nepali word ‘eelum’ must stem from the inherent talent of its inhabitants. Bishnu Sherchan noted this long ago when he visited the district, hence the famous verse: Nepal bhan ali all Ilam chharchan laya...I want to sprinkle a little Ilam across Nepal.

Indeed, if Kathmandu had the same commitment to waste disposal and water treatment as Ilam’s municipalities, the world would be a better place. Ilam’s commitment to waste disposal and water treatment as Ilam’s municipalities, the world would be a better place.

While the rest of the country is experiencing six hours of daily power cuts, Ilam has a waste treatment plant, safe drinking water, telemedicine, latrine building, and projects to improve farm productivity. NCCDC is also involved in biodiversity conservation and the revival of community forestry along the border with India, where there has been serious denudation on both sides of the border. It has even installed a fog collector in Danda Bajar to augment the drinking water supply.

Ather Adhikari says Ilam is a model for other districts to follow. “If we can do it, so can others,” he says. “We are replicating Ilam’s experience.”

Another Ilam NGO is the Mahila Jagaran Sangh, which works with 9,000 women in a microcredit scheme that generates income for families. The group’s “Kutukte” program now has Rs 30 million in savings and lends to women for small enterprises and dairy and tourism projects while also investing in community micro-hydro.

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NCDC’s partners include Norway’s Development Fund (ICOMOD, WUF, UNICEF and SNV). NCDC with the Alternative Energy Promotion Program has installed nearly 200,000 low-cost subsidised small hydro-power projects. The Nepali government has declared “Panchayat district” the power supplied to 200 households saves Ilam Rs 700,000 worth of diesel and kerosene per year and has brought down the cost of milling rice, reduced indoor pollution and increased incomes, by allowing villagers to work at night. And, unlike Kathmandu, where next week’s six hours of daily power cuts are only a taste of what to come, Ilam’s villages have power all the time.

Foster father

Didier Benard took a RNAC flight from Paris for his first visit to Nepal in 1985. “As soon as I got on board, there were beautiful Nepal ladies serving Nepali food, the interior was decorated with exotic photos of Nepal,” he recalls. “I just felt I was already in Nepal.”

Benard has been a regular visitor to Nepal ever since, visiting the country every two years since he was appointed honorary consul of Nepal for France in 1999. But it’s not because of his honorary designation that he keeps coming back—it’s because he truly loves this country.

His two children, aged 11 and 8, are from Nepal. During his first visit to Nepal, he adopted his first child— a three-month-old boy. Five years later, it was a baby girl. His son Aurélien Ram Prasad Benard (with father Didier, picture) is now an engineer, and daughter Atha Agathe Diksha Chhetri Benard is studying to become a dental surgeon. Benard adopted them through the ODA Marseille, a philanthropic organisation that helps prospective parents with international adoptions.

As a consul in France, he has gone beyond the call of duty to promote Nepali tourism and business. He is particularly drawn to the idea of village tourism: “People think you have to be fit to travel in Nepal. Actually, you can trek at a low altitude, meet villagers and hang around in tea gardens.”

In 2007, Benard hosted a video conference from Phidim, Ilam, where he spoke. Over 90 percent of orthodox tea finds a market abroad, he says, and Nepal’s tea is far superior to Indian tea because the tea plants are much younger.

His work has inspired a group of French agro-engineering students to study orthodox tea, and 13 students are visiting Ilam tea plantations for a field visit this January.

Benard issues 150,000 tourist visas per year, and he’s developed a website (http://www.consulat-nepal.org) for inquiries and information about Nepal. It is listed by the French travel guide Routard as one of the most complete sites on the country.

He visits Nepal and Ilam’s national parks in Chitwan, Chitwan, and Bardiya, and plans to promote them in France.

100 YEAR PLAN: Homnath Adhikari of Namsaling in Ilam at a pilot waste-water treatment plant that he helped set up. Ilam’s development model could be replicated all over Nepal.


**Politics**

**Royal massacre:** On the night of Friday, 1 June 2001, King Birendra and members of his family were killed in a shootout in Narayanthang Royal Palace. The entire country grieved the death of 10 royals at the hands of Crown Prince Dipendra, who was believed to have turned on his family due to frustration at not being allowed to marry the woman he loved. According to the ruling of the government inquiry, Dipendra carried out the massacre single-handedly, then turned a gun on himself. Still, he was still living and died whilst in a coma three days later.

**Raging war:** The massacre gave impetus to the Maoist revolution. The Maoists attacked the Royal Nepal Army base in Ghorahi in November 2001, dragging the army into a war that till then had been fought by the police. More people were killed in 2001-2002 than in all previous five years of the conflict. Human rights violations were rampant on both sides.

**Royal takeover:** On 1 January 2000, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai was elected PM and set out to develop his nation through a forward-looking political outlook, the agreement stated. The Maoists thus entered into an alliance with the main political parties.

**Mainstream Maoism:** On 22 November 2005, rebel leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the Seven Party Alliance signed a 12-point agreement brokered by India to counter the king's rule. Bhattarai was forced to restate parliament and step down. Ten years and over 16,000 lives later, the Maoist insurgency finally drew to a close with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 21 November 2006. That's just the politics. The last ten years were particularly good for banks and mobile companies. Remittances skyrocketed. Urbanisation doubled Kathmandu Valley's population. This is a look back at the most dramatic decade in Nepal's history.

**2000-2009**

The first decade of the new millennium was a dramatic one for Nepal in many ways. The country witnessed the spread of the Maoist revolution, a massacre of royals unparalleled in world history, a king's attempt to reinstate absolute monarchy, and a pro-democracy uprising that took the country from kingdom to republic. On 1 January 2000, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai was the prime minister and that seems like a long time ago because we've seen 12 governments since.

**Peaceful:** Although there were reports of intimidation and booth capturing, the Maoists emerged as the biggest party, winning 240 out of 601 seats.

The world's youngest republic: The newly formed Constituent Assembly passed a resolution with near total unanimity to declare Nepal a democratic republic on 28 May 2008. “Nepal shall remain a sovereign, independent and integrated, secular and inclusive country,” announced the then Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula. This announcement also scrapped all the legal and traditional privileges of the royal family, who became commoners from that point on. The resolution was passed by 560 of the 566 members present.

**Political impasse:** After months of haggling over the post of president and prime minister, the Maoists formed a government on 16 August 2008 under the leadership of Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Earlier, NC candidate Ram Baran Yadav had been elected the first president of Nepal on 21 July 2008. The Maoist-led government resigned on 4 May 2009 when their attempt to sack the army chief was foiled by the direct intervention of the president. A coalition government of 22 parties led by UML was formed on 25 May. A six-month Maoist obstruction of the House, mirrored by increasing intimidation wide protests for civilian supremacy capped by the declaration of Maoist ethnic autonomous councils across the country, ended just short of Christmas 2009. The constitution remains to be written ahead of the May 2010 deadline.
Society

While political wrangling continued, the Nepali people showed unbelievable resilience to get on with their lives in the face of major hardships.

Kosi floods: Floods in eastern Nepal in 2002 killed 445 people and left some 128,000 families homeless. Nearly half the country’s 75 districts were ravaged. Then in 2008, the Kosi broke its banks and carved a channel of destruction through Nepal and India. Over 70,000 people were displaced by the country’s worst flooding in 50 years, and five million were rendered homeless in north India.

Far from home: On 31 August 2004, Islamic militants killed 12 Nepali migrant workers in Iraq. Politicians back home used the massacre to stage protests that soon escalated into an anti-Muslim campaign. Organised attacks vandalised migrant recruitment offices and media houses. It emerged later that most of the victims had contracts falsely promising them jobs in a five-star hotel in Jordan, but were diverted to Iraq by an American contractor, Kellogg, Brown and Root.

Karnali highway: After 15 years, the Karnali Highway linking Surkhet with Jumla was inaugurated in July 2006. Within 11 months, 20 people had lost their lives in 40 road accidents. The army opened the pilot track, but lack of maintenance means most of the highway has since become impassable due to landslides.

Jajarkot epidemic: More than 400 people died from a cholera outbreak in Jajarkot in mid-2009. The government said it sent teams of doctors and drugs to Jajarkot but locals claimed they’d seen neither three months later. Human rights bodies tried to shift the blame on food donors, but the long drought and delayed monsoons that contaminated water supplies were more likely culprits.

Business and technology

Banking boom: Fuelled by remittance money, the banking sector grew exponentially and Nepal now has more than 40 commercial banks, 60 development banks, nearly 90 finance companies and several hundred cooperatives. There are 1601 licensed deposit-taking institutions, and at least 24 financial institutions including five A-class commercial banks are in the pipeline. On 1 January 2010, Nepal will have to allow foreign banks as part of its commitment to the WTO. Local banks may struggle to compete, but consumers will enjoy more choices.

Housing boom: The remittance economy has also fed a housing boom that has resulted in growth in the market for construction material. With more than $1.5 billion entering the country in remittances every year and nowhere to invest but in real estate and housing, the second half of the last decade saw prices skyrocketing. Banks raced to offer loans and now have over Rs 1.14 billion invested in housing and real estate, considered risky assets by Nepal Rastra Bank. It prompted a 25 per cent loan cap on commercial bank exposure. The days of ‘unreal estate’ may finally be over.

Mobile all over: Nepal Telecommunications Authority auctioned off a private mobile telephone license in 2000, bringing cheaper, and somewhat efficient, phone services to consumers. Nearly six million people in Nepal now own a mobile phone. Mobile phone coverage is available in all 75 districts of the country, as well as the top of Mount Everest. Mobile phones were a crucial tool for organising dissent during the royal takeover, forcing the king to clamp down on mobile services for four months in 2005.

Digital bridge: In 2007 Mahabir Pun, a teacher and a social entrepreneur, was awarded the Magsaysay Award in recognition of his outstanding work in setting up the Nepal Wireless Networking Project in his impoverished and wholly disconnected village of Nangi. Nepal’s internet user base has grown from 200,000 in 2007 to 499,000 this year, a feat made possible by the decreasing costs of computer and internet services.

Dark decade: Despite our much-touted hydro-potential, our energy crisis has gone from bad to worse to absurd, culminating in 16-hour-a-day power cuts in winter 2008. Nepal’s second largest hydropower project, Mid-Marsyangdi, finally became operational in 2008. The wrangling over the gigantic West Seti continued through the decade. The future of our CFL bulbs may rest on community micro-hydro projects. An example: Palpa district alone has 22 community hydro-power projects that produce electricity at a tenth of the rates of the national electricity supplier.
Culture

Tales of conflict: Narayan Wagle made history with his novel Palpasa Café in 2005, selling over 16,000 copies that year. The novel won the Madan Puraskar and is said to have changed the reading habits of Nepali people. Kunda Dixit's trilogy A People War was combined with a travelling exhibition seen by 350,000 people across the country. In fact, it has been a pretty good decade for writers, especially those writing in English. Manjushree Thapa's Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy to Democracy put her on Penguin India's hit list, and Samrat Upadhyay came out with three books. Young writers like Sushma Joshi have followed suit and the literary scene promises much.

Old and new music: Folk music is the most popular music in Nepal and cheap recording technology and mushrooming radio stations have granted artists newfound status. Twenty-seven-year-old Anju Pant's folksy ballad "Na birse timilai..na paye timiliai.." was downloaded by a million people. Nepalaya organised peace concerts across the country during the insurgency, and continued to nurture uniquely Nepali talent through its regular sit-down jam sessions. Jazz and blues festivals became a fixture on the Kathmandu circuit, and proved Nepal is not quite a backwater.

Documentary capital: Kathmandu seems to have an insatiable appetite for documentaries that is only whetted by festivals like Film South Asia and the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival. Filmmakers like Kesang Tsetan, Prem BK and Mohan Mainali made impressive documentaries chronicling tales of the conflict and the Nepali underclass. Tsetan and BK's Frames of War was the biggest documentary blockbuster: it was seen by more than 150,000 across the country. Our commercial film industry, unfortunately, is too busy emulating Hollywood scripts (badly) and lifestyles (with tragic results).

Life's a stage: WE might not have Mamma Mia or Billy Elliot, but we do get plenty of A Doll's House. Arun Baral's Pratiwimba and Sunil Pokharel's Aarohan theatre groups are the two pillars propping up theatre life in Nepal. In the last ten years, they have introduced classic foreign theatre to Nepali audiences with junkets like the Ibsen Festival.

Sports: Nepali sports fans haven't had much to cheer about. For the most part, our teams have fared poorly in international competitions. The national football team won a bronze medal in the 1993 South Asian Football Federation Cup, but has made early exits in most competitions since. Our martial artists haven't done much better, winning several medals in regional tournaments, but none in the Olympics. Our national sports authorities haven't helped. The top division of the domestic football league, for instance, was inactive for years because of rifts between the Nepal Sports Council (NSC) and the All Nepal Football Association.

Cricket, however, is a different ball game altogether. The Nepali national youth cricket team first hit the headlines when they reached the finals of the ACC trophy in 2000, and went on to win the ACC Premier League in 2004 and 2006, and the Plate Championship in the 2006 Youth World Cup. Such success was in large part the result of a concerted state effort to develop the sport, and perhaps NSC's Vision 2020 will change our fortunes.

Media

Journalists in the cross-fire: Whether working as district correspondents in Maoist strongholds, or at headquarters in Kathmandu, journalists faced threats and censorship, and 29 lost their lives on the job at the hands of both the state and the rebels. Journalists were arrested right after the royal massacre, Maoists killed journalists like Gyanendra Khadka in retaliations, and the army edited copy in newsrooms during the royal takeover. Press freedom continues to suffer.

Mushrooming media: Despite the challenges, Nepali media has flourished. There are now nine privately owned broadsheet dailies and two broadsheets under state ownership. There are 10 television stations and 22 others have been granted operating licenses. The growth of FM stations has been phenomenal throughout the South Asian region: Nepal now boasts 200 FM stations, mostly community-operated, and 150 more are set to go on air soon.
Magical mystery tour
Simon Arthy’s Yak and Yeti will delight kids and adults alike

KATY WILLIAMS

Conflict advisor Simon Arthy has been living and working in countries in conflict emerging from war for over 20 years. But when he’s not at his day job, he can be found performing magic tricks, singing at his day job, he can be found illustrating children’s books. His debut book, Jack and Betty & the Yak and Yeti is one for the holiday season.

Arthy’s inspiration for this charmingly titled book is practical as it is touching. The material of working in the conflict sector has led him to focus on the positive aspects of each country he has lived in – its culture, myths, identity and history. With three children, now aged eight, six and four, this was all too believable.

He found himself striving to make his children’s life experiences magical, by portraying every outing and holiday as a wild adventure, learning magic and doing shows for them dressed in outlandish costumes, and making up new stories every night at bedtime.

“With all the stories flowing, I inevitably thought, why not actually write a story, dedicated to the kids, so that they can have it on their shelves for the rest of their lives?”

In spite of working full-time, Arthy found the time to pen his debut, aided in no small measure in Kathmandu’s crowded streets. He even used the map of the world as a magic carpet of sorts for his child protagonists.

For Ambar Gurung, unity rules

When he visited our People After War photo exhibition in Nepalganj earlier that day, Ambar Dai lingered over a photograph of a father being embraced by his daughter and son, who fought on opposite sides during the war. The cover picture of People After War, taken by Charles Haviland, shows Maoist guerrilla Juna Rai and army soldier Bhutan Rai reunited with their father at their home in Kathmandu after the war.

“Yo Nepali daju baini bich ko ladain rahechha,” says Ambar dai. It was a war between Nepali brothers and sisters. He says he has been inspired to compose a piece dedicated to reconciliation between Nepalis. The man who put to music ‘Sayan thunga phul ka ham’, the lyricist who evokes such a strong sense of Nepali-ness through his songs, is aghast that politicians are only talking about dividing rather than uniting.

That evening, Ambar Gurung begins the concert with his ‘Ma Ambar hun’, and then the soothing words and melody of ‘Ukali lagda pasina puchhne…’ His voice breaks, and he has to stop. His student, Avas, steps right in to sing the missing stanzas. Nepa-laya organised its concert tour to coincide with Narayan Gopal’s 70th birth anniversary, and Ambar Gurung pays tribute to the late great singer with a rendition of his ‘Saum ko jhuka’, sung by the female vocalist accompanying him, Angela Singh. She adds a delicate new dimension to Narayan Gopal’s trademark voice, and sings Aruna Lama oldies with great sensibility.

Ambar Dai lets Avas sing ‘jasa kesh timle phukayau’ and smiles at the words written long ago about the simple sight of a woman’s hair flying in the breeze that makes him marvell at the joy of life: “I ndi hera muskuru…” Life is smiling.
In November, Jug Chaudhary, a 30-year-old mother of four children, was beaten up by her family members and paraded naked around a village in Kailali. They dragged her out from her home, beat her mercilessly and then forced her to eat human excreta. Her mother-in-law’s brother had just passed away. She had been accused of putting a spell on him that caused his death.

When Chaudhary’s husband, a labourer in India, returned the couple went to the police station but could not file a complaint. “They said it was a personal matter, it should be solved in the community,” says Chaudhary. She did not receive justice. She is living in the same village, in the same Dalit community as those who accused and assaulted her.

Chaudhary made the journey to Kathmandu to talk at a public forum last week. It is extremely difficult for her to talk about what she went through publicly. She has to stop many times and her voice cracks when she describes how helpless she felt when she realised there was no one she could turn to.

She has now decided to leave her four children in the village and move to India to look for jobs. But she has this to say: “I came all the way to Kathmandu to talk about this because I do not want other women actually to go through what I did.”

Five other women from Dalit and other minority communities in Lalitpur, Saptari, Siraha, Kailali, Sunsari and Makwanpur also speak at the forum. Each was branded a witch and humiliated in front of her community. In each case the perpetrators have been let off the hook. No one has come to apologise to the women for treating them like animals. They are awaiting justice, but living in fear of being targeted again. “I can’t sleep because I am afraid they are going to come back for me,” says Chaudhary.

These are not the only cases. But we only hear of those cases where brave women actually talk to journalists and file cases with the police. There are thousands of Nepali women who quietly bear the ordeal of being labelled a witch. They are awaiting justice, but living in fear of being targeted again. “I can’t sleep because I am afraid they are going to come back for me,” says Chaudhary.

Nepal’s legal system does not have provisions to punish those involved in witch-hunts. If a complaint is filed and the guilty apprehended they are imprisoned for a short duration and slapped with a fine. The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare and Nepal’s Women’s Commission are only just recognising the legal vacuum and have drafted laws against the practice. But we are still a long way from actually having a law that fully addresses this problem. However, Nepal has been a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women since 1990. This international convention has clear provisions against gender violence. The state is obliged to amend domestic laws to conform to the spirit of the convention. Follow the letter of the law, or provide legal redress in cases where such laws have been violated. Nepal has also signed nearly two dozen conventions on human rights, all of which touch upon gender violence. So say we don’t have laws in place is a cop-out, pure and simple.

Witch-hunting is an extreme form of gender violence and the reason it is not taken seriously is because the victims are usually from marginalized communities. Nepal’s gender movement has made amazing strides, but it has done little for this community of victims.

Activists in Kathmandu can push for laws against witch-hunting while those in the field can work to spread awareness of the medieval superstitions that target these women. The Nepal Police, too, needs to include a chapter on how to address crimes related to superstition in their training manuals.

Three years ago in June, the interim parliament declared Nepal an ‘untouchability-free nation’. Such empty proclamations mean little to women like Jug Chaudhary. This year, Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal acknowledged the state’s failure to deliver on its promises, saying “it is unfortunate that we haven’t been able to implement this declaration in practice.”
Dahal invokes India

Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s announcement that he will talk directly with India, and not with its ‘robots’ in Nepal triggered a flurry of comments in the Nepali language newspapers:

**Interview with Pushpa Kamal Dahal, BBC Nepal Service, 23 December**

Rabindra Mishra: In what capacity will you hold talks with India?

Dahal: Having gone through the media reports today, I realised they did not understand my speech yesterday. It was a sarcastic political comment on the political parties for not having their own stand and waiting for directives from Delhi. I was purely a political satire. Second, Delhi also has its own problems and therefore I pointed out the need for talks with Delhi.

You say controversial things then blame the media for misinterpreting you. You have announced the beginning of talks with Delhi from the podium.

The speech was not against the spirit of dialogue with political parties but it is against Indian interference.

The government holds talks but if the leader of the opposition party says he wants to talk about the 1950 treaty, will India take it seriously?

It does not matter if they listen or not. I put forward these issues when I was PM and I raised the same issues as an opposition leader. Therefore the problem is the political parties cannot seem to decide on their own.

We know you took refuge in India during the insurgency, visited the Indian embassy in Kathmandu, and we all say you hugging the Indian PM Manmohan Singh. The way you mix things up is wrong. I talked to India about unequal treaties, water resources and hydro power development and directly rejected suggestions offered to me which were against the country’s interest.

I did not feel that I was the an elected leader. But I did not feel that I was the leader of the opposition party yesterday. It was a sarcastic political comment on the political parties for not having their own stand and waiting for directives from Delhi. I was purely a political satire. Second, Delhi also has its own problems and therefore I pointed out the need for talks with Delhi.

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**Pushpa Kamal Dahal: “Will you restore civil supremacy or not?”**

Nagarkirti, 24 December

Nagarkirti says daily you openly called on a neighbour to resolve our internal conflicts and that was unbecoming of an elected leader. There cannot be a clearer misinterpretation of my speech. I only said I wanted talks but it was distorted. This is yellow journalism.

**Rabindra Mishra**

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People are increasingly alarmed by the day-to-day delays political parties in writing the constitution. “If the political parties continue to act like this, they won’t write the constitution and will endanger the country’s future,” said participants in an interaction programme organised by Himal Khabarpatra in Itahari.

On constitution-writing

Tanka Prasad Neupane (professor): The political parties forgot the commitments they made in the CPA. NC and UML are talking of a parallel government in the past announced, the constitution cannot be written.

Ashok Tamrakar (Industries and Commerce Association): Industrialists and entrepreneurs fought for democracy and voted in the CA elections expecting the new constitution to be written and an economic revolution to take place. If the constitution is not written within the stipulated time, the people who overthrew the 240-year-old monarchy can take place. If the constitution is not written within the stipulated time, the people who overthrew the 240-year-old monarchy can.

Ashok Khudang (Federal Limbuwan Council): The Maoists, NC and UML are contesting for a constitution to suit their own interests. When we point out the obstacles in writing the constitution, we are labelled regressive, anti-monist and communal. If they don’t write the constitution on time, we are ready to give an alternative.

Laxmi Gautam (All Nepal Women’s Association): Our understanding of the CA was to write a new constitution first and then to run the interim government. Our political leaders seem to have understood just the opposite.

On federalism

Dipendra KC (NC): Nationality should be at the centre in a federal system. Topography, natural resources and social aspects should be taken into account. Creating federal units is a purely technical issue in which politics should not play a part.

Aiyebu Ansari (Nepal Muslim Autonomous State Council): No political parties have addressed the issue of the 1.2 million Muslims living in 73 districts of the country, though ethnic issues have been raised.

Padam Adhikari (Federal Limbuwan State Council): We should find a balance between ethnic and historical backgrounds and the preservation of social structures in creating federal states. States should be given the right to self-determination, not a particular ethnic group. This will enable all castes to enjoy the provisions of autonomy, self-governance and special rights. On the basis of LO Convention 169 and historical background, we believe that the Arun and Kosi rivers should be part of Limbuwan.

Keshab Dahal (rights activist): We envisaged federalism as a means to end social discrimination and the domination of a particular caste in a unitary system. This was not aimed at curtailing the rights of privileged castes and giving oppressed castes special rights in the name of federalism. Nepal is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country but we are talking about giving special rights to particular castes and languages in a new federal set-up. If this happens, it will be far different from the past.

DN Mahesh (MJF-D): The Mahies has been the victim of domestic colonialism. The major question is how to liberate it. Mahies peoples’ should be proportionately represented in all state mechanisms. There should be an integrated Mahies Pradesh and Mahies should be given the right to decide on the number of states within it.

Mili Ram Chaudhary (Tharu Welfare Council): Ethnic ratios should be based on federal units. All castes should have proportionate representation and access at central, federal and local levels.

“May not meet deadline”

Laara Prasad Ghimire, Chief Whip, NC, Ramechap

The CA is still working, right?

Eight subject committees have finished discussing their preliminary drafts and concept papers. All the committees were supposed to have finished discussing drafts by November-December. But the Constitutional Council and the State Restructuring and Distribution of State Power committees haven’t finished, which may force us to revise the schedule once more.

Will we ever complete the constitution if the schedule is repeatedly revised?

We are determined to finish it. But we have already cut down the me time period for public scrutiny of the constitution from three months to one month, and it still doesn’t look like we will write the constitution on time.

‘Not optimistic’

Upendra Yadav, President, MJF, Sunsari

What’s happening in the CA?

Just a couple of days ago, the Committee on the Distribution of Natural Resources, Financial Rights and Public Revenue finished discussions on its preliminary draft and concept paper. The Constitutional Council is considering revising the schedule once more, and the State Restructuring Committee and the Committee on the Forms of Government are working on their drafts.

After repeated revisions of the schedule, there isn’t enough time for public scrutiny of the constitution, right?

With the deadline so close, it will take a lot of hard work to write the constitution on time. As a result, there isn’t enough time for the public to review the constitution, and we may break our promise to the people to finish the constitution within two years.

Why isn’t the party leadership more serious about the constitution with so little time left?

The NC, UML and the Maoists are to blame. There are discussions going on between them, but they aren’t concerned about anyone else.

Aren’t you participating in the discussions?

They haven’t consulted us. That’s why currently we’re pressuring them to finish the constitution on time. We are also pressuring them to fulfill past agreements with the MJF.

Will the constitution be written on time?

Well, so far it seems unlikely. If they don’t meet past commitments, the constitution won’t be completed.
EXHIBITIONS
- Marfa to Manhattan, exhibition of photographs by Kashish Das Dherev at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited, till 31 December 11AM-3 PM, 4438974
- People After War, permanent photo exhibition, every day 11AM-4PM, Madan Puraskar, Patan Dhoka, for bulk bookings call 5521393

EVENTS
- Christmas Workshop at Assumption Catholic Church, 25 December, Shobhpat, 5520712

MUSIC/C
- Hylazz every Friday evening by Inner Groove at the Rox Bar, 4488962
- Solo gig every Tuesday at Mohk, Pulchok, 7.30 PM onwards, 5526212
- Live band every Friday and rooftop BBQ everyday by Kausi Kitchen at Dharwar Marg, 4224007
- Some like it hot, every Friday BBQ and live music by Dinesh Rai and the Sound Minds, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarika's Hotel, 7PM onwards, 4479488
- Happy cocktail hour, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at The 6th Sense Bar, Thamel, 5-7PM
- Nepali Ghajals and songs at D'Sounge Beijing Duck Restaurant, every Thursday 6.30 PM onwards, 4488589
- Audra Night live fusion music by Deepak Nepali every Friday, 7PM at Golokama Forest Resort, 4451222

DINING
- Arabian Night, with bellydancers from Nepal on New Year's Eve, Megha Malik Hall, Hotel Soaltee
- Christmas French cuisine, veg and non-veg, Rs 2900+ and Rs 3000+ respectively, Chez Caroline, Babar Mahal Revisited, 4296700
- Jingle bell shaped pizzas, with Christmas punch, BBQ and gourmet fare, Aqua Java zing, Thamel, 4254809
- Christmas Turkey Dinner, till 1 January, K-totl Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel, 4700043
- German Food Festival, till 1 January, Irish Pub, Lajimpat
- Christmas Cake shop, christmas pudding, chocolate Santa Claus, hampers and more at The Lounge, till 31 December, 4491234
- Lavazza Coffee and Baskin robbins, at Blue Note Coffee Shop, Lajimpat
- Strawberry Eggbar, strawberry flavours at The Lounge, 4.30PM - 6.30PM, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, 4491234
- Oriental Nights, all flavours and specialities of Asia every Wednesday at The Cafe, 6.30PM, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, 4491234
- Live continental BBQ Fiesta Oriental Nights, 4.30PM - 6.30PM everyday
- Chocolate, Coffee and Caramel, every evening at The Lounge, 4.30-6.30PM, 4491234
- Wine and cheese, every Friday & Saturday at The Lounge, 5-8PM, 4491234
- A cafe's coffee, Dhoikama Cafe, Patan Dhoika, 5522113
- Jazzabella Cafe, TGIF, 10% discount all day, happy hour 6-8PM, Thamel, 4470043
- The Corner Bar, 5-7PM, 3-10PM, Radisson Hotel Kathmandu, 4491181
- Al Fresco, for homemade pasta, steak and freshwater trout, Soaltee Citrus Plaza, 4273999
- Kakori, for biryani, curries and kebabs, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 7-10.45PM
- Mediterranean cuisine every Friday from Greece, Italy and the Middle East at The Cafe, Hyatt Regency, 4491234
- Toppanganiyaki meal items and garlic ice at Le Restaurant, Galidrara, 4423618
- Plat Du Jour at Hotel Shangri-La, Lajimpat, Rs 600, 4412999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser Cafe, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika's Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM, 4423341
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-La with live performance by Ciney Gunung, Rs 999, at the Shambhala Garden, every Friday, 7PM onwards, 4429999
- Himalayan Rainbow Trout at Hotel Yak and Yeti, Darbar Marg, 4243899
- Tiger for Breakfast, breakfast everyday at 1905, Kantipath, 4215068
- Stupa View Restaurant, for vegetarian creations & clay oven pizza at Boudha Stupa, 4480262
- Golokama Forest Resort for a variety of facilities at Trigtai bar, 44512126

WEATHER
This weekend, expect partly cloudy skies and warmer mornings, as precipitation in the Himalayan region and South Asia has been dropping. For example, the Valley hasn't seen its December quota of rainfall since October. On the contrary, most of the rain in the upper regions of Nepal has fallen from mid- to late-November. This trend is expected to continue into December with a slight decrease in precipitation, which will help reduce water levels in the rivers and streams of our country. However, it's important to note that the forecast is subject to change due to the variability of weather systems in the region. It's advisable to check the latest updates for your area to plan your activities accordingly.

Some of the prominent events of the European Expedition were meeting and handing over an Everest Rock to the Nepali Prime Minister's office to the President of Austria and France, speaking at the European Parliament, and at a climate change demonstration at Brussels. Both Aja and Dawa also participated and spoke at the Government of Nepal-organised Summit's Summer in Copenhagen on 11 December.

ABOUT TOWN
Two friends [Madhavan and Sharman Joshi] embark on a quest for a lost buddy. They encounter a long forgotten bet, a wedding they must crash, and a funeral that goes impossibly out of control. Then another journey begins through memory lane, as we are introduced to an old friend free-thinker, Rancho [Aamir Khan]. The reason for his long-time disappearance unfolds with the story.

Call 4442210 for show timings at J al Nepal www.jainepal.com

GETAWAY
- Fly Away, Marco Polo Travels offers a 3-night package deal to Thailand for Rs 29000 pp on twin sharing basis, inclusive of airfare, a 4 star accommodation.
- Escapade, one-night stay with Christmas gala dinner, cultural shows, Christmas lunch and drinks at Dharwar Mountain Resort, Rs 3000 pp
- New Year’s, The Dwarika’s Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort offers an overnight stay with BBQ dinner, live band, champagne and brunch.

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

HOMECOMING: Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal at Tribhuvan International Airport, back from the Copenhagen Climate Conference on Sunday.

CHAOS: A fire rages as police stand guard in New Baneswor following riots during the Maoist-called Nepal Bandh on Sunday.

NOT SO FAST: Policemen recover around Rs 300,000 and IC 5000 worth of counterfeit money as the perpetrator, J agir Sikh Adit, looks on in Lalitpur on Thursday.

THIRSTY: Culture Minister Minendra Rijal sipping Tongba, or millet beer, during the inauguration of the Nepal International Indigenous Film Festival on Tuesday in Dharan.

OUR GRANDMOTHERS: Five women, subjects of the Hamra Hajurama Photo Exhibition, at the opening at the Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal, last week. The exhibition concludes on Friday at 6 PM.
Never, never on a Banday

We've always been a nation of whiners. The Baddies just handed us a three-day forced holiday on a platter and all we did was grumble about it. Taxi drivers complained they couldn't cheat passengers at the airport, customs officials in Tatopani complained they couldn't collect their usual kickbacks, and Lazimpat's night walkers were out of business.

Why not look on the bright side of Bandays? The Ass' back-of-the-envelope calculation reveals that we saved Rs 600 million worth of fuel in three days, thus reducing our trade deficit with India, slashed Nepal's carbon footprint by 1.4 million tons of CO2, and put ourselves on track to fulfill the Prime Minister's commitment in Copenhagen to make the country carbon neutral by 2020.

An average of 15 Nepalis die and 30 are injured every day in highway accidents across the country, which means the three-day ban saved the lives of 45 Nepalis, and an additional 90 who would otherwise be maimed were not. This is why we welcome the indefinite banned from January 25 onwards. If it lasts a month, we'll have saved the lives of nearly 500 Nepalis and also temporarily arrested glacial retreat in the Himalaya.

The Baddies had promised that the banned would be peaceful, and sure enough it was three days of peace and tranquillity. Non-violent goons nearly lynched DSP Chaudhari, peaceful YCLs prowled the streets of Pokhara, Akhil threatening to burn down any restaurant that dared open. In Surkhet, the office of an aid organization was ransacked in a completely non-violent manner; and comrades in masks threatened to gently break the legs of anyone who dared go to work.

Govt offices were either set on fire or vandalised in an extremely peaceful manner; journalists were thrashed non-violently and ambulances were smashed so the patients inside could rest in peace.

Chairman Awesome's much-maligned speech in which he went on the warpath against the Injuns, and then immediately said the speech was supposed to be sarcastic, revealed at least one thing: he has a sense of humour. Boy, are we glad he was just joking. I don't think this country can afford another remote-controlled robot.

There were other signs of sophisticated humour at the rally. A couple of YCLs wearing their trademark black North Face down jackets held up a banner that said: 'Indians and Dogs Not Allowed in Nepal'. Ha-ha-ha. Others trampled on the Indian tri-colour. Hoo-hoo-hoo. PKD must have regretted that one, 'cos he was later overheard apologising profusely in Hindi to someone on his mobile.

The cabinet also showed it has a sense of humour by nominating GPK for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Ass can't figure out what would be more embarrassing: nominating the man, or Girja actually winning the prize.

The Prime Minister is off again, this time to China, which means you should expect monstrous traffic jams both on the ground and in the air on Saturday and next Thursday. Last time he flew off to the climate summit, the airport was closed for two hours. International flights were diverted, domestic flights were cancelled and then the airport ran out of parking space when flights bunched up in the evening. We may have gone from kingdom to republic, but why does the entire diplomatic corps have to troop off to the airport to say 'bye' or 'hi'? And CAAN insists on issuing a NOTAM closing down the airport for VVIP movements. Makunay has outlived his usefulness and should gracefully retire after this China trip, but before that he should take one last decision to scrap these practices.

Stiff bargaining is still going on till pre-stone time between the PMO and the Chinese embassy about the size of the prime ministerial entourage. The Prime Minister wants to take along his wife and dotter, and a retinue of 19. The embassy has capped it at 8, but will allow one offspring. China still has a 'One child policy'.

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