Nepal can feed itself

Next week, the country marks rice-planting day. Nepal used to be a net exporter of rice, today it imports staple grain. The ongoing census will show us how fast our population is growing, and whether or not our farm productivity can keep pace.

Despite a banking crisis, a power crisis, a political stalemate, and stagnant investment Nepal’s economy is expected to grow by 5 per cent this year. What saved us was the most-neglected part of the economy: agriculture. Nearly half the paddy fields are rain-fed, and last year’s favourable monsoon with timely winter rains meant that rice production grew by 11 percent. With sustained investment in irrigation and technology there is no reason why Nepal can’t feed itself. Travelling across Nepal this week, it was clear that for a majority of Nepalis the priority was neither the constitution nor the politics in faraway Kathmandu. It was whether the rains will come in time, whether fertiliser will be affordable and whether farmers will get a fair price for their produce.

A new way of rice farming called SRI (System of Rice Intensification) is bringing new hope to thousands of farmers in 35 districts across Nepal. With minor adjustments to their planting method, farmers can grow double the rice with less seed, less water and less fertiliser.

Not all solutions for Nepal are political. The farmers seem to have got the point.

Rubeena Mahato in Kailali

The rise and fall of Acharya B

A Nepali associate of Ramdev finds money and politics don’t mix very well with religion. New column by Jyoti Malhotra in New Delhi p3
A man accused of being involved in a murder is appointed in a party in the ruling coalition. Challenged by lawyers, the Supreme Court rules that the minister has to take personal moral responsibility, and asks the police to report on progress in the murder investigation everywhere.

Anurag Acharya (‘Reinstating the state’, #558) notes that politicians have a huge patronage influence in the creation of the current government. Private capital is the brain of government, and serious qualms over what actually pushes it to...
Cock-fight

BY THE WAY

Anurag Acharya

Rise and fall of Acharya B

A Nepali associate of Ramdev finds money and politics don’t mix very well with religion

Illegally sold to Bakhri, the Udaanse Akhara.

And since information is power, and since all those fattened on Mannohar Singh’s material reform were also now seeking spiritual gain, what better way to feed them soil food than through 24x7 religious messaging on the Astha TV channel. 99 per cent of whose shares were owned by Balkrishna himself?

The Ramdev-Bakhri empire, including an island in Scotland, now amounted to a kosher cost $300 million. But the empire of the state struck back. Influential Congress leader Digvijaya Singh fired the first salvo, accusing Balkrishna of being a Nepali with a criminal record back home, that his Indian passport was fake, and that he had violated the Indian Arms Act.

Poor Balkrishna. Not really being versed in the ways of the Indian elite, leave alone the political elite which can run rings around the most sophisticated entrepreneurs, he began to defend himself to the press. Short of invoking the 1950 India-Nepal treaty, which guarantees to all Nepali citizens the right to live and work in India, the young godman did everything he could to paint a picture of being an honourable citizen. Even if he didn’t pay his taxes on time.

A fueling media was taken aback when Balkrishna refused to come clean about the alleged land grab around the Digya Yog Trust. “Who do you think you are? Who are you to ask me?” Balkrishna answered.

That’s how the first thread of the holy struggle within the unholy alliance began to unravel. The police cracked down on Ramdev & Co and in the ensuing melee, Ramdev escaped from the police dressed as a woman. Balkrishna went missing and subsequently said he had actually been tending to the injured. At present, the live tv tamasha is over and India is catching its breath.

The anger in the Madhes this time is against Madhesi leaders themselves

But since then, Madheshi parties and their egotistic leaders have splintered, squandering those aspirations. Madhesi civil society stalwarts who had earlier played a crucial role in bringing leaders from different ideological backgrounds into a united platform, have now gone off on their own and are largely discredited in the eyes of their own people. There has been a re-amalgamation of some Madhesi parties, but it is uncertain how long this marriage of convenience will last.

Ask people in the “capital” of the proposed Tarai-Madhesh Pradesh about Madhesi leaders, and there is a common refrain: “They are all the same.” A 40-year-old rickshaw driver wiped the sweat from his brow with his gamocha and spiced his Maahilhi with a choice epithet: “People died here to put those ch**iyas in the Assembly so that we could get a constitution that would end the centuries of humilation.”

Large sections of the Madhesi population does not foresee an overnight change in their fortunes. However, people here had counted on those who used Madhesi grievances to carve out political space for themselves in Kathmandu to deliver on some of their promises.

Foremost among them was security, but the criminalisation of politics in the Madhes actually worsened the law and order situation. One of the changes of 2008 was that Pathal was starting treating Madhes with more respect. But even that has changed.

“The Madhesi Andolan people were rude, the police ate bananas and did not bother to pay,” recalls a fruit vendor in the main market here, “for some time they refused to come clean about the alleged land grab around the Digya Yog Trust. ‘Who do you think you are? Who are you to ask me?’ Balkrishna answered.

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BIRGANJ – Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal will not forget those last few hours of grilling political negotiations with UDMF when the Madhesh front refused to extend the tenure of the CA and warned that they would resign from the assembly and get Madheshi members to meet in Birganj. The Madhesh front even threatened the Kathmandu establishment that if their demands were not met they would declare a secession of Madhesh declaring Birganj its capital.

It is doubtful if the UDMF would, or could, have pulled off all that because at three in the morning it agreed to the extension but stayed away from voting for the extension. The government incorporated their demands (Khanal’s resignation and the inclusion of at least 10,000 Madhesis in the army) in the 5-point deal.

But here in the heart of a swelling movement, the Madheshi one is struck by the air of normalcy. This doesn’t seem to be the kind of place that could be the capital of a new Madhes. It is hard to believe that the streets are the same that witnessed historic protests in the winter of 2007.

Back then, a strong wave of identity politics had galvanised people across the Tata’s economic and political background. In spite of criminal infiltration and violent upsurge in places like Gaur, Nepalgunj and Butwal, the movement gained credibility due to an assertive presence of people from all walks of life. The burgeoning aspirations of the hitherto marginalised communities were dark whisperings that some of the land had been illegally sold to Bakhri, the Udaanse Akhara.

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It sounds too good to be true. Lalku Katharia, a farmer in Lalbojhi of Kailali has doubled his rice harvest from half the seeds he used last year. He did this without even needing to flood his fields with scarce irrigation water.

Lalku and other farmers in western Nepal are taking part in trials of a new technique called SRI (System of Rice Intensification) which have been shown to increase rice production by more than double with fewer seeds and fertilisers, even in arid areas. It seems to be ideal solution to a food-deficit country dependent on rain-fed agriculture.

“Look, I didn’t have to flood my field, and there are 100 tillers from a single seedling,” says Lalku, showing us his rice patch, “earlier I used to get only 10 tillers each.” SRI also produces sturdier plants with thicker tufts that can withstand floods.

“IF SRI is adopted in a national scale, we can double our rice production with ten per cent the seeds, half the fertilisers and very little water. What could be more perfect?” asks Rajendra Uprety, a government agriculture officer who helped introduced the technique in Nepal (see box). In Morang, 2,000 farmers are regularly using SRI and are happy with it.

Lalku is now getting his second harvest from SRI just before the monsoon floods can damage crops. Crops in this part of Kailali are prone to annual floods from the Mohana river, and has not seen a good harvest in five years. SRI is perfect for these places as it does not require much water and rice can be planted early in the dry months when flooding is not a problem.

A few hours away in Ramshikarjula, Bedanand Upadhay doubled his rice harvest this year. Thrilled with his success, he is now planning to expand SRI to the rest of his farm. “I could not believe my eyes. I had never produced so much with so little,” he says. The word has spread and Bedanand is now training neighbouring farms in SRI.
**SRI in Nepal**

System of Rice Intensification (SRI) was invented by French Jesuit Fr Henri de laulanie in Madagascar in 1983 after 30 years of research. Today it is used in 30 countries including China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia, where research has shown yields increase 30-50 per cent using half the amount of water. China in particular, is leading the way, using SRI in conjunction with hybrid seeds. India has adopted SRI as one of the components of its food security program and is promoting the method in 38 districts and is planning to convert 5 million hectares of land into SRI plots in the next five years.

In Nepal, SRI was pioneered by Ratendra Uprety when he was District Agriculture Extension Officer in Morang. He read about it in an agriculture journal and decided to give it a try. Today there are SRI tests and demonstrations being carried out in 35 districts across the country: 300 ha in Dang, 120 ha in Jhapa and 80 ha in Kalari. Test plots like these produce up to 12 tons per hectare, compared to 3 hectares produced by the old method.

In Dakshin Purba VDC, 24 farmers this year converted to SRI with assistance from FAO. Farmers are trained in the technique right from the transplanting to harvest in 16 weeks.

“Where irrigation is available, SRI can be done pre-monsoon, allowing farmers to harvest at least one rice crop before the rains, increasing their food security,” explains Xavier Rouan of FAO.

However, while farmers across the Tarai don’t need much convincing about SRI, the government in Kathmandu is more reluctant. The National Agriculture Research Centre (NARC) is still not backing SRI as government policy. “It is surprising why the government is not supporting SRI,” says Bipay Mallik, Director General of Department of Agriculture. “But we are not waiting for NARC and are holding SRI demonstrations in all rice growing districts so that farmers can adopt the technique themselves.”

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**How it works**

With all the advantages it offers, SRI is quite simple, and can be done on local or hybrid varieties alike. Instead of waiting for the seedlings to mature, young plants of 6-10 days are transplanted one by one, allowing the roots to spread out further. They are also planted farther apart, at 20 cms, so that seeds don’t have to compete for food and light and this also reduces the amount of seed required. The difference of old rice and new rice transplanted at the same time is apparent in paddy fields of Dakshin Purwa VDC, Kalari, below. The patch in the foreground uses the old method, and the one behind uses the System of Rice Intensification (SRI).

The field is irrigated just enough, without submerging it in water and water is drained two-three times at an interval of 15 days. This allows bacteria in the soil to improve fertility. A weeder machine and composting means less pesticides and fertilizers are needed. Traditional paddy-growing submerges fields to control weeds and pests, and the downside of SRI is that it is more labour intensive, requiring more hands for weeding, timely drainage and careful planting. But the benefits in greater harvests far outweigh these shortcomings. SRI produces 150 quintals of rice per hectare for a land that yields 20 to 30 quintals in the old method, using 35 per cent less water, 10 per cent of seed and 50 per cent less fertilizers.
MARCUS BENIGNO

Yoga in recent decades has undergone a western facelift or perhaps more fittingly a reduction. Avid practitioners of the discipline are less likely to be full-fledged yogis on an ascetic quest to moksha (liberation from worldly suffering) and more likely to be well-to-do urban women.

“They say there are 15 million people practicing yoga in Europe and the US, but I wouldn’t say there are 15 million yogis,” explains Sam Voolstra, director of Pranayama Yoga at the Moksh complex in Pulchowk. The newly opened yoga center joins a list of studios available in Kathmandu, but its fresh, modern look contrasts with its typical ashram counterparts. Voolstra, a partner of the successful adventure sporting company The Last Resort, brings a similar approach to Pranayama: a streamlined, frill-free brand with program options tailored to the customer’s requirements.

“There is no such thing as one style of yoga,” says Voolstra. The center offers a set of diverse styles at varied levels of difficulty, including pregnancy, post-natal and children’s yoga. It hopes to appeal to a wider audience.

Bending over backwards

New yoga center offers choices for up-market consumers

Li Na represents not just

CLARENCE CHUA in BEIJING

Li Na’s victory on the red clay courts of Roland Garros has caused a media frenzy in China. Her win at the French Open makes her the first Chinese and Asian woman to win a grand slam singles title and her play is inspiring a generation of budding tennis stars across the country.

After winning the French Open, Li Na is now ranked No. 4 equaling Kimiko Date of Japan as the highest ranked Asian woman tennis player ever. Li will stay in Europe to prepare for Wimbledon and looks set to serve up some strong play as China and the rest of Asia watches closely.

CCTV commentators equate the win to Lu Xiang’s Olympic gold on the track and field and Yao Ming playing in the NBA. For 12-year-old Alvina Lai, Li Na is her new favorite player.

“Hi! My name is Alvina Lai and I come from Hong Kong. I’ve been playing tennis since I was three and a half and Li Na is my favorite because she won First Asian woman to win a grand slam singles title prepares for Wimbledon...
China, but Asia

the French Open,” says Lai after her tennis lesson. At the Potters Wheel Tennis Academy on the outskirts of Beijing, groups of young girls are perfecting their backhand strokes. Carlos Rodriguez, the former coach of Olympic gold medalist and former world number one Justine Henin, is their full-time trainer.

“We have to use this momentum to encourage young players. I promise you that we can do it.” Whether that is in Thailand, Malaysia, China or whatever,” says Rodriguez. About 14 million Chinese play tennis, while more than 100 million play badminton. The tennis academy’s director, Andres Bruno says they are already expecting an increase in membership. “When Li Na lost the final of the Australian Open, more and more people called to sign up. Now, just a few days ago after Roland Garros, people are coming to sign up for the summer camps. I think there will be 20 or 30 per cent increase after Li Na’s success,” he says.

Twenty-two years ago the fresh-faced 17-year-old Chinese-American Michael Chang created history by becoming the youngest player to ever win a tennis grand slam. His victory at the French Open sparked a tennis boom in Asia, making Prince Charles, the then chairman of the AIG, come to his first tennis tournament in Asia. “There are a lot of players that win only once, but if her ambition is to be the No.1 player she can do it. She can improve her serve and her forehand and her stamina. Mentally, emotionally and physically it is not easy, but if she can recover, for sure she has the game. No doubt about that,” he says.

www.asiacalling.org.
Off-beat trekking
Two new hiking guide books give us a fresh perspective on trekking in Nepal

T
e to the list of numerous Himalayan trekking guidebooks come two new ones this season that take hiking enthusiasts to routes less traveled by, and also to take a fresh look at established ones.

Nepal Trekking and the Great Himalayan Trail looks at the “holy grail” of the traverse of high-altitude passes not just in Nepal but from Bhutan right up to Kashmir. In Nepal, the trail takes about five months at one go, but can also be done in more manageable sections.

It is well-established that inappropriate tourism fouls its own nest. Examples are some of the popular trekking routes in Nepal, where the influx has brought visitors and huge numbers of porters and support staff that overstretch the carrying capacity of fragile mountain valleys. Tourism provides some income but also brings inflation with the nett effect of making poverty worse. And lately, trekking trails in Nepal have been overtaken by highways, bringing both advantages and disadvantages.

The Great Himalayan Trail is a project designed to re-invent trekking tourism in Nepal, with the world’s longest and highest trek. Boustead, who has the great traverse himself, has put together the hook from his own personal experience and sprinkles it with advice on local communities and their needs. Getting Trailblazer to add this title to its other handbooks like Indian Rail, The Silkroad, Trans-Siberian and Himalaya by Bike will provide a fresh new dimension to eco-trekking in Nepal.

Nepal Trekking is different from other trekking guides not just because it takes the various sections of The Great Himalayan Trail chapter-by-chapter, but also because it approaches trekking from a whole new perspective. It looks at an expedition’s ecological footprint, how the arrival of outsiders can help rather than hinder local development and enlightens visitors about Nepal’s incredible biological and ethnic diversity.

The Guidebook for Himalayan Trekkers is published by the Department of Geology of Tribhuvan University. It can be described as a naturalist’s guide to trekking in the Everest region. Although it is called a guidebook, the book reads more like an academic report on the geology of the Khumbu. For the lay-trekker, the description and terminology may be too technical and dry. Any native of Nepal or visitor must wonder at the cataclysmic collision of the continents 70 million years ago that thrust the Himalayan mountains nine km into the stratosphere. In that sense, one doesn’t have to be a geologist to be curious about the tectonic forces that created this range and the areas of erosion that sculpted our mountains and valleys. In that sense, everyone is an amateur geologist and this book is a quaint guide to understanding the geology, physiography, climate and vegetation of the Himalaya.

Having the handbook handy while walking from Namche to Pheriche, for example, will be on-the-spot guide to interesting outcrops, explanations of rocks and boulders found along the way as well as pointing to the hazards of glacial lake outburst floods caused by global warming.

The authors even take us beyond base camp to the summit of Mt Everest to explain the amazing fact that the summit is made of yellow limestone. Microscopic examination of this rock shows remains of prehistoric marine microorganisms, forcing us to marvel that those rocks were once at the bottom of the Tethys Sea. We see the effects of the glacial retreat following the last ice age, the little ice age 400 years ago, as well as the accelerated thawing of the Himalaya today due to climate change.

If you can bear with the overdose of technical terminology and the academic language, the book will provide you appetite for geo-tectonics and may be worth extra weight in your backpack.

Kunda Dixit
DINING

Sunday Jazz Brunch. Enjoy a relaxing Sunday at Hyatt with barbecue and live Jazz music by ‘Tinner Groove’ from 12pm to 3.30pm. Hyatt Regency, Boudha, for bookings call 4491234.

Saturday @ Hyatt. Make your weekend more exciting with family and friends. Enjoy the afternoon with a splash in the pool, relax and sample the sumptuous barbecue brunch. Hyatt Regency, Boudha, for bookings call 4491234.

Degas Restro Lounge, for mouth watering deals from Bibimbab to Vietnamese hotpot that has become an affordable and popular choice in Southeast Asian cuisine. The quintessential Vietnamese meal, phở consists of rice noodles, lime, bean sprouts and basil or mint churned in a clear chicken and vegetarian phở. A lovechild of the Chinese chicken noodle and Malaysian yee sang, the banana flower salad at Upstairs is made from rehydrated rice paper, crispy vegetables and steamed banana hearts drizzled with a sweet peanut dipping sauce.

Jazz Upstairs, the perfect place to chill down with your friends, listen to good music and have a plate of the best momos ever. Lazimpal.

Tapas Night with Sangria, for the true flavours of Spain indulge in Tapas buffet snacks with a glass of Sangria @ Rs499. 17 June onwards, every Friday 6pm onwards. Splash Bar and Grill, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpal.

Arabian Nights. taste the culinary delights from the Middle East every Friday at The Cafe from 6.30pm to 10.30pm. For bookings call Hyatt Regency, Boudha at 4491234.

Cinnamon Grill Lounge, offers delicious food and good music, added bonus! live performance by Ciney Gurung every Saturday, Jhamsikhel.

GETAWAYS

Adventure De’ Monsoon Mania, a two day fun trip that includes beach games, typical Nepali games Guchha, Chungi, Kabaddi, drinking competition and live performance by the Saayas band organised by Country Road 4 Hamro Soach in association with Himalayan Enchanter Treks & Expedition. 8 to 9 July, Departure time 6.30am, 8am (rafters), 2pm (non-rafters), Royal Beach Camp.

Join the 1 Generation

UPSTAIRS CAFÉ

Sl dotted piece of roast pork, pickled carrots, julienned cucumbers and sprigs of mint, christened with pâte, is a tasty vestige of Indochine.

Cà phê sữa (cappuccino). Unique to Vietnamese café culture, the coffee concoction is presented in a filter construction that slow drips dark roast into a goey layer of sweetened condensed milk, served iced or hot. Upstairs’s rendition could be a few beans stronger.

Bánh mì Việt sandwich. probably the only good that came out of French colonialism in Southeast Asia, the marriage of a crusty baguette with

Gôi hoa chuối. Banana hearts, common in Southeast Asian dishes, are a meat alternative with a texture comparable to the artichoke. A lovechild of the Chinese chicken salad and Malaysian yee sang, the banana flower salad at Upstairs is made from rehydrated rice paper, crispy vegetables and steamed banana hearts drizzled with a sweet and tangy dressing.

Phở. The quintessential Vietnamese meal, phở consists of rice noodles, lime, bean sprouts and basil or mint churned in a clear chicken and vegetarian phở. But trumps with its duck special. Sijun heo rim. A house specialty, the caramelised pork ribs make Upstairs worthy of a weekly standard dive.

Head 100 meters north from the US Embassy, turn right into the first alley and climb Upstairs.

SOMEPLACE ELSE

Not quite búsqueda, not quite ramen, phở (phở) is a staple. A Vietnamese hotpot that has fast become an affordable and reliable fixture in the global kitchen. Lucky, Kathmandu has jumped on this trend and made Upstairs worthy of a weekly standard dive.
E coli alert

The authorities dealing with the recent E coli bacterial outbreak in Germany could have drawn lessons from travel medicine literature. E Coli and other bacteria like shigella, campylobacter and salmonella are a constant source of problem for tourists and expatriates in developing countries. (The native population is also affected and suffer severe gastroenteritis, but locally probably require a more sizeable dose of the organism to fall prey.)

Halogen compounds like iodine and chlorine tablets are useful companions of tourists in the developing world. In Germany, even as the hunt was on to find the source of the E coli outbreak, an effective means to deal with the problem would have been to tell the German public at large to soak all salad for at least 20 minutes in iodine or chlorine solution. This procedure would have killed the E coli and inhibited the outbreak.

In Nepal we tell people who wish to eat salads to buy a small bottle of 5 % Lugol’s iodine (locally available) and to put 6 drops of this in 1 l of water and soak the raw vegetables in this solution with a bit of stirring and allow it to remain in contact for 20 minutes to kill the pathogens (except probably cyclospora, a seasonal cause of diarrhea in expatriates). Chlorine tablets can also be used, but potass (potassium permanganate) is not effective and causes teeth staining. Washing the salad just with bottled or boiled water is unhelpful because a germicidal activity is necessary.

An important point on water purification (which is unrelated to cleaning salad) is that all pathogens are killed as soon as the water starts boiling. For good measure you can let the water boil for one minute, but there is absolutely no need to boil the water for 10 or more minutes even at high altitude where the barometric pressure is lower and water boils more promptly.

Finally, a sobering thought: there must be many infectious disease outbreaks we never hear of in countries like Nepal because of lack of surveillance and detection. The Health Ministry and related INGOs need to strive for better documentation so that effective plans can be made. But for now Germany can certainly use a page from available travel medicine literature.
Last Friday, after participating in a literary event in the starched environs of the Nepal Bharat Library in New Road, I made my way to a Jhamel bookshop only to find the space below it crammed with those present for the opening of an art exhibition by Ragini Upadhyay. After once more confirming that had I the time, I’d love to spend a year held hostage in this particular bookshop, I ran across to Yala Maya Kendra, where Bhaskar Dhungana was previewing his short movies. The rain began, relentless, but could not prevent us from stumbling through running streets and dripping eaves to finally arrive at a Newari bhoj in Chyasal, that warren to the east of Mangal Bajar.

I was bemused (and entertained) by the range of events on offer that weekend. Doubtless, people across the Valley were congregating in other galleries, bars, restaurants, cinema halls, malls and public spaces, the totality of their experiences making for a panorama of what you can do in Kathmandu on any given day. These days, things have moved on somewhat from the time renting a VHS tape from Suwal was occasion for the entire joint family to sprawl across straw mats and while away a Saturday, and even that would have represented an advance on your generic Kakani bhoj, or picnic.

As I’ve noted before in this space, the world has come to Nepal, and Nepal is making its own world at least as far as culture – high and low – is concerned.

But is our latterday cornucopia of consumption really so much of an advance? Far be it from me to bemoan all the choices available to one, but what is the opportunity cost involved in choosing how to spend one’s time (and money)?

It’s not only a matter of choosing between a book launch, an art exhibition, a movie. It could be between the above and a get together with friends, getting on with that hobby (which one?), and a good old-fashioned dalbhat with family. Too often, the more conventional timepasses are passed on in the name of keeping abreast with what’s new.

Does this mean less of the old? Inevitably. Our mental architecture is as clogged as the Kathmandu Valley. But just as we must provide for parks and public spaces where the old can breathe with the young, we must carve out –– and the violence of that expression is exactly what is intended – space within our busy lives to accommodate what we value from the past. Either something has to be given up, or something will give, by which time it is usually too late to go back. That field where you played seven-stone as a child will be gone, and your parents whom you don’t have the time for will be gone, and in your incessant bustling about in a future-oriented present, all you’ll have of the past will be a few photos someone else has uploaded onto Facebook.

In the brave new world of Nepal, every activity is geared towards achievement, making a difference (for oneself), or partaking of something worthwhile. Perhaps we can’t all be renaissance men (and women). Perhaps there is some worth in spending the day playing cards after all. If you still remember how to do that.
The spine of a ridge at 4,100 is where many of the harvesters fall prey to altitude sickness.

Yarsagumpa picking season is also a time for young men and women (like these two from Rukum) from all over mid-western Nepal to meet up and find their partners.

Standing room only on narrow sections of the trail with mules, men and women all carrying enough food and fuel to last them for two months on the high valley.
Jagraj Pun (pictured below), 38, took a long breath, prayed to his ancestors and pitched his tent on the banks of the icy cold stream. His wife held their two-year-old son and heat up the raksi jar. This is going to be their home for the next two months, and the family is getting comfortable after a long trek.

Here, in upper Rukum, it is the picking season for yarsagumba, the Himalayan caterpillar-fungus that is worth its weight in gold in China for its supposed aphrodisiac properties. Chinese medicine’s demand for this creature is generating income for hundreds of thousands impoverished Nepali villagers from Humla to Gorkha.

Just on this one valley alone, there are 7,000 people, some of whom have trekked two weeks, from various parts of mid-western Nepal. The pickers each pay Rs 1,000 to a committee that organises the harvesting every season and provides security from armed robbers who prey on pickers. Many like Jagraj have come with their families, entire villages in mid-western Nepal are padlocked during the yarsagumba picking season. The trail is steep and made more difficult by the sheer numbers of people.

At their destination in Pupal Valley, the official yarsagumba picking is declared by opening a gun shot, and suddenly thousands of people fan out like ants up the grassy slopes. It is strictly ‘first come first gets’ because yarsa harvests decline steadily in the two months that the pickers are here.

On the first day itself Dharmajit Pun of Pelma in Tukum found 45 caterpillars, a family of six found 30, Nainkala of Thabi in Rolpa found only one, and 19-year-old Hiramati of Ranma in Rukum hadn’t found a single caterpillar even by the end of the second day.

Yarsagumba from Rukum and Dolpo are big and bright yellow and fetch the best prices. One kg of yarsagumba is worth Rs 30,000 here, but is Rs 100,000 in Kathmandu and US $8,000 by the time it gets to Shanghai. Yarsagumba worth Rs 1.4 million in Kathmandu was harvested here last year from this valley alone. An average family of four can earn up to Rs 140,000 in the two months they spend up here, but they have to spend about a quarter of that in food.

Old-timers say yarsagumba harvests are declining and there will come a time soon when the caterpillar-fungus and butterflies that they metamorphose from will be extinct in these mountains.
Editorial in Rajdhani, Doha

For some time now, there is growing public perception that interference by foreign governments in Nepal has become more intense. The reasons could be many: the disunity among the political parties, the growing balance of payments gap, the burgeoning petroleum import bill or cross-border crime. In most of these areas, Nepal’s rulers are not clued in, they are apathetic while foreign governments are stepping in to fill the vacuum. What is the question arises, does Nepal even have a foreign policy?

Traditionally, foreign policy is the policy of the party in power at any given time. But because there is a balance of power between the left and non-left parties, foreign policy is ad hoc, and not in the overall long-term national interest.

A country that is geo-

Mid-year review

Editorial in Karobar, 20 June

The Nepal Tourism Year 2011, which started with the ambitious aim of bringing in one million tourists, is half way through. Yet, we do not seem close to achieving our targets. The five-star hotels are not satisfied with the room occupancy, the locals who invested in home stays are now skeptical about it, and tourism festivals do not look very encouraging.

It is time for us to now evaluate our shortcomings in promoting Nepal internationally. Perhaps we announced the tourism year too soon, without considering the support system required for it. Not enough effort was put in to develop the required infrastructure and little work that had been started was stalled because of the delayed budget. Yes, the budget was delayed, but the Tourism Year Secretariat and the Tourism Board cannot pass the blame on budget delay.

The truth is both the government and the private sector have failed in promoting the tourism year. Distributing few brochures and posters is not enough to change the perception of Nepal internationally. Little has been done to attract internal tours.

The politicians too have forgotten their promise of not calling any bandas during 2011. They have conveniently deployed their sister-organizations to call strikes, even against the arrest of a criminal.

The best thing to do would be to evaluate tourism year and develop a new strategy for a half-year success.
Will the Maoists split?

Sudheer Sharma in Kantipur, 18 June

The top three leaders of the Maoists who appeared together on the stage in Rautahat last week announced the party would not split. In a two-hour long program, the leaders were seen avoiding talking to each other.

The split is now manifested vertically down to the cadre level who mock of rival leaders openly by name. The leaders are all holding separate meetings of their supporters, publishing separate newspapers and magazines, forming parallel committees. It is as if the party has virtually split already.

Many argue that this is just a strategy. But given the party’s internal disarray in recent times, one can easily conclude that this is not to distract the other parties. It might have helped their bargaining position with the NC on the number of PLA to be integrated and their facilities, but the rift has landed the Maoists in serious trouble.

The Kiran Baidya faction believes there is no alternative to revolt, a fight for national independency against Indian hegemony. The Baburam Bhattarai faction favours peace and constitution and believes Nepal’s unequal relations with India have to be sorted out diplomatically, instead of irritating Beijing now. Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s stance on the issue of peace and constitution is similar to that of Bhattarai but it varies on India, where his line is closer to Baidya’s. The strategy of this faction is to bring together all anti-Indian political forces, and the Khanal-led coalition was conceived as preliminary model.

If it is to avoid a split, the Maoist party now has three alternatives: First: compromise saying the party split will not benefit anyone Second: collate opinion of their cadres on three separate political documents, which they adopted in 2004/05 Third: call a national convention.

If none of the above work, the Maoists will split. This is nothing new in the Nepali communist movement, but the Maoists remained undivided despite differences over the years. If the Maoists internal disputes are not resolved, this will not only affect the peace process but also have political impact on the national level.
I t looks like the implied threat from donor governments in Kathmandu that any party organizing bunds will be denied funding and/or visas is already doing the trick. Last week, the Youthful Force had announced a bund against a government lead by its own mother party to protest the arrest of their leader for beating up a journalist. It was mysteriously and immediately withdrawn because top leaders of the UML youth wing suddenly realized they’d never be able to overstay their visas in the land of the free and the home of the brave. More ideas for visa deterrence and rewards of the braves. More ideas for visa deterrence and rewards of the braves. More ideas for visa deterrence and rewards of the braves.

- Feuding sports council officials will not get British visas for the Olympics
- CA members accused of VAT fraud will be on a Schengen shitlist
- Those making illegal U-turns on Putali Sadak will not be eligible for DV lottery
- YCL and YF members beating up journalists won’t even be allowed into Bihar
- Baddie extortionists get visa to finally fix this country:
  - VA members selling red passports cannot have Indian ration cards
  - Relatives of tiger poachers will not get student visas for Australia (tigers and rhinos can travel without visas to Melbourne Zoo)
  - Ministers who are ex-war criminals will get a visa waiver and an all-expenses paid trip to The Hague
  - Owners of illegal quarries will get expedited visas for the Gulag Archipelago
  - Those caught stealing electricity will have their request for political asylum in Belgium rejected
  - Corrupt NOC and NAC officials and their political bosses will be on the BI visa watchlist
- PKD had postponed the party’s central committee meeting again to buy time to mollify Mohan (“Bad Hair Day”) Baidya by inviting him to the Pistachio Palace for a tete-a-tete. But it did not go as planned: Kiran immediately brought up The List of the Chairman’s 18 Deviations. Why are you going around meeting phoren intelligence handlers without telling us? You have developed a dangerous personality cult. And now that Awesome’s grand-dotter is becoming a Xavierite, can others be far behind? Another Baddie student of the Cranti-Curry persuasion has been warning senior leaders not to exhibit bourgeois tendencies by enrolling their kids in private schools, but this hasn’t stopped them from doing exactly that. And now that Awesome’s grand-dotter is becoming a Xavierite, can others be far behind? Another Baddie student of the Cranti-Curry persuasion has been warning senior leaders not to exhibit bourgeois tendencies by enrolling their kids in private schools, but this hasn’t stopped them from doing exactly that. And now that Awesome’s grand-dotter is becoming a Xavierite, can others be far behind? Another Baddie student of the Cranti-Curry persuasion has been warning senior leaders not to exhibit bourgeois tendencies by enrolling their kids in private schools, but this hasn’t stopped them from doing exactly that.

PKD must admire the hon’ble prime minister for going about his duties as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. One month into the three-month extension of the constitution deadline, he has very conveniently forgotten to step down as promised in the 5-pt agreement, the peace process is stuttering, the budget is uncertain. Yet, JN has all the time in the world to lay the foundation stones, unveil statues, declare Nepal landmine-free and declare Kaski open defection-free. No wonder PKD wants his job so badly. To Whom It May Concern: henceforth pls invite Upadro Yadav for a tete-a-tete. But it did not go as planned: Kiran immediately brought up The List of the Chairman’s 18 Deviations. Why are you going around meeting phoren intelligence handlers without telling us? You have developed a dangerous personality cult. And now that Awesome’s grand-dotter is becoming a Xavierite, can others be far behind? Another Baddie student of the Cranti-Curry persuasion has been warning senior leaders not to exhibit bourgeois tendencies by enrolling their kids in private schools, but this hasn’t stopped them from doing exactly that.

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And now it’s time for our weekly update on the intra-Maoist feud. Despite the show of unity in Rautahat last week, the body language was revealing. And how come they arrived in Gaur in two different helicopters from Kathmandu? Either the party is rolling in dough, or the leaders all have their own independent source of funds.

- Work permits for the Gulag Archipelago
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