Healthy progress

Nepal’s maternal mortality rate has dropped from 850 per 100,000 live births twenty years ago to 280 today.

Despite being in a state of statelessness since 2006, and a ruinous war that pushed health care back decades, despite corruption and mismanagement, Nepal has surprised the international community with its progress in maternal-child health. This issue of Nepali Times has special coverage on how it was done.

Hospitals that are affordable and efficient, health assistants who prefer to work in the districts, an amazing project to save the lives of mothers and newborns. Having a dedicated and compassionate general practitioner in a far-flung hospital makes the difference between life and death to many Nepalis every day.

By the way p3

Anurag Acharya
It doesn’t seem to matter whether the head of state is an absolute monarch, a constitutional king, or a ceremonial president as far as the government’s policies and plans are concerned.
Health reform makes health care more affordable, expands coverage to all citizens and makes our health system sustainable.

That was US President Barack Obama defending his Health Care Bill earlier this year, but he may as well have been speaking about Nepal. Of all the responsibilities of the state, guaranteeing citizens affordable health care is primary. In a country cursed with inequality and neglect like Nepal, it means making sure that malnutrition doesn’t stunt children, that they are vaccinated against childhood killers, and that anemic mothers do not give premature birth to underweight babies and they have access to skilled maternity care.

It is in an elected government’s terms of reference to do all it can to prevent infectious diseases, and when people do fall ill, it or have to give birth, hospital care will be accessible and affordable. Poor health care in Nepal is not a medical problem, it is a political one.

But despite being in a state of statelessness now for more than five years, despite a ruinous decade-long war that set health care back decades, despite corruption, mismanagement and an uncaring bureaucracy, Nepal has been internationally recognised for its remarkable progress in maternal-child health. More than 850 mothers in every 10,000 births survive (a national average), and 80% of deliveries in private hospitals now receive the care they need. In Kathmandu, the city’s government hospitals are now the ones rated the most affordable and highly regarded.

True, there are still parts of Nepal where these figures are high, but the country is set to meet most of the UN’s Millennium Development Goal health targets by 2015. Just imagine how much more progress would have been made if there hadn’t been a conflict, and the state machinery was more responsible and responsive.

Even with all the achievements in mother-child survival, vaccination programs and awareness, health care access in Nepal is seriously skewed. Thirteen medical schools produce 1,300 MBBS doctors a year. But most of them work in private hospitals in the city, or emigrate. Same story with staff nurses. The Health Ministry needs just 140 doctors for 75 district and zonal hospitals, but it finds it difficult to fill those posts. Most private hospitals are too expensive, government hospitals are mostly mismanaged, and in the absence of a national health insurance scheme, Nepalis are left to fend for themselves.

As the health focus in this issue shows, there are working examples of hospitals that are affordable and efficient. There are health assistants who are not attracted by the bright lights of the cities, and there are government programs for the care of mothers and newborns that are saving lives. We need specialist doctors and surgeons, too, but for the bulk of the population, MDGP (general practitioners) are more appropriate. These are all-rounders who can perform caesarians, simple orthopedics, and are able to diagnose childhood ailments. MDGPs are foot soldiers on the frontlines of health care in rural Nepal. And our experience with MDGPs in the hospital in Philim has saved lives of hundreds of mothers and babies because of a dedicated MDGP, the Chautara district hospital has stayed relevant because of one doctor who refused to work in the city. Many mothers used to die due to complicated pregnancies until an MDGP arrived in Baglung, and he is now performing 800 deliveries a year, many of them C-sections.

Having a dedicated and compassionate general practitioner in a far-flung hospital makes a difference between life and death to many Nepalis every day. Their work gives the country a healthy majority. They are the true heroes of Nepal today.
President Ram Baran Yadav read out the government’s annual policies and programs to parliament this week. Successive governments since the Panchayat have been used to dishing out platitudes in this annual ritual, and it doesn’t seem to matter whether the head of state reading it is an absolute monarch, a constitutional one, or a ceremonial president.

The vacuity of Nepali politics couldn’t be more glaring as the opposition couldn’t find anything more substantial than the phrase ‘People War’ to latch on to in the 22-page document. Who cares what it is called, point is it was a people’s war because 16,000 people were needlessly killed.

A slightly more substantial critique of the policy paper came from the private sector. One can understand their misgivings because the document doesn’t back a full-blown market economy. But this does not mean the government has ignored the private sector, as some economic pundits have alleged.

One has to almost sympathise with a government which, while it aims to promote transparency and social accountability in the private sector on one hand, has fallen for the liquidity crisis created by corporates to roll back on its financial disclosure policy for investments over Rs 1 million. Big Business is even lobbying through commercial banks to get rid of the Anti-Money Laundering Investigation Department.

The government aims to boost investment in the large manufacturing sector with incentives and assurance of protection, but it is unlikely to have any positive impact as long as the country reels under 16-hour power cuts in winter, union rivalries and extortion. It might actually make sense for the government to boost the rural private sector by promoting small and cottage industries in the areas where there are community-built mini-hydro plants. Cooperative savings and rural banking can be encouraged to ensure hassle free loans to those setting up rural agribusinesses. This could prove crucial in augmenting the rural economy, creating jobs and reversing the manpower flight.

The establishment needs to appreciate that unless Nepal invests in agriculture and become food sufficient, we cannot control double digit food inflation which has robbed people of their savings. City slickers poked fun at the government’s decision to provide crop and cattle insurance. But those ridiculing it either don’t know (or don’t care) about the about the vulnerabilities of small farmers. If the banks can be bailed out of a crisis created by their own greed and recklessness, why can’t poor farmers be insured against natural and market induced calamities?

One major reason for the decline of agriculture production in Nepal is the continued conversion of fertile farmlands into housing plots and loan collateral. A scientific land-use policy can help to put a halt on random plotting of farmlands in the Valley and along the Tarai.

The government is yet to table the SEZ (Special Economic Zone) bill in the legislative parliament but there is concern it may be used by those who control the government’s cogs and levers to confiscate the land and livelihoods of locals in the name of economic growth. The day hunger for growth turns into growth of hunger is when this resource will turn into a curse. State-led land grab in India have inspired indigenous protest movements, and an insurgency.

The government aims to “gradually improve the quality of basic free education”, but is unclear about the definition of basic education or the time it needs to ensure its quality. Free basic health, is also not clearly defined but since it is constitutionally guaranteed, will be introduced in nine districts in the Tarai within a year. There is no talk of national health insurance except for civil servants. Barring some sections that look like they have been cut and pasted from the time of King Birendra, the paper is workable. The opposition does not have to literally live up to its name. Why not, for a change, play a constructive role in monitoring the implementation of government’s program?
Banking on technology
Dailekh leapfrogs technology to bring banking to rural Nepal

DEWAN RAI in DAILEKH

Rupa Thapa (pictured), 66, of Pagnath village, was the first person in Dailekh to receive a Smart Card under ‘Sajilo Banking Sewa’ launched by Siddhartha Bank aimed at bringing in Nepal’s remote areas into the banking net. As a pilot project, the cards have been distributed to people under the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) cash-and-food in Dailekh.

WFP beneficiaries receive family food rations as well as Rs 90 per day for up to 80 days of labor on community roads, irrigation canals and drinking water projects. Siddhartha Bank is involved and has benefitted 484 households in Pagnath VDC alone.

The Smart Card works as a passbook and cardholders can avail all banking facilities through it. Later, Siddhartha will also allow depositors to also collect remittances, pay utility bills and disburse credit and micro-insurance.

A banker travelling to the village carries a portable battery-charged Point of Sale machine linked to bank’s online network through mobile telephone service to make transactions. Smart Cards are similar to debit cards, but they use fingerprint for identification instead of personal identification codes, which makes them safer than debit and ATM cards.

“Rural customers in future can enjoy modern banking services from their nearest locality through branchless banking service,” says Siddhartha Bank CEO Surender Bhandari (see interview).

According to the Rural Microfinance Development Centre in Kathmandu only a quarter of the population has access to financial services. Siddhartha Bank’s Easy Banking service has shown that with right technology and little innovation, banks can tap the wealth in the rural market and ease the liquidity crisis.

Says Bank Naryan Shrestha of Nepal Rastra Bank’s initiative to extend banking services to rural Nepal.

Nepali Times spoke to Surender Bhandari, the CEO of Siddhartha Bank, about the challenges and rewards of extending financial services to rural Nepal.

Nepali Times: What was the rationale behind launching smart card in a remote district like Dailekh?
Surender Bhandari: Difficult topography and limited availability of resources and infrastructure in rural areas makes it virtually impossible for financial institutions to provide banking services through traditional banking.

Hence, with new technologies like smart cards, it is possible to offer modern banking services in rural areas as well.

What has been the response?
As we see, the response is very encouraging. Local residents and government officials appreciated the service. Once we launch our full-fledged service customers can enjoy cash deposits, withdrawals, remittance collection, utility bill payments, credit disbursement and so on.

Where else in the world has this worked?
The most successful examples are M Pesa in Kenya, FINO, EKO and ALW in India, Easy Paisa in Pakistan and G Cash in Philippines.

However, success depends on the business module, technology and the channels being used. In some places, mobile phone based branchless banking has become successful whereas in other places smart card-based modules have worked. We shall develop and use a business module and technologies appropriate to the place depending on the topography, demography and other available infrastructure.

What are the risks and potential problems?
We have been using latest security features available. Our hardware and software being used for the services are fully compliant with international level security certifications. We are also minimising transactional risk by using multiple factor authentications like biometric/ fingerprint verification, voice guidance in local language, smart card with photo and other details printed on it. All these features make the service secure and robust.
The Nepal Business Climate Survey 2010, recently published by Interdisciplinary Analysts (IDA), reported deficiencies in governmental coordination and monitoring of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which employ more than 70 per cent of the country’s workforce.

IDA, a Kathmandu-based research and consultancy firm, with support from the Asian Foundation, evaluated 1,023 micro, small and medium enterprises in four districts—Morang, Rupendehi, Kaski and Banke.

Despite the limited sample, the survey’s findings reveal a general discontent among SMEs regarding the government’s inadequate involvement in the business sector. In the survey findings, 33 per cent of respondents said that government officials never bother to reach out to them. Although a quarter of them responded that the involvement was through business associations, a majority of the small firms in Nepal are not members of any association. This means that SMEs have little opportunity to interact with the government and share their concerns.

“The government plays a multi-dimensional role in the business sector,” says Sudhindra Sharma, who led the survey at IDA. “But it appears that the government has failed in its facilitating and monitoring roles.”

Nearly half of the respondents said that no inspections of their businesses on the basis of regulations have ever been conducted. 77.5 per cent said officials seldom come to discuss policies or regulations that may affect their enterprises. More worrisome is that 65 per cent of respondents said they never receive advance notices when changes are made in the central government’s rules and regulations that particularly affect their business.

Considering the employment opportunities that small enterprises offer, the government should take an interest in training and guiding entrepreneurs in the area. With such detachment, it is unlikely that the government can improve its policies that will support the growth of SMEs in Nepal. Unsurprisingly, the survey reveals that the public office which interacts most with these companies is the Internal Revenue Department, reiterating the perception of the SMEs that the government is more concerned with the revenue it can earn from such enterprises, than with facilitating its development.

The statistics indicate SMEs’ disillusionment with the government and its failure to promote an efficient and cooperative market environment. Only when the government—on all levels—engages with SMEs through clear and direct channels can such an environment be fostered. Such a two-way exchange would facilitate effective policies and training and ultimately, a healthier business climate.

Flying green
Yeti Airlines partnered with Tiger Mountain Karnali Lodge & Camp to plant 3500 tree saplings in Bindrapuri Madhyapur community forest to inaugurate their Green Project. Yeti airlines will plant one tree on behalf of every passenger that board on Kathmandu- Dhading or Kathmandu- Nepalgunj flight.

Safety first
Morang Auto Works conducted Yamaha Safe Riding Science program at Kathmandu Engineering College to teach riders about road safety. MAW has conducted this program in four separate colleges in Kathmandu.

Going international
The first IB World School in Nepal, Ullens, is now running the IB Diploma Program. The program is an internationally accredited high school diploma.
The greening of Greenland

Book by an Icelandic photographer on how climate change is affecting the livelihoods of the inhabitants of the Arctic Circle has lessons for the Himalaya

The Arctic ice sheet of northern Greenland has long been ‘off the map’. Today, this remote region has grabbed the world’s attention because its glaciers are the most visible indicators of global climate change. The retreating glaciers have exposed the land and its resources, making the region one of the most disputed territories on earth. With several nation-states laying claim to the mining and oil rights of the region, what remains of the ice sheet is an ambiguous international zone waiting to be mined.

The melting ice sheet is in fact a landscape that has been inhabited for thousands of years. The hunting communities of northern Greenland have adapted to a harsh and unpredictable environment. The town of Uummannaq, for example, is perched on top of a rocky cliff to avoid periodic tsunami caused by icebergs calving from a nearby glacier. The people who live here are acutely aware of the sheer contingency of life on earth. Unlike much of the ‘modern’ world, they haven’t forgotten that nature, far from being a harmonious entity, is fundamentally unstable.

The Greenlandic word for ‘nature’, pinngortitaaq, literally means, ‘to come into being’, and is derived from the word pinngorpoq or ‘becoming’. For these Greenlanders, nature is not some kind of ‘big other’ or even something ‘over there’ that needs to be saved. What is called nature is nothing less than the world in its becoming.

But unlike the episodic ‘becoming’ of the tsunami, today’s climate change has produced a more permanent tsunami that threatens their traditional livelihood. Over the past few decades, entire sheets of ice have melted into the ocean, transforming the region completely. Many communities can no longer make a living through hunting because warming temperatures have shortened their hunting seasons.

In ‘lost Days of the Arctic’, the Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson has documented the twilight of these landscapes, and the dying breed of hunters who inhabit them. Like filmmaker Werner Herzog, who undertook a similar project in Antarctica in the film Encounters at the End of the World, Axelsson’s camera focuses less on the Arctic equivalents of fluffy penguins, stranded polar bears, and on something that is far more difficult to evoke: the ‘dreams’ of the landscape and its inhabitants. From a close-up of the face of a sled dog howling in hunger, to a settlement dwarfed by an immense iceberg, each and every subject is captured in glorious, otherworldly Arctic light. A similar picture book is dying to be shot and written about how receding glaciers in the Himalaya are affecting livelihoods in Nepal and Tibet.

But these disappearing landscapes also signal a
Further reading:
www.crymogea.is
www.polarworld.co.uk
www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jul/o5/oil-supplies-arctic

non-human future in which we are no longer present. Most scientists believe that the climate of the Arctic is now at a tipping point, after which its ecology will be irreversibly transformed. But perhaps the most important message of Axelsson’s book is that this process is more complex than the narrow vocabulary of contemporary environmentalism suggests.

The people and wildlife of Greenland are not mere victims of the effects of industrial development. Many Greenlanders participate in, and are beneficiaries of, the nascent mining and oil industries. In fact, many welcome the ‘greenlanding’ of Greenland because the melting ice offers the promise of a more stable, ‘green’ ecology in which it is easier to survive and make a living. Ironically, it also represents something that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago: the possibility of Greenland becoming an autonomous, ‘modern’ nation.

By projecting a false image of nature in opposition to culture, ecologists might be obstructing their own efforts to protect what remains of the earth’s landscape. Geologists suggest that the earth has advanced from the Holocene, the geological era that began more than 10,000 years ago, to a new era termed the Anthropocene.

While this shift in terminology is meant to draw attention to the extent of human impact on the geo-sphere, it also reminds us that its effects are included in rather than separated from the fragile ecology of the earth. Like the hunters of Greenland who envision nature as a work in progress, those who hope to protect the earth should accept the fact that its ecology has adapted to human interventions. Milap Dixit

'Last Days of the Arctic' By Ragnar Axelsson
Crymogea Polarworld, 2010

As Nepal’s most modern printing facility, Jagadamba Press is known for its state-of-the-art equipment. But we never forget the human touch.

Boudha Stupa Restaurant & Café
“Gyakok” wood-fired pizza, Home made pastas
Himalayan Arabic coffee
free Wi-Fi
Boudha - 6
Tel 5130681
7 Days script writing workshop, organised by Indigenous Film Archive (IFA) for innovative Nepali writers and filmmakers. Till 10 July, 9am to 5pm, fee Rs 1000, application deadline: 29 June, 9851063480

Career Fair Nepal, a platform to obtain information regarding career opportunities. 8 to 9 July, 12pm onwards, Bhrikuti Mandap

10 July, 9am to 5pm, fee Rs 1000, Man Bahadur Harijan. Display of works created by local artists in ceramic exhibition by Ceramic Hands, ceramic printmakers Sangita Ghimire, Manju Shyam, Tika Datta Dahal and Bishan Raj Bhandari. Till 16 July, 9am to 6pm, Satya Dance Academy, Bhabhaniti, 9803822622

Summer Music and Dance Camp, organised by Kathmandu Centre for Performing Arts, to 19 July, Satya Dance Academy, Bhabhaniti, fee Rs 1000 (scholarships available)

Nepal Cine Symposium, a South Asia focused international film network and promotion platform for cinema which includes a film festival ‘Something like a film festival’ organised by DocSkool. 19 to 22 November, submission open until 30 August, www.cinesymposium.com, amanyu@cinesymposium.com

The Great Indian Education Fair, a unique education exhibition showcasing the finest Indian universities, colleges and institutions. 22 to 23 July, The Everset Hotel, New Baneshwor

Ink & Clay Expressions in Clay, ceramic art exhibition by Ceramic Hands, display of works created by local and foreign artists under the tutelage of Kaileepri Shrestha and ‘P’ by Man Bahadur Harjan. Till 23 July, 11am to 6pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Bambahara Revisited

Etching Art Exhibition, featuring works of upcoming Nepali printmakers Sangita Ghimire, Manju Shyam, Tika Datta Dahal and Bishan Raj Bhandari, till 23 July, 9am to 6pm, Satya Dance Academy, Bhabhaniti, 9803822622

East meets West

Sukarma performs in La Perrière and makes a former ambassador nostalgic for Nepal

Music and Fashion: The Grind, featuring the best DJs in town, 9 July, 2 to 10pm, Hotel Shahanshah Poodle, Rs 1000, fee entry for ladies, 9801517605, 9851050919

Mukti N Revival at House of Music, don’t miss out on your chance to hear live performance by one of Nepal’s favourite musician, 9 July, 9 to 11pm, House of Music, Thamel

Summer Music Festival, a month long celebration of summer with unique mix of musicians. 8 July, Mukti N Revival, 12 July, April Rush, 14 July, Aster Studios, 15 July, Sapak, 7.30pm, entrance Rs 200, 5528362, 9841259007

Funky Fresh E.L.E.M.E.N.T.S, a youth empowerment program for young hip hop enthusiasts above the age of 13 to harness their skills to become independent hip hop artists. 23 to 30 July, 10am to 6pm, Satya Media Arts Collective, Jawalakhel, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jawalakhel, fee Rs 1000 (scholarships available), application deadline 21 July

Organic Market, a weekly organic market where along with picking the fresh organic produce for you can enjoy brunch. 9 July, 10am to 12pm, 1965, Kathmandu

Sunday Brunch @ Red Dingo. 10.30am to 2pm, Rs 1200 for adults, Rs 500 for kids aged 5 to 12, Jawalakhel

Picasso, the perfect place to spend your Friday evenings listening to Jazz and dining on French cuisine. Live music on Fridays, Jhamarikhet, 5009076

9th Annual Wine Festival, Kilroy’s monsoon wine festival will feature 15 varieties of exquisite wines from six different countries. 1 July to 15 September, Kilroy’s of Kathmandu, Thamel, 4250440

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. For bookings call 4491234

Tapas Night with Sangria, for the true flavours of Spain indulge in Tapas buffet snacks with a glass of Sangria @ Rs 409. 17 June onwards, every Friday, 6pm onwards, Splash Bar and Grill, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat

Irish Pub, for the simple reason that the place actually feels like a bar. Don’t miss out on their Irish coffee. Lazimpat, Ananda Bhawan, 4416027

Mike’s Breakfast, huge breakfasts and a never-ending supply of "true" Irish Pub, from 2004 to 2007.

VIVE LE NEPAL: Members of Sukarma line up on stage after their concert in France last week. Michel Jolivet is second from right.

Now that Nepalis are considering adopting a French-style constitution, it may bear reminding that our politicians are duly trained in writing a new constitution in a few days. And France is in the throngs of picking a new president out of a mob of candidates each more appalling than the others. Sukarma helped us forget at least for a short while that elections are next year.

Our two countries are not in good shape. I miss Nepal. I wish it influences the curve of events in France. Thanks to the Nepali brand of federalism, I could yell loud enough to obtain self-government for La Perrière, forget about Sarkozy and Strauss-Kahn, and welcome tax-free all my friends from Nepal. Vive le Nepal.

Michel Jolivet served as Ambassador of France to Nepal from 2004 to 2007.

Michel Jolivet
coffee amidst a lush garden setting characterise this café, popular among tourists and locals alike.

The Factory, a trendy resotor for a refreshing stopover in the chaos that is Thamel. Great food and drinks, with zesty music. Don’t miss out on their cheesecake. It’s a must.

Mandala Street, Thamel

The Lazy Gringo

Real Mexican food is generally an anomaly beyond the Western Hemisphere. Rounds of naan or pita masquerade as tortillas, and sweet, tangy curd substitutes for sour cream. But the Arizona-style Mexican preparations at the Lazy Gringo on Jawalakhel Chowk, albeit more Southwestern than ‘south of the border’, break substitutions with beef options and seasonal luxuries like jalapeños and guacamole (if you’re lucky), prompting this born-again reviewer to rallying cries of refried goodness: “Si, se puede!”

Dry-erase markers and laminated order sheets are charming, inviting customers to build their own burrito. But for the lazy gringo, the menu offers typical New Mexican fare served on flour tortillas including tacos, enchiladas, quesadillas and even gorditas (puffy tacos).

The Stuffed Gringo, a wide mouthed burrito packed with rice, sour cream, salsa, guacamole (sadly unavailable at the time of review) and choice of beef, chicken or “bean only” is a testament to the hearty appetites of the Southwest US.

Alternatively, if you’re believing in ‘everything is better fried’, indulge in the chimichanga, a fried, crunchy version of the burrito. Stuffed jalapeños with white cheese, battered and fried are a hit on the specials. But the fry fiesta isn’t over yet. For dessert sample the sopapillas, fried tortillas dusted with powdered sugar and served with honey, or the fried ice cream (yes, you read right), an invention only an American could conjure.

And thick Oreo or Snickers milkshakes and root beer floats point friendly fingers to its American owner.

Marco Pollo

On your way to the city zoo, track back on the roundabout 270 degrees to the gringo, enter through the back and up to the first floor.

Space
Bread ‘n water
Service
Deal-icious
Repeat?
When the friendly 22-year-old American Nick Simons (pictured) arrived in Kathmandu in 2002 he worked for an NGO in the hydropower sector. In March 2003 he returned home to New York and told his parents, Jim and Marilyn Simons, how he had grown to love Nepal sharing with them his dream to study medicine. Before starting his mandatory premedical course in the autumn of 2003, he decided to travel to Bali where he tragically drowned while swimming.

In 2006, Jim and Marilyn set up the Nick Simons Institute in Kathmandu in memory of their son to provide quality health care to people in rural Nepal. It has had a remarkable impact on training and supporting health facilities in rural Nepal. Partnering with other hospitals and organisations, NSI has helped train and support over 1,000 health care workers and 99 per cent are still working in their rural locations.

NSI has realised the importance of working with government institutions so that the impact of the program (for example, training skilled birth attendants) is more effective and widespread. Much-needed refresher courses for health workers in rural areas has met with a great deal of enthusiasm by the participants which is bound to influence patient care.
We know, now, that the neighbourhood worries Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh a great deal. India has been so caught up with tailing its own shadow that in recent months the government seems to have pretty much taken its hand off the steering wheel. The Great Middle-Class Debate on corruption and black money, which is ending up looking rather farcical as government and civil society activists continue to spar over a proposed bill on this subject, is commanding all attention.

It was to stanch this flow of mixed messages and resultant despair that Manmohan Singh decided to call a select band of editors to hear him on a variety of subjects last week, not least on India’s neighbouring countries.

“You didn’t say anything on the neighbourhood,” said one editor, after the prime minister had offered a tour de horizon on all the challenges that currently confronted India. “Well,” the prime minister answered, “the neighbourhood worries me a great deal, quite frankly.” It was a forthright answer, given without hedging any bets, and it offered several insights into the mind of one of the most influential men in South Asia. Over the next couple of hours or so, there was something on Sri Lanka and Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US troop pullout from that country. Nothing on Nepal. Nor on Bhutan, or the Maldives. Perhaps the PM believes those are the good news stories, or at least not a cause for immediate concern.

Manmohan Singh’s remarks on Sri Lanka, are in fact, quite extraordinary, especially because this is the first time since Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse won the civil war in 2009, after killing LTTE supremo Prabhakaran, that India has criticised him publicly.

Delhi maintained a formidable silence ever since Prabhakaran’s death, including over the Channel Four documentary that showed chilling footage of Sri Lankan soldiers raping Tamil civilian women and maltreating the bodies of dead LTTE soldiers, because Rajapakse did for Delhi what no one else could do since Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by the LTTE in 1991.

Reducing the PM’s concerns on the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils to domestic political arithmetic would be a mistake. It is true that Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha has offered the support of her ailing AIADMK MPs to the Congress-led coalition in Delhi. However, the other Tamil Nadu party, the DMK, is so weakened after its implication in the 2G spectrum scandal, it really has no choice but to pay much more attention to the Congress party.

Manmohan Singh’s courage in speaking up on Sri Lanka is in stark contrast with his undiplomatic remarks on Bangladesh in which he said the Jamaat-e-Islami party was anti-Indian and that it was supported by a quarter of Bangladeshis.

The gaffe has created a deep chasm of distrust in Dhaka just before Foreign Minister SM Krishna’s visit this week. Sonia Gandhi is travelling there later this month and Manmohan Singh will go in September. The offending remarks have since vanished from the government website.

But on one point, the Prime Minister is right. India lives in a “very uncertain neighbourhood … we have to swim and keep our heads high.” Lowering your eyes and re-reading the history books wouldn’t be such a bad idea, either.
No home delivery

It was well past 4 pm but there is still a long line of patients getting their medicine at the pharmacy. The wards are still packed with people. Several things stood out during a recent visit to Dhulikhel Hospital (right). First is that despite being a community hospital, how clean and well-managed it is. There are orderly lines, no shouting and chaos. Secondly, unlike most other private hospitals in Kathmandu, relatives of patients aren’t carrying wads of cash to pay for treatment.

First-time patients at Dhulikhel Hospital pay a registration fee of Rs 15, for which they get a check-up by a cardiologist, nephrologist, a dermatologist or psychiatrist. No further payment is required. On the second visit the patient pays only Rs 10 and medicines are discounted. In-patients pay a daily charge of Rs 150, which includes three meals a day.

For people used to Nepal’s government hospitals, the first thought that comes to mind is that since it is so cheap the quality of service must be bad. But Dhulikhel Hospital probably has the best level of diagnosis and care in Nepal. How do they do it?

“This is a non-profit, community based hospital and our mission is to provide affordable health care to all,” explains Rajendra Koju, administrative director of Dhulikhel Hospital, “when setting the price for any service we just add the cost price, maintenance cost and a slight overhead. We don’t have a profit margin.”

Dhulikhel Hospital gets no support from the government, and although it gets donor help for new investment in equipment and infrastructure, the hospital meets its operational costs from fees.

“Everything comes down to management,” says Koju, during a tour of the wards, “when we know exactly how much we spend and exactly how much we earn, we can set a number that is affordable to the people and yet not a loss for the hospital.”

The question is why can’t other hospitals in Nepal run like that? The answer seems to lie in the extreme commercialisation of Nepal’s private health sector on the one hand, and the mismanagement of government hospitals on the other.

And in complete contrast to other hospitals where relatives of patients have to be so...
When her labour pains started, Debmaya Pariyar hopped onto a bus by herself and headed to the nearest hospital in Nepalgunj. It took her an hour to reach the city. Soon after being admitted into the maternity ward of the Bheri Zonal Hospital, Debmaya gave birth to twins. “I’m glad I listened to the skilled birth attendant in my village,” she says, “she had warned me there could be complications if I gave birth at home.” Here she is last week with her two other daughters, Subina and Khushi, and mother, Nainimaya.

**When 25-year-old Mayarani Chaudhari of Dodhari of Bardiya gave birth to a still-born baby girl, her family starting digging a hole in the ground to bury her. But they decided to call the skilled birth attendant, Pushpa Sigdel, to have a second look. Pushpa found that the baby had its windpipe squeezed by the umbilical chord. She gave artificial resuscitation and revived the baby. Last week, Mayarani posed with daughter, Shami, in her lap and her son, Samir. Pushpa (centre) is her assistant, Luna Rana Magar, are also in the picture. Says Mayarani: “Pushpa Didi is like a goddess to us, she brought my daughter back to life.”**

**Krishna Nepali gave birth to her first baby boy in a hospital in Guliyara of Bardiya because her mother-in-law Himkumari insisted on it. “We used to have babies at home, but now we know it is dangerous for both mothers and babies so we took my daughter-in-law to hospital,” says Himkumari (right). Save the Children is helping the government with community-based newborn care for mothers and their babies in Bardiya. UNICEF and Plan Nepal are involved in other districts.**

---

### Birkha Dai’s clinic

**ABHAYA SHRRESTHA IN MUGU**

Birkha Bahadur Rokaya (**picture**) walks off the trail to where a fallen tree branch has clogged a stream, causing water to form a puddle on the trail. Despite the cold drizzle, he tugs at the branch until the stream gets unblocked and water drains away from the trail. Footprints indicate that other travelers have chosen simply to walk around the puddle.

It is a small gesture, but it shows why Birkha Dai is such a compassionate community organizer in the remote village of Murma of Mugu. He was instrumental in getting the village to build a health post here with the help of the Help Nepal Network (HeNN), a community organization of Nepali individuals all over the world.

Having been a fundraiser for HeNN based in the United States for over six years, I am now in Mugu to see for myself the health post that the organization helped build. It is a long ‘L’ shaped house with stone walls, a wooden roof and a blue-and-white sign. A neat, grassy yard lies in front with a fenced vegetable patch along the side.

The child mortality rate in Mugu is three times the national average, with most children dying due to diarrhoeal dehydration, acute respiratory infection, vaccine-preventable illnesses. Seven years ago, Birkha Dai approached HeNN for funds to construct a health post in his village because he knows first-hand of the high cost of poor healthcare. Four of his children died of illnesses when they were young.

HeNN agreed to provide Rs 500,000 for the health post, and Murma residents chipped in with land and labour costs. The health post now treats up to 20 patients a week and has run two health camps. Retention of health workers is a big problem in remote Nepal, but the health assistant and a midwife, paid by HeNN, remain available around the clock.

The district hospital in Gamgadi is a three-hour walk away, and locals prefer the health post because it saves them time and cost. Although services are basic, the clinic has already saved the lives of mothers with complicated pregnancies. Murma residents are grateful to HeNN and they have other requests: adding another health assistant, building a lodge at the health post so it can generate its own income and subsidise medicines. The local school only goes up to Grade 8, can it be taken up to SLC?

As Birkha Dai and I walk past the jewel-like Rara lake towards the airfield in Talcha we pass others on the trail. From the way they greet him, it is evident that Birkha Dai is such a compassionate community organiser.

Abhya Shrestha is an executive member of Help Nepal Network (www.helpnepal.net) and lives in Chicago.
“Agree on what can be done now…”

Interview with Mani Shankar Aiyar of the Indian National Congress, Naya Patrika, 2 July

Naya Patrika: Why isn’t the Indian establishment willing to accept the Nepali Maoists?

Mani Shankar Aiyar: Nepal is a sovereign country. It is not for the Indian government to dictate who should be the decisive force in Nepal. India is mostly worried about the supposed relations between the Indian and the Nepali Maoists. I have not worked as the defence or home minister of India to say for sure. But as a politician, I can say this for certain that the Maoist parties in the two countries have no more than ideological solidarity.

Do you think there is really some such partnership between the Nepali and the Indian Maoists?

I have not worked as the defence or home minister of India to say for sure. But as a politician, I can say this for certain that the Maoist parties in the two countries have no more than ideological solidarity.

Rakesh Sood, was pelted stones by protesters and shown black flag. It is said that the Indian establishment was greatly upset over this?

We Indians are used to being pelted stones and shown black flags. This is not an unusual incident. I have been at the receiving end of such protests many times while serving in Pakistan. The diplomatic relations of two countries should not be influenced by the reactions of a crowd.

Rakesh Sood, pelted stones by protesters and shown black flag.

It is wrong to assume that India does not want Nepal to have a constitution. Our humble suggestion is that it may not be possible to build a complete constitution at once. But that should not be a reason to obstruct the entire peace process. Nepal can declare a constitution at the earliest by gathering consensus on important subjects and then amend constitution with time to iron out contentious issues. The Indian constitution has been amended 144 times. If now we have no misgivings about it. I am going to advise Maoist chairman Prachanda to do the same: agree on what can be done now and make adjustments later.

Who is next?

On Wednesday, the NC suggested that Pushpa Kamal Dahal should lead a national unity government provided the fundamentals of the peace process move forward.

“On Wednesday, the NC suggested that Pushpa Kamal Dahal should lead a national unity government provided the fundamentals of the peace process move forward.”

Sources say the NC assured Dahal of its support in forming a national unity government if it agreed to the number of Maoist fighters to be integrated, the modality, rank harmonisation and rehabilitation package.

“We considered the gravity of the situation and made conditions more flexible than before,” said a NC leader. “There is no favourable environment within my party at the moment so we may even consider an NC candidate just in case we are not able to lead the government,” the leader quoted Dahal as saying. The NC is said to have told him that the party would name the candidate “within four hours” if it is to lead the government.

Earlier, the Maoists had proposed Baburam Bhattarai to lead the national unity government. He was proposed by vice chairman Narayan Kaji Shrestha after it was approved by Dahal and was seconded by Mohan Baidya. Sources say Bhattarai’s name was proposed in a meeting of office bearers held a few days back and that Dahal put forward his name after being pressured by the two deputies to change his working style in the party and make the leadership inclusive.

After the office bearers’ meeting at Dahal’s residence on Tuesday, Shrestha told reporters that the party would hold talks with other political parties regarding Bhattarai’s candidacy and implementation of the five-point agreement.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“People in the government are plotting to kill me and creating conditions to get me attacked.”

UML leader KP Oli after the home ministry called back the team responsible for his security.

Prime Minister: “The corrupt will not be spared at any cost.”

Arm band: Impunity

Batsyayan in Kantipur, 4 July

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

People in the government are plotting to kill me and creating conditions to get me attacked.”

UML leader KP Oli after the home ministry called back the team responsible for his security.
Baburam Bhattarai in Naya Patrika, 28 June

The five-point agreement was a victory of progressive forces over regression who wanted to dissolve the CA and push the peace process to the brink. However, only one point of the agreement, extension of the CA tenure, has been implemented so far. The peace process and constitution writing have not progressed and there is a fear that the farce of May 28 will be repeated again.

The PLA integration and constitution writing is an end, and a national unity government, the means to achieve it. The debate about whether integration comes first or constitution, whether national government should precede the peace process are irrelevant. Peace process, integration, constitution writing and national government are all inter-related. They should all go simultaneously.

The integration of Maoist combatants has been unnecessarily complicated. We have accepted the old army as our national army, but some political parties tend to overlook the contribution of the Maoist army to historical changes. Let me be clear: the peace process will never complete until the Maoist combatants are integrated in a respectable manner.

We know the army follows certain standards in recruitment, which we have accepted. But Maoist soldiers are also trained like any other army and their battle experience should also be taken into account in the integration process. This shouldn’t be so complicated. We are close to agreement in numbers, we have proposed 8-10,000. We have to finalise the golden handshake package, the rules for ranks and organisational structure after integration. If the political parties are honest and accountable to the state, we are close to an agreement on political and constitutional issues.
Shahi Nepal Bayuseba Nigum

Nepal’s national airline was flying high as long as the country was an absolute monarchy. As soon as we got a constitutional king in 1990 it started being dismantled by the khangi Daul, Dauter & Son-in-law, GmbH. But the real collapse came in the past four years after Nepal became a republic and they dropped ‘Royal’ from Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation. RNAC is now d NAC, No-Aircraft Corruption. Meanwhile, it has emerged to its old name: ‘Shahi Nepal’. The airline couldn’t sink any further, the baddie Touristic Corporation. RNAC is now d NCAA, No-Aircraft Corruption. And just when we thought the airline couldn’t sink any further, the baddie Touristic Minister is showing a knack for wrecking NAC. He has replaced a veteran airline captain and appointed his Kalikot crony, Grade 8 graduate Manrup Shahi, as the new chairman. But the airline’s glory days may be far from over, because it has reverted after Nepal became a republic. The airline couldn’t sink any further, the baddie Touristic Corporation. RNAC is now d NCAA, No-Aircraft Corruption. And just when we thought the airline couldn’t sink any further, the baddie Touristic Minister is showing a knack for wrecking NAC. He has replaced a veteran airline captain and appointed his Kalikot crony, Grade 8 graduate Manrup Shahi, as the new chairman. But the airline’s glory days may be far from over, because it has reverted after Nepal became a republic

Meanwhile, it has emerged that the guy who tarmaced the helipad at the airport had thought the airline couldn’t sink any further, the baddie Touristic Corporation. RNAC is now d NCAA, No-Aircraft Corruption. And just when we thought the airline couldn’t sink any further, the baddie Touristic Minister is showing a knack for wrecking NAC. He has replaced a veteran airline captain and appointed his Kalikot crony, Grade 8 graduate Manrup Shahi, as the new chairman. But the airline’s glory days may be far from over, because it has reverted after Nepal became a republic

The former-Yugoslavia Model: Chop country up into little pieces
The North Korea Model: Use their definition of ‘democratic people’s republic’
The Cambodia Model: Let our Maoists go back to where they left off in April 2006
The Somalia Model: Leave over federal units to ethnic warlords
The Sri Lanka Model: Leave it to the Norwegians
The Bhutan Model: Leave it to the Indians

When a couple of his classmates from school came to meet him at Baluwatar, they reminded the prime minister of his childhood nickname: “Pangray”. They found Pangray hiding under the blanket pretending to be sick because he didn’t want to face his party’s central committee, and the wrath of those who want him to step down. “I didn’t promise to resign, I promised to re-sign,” PN said. The PM told his party he doesn’t know who sneaked the words ‘people war’ into the president’s address to parliament. He lied. The PMO warned the president under direct orders from The Boss not to deviate from the text when Shital Nibas raised objections. It’s pretty clear who sprinkled the president’s speech with Maoist jargon and doublespeak: Maoist Prime Minister Comrade Pangray.

Trust His Fierceness to try to out maneuver the two rivals within his party by playing footsie with both. To Banidya the Hardcore he has been saying, don’t worry comrade it is just tactical we will grab power after Dasain, let’s just confuse the useful idiots by pretending to fight. At the same time, PKD has proposed BRB as prime ministerial candidate. Laldhoj Comrade, being even more devious and scheming than his chairman, sees right through it and has so far refused to swallow the bait.