A lot of the fallout from Prime Minster Baburam Bhattarai’s trip to India last week was muffled by the firecrackers over the Tihar holidays. But it has resulted in two clear outcomes: widening the acrimonious rift within his Maoist party, and bringing the Nepali Congress closer to the Maoists.

The irony of it all is that Bhattarai’s faction of the ultra-left Maoist leadership is today closer to the centre-right NC than to comrades-in-arms within his own party. The Baidya faction is rolling up its sleeves for a Central Committee showdown this week, while Pushpa Kamal Dahal plays an ambiguous role as he himself is publicly ridiculed by his erstwhile ally, Ram Babadur Thapa.

Bhattarai’s strategy seems to be to get the NC on board before the CA term expires on 30 November, and use that as the basis for another six-month extension. However, NC leaders say there will not be enticed into government unless Bhattarai can convince his own party about dismantling cantonments and coming up with a flexible proposal on integration in the coming two weeks.

What is clear is that the prime minister has to now move beyond micro-managing Kathmandu’s traffic snarls, inspecting eateries on the Prithvi Highway, and earnestly untangle the political deadlock as well as address the structural issues plaguing the economy. He has done just that by winning back India’s trust and assuaged existing and potential investors.

But will the enemies within his own party allow him to succeed?  Kunda Dixit
The Power of Nepal's Manpower

Nepal's head of state and head of government both recently had a chance to see up close and personal the plight of Nepali workers in the Gulf. President Ram Baran Yadav was on a visit to Qatar, while Prime Minister Bhattarai made a stopover in Doha.

The president had a long chat with the progressive and pragmatic Emir of the gas-rich sheikhdom over a lavish banquet. They talked about the potential for further Qatar-Nepal cooperation, especially in agriculture and tourism. The only reason Nepal hasn't been able to cash in on Qatar goodwill towards Nepal and take it beyond exporting "manpower," it seems, is because the various branches of government here are so feckless. Distracted by holidays and politics, they couldn't even get their act together to give the president talking points for a specific Qatar request to invest in agriculture in Nepal.

Both President Yadav and Prime Minister Bhattarai, however, met Nepalis and heard first hand that their real problem is exploitation by fellow-Nepalis. The statistics are shocking: every year, more than 200 Nepalis come home in coffins from Qatar alone, mostly dying of stress and heat stroke. Ten Nepalis are deported from Doha airport every day because mid-level back home have duped them with fake papers. Even those who find work earn much less than what the recruitment agencies promise. Middlemen take away as much as a worker's annual salary, which is working abroad. They send home more than $2 billion a year, and remittances now make up one-third of Nepal's GDP. One in every four persons in Qatar today is a Nepali—most of them are unskilled construction workers. Doha's impressive skyline is shiny with the sweat of Nepalis.

For two decades now, Nepal's national policy has been to take the easy way out and address unemployment by exporting manpower and, increasingly, womanpower. The 1.000 Nepali workers who pack planes flying out of Kathmandu every day represent a chronic failure of governance, failure of education and failure to generate jobs at home. A recent article from Bhopal in this paper showed that most young men would stay back in Nepal if they could earn just Rs 6,000 more than their present income.

A ruinous war was fought to right the wrongs in society so Nepalis wouldn't have to migrate for work. The architect of that war is now the prime minister. The conflict also pushed Nepal's development back decades, and in a vicious cycle, dampened investment, destroyed jobs. The prime minister has just returned from India with a plan to jump start investment, and all we can say is that it is better late than never that Baburam Bhattarai has seen the light. But luring investment takes time. It would be best to use the lag phase to boost earnings from our migration-based economy by:

- Reducing the cost of migration for workers, simplifying procedures
- Cracking down on exploitation and bribery by recruiters and immigration
- Reducing the cost of official remittance transfer
- Providing mandatory orientation and skills-training to workers so they can double their income

Studies have shown that Nepal can easily double its present income from remittances if these simple steps are taken. That, in turn, will buy time until Nepalis can finally work on their soil and not have to toil in the hot sands of some distant desert.

Well done Major Ghimire. You are the true son of Nepal Ama.

Pawan Ghimire

On the one hand there are brave soldiers like Major Pawan Ghimire (Soldiering on, #575) who have lost their sight who work to help others and on the other hand we have former soldiers who turn their backs on themselves to others. They just keep on looking for reasons to lost us, who want everything for free, who want to get paid for doing nothing.

Who Cares

Kunda Dixit

THE POWER OF NEPAL

#575)

Welcome back, Akriti Rana ('My way home', #575). Let's hope more people decide to do something about the state of Nepal by returning than just sitting back and complaining about how corrupt, dirty, polluted it is to justifying staying away.

JB

My first job in Nepal was with one of the numerous NGOs but sadly after working for it for nearly three years, I had to quit. My salary was almost as part to what I used to earn abroad and I dived into my new job full of hope, dreams and an excitement. I was punctual, straightforward, met people of different backgrounds, castes and religions. I was setsided by every single experience. Sadly, by the end of my third year it became unbearable. Facing people at work became a nightmare. I was completely out of sync with how the system worked. I wanted black and white, but they worked in grey. I got so disgusted with the system and our Nepal attitude and mentality towards work that I decided it was better for me to quit. But I am still hopeful. One thing for sure: no more NGOs or UN or 'social work' for me. It's time for me to do something on my own.

Still Hopeful

GyraRef

Why do you want to force senseless nationalistic prejudice onto people who feel suppression, senselessness and helplessness? Are you born with a national identity tattooed on your forehead?

Global

Sarah G

Rich kids have the option of returning, the poorer ones don't. The rhetoric of working in Nepal in various NGOs and INGOs too only come from people with similar privileged background.

Adarsh

Opportunities for those who worked or studied abroad really do come down to the individual and what your are prepared to deal with when you come home. Work culture and ethics as described by Akriti Rana is a difficult area to deal with.

Rishav

The rhetoric of working in Nepal in various NGOs and INGOs too

Nepal needs a policy to attract more overseas, have returned to China to do great work.

Kunda Dixit

It is not enough to tell people like Akriti to get back following higher studies overseas. Recently, I was in China and several colleagues who spent years in overseas, have returned to China to do great work.

K Hill

Why did you work in Malaysia?

Times

Kunda Dixit

The rhetoric of working in Nepal in various NGOs and INGOs too only come from people with similar privileged background.
The New Deal

The knee-jerk reaction of Baburam Bhattarai’s critics to the BIPPA agreement is another manifestation of bankrupt nationalism

The knee-jerk reaction of Baburam Bhattarai’s critics to the BIPPA agreement is another manifestation of bankrupt nationalism with its southern neighbour on an equal footing. While the Indian side is known to be very sensitive about its security concerns, the Nepali side also secured Indian commitment not to allow its land to be used against its neighbour. Bhattarai’s statement that Indian security cannot be addressed in isolation reflects that Indo-Nepal relationship has gone through a paradigm shift.

Not long ago, during the war, the Indian government looked the other way while Nepal’s Maoists went in and out of Delhi. Then, when they won the election Pushpa Kamal Dahal became prime minister they became conspicuously and overtly “anti-Maoist”. So much so that its ambassador in New Delhi has become conspicuously and overtly “anti-Maoist”. So much so that its ambassador in New Delhi has been made a full-fee out of himself by stating that it is quite normal for industries to be destroyed and shut down and that the government can’t take responsibility.

Mercifully, Tihar came in the way and the media went into hibernation so these rants didn’t get wider play. The government has guaranteed safety of Indian investors, something it has done for investment from other countries, and it is fulfilling its obligation to ensure economic growth by assuring outsiders that their investment in Nepal is safe.

Although the state also has an obligation to guarantee domestic investors similar safeguards, consistent economic underdevelopment along with technological lag means that Nepal’s resource and energy drained economy urgently needs injection of foreign capital to rescue it from stagnation.

Nepal also competes with countries with low wages but much more attractive political, energy and labour situations. We need to generate enough power so that industries don’t shut down and workers are not laid off due to losses incurred as a result of underproduction. Nepal does not have that kind of money now, it needs the outside world.

And that is probably why Bhattarai’s confidence comes from: as a PhD he understands this on an academic level and knows that politically BIPPA was the only way to go. Those that don’t agree must either come up with a better alternative, or not be spoilers.

After three days of marathon diplomacy in the Indian capital, Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai returned home with Indian goodwill, only to be greeted at the airport with bad will from his fellow comrades.

Bhattarai exuded confidence, but where does it come from? He couldn’t have cared less about the black flags at the airport gate. “I expected this, he told the press, “but it needed to be done because it is in the interest of the nation.”

Beyond the rhetoric and polemic, the India visit was a refreshing departure from previous ones. For the first time, the two countries issued a joint statement agreeing to review and revise the 1950 treaty which will provide a window of opportunity for Nepal to establish ties for their part the Maoists overlooked the changed geopolitical context of their revolution.

If the deal in New Delhi last week is anything to go by, both sides seemed to have learned their lessons. The $250 million line of credit is an indication that India is ready to ratchet up its economic involvement in Nepal. This is strategic: a poor and chronically unstable Nepal is not in India’s national interest.

New Delhi has decided to help Baburam Bhattarai try to be the architect of Nepal’s economic transformation by encouraging investment, creating jobs. Why should Nepal be against that? They aren’t. It is only Bhattarai’s enemies within his own party who are against it because they are against him. The knee-jerk reaction to the BIPPA agreement is another manifestation of bankrupt nationalism from hardline Maoists as well as the confused UML.

UML leaders are so vacuous they haven’t even bothered to elucidate what exactly it is they don’t like about BIPPA. Maoist ultra Mohan Baidya has made a complete fool out of himself by stating that it is quite normal for industries to be destroyed and shut down and that the government can’t take responsibility.

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Radio at the crossroads
Nepal’s community radios risk alienating the communities they claim to serve

ANTHONY WILLE

Community radio in Nepal is frequently celebrated as a model for radio broadcasting in South Asia. There are almost 200 licensed community stations on air across the country, often broadcasting to impoverished and remote areas. In theory, community radio props up grassroots democracy but there is a growing gap between the promise and reality of community radio in Nepal.

The phenomenal growth of community radio in Nepal has been without oversight. Ownership is increasingly dominated by local elite who start stations in the name of the community. Privileged class and castes and politically well-connected males hold licenses through cooperatives or NGOs, whose limited objectives are often politically motivated, may be out of touch with the communities they serve.

Publicity is the lifeblood of politicians, and the widespread ownership of radio sets has naturally made community radio a targeted publicity tool for politicians. The Community Radio Support Center estimates that political parties, through cooperatives or NGOs, whose limited objectives are often politically motivated, may be out of touch with the communities they serve.

Ownership and participation. The performance assessment system, a point-based method of scoring the “health” of community stations, is devoted to the local orientation and community participation.
7 billion +
Family planning and reducing resource consumption can help tackle the population crisis

As the global population surpassed 7 billion people this week, addressing the challenges associated with a still-growing world population will require a two-pronged response, according to experts with the Worldwatch Institute.

The combined measures of empowering women to make their own decisions about childbearing, and significantly reducing global consumption of energy and resources would move humanity towards environmentally sustainable societies that meet human needs.

Roughly 4.5 billion people have been added to the world population in just the last 60 years, according to UN estimates, putting increased strain on the world’s ecosystems and resources. Because humans interact with their surroundings far more intensely than any other species, it is accelerating climate change and driving species to extinction.

To some extent, these outcomes are now unavoidable, says the Worldwatch Institute; we’ll have to adapt to them. But in order to improve the likelihood that they will not be catastrophic, governments need to reduce population growth and address the environmental and social impacts that continued population growth will have.

“It is precisely because the human population is so large and is growing so fast that we must care how much we, as individuals and nations, are increasingly out of sync with environmental sustainability,” said Worldwatch President Robert Engelman, an expert on global population. “The challenge becomes even more with each generation. Fortunately there are ways to practically and humanely slow population growth and reduce the impacts associated with the growth that occurs.”

Earlier this year, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) launched ‘7 Billion Actions’, a campaign to highlight positive actions by individuals and organisations addressing global development challenges.

“Addressing global population growth is not the same thing as controlling population,” Engelman said. “The most direct and immediate way to lower birth rates is by assuring that women can make their own choices about when and whether to bear a child.”

He said that the world’s energy, water, and materials consumption must also be controlled through greater use of conservation, efficiency, and green technologies. He recommends two solutions:

- Empower women to make their own decisions about childbearing
- Consume fewer resources and waste less food

Humans appropriate anywhere from 24 per cent to nearly 40 per cent of the photosynthetic output of the planet for food and other purposes, and more than half of the planet’s accessible renewable freshwater runoff. In addition to overuse of finite resources, humans waste large quantities of food every year.

Industrialised countries waste 222 million tons of food annually. If fewer resources and less food were wasted, the world would be able to feed more people and use fewer resources. With nearly 1 billion hungry people worldwide, wasting less food would also mean utilizing existing resources, not new ones, to feed them.

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As a foreigner living in Nepal, if you are not equipped in the art of hard bargaining, you are doomed.

Vendor: “That is 2,500 rupees.”
Me: “What?” (Walking away)
Me: “500 rupees.”
Vendor: “Oh-ho. I told you 2,500 rupees and you say 500 rupees, are you kidding me? Ok I give you Nepali price now, not tourist price. 1,500, exclusive.”
Me: (Walking away, waving)
Vendor: (Running to catch up) “Don’t go away! How about 1,200? 1,000? Ok ok 500 hundred it’s yours. You are very lucky today.”

Hmm… am I really lucky? After living in Nepal for a few weeks, I thought I had learnt the tricks of the trade in bargaining, yet I still ended up paying more than I should have. No matter what, it seems, foreigners will always pay more.

“To take a taxi there, it would be around 200 rupees for us,” Nepali friends would tell me, “but for you they won’t go for anything less than 300.”

The guava from a street vendor should be cheaper, but I know I am paying the “foreigner tax” even when he has come down by half. And worse, a Nepali friend buying bananas on my behalf has to pay more because the fruit seller knows it is for me.

The dual pricing is state-sanctioned because there are different prices everywhere you go. To a certain extent this happens in most Asian countries, but nowhere is it as institutionalised as in Nepal.

To enter the Patan Museum, there is a different price for Nepalis, another one for SAARC countries and another one ten times more for “other foreigners.”

A recent news item that showed Chinese tourists in Nepal spend on an average two times more than other tourists made me wonder. Chinese are the world superpower in bargaining. Maybe we are just less effective in bargaining overseas because of language issues? Very early on in my stay I decided there is no point trying to fight this price apartheid, and accept it as a part of Nepali culture, and an honourable contribution to uplifting Nepal’s economy.

It is surprising how quickly one gets used to Kathmandu’s infamous traffic. At first it looks like a chaotic blend of trucks, buses, motorcycles, scooters, bulls, dogs, goats, push carts and even two-wheel tractors that are used for rice planting back in China, but in Kathmandu are attached to trailers loaded high with cement bags. There are few zebra crossings, and even on the ones that exist, vehicles have the right of way. The road centre line is just a suggestion, everyone ignores them. The roads are heavily cratered, and these are euphemistically called “pot holes.”

But within my first week of arrival I was negotiating all this as if I was born here. Real traffic rules are broken all the time, but the unspoken rules of the road are steadfastly followed and they seem to work perfectly. Every vehicle pores into every available space creating a complete gridlock, but somehow inch-by-inch this hopeless monstrous mess inevitably untangles itself.

And the amazing thing is that everyone manages to keep their cool. Despite the anarchy on the streets, this is probably the country in Asia with the least road rage. No one is shouting obscenities and making rude gestures even though they have every reason to. There is a live-and-let-live quality to Kathmandu’s street ecosystem, and as the time comes for me to leave for the reverse cultural shock of adjusting again to spotless clean streets where cars glide along on their lanes, it suddenly hits me that I am truly going to miss Nepal’s lawlessness.
I"m paradox that the International Year of Forests 2011 is being marked in Nepal by a fast-spreading weed vine that is literally choking trees to death in the Tarai. The alien creeper is sweeping across Nepal from east to west and has devastated trees in the Chitwan National Park (CNP), threatening more than half the park’s vegetation. Known as “lahare banmara” by locals, the weed has the Latin name Mikania micrantha, and has covered nearly a quarter of the national park in Chitwan. Mikania is like the previous banmara weed which is a native plant in Mexico and arrived with American livestock refuse to eat the weed and the only use for it is to use as fuel. Herbicides are not recommended because of the toxic effect on livestock. The weed can also propagate itself with a broken stem. Which is dispersed by the wind. The weed is prolific because it produces as many as 40,000 viable seeds every year per plant. Mikania needs open space and grasslands next to river banks which is where buffalo’s preferred plants. Chief Warden Jhamak Karki of Chitwan Environment, is also concerned about the weed affecting the rhinoceros habitat. “Mikania needs open space and grasslands next to river banks which is where rhinoceros graze,” she says. The weed destroys a plant that is called “rhino’s apple” because the animals love the fruit.” Before rhinos, the weed also affected the wild buffalo herds in Kosi Tappu by smothering the buffalo’s preferred plants.

Chanda Rana of the group, Save the Environment, is also concerned about the weed affecting the rhinoceros habitat. “Mikania needs open space and grasslands next to river banks which is where rhinoceros graze,” she says. The weed destroys a plant that is called “rhino’s apple” because the animals love the fruit.” Before rhinos, the weed also affected the wild buffalo herds in Kosi Tappu by smothering the buffalo’s preferred plants.

Chief Warden Jhamak Karki of Chitwan says the weed is now a serious enough threat for the park to go on a war footing. Mikania is prolific because it produces as many as 40,000 viable seeds every year per plant which is dispersed by the wind. The weed can also propagate itself with a broken stem. Livestock refuse to eat the weed and the only use for it is to use as fuel. Herbicides are not recommended because of the toxic effect on the environment.

While research into fighting this menace continues, Rana says: “The only way we have seen so far to fight the weed is to physically uproot every plant, but this is time consuming and difficult.”

Stuti Sharma

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What better way to end the festive season than to donate generously to a fundraising drive (literally) for the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre (SIRC)?

The Centre is organising a Volkswagen Beetle rally from Kathmandu to Peshawar and back to raise more than $100,000 to fund the care and rehabilitation of poor Nepali patients who are paralysed by spinal injuries. The sky blue Beetle will take two weeks to cover the roundtrip distance of 2,000 km and will pass through Lucknow, Delhi, Amritsar, cross the border to Pakistan at Wagah, Islamabad and turn around in Peshawar.

The fundraiser hopes to draw supporters and donors before flagging off on 4 November, Friday from the SIRC in Sanga at 10AM, and at stops along the way in Nepal, India and Pakistan. Segments of the trip can be “bought” at $100 per mile.

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“Yakoso mase!” Without fail the entire staff at Kotetsu cordially greets customers as they enter the sushi bar and teppanyaki in Lazimpat. For the last six years and counting, the former textile trader Kensei Tomita and his wife and retired schoolteacher Sumiko Tomita have given fish fiends and beef buffs a reason to splurge.

Free of the frills, flames and flying shrimps commonly found at teppanyaki chains like Benihana, Kotetsu is for the serious foodie. Its open kitchen atmosphere lends to transparent preparations—very neat, very clean. At its heart is the teppan, a wide iron plate where prime cuts of meat weighed to the gram like Australian beef (Rs 1400 for 180 grams) or Kobe beef (Rs 2200 for 100 grams) and seafood like full squid and salmon are cooked right before our eyes. Seared then covered with a metal bowl to ensure an even cook, the chicken at Rs 600 is on the lighter end of the billing scale but is nothing short of oishii—delicious.

A traditional teppanyaki, the Okonomiyaki is a savory pancake of bacon layered between fried egg and a batter of flour, yam, cabbage, and green onion and drizzled with a thick, tangy sauce that tastes like Worcestershire. The heavy cake resembles a Newari bara or a mound of Thanksgiving stuffing. Dedicated to high quality, Kotetsu imports fresh fish, mollusks and crustaceans every other day to the valley. Raw or grilled, the ocean viands are sure to exceed expectations. For sushi the selection is standard and prepared meticulously by a veteran master of the art. The Ryan Maki is six pieces of spicy tuna and rice tightly rolled into perfect bites. The sashimi platters charge a hefty toll but for good reason. A splurge at Rs 3,000, the Special Sashimi presents a rainbow of cuts of fish that left a neighboring Japanese patron highly impressed. But don’t be deterred, sashimi plates like the mackerel for Rs 700 and the octopus for Rs 600 are available.

In a landlocked country, seafood is bound to be pricey, and Kotetsu’s is worth every rupee. So when indulging in its sumptuous imports, be sure to order rounds of cold or hot sake and forget your woes.
Ten years ago Dr Yusuf Hamied, chairman of the Indian drug company, Cipla, stunned the global health community by drastically decreasing the price of anti-AIDS drugs. Thanks to this initiative the price of a year’s cocktail of drugs is now about 20 cents a day, a fraction of what it used to be. In 2001, there were about 2,000 people in the developing world receiving these drugs, now that figure is over 6 million. AIDS, because of the availability of these drugs, is no longer a death warrant.

Dr Hamied had to deal with the patent rights of the drug companies and governments of Western countries who were not keen to give them up. In general it came down to making these drugs available on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, which means the patent owners were motivated to give up their exclusive rights (which usually lasts for 20 years) for helping the poor person with AIDS.

Ten years hence the battle lines are drawn again between patent rights and patient rights for Western drugs for non-communicable diseases like cancer and diabetes which are plaguing the developing world. These diseases are generally the consequences of better and longer life. Poor nations won’t foot patent rules. But Western nations and big pharma (Roche, Pfizer) are saying that for continued incentive for further discoveries and invention of drugs (like breast cancer medicine, Herceptin) they need to push for patent rights.

The indefatigable Dr Hamied is again in the picture willing to make these expensive cancer and diabetes drugs as copy cat, knock off drugs using biotechnology. He is joined by his Chinese drug company friends (BioMab) to help make the drugs available at a fraction of the Western price. Don’t be surprised if we start obtaining our cancer and diabetes drugs from the Chinese border town of Khasa.

This time Western governments and drug companies are taking a long, hard look. They are contemplating not giving up their patent rights as easily as they did with the AIDS drugs. At this rate they fear the lack of incentive for new discoveries, the humanitarian factor notwithstanding.

The United Nations is currently tackling the issue of rampant non-communicable diseases in the developing world, and the stage is set for heated debates regarding patents that will affect the lives of millions of patients worldwide.

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To Nepal’s famous handicraft exports, now add another unusual item: skateboards. Yes, handcrafted wooden skateboards Made in Nepal by Marius Arniko Arter.

Born in Nepal, Arter had spent most of his early years in Kathmandu before he returned to Switzerland with his parents. When he came back in 2004 to the place he once called home, his love for Nepal was rekindled and he decided to stay. A keen skater, Arter searched for a skateboard in Nepal. When he couldn’t find it, he put his carpentry skills to work and made two boards, imprinting it with local carvings.

“My skateboard attracted a lot of interest in Switzerland,” Arter recalls, “everyone wanted one.”

With backing from Swiss friends, Arter returned to Nepal in 2007 and started Arniko Skateboards, naming it after the Nepali middle name his parents had given him. The company logo has a stylised Nepali flag and he got local wood craftsmen to carve designs on the skateboards.

The Canadian Maple and glue required to make the boards are imported, but everything else is made in Nepal. “We try to pick up ideas from Nepal to transform them into designs,” explains Arter. “We even have one with mountaineer Tenzing Norgay’s face and more recently, a long board with a woman playing the sitar.”

Apart from skateboards, Arniko also manufactures a clothing line of t-shirts, hoodies, pants, and accessories in Nepal. The production materials used at Arniko are certified by Confidence in Textiles, IMO Control, Fairtrade International and Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production.

The Arniko Skateboards store at Mandala Street in Thamel easily catches eye because of the sturdy designer boards that hang on its walls. Arniko’s boards are made in the ‘70s slalom style, not readily available in the international market. “These are ideal for urban and downhill cruising,” explains Arter, “so although we are not a global brand, those interested in old-school skateboarding recognise us.” Arniko Skateboard also has stores in Switzerland and sells online.

Arniko sells up to 200 boards a season and each one is a work of art. Says Arter: “Some people buy the boards to simply hang them on the wall.”

When asked why he prefers to work in Nepal, Arter replies: “Working here is not easy but this is where I was born. This is my bit to make Nepal’s name recognised around the world”.

arnikoskateboards.com
Paavan Mathema
Now, meditation tourism

Once is not enough for Dhamma Pokhara’s vipassana courses

A soma yagya in Panauti

STUTI SHARMA

It’s a material world, and the modern lifestyle brings with it higher stress levels. Individually, people practice yoga and meditation to try to regain their mental equilibrium. But one group is tackling societal stress and collective tension by organizing a yagya: an ancient Hindu practice of prolonged prayer and chanting. It is all happening in Panauti outside Kathmandu next week, and its prime mover, Martin Gluckman of the Vedic Society, denies it is all mumbo jumbo.

““There is now scientific proof that society’s mood and its spiritual harmony can be ensured with yagyas, there are favourable changes after the ceremony takes place,” Gluckman told Nepali Times as he put finishing touches to the ceremony which will last a week and is expected to be visited by thousands from Nepal and abroad.

A soma yagya is a “super yagya” that invokes “soma” the nourishing elixir of life and nature. Soma yagyas that are performed to increase the society’s cohesiveness and harmony, and involves the burning of the soma plant from the high Himalaya which is put into the holy fire. “Besides praying for peace and harmony in the banks of the lake. But, like Anath Pindika, he decided to set up a meditation centre to help people stressed by the demands of a modern lifestyle.

Lots of vipassana enthusiasts chipped in to help get the Dhamma Centre going three years ago with the construction, landscaping and fixing up the water supply and other utilities.

Donations from vipassana teachers, students, organisations made Pokhara’s meditation centre possible. Nepal Vipassana Center helped with conducting the meditation courses in the early days.

Dhamma Pokhara is already very popular among Nepal-based expats and tourists, as well as locals for its 10-day vipassana course. “I just wish there were more Nepalis who would learn this wonderful technique of purifying the mind,” says Nara Bahadur Guruji who runs the centre.

Just as the tourism brochures say about Nepal, it could also be said of Dhamma Pokhara: “Once is not enough.”


Nepal,” Gluckman says, “the soma yagya in Panauti is expected to create conditions for healing, love and peace on the planet.”

Gluckman and Hankey feel yagyas like the one planned for Panauti persuade people to be mellower, be less aggressive and be considerate members of society.

Gluckman, a South African Hindu environmentalist and spiritualist, organised a soma yagya in Auroville in south India last year with the help of the Institute for Studies in Vedic Sciences and Agnihotra USA.

Although small scale yagyas are common in temples across Nepal, they normally involve animals sacrifices which is unacceptable as it promotes needless violence. Says Gluckman: “Vedic Society is reviving an ancient celebration of peace as a gift to Nepal for it has gifted the world its enriching ayurvedic knowledge.”

Soma Yagya 6-11 November Panauti, Kathre District www.vedisociety.org
Turning guns to pens
Economics trumps politics in India-Nepal relations for the first time

Probably for the first time during the visit of a Nepali leader to New Delhi in recent times, economics trumped politics. When Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai met Manmohan Singh last week it was evident there was a new pragmatism in dealing with Nepal.

Indian policy makers, who say they have been burnt, bitten and bruised each time they tried to "influence" good old friends in Nepal, seem to have now decided they will, as much as it can, stay away from playing political sides in Nepal. Meaning, if Bhattarai wants help with the peace process or writing the Constitution, he will have to ask for it.

But officials say this shouldn't be construed as a new touch-me-not approach towards the Himalayan republic. South Block, that elegant old red stone building in Delhi which houses the ministries of foreign affairs and defence as well as the prime minister's office, has noticed a big difference it dealing with Bhattarai in comparison to his predecessors.

The trouble is that all this bon homie in Delhi about Nepal's new prime minister does have an equal and opposite reaction in Nepal. Bhattarai has been greeted by a barrage of criticism since he returned Monday to Kathmandu from hardliners within his own party and the UML.

"Tell me what you want," Manmohan Singh is said to have told Bhattarai, "and India will do its best to give it." This message was as true for the $1 billion credit line that Kathmandu was hugely keen be announced during the Bhattarai visit, to building a fast-track highway from Kathmandu to the Tarai. Unfortunately, the requests came too late for the Indian bureaucracy to process it in time for the visit.

Bhattarai had expected opposition to the Bilateral Investment Protection and Promotion Act (BIPPA) tack home, but what Indian businesses and officials can't understand is what Jhala Nath Khanal and others opposed to it gain by blocking Indian investment in Nepal. After all, they say, Nepal has signed the BIPPA with several other countries.

The most important takeaway from the visit was the signal that India was ready to return to business-as-usual and would, indeed, open its heart as well as its purse-strings based on mutual trust between the two governments. It was also the recognition that India and Nepal can't do without each other.

Bhattarai has the support of Pushpa Kamal Dahal within his party, and there is now only the Kiran faction playing spoiler. The prime minister was trying to appease critics from within his own party by raising the cases pending against several Nepali Maoists in detention in India.

Bhattarai understands more than any of his predecessors that Nepal could benefit from being the bridge between India and China, but he affirmed that India constitutes a special relationship for his country. He spoke wryly about his own image at his first public meeting in Delhi: "In Nepal, they call me a pro-India agent, and in India they call me an anti-India agent."

Still, oratory is not Bhattarai's strong point and he seems to know it. He also seems to know that the time for rhetorical flourishes and symbolism is long over in India-Nepal relations. It is time to work towards economic and trade cooperation to create jobs and raise growth rates in Nepal.

Bhattarai wanted India, the self-declared economic engine of the neighbourhood, to pump money into his country in investment, trade, loans and aid. For its part, India seems more than ready and willing to apply the "Afghan model" with Nepal.

India has disbursed millions of dollars across Afghanistan, including in micro-finance projects to help dig tubewells, build schools, set up sewing machine units for women. The idea is to train and skill a war-torn population, to build and create a new country after decades of civil war. India hopes it can replicate this in conflict Nepal as well. If the Maoists and the Nepali Congress can compromise on the peace process, India has offered help in rehabilitation and skills training for ex-combatants.

Barshaman Pun 'Ananta' till five years ago was a guerrilla commander, planning and leading attacks on military bases. In Delhi last week he was dressed in a business suit and tie as Nepal's finance minister.

Ananta laughed as I asked him about this transformation. "I have used a gun, and now I have to use a pen," he said. "But the motive remains the same, to assist in improving the lives of the people of Nepal."
The changes brought about by microhydro plants and small Peltric sets have made a huge difference to local livelihoods in the remote areas of Nepal. The kerosene lamps has become a thing of the past. Many households now have computers instead and telecom companies have been able to expand their services to the villages by installing their towers in the remote corners of the districts. Life in villages of Solukhumbu district will never be the same. Not long ago, locals in Solukhumbu were forced to pay Rs 200 per litre of kerosene just to light their house. But today villages here run cyber cafes, FM stations and highvision cinema halls. Small-scale industries have been set up. And while the nation prepares to face annual power famine this winter, villagers in Solukhumbu enjoy uninterrupted power supply.

Chilime, the first nationally funded commercial hydropower project that came into operation in 2003, led to a spurt in investments in Rasuwa district. Several medium and small scale projects including 57 MW Syangjen Hydro Project and 60 MW Trishuli A are underway. Besides, locals have made investment in 7 MW Dharuchhe Diksha and 15 MW Phalukhola hydro power projects.

Sindhupalchok district saw its first power project in 1970s when China built the Sunkosi project. According to Naresh Pandey, the district chief of NEA, 72 of 75 VDCs in Sindhupalchok now have electricity. Some 2,773 households benefit from micro hydro and 200 household have solar set at their homes, although tourist destination like Helambu and other remote areas are yet to get access to electricity.

Gagan Thapa in his Facebook page, 26 October
Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai in 1991: “Foreign investment in the industrial, business and financial sectors should be ended, only then will Nepal’s nationalism be strong.”

Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai in 2011: “Without foreign investment in the industrial, business and financial sectors Nepal can never aspire for economic prosperity. That is why the BIIPA Agreement is a nationalist proposal.”

I support the prime minister’s newer view. Dr Bhattarai came up with his new way of thinking quite easily, but how expensive it turned out to be for the nation: 20 wasted years and 15,000 lives lost.
Ilinita Dahal in Nagarkot, 17 October

Ujjan Kumar Shrestha and Renuka Poudel first met at a rice mill in village where they fell in love at first sight. Ujjan was married so they decided to elope. Eventually, she won acceptance from his family members. But this love marriage claimed life of three innocents.

On 24 June 1998, Ujjan was still fast asleep at his home in Okhaldhunga-7 Tarkebari, when two porters woke him up at around 3 am, insisting that he take them to Ghodhi Danda Bazar. On the way, after 45 minute walk, Ujjan was alarmed when a torch light fell on his eyes. He saw a group of people hiding up in a terrace.

“Run” a sound warned from behind a stone boulder. The porters stepped back. They were Renuka’s brothers Dor Bahadur and Thal Bahadur, Balkrishna Dhungel, Puskar Gautam who had brought along their fellow comrades. Ujjan was scared to death. A bullet passed along their fellow comrades. Ujjan’s murderer Balkrishna Dhungel is now a Maoist CA member.

Meanwhile Puskar absconded to Kathmandu, and worked as a journalist for a decade. The police never arrested him. He went to the UK for higher studies in 2007, returned to Kathmandu and is now living in Delhi. His case is still pending in Okhaldhunga district court.

“Ujjan’s body was never found,” said Sabitri Shrestha, Ujjan’s sister who has been fighting for justice for the past 13 years. “We performed his last rites without his body as commanded by police.”

Despite threats from Maoists, Ujjan’s brother Ganesh Kumar filed a FIR against the culprits. Sabitri recalls that Dhungel had announced in a public speech in the village that he would murder Ganesh Kumar too. Fearing for his life, Sabitri asked him to come to Kathmandu.

When Ganesh Kumar returned home after four years in 2002, the Maoists were alert. On 22 November, six strangers came to his house while he was working in fields. Unable to recognise him, they asked his 14-year old daughter Ranjana to identify him. They shot him dead right in front of her.

Ranjana could not bear the guilt of pointing her father out to his murderers. She too committed suicide in 2006.

The Maoists have seized all property belonging to Ujjan’s family. They bombed his house and his family members have never been able to go back to village for the past five years.

Nepal's prime minister and leader of the Maoist party, Prachanda, was a RAW agent.

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Power, money and Madhes

Sharat Bimal Yadav in Nagarkot, 17 October

During the April 2006 people’s movement, there were cordial relations between Madhesi leaders. But when power politics started, hostilities grew. Leaders spill up parties for money. There were financial irregularities within parties and betrayals by fellow revolutionaries which forced me to retreat from active politics.

All these parties which carry the flag of Madhes have only two goals today : money and power. It is surprising that the remark about Madhesi separatism has come from a defense minister, Sharat Singh Bahadur. Everyone knows when and why Bahadur became a Madheshi. How can the Madhes be separated from the country simply because Bahadur declares it? The majority of people in the Madhes would never concede to this. The Madhes revolution was a cry for equality and identity. Separation was never a demand of the Madhesi people. Madhes politics lacks principles. There is no crucial difference between the agendas of the so called Madhesi parties. We don’t need nine different parties that claim to represent Madhes.

When there was a movement going on in the streets for democracy, these Madhesi leaders were either circling Delhi or supporting the king. Today, they have become the staunchest republicans. What per cent of people from Madhes do they really represent is clear from the number of votes they recieved. The truth is that the most radical section of Madhesi politicians today are the sons-in-laws imported from across the border who have no mass base. Madhesi politics has been hijacked by these people.

After looting from everywhere they could, they are now doing politics in the name of Madhes and Madhesi people. It is sad that the national parties are viewing the Madhes issue from the eyes of these opportunistic leaders. They should listen to the people instead. Until this trend persists, Madhesi people will not have anything to be glad about.

Thank you to all our sponsors, patrons, crews, volunteers and our beautiful audience for making Surya Nepal Jazzmandu 2011 'The Biggest Jazz Party in the Himalayas' See you in Jazzmandu 2012 'November 1st - 8th'
You know it is a slow news day in Nepal when the wire services start filing stories about toilets being built on Mt Everest. So the highest mountain in the world is going to be declared an “open-defecation free zone”. This doesn’t affect the Ass one way or other because yours truly is not in line to set a new world record to take the highest dump in the world. But the reason the high-level authoritarians have taken this step is because the poo pile on the South Col is now so high there is nowhere to pitch a tent. Apparently there are freeze dried droppings there from as far back as the unsuccessful 1952 Swiss Mt Everest Expedition. OK, there will now be outhouses with commodes from Camp I to Camp V, but how is that going to help? Frozen lumps will still be coming out pulverized from the bottom of the Khumbu Icefall in a couple of centuries. Be that as it may, there is cause for serious concern: global warming is melting the Himalaya and it’s going to thaw out everything. Everything.

The Maldivian government is getting pretty exasperated, apparently, with the frequent change of government in Nepal. Five in the last five years at last count. The reason is that no sooner had they sent an emissary to invite Mahunay for the SAARC Summit, than he was gone. So, the envoy was dispatched again to invite Jhol Gnat, and he too was out. This week, the Maldivian emissary was back to deliver the invite from President Nasheed to Prime Minister Bhattarai. The question is, will Bhattarai still be PM on 10 November when the first SAARC summit in the southern hemisphere kicks off on Addu Atoll?

Breaking News: BRB Breaks Down at JNU. Really, what’s with our comrades? You’d expect the iron-fisted former guerrillas to have hearts of stone, but they’ve turned out to be cry babies. Even Comrade Ferociousness has a habit of shedding a strategic tear or two when the occasion so demands. And when Padam Dai heard the prime minister speaking haltingly in Nepal Bhasa at a new year function the other day, he couldn’t stop his tears either. Could that be because he couldn’t bear to hear how BRB was butchering the mother tongue? But when his turn came to speak, Padam Dai himself got the year of Nepal Sumbut wrong. Someone tell the prime minister to quickly brush up on his Sherpa, Gurung, Tamang and Magar since their new years are around the corner and we don’t want any more crying.

Despite tears shed, the prime minister’s Delhi visit seemed to have gone well. Except he didn’t get to meet Sonia because, we were told, she was still recuperating. But then the very next day Sonia was seen at a photo op on 10 Janpath with Jigme the Fifth who had brought along his new bride for a darshan, before whisking her off (wife, not Sonia) on a honeymoon in Rajasthan.

It was when BRB got back home that all hell broke loose. One expected Mohan “Comrade Pokhrel” Baidya to raise fears of “Sikkimisation”. One expected Comrade Cloud to skewer Comrade Red Flag. It was even quite expected that Comrade Mahara should hop off to China while Lalitdhoc was in Delhi. And it would surprise no one that PKD would be working behind the scenes to stab BRB in the back. But the most unexpected was Comrade Cloud suddenly having a go at Unserer Fuhrer and accusing him of being an uncooked operative. What gives? Cloud must see an opening to use the nationalism and the ethnic card to make a break for prime ministership himself. Interestingly, only the previous week Lotus Flower commiserated with cadre that he made a mistake sacking Gen Cutwall in 2008, and that he only did so because Cloudy (who was then defence minister) insisted.

First he promised us a deal in “45 days”, then BRB said “after Dasain”. With no progress, he said, “before the India visit”. Then it was “after Thar”. Thar is over, and now the prime minister is promising a deal “after Chhat”. You can be sure he is now going to say “after Lhosar”.

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