RETURNING TO THOMAS BELL’S PHOTOGRAPH OF THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER THAT BROUGHT HOME THE HORROR OF WAR.

14-15

BATTLE OF BENI

BY GHANSHYAM KHADKA

2016 marks the 20th year since the Nepal conflict started, and 10 years since it ended. In a series commemorating the two anniversaries, Nepal Times returns to talk to people who were caught in the middle.

We trace the tragedies that struck their lives, the trauma of bewilderment, and the healing process as families affected by both sides come together to seek truth and justice.

We will revisit the stories of Purnimaya Lama and Devi Sunar (pictured, left, both from Kavre. Purnimaya’s husband, Arjun, was abducted, tortured and killed by the Maoists in 2005. Devi’s daughter, Manisha, was 14 when she was raped and killed by soldiers in 2004.

More than a decade later, Purnimaya and Devi have joined hands to pursue justice for their loved ones, who had been killed by opposing sides. On Thursday, they came together to tell their stories at the Peace Column, a telephone pole riddled by several bullets during the Battle of Beni (see story on pages 14-15), and which has become a war memorial.

Neither of them has faith in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which they believe is designed to protect perpetrators of war crimes.

“I am fighting, endlessly and sometimes hopelessly,” said Devi, 45. “I am fighting because I do not want other girls to suffer like my daughter.” Purnimaya, 52, said with fiery determination. “You cannot kill anyone for political reasons, and that is what I want to tell those who killed my husband.”

Purnimaya and Devi are fighting against powerful men. One of the six Maoists against whom Purnimaya filed a case at the Supreme Court is former Forest Minister Agni Sapkota. Devi has lodged a case against high-ranking army officers Niranjan Baisi, Bhaba Khatry, Amol Pahari and Surendra Subedi.

After the 2006 ceasefire, Purnimaya met Maoist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who promised to find out the truth about her husband. Nothing happened. Now, Dahal is PM once more, and Purnimaya fears he will try to get conflict-era cases dismissed.

Both know it is going to be a long struggle. “With the Maoists in power again, we will have to go back to the streets,” Purnimaya said. Devi nods, and adds: “I am prepared to be thrashed by police again.”

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The problem is not the democratic system, but the people who abuse it.

In democracies, it is the standard operating procedure to detain civil society activists and dissidents. But it is when a nominally democratic state is supposed to be governed by its professed core values starts incarcerating journalists and trying to muzzle the media, that the situation turns ominous.

Recent events prove that you do not need a dictator to roll back democracy and try to exert control over the free press. Parallel power centres can easily commandeer the system, and we are threatened by the rise of elected demagogues.

Nepal’s political transition is in a prolonged interregnum between two constitutions, and it is the people lose their trust and faith in the public officials they elected to power. That is when there is a creeping nostalgia for strongman rule. In Nepal, we see this mindset manifested in support for an executive presidency in the new constitution, and the public’s admiration for centralised control as in China, or for leaders like Lee Kuan Yew to steer the country towards prosperity.

That is when there is a creeping nostalgia for strongman rule. We hoped for benevolent dictators, but it turned out not to be an effective form of governance. Wrestling against them because they were unrepresentative, fundamentally weak and the status quo benefits the privileged few, and genuine democracy would shake things up. The problem is not the system, it is the people who abuse it for personal enrichment and power. Corrupt party apparatchiks, political brokers, and patronage are the real reasons for the state we are in.

The answer is to keep strengthening the pillars of democracy, and fortifying the institutions that pose a critical check and balance to a failed Executive and illegitimate centres of power: civil society, mass media, the Judiciary and the Legislature.

Ancient and despotic views. Populist politicians use this to stoke xenophobic fears about migration, crime, and terrorism, and the mass media can be manipulated to whip up the electorate. Democracy thus ends up being a power demagogues who capitalise on nationalism, bigotry and identity politics, especially during times of turmoil.

Jochen Bittner of the German newspaper Die Zeit calls this global anti-democratic wave “interimism” — it is based on fear and offers stability over freedom, and could also be called ‘Putinism’. Bittner compares Orderism to the promises of utopia under Communism, and says ‘it is merely a fig leaf for tyranny’. The enemy is liberal democracy, and in this Putin, Trump, Dictore, and others have a mutual admiration society.

In Nepal, the yearning for strongman rule stems from 25 years of political instability, reckless and unaccountable leadership, and democratic decay. There is a romantic notion that the Malaysian model of limited democracy would usher in economic growth, but it is all too easy to forget that Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is today facing a US Department of Justice investigation into one of history’s biggest corruption scandals.

Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and we see a glaring example of that in Nepal today. Our own anti-corruption watchdog is now more powerful and dominant than the elected government of the day. It is fashionable to say in hoity-toity circles in Kathmandu that Nepalis are too immature, ignorant and poor to deserve democracy. That perception is natural, because the status quo benefits the privileged few, and genuine democracy would shake things up. The problem is not the system, it is the people who abuse it for personal enrichment and power. Corrupt party apparatchiks, political brokers, and patronage are the real reasons for the state we are in.

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Government vs GDP

Big cabinets create a big mess, and perpetuate an ad hoc system

Would he, like his predecessor K P Oli, also have six deputy prime ministers and 40 ministers? Oli justified his jumbo government on grounds that he faced clear and imminent danger from the Nepali Congress. It is such cynical justification for the politics of survival at the taxpayer’s expense that has kept this country from developing.

Prolonged political transition may benefit politicians, but the people bear the cost. We have now already paid for expensive governments for 20 years. Big cabinets create a big mess, and perpetuate an ad hoc system. Not all transitions need big cabinets. Take the case of the first post-1990 government led by K P Bhattarai, it had only 11 ministers, yet it successfully organised elections and quickly drafted a new constitution, spurring economic growth.

These days, it is all about ministerial berths in governments that last no more than nine months. Such frequent government change and big councils of ministers raise the operational cost of government. The clash of partisans and personal interests also makes teamwork difficult.

Statistics show that bigger cabinets hinder economic growth. Data from the past 26-year timeline of 23 councils of ministers allows us to correlate GDP growth with cabinet size (see graph). The biggest-ever government after 1990 belonged to Baburam Bhattarai in 2012, and the GDP growth rate during his tenure was a mere 3.8 per cent, with the level of corruption rising to historical levels. When Chief Justice Khil Raj Regmi replaced him in an election government, he had just 11 ministers, and GDP growth rose to 5.7 per cent. This correlation can be seen throughout the last 26 years.

The focus of ministers in a big cabinet goes to government survival and maintaining ministerial portfolios. If the team is bigger, coordination becomes weak, thus impairing governance. Prime Minister Oli, for instance, had a run-in with Home Minister Shakti Basnet that strained his relations with Deputy Oli also announced a free dialysis service for all kidney patients, but Health Minister Ram Jatan Chaudhary was oblivious to the plan.

The new constitution has tried to address this problem by stipulating that ministerial councils should be no bigger than 25, however the rule was already broken by Oli and will probably soon be ignored by Dahal, and Deuba after him.

As we have seen in recent history, it is a chicken-or-egg question: the size of the council of ministers in turn leads directly to weak governments and more instability.

Honda BR-V in town

Spaku Trading Company recently unveiled Honda’s new compact SUV, BR-V. Nepal’s first seven-seater SUV boasts a 1.5-litre petrol engine, ground clearance of 210 mm, heat-absorbing windscreen, CVT with paddle shifter and eco lamp. The vehicle comes in six colours, at a starting price of Rs 3.99 million.

Connecting cities

Turkish Airlines began non-stop flights from Casablanca Airport to Erbil in Iraq on 5 August. The flights will operate on Mondays and Fridays in both directions.

ECONOMIC CLASS

Manish Jha

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An Olympian moment

Nepalis need to really believe that sports can make a positive contribution to the development of youth and the quality of life.

RABI RAJKARNIKAR

The Games of the XXXI Olympiad are underway in Rio de Janeiro, and nations eagerly await the moment when they can savour the pride that comes with seeing their athletes sparkle, shine and carve their names in the history books.

Some go on to become legends, inspiring whole new generations of youth to one day realise their own dreams to compete at the ultimate sports platform on earth.

Sport is a unique and indispensable tool for a country’s development, as well as a means to promote peace, culture and education. In particular, it provides young people with hope.

Nepal’s legitimacy in the Olympic Movement depends on it upholding the highest standards of ethical behaviour and good governance. All members of the Nepal Olympic Committee (NOC) must adopt, as their minimum standard, the Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance of the Olympic Movement.

Otherwise, we will continue to be exposed to public criticism when the NOC sends more officials than athletes to the games. Such behaviour seriously undermines any NOC-defined mission, and the selection of the athletes is also compromised.

So why is it that we in Nepal have thus far not been able to foster this shared vision that the world has so positively embraced? Is it because most Nepalis do not really believe that sports can make a positive contribution to the development of youth and the quality of life?

Sports is never neutral. It can teach values and ethical behavior, or not. It can help people develop a positive self-image and respect for others, or not. It can strengthen community life, or not.

Millions of people around the world practice sports as a healthy pastime, or for the sheer fun of it. Sports can bring people together, foster friendship, reinforce healthy lifestyles, and build civic pride and community participation. Or it can be about violence, drugs, cheating, match fixing, and winning at any cost.

This is why it is essential — and no sooner than ever before — to actively support positive values in sports, in simple and powerful ways. This is everyone’s responsibility, especially those associated with clubs, sports clubs, National Federations, National Sports Council and, most importantly, the NOC.

Modern Olympics place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity, as stated in the Olympic Charter.

This week in Brazil, seven Nepali athletes — three men and four women, including the youngest athlete participating in the Rio Olympic Games — are representing our country, making us proud. We stand equal with all participating nations from the five continents, symbolised by the five interlaced rings of the Games.

The intangible benefit of being part of this Olympic Movement is that it inculcates a way of life based on the joy of effort, the value of good example, and social responsibility. It also fosters respect for mutual understanding, and the spirit of Friendship, solidarity and fair play.

The Olympic Movement’s three core values are Excellence, Friendship and Respect.

Excellence refers to giving one’s best, either in the playing field or in life. It is not only about winning, but also participating, making progress in personal goals and striving to do our best.

Friendship encourages links and mutual understanding between people, and building a peaceful and better world through solidarity, team spirit, joy and optimism. The Olympic Games inspire people to overcome political, economic, gender, racial or religious differences, and to forge friendships in spite of those differences.

Respect includes respect for oneself and one’s body, respect for one another, for the rules as well as for the environment.

It refers to the attitude of fair play that athletes should have, and to a commitment to avoid doping.

The following principles of Olympism amplify the core values and allow them to be expressed in a way that drives far-reaching social change, which is where Nepal needs to focus:

- Non-discrimination: The Olympic Movement strives to ensure that sports is practised without any form of discrimination.
- Sustainability: The Olympic Movement organises and delivers programs in a way that promotes sustainable economic, social and environmental development.
- Humanism: The Olympic Movement places human beings at the centre, ensuring that sports remains a human right.
- Universality: Sports belongs to everyone, and the Olympic Movement takes into account the universal impact it can have on individuals and society.
- Solidarity: Developing programs that create a meaningful and comprehensive social response to issues within the Olympic Movement’s sphere of influence.
- Alliance between sport, education and culture: Commitment to promoting the spirit of Olympism at the convergence of sport, culture and education.
KEVENTERS COMES TO KATHMANDU

British-era brand now serving its finest milkshakes in Kathmandu

Independence, expanding the business to other cities in India, like Delhi and Benaras.

The arrival of Keventers in Kathmandu is a pleasant surprise for people like Rajamukar, who grew up knowing and consuming its milkshakes.

“I would love to enjoy the Keventers experience again in Kathmandu. Hope it brings back old memories of Darjeeling,” said Sujata Shrestha, who also spent two years as a student in Darjeeling.

To support and encourage Nepal’s business climate, the franchise will source milk and ice-cream for its milkshakes from local vendors in Kathmandu. “It is important to promote local products. If the products are good, there might be possibilities of exporting them, which is beneficial for local businesses here,” said Keiral.

The localisation approach will not be limited to milkshakes, but also the Keventers packaging. A signature product of the franchise — its distinctive glass bottles — will be given a Nepali touch with lali guars, the national flower of Nepal, printed on it. Says Keiral: “Over the years, the bottles have become an iconic product of the franchise and adds to the brand’s aesthetic quality.”

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LORRY LAUREATES

A visit to the truck studios of Banepa where poets and artists let their creative juices flow

UPASANA KHADKA

The automobile workshops of Banepa have traditionally specialised in building bodies on truck chassis, but less well known is the town's reputation for gaudy truck art and the桡ory poetry on vehicles. The messages are hard to miss while driving along Nepal's highways: some are witty, others profound. They range from the common ‘Ams Babu Ko Ashirbad’ (Parent's Blessing), and ‘See You Again’ to the more complex shayari verses about lost love and patriotism.

“When drivers came with requests for shayari, I used to scribble down about three on the spot and ask them to choose their favourite,” says Narayan Bhatta Karna, Banepa’s legendary lorry laureate who is now retired. Karna is well known for his hit song ‘Biko Timra Yad Harale, but stopped writing poetry for trucks five years ago. Hundreds of his verses can still be seen on vehicles all over Nepal, but many others disappeared after the vehicles were abandoned or painted over.

“Most of my songs have been fops, except ‘Biko Timra Yad Harale,” Karna said, “but because many of the lyrics were written on the spot for the trucks, I don’t remember most of them.”

Rendering the poetry onto the sides of trucks is the job of painter and poet Kamal Kumar Chowdhury.
who is much sought-after in Kavre. Originally from Sunauli, he has been painting trucks in Bhune for over two decades in his Kala Sona Art shop, which charges up to Rs 12,000 to paint a whole truck.

“Our drivers are very influenced by western culture, and they want logos of Adidas, Playboy, Barcelona and Manchester United,” he said, displaying a sample Barcelona logo that he was working on.

Choudhary is a two-in-one expert: he composes a poem on the spot, which he then paints on the side of a customer’s truck. He tries not to repeat his poems, so each driver gets an exclusive. Sometimes customers request the poem he proposes, and ask him to write them another one.

“Some drivers come with their own poems, others want me to write them so I ask for a theme, it is usually about love, longing, separation,” Choudhary says, adding that a common subject is the fragility of life, which could be due to the danger of being a driver on Nepal’s treacherous

highways.

Jivan Choudhary is an accomplished painter in Kavre, and Kanch’s nephew and protégé. He does not write poetry, but paints what the drivers want on the sides of their vehicles. Most popular these days are the words ‘Blind Love’, or even ‘SMS’ and ‘Facebook’ on the backs of tipper trucks.

Bikash Tamang is a truck driver and is having a verse he had himself written painted on the back of his truck. “Bhiksho pet, khalgo gojo za phato gremi in manusi dhera ko siksayena jaancha (A man learns a lot from an empty stomach and false love),” Explained Tamang. “It is based on my own real life experience.”

Jivan is busy painting the flag of Nepal on the side of another truck and trying to get driver Tamjik Rambali to buy it up and decide on the siksayen he wants on his vehicle.

“I am not sure about the words yet, maybe we will sit down with friends over drinks and come up with something by tomorrow,” he tells Jivan. “Whatever it is, it should capture the attention of the vehicles behind me on the road.”

POETRY IN MOTION: (far left, top) Truck driver Bikash Tamang (right) and painter Jivan Choudhary (left).

Jivan Choudhary paints the flag of Nepal on the side of a truck (left).

(far left) Artist Bajrangi’s legendary portrait Harayan Shrestha Kuma (left), and his masterpiece of verses (right).

Kamil Kumar Choudhury is a 2-in-1 artist, caught after for his painting and poetry (below).
Last tape, SAVE the date for Likaye’s Last Tape directed by Shankar Raj, with acting by Sudam KC. Inspired by Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape.
5 to 16 August, 5.30 pm, Theatre April, Sandan, Tickets: Rs 200, 300 and 500.
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Cycle Rally, Join the Cycle Rally to show your solidarity for International Youth Day 2016. The rally is jointly organised by Collective Campaign for Peace and Cycle City Network Nepal.
20 August, Starting point: Bhaktapur Durbar, Kathmandu.
(01) 4205413 / 4205409, 9871761617

All about literature, Organised by the Drama and Debating Club at Budhanilkhatan School, the Nepal Youth Literature Festival features talk programs, interviews of Nepali writers, workshops and literature-related competitions.
19 to 22 August, Bhaktapur Kathmandu School, Kathmandu. Registration: Rs 400 (short competition), Rs 500 (long competition).
(01) 4705196, tweet bridge@gmail.com, 9871761577

Wunjala Moskva, Try your hand at Russian and Ukrainian dishes in the lush garden with ancient trees and trickling streams.
Kathmandu, (01) 4845926

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Jomolkhel, 9871016475

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Jomolkhel, (01) 5245597, barista nepal@gmail.com

Hit the trails, Ride along the ridges of Shivapuri with fellow bikers.
12 August, 10 am onwards, Starting point: Peace Cycle Cafe, jomolkhel, (01) 4845926, 
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Open mic night, Grab the mic and sing your heart out at House of Music every Tuesday.
House of Music, Thamel, 9871051172

The Café, Enjoy a wide spread of vegetarian and non vegetarian dishes at Saturdays. Indulge in traditional Chinese brunch with six-fried wok dishes, dim sum, salads, maozin, fried rice and more on Sundays. Durbar and Sunday, 12.30 to 4 pm.
The Café, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Rs 2,300 plus taxes and service charge including the Premium Lounge.

Rock n’ Roll, Get up for rock live music by the celebrated Malik and Nepal.
20 August, 7 pm onwards, Karma Bar and Lounge, Unicef, Trisuli, Kathmandu.

Music for Choice, Rock band Robin and the New Revolution tunes to the stage with some of their hits at the Music for Choice concert organized by Marie Stopes Nepal.
13 August, 5 pm onwards, Bhaktapur Durbar, Kathmandu.

Mango Tree Lodge, Culture walks, rafting in the Karnali, wildlife exploration, and jungle safari at the Bardia National Park.
Bhutan, Bardia, info@mantreehotel.com

Hotel Barahi, Enjoy a great view of the serene natural landscape, a wide swimming pool to beat the heat this summer, and spontaneous parties from the German Bakery.
Lalitpur, Kathmandu, (01) 4694977 / 4805326

Club Himalaya, For amazing mountain views and refreshing weekend escapades.
Asan, (01) 4600290

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Yatayar, Pokhara, Rs 5,995 per person on twin-sharing basis. Package with adventure sports: Rs 8,599, (01) 462322, 9889187015 / 8890579094

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EVENTS DINING MUSIC GETAWAY
Long before there were highways to Kathmandu from the plains, there was only one way in and the same way out: the Chitlang Trail. Everyone and everything from India to Kathmandu passed through this steep staircase trail that started in Bhumpedi, crossed an old iron bridge over the Kulekhani river and descended steeply down to Thankot.

The trail has seen them all: Indian pilgrims visiting Pashupati at Shivasoti, or herds of water buffaloes for the Basain slaughter. And in the other direction would go Nepali students headed for school in Benares, or royalty in palanquins headed to the plains. The Mercedes Benz gifted by Adolf Hitler to King Tribhuvan, and other automobiles were physically carried up this trail from the plains.

Nepal’s rulers wanted to keep Kathmandu militarily impregnable from the south, and were therefore not in a hurry to build a motorable road. Today, ruins of Kama era rest houses and clauded stone stairs overgrown with vegetation are the only relics of this historic trail. The iron bridge and much of the trail have been submerged by the Kulekhani dam.

There are two roads that lead to Hetusa via Chitlang: the first is the Tribhuvan highway, built in 1959 to finally link Kathmandu to India, and the newer road via Dukshinkali.

But there is a third — adventures and shorter — route that follows the old trail from Godam in Thankot over Ch Chandragat Pass to Chitlang Valley.

The steep switchbacks from Thankot to the pass are not for the faint-hearted drivers or passengers, and the route is nearly impassable in the monsoon. A four-wheel drive is a must, and it will test every off-road skill a driver possesses. It is quite literally an uphill task.

But for a real weekend adventure getaway, forget the SUV, hop on your mountain bike and go up and over Chandragat to Chitlang. You can stop and admire the old trail, and remember our forebears who walked this route.

Chitlang itself is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic settlement, with a mosaic of Newari, Tamang and Brahmi-Chepuri settlements. This was the old trade artery to Kathmandu, and relics of that era can be found everywhere.

What to eat
Chitlang’s famous goat cheese is not to be missed, nor is the Himalayan Plantations olive farm started by Hariram Budor. The area takes immense pride in its organic produce, which you may want to try on the spot or pack up for home. Shops and restaurants around Kulekhani Lake serve fresh fish delicacies.

Chasing the cheese
Ashok Kumar Singh Dakhuli went to France to learn the fine art of making goat cheese 15 years ago, and came back to Nepal to produce goat cheese like it were going out of fashion. Dakhuli buys goat milk from surrounding villages, and has set up the Chitlang Cheddar Cheese Production Society, raising the cash incomes of hundreds of families. Dakhuli’s cheese plant is testimony to what can be achieved in Nepal if people put their minds to it. Dakhuli now supplies goat cheese to Kathmandu’s supermarkets.

Getting there
Taking an off-road jeep from Godam (on the way to Thankot) all the way to Chitlang will cost around Rs. 150 per person. You can also hire a jeep from Godam stop for Rs. 1,000, depending on your bargaining skill. It’s a hair-raising ride, so you may prefer to just ride your mountain bike or even hike.
Having myself missed this year’s *The Jungle Book* on the big screen, I will immediately underline that this is not a film to watch on a plane, or on your computer. The newest Walt Disney production is a live action film augmented with glorious computer-generated images, creating a stunning, if somewhat overly Disney-fied jungle world that pulls the viewer in, leaving us rapt in the wonders that have captivated children and adults alike since Rudyard Kipling’s stories of the Indian jungle were first animated in 1967 — also, of course, by Disney.

I have oft-bemoaned the lack of original source material that has necessitated the recent slew of remakes and spin-offs in mainstream cinema; in light of these intellectual property constraints, *The Jungle Book’s* new iteration has done incredibly well for its investors, grossing an astonishing $941 million (to date) to its already very high $175 million budget — an indicator that will undoubtedly have most studio executives casting around wildly in their archives for the next big remake.

While the visuals are exquisite, Jon Favreau’s *The Jungle Book* hews just a bit too closely to its charming predecessor, but without the same amount of verve. Adaptations and remakes of old classics are tricky, most can never shake off the shadow of the original, with film-makers hesitating to change that which worked so well the first time. Unfortunately, erring on the side of caution also results in boring, predictable repetition that is anathema to the pickier viewer, and I will warn those with lower thresholds that you will find yourself feeling slightly irritable every time this overly cute Mowgli (played by Neel Sethi) gleefully crows and preens over the long-suffering Bagheera (voiced wonderfully by the immensely versatile, always great Ben Kingsley).

While the new *The Jungle Book* is far from being a total loss, it is a shame that a film with so much talent could not have at least equalled its predecessor. With Bill Murray voicing Baloo, Scarlett Johansson as Kaa, Christopher Walken as King Louie, Lupita Nyong’o as Raksha (Mowgli’s wolf mother), and Idris Elba as Shere Khan, the film has moments of transcendent beauty, hilarity, and a sense of wonder. It manages to portray the real tenderness between human and animal that made *The Jungle Book* so special in the first place. Unfortunately there is always an awareness that something is missing, something new.

Perhaps the better way to introduce your children to this classic is to go back first to Kipling’s volume of short stories, which include treasures such as *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*, and only then turn towards this remake, after having introduced the older animated version which, at least in my mind, is so much sweeter than this new shiny, expensive, slightly empty beast.
Crooks and middlemen

estimates that cooperatives, mostly run by leaders and lawmakers, have swindled about Rs 10 billion from people as far as functioning as commercial banks with exorbitant interest rates.

“Even the PM was influenced by these businessmen legislators, he did not help me at all,” KC said, “there are only a handful of public servants who want to serve the people. Most just want to get rich quick, and go for kickbacks.”

He says he knows the system was corrupt, but he had no idea how deep-rooted it was. “I saw it with my own eyes — it was shocking for me,” he said. “Now I know Nepal is run by a cartel of crooks and businessmen.”

He says things will not change unless people wake up.

“These crooked politicians are unfortunately elected by the people,” he said as he showed us out of his room, “make sure you note this down: anyone who has money and muscle can win elections in Nepal. It is the people who must stop them from ruining the country and their lives.”

First decisions

www.onlinehubucer.com (4 August)

Hours after being sworn in as PM for the second time, Pushpa Kamal Dahal made four decisions to carry out the government for the people program, provide the first instalment of the reconstruction grants to 531,200 earthquake-affected families within the next 45 days, mobilise doctors in all Primary Health Care Centres, and encourage registration of births by offering incentives to the locals.

Will PM Dahal’s first decisions be implemented? To find out the answer, we review the first decisions made by his predecessors when he became PM for the first time in 2008, Dahal’s first decision was to get the new constitution promulgated by the First Constituent Assembly (COB) kept. But the First COB was dissolved four years later without a constitution in place.

Mostly Kumar Nepal, who became PM after Dahal stepped down, decided to build a memorial in Katha Park to honour those killed during the struggle for republicanism. But the project was a non-starter.

Jhala Nath Khanal became PM after Nepal, and his first decision was to build a tunnel road connecting the Kathmandu depot of Nepal Oil Corporation with the East-West Highway at Chyuphe Khola of Dhading. But he had to resign in just seven months, and the successors did not follow up on his decision.

The first decision of Baburam Bhattarai, who succeeded Khanal, was to implement the United Nations Convention against Corruption. But no progress was made after his resignation.

Khal Bahadur, who headed an interim government to hand the second CA elections — decided to prepare guidelines to distribute financial assistance. His successors, however, did not adhere to them.

Sushil Koirala, who became PM after the CA elections, decided to upload receipts for bills amounting to more than Rs 5,000 each, on the websites of the ministries concerned. This is the only decision that is being implemented even now.

The second decision of KP Oli, who became PM after the promulgation of the new constitution, was to replace all the 17 twin-ruled crossings across the country with suspension bridges. But only three were replaced during his nine-month tenure.

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Returning to the photograph of the mother and daughter that brought home the horror of war

Jamil Khatoon and her three-year-old daughter, Saljia, were preparing to sleep in a room above their bangle shop on Bima’s market street. Her husband was not home.

It was 20 March 2004, and at about 10 pm she heard the sound of many running footsteps outside. Soon after, there was a deafening explosion from the direction of the Army base, followed by gunfire, more big bangs, and people shouting commands and screaming.

The fight continued throughout the night. Their house shuddered and the window panes rattled with every explosion. Jamila had to muzzle her daughter’s cries as they cowered under the bed. She did not have the courage to peep outside, and stayed awake all night, praying for their lives, and for daylight.

The next morning, hours after the firing had stopped, there was a sound of helicopters overhead. Jamila was still hiding in the room, her daughter fast asleep, when someone knocked on the door. Soldiers were asking the residents to come out of their houses. The Maoists had already fled.

Jamila stepped outside, blinking in the sunlight, her eyes swollen and red. She still remembered vividly the scene that greeted her that morning: blood, bullets and bodies. The District Administrative Office building had been reduced to rubble, and was still smouldering. The streets were strewn with spent ammunition and unexploded bombs.

The steps outside Jamila’s shop had fresh blood from a dead female guerrilla, and she got a bucket of water to scrub it clean. Her daughter was standing nearby watching her, when journalist Thomas Bell walked by.

“I thought he was a tourist,” Jamila recalls, and ironically that is exactly what Bell remembers thinking: “She must think I am some strange tourist.”

Bell — then with the Daily Telegraph in Kathmandu — was one of the first outside journalists on the scene (see box) and what
Battle of Beni

LIVES AFTER WAR: Thomas Bell’s photograph of Jamila Khatri wetting blood from her dupatta while her three-year-old daughter Srija watched, became an iconic image of the conflict (left). Jamila and Srija Khatri visited the A People War Traveling Photo Exhibition when it arrived in Beni in 2008 (left, bottom).

The famous bullet ridden telephone pole that survived the battle of Beni is now a shrine monument at Talka Mayo (centre, right).

Sajita is now 15 and in Grade 9 at a local government school. Her memories of that night and the day after are derived mostly from what she has heard from her mother and neighbours. But she does remember seeing blood and bodies, and being scolded by an army soldier. She understood later from her mother that the soldier had snatched away an unexploded pipe bomb from her friend, shouting angrily at her. She is now thankful to that soldier who saved her life.

Not much has changed in the lives of the Khatri family since then. They now live in a small house in a landless aquatic settlement near Beni. Jamila still sells bangles in the same shop where she had hidden during the Beni battle. The country has gone from war to peace, from monarchy to republic, and there is a new constitution, but none of this seems to have made a difference to the Khatri family or others like them in Beni.

“None of the leaders really care about us,” she said. “We just have to fend for ourselves.”

Night of terror

In 2004, the war was at its height and the Maoists had been attacking one district headquarters after another. The tactics was to lay siege to the town at night, destroy the district administration buildings and attack the army and police bases, to inflict maximum damage and injury. The attacking force consisted of villagers and often used them as human shields in order to escape the defenders to reach their bases. Even though the Maoists would suffer heavy casualties, the attacks would expose the government’s vulnerability and be a propaganda victory.

An estimated 3,000 Maoists and villagers were killed in the Beni attack, most of them women. The clash lasted from 10.30 pm on 20 March 2004 until 6 am the following morning, after which the Maoists remained with Army helicopters in hot pursuit. In all, 19 civilians, 17 police and 16 soldiers were killed, but hundreds of Maoists were also slain, many buried by the river where they were fought over gurrula columns as they marched back to the mountain passes of Khukum.
Amb-assadors at large

Just as your favourite neighborhood Ass-troller predicted in this space last week, the tug-o-war over ambassadorships has begun, as the new regime dumps a list drawn up by the old regime.

The UML’s appointees have all been scrapped, and we are now going to get a mish-mash of left-handed candidates. The Congress and the Rastriyas are dividing up the world into spheres of influence, with the Maoists gunning for posts in Germany, France and Denmark, while the Congress want London, Washington and New Delhi. The ones without political clout or are unable to afford the prepaid deposit will have to settle (sorry, lads) for Myanmar or Sri Lanka.

But being a chronic optimist, the donkey always looks on the bright side: see how much money we have saved the national exchequer by keeping 16 of our ambassadors ass-ass-off for a year or more. It’s not without reason we call them ambassadors-at-large. Besides the monetary savings, potential guffaws and indications of pleni potentiaries have also been obviated since our dips are historically prone to shoplifting, human trafficking, facilitating the informal trade in contraband items between Nepal and the country of their posting, and even trying to sell off historical embassy property in return for handsome rewards from the Mittals.

But even when the envoys are finally nominated, we could see a repeat of 2008 when the Maoists chosen Excellencies for Delhi and Paris (Comrade Parcha and Comrade Pampha respectfully) were not accepted by host governments. Nominated by our Supreme, they never got their Agreements. At this rate, we’re not going to have new ambassadors any time soon, which is great news for the aforementioned exchequer because the country is going to save wade of dough.

The money saved can go to pay for the 41 officials who chaperoned seven Nepali athletes to Rio. If there is one Olympics Gold Medal that Nepal can win hands-down it will be in the athlete-to-banggers-en ratio, beating even the notoriously jukulitering Olympic Committees of nations like Guine Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe. Oh, by the way, just so we have our geopolitical priorities right, do we have diplomatic relations with those two countries? If not, better tie the knot so we can share ideas on how to beat the international record on freeloading sports bureaucrats.

Speaking of sports, Beddye ministers don’t seem to be getting as much exercise as they used to during their underground years, as can be gleaned from their ample girths. Awesome! J’s tummy is now becoming hazardous to his health, and the entire politiuro looks like it needs a workout. This is a matter of serious national concern.

It’s a pity he has decided not to partake of ribbon-cutting and badge-wearing ceremonies because that would have been good exercise. However, we are pleased to see that The Fearsome One is off to a flying start to burn off kilo calories by doing a ramba-like folk dance on the occasion of International World’s Indigenous Peoples Day.

And if he keeps on having to carry 20kg of matted gerlands from party cadres, it may mean he will have lost enough weight in nine months to be finally fit for the job by the time he will have to step down from his job.

One thing we are no longer worried about is a Prime Minister Comrade Terrifying being at a loss for words when he goes to the United Nations to deliver his address in English at the General Assembly next month. Given the number of dictionaries he has stacked up on his desk, and provided he uses his spare time in Baluwatar to memorize at least The Oxford Dictionary of English, his vocabulary will be so vast that the international community will finally be convinced that he has indeed made a smooth transition from bomb maker to bombastic speaker.

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