

EXCLUSIVE

Free to be poor

Having waited for six months for government support, kamaiyas freed from bonded labour are losing their patience and say they will settle on any piece of unclaimed land. Kamaiya activist Dilli Chaudhary says: "First, they told us they'll give us land by Dasai, then Tihar, now Maghi is over and we're still waiting." Destitute kamaiyas had no cause to celebrate their biggest annual festival on 14 January. There are an estimated 16,500 kamaiyas in the western tarai districts of Nepal and most



of them are now camping in the open after they were "freed" by government decree in July.

The government recently announced it was distributing parcels of land to 62 families, but Chaudhary and NGO sources say they don't know of anyone who has received land yet. The kamaiyas now plan to identify unclaimed farmlands, and start occupying them. Chaudhary says his people will measure 10 katthas—an area 40 by 40 cubits—for each family and build their huts. There is fear that the local administration may give some trouble. "But since they've seen the worst, they now seem ready to face it," says Ashutosh Tiwari, a Kathmandu-based activist now in Dhangadi.

BINOD BHATTARAI

Last year, international auditors discovered some fishy goings-on in two of Nepal's foremost banks. Now, it's not just fishy any more: Nepal Bank Limited (NBL) and Rastriya Baniya Bank (RBB) are on the verge of collapse. Almost half their assets are non-performing, loan recovery is down to a catastrophic 25 percent, and their cash ratios (adequacy) are billions of rupees short of the mandatory minimum.

"There's no doubt that the two banks are ailing and failing," admitted Bimal Koirala, secretary at the Ministry of Finance. He told the parliament's Public Accounts Committee last week that only major reforms can ensure that some Rs 45 billion worth of depositors' savings aren't lost. This was a shocking admission by a senior government official, and one that could trigger a run on the banks. But it was also an indication of just how serious the situation is.

Every politician present at the hearing seemed to agree. But their statements showed more myopic partisan grandstanding and blame throwing than desire to address the crisis itself. Leftist politicians are either convinced about the government's reform plan, or are they offering alternatives. The PAC is meeting again on 19 January to review a crucial sub-committee report on the issue.

That NBL and RBB are in

WHAT IF?

Two of Nepal's biggest banks are insolvent. Rs 45 billion worth of depositor's savings is in danger. The largest borrowers are the biggest defaulters. Banking reforms are the only hope.

bad shape is not news. The Commercial Bank Problem Analysis Strategic Study (CBPASS) in 1992 had already warned of a crisis. But nothing was done, and last year international auditors KMG estimated the negative net worth of the two banks to be anywhere between Rs 20 and 25 billion (depending on who's counting) and declared them "technically insolvent". It blamed bad management, bad accounting, bad supervision and excessive political interference in the past seven years for the woes.

There are ways to

resolve the crisis, like handing the banks over to external management, but politicians have an unspoken worry that skeletons are going to topple out of their closet if outsiders are let in. For the opposition, it has been just too tempting to flog the government by opposing "externally-dictated" reforms. The interests of some 40 major defaulters (a literal Who's Who of Nepal's business elite) is also delaying a decision. Nepal Bank's board members, who know very well that the value of their equity is in the negative, want the government to pay for the new management team but still want to call the shots even after the new managers arrive.

If the banks do collapse, losses will be staggering. The collective assets of NBL and RBB run up to Rs 80 billion and the two control over 60 percent of all banking transactions in Nepal. Because the government doesn't have the money needed to rescue the banks, small and big depositors stand to lose their savings. And the 10,000 employees of both banks will not just lose their money, but also their jobs and pensions. It is a nightmare scenario and the money involved is so staggering that the government doesn't even seem to want to think about it. We're told that some major depositors are beginning to show signs of panic: the Royal Nepal Army and the Employees' Provident Fund have already withdrawn about Rs 2 billion of their mature deposits from one of the two banks under various pretexts after the KMG report became public.

The crisis did not come overnight. The banks lent unwisely, often under political pressure, pouring good money after bad into non-bank sectors like textiles, sugar and steel. Worse, they waited two years after the firms defaulted to begin taking action to get their money back. Most loans were secured against property, often over-valued, which are now not worth much because of a real estate crash. Now the largest borrowers are the biggest defaulters. Financial analysts say the situation is now much worse than it was depicted in the KMG report last year. "If that was the macro-picture, imagine what things could be

like on the ground," says a foreign economist who has studied Nepal closely over 10 years. "The hole is getting bigger every day we fail to do something."

Part of the blame for today's mess is the Nepal Rastriya Bank which has always acted like a government department rather than an independent regulator. All it can do now is hope things will work out. Governor of Nepal Rastriya Bank, Dipendra Purush Dhakal, told us: "A turnaround is impossible. If that can be done with the smallest effort today, why not do it and take a chance to make the banks profitable again?"

That effort would cost \$25 million, and the World Bank may be agreeable to lending the amount but only if the government comes up with an acceptable reform plan. Other donors and creditors will be watching those reforms keenly. Acceptable financial sector reforms are also a pre-requisite for Nepal to qualify to use money from the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility.

The financial reform agenda at present hinges on amending the laws to make the Nepal Rastriya Bank independent, and more capable of supervision and monitoring. A bill to that effect is to be tabled in parliament in the upcoming session. NBL and RBB reform plan also includes:

- Selecting and appointing external management teams;
- The teams take over day-to-day bank management;
- Work on a time-bound plan to address issues such as the high default rate; and
- Have them function as real banks in two years.

There's a sense of urgency about seeing these reforms through. According to the timeline, the deadline for management contract proposals is next week, and they will be evaluated by mid-February. Negotiations with selected teams is to begin in March, and the new management team is expected in Nepal by the Nepali New Year. Whether or not it will be a happy 2058 will depend on how well the negotiations go and how much political interference there is. ♦

GAGGING RADIO

Nepal is a public radio pioneer in South Asia. It was the first country to allow community radio stations in 1997 when Radio Sagarmatha went on air in Kathmandu. Nepal has also been more liberal than others in the region in allowing private FM broadcasters. The deregulation increased credibility and professionalism of radio, made the medium interactive and citizens more aware of news and trends.

But it seems the government doesn't think so. A sudden decision by the Ministry of Information and Communication on 16 January (circulated to radio stations on 16 January only) banned the broadcast of independent news and current affairs on FM. A clause in the FM licence disallows news broadcasts, but the government claims private FM stations were circumventing it by reading a selection of daily newspapers without checking facts. Sources at the ministry told us the decision was taken by journalist-turned-minister Jaya Prakash Prasad Gupta himself in the aftermath of the street riots 26-27 December. Some FM stations were blamed for inciting tensions by broadcasting jingoistic reports and songs. Interestingly, the government move comes at a time when Gupta himself has been under fire from the media for demanding an apology from the Indian actor Hrithik Roshan for rumoured comments about Nepal that incited the violence, but which later proved to be false.

Bharat Koirala, the one Nepali who has been engaged in a crusade to promote community radio and campaigned five years to get Radio Sagarmatha its licence, is not happy with the decision. "It's not right," he told us. "FM stations were helping create a free, independent and pluralistic media, and promoting public debate in our democracy."

Media analysts say the government is using the violence as an excuse to crack down on the freedom of the airwaves. Gupta's ministry had already written to all stations demanding tapes spanning the period of the street violence, then it set up a committee to prepare "guidelines" for FM broadcasters. Finally, came the letter from the Ministry to 11 FM stations (six in Kathmandu and five outside) asking them to stop independently-produced news and current affairs. Radio Nepal news, however, can still be relayed. But to broadcast what the Ministry calls "second-hand news" the new rule requires stations



to quote sources and "verify facts" before they go on air.

"This is exactly how zonal commissioners used to behave in Panchayat days to control the press," says Raghuji Pant, UML MP and a former journalist. "You cannot be more undemocratic than that." The Parliament's Development Committee has decided to order the Ministry to send copies of all FM station licences and call officials over to explain reasons behind the decision. The hearing is to take place on 24 January.

The distinctive and popular voice of Radio Sagarmatha, which relied heavily on its own news and analysis, has been worst hit. The station had popular talk shows, news programmes, panel discussions and phone-ins. The station is run by a group of environmental journalists and was already under pressure from the Ministry, which hadn't renewed its licence. Kantipur FM, the other station with substantial current affairs content, defied the government and went ahead with its morning news-show and also evening broadcasts on Wednesday, as did Classic FM which uses the Radio Nepal's own FM transmitters.

Most station managers preferred not to comment openly on the decision, fearing retribution from the Ministry. Said one: "Maybe the democratic government wants the people to only listen to propaganda on Radio Nepal. The decision is an insult to listeners and their capacity to judge news from rumours." But Sri Ram Poudel, Secretary at the Ministry of Information and Communication, denies that this is an attempt to gag radio. "This is not censorship. We are only trying to make news more factual."

INSIDE



EDIFICE COMPLEX

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KINGDOM OF AMNESIA

It was just two weeks ago, but it feels like ages have passed. It is like that with bad things: you don't want to remember. And in this Kingdom of Amnesia, we are especially good at pushing aside memories, and not learning lessons. So it seems now like a bad dream—those two days of sudden violence. As swiftly as it flared, the flames died: a *paral ko aago*, like a haystack in flames. All that remains today is the scorched asphalt at the Baneswor crossing, the shattered Bata sign in Mangal Bazaar, the crumpled Gupta Bhojanalaya in New Road. What is also left is the bereavement of families whose children were killed, the scars in the psyche of those on Kathmandu streets who were mistaken for being from somewhere else. And for the others, there is the frightening spectre of what we are capable of doing and how little it takes to get us to do it.

So, two weeks later we are back to where we started. Our leaders in the ruling party are still snarling at each other, and the fight is about distributing the power to plunder. No one has any illusions about it anymore: this has never been an ideological battle over the best and quickest path to development and social justice—it is a Darwinian struggle involving the political survival of the least scrupulous. The problem is that one faction has monopolised the spoils of power, and the other one wants a piece of the action. Do they stop to think that pretty soon the coffers will be empty and there will be nothing left to fight about?

The Congress' *Kumbha Mela* in Pokhara this weekend promises some pyrotechnics, but nothing major—just another boring bout between Girija Koirala and the mentors of Sher Bahadur Deuba. No one expects a



real resolution of the crisis of leadership and governance in this country post-Pokhara. And even though the Prime Minister, who is also party supremo, seems to have got his electoral sums right and will probably keep both posts, this is unlikely to do anything to placate the Deuba squad. Koirala sits on two chairs, and the rebels will continue trying to pull both chairs from under him.

So nothing has really changed, except this feeling of free fall. The government is getting ready to arm a paramilitary force, and international arms dealers are circling like vultures. The ruling party had better sort out its power struggle for this country's sake, if not their own. Just look at the alternative. Trapped by the irreversible slogans of their own revolution, the ultra-left is inviting a crisis that could one day even cost us our independence. Those on the far right are set on a course of democratic reversal. And what does the government do? It plays petty games by blocking news and current affairs on FM, forgetting that rumours like the ones that fanned the flames last month can only be countered by open, transparent and responsible media.

Scapegoating selected media, and blaming the messenger is not going to mask the incompetence of a government that demanded an apology from a foreign actor for something he never said. Banning news on FM is the kind of decision we have come to expect from officials so insecure that they are afraid of their own shadow.

WAITING FOR SPRING

All right, this was a bad winter. The only thing to break the monotony of haze and frost was the fierce heat of burning rubber on the streets. And to top it all, you couldn't buy kerosene when the price was hiked, and again you couldn't buy it when the price was slashed. Then we found out it was because all the kerosene was being used to dilute our diesel. Then came the gas shortage. Subsidised kitchen gas powers three-wheelers, which the government in its infinite wisdom has allowed to roam our streets so we can embark on the search for cylinders to cook our meals with. So don't blame us for slipping into cynical mode, it is getting harder and harder to keep this upper lip stiff, and the chin up. One consolation is that things have to bottom out, and it will get better once it gets worse.

But at least the sun has begun its return to our hemisphere and someday soon we will start feeling our homes, offices and blood getting warmer. The birds will return, the bees will buzz and the streets will be leafy again. And maybe the tourists will be back. This cruel winter must draw to a close, and then spring can't be far behind.

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RABIN SAYAMI

STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL

Girija's last hurrah



*Leaning out over
The dreadful precipice
One contemptuous tree.*

-WH Auden

In the morning, you can see vapour rising from the surface of Phewa Lake. The sun penetrates the morning mist, and the Valley of Pokhara finally comes to life. Madhapudhare looms, incredibly high in the sky, it is so clear and near you want to reach out and touch it. By afternoon, there is a crisp winter breeze wafting over the lake from the forest on the far bank. The mood brings back the innocence you thought you had lost long ago in the dreary journey of life. As evening falls, the shadows of the surrounding hills lengthen across the valley floor absorbing the darkness. Then the moon rises, and the snowy flanks of Annapurna glow in the dark with an unearthly luminescence. Pokhara is magical anytime of day, anytime of year.

And it is in Pokhara that the Nepali Congress' own political Kumbha Mela is being held at a time when the ruling party faces serious challenges of internal rift within, and a challenge to parliamentary democracy by forces without. For the sake of the party and the nation, the Nepali Congress has to come to grips with itself and the nation's problems.

But since politics is about power, Pokhara too will see the war for party leadership erupt openly once more. Girija Prasad Koirala will be trying to ruthlessly steamroll dissidents. Sher Bahadur Deuba and his band of rebels have publicly announced that he wants at least one of Koirala's jobs, and he has refused to accept defeat in the no-trust vote two weeks ago. The party constitution is expected to be amended to elect half the central committee members from a national constituency of general convention members, but Deuba's regional hold over the party apparatus in the mid-west and far-west regions of the country will not be enough to foil Koirala.

That amendment is likely to be the most important concern of Nepali Congress general convention representatives from all over the country when they assemble this weekend in Pokhara. Koirala has declared in an interview that he does not need more than "two or three years" to groom a successor. Pokhara is the best place to make that announcement, where he will have a receptive audience with his hardcore supporters heavily outnumbering the rebels. (The representation arithmetic has been carefully manipulated that way by his cousin and hatchet man, Sushil Koirala.)

On the other hand, Deuba and his vocal fellow-travellers, Khum Bahadur

Khadka and Bijaya Gadhedar, will make sure that it's not a cakewalk for the Koirala dynasty. They know this is their final chance to prove their relevance in a party that has functioned more like a platform thus far, but is likely to acquire the semblance of an actual political party in Pokhara.

Nepali Congress leaders like to think that theirs is a mass-based party. What they don't say is that it is so by necessity. When it was underground and functioned in a hostile environment, ad-hocism was the only way to run it. The party can't afford to run that way now. Transparency, accountability and openness are the new principles of the Tao of Political Management. And political parties first need to be democratically governed if the country is to be democratically governed too.

The Pokhara convention should also re-examine the role and function of Nepali Congress party in the country's rapidly worsening circumstances. When it was spearheading a revolution, the centrality of party leadership was quite logical. You don't fight a war without a general whose orders are carried out without question. Evolutionary methods are better suited for more settled times. Evolution depends on creativity, adaptability and flexibility. This means a party needs an internal structure where dissent is managed, not squashed. The party must therefore learn to place more emphasis on the management ability of its leaders. When half the central committee members come from direct elections, all party leaders aspiring for a national role would like to be elected rather than selected. In a democracy, elections

give more legitimacy than selections. But elections do not always send the best managers into positions of power, and so the internal structure of the party needs to be re-designed for efficiency.

Nepali Congress stalwarts frown upon the dictatorial ways of cadre-based parties, but there is nothing wrong in learning from them the lesson of being organised around shared values and norms. This makes everybody respect the rules of the game. When there are elections for leadership, and that will be more often in the future, the winner will still take all. What they need to remember is not to leave losers behind. There can be no winner without at least one loser, so the rules of the game require that the loser be given due importance as well.

In elections everywhere, the loser shows the grace of congratulating the winner. The reason why Koirala and Deuba could not show even half as much maturity, despite being in the same party, is that Nepali Congress hasn't designed its organisation to accommodate dissent while coping with change.

Considering that the convention takes place every four years, and octogenarian Koirala is asking for three more years, Pokhara will probably be his last hurrah. History will perhaps be kinder to him than his critics have been so far, but we will remember him better if he succeeds in kick-starting the institutionalisation of his party. Delegates to the General

Convention of the Nepali Congress share a bigger responsibility than perhaps they themselves realise. It concerns us all, because internal matters of a ruling party are not internal at all—they assume national importance. A location as grand as Pokhara deserves momentous and historic decisions. If the Nepali Congress fails to rise to the occasion, they will have no one to blame but themselves. ♦

Sher Bahadur Deuba

MIN BAIRAHARYA



Rationalism and nationalism



SUBHAS RAI

Even as the Indian media mull over why Nepalis could be so annoyed at us as Indians being such nice guys, it follows fail-safe methods in annoying them. Sure, what happened in Nepal last month was bad. The chain of events shaped a number of contradictions in that society: a poor showing by an ineffective government, the hills-plains problem, anti-Indianism amongst some Nepalis. In the last decade the gains of Nepal's pro-democracy movement have ebbed. And the ultra-left and far right seem to be ganging up, and in fact helping create that hopelessness where many will welcome strongman rule once again over democracy.

There's been little analysis of these deeper and real issues in the Indian media. But there has been no hesitation in finding Nepal as a whole guilty of lots of unpleasant things. What if the Indian media applied to its own society even a tenth as sensible a tenth of the standards it has judged Nepal by? The results would be interesting. From what sort of platform do the media in India apply their moral loftiness? The planks are many. Let's look at just four:

WHY ARE THEY BEING SO IRRATIONAL?

India's injured innocence is a bit misplaced. The irrationality of the rioters in Kathmandu was very real. So was the damage and loss of life it led to. It still in no way surpasses the many wonderful things we do here in India-only we do them more often. After MF Hussain has paid a thousand times for his supposed sins against the gods, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad-Bajrang Dal still attacks his film in Ahmedabad, slashes theatres and intimidates audiences. It then proudly proclaims its "defence of Indian culture", and says it will persist no matter what apologies Hussain may tender for crimes he has never committed. I couldn't spot any editorials in the papers that focused mainly on the irrationality of the VP's attack on the film. Those that mentioned it editorially at all took care to distance the whole thing from the Vajpayees, Advanis and Murali Manchar Joshis-all very rational people. The last is a professor of physics who believes there were flying chariots and nuclear weapons in the time of Lord Ram.

The loss of five lives in Kathmandu was a major tragedy, and the circumstances quite unprecedented for Nepal. But Advani's *sathyatva* in this

country left many more hundreds dead in its insane trail. Vicious outbursts by the Thakeras and Singhs too, have led to far more loss of life than anything that ever happened in Nepal. But that's only politics. What's with these Nepalis, anyway? No irrationality, please. We're Indians.

NEPAL AS A DEN OF THE ISI

The 'den' image has cropped up in countless reports since the hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane last year. Remember how the Indian media went to town then? The ISI may well be active in Nepal. But the Indian government tells its people the ISI hasn't been dominant in India either. They've even been active recently inside Delhi's Red Fort. And if we go by the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) view of things, the ISI is entrenched in every city and town in this country. So if Nepal is their den, what does that make India?

That the Delhi government is specially gifted in ISI-spotting is beyond dispute. One of its intelligence agencies puts out a note calling Dr JK Jain an ISI agent. If true, this confirms the ISI has successfully penetrated the National Executive of the ruling BJP. Jain is a former BJPM, a Sangh media baron and among the most faithful of saffron souls the parivar has ever known. That the Sangh parivar itself has historically so often served the cause of India's sad enemies is indisputable. However, it turns out the allegations spring from a petty property dispute the man has had with a BJP minister. That's frightening. If this is how rationally they deal with their best friends, one of their own pack, imagine what they would be willing to do to their political opponents.

THE RISE OF ANTI-INDIANISM

Nepal has long been known for its tolerance and friendliness. What's occurred is an alarming break with that tradition. It might help, though, to try and understand why it's been happening. It isn't so many years ago that India blocked all transit points but one on its border with Nepal. Delhi then decided to make us look worse by arguing that it had upheld its "international obligations" by keeping open that single transit point. This was not only a technical stand, but also a very stupid one. We were talking about a country we claimed to have

What if the Indian media applied to its own society even a tenth of the standards it has judged Nepal by? A noted Indian writer explores the moral loftiness of his country's press.

'Deep and friendly relations' with. If anything, it's surprising the anti-Indianism provoked by that act didn't burst into the open then as it did this time over a foolish, possibly planted story.

The situation on the border changed when the Gujarat government was in power. A trade treaty was signed, bilateral trade thrived and things improved. Sadly, all that is threatened as New Delhi refused to look at the piling up of anti-Indian grievances in Nepal. Our water disputes with Kathmandu have hardly been handled with great delicacy. And along the border are dams and other structures that could one day cause mega-deaths on both sides. We built most of them. The Nepalis have protested against these in the past. Indian media audiences know nothing about them.

And take what young students could be learning from Uttar Pradesh's textbooks: that Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, for instance, were and should be part of a Greater India. The anti-Indian rioters in Nepal's streets haven't latched on to that one yet, it's a matter of time before they do. After all, some of them seem to have drawn much inspiration from the politics of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. And in case there's any chance of their missing the point, there's KR Malkani to set that right. He laments India's failure to acquire Nepal when it had a chance to do so, thereby forfeiting prime real estate in the hills. Malkani says out loud what the top bosses of the parivar deeply believe but won't openly admit. Not just yet, anyway.

Take the bans on New Year revelry, birthday cakes and honeymoons in Uttar Pradesh. These were indeed attacked as irrational hogwash. But again, what the BJP and ABVP did on the ground was never connected to the paragons of rationality in government. But with Nepal, a whole society can be stereotyped on the actions of a few. The RSS has really got its knickers in a twist over Nepal-remember all the stuff about The Last Hindu Kingdom? The only Hindu ruling monarch? The Sangh crowd was always against the pro-democracy movement in that country. At the same time, Nepal is, ah well, Hindu. How do you lead mouth it and support it at the same time? It's not easy.

Many Nepalis were angered by Indian coverage of the IOB hijack last year. Security at Indian airports has hardly been exemplary. And yet the kind of "we penetrated Kathmandu airport-security" stories could also have been done at a dozen terminals in India. Besides, the stereotyping of Nepal and the Nepalis that was a by-product of the accompanying hysteria did not make India too many friends in Nepal.

NEPAL AS UNDERWORLD HAVEN

This much repeated charge is not without truth. It might help, though, to point out that a large part of that underworld is, er... Indian. Within that, the mafias of Mumbai and UP have a big share. The Chotta Rajans, Dawoods and Babbloo Scivastavs have all had bases and links. It's clear the unfortunate young actor, Hrithik Roshan, never said the ridiculous things attributed to him. There's more than one way, though, that the false idea that he did could have caught on. Bollywood and mafia links are not Nepal's problem. But it is the Indian media's. Many in it have no incentive to probe deeply the ties that bind Bollywood to bad money. Such an investigation could prove highly embarrassing. The Indian media are just covering police action. Not one independent investigation has come from them. Surely odd, for a media that prides itself on its knowledge and coverage of Bollywood. From the Indian media, let's have less instigation and more investigation. ♦

(P Sainath is a Bombay-based writer and journalism trainer who writes regularly for The Hindu and The Telegraph. He is the author of the award-winning book, Everybody Loves a Good Drought, Penguin, 1996. The above piece was adapted from a longer version that appeared in The Hindu.)

AFTERSHOCKS

'Waiting for the big one' (#25) left me in a state of panic. It has projected an apocalyptic picture of the valley after a magnitude 7 or 8 quake. It seems the aftermath will be more serious than the actual earthquake. No one can prevent an earthquake, but the time has come to think of earthquake safety and ready emergency and relief strategies. Recent quakes in El Salvador and Turkey have lessons for us: if we depend only on the government's safety rules, all we can do is pray.

Ajay Das
Lalitpur

ARTHA BEED

Could not agree more with Artha Beed (Closed Economy, #24).

These irresponsible mushroom (and umbrella) parties seem committed to turn Nepal into hell (well, its half hell already). They have no clue what the far reaching consequences are. I am just frustrated with these classic @#%&* (excuse my language) Why don't they see the larger picture and imminent threats. God save Nepal!

Bhim Karki
by email

Thank you for inviting views on your article (Shareholding Nepali Style #25) on troubles caused in the annual general meetings in AGM of public limited companies due to public shareholders and your interest in transparency in companies. But I don't understand why Artha Beed thinks

people holding 10 shares don't have any idea about operating a company. In fact, they may be more brilliant than the directors. Shareholders may have valuable insight into running companies, and what makes you think the directors are sincere to shareholders?

Manij Lakhey
by email

MORE BANDHS, PLEASE

I read Mr. Padma Jyoti's comment ("On Bandhs", #25) on the Internet. During my recent trips to Nepal, I have witnessed a few bandhs myself and I must say the city was surreally tranquil because of the lack of traffic congestion, noise and air pollution. Seriously,

these bandhs are probably pretty good to clear the smog-choked environment. What the safe tempos or the government's environmental policies could not achieve, the "bandhs" probably do. We should not underestimate the ultimate motive of our political parties in calling for shutdowns from time to time. It's the environment, stupid!

Subarna Bhattachan
Lawrence, Kansas

WHERE IS BIMALA?

Allow me to inform you that Inspector Bimala Thapa whom you had pointed out as an example of resistance to the prevailing corruption in public life ("New heroes, quiet



revolutions by John Child, #13) has been removed from her post opposite Singha Durbar. Rumour has

it that she crossed a couple of government ministers by insisting that their children come in person to collect their driving licences (and take a test?) rather than the licence being delivered to their residence by a messenger.

Mark Pickett
Kathmandu

NUTS

Mr Lal's malicious little crack at

"bahunism" in his article 'Look back in sadness' (State of the State, #25) was uncalled for. If he wants to practice tolerance and harmony as he preaches it, I suggest he take an honest look at his own deep-rooted prejudices, which seem to surface from time to time in his writings. Meanwhile, Mr Under My Hat Dixit is nuts! Keep up the nuttiness!

Kishore Joshi
Handigaon

Correction

The picture accompanying the Nepal literature column "Words of dislocation" on Sarubhakta (#25) was taken by Kumar Ale.

FIRE ALARM



1
SALIL SUBEDI WITH
HEMLATA RAI

If a major fire breaks out in your neighbourhood the thing to do is dial 101, but don't be too sure that the firefighters will rush over. Provided they turn up at all, for it is as likely the firemen would be busy repairing their tenders, some of which are more than 60 years old. And if there are more than four big fires simultaneously in Kathmandu, the most anyone can do is sit back and watch the flames, as fire engines run here and there with empty water tanks. "Only after something disastrous will the government come up with anything new. At the moment we can do nothing but hope nothing like that happens," says one fireman in Kathmandu.

If you want to know what he is cribbing about, take a stroll around the 63-year-old Juddha Barun Yantashala at New Road or the fire brigades offices in Lalitpur or Bhaktapur. Even a brief chat with firefighters will tell you how careless authorities have been about something like firefighting. And we aren't even talking of the safety of these daring workers or how they have been discriminated against over the years.

There are 11 fire engines operational in the Valley—one in Lalitpur, two each with the Nepal Police and the Pashupati Area Development Fund (PADF) and three each with the Juddha Barun Yantashala in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur. PADF has been trying to give its two Japanese fire engines (one without a tank) to the government, but the government has so refrained from taking up the offer. Explains Min Bahadur Poudel, chief of the Disaster Relief Section at the Ministry of Home Affairs: "We want to hand over all the existing fire brigades to the local development authorities (municipalities). That's why we haven't done anything."

There is also an acute shortage of firefighters. Numbers have fallen drastically in a few years. The Kathmandu fire brigade has 30 firemen to manage four trucks (one with a ladder). Each truck requires 10 firefighters under normal circumstances. Poudel of the Home Ministry doesn't seem bothered. "They are already without work. There are no fires in the Valley. They can manage with what they have," he says.

Firemen at Bhaktapur told us that they have to respond to an average of 20 fire incidents every month. Their engines are petrol-guzzlers, but the government



If there is anything scarier than a big blaze in the inner city areas, it is the state of our fire-fighting capacity.

remains totally oblivious to their problem. The government gives them a grossly inadequate Rs 100,000 each year for fuel and maintenance of machines. "We have to personally beg petrol pumps to provide fuel on credit," says a fireman. (None of them wanted to be named since a colleague of theirs was fired for speaking out openly to a newspaper.) "We get the same amount that was budgeted in 1994," he moans.

No roads, no water

The growing number of houses built without regard to fire safety makes the scenario all the scarier. Add to that the fact that 50 percent of the Valley's 1,260 km of road passes through high-density areas with narrow alleys and lanes. Firemen say a road must be at least 8ft wide for the fire trucks to manoeuvre. The water hose is 75m long and water can be directed a further 70 feet at full

throttle. "It's just impossible to put out fires in the inner city," says a Kathmandu fireman. The Valley desperately needs portable fire engines—smaller trucks carrying 1000 litres of water that can go anywhere, he says.

Then there is the water problem itself. All three fire brigades are perennially short of water. The 10,000-litre water storage tank at the New Road fire brigade is completely dry, and has been so for three years. In Patan, every other day a fire engine goes out to collect drinking water for its staff. "We had a 3,600-litre tank built but it leaks. We've asked for it to be repaired several times. We still have to collect water from Bode and Mahankal," the fire brigade says. And during the dry season, they are often ordered to supply drinking water to the residences of Ministers and other government officials.

Fire hydrants can be seen at odd intervals along some Kathmandu streets, but are useless for the firemen. According to the Nepal Water Supply Corporation, in 1997, there were 235 hydrants, 106 in Lalitpur and 129 in Kathmandu. But most of them are either out of order or blocked. Even if they were to function, it would only be at specific times since they are all connected to the water supply lines and even then the flow is feeble. "Fire hydrants aren't our priority at the moment. We are more focused on public water supply distribution," says Naor Kumar Tamrakar, acting Deputy General Manager of the Corporation.

Exploited, uninsured

Firemen say they sometimes fear the worst. Says one: "We're often harassed when tackling fires. If there's a big blaze, we'll probably be lynched if we aren't able to put it out."

They continue to risk their lives only out of sheer "dharma", as one

of them puts it. None of the three government-run fire brigades in the Valley provide fireproof jackets to firemen, let alone oxygen masks, cylinders and other equipment. Their 'latest' acquisition is the German-made Magirus Deutz fire tenders which all three brigades bought in 1976. The only 'hi-tech' fire engines, i.e. with foam to combat blazes, are at the Tribhuvan International Airport.

Firemen are increasingly upset about government indifference to their welfare. There have been no promotions since 1981, and no new recruitment since 1991. Patan's fire brigade has been without commanders since July 2000. And, no, they're not covered by any insurance policy. "You can imagine the risk to the poor siphis," says a fireman.

"We are constantly at risk saving other people's lives," says another from Patan, recalling the death of a colleague who inhaled toxic fumes while rescuing a person from a well.

"We do feel for them, regarding issues like insurance, training and overtime allowance. But at the moment the government does not have any budget for that. It will take some time," says Poudel of the Home Ministry, and leaves it at that.

Retiring employees have a hard time getting their pension books from the Nijarati Kamachari Kitabkhana (the government records office). "We are stuck with work that gives us neither professional nor personal satisfaction," says one who has been a siphis for 19 years.

The Home Ministry is responsible for the fire brigades in Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur, but firemen aren't too sure who is in charge. They've been to the Public Service Commission, the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority, the Local Development Ministry and even the Special Police, to pour out their woes, but to no avail. The firemen are hired under provisions similar to the armed forces, but are denied corresponding facilities. The Superintendent must be a graduate with basic training in firefighting. "But here the khadar [a lowly functionary] of the ministry is assigned to the post. He knows nothing about firefighting," says a

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



Explaining everything

I've never felt more dull-witted and uncreative than in a Nepali January. But there has been a ray of light, if not warmth, from the book *Guns, Germs and Steel* by the American scientist, Jared Diamond.

not. This is one of the best things I've ever read, on any topic. It oozes humanity and an endless fascination for an array of topics. Diamond is a biologist by trade, a genius and a polymath by inclination.

His thesis is blindingly simple. People evolved differently in different parts of the world according to their access to wild plants and animals to domesticate. The largest selection of those were in West Asia, what historians call the Fertile Crescent, modern-day Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, and Egypt. The same plants and animals were also acquired by adjacent societies and those that traded with the West Asians: the ancient Chinese and Indians, the Celts and Teutons of northern Europe and even some indigenous folk from Southeast Asia. Having a broad choice of domesticated plants and animals meant that nomadic hunter-gatherers settled down and produced food surpluses. This allowed them to support specialists, first craftspeople, then scribes, bureaucrats and inventors. They developed technologies, the "guns" and "steel" of the book's title.

Meanwhile, the people of the Americas, Africa and Australasia lagged behind because, according to Diamond, they had fewer, less efficient food sources. No wheat, for example, no cows, horses or pigs. They were not able to develop writing systems, the wheel or gunpowder. Their societies largely remained organised as village-level chiefdoms without central

political authorities. There were exceptions to this: the Incas of South America, the Aztecs of Mexico and the Mississippi valley native tribes are some of them. But these people were particularly vulnerable to something else that was developing in the Eurasian societies—the "germs" in the title of the book.

European colonialism wiped out huge numbers of people in these less developed society, usually through the spread of disease that had leapt to humans from domesticated animals. Those who domesticated the animals had developed relative immunities, those who hadn't died in droves. Any other resistance was seen off by military technology and the use of horses in battle. People in South Asia, Africans, Australian aborigines and indigenous hunter-gatherer societies in various other parts of the world suffered similar fates as developed peoples spread outwards in search of gold, land and loot. Religion buttressed imperialist movements and Diamond is particularly scathing in his analysis of the role of organised faith in economic development. Successful societies, he writes, had religions that justified "kleptocratic elites" who in turn funded military structures, mercantilism and national myths.

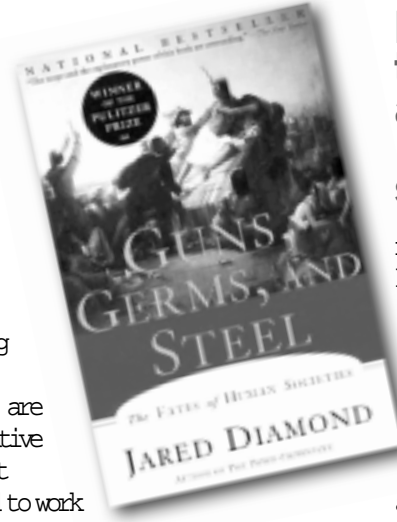
The underlying message here is that circumstance, luck and a degree of ruthlessness gave the north its prominent position in global development, not intellectual or evolutionary superiority. Diamond's conclusion is a withering attack on racism and social Darwinism and a plea for the inheritors of history's good fortune to be both humble and generous in victory.

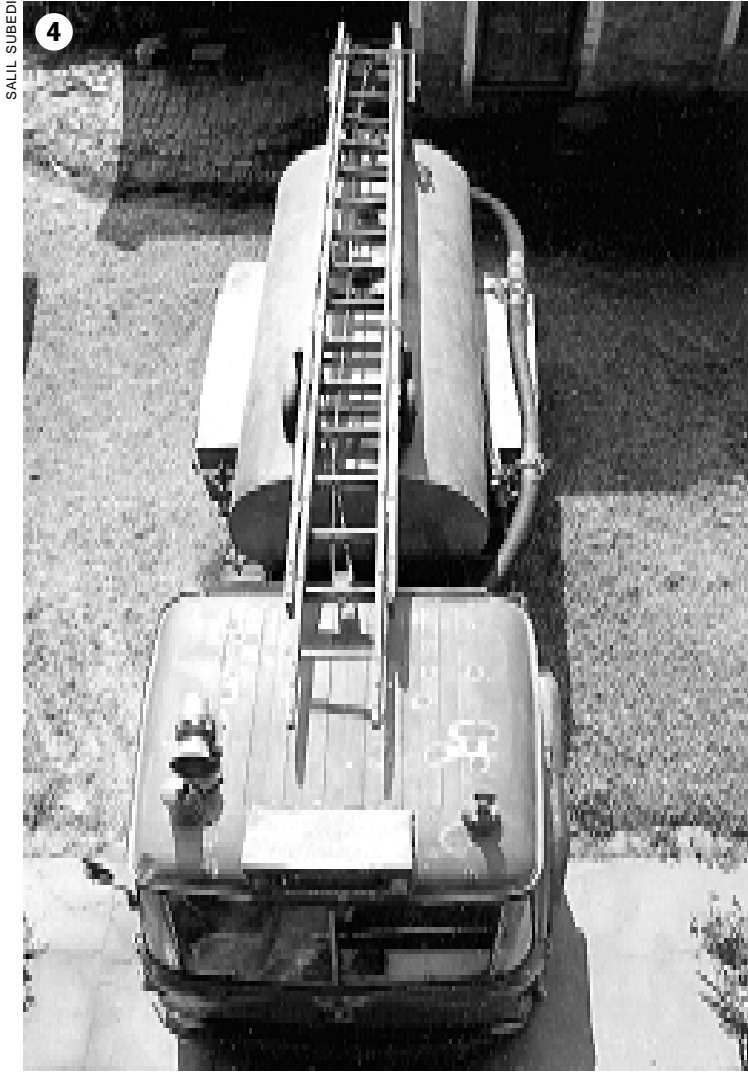
May I humbly recommend this book to people from both sides of the global development divide. ♦

There are countless theories to explain why some parts of the world have lots, and others little: why North and West are rich and much of the South and East wallow in poverty and underdevelopment. Some of the theories are odious and racist, others are ideological, conspiratorial or downright silly.

One of the latter goes something like this: people from cold climates (Europeans, Japanese, Han Chinese) are more industrious, inventive and creative than people from the tropics (almost everywhere else) because they had to work harder to cope with the cold. I have had thoughts like those brayed into my ear by saloon bar sociologists in many places, including Kathmandu. As a representative of one of those northern peoples, the Canadians, let me say I've never felt more dull-witted and uncreative than in a Nepali January. I can't invent ways to find any LPG or kerosene. And as for industrious, well, ask the editor of this paper about whether I met the deadline for this column.

A ray of light, if not warmth, on this perplexing topic comes from a newly acquired book *Guns, Germs and Steel* by the American scientist, Jared Diamond. The cover blurb says the book is "a short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years." It may sound grandiose but it's





1. A non-operating Dennis Fire engine in Kathmandu.
2. A Magirus Deutz with the Bhaktapur fire brigade. On the far end is a small sunny pond which is the brigade's water source.
3. A Magirus Deutz in Kathmandu.
4. A Bedford fire engine in Bhaktapur.
5. The Dennis at Bhaktapur Fire Brigade station which a Belgian tourist mistook for a history museum.

fireman from Kathmandu. Neither is there any training for new recruits either. Only the first batch of firefighters were given formal training when the Juddha Barun Yantrashala was established back in 1938. "We learn the skills from our seniors," they say. "The Home Ministry does receive scholarship and training offers from friendly countries every year. But since none of our firemen meet the criteria set by trainers, we are unable to send anyone," says Pudel. Firemen, however, claim that ministry officials have been going on these training programmes. If that was not enough they are also called upon by the police during riots to shoot water. According to the firefighters, the cops have not used their water cannons even once. "We are the unlucky ones, left to face the mobs. We are neither armed nor protected. The police exploit us. They hide behind our trucks and order us to move ahead. Why don't they use

their cannon instead?" asked one fire fighter. Recently, they were called upon to extinguish a roused fire at the Gopi Krishna Cinema during the recent riots. Eyewitnesses say that despite their hesitation, firemen were forced by police to move ahead when suddenly a stone crashed through the windscreen and injured the commander badly. An eyewitness said: "He was taken to the army hospital, the wound sutured and that was it. He was neither compensated nor given any further medical treatment." "This kind of treatment hurts us a lot," says the commander, who remained in bed on a liquid diet for a week, paying for the medication out of his own pocket. There is now another worry for the firemen: the government decision to rid the Valley of vehicles more than 20 years old. Says a veteran fireman: "I wonder what the big bosses are planning to do with our fire engines that are more than 50 years old." ♦



Operational Fire Engines with Juddha Barun Yantrashala

- Morita, German**
Model: 1976, Capacity: 4,000 litre (Kathmandu-2)
- Magirus Deutz, German**
Model: 1976, Capacity: 2,400 litre (Kathmandu-1, Patan-1, Bhaktapur-1)
- Bedford, UK**
Model: 1973, Capacity: 1500 litre (Bhaktapur -1)
- Dennis, UK**
Model: 1945, Capacity 1,200 litre (Bhaktapur-1)

Kathmandu Valley Road Map highlighting heavily populated areas which the fire brigade cannot access.

Everest Hotel

Planning permission has been granted for building the world's highest hotel—17,000 ft above sea level—in the Rongbuk valley on the Tibetan side of Mt Everest. The project has however angered environmentalists and climbers who feel that the hotel will attract more visitors and make the area a virtual theme park. The man behind the scheme is Russell Brice, a New Zealand-born mountaineer who has been climbing and running expeditions on Mt Everest for more than 20 years. Brice and his Nepali partner, Ang Tsering Sherpa of Asian Airlines, first met representatives from the China-Tibetan Mountaineering Authority in Lhasa, where they agreed upon a joint venture to build a lodge at base camp. Brice then had to seek the approval of more than 88 government authorities before finalising the proposal for the eight-bedroom hotel and six chalets with 36 beds. The proposed hotel will cover 22,000 square feet of the base camp area, and will include a bar and restaurant serving local cuisine. The hotel, yet to be named, is expected to cost £2.3 million to build and designers say they have ensured that the complex will be solar powered and waste will be recycled into energy using highly pressurised tanks. Buddhist monks have advised that the design remain traditionally Tibetan. The idea germinated from a temporary camp set up by Swedish climbers 10 years ago. "It made sense to have this sort of set-up permanently, to serve not only climbers but also the majority of tourists who visit the base camp for a short time," says Brice. But honorary secretary of the Mount Everest Foundation, Bill Ruthven, dismisses the idea: "This is commercialising Everest. It should be left aloof from the masses."

DFID gives £19.5m

Britain's Department for International Development (UK) has agreed to give Nepal £19.5 million to support programmes that would facilitate pro-poor governance. The money is to be used over an eight-year period in projects to improve governance. The Prime Minister's Office is the counterpart to DFID's Enabling State Programme (ESP), chiefly because governance issues overlap different government agencies and departments. Without any pre-conceived projects, the ESP will provide funds for activities formulated by Nepalis. "The idea is to get Nepalis to conceive, design and implement activities to improve governance and take responsibility for the outcome," says Sailendra Sigdel, ESP national programme adviser. "It's a programme seeking not to build bridges or roads but to change behaviour." ESP essentially aims at making Nepalis capable of taking charge of the change they want and involving them in the entire process. It hopes to enable or facilitate "change advocates" to function as pressure groups to bring about the desired changes in governance. Though an idealistic goal, DFID seems convinced it is worth a shot. Which explains why—unlike most projects funded through bilateral grants that budget as much as 40 percent of programme funds to pay advisers from donor nations—ESP has just 4 percent of the kitty set aside for External Technical Assistance. Even that will be spent on monitoring. "We'll be closely monitoring the programme to ensure no specific interest group hijacks it," says Michael Lowe, ESP manager.

RNAC chief suspended

Harj Bhakta Shrestha, the controversial executive chairman of the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC), was suspended last week upon the recommendation of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA). The anti-corruption body has been probing the controversial Lauda Air jet lease by RNAC, which was done through direct negotiations despite a standing CIAA directive that all leasing be conducted through open competitive bidding. Shrestha had led the negotiations to lease the Lauda Air Boeing 767 that has been part of RNAC's fleet since 1 December 2000. The jet was leased for 18 months at \$3,500 per flight hour, but there are allegations that other "hidden costs" have increased that figure to about \$5000.

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SHIVA GAUNLE

After a courtship that lasted years, Anrita and Ganesh Bhakta finally got married. But within a few months, the couple had filed for divorce. The judge hearing their case tried to convince them that a divorce was not the only solution. It was an effort wasted since both were bent on separation. So the necessary papers were prepared and that was the end of a marriage both partners had looked forward to so eagerly.

Anrita and Ganesh Bhakta's divorce was one of over 200 cases registered in Kathmandu last fiscal year. That represents around 9 percent of all cases filed in the court, and is the highest in number after traditional disputes relating to land, money lending and inheritance.

There is definite evidence that divorce is on the rise in Nepal. Social scientist Ram Bahadur Chhetri of the Tribhuvan University found plenty of evidence while helping students gather data on the issue of divorce among Bahun, Chhetri and Newar communities of Pokhara and Kathmandu. As part of the study they also collected information from the district courts of Jhapa, Sunsari, Rautahat, Rupandehi, Palpa and Barke, and the results were the same.

The findings from these eight districts provide an indication of the changing social scenario in the country. And given that these areas are all semi-urbanised, it also reflects the attitude towards divorce among people who are educated and financially stable, and who have the confidence to approach the courts. People from all castes and ethnic groups are opting for divorce. But it is more common among Bahuns, Chhetris and



Splitting up

Newars, which could have something to do with higher levels of education in these communities.

Among the reasons cited for divorce by women are physical and mental torture, non-maintenance and lack of companionship. In Rautahat (perhaps due to its proximity to India) the issue of insufficient dowry is also cited. However, social scientists believe there could be

many more reasons and that lawyers mention only those reasons that are likely to speed up the divorce process.

Two major reasons not often explicitly stated are lack of sexual satisfaction, and cheating. Bibita from Kathmandu was granted a divorce in 1997 and the reason stated was lack of interest. The main reason according to her, again

not presented to the court, was that she had shared no physical relationship with her husband for the five years she was married. The last straw was a letter from her husband that said, "I didn't have a physical relationship with you because I thought that it would destroy your life. I have chosen another person as my life partner. Please forgive me."



Divorce cases are on the rise, and the law remains loaded against women.

Cases from Kaski and Sunsari show a predominance of cases where the wife gets into a sexual relationship with another while her husband is away working and vice versa. Since people are not comfortable talking about sex in Nepal, gathering reliable data on this aspect is rather difficult. However, there is reason to believe that such instances could be much more widespread than reported during divorce cases. The laws of this country are biased against women and many of them, like Bibita, quietly endure everything rather than take action. (see box).

Chhetri believes that reasons being presented in court nowadays are not new. Earlier, women did not raise these issues because of lack of education, weak financial status and general oppression by husbands, family and society. The rise in divorce is also a sign that women are now more self-assured

and making their own decisions. Upholding too is playing a major role in divorce cases of today. In cities and towns, girls are less discriminated against, get a proper education and are more outgoing in their outlook and behaviour. However, after marriage, society in general, and their in-laws in particular, tend to slot them into the role of the traditional wife or daughter-in-law. Career-minded women are not prepared to accept this. This sometimes leads to problems and when the husband sides with his parents the woman finds it easier to file for separation and concentrate on her career. But that is not so in all cases. There are still plenty of instances where totally incompatible couples continue to live together. Concepts and thoughts cannot change so easily. ♦

(Adapted from Himal Khabar Patrika.)

Lesser citizens

Nepal ratified CEDAW (the UN convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women), which recognises marriage and family rights as important and inalienable rights of women, in 1991. Article 11 of the Constitution of Nepal also guarantees legal equality between men and women. But when it comes to actual practice these assurances are not worth the paper they are printed on.

"The chapter on Husband and Wife and the chapter on Marriage in the Civil Code are highly discriminatory against women. It puts women at a disadvantage while they are married and when they demand a divorce," says Dr Shanta Thapaliya, advocate and women rights activist. She is mainly critical about the legal provisions that demand a woman's loyalty to her husband, even after the husband's death or a divorce. In case a woman has a sexual relationship with another man or remarries, her share of property received from the former husband will revert back to him or to his natal family. On the other hand, a simple verbal accusation by a husband that his wife has been unfaithful is recognised as valid grounds for divorce and the wife is even disqualified from receiving alimony.

As a state party to CEDAW, Nepal is obliged to ensure similar responsibilities and rights for men and women in marriage and divorce and the maintenance of children, irrespective of their marital status after divorce. The clauses concerning these rights in the Civil Code are both contradictory and inconsistent with the CEDAW charter. Women rights activists are critical about both the executive and legislative branches of the nation for failing to bring about amendments to the four decade-old Civil Code which they say is guided by "outdated and orthodox" social values. For example, the Civil Code allows a man to re-marry without divorcing his first wife if she fails to bear a child after ten years of marriage. The provision assumes that women are solely to blame for infertility. "Social discrimination (against women) triggered by illiteracy and an orthodox culture is furthered by a discriminatory legal system. Nepali laws related to marriage and family rights, in many cases, reinforce women's subordination to men," says Sapana Malla-Pradhan, an advocate with the Forum for Women, Law and Development.

Nepali laws are also discriminatory on the issue of granting child custody to women. Divorced women cannot get custody of their children. And if they do by mutual consent, the Civil Code's chapter on Paupers denies them the right to look after their children if they re-marry. This also applies to widows re-marrying after the death of their husband. However, fathers retain the right irrespective of their marital status after the death of the wife or a divorce.

The same discriminatory provisions exist with regard to adoption. A woman whose husband is not dead or who has sons either herself or from a co-wife cannot adopt a child. A woman is not also allowed to adopt a daughter without her husband's consent, whereas a man can do so without consulting his wife.



Grounds for divorce

In case of forced marriage between minors, a divorce can be obtained through mutual understanding between the two parties when they come of age. The procedure to obtain a divorce for women is easier than for men, but alimony or any other form of maintenance expenditure will be paid to the divorced wife only if the cause of the divorce is established to be the husband. The husband will then provide maintenance to the wife only for five years or until the wife remarries, whichever comes first. However, the provision of maintenance is at the court's discretion and is awarded only in cases where the wife does not have a source of income.

For men

- if wife lives separately from husband for more than three years;
- if wife attempts to take the life of or causes disability or any serious physical damage to husband;
- if wife has sexual relationship outside marriage or admits having sex outside marriage in a court;
- if wife elopes;
- if wife does not produce a child in 10 years after marriage husband can remarry without divorcing the first wife
- if wife is infected with an incurable, transmittable sexual disease or if she becomes insane, crippled or blind, husband can remarry without divorcing the first wife; and
- if a married woman or a widow enters a forged marriage by stating her marital status otherwise, she is penalised and the marriage is automatically terminated.

For women

- if husband remarries;
- if wife is thrown out of the family house;
- if husband lives separately from wife for more than three years;
- if husband attempts to take life, causes disability or serious physical damage; and
- if husband is impotent.

óHemlata Rai

Epidemic proportions

The Hepatitis B virus is spreading fast, and most people don't even know.

HEMLATA RAI

A silent killer is upon us. If the doctors are to be believed, there is a "sudden, persistent and progressive" growth in Hepatitis B cases since 1997, and which they claim can be signs of the "emergence of an epidemic" in Nepal.

Researchers put the number of Hepatitis B patients in Nepal at 200,000, and approximately 200 new cases are recorded annually. The incidence of acute Hepatitis B was 9 percent in the five years between 1982-86; it rose to 15 percent between 1987-91, and is projected to have grown by 36 percent between 1997-2000. Doctors warn that there could be more undiagnosed cases.

A major hurdle to controlling the spread of the disease is that an infected person can carry the Hepatitis B virus without showing any symptoms of the disease and transmit it to other healthy people. It is often diagnosed too late, after having exacted its toll and manifested itself in some deadly liver ailment. Studies have shown that Hepatitis B is responsible for 60 percent of chronic Hepatitis, 40 percent of liver cirrhosis and 34 percent of liver cancer in Nepal.

The virus is present in blood and body fluids, and spreads through skin and mucous

membranes. The infection is generally from mother to child, child to child, unsafe injections, blood transfusions and sexual contact. When children contract the virus from their mother during birth or during breastfeeding, they become life-long carriers of the virus, infecting other healthy people. However, there is a cure for infected adults.

The infection is detected through blood tests and in case of indications of active liver damage, the patient is recommended for a liver ultrasound and a biopsy. The government's Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases Control Division identifies drug addicts, commercial sex workers, military personnel, migrant workers and patients with chronic kidney problems as particularly vulnerable to the disease.

The problem is there are people who are even sceptical of the existence of the virus, and claim that it is a pharmaceutical industry-engineered scare. However, the people working to raise awareness against the virus dismiss the claim simply as a "misconception". They claim that people developed this misconception as in some adults the virus sometimes just disappears, without ever developing into a serious ailment. The rate at which the virus develops into a

chronic infection among adult recipients is also low. Studies show that there is an 80 to 90 percent chance that the Hepatitis B infection develops into a chronic infection if the infection occurs in infancy, less than 50 percent if infection occur in childhood and less than 5 percent if it occurs in an adult.

Sharad Onta of the Resource Centre for Primary Health Care said that the rate of Hepatitis B infection in Nepal is alarming, and that biologically, the Hepatitis B virus is more infectious than HIV. According to him, preventive vaccination is the most effective way to control the spread of Hepatitis B virus. But he was critical about the way the vaccination is administered in the Kathmandu Valley. "What is dangerous is the commercialisation of the Hepatitis B vaccination in Nepal. There is neither a price-control mechanism nor follow-up to check if the pharmaceutical companies are selling unnecessary vaccines to the public."

A preliminary report by the Liver Foundation Nepal (LFN) throws up some interesting findings. It shows that certain ethnic groups like Tibetans, Manang-bas and Sherpas have higher Hepatitis B prevalence compared to other ethnic groups in Nepal. "It is because among them, mothers are transmitting



MIN BARACHARYA

the Hepatitis B virus to their children. However, we still need further studies and investigations to establish the real reasons as to why some groups have higher Hepatitis B prevalence," said Dr Santosh Man Shrestha of LFN.

The open border with India, and the large number of young people who travel abroad to find jobs are also to blame for the spread of the disease. The LFN study reveals that 90 percent of Hepatitis B cases in Nepal originated in India via the thousands of Nepali migrant workers. Nepalis migrating for work to other Asian countries are also vulnerable. East Asian countries like Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan, traditionally favoured by Nepali workers, also have high incidences of Hepatitis B.

Better air links with countries that have a high prevalence of Hepatitis B is also facilitating the

spread of the virus. According to the documents made available to us by the Nepal Liver Foundation, China has a Hepatitis B surface antigen (HbsAg) prevalence of 10 percent, Bangladesh 7.5 percent, and Pakistan and India, 5 percent.

The Asian-Pacific Consensus Meeting on Hepatitis B and C, held in Fukuka, Japan early last year, recommended universal immunisation for newborns as the best way to prevent the spread of Hepatitis B. Nepal's progress in this direction has been tardy. The reasons include widespread ignorance about the disease and the prohibitive cost of the vaccine. Compared to neighbouring Bhutan, which supplies the vaccine at about Nepali Rs 35 per dose (Rs 105 per course), Nepalis have to pay five times more, Rs 175 per dose, Rs 525

for a complete course.

There are two types of Hepatitis B vaccine available in Nepal: plasma-derived, prepared from purified Hepatitis B surface antigen taken from persons with chronic Hepatitis B, and a genetically engineered vaccine, prepared by inserting the Hepatitis B surface antigen in yeast. Both kinds are recognised as safe and effective.

The non-governmental sector blames the government for the high price of the vaccine. Until the price of the vaccine is reduced, and there is greater awareness about the need for vaccination, Nepalis will have to protect themselves by avoiding unsafe injections, unsafe blood and blood products, tattoos, acupuncture and dental care, taking proper medical and surgical care and avoiding multiple sex partners. ♦

VILLAGE VOICE

byHEMLATA RAI

Kumrose Machan

When the residents of Kumrose decided to set up a community forest adjoining their lands, it was a tough choice. Bordered by the Rapti river on the south and the Royal Chitwan National Park on the west, it meant facing one of two perennial problems: suffering the annual monsoon flood of the river or facing possible danger from wild animals. Having decided the second choice was relatively safer than the first one, villagers, in the late 1980s, initiated a small-scale reforestation programme to save their fields from inundation and erosion. That decision was the first step towards what is today known as the Kumrose Community Forest.

"The local leadership was criticised by people when it was first decided that a reforestation programme was to be implemented in our village. People were afraid that wild animals from the nearby Royal Chitwan National Park (RNP) would make this patch of forest their home and cause more trouble to local farmers," says the present Kumroj Village Development Committee (KVDC) Chairman Krishna Lal Chaudhary.

However, the lack of enthusiasm among locals did not deter Pradhan Panch Lok Prasad Barakoti from implementing the reforestation project. The Community Forest Programme initiated in 1992 by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMNC) restored more than 1000 hectares of degraded land adjacent to RNP. The forest management was then formally handed over to the community in November 1996. The community forest today lies within the KVDC located just outside the National Park.

With the forest care wildlife, like the villagers had anticipated. Today, KVDC is home to the endangered one-horned rhinoceros,



KMNC

A community-managed forest shows what could possibly be done in buffer zones surrounding conservation areas.

three species of deer, marsh mugger crocodiles, the rare Bengal tiger and 159 species of birds. However, this quick colonisation by wildlife has not caused any trouble as the residents had feared initially—it is instead a matter of pride and a source of valuable income.

Curious visitors to the community forest have encouraged local micro-entrepreneurship at the individual level, and the success of preservation efforts has also encouraged the people to start community enterprises. The users' group of Kumrose Community Forest, along with the village development committee, recently constructed a machan (view tower) that can accommodate eight visitors at a time. The machan offers visitors a chance to experience jungle life at night, and in the daylight, the opportunity to observe animals and birds in a peaceful setting. Apart from the machan, Kumrose Community Forest offers other safari facilities like elephant rides, jungle walks and

camping on request.

Rare birds like colourful parakeets, scarlet minivets, endangered dusky horned owls, large grass warbler, lesser adjutant stork, lesser spotted eagle, yellow bittens, darter, black stork and bristled grass warblers have been recorded in the forest. It is also rich in flora—there are numerous species of trees including *simal* (*Bombax ceiba*), *vellar* (*Treia nudiflora*), *kumiro* (*Litsea monopetala*), *sissoo* (*Dalbergia sissoo*) and *khair* (*Acacia catechu*).

Annually, the Kumrose machan earns between Rs 100,000–150,000 from both Nepali and foreign visitors. The main drawback at the machan is the lack of eateries at the site, which keeps away visitors who might otherwise have preferred to spend a night at a community-managed machan rather than in already congested Sauraha, a 20-minute bicycle ride away inside the RNP area.

"There are many agencies who talk big about village tourism, but nobody came up to help us. We are willing to work and manage the machan as a community, and we are confident that if we are trained in restaurant and lodge management we can attract more visitors to our forest and machan and hence increase our income. That will be vital for self-sustenance and also enhance the sense of ownership towards natural resources," says a discontented Hira Bahadur Gurung, vice-chairman of Kumrose VDC. "Due to lack of proper publicity, we do not get as many guests as expected," said Chaudhary of Kumrose VDC.

The Kumrose VDC population includes Tharus who are indigenous to Chitwan valley, and also hill migrants—mainly Bahun, Chhetri, Magar, Gurung, Newar and Tanang. These subsistence farmers depend on farming and also raise livestock for their livelihood. The community forest now fulfils the fodder, fuel-wood and timber needs of about 1178 households. Apart from these benefits to the villagers, the Kumroj VDC itself earns approximately Rs 1.2 million annually from the community forest, of which half is spent on conservation, while the other half is allocated for local development activities. The annual development fund provided by the RNP is another source of income for the VDC. ♦



Krishna Lal Chaudhary



Hira Bahadur Gurung

HEMLATA RAI

BIZ NEWS

Hotel blues again

We're another week closer to the 11 February strike deadline by hotel unions. The unions say that since the government had asked them to "halt"—not "withdraw"—protests for two months, they reserve the right to protest or strike if the decision does not address their demand to be paid a 10 percent service charge. The unions have submitted a nine-page argument for having the service charge to the government committee, which is expected to recommend a way out by early next month.

The group of 16 business and industry groups that rallied behind the hotels to shut down rather than wait for a strike, has completed a socio-economic impact study on what the charge could do to the economy. Its main argument against the charge is that it is against the principle of pricing, where the value of work is determined by the employer and not by mobs. It also argues that the charge is unacceptable, especially when labour laws don't allow employers to fire even the most unproductive workers, requires them to pay for work not done and does not allow the hiring of contract labour.

Tourism last year dropped by 11 percent. And industry argues that if it were to fall by the same percentage this year, the direct cost on the economy would be Rs1.8 billion. With four taken as a multiplier of the effects, losses could add up to Rs7.2 billion. The government we're told is "working" to meet the deadline, but there's no hint of what its recommendations would be. The union says it knows what to do should the decision be unfavourable. Industry's single-point agenda is no service charge, or even negotiations until the threat of strike is withdrawn. Some arguments and counter-arguments of the unions and industry:

- Unions say the 10 percent charge is standard in many countries. Industry refutes this saying that this is in no way an "international standard". Unions cite examples from countries like Indonesia and Singapore.
- Unions say trekking and travel agencies and other industries won't demand the charge. Industry maintains it will be inevitable, given even the union's *andolan* (revolution) is illegal.
- Unions say service charge will only be charged in hotels and Nepali fast food outlets. Industry says it's a contradiction that "union bosses" do not seem to worry about the extra change that those in lowest rungs of the economic ladder could earn.
- Unions say that workers elsewhere have better facilities than what Nepali workers get. Industry maintains that if Nepali workers should get similar perks as those in Germany then everything in Nepal should be as it is in Germany.
- Unions have presented "low" salary structures in different hotels to prove their point. Industry maintains that the account does not factor in free or subsidised food, medical benefits, etc.
- Unions say hotels maintain different account books and hide profits. Industry charges there are several government departments looking into that and especially with VAT there are no chances of doing what the unions allege.

Court bars Indian vehicle imports

The Supreme Court has ordered an interim ban on Indian vehicle imports until its convenes again to hear a petition by a consumers' rights group which charges that import procedures are in contravention of Nepal's emission standards. The Court has also asked the Customs Department to furnish details on vehicles imported on the basis of "self certification" so far.

The petitioners are challenging a Ministry of Population and Environment (MOPE) decision allowing imports on the basis of "Conformity of Production" (COP) issued by manufacturers and not by an independent agency recognised by the government. Nepal's Emission Rules require importers to furnish both "Type Approval" and COP for vehicle imports. This changed since August after Nepal agreed with India that this could be done through "self-certification". The 26 December petition was filed by three non-governmental organisations Pro Public, Martin Chautari and Leaders Nepal after the MOPE's November decision allowed "self certification".



MIN. BALACHANDRA

ECONOMIC SENSE

by ARTHA BEED



What about Indian vehicles?

We don't trust a company with a turnover larger than Nepal's GDP. Indian car-makers should be trusted to self-certify their products, just as the Koreans and Japanese are.

The judiciary has once again proved that the executive is either inefficient or incompetent. Last Friday, the Supreme Court ruled that no "engine operated vehicles" shall be imported from India for another fortnight till it decides whether the petition raised to do so is right or wrong. The injunction would mean that the can of worms is opened once again and the hullabaloo of the achievement of the Prime Minister's visit to India is all over.

In Nepal, public interest litigations have become a powerful tool to settle scores between various people outside and inside politics and perhaps this is again an interesting enactment of the same and as always the victim is business in this country.

The half-baked emission standards announced in 2000 threw up a lot of issues relating to the import of vehicles. Even as it remained unclear whether the same standards apply to vehicles manufactured in Nepal, the focus of all attention was the growing number of vehicles manufactured in India. The government seems to have a soft spot for Japanese and Korean vehicles—it understands that economic diplomacy is one way to keep donor money coming in.

The production of a vehicle entails the issuance of Type Approval certificate to certify that the prototype of the vehicle is suitable for production. Various agencies in-country as well as certain regional bodies generally issue this certificate. Thereafter, the manufacturer issues a certification of Conformity of Production (COP). This certificate is generally issued after the volume of production reaches a certain figure. This is part of a manufacturer's self-certification process and there is generally no regional or national body

that provides such certification.

However, Nepal believes that it has to be done the Nepali way—we do not allow self-certification, and we don't believe in companies with turnovers greater than our own GDP.

The import of Indian vehicles was on hold from December 1999 to July 2001 for the same reason, until the government gave in and allowed self-certification like it does Japanese and Korean auto-makers. This has angered some of our self-proclaimed environmental activists who feel the import of Indian vehicles violates lofty Nepali standards, and they are now seeking a court injunction against it.

The issue here is whether Indian automobile producers are being denied the chance to speak for themselves and vouch for their standards, something allowed to manufacturers in other parts of the world. Perhaps the emission-chasing activists are being biased in singling out only imports from India. Perhaps they are driven by political forces to settle scores that are really beyond the ambit of vehicles or even business.

The issue is of equal treatment for all imports. If all other countries can get away with the fact that they have no equivalent system of certification other than self-certification, why

should Indian vehicles not be granted the same? On the contrary, if the system in the Nepal Standard 2000 specifies a different process of certification, it should be applied across the board on all imports. There has to be a level playing field.

We are really good at announcing messed-up policy, especially in the transportation sector—be it the microbus fiasco or banning old vehicles. We have made a mess of the Electric Vehicle industry by allowing unrestricted production and the unregulated use of cooking gas to run vehicles has created the LPG crisis.

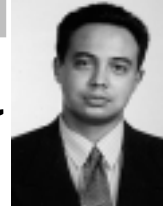
We argue and complain about inequalities meted out to us but we still continue to practice partisan policies at the behest of political and other vested interest. The fact that a different cabinet made the policy does not change what it means. This is not the time for judicial intervention or to argue, but to go to the bottom of the issue. If there is a provision in the Nepal Standard 2000 then implement it on all imports and also domestic manufacture, otherwise change the provisions of the standards. We have had enough of half-baked policies followed by callow implementation. ♦

Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com



COMMENT

by ANIL SHAH



Think nationally, act individually

The old Chinese greeting, "May you live in interesting times", seems to be appropriate in contemporary Nepal. This is as interesting as it gets. Along with 23 million other Nepalis, I too call this patch under the sun my home. Home is where the Himalayan peaks are, where the thundering rivers roar, home is the lush valleys and abundant plains. It is God's own country, a home we have inherited from our ancestors and which we will soon pass on to our children. The question is what is our generation doing to this kingdom?

A decade ago our leaders rose up to demand an end to the uni-party Panchayat system. After much loss of life and property, they proclaimed that we were now entering the golden era of multi-party democracy. Today, some of the same leaders organise riots to demand an apology from a movie actor. Five young lives are lost, and we find ourselves with our feet firmly in our mouths. Far from demanding an apology, it looks like we will be the ones to apologise: to the families of those killed, to those whose shops were stoned, and even to those we falsely slandered.

Ten years ago, we thought all Nepalis regardless of caste, creed or religion would be treated equally and live in harmony as one nation, one people. We have since abused our freedom to pull apart those of other religions and castes, we have used our freedom to become parochial and insular. Leaders we elected to high office have taught us to

Far from demanding an apology from an actor, it looks like we will be the ones to apologise: to the families of those killed, to those whose shops were stoned, and even to those we falsely slandered.

distinguish between "us" and "them" and to make Nepal more "ours" and less "theirs".

After this tragically wasted decade, it is important to look at where we are now and chart out a new destiny. I look at the eyes of my innocent child, full of trust in me, content and confident knowing that I will only do what is best for her. I try to look for the eyes of our leaders, searching for the same commitment and confidence. I fail to find a leader.

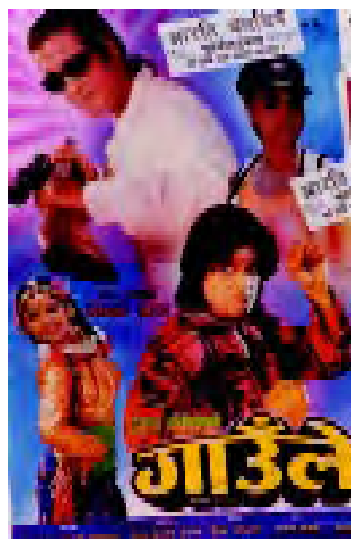
Groping for solutions, I come across the traditionalists who have put their fate in the hands of Lord Pashupatinath. I meet monarchists who say the only way forward is a coup: the palace and the army have to take over law and order since without stability nothing else is possible. (Staging a coup may be the easy part, the hard part is coming to grips with the magnitude of the country's problems after that.) I turn to the revolutionaries who want to take us down to the lowest common denominator and start all over again, but I can see a bottomless abyss there. I move on to the establishmentarians, and all they can do is blame "anti-democratic" forces for the failures of the past decade, thinking that somehow

this will take the attention away from their own infighting, mismanagement and venality. I turn to my escapist friends who are desperately filling out their visa application forms for the United States and Australia, but this is the eject seat—don't we have a responsibility to return to society what society has given us?

There are no quick solutions. Urban Nepalis have got too used to fast money, fast food, fast cars, instant gratification, and that is why we seek an instant solution to our national problems as well. The only way out is to stop passing the buck, and individually start being a part of the solution. If we don't like living in a dirty street, stop littering and spitting on it. If we want to have enough water and electricity, let's conserve what we have and raise our collective voices to support viable solutions. If we want tourism for development we have to foster tourism, not wreck it. If you have to use the streets to protest, it should be to take brooms and baskets to clean them, not to burn tyres. The road ahead is long and difficult, but the solutions have to come from us. No one else is going to do it for us. These are big problems but not insurmountable ones. One place to start would be to stop reading articles like these and to start thinking nationally and acting individually. ♦

Anil Shah is a graduate of International Business Finance from George Washington University, USA and is currently with Nepal Grindlays Bank in Kathmandu. The views expressed here are his personal ones.

No business like show business



RAMYATA LIMBU

asking in the success of *Darpan Chhaya*, the first Nepali film to run for 51 days in eight of the Valley's theatres simultaneously, the film's director Tulsi Ghimirey was delighted. At a ceremony last week, Ghimirey and actors Neeruta Singh, Uttam Pradhan and Dillip Rayamajhi met fans outside a downtown theatre. "Owing to your energy, the Nepali film industry has gathered momentum," said Ghimirey. "I hope you continue to watch our films. If we fail you, you have every right to curse us."

Ghimirey had reason enough to get emotional. Having entered the Nepali film world in the mid-80s with a number of quick successes after a long apprenticeship in Bombay, his later movies had flopped one after another. In a last-ditch effort, the director banked everything—his reputation, knowledge of film grammar, and finances—on *Darpan Chhaya*. As he puts it, the film would decide whether he would make it or break it in Kollywood, as the Nepali film industry calls itself. The gamble paid off, fortunately for both Ghimirey and Nepali cinema.

Tulsi Ghimirey's *Darpan Chhaya* is a simple "you'll laugh-you'll cry" story about a bunch of college kids. What makes it stand out is that it is imbued with a certain 'Nepaliness' that most local productions sorely lack. The film is devoid of the bloody



Rajesh Haral



The Nepali film industry is finally coming into its own. The success of *Darpan Chhaya* and the censor row over *Aago* have given Kollywood a new boost.

brawls, trashy innuendo, melodramatic, crude sex and histrionics that characterised the flood of films produced in the mid-nineties. This was when novice producers who were more speculators than cineastes made films that can at best be called poor copies of Bollywood productions. What these copycat movies lacked, however, was the real edge Bombay has—production values and quality.



Tulsi Ghimirey

Incidentally, another film by Ghimirey had started the trend. His family action drama, *Chiro*, was a big hit in 1991. Ghimirey understood that a Nepali public weaned on a 40-year diet of Hindi films had to be given comparable themes and quality. Based on the familiar father-murdered-brothers-separated-reunion-final retribution theme, the film managed to do just that.

But the spate of copies that followed failed miserably. There was overkill and Kollywood took a nosedive. This was a bleak period for Nepali cinema—sometimes producers couldn't even collect Rs 50,000 on a film. The industry also fell victim to the novelty of satellite television

in the early 90s, when viewers preferred to stay back home and watch the latest Hindi hits in the comfort of their living rooms.

Nepali over Hindi

Films are big business in Nepal. Theatres, whether cavernous buildings cramming hundreds, 'hi-vision' video halls that are converted garment factories, or wood-and-straw shacks posing as cinemas are spread all over the



Narayan Puri

country. In the remotest of hamlets, posters of filmstars vie for pride of place with pictures of deities and family portraits. Film magazines do brisk business, and just about everyone can hum the latest hit tune.

Once under the spell of Hindi films, this fan following is gradually switching loyalties to Nepali films. Except for the tarai, demand for Hindi films is shrinking and Nepali films now have 70 percent of the market share. This has come with the industry beginning to understand public taste and inclination, and also making the most of existing technology and new tax breaks. The government last year decided to exempt Nepali films from the film development tax. Instead of paying tax on screenings, exhibitors can now share part of the earnings with producers and distributors.

Narayan Puri, one of Nepal's youngest and most prolific directors, also attributes this change to a newfound 'Nepali pride'. His film, *Aago*, based on the Maoist movement, was shelved for a year while a battle royale raged with censors. The Rs 3.4 million film was finally released in October last year and did brisk business in Kathmandu. Now showing outside

the Valley, *Aago* expects a turnover of Rs 15 million.

Darpan Chhaya, produced on a modest Rs 4 million budget (Rs 3-5 million is average for a Nepali film) has already made Rs 6.5 million. Even by conservative estimates, the producers expect a turnover of Rs 10 million.

Says filmmaker and president of the four-month-old Film Development Board Yadav Kharel, "It's a healthy sign that Nepali films are being bought and sold while still on the floor of the editing room. Businessmen, including exhibitors and distributors, are investing too. Distributors are putting up 40 percent of the capital required in exchange for exclusive distribution rights. Thematically and artistically, Nepali films still have a long way to go but they can replace Hindi films in terms of quality and economic achievement," says Kharel.

The Nepal Motion Picture Association, the body that represents the interests of producers, distributors and exhibitors, is working with the Film Development Corporation to get government recognition for the movie business as a production-oriented industry rather than a service-oriented sector. This would entitle it to tax concessions when importing



ALL PHOTOS: MIN BAIRACHARYA



raw material and equipment. Already after the tax break announced last year, production has doubled.

In 1995 Nepali theatres screened 20 Nepali films (compared to 124 Hindi films) in 148 theatres within Nepal, and Nepali-speaking areas of India like Darjeeling. This year, about 40 Nepali films (compared to 80 Hindi films) were screened in about 336 theatres around the country, including 64 hi-vision halls. Once underpaid actors are working double shifts, and their price tags have shot up. Popular male lead Rajesh Haral charges Rs 300,000 per film, while actresses like Neeruta Singh and Jal Shah are demanding as much as Rs 200,000, more than double they made just a couple of years ago. It's not just the stars who're having a field day—film technicians are in demand too, confirming dates for the next project before they're even done with this one. Dance masters and fight masters are also fully booked.

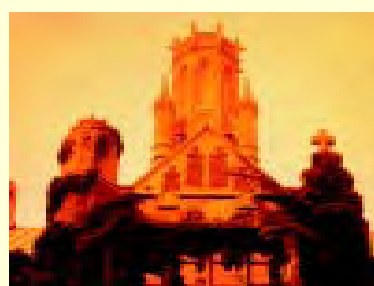
Finally, tech-savvy directors

are making most of technology to cut production time and costs. Director Puri edits and dubs his films on digital computer. "In terms of time and money it's cost effective. What might take 200 hours on analog can be completed in 100 hours."

While Kollywood can't compare with Bollywood in terms of scale, it is now producing the same number of films as, say, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Australia. "This is the beginning of the best period of the industry," says Ghimirey. He believes that it is because the middle class has returned to theatres. New theatres and multiplexes in Kathmandu have also lured the upmarket crowd back. As film enthusiasts line up to watch *Darpan Chhaya* outside Biswajyoti, manager Motiram Pradhan exudes confidence. "It'll probably complete 100 days. That means other Nepali films waiting for a slot will have to wait a long, long time." ♦

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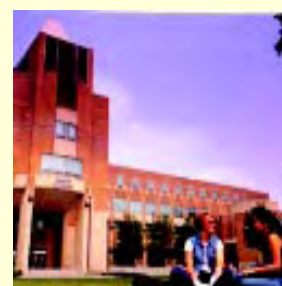
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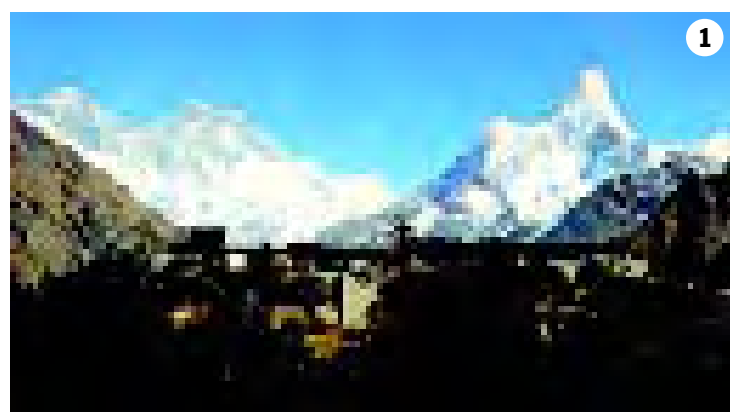
Kathmandu's urbanscape today is a mishmash of many influences: western extravaganza, glimpses of nouveau riche and ethnic chic, careless improvisations. But dominating the urban milieu are the concrete monsters towering over narrow lanes, or wedding cake villas that seem to have been uprooted from Beverly Hills and plunked down on Bhaisepati.

The basic contemporary urban look is of a reinforced concrete skeleton frame, flat roof, cement plastered surface and large windows. This "neo-Baneswar" style dwarfs everything else. Twenty years ago when the tile-roofed, mortar and brick two-storey houses started being torn down to make way for these boxes, it was a sign that Kathmandu was finally getting a "modern" look. Unfortunately, our architectural models seemed to have been borrowed from Gorakhpur rather than Kyoto. This trend abated slightly with the slump in the real estate market in the past five years, but population pressure has made it pick up again. The economics of such constructions makes immediate sense: it enables people to build higher than before, whether to stretch a small piece of land to surprisingly large rent-able floor space, or in the quest for more sun. We have very sensible building codes and zoning laws, but since these are rarely implemented, the sky is the limit. "People take it as an achievement if they can rise higher than their neighbours on the same foundation," says architect Deepak Man Sherchan of one of Kathmandu's most sought-after architecture firm, Creative Builders Collaborative.

House owners ignore the advice of architects and engineers when building becomes a race to keep-up-with-the-Janardans. My house has to be higher than the neighbours', how many rooms can I cram on each floor, how can I make my staircase narrower and steeper than the next guy's. There is no thought paid to the strength of the foundation, the frame or the soil underneath. There are many problems with new structures, including poor insulation, the cold-trapping qualities of concrete but among

the most worrying is the stability of the buildings (see: *Waiting for the big one*, #25).

But in the midst of all this urban squalour and appallingly hazardous construction, there is the slight glimmer of hope that a new generation of Nepali architects is marrying form with function and designing new buildings that try neither to be too ethnic, nor abandon totally Kathmandu's traditional



1. The Everest View Hotel in Syangboche; 2. Heritage Plaza in Kataladi; 3. The Oasis 49 Dhara building soars above the Patan skyline; 4. The Rastriya Baniya Bank's "lego" look; 5. Reconstructed Rana-Victorian facade of the Yak and Yeti; 6. The Shangrila Hotel in Lazimpat's elegant Nepali design; and 7. A row of houses in the "neo-Baneswar" style along a Patan street

silhouettes. And it does not matter that this is happening only on the facades because it returns to the street-front Kathmandu's historical harmony of space and grace. So at least we have not completely sold out. "You need to have a feeling for architecture and your city. Only then can any form of architecture representing the essence of the city develop," says veteran Nepali architect Bihuti Man Singh.

A Malla-era Newari house generally didn't go higher than three storeys, the ideal height for a house in a seismically-active, former lake-bed Valley. The ground floor was used for storage or a shop in a bazaar area, the second for living and sleeping, and the top floor had a kitchen and pooja area. The use of locally available materials made construction economical, and the house was easy to maintain. The presence of different layers of bricks (raw and fired) made the walls stronger and also insulated the rooms. The sloped roofs made of tile or slate protected the walls from rain. This was a time-tested construction suited to the valley's climate. Until recently the design

also met the culturally determined dwelling needs of inhabitants. But as joint families disintegrate and inheritance fragments ancestral buildings, traditional courtyards are not feasible anymore, and the size of the rooms reflect the shift towards nuclear families. The challenge for modern Nepali architects, then, is to design space according to contemporary needs, while taking lessons in construction techniques from older structures. The extensive use of brick is something that still makes sense for Kathmandu, which lies in the monsoon belt, but the mortar can be changed to cement.

The present trend towards merging Malla with Rana-Victorian styles began in the 1950s when the focus was on form rather than function. Later a few foreign architects, like Austrian Carl Pruscha, brought back Malla-period elegance and combined them with modified interior space. One of the notable examples was the Shangrila Hotel in Lazimpat, which had the dimensions, structural harmony, and landscaping to allow modern



amenities to co-exist with a traditional look.

The establishment of the Chinese-built Harisiddhi and Bhaktapur brick factories helped sustain interest in exposed-brick forms. "Chinese bricks" added a new layer to the history of construction techniques in the Valley. And it was the spurt in the tourism industry and the flurry of hotel-building that brought back the traditional essence to Kathmandu architecture. Dwarika's Hotel in Battisputali is the ultimate example because it re-uses antique windows, doors and carved wooden columns in a modern new building, then there are the Vajra Hotel, the Soaltee's new wing, the elegant lodges that have sprung up in Bhaktapur and the bread-and-breakfast pensions currently under construction in Patan. Hotel Narayani is building a shopping mall and turning its coffee shop into a conference centre and is going for a sloped roof, carved wooden windows and exposed brick walls. Proprietor CS Gyawali says: "This is an expensive and time-consuming task, but I am optimistic that it will make the hotel more appealing to tourists and also make it blend better with the traditional surroundings of Patan."

Not everyone got it right, of



A house is not just a home, a business both speak volumes about the level and the cultural awareness of a city.

course. Soaltee's original old wing had the look of a Las Vegas motel, there are still hotels being built that look like the owners have edifice complexes, structures that truly represent a megalomaniac's dream come true. Then there is what can only be described as the Banglangpoo-Thamel style: quick-rise ferro-cement and glass that has come to be the trademark of Thamel-by-the-lake in Pokhara, in Thamel-on-the-hill in

Negarkot, or in the original Thamel. Perhaps it wouldn't have mattered if these buildings had come up in the middle of the Ganges plains, but they co-exist with (and often stand in place of) the exquisite living architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley. Many owners and designers get carried away, while trying to be traditional they end up with hotels that look like Taj Mahals with brick façades, completely dissonant with the



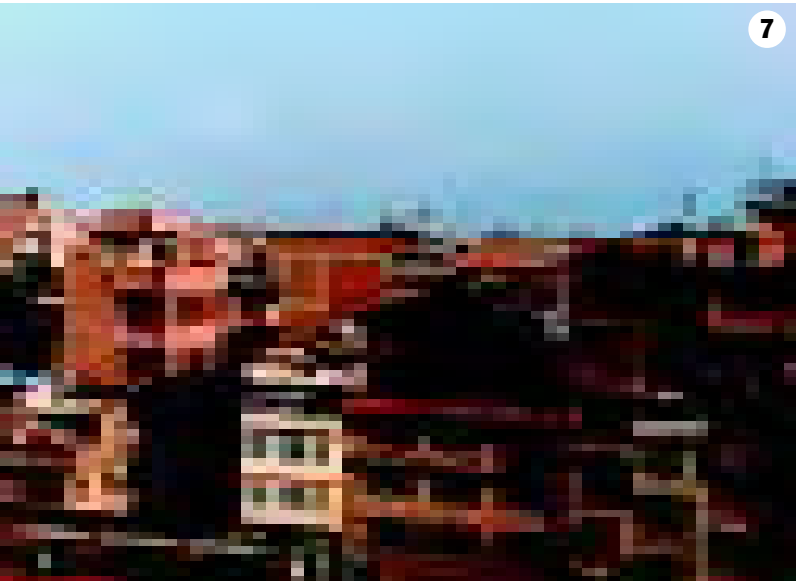


MIN BAIRACHARYA

Modern Nepali architecture is finally showing signs of moving out of its kitsch phase to explore new styles and tastes that are in harmony with the urban and natural environment. But with so much ugliness around, it will take time to make an impact.

surroundings. Your building cannot stand out like a Dharahara, unless (like poor Bhimsen Thapa) you want to make a folly. Outside Kathmandu there are some good examples of resorts that have not overwhelmed or tried to compete with the natural surroundings—foremost among them is the low-profile and intelligently planned Shangrila Pokhara, and the incredible Everest View Hotel in Syangboche that is so discreet that you don't see it until you are right in front of the building, and even then it never rises above the tops of the junipers on the

hotels with brick and tile facades. The Yak and Yeti has cleverly integrated the old Lal Durbar with a boldly cantilevered new wing. Nearby, the Heritage Plaza has unusual sheet metal roofs steeply sloped to make room for a spacious attic. The roofs are emphasised with slopes and struts for support, echoing one of the most elementary aspects of Newari design. The brick walls have staggered and layered projections to break the monotony and protect the structure from rain. The result is a simple, functional multi-storeyed building that stands out, especially in contrast to its



MIN BAIRACHARYA

Business complex is not just an office: A lot of respect for their surroundings and its people.

ridgeline. And of course, what can we say about Tiger Tops in Chitwan that has built rooms on the jungle canopy, an idea that has been copied all over the world. But Kathmandu's new architects seem to have learnt their lessons well. Today, although Kathmandu's skyline is a jagged outline of concrete terraces, from certain aspects you do see the emergence of a new line of red roofs, modest modern

nondescript neighbours. The acclaim for the Heritage Plaza seems to have sparked off a welcome copycat trend. It's not all faux-Malla, though. Other buildings have attempted similar effects: the RB complex at Ramukteswor, the Himalayan Bank on New Road. And of course there is the Rastriya Baniya Bank's Legoland building—that impossibly-complicated but somehow symmetrical construction has



MIN BAIRACHARYA

actually turned out to be not out-of-place at the Singha Durbar intersection, its self-conscious flamboyance in stark contrast to the staid police barrack across the avenue. Predictably, the reaction to the building is mixed, with some insisting it is a sore thumb while others believe it is the only true expression of modern, mercantile cosmopolitanism in the city. As private residences go, the news is almost uniformly bad. Along the Ring Road, in Maharjunj you go dizzy driving past the sudden visions of post-modern southern Californian kitsch. These are Kathmandu incarnations of the bizarre Punjabi Baroque seen on the outskirts of Delhi. Behold the manifestation of Kathmandu

Baroque: wedding cake colours and protuberances, Greco-Roman porticos, marble flooring that destroyed the natural environment of Godavari, Jacuzzis and pools in this waterless world, Rajasthani carvings, Swiss chalet roofs, Buckingham-style balconies, and White House-style Corinthian columns—all in one house. Money is no object, clearly, when building in the service of thou-shall-be-one-up-on-thy-neighbour's house. Architects, when faced with such follies, say they're hired, but hardly consulted, and basically fill the role of the structural engineer. "We alone cannot do anything. There has to be a conscious effort on the part of the client and society as a whole to build houses

that respond to the surroundings," says architect Bireesh Shah. Architects and armchair critics are unanimous that the challenge the city faces is developing a vocabulary of space and buildings that actively begins to dilute the ugliness all around. A style that expresses something about how modern Nepal is interact with their natural physical surroundings. A house is not just a home, a business complex is not just an office: both speak volumes about the level of respect for their surroundings and the cultural awareness of a city and its people. Deepak Man Sherchan is pessimistic, he is afraid that it will take another major earthquake for Kathmandu to set things right so that we can start rebuilding from scratch. ♦

toyota

This is IT

GAURAB RAJ UPADHAYA

Step into the first floor of Sigma House in Balaju any morning and you will see 40 youngsters tapping away at their keyboards, listening intently to the headphones connected to a special communications set. Fast forward to 2pm, and you see all of them, the MD included, taking time out in the company cafeteria. One evening and they're on the company grounds, playing volleyball or badminton. Welcome to the world of IT-enabled services and a new breed of white-collar workers.

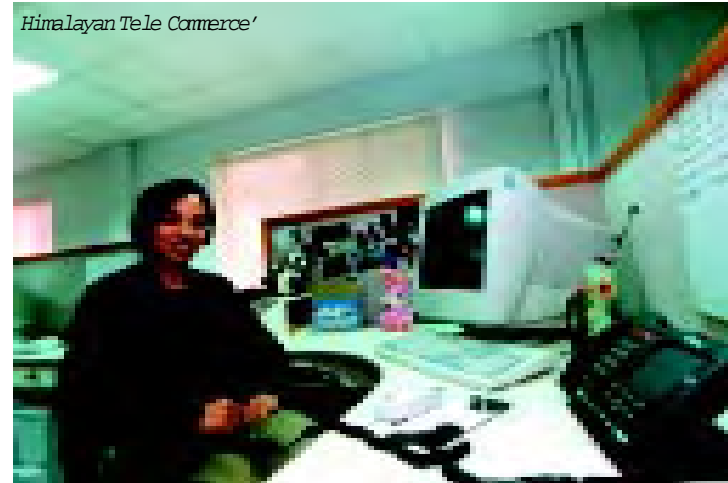
After failing for years to get foreign software development jobs in Nepal, IT entrepreneurs are now gunning for IT-enabled services, which are usually labour-intensive jobs like medical transcription, call-centre services and data entry. There are already seven such companies in Nepal, two of them full-fledged operations and the others start-ups.

The first movers in IT-enabled services were Geographical Information System (GIS) and data creation companies, Geo Spatial Systems and Digital Melkein. The Japanese-funded Geo Spatial Systems was the first in, venturing into converting old hand-drawn cartographic maps into digital format.

Then came in the medical transcribers-Himalayan Info Tech and Unlimited Nmedia. Both companies have completed their first phase of recruitment, and are



A full shift at Himalayan Tele Commerce's call-centre in Sigma House, Balaju



Himalayan Tele Commerce

ALL PHOTOS: MIN BAIRACHARYA

As research-oriented, software development jobs are difficult to get, Nepali companies are gunning for labour-intensive IT-enabled services.

now training their workers. The medical transcribers listen to recorded accounts of diagnoses and surgery and then transcribe them to be stored in computer databases. Countries have specific rules about how medical records should be transcribed, so quality is a matter of highest concern here.

The third business catching on in Nepal is the call-centre service. There are three firms trying their hand at this. Himalayan

Telecommerce is already in beta, and has started test calling, and the other two, Serving Minds and Solutions.com, are in the early stages.

The call-centres are the top-of-the-line IT-enabled service providers. To understand how it works, say, for example, you live in the USA and want to know the balance on your credit card, promise a payment, or just apply for one, chances are you'll ring the toll-free number and hear what sounds

like an American accent, but is actually a Nepali voice giving you all the information you need. And is now Andy. Or you could be making airline reservations, complaining about a faulty product, or asking for help in putting together your child's new toy. The same goes for telemarketing—people all over South Asia work all hours, offering strangers in the USA or Canada, information like the latest in blanket vacuum-sealing technology. It's much cheaper for firms overseas to outsource such work to countries like Nepal.

What make these companies important is that they currently provide around 1,000 Nepalis with hi-tech jobs. Employees don't necessarily need to have hi-tech backgrounds—the companies have trained even high school graduates for the jobs. "We want people who understand English, and can maintain a certain quality of work. Their level of education is not very important," says Juddha Gurung of Himalayan Info Tech. His company received more than 5000 applicants, but only 480 were selected. The workers, most of them urban youth, start at around Rs 6000 on completing the training programme. Once the companies start full-fledged production services, the salary and benefits are sure to go up.

Initial investment in IT-enabled services has already crossed Rs 500 million, and as the companies grow and more come in, the investment amount will also rise. The projected annual revenue from the operation of a single call-centre with 40 people is around \$1 million. Medical transcription is potentially an equally lucrative business, with an average rate of 5 cents per line of transcription. Most companies work only single shifts now, but are aiming at round-the-clock services. If properly planned, revenue from such services can easily touch Rs1 billion annually, and provide jobs to at least 5,000 people.

The obvious question then is why Nepal should be an attractive destination for firms overseas to outsource such work when IT giant India is right next door. Entrepreneurs have different

answers, but the general consensus is that Indian companies are moving towards global e-commerce-oriented services. Nepal is just entering the info-tech arena and lacks skilled manpower for advanced services, but has a workforce that can be trained in ancillary services and so has a slight price edge over India. Raghu Shah of Himalayan Tele Commerce, a call-centre operator, also cites business

documents, a "yellow paper"—a document issued by the customs when goods are shipped. But what of wireless exports? IT entrepreneurs have long demanded that this rule be amended. There's finally an IT policy, but still no legal provision for knowledge and service exports. Tax reduction at source is another bone of contention. The tax office wants companies to deduct tax at source even



Juddha Gurung of Himalayan Info Tech



Raghu Shah of Himalayan Tele Commerce

ethics and customer service as reasons Nepali companies will get business. "Some companies like smaller outfits like ours, because we will give priority to even the smallest of clients," he adds.

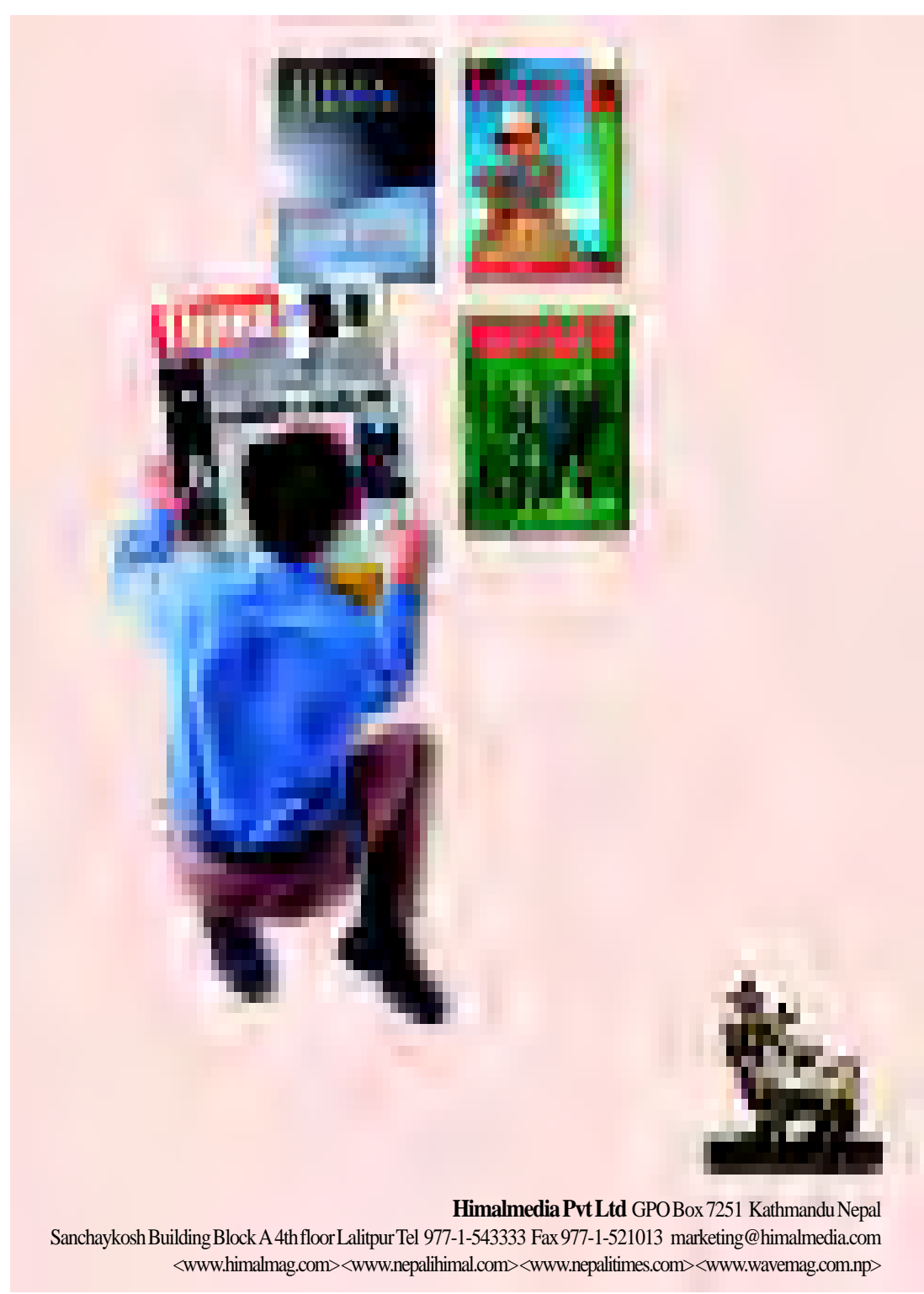
Entrepreneurs are doing their best, but it isn't all smooth sailing. The biggest problem seems to be, as always, government indifference. The IT-enabled services sector is not regarded as an industry and doesn't receive any export concessions. "We pay 20 percent tax compared to 0 percent in India. It's difficult to remain competitive," says Shah.

Entrepreneurs don't want just tax-breaks though; they want to be recognised as a valid, viable export industry. Without that they cannot bring in their export earnings in the form of foreign currency, points out Uresh Bajrai of Geo Spatial Systems. "We've not yet paid any tax, because we applied for our export income to be tax-exempt. But even after a year and a half, the problem hasn't been solved." The various ministries concerned just pass the buck. According to export regulations, companies need to submit, among other

when paying for satellite bandwidth. "This is ridiculous," says Shah.

For IT-enabled service businesses the 1999 Communications Policy, was a shining star. The liberalisation of telecom services allowed private parties to have their own V-SAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal) terminals, which means they do not have to rely on service providers for bandwidth. But the Policy also dictates that users must have devices installed by local companies, and also buy the equipment locally.

Yet, for all that businesses are still excited and remain open to new ideas. As the Internet has grown, new avenues have opened up. Entrepreneurs here hope and are certainly acting on the premise that there will be a trickle-down effect. In such a large and diverse global market, they feel, Nepal can definitely corner a niche somewhere. And developing the requisite expertise in IT-enabled services, will perhaps help the country move into other IT arenas. With a little help from friends in high places and a sustained emphasis on quality, Nepal's IT boom could be just around the corner. ♦



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MARIO OSAVA IN RIO DE JANEIRO
The World Social Forum 2001 (WSF) gathering to take place later this month in Brazil will be a bold experiment at drawing together a broad range of interests and civil society groups with the ambitious aim of rebuilding the dreams of the Left in today's globalised world. The 25-30 January gathering in the southern Brazilian port city of Porto Alegre, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, will draw delegates of trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and political and social movements from throughout the world to identify new routes and proposals to mobilise civil society internationally.

The initial projection of 2,700 participants, divided equally among the four above-mentioned sectors, could actually be several times that given the flood of registrations, said Renard Carvalho, with the Brazilian Institute of Socio-Economic Research, an NGO on the organising committee. One example of the strong level of interest is Italy, where a flight will have to be chartered to bring in all of the delegates. Other countries have also exceeded their quotas. The total number of participants could be in excess of 10,000, said Rio Grande do Sul Deputy Governor Miguel Rossetto, one of the gathering's hosts, who recently made a European tour to publicise the event.

The WSF emerged as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum, which has been taking place annually in late January in Davos, Switzerland for the past 29 years.

The World Economic Forum "has played a key role in formulating economic policies throughout the world, sponsored by a Swiss organisation that serves as a

Searching for a new utopia



After the protests in Seattle, there's now an organised alternative to Davos and the WTO—the huge World Social Forum in Brazil this week.

consultant to the United Nations, and financed by more than one thousand corporations," according to the WSF website.

The idea to organise an alternative forum parallel to the World Economic Forum emerged from demonstrations staged since 1998 against meetings of the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), such as the mass protests held at the WTO ministerial conference in Seattle, late November and early December 1999. Organisers describe WSF as "a new international arena for the creation and exchange of social and economic projects that promote human rights, social justice and sustainable development," and which "will provide a space for building economic alternatives, for exchanging experiences and strengthening South-North alliances between NGOs, unions and social movements".

Participants will try to come up with "strategies for grassroots organising" and "build proposals to democratise international institutions such as the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank to limit

the influence of multinational corporations on local communities". While the working agenda is "anti-Davos", it will be based on the search for concrete proposals, said Carvalho, who stressed that this year's gathering would be a "first test" of joint reflection by organisations dedicated to a wide spectrum of issues, in the search for alternatives to neo-liberalism. The theme "Another World is Possible", highlights the aim of coming up with global proposals that would place "human development and participative democracy among the top priorities of governments and citizens".

The WSF is also an attempt to reorganise and give direction to the world's leftist forces, but not merely political parties taking part along with socially concerned trade unions, parliamentarians and government officials will be NGOs fighting for the widest range of causes. Human rights defenders, land reform advocates, environmentalists and activists working on issues ranging from foreign debt to urban planning, the fight against poverty and inequali-

ties, gender questions, and even the issue of a one percent tax on financial transactions—the so-called Tobin Tax—will exchange ideas in Porto Alegre.

The WSF will not be a decision-making body, no final document will be approved, but groups represented at the forum will be free to disseminate proposals and joint positions that arise from specific meetings. The choice of Porto Alegre to host the gathering was a statement in and of itself. For the past 12 years, the city has been governed by Brazil's leftist Workers Party, which has run the city based on innovations and people-oriented policies such as the "participative budget", micro-credits, and top priority attention to social problems. Brazil's Landless Movement (Movimento dos Sem Terra, MST) will propose that seeds be named a common heritage of mankind, as part of the struggle against transgenic products. It will also organise group visits by participants to camps set up by landless rural folk, waiting to be settled on their own parcels of land.

Among the personalities who have confirmed their attendance are US linguist and activist Noam Chomsky, Indian physicist and eco-feminist Vandana Shiva, the leader of East Timor's independence struggle and 1996 Nobel Peace laureate José Ramos Horta, Egyptian economist Samir Amin, and Danielle Mitterrand, president of the France Liberté Association. Chomsky sees the gathering as an "opportunity of unparalleled importance to bring together popular forces from many and varied constituencies from the richer and poor countries alike, to develop constructive alternatives that will defend the overwhelming majority of the world's population from the attack on fundamental human rights." ♦ (IPS)

How globalised are we?

WASHINGTON—Singapore, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries are the world's most "globalised" nations, according to a newly-devised index released by *Foreign Policy* magazine.

Interestingly, the United States ranks only 12th on the magazine's list of 50. The US economy is not as dependent on international trade and investment as those of other nations, and its citizens, on a per capita basis, are much less well-travelled than Europeans. The US would be among the least globalised countries on the list but for its huge lead in technology and Internet use.

The index, devised by Foreign Policy and the Global Business Policy Council (GBPC) of AT Kearney, found a correlation between the degree of a country's globalisation and its small size and open economy. "Size matters," said Moises Naim, *Foreign Policy's* editor. "The smaller you are, the easier it is to be globalised." It also found that more globalised countries were less likely to suffer corruption or the denial of basic freedoms to their people. In reaching that conclusion, it used two other much-cited indexes: on civil and political liberties, by the New York-based, neo-conservative Freedom House, and on corruption, by Berlin-based Transparency International. Countries highly integrated into the global economy also tended to be those where wealth was more equitably distributed.

But Naim stressed that causation was not addressed by the study. "We are not claiming that globalisation leads to equality or political freedom," he said. Income disparities may have far more to do with history, economic growth, welfare and education programmes. The new index is based on a rating of four different groups of measurements: trade, finance, personal contact and technology.

Trade was measured by the convergence of domestic prices with international prices for goods and services, and the percentage of trade as a share of the country's GDP. Finance, by inward and outward foreign direct investment (FDI), portfolio capital flows, and income payments and receipts as shares of GDP. Personal contact was measured by cross-border remittances and similar transfers as a share of GDP, the number of minutes per capita of international phone calls, and the number of international travellers per capita. Technology variables included the percentage of the population with Internet access, the number of Internet hosts and secure servers per capita.

Singapore is at the top because of its high trade levels, heavy international telephone traffic, and high volume of international travellers—three times its four million population. Next are the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Finland, Ireland, Austria, and the United Kingdom. Switzerland and Austria do well due to travel and tourism, while Ireland scores high due to remittances from citizens living abroad. The Netherlands tops the Index in the financial category, with Sweden, Finland, and the United Kingdom also scoring high in the economic group.

Canada ranks 10, followed by Denmark, the United States, Italy, Germany, Portugal, France, Hungary, and Spain. Among developing countries, besides Singapore, Malaysia is the highest ranked, at 20, followed by Chile at 26, South Africa at 27, and Tunisia at 28. In Asia, Malaysia was followed by New Zealand at 21, Australia at 23, Japan at 29, Thailand at 30, South Korea at 31, Philippines at 33, Indonesia at 38, China at 49, and India at 50.

The analysis stressed that technological factors have become the driving force of globalisation, particularly since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. It said the sharp rise in Internet access and usage among advanced economies more than offset slowing growth in more traditional measures of integration like cross-border trade and foreign investment.

The index notes that many variables that indicate the extent to which a country has become globalised are unavailable. The degree to which cultures are penetrated by foreign influences is very difficult to measure, while, in other cases, such as immigration, the reliability of existing statistics is subject to question. ♦ (IPS)



The mother of all mergers

ALEC KLEIN

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) last week unanimously approved America Online's takeover of Time Warner, clearing the way for the partners to finally create the world's biggest media company a year after they first announced their mega-merger. The agency, concerned about AOL Time Warner Inc.'s potential market power, took much longer to review the transaction than the companies had anticipated and it imposed tougher conditions than most analysts expected.

The chief condition requires AOL Time Warner to open its hugely popular instant-messaging system to three rivals. Instant messaging, which allows Internet users to send brief notes to one another in pop-up boxes that appear on their computer screens, is widely expected to become a broad technology platform for trading music, video and other data.

When the all-stock transaction was announced on 10 January 2000, it was the biggest merger in corporate history, a marriage of old- and new-media titans. The deal—then worth \$183 billion—is now valued at \$112 billion as stock prices of both companies have declined. The merger represents a seminal event in corporate marriages, bringing together the world's dominant Internet service provider, with about 29 million subscribers worldwide, and the venerable Time Warner brands, including *Time* magazine, CNN, HBO, Warner Bros. films and the nation's second-largest cable provider.

Whether the merger will succeed is already the subject of debate among analysts. Consumers will quickly begin to see AOL and Time Warner cross-market their products—including movies, music and magazines—on the web and through traditional channels. And analysts expect AOL to begin exploiting its instant messaging (IM) system further, creating a communications platform that some think could rival telephone and e-mail.

Competitors are likely to press again for regulatory assistance in harnessing the behemoth, while some media companies may decide to find a partner to better compete. Among the candidates frequently mentioned is Yahoo! Inc. Analysts say AOL Time Warner will be a formidable force because it controls about half of the Internet access market in the United States and a huge chunk

of entertainment, cable and publishing businesses. "It's unique," said Scott Cleland, chief executive of Precursor Group Inc., an independent research firm in Washington. "This company will be a de facto leader in its space because no one can match the audience." Regulators on both sides of the Atlantic have spent months trying to figure out how to rein in the media giant so it doesn't stifle competition on the Internet and restrict consumer choice in the marketplace.

AOL underestimated the ferocity of its opponents and the effectiveness of consumer groups that lobbied against it. The company had expected the deal to close in the autumn of 2000. The various conditions attached to the deal by the FCC, the Federal Trade Commission and the European Union appear to put safeguards in place that will protect consumers but still allow the combined company to capitalise on its content and distribution might. "Public officials have taken a merger that had enormous consumer dangers for some of the most vibrant services and developing markets, and transformed it in a manner that should promote substantial new competition for high-speed Internet and interactive television service—an enormous victory for consumers and competition," said Gene Kimmelman, co-director of Consumers Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine.

Under FCC's decision, before AOL Time Warner offers advanced IM services, such as video conferencing, over its cable network, it must agree to allow at least one IM rival to connect to its system. AOL currently blocks other instant-messaging systems from inter-operating with its own because it says it is concerned about user security and privacy—a claim that rivals say is designed to maintain competitive advantage. In addition to conditions governing IM, the FCC also included some language to protect small and regional Internet providers that want to provide high-speed service over AOL Time Warner's cable network.

The FCC's action comes after FTC (Federal Trade Commission) unanimously approved the deal in December. The antitrust agency accepted a settlement that requires Time Warner to open its cable lines to Internet rivals and effectively turn the privately owned system into a kind of public channel for delivery of information over the Internet. The key to the FTC settlement was a

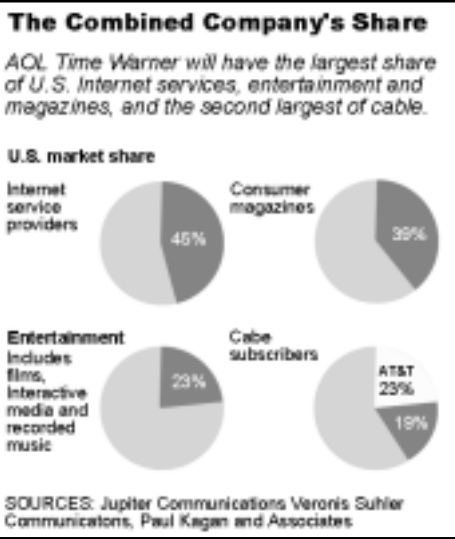
AOL and Time Warner can finally go ahead with their \$112 billion merger.

condition that requires Time Warner to open its cable network to Internet service providers that compete with AOL.

The FTC decision followed an antitrust

review by European Union regulators after which the European Commission formally approved the AOL-Time Warner merger. The Commission's ruling followed a four-month antitrust review that led Time Warner to call off a separate merger with the British music giant BMT Group PLC. AOL, meanwhile, agreed to sever its relationship with Bertelsmann AG, Germany's giant music and publishing firm, and French media company Vivendi SA.

Now that the regulatory agencies are done, the new company will quickly begin restructuring operations, which could mean layoffs. Once the merger is finalised, AOL shareholders will own about 55 percent of the combined company and Time Warner stockholders will hold 45 percent. AOL shareholders will receive one share of AOL Time Warner for each share they own, while Time Warner stockholders will get 1.5 shares of AOL Time Warner stock for each share they own. ♦ (Washington Post)



Sex, lies and AIDS

SIDDHARTH DUBE IN NEW DELHI

despite a decade of record economic growth in India, poverty and tragedy remain as commonplace as ever. Mounting HIV-AIDS epidemic is increasingly to blame. More than 2 million adults have died of AIDS, overwhelmingly in the country's most dynamic states. Some 300,000 died last year alone, far more than in any other country. More than 4 million people are infected or sick. Many of these adults are from India's middle class, skilled and often well-educated. Even more are from the vast ranks of the poor.

Almost certainly, far worse lies ahead. Because the government's prevention efforts are lagging dangerously behind the epidemic's growth, the number of adults infected is doubling every 18 months or so. On average some 3,500 Indians contract HIV every day. A World Bank report warns that without adequate prevention efforts, 35 million Indians—5 percent of the country's adults—could be infected by 2005, a number equal to the current global total of people with HIV-AIDS.

Since the end of colonial rule, India has been transformed by vast population growth, urbanisation and wider prosperity. Single men crowd the cities, only rarely able to visit their wives in the countryside, feeding a gigantic commercial sex industry that flourishes in the cities. Each new study confirms how sexual mores have changed inevitably. The only vestige of tradition is the powerful taboo on public discussion of sex. But this serves only to leave the majority



A prostitute waits for customers, Karanthipura, Mumbai

Last year more people died of AIDS in India than in any other country.

grossly ignorant of sexual matters. One in every 10 adults suffers from one or more sexually transmitted diseases, increasing the risks of HIV transmission.

India's epidemic began in the prospering western and southern states, where it is now at its worst: Maharashtra, an industrial and financial powerhouse, and Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, leaders in the information technology boom. In the first two states, well over 2 percent of adults are infected. In Mumbai and another half-dozen cities and towns, 3 to 5 percent of adults are infected.

At first glance, the Indian government's failure to curb HIV/AIDS is baffling. In 1992, faced with evidence that large numbers of middle-class men and women were infected not just the poor and "sexual degenerates"—the government ended its reliance on penal methods, such as forced testing. It has since borrowed nearly \$300 million from the World Bank for HIV-AIDS prevention, and top-level official concern is finally

evident. But India's epidemic is running far ahead of the government's response. The programmes in place today would possibly have been sufficient to curb the epidemic a decade ago; today they serve only to mask the fact that it is all but unchecked. Even in the worst-hit cities, sex workers still lack the information and support they need to protect themselves and their clients.

Prevention programmes for homosexual men are all but non-existent. Few schools and colleges have meaningful sex education programmes. Because public information campaigns evade sexual issues they have spawned dangerous new myths, such as that HIV is spread only by vaginal sex. Unsafe blood and contaminated medical equipment are infecting tens of thousands more each year. And those infected, sick or dying or their survivors can expect virtually nothing by way of counselling, medical care or other support.

Moreover, human rights abuses linked to HIV-AIDS are still legion.

People with HIV/AIDS are often dismissed from their jobs, forced out of their neighbourhoods or denied medical care. The police, politicians and even judges routinely order the arrest and forcible testing of sex workers and homeless women. Legislators in Maharashtra and Karnataka continue to push for laws that would allow the branding of infected sex workers. A Supreme Court ruling that bars people with HIV/AIDS from marriage has further demonised them and the disease itself. India's leaders have barely any time left before HIV/AIDS claims tens of millions. There is proof that they can succeed against this disease, if they are truly committed and act early. The chief minister of the southern state of Tamil Nadu quelled a severe epidemic by promoting frank information campaigns, better treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and some sex education in schools. In communist-led West Bengal, sex workers have been allowed to unionise and so to protect themselves: HIV rates remain low.

Most Indian states are still only mildly affected, giving their leaders the chance to avert full-blown epidemics through such relatively painless programmes. But for every reason, from disbelief to discomfort, few are likely to rise to the challenge. It is even less likely that the leaders of the worst-affected states will take the necessary steps to control their epidemics and prevent infection. This failure of leadership will mean a calamity for many million Indians. ♦ (Washington Post)

Indonesian "Yummies"

JAKARTA—Economic recovery is nowhere in sight in Indonesia where currency fluctuations have put even daily necessities almost out of reach of many people. Yet, in cities across the country, exclusive entertainment spots are still not short of clients.

The latest models of luxury cars are regularly parked outside these hotspots. "I pass through every weekend," Yaya Suryana, a lecturer at the State Islamic University in Bandung, says of a particularly popular entertainment strip there. "And it seems there is no such thing as economic crisis whatsoever," he adds.

Meet the "yummies"—Indonesia's young, upwardly mobile, modern, independent elite singles, who live it up even as tens of millions of their countrymen struggle to make ends meet. Highly ambitious, yumies rarely apologise for their lifestyles, reasoning that they deserve to party as hard as they work—and they have more than enough money to live it up. Often occupying high positions in companies or owners of successful businesses, these 20-somethings earn between \$12-15,000 annually—a small fortune in a country where the per capita annual income is \$617.

Some commentators dismiss them as a selfish bunch. They note that many yumies jump jobs—proof of "disloyalty" and "ungratefulness"—and delay having a family for fear of jeopardising their careers. Others see them differently. Explains psychologist Joyce Djaelani Gordon: "This generation sees life as a sea of opportunities they must dive into."

A sense of adventure is one characteristic that yumies share. It is this that distinguishes them from their parents' generation—yumies seem to have a fondness for challenging sports. Bambang, one of them, has taken up paragliding. "I feel closer to God when paragliding. You realise how insignificant you are," he says.

That many yumies do not think twice about leaving high-paying jobs to start their own businesses is evidence of their willingness to take risks, say sociologists. Rina Octaviani is 25 years old and already owns a boutique in an exclusive area in Bandung. She earns about \$1,200 a month—most of which she spends on weekend escapades in an exclusive resort, where she indulges in her favourite sports. "Money isn't a problem," says Octaviani. "It gives me a lot of fun and, more importantly, recharges my energy to work harder." (IPS)

Biodiversity burn-out

MICHAEL A BENGWAYAN IN BAGUIO CITY, PHILIPPINES

before moving on to the new millennium, the world marked 29 December as Biodiversity Day, designated by the United Nations to focus national and international attention on the importance of preserving plant and animal life in all its variety and richness. In the Philippines, it passed almost unused.

It stands to reason. After all, this is one country where humans are destroying nature faster than in any other place on earth. At the current rate of destruction, it is estimated that many of its plants and animals will die out before long—gone the way of the Dodo. The Swiss-based International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in its Red List of threatened and extinct species published September 2000, named and shamed the Philippines as the world's leading destroyer of fauna and flora. Another group, Conservation International (CI), described the Philippines as the "hottest" of the 25 so-called 'biodiversity hotspots' in the world. These are several areas with the least number of species and an alarmingly high degree of threat against those that do exist.

Hotspots include the Mediterranean basin, Madagascar, Caribbean islands, the Atlantic forests of Brazil, Cape Floristic region of South Africa, mountains of Central China, Brazilian Cerrado, Southwest Australia, Polynesia and Micronesia, the Western Ghats of India, Sri Lanka, central Chile, Guinean forests in West Africa, and the coastal forests in Kenya and Tanzania. The Philippines ranks the second in the world after the African continent—in terms of extinct and threatened plants and animals.

"Government negligence has prompted the devastation not only of forests but all that live with it," says Senator Loren Legarda, former chairwoman of the Philippine Senate's environmental committee, in her final report in April 2000.

Much blame has fallen on the government and its agencies for lacking the political will to accord priority to conservation programmes in order to protect the national heritage. "The Philippines, which has perhaps the best coral reefs, does not give importance to its water resources," says a World Bank-sponsored study published in November 2000. "Dynamite and cyanide fishing are still rampant in the Philippines and Indonesia and the governments have done little to curb these destructive fishing methods which are illegal under Philippine laws as well as under the 1975 Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES)," it adds.



- There are 25 'biodiversity hotspots' in the world – areas with the least number of surviving species and a high degree of threat against those that exist
- The Philippines ranks second in the world, after Africa, in terms of the number of extinct and threatened plants and animals
- Threatened animals in the Philippines include the Philippine Eagle, the rarest eagle in the world. Only about 350-600 of them now exist

Flawed government policies have also been criticised by foreign development agencies. Dr Frances Korten, former head of the Ford Foundation in the Philippines, says that a \$325 million loan from the Asian Development Bank in 1990 for a national reforestation programme was wasted through faulty policies. "The programme was ill advised and managed and relied on insufficient data. The programme accelerated the damage it intended to reverse," she charges.

The IUCN Red List indicates that of the 11,046 endangered and

At the current rate of destruction, the Philippines archipelago, described as the "hottest of biodiversity hotspots", may soon burn itself out.

extinct plant and animal species documented by the organisation in 112 countries, 932—or nine per cent—are in the Philippines. The List is the result of the most comprehensive analysis of global conservation ever undertaken, involving 120 governments and 735 non-government organisations.

The IUCN cites the Philippine Eagle, the rarest and second largest eagle in the world, and the Mindoro crocodile as two of the threatened animals while 227 plants are listed as extinct or threatened. The Philippines, with 2.2 million square kilometres of territorial waters, once had 27,000 sq km of coral reefs in good shape. Today this is down to 1,161 sq km. Even this will eventually die as there is little effort being made to protect these natural fish-breeding grounds, the World Bank says in its Environment Monitor for September 2000.

The environmental think-tank Earthwatch Institute warned in 1998 that 30 percent of the Philippines' coral reefs were already dead and aggressive conservation efforts were needed to save the rest. Over 11,500 sq km of mangrove forests have been indiscriminately cut for firewood, construction and charcoal or lost to commercial fishpond development says the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR). "The coral reefs, sea grass beds and mangroves support 80 percent of all commercial species of fish and shellfish. In the last 20 years, these have declined as much as 57 percent in the Philippines," says Mario Carreon of the BFAR.

The impending loss of coral reefs will reduce marine fisheries production by 10 to 15 percent and threaten the livelihood of an estimated 65,000 fishing families. As the coral reefs die some 500 to 700 animal and plant species that thrive in them will also face extinction, the World Bank report warns. Deforestation, poaching, over-hunting, logging, pollution and urban growth are among the reasons cited for the destruction of the environment. ♦ (Gemini)

Still no confidence

Sher Bahadur Deuba in *Tarun*, 8 January

Fifty-six MPs, including myself, had filed a vote of no-confidence against our parliamentary leader, Girija Prasad Koirala. When we filed our motion we had stated that we were doing this because Koirala had been unsuccessful on the three issues that he himself had claimed he would successfully tackle. When he became prime minister, he had said that he would solve the Maoist crisis, control corruption and provide security in the country. After nine months we have analysed how his government has been functioning and have concluded that he has not been successful in solving any of these three. This is why we filed a vote of no-confidence and we feel that we filed it at the right time. The procedures for election in parliament and a parliamentary party are different and Koirala has committed a crime by enforcing parliament election rules on the parliamentary party. In parliament, MPs are elected from different parties. Their election symbols, their election papers are all different. They sit in groups separately. There has to be some difference in the way a parliamentary vote is conducted, and elections to a parliamentary party. In the present case, for his selfish needs Koirala has forced one set of rules on another and he did not even table the rules before enforcing them. We showed our displeasure and boycotted the elections. So how can this be called an unsuccessful no-confidence motion? We had stated that a reign of terror would be unleashed if open voting took place, but who listened to our pleas?

Revolving door governments

Chhalphal, 7 January

Excerpts from an interview with Nepali Congress MP and former minister, Ram Sharan Mahat.

- Q. You say that the no-confidence motion is justified, but at the same time you did not vote for the motion. Why?**
- A. For the sake of party unity, I stayed neutral and did not vote. There are many issues within the party that can only be solved through consensus and this was my effort till the end. However, solutions could not be found. That is why I felt it was not correct to participate in the voting process. The nation is facing many problems, and at this moment the party should be united and move forward collectively.
- Q. You were definitely not scared of the prime minister and therefore stood neutral?**
- A. This is a stupid argument and I do not attach any importance to it. I do not want to comment on such rumours.
- Q. Both Koirala and Bhattarai were unsuccessful in providing good governance, controlling corruption and providing security. Will Deuba be successful on these counts?**
- A. This is not a question of proving one's competence. It was wrong to remove Bhattarai from the PM's post. It has now been proved that the reasons stated while removing Bhattarai were baseless. Therefore this issue has now been raised again. Despite the majority of a particular party, the government is being changed every six months. This is not a good sign; it sets a bad precedent. We have to save the party from this and unite the party. Understanding, consensus, and unity must be developed in the party. For this the party must think with a cool head. The present crisis is not beneficial to anyone in the party. We have to take steps to stop the system of revolving-door governments.
- Q. Is your present battle a battle of principles, or a battle for the chair?**
- A. The issue of principles is there but I cannot deny the fact that it is also a battle for the chair. Therefore this is a display of one's forces too. To solve all these issues the party should be united, but the tragedy is that in the Congress one's strength is being displayed all the time. It has been reduced to head counts. The party leadership is responsible for this. If peace had prevailed, we wouldn't have had these difficult times. Therefore leaders have to tread carefully and with great understanding.
- Q. What do you mean the leadership has to tread carefully and with great understanding?**
- A. At present Koirala is leading both the party and the government. The absence of peace and understanding within the party has led to these problems. Every party has many centres of power and this is true for the Congress as well. One has to gain support, handle all of them carefully and move ahead. This is the test of a successful leader and statesman. Koirala has been unsuccessful on these counts...

Contending leaders

Nepal Jagaran, 8 January

The two main contenders for the post of party president are Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba. For membership in the Central Working Committee, the contenders are Ram Chandra Poudel, Shailaja Acharya, Sushil Koirala, Khum Bahadur Khadka, Bijay Kumar Gachhedar, Mahesh Acharya, Nar Hari Acharya, Govinda Raj Joshi, Jai Prakash Prasad Gupta, Chiranjibi Wagle, Gopal Rai, Purna Bahadur Khadka, Mahadev Gurung, Prakash Koirala, Bal Bahadur KC, Ram Sharan Mahat and Arjun Narsingh KC. It appears that the Nepali Congress is divided into the Koirala and Deuba camps. And if these camps slug it out in an election, then many are expected to lose.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

It's our challenge to you [the Girija group]. Wait and see what will happen if you dare deploy the army against us. See which side the patriots will point their guns against traitors like you or patriots like us? If you have the guts try it. Why only talk about it.

—CN(Maoist) leader Baburam Bhattarai in Jaradesh, 16 January, 2000.



"It's me who is more worried about the nation, the citizens and democracy."

नेपाल समाचारपत्र Nepal Samacharpatra, 14 January 2001

Divisions among Maoists

Nepal Jagaran, 8 January

नेपाल जगरण

Divisions are now apparent within the Maoist movement. It has mainly to do with disagreement among the top leadership but it has now slowly spread to the grassroots level and is affecting all aspects and levels of the party. The main issue is the conduct of the people's war. A certain section has been proposing that the people's war should be stopped for some time, wait for a new direction and think, and only then take new steps. The opposing faction has labeled this a cowardly step and branded its proponents as reactionaries.

It seems that two power centres have been created in the Maoist party, one led by Dr Babu Ram Bhattarai and the other headed by Prachanda. Babu Ram Bhattarai thinks that the Maoist forces will be decimated once the army is mobilised and is therefore proposing a temporary ceasefire. He feels that a new strategy must be found and only then implemented. He presented his thoughts at the politburo meeting but politburo members brushed aside his proposals and asked the central committee to give its judgment. Prachanda and his supporters did not attach importance to Bhattarai's thoughts and have said the Bhattarai camp is full of reactionaries.

The very issue of this tussle is going to affect the working and morale of the Maoists. Prachanda and his followers are in no mood to call a ceasefire. They want to continue with their present line of action and are not prepared to listen to opponents. The cracks in the Maoist camp are now clearly visible.

Government signals civil war

Editorial in Jara Ahan, 12 January

जनआहान

With the formation of the Armed Police Force (APF) the government has signalled the start of a civil war in the country. This force has been created to suppress the people's war and the struggle being carried out by the Maoists. When the Act covering the formation of this force was being drawn up, the Defence Minister had stated that if the Maoists did not change their ways, they would have to face not only the police but also the army. The Maoist activities are for rationalism, a people's republic and democracy and the strengthening of people's rights, and the government is bent upon denying these very rights to the people. With the creation of this force, the government has now shown its true colours.

Through this action the government has blocked all political moves to a solution. In fact, solutions that could be reached concerning burning issues of the country and the people have been blocked. The government always blows the bugle and states that it wants peace for the people and the country, but has now put a stop to all moves towards peace. It is

not listening to the cries of the people and is not showing any interest in solving these problems either. The process of dialogue, supported and moved forward by the Maoists, has been sidelined by the government. It is now bent upon starting a civil war.

Government vehicles misused

Nepal Samacharpatra, 16 January

नेपाल समाचारपत्र

People in high political, administrative and judicial posts are known to misuse government vehicles. There are former prime ministers, former chief justice of the Supreme Court, former ministers, former members of parliament and other high officials among those misusing vehicles. The law allows special classes



PC Lochani

of government officials and members of constitutional bodies to import private vehicles under a reduced duty scheme but those who use this facility are not allowed to use government vehicles anymore. But there are still many government officials who have imported vehicles, but continue to use government vehicles.

Among them is a list of 101 justices, some of whom are Kabilraj Regmi, Ramprasad Shrestha, Harijunga Sigapati, Arjunprasad Singh, Minbahadur Rayamajhi. Others include the National Planning Commission vice-chairman Prithvi Raj Ligal, members Ramesh Naranda Baidya, Harishanker Tripathi, and Yadav Lal Shrestha, secretaries Govinda Raj Bhatta, Rewati Ravan Pokhrel, Kragendra Basnyat, and the Public Service Commission's Vidyas Chettri. These individuals have not given up their government benefits even after importing their own vehicles.

Then there are former officials yet to give up the government vehicles that were made available to them while they were in office. This includes former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, and Lokendra Bahadur Chand, former chief justices Vishwanath Upadhyay, Trilok Pratap Rana, and Om Bhakta Shrestha.

According to the sub-committee under the governance committee formed by Parliament, former prime ministers Sher Bahadur Deuba and Lokendra Bahadur Chand have not returned a jeep and a motorcycle respectively.

There are more of those who are no longer in government but are still using vehicles like former minister Devendra Raj Kandel, Mohamed Aftab Aalam, Bhakta Bahadur Rokaya, Ananda Prasad

Dungana, Dipak Prakash Banskota, and Ram Krishna Acharya. Likewise motorcycles issued to Prakash Chandra Idhani, Rajiv Parajuli, and Gajendra Narayan Singh have not been returned.

The study by the national governance management committee authorised MP Arjun Junga Bahadur Singh to investigate the number of vehicles being misused. The report also stated that former minister Govinda Nath Upreti and Balam Charti Magar have not returned a motorcycle each while Arjun Narsingh KC is still going around in a government jeep. According to a member of the sub-committee, former minister Purna Bahadur Khadka, former deputy prime minister Shailaja Acharya, former minister and presently public accounts committee member Hridayesh Tripathi, were found to have misused government-owned vehicles. An unnamed former water resources minister is reportedly making use of 20 vehicles, 18 of which belong to the Irrigation Department.

Paperless Central Library

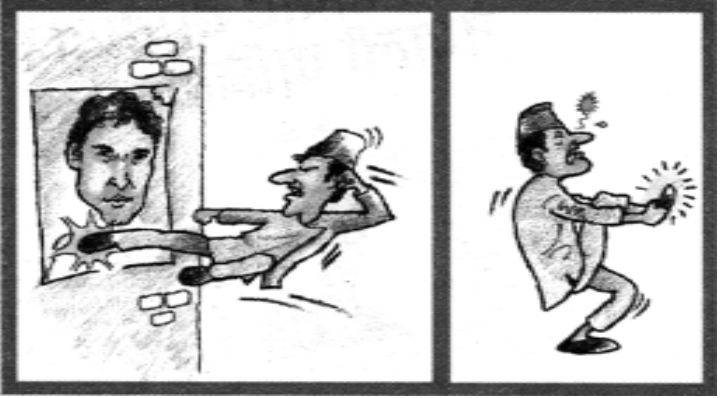
Gorkhapatra, 12 January

गोरखापत्र

Plans are on to make the country's largest library, the Tribhuvan University Central Library, a paperless one. A strategy has already been formulated and it is estimated to cost almost \$400,000. The financial crunch at the moment is holding it up and as soon as money is made available the project will be implemented.

The Central Library was established 40 years ago with 1,200 books and 1 cupboard. Two years later it was merged with the Central Library in Lal Durbar and was re-named the Central Library, TU. Currently it has a collection of almost 235,000 books.

The library does not have a complete list of all the people who have borrowed books from the library and not returned them. According to sources, among them are many prominent people of the country. A partial list is given below: Prakash Lochani, Karal Chitrakar, UB Prachanang, Ram DCO Singh, Mangal Raj Joshi, Krishna Mohan Shrestha, Yan Bahadur Ale, Suresh Acharya, Rajendra Acharya, Anbar B Dangi, Tara BKarki, Jeevan Chandra Koirala, Yogesh Krishna Kharel, Nawa Raj Gurung, Karala Pant, Raju Nepal, Shambhu Narayan Pradhan, Ranji P Poudel, Hari Bhakta Pathrak, Rajan Pant, Harihar Dahal, Prabhu Pathrak, Mohan B Basnet, Mikurda Baral, Bijay Baniya, Uday Nath Poudel, Chandra Shah, Uttam Bhakta Wagle, Sudip Kumar Pathrak, Ganesh Rai, Sri Krishna Shrestha and Krishna Malla.



ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES

❖ **Movie** ticket bookings online at <www.nepalshop.com>
❖ **Pequenos Milagros (Small Miracles)** A film by Eliseo Subiela, Argentina, 1997. An introverted but willing Rosalia believes in being a fairy and succeeds in charming the all-too-structured reality around her. Organised by the Inter-Cultural Film Society. Saturday, 20 January. 4:30pm. Russian Culture Centre. <icfs@wlink.com.np>
❖ **Russian Film Festival** Jointly organised by the Kathmandu Film Archives (a Martin Chautari & Godavari Alumni Association undertaking) and the Russian Cultural Centre.
Schedule
Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears (1981 Best Foreign Film Oscar winner): 24 January, Wednesday, 5:30pm
Genghis Blues (Courtesy Himal Association): 25 January, Thursday, 3pm and 5:30pm
Brothers Karamazov (Based on Dostoevsky's novel): 26 January Friday, 5:30pm
Tickets at Mandala Book Point in Jamal, GAA Hall in Thamel, Martin Chautari in Thapathali, and all Momo King branch. Rs 100 and Rs 50 per show. For more information ring Martin Chautari at 246065 or email <chautari@mos.com.np>



EXHIBITION

❖ **Angkor** A black and white photography exhibition by Jaro Poncar from Prague. The focus of the exhibition is the temple complex Angkor Wat, one of the architectural wonders of the world. Last day 20 January. 8 am to 6 pm. Indigo Gallery, Naxal.

SLIDE LECTURE

❖ **Across the Himalaya and Beyond** Lecture and slide-show by Arlene Blum who's led over 20 successful mountaineering expeditions, including to Mt Everest and Mt McKinley and the first American summit of Annapurna I (8,091 m), and a 2,000 mile, nine-month trek across the Himalayan regions of Bhutan, Nepal and India. Friday, 19 January, 6 pm. Indigo Gallery, Naxal. Rs 200. Reservations required. Call 413580 or email indigo@wlink.com.np

MUSIC

Shangri La Music Package
❖ **Jazz Fever at the Jazz Bar.** Piano (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday), piano and violin (Tuesday), live jazz (Thursday and Saturday) and live Irish music (Friday). International cuisine with drinks from a bottomless cellar, gourmet food and espresso, cognac and cigars... and more! 435741-43 or www.hotelshangrila.com
❖ **Jazz** Jazz by Cadenza at Upstairs Restaurant, Lazimpat. Every Saturday 7:30pm—10pm.
❖ **Rock and Blues** Robin 'n' Looza play rock, blues, soul, and Nepali tunes at The Bamboo Club, Thamel. Every Friday evening.

DANCE

❖ **Odissi Dance** by the renowned Odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal and her group to mark the Republic Day of India. Sponsored by the Indian Council of Relations (ICCR). Venue the Royal Nepal Academy on 25-26 January. More details at the Indian Embassy. 413174, 410900
❖ **Traditional Dances** every evening in the courtyard of Dwarika's Hotel. Enjoy drinks from a choice of two bars. No entrance charge, however reservations are recommended for diners. 479488.

EATING OUT

❖ **Authentic Nepali sekuwa** (barbecue). Regular Friday night sekuwa in the lamp-lit courtyard setting starting 2 February at Dwarika's Hotel. Select your own appetisers, momos, salads and choice of meats as well as delicious desserts. Package includes one free drink and lucky draw. Reservations recommended. Dwarika's Hotel, 479-488.

EVENTS

❖ **CAN Info-tech 2001 - Nepal Information Technology Show and Conference** Nepal's sole IT exhibition bringing together hundreds of experts, professionals, buyers, sellers, manufacturers and suppliers to provide a forum for networking and exchange of ideas. Some of the world's leading IT companies will also be represented in the show. A two day conference on *IT Revolution: A Millennium of Opportunities* will also take place with representatives from more than seven different nations. 25-29 January, Birendra International Convention Centre, Baneshwor. Tickets Rs 50. Rs 25 for coupon holders. 432700.
❖ **How Nepalese Organisations Could Benefit from the Asia Invest Programme** An information seminar organised by Technology and Trade Information Promotion System (TIPS) National Bureau in Nepal. Ms. Genevieve-Anne Dehoux, Senior Project Manager, Asia-Invest Secretariat in Brussels will be the main resource person. 22 January, Monday from 9:15 am—12:30 pm at the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) Meeting Hall (Room 10), Teku.

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HOT SPOT



URVASHI BAR
A sophisticated evening of music, dancing, and entertainment. The bar is open from 7 PM to 1 AM. The music is a mix of contemporary and classic. The bar is located in the heart of the city. The bar is a must-visit for anyone looking for a good time.



NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

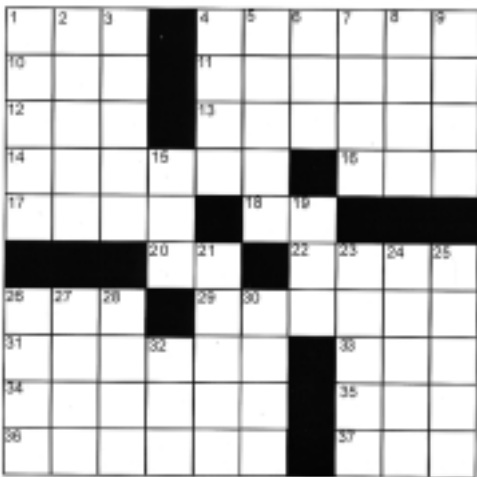


There isn't much you can forecast with a weather satellite picture like this. The subcontinent largely devoid of clouds, thick haze and fog over the Indo-Gangetic Plains, a hint of high-altitude cirrus riding the jet stream above Iran. The western Himalaya could get some cloud cover but not much precipitation. The high pressure region in northern South Asia is really asserting itself. So, in a nutshell: expect the present morning frost conditions to continue in Kathmandu Valley with minimum temperatures in the 0 degree range in the city, one degree below zero on the outskirts. Clear skies will allow daytime temperatures to soar to 20 degrees. A slight rise in minimum temperature in the early part of next week with possibility of fast-moving high and dry clouds.

KATHMANDU

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
20-00	20-01	19-02	18-02	19-01

QUICKWORD 16



Across

- Pacific-rim metropolis, partly (4)
- Filcher steals chicken (4)
- Reasons remain uncollected (5)
- Creamy French accompaniment to wine (4)
- Angst or boredom? (5)
- Ideally, some thoughts stay this way (4)
- Southern direction (3)
- The road shortened (2)
- One little pixie (3)
- The first British royal divorce (6)
- 20th century Renaissance spot (6)
- Cheated! I was _! (3)
- Moving high in Chicago (2)
- The heart of the digital era (3)
- Public prosecutor's American office (4)
- A temptress _ (5)
- Hearty Irish food (4)
- Apnea, or a plain old _? (5)
- Conceal Stevenson's evil half (4)
- A singular opera (4)

Down

- Hewing garden tools (4)
- Possesses (4)
- Fall like dominos or some pins (4)
- Wildbeest (3)
- Feds (3)
- Knight receives the command of the garter (5)
- _ a sword (5)
- Books and trees must have a _ (4)
- Repressive garment, like a corset (6)
- She broods here (6)
- Accident! Rush here (2)
- Morning radio news (2)
- Repent some actions at leisure (5)
- Yet another attraction (5)
- Keep the baby quiet (4)
- Shorten hair, pictures (4)
- Great Inca centre (4)
- What a Swiss army-knife, for instance, has many of (4)
- Common reaction to miracles and large buildings (3)
- Start the countdown. In Italian (3)

Terms and conditions

- The contest is open to everyone, except employees of Himalmedia Pvt Ltd and Infocom Pvt Ltd.
- In case of more than one correct entry, the winner will be decided by lucky draw.
- Entries have to reach Himalmedia, by 5 pm, Tuesday.
- The winner will be announced in the coming issue.
- The prize has to be collected from Himalmedia within a week of the announcement. Please come with an ID.

QUICKWORD ANSWER 15



The only correct entry was sent in by **Terence D'Costa**

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Name.....

Ph.....email.....

A decapitated God and an insatiable princess

One knows exactly how old the temple is. It probably began with a small shrine to Bhairab, the god of terror, and slowly, as the city of Bhaktapur grew, it was given the status of a temple. Tradition has it originally a large, single-storey construction, which could account for the otherwise inexplicable finials where the ground floor meets the first. Its importance is never in doubt, whether as a small shrine, a single-storey temple or the present majestic edifice that occupies one whole side of an important Bhaktapur Square. Because, if legend is to be believed, the temple originally enshrined was not a metal or wooden replica, but the actual head of the god himself.

It seems Bhairab came from Banaras where he is identified with the Shiva of Kashi. Viswanath, to watch the famous festival of Bisket disguised as a mortal. A tantric priest of unusual

perception recognised the god, and wishing to keep him in Bhaktapur began binding him with powerful spells. In desperation, the god began to sink into the earth but not before the tantric quickly cut off his head. A trophy so sacred required a suitable shrine, so it was carried, dripping blood, to the temple in Tamauchi Square where it was installed with great rejoicing. Wherever the blood had fallen was marked with large stones that were worshipped as shrines. They are still in the streets today, reddened with vermillion, but no longer so sacred they may not be stepped upon or driven over. Medieval Bhaktapur grows suddenly modern and its religion moves with the times. Restoration, for instance, must forget taboos like unbelievers not entering the holiest precincts. Purification ceremonies are conducted and the work goes on.

Records suggest that the Bhairab temple was commissioned by King Bhupatindra Malla (1690-1722), a connoisseur of art and a great builder, but there is another, more romantic story. The king, reverent of beautifying his city, felt that the existing Bhairab shrine did little credit to its unique importance. So he ordered two more floors to be added to the temple, to be topped with a gilded roof and golden finials. Instead of being pleased by all this royal extravagance, the god grew angry at being disturbed. He caused earthquakes, drought and pestilence to threaten the city. The worried king consulted his astrologers and soothsayers and they finally came up with extraordinary advice. To appease the furious deity, the king must build a temple for Bhairab's consort that must be of singular beauty and size. Only then would the god be satisfied.

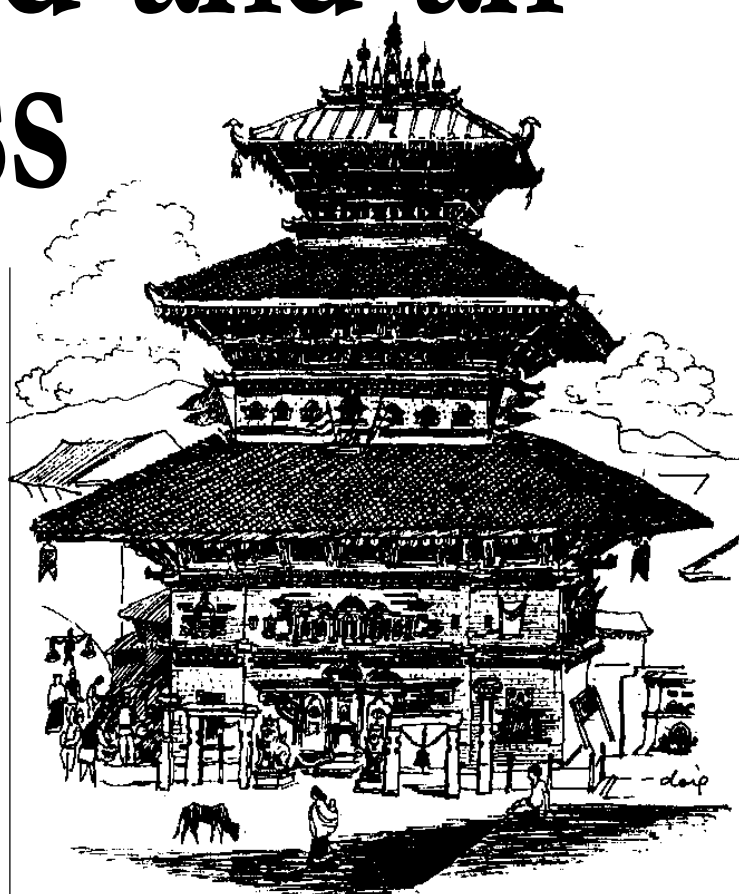
It was done at last. The temple was built, the angry Bhairab appeased. At least until 1934, when a severe earthquake that devastated Bhaktapur made a ruin of the temple. It has been faithfully restored, so that few if any looking at it today would doubt it being centuries old.

During Bhaktapur's spectacular Bisket festival, the image of Bhairab is drawn through the streets in a heavy wooden rath. All of Bhaktapur turns out to watch or take a turn at pulling on the ropes. Or they help raise an enormous pole at the beginning of the festival and lower it at the end. The

pole and the festival recall an amazing story. There was in Bhaktapur an insatiable princess who demanded a new lover every night. Normally the men of the city would have felt privileged to oblige, but strangely no man, however strong, survived the experience. Every morning there was the sad procession of mourners taking away a son or brother or husband. The city became muted with grief. At the speed at which they were dying there would soon be no men folk left in the city.

One day, in the very best tradition of fairytales, a handsome stranger rode into town. Unknown to anyone, he was naturally a prince. The stranger, seeking shelter for the night, happened upon an old lady convulsed with grief who between her lamentations told the prince the story of the demanding princess. That very night her only son was to present himself to the palace and the next morning she would go to collect his body. The prince gallantly promised to take her son's place, and did.

The princess was beautiful. It was love at first sight, but the prince was as clever as he was handsome. After the princess fell asleep, he quickly hid himself in a corner of the room, sword in hand. To his horror, two serpents writhed from the princess's smothered, growing larger all the while, and obviously in search of their prey. In a flash the prince was upon them, severing their evil heads from their



Instead of being pleased by all this royal extravagance, the god grew angry at being disturbed.

bodies. In the morning, when the old woman leading a procession of mourners came to collect his body, there was the prince happily hard in hand with the princess. Great were the celebrations. Bisket was born, and Bhaktapur lived happily ever after.

The wheels of the great Bhairab chariot are stacked under the eaves of the temple. Sometimes, when the crowds at Bisket grow boisterous, battle looms in the square. At other times processions converge on the

temple, pujas are performed, a knife flashes and a sacrifice is made. A tourist rides a guardian lion to be photographed. Something is always happening. Like models from Singapore showing the latest fashions from Rome and Paris. Or a film unit filming an epic. Life about the temple is so interesting that one begins to scrutinise handsome strangers. Could one of them possibly be...? ♦

(Excerpted with permission from *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, HarperCollins, 1999.)



Bhaktapur Dabur Square, with a lot more people and some modern structures near the Bhairab temple (right).

MIN BAURACHARYA

BOOK REVIEW

by MANJUSHREE THAPA



For those seeking a greater diversity of voices in Nepal's literature.

DB Gurung belongs to the third generation of Nepal's English literary writers—the first slim generation consisting of

Balakrishna Sama and Laxmi Prasad Devkota, and the second (slightly less slim) generation of Abhi Subedi, Padma P Devkota, Peter J Karthak, Mani Dixit, and a few others. While the literature written by the earlier generations remained confined to very narrow reading circles, Gurung's generation is poised to narrow the considerable gap between Nepal's English literature and the larger world: he is the first Nepali to have a novel published by a reputable publishing house outside Nepal. The son of a Gurkha veteran of World War II, Gurung made first his mark in poetry, publishing a collection *Whisper* in 1992. As with much English literature published in Nepal, little fanfare accompanied that publication. Eight years later, however, *Echoes of the Himalayas* received a good amount of attention: by having his novel published outside Nepal, Gurung got Nepal's literati to take note of him.

Echoes of the Himalayas is fresh and worldly in outlook. Protagonist Gagan Ghondey's father is a retired Gurkha serviceman in the British Indian forces who returns to Nepal after his retirement, only to suffer discrimination and exclusion: and so he migrates to Bhutan. Gagan grows up between Bhutan and Sikkim as an emotional, poetically inclined youth who harbours a deep nostalgia for his imaginary homeland Nepal. The novel begins as he sets off from Sikkim to make a place for himself in Nepal.

Reaching Biratnagar, Gagan finds that Nepal meets none of his expectations: Biratnagar is 'a confused, shapeless town, sprawled in typical Indian fashion over an endless plain that [have]

no hills or rivers, and...littered with filthy stagnant ponds, swamps and puddles that [breed] mosquitoes and germs.' However, Gagan slowly adjusts to this alien Nepal; but he has a hard time finding work because he lacks citizenship papers. At the end of a few difficult months, he has overcome his poetic bent and is making a living shoveling sand, carrying loads, teaching privately and smuggling Indian goods across the border.

Gagan returns to Sikkim after his father's death. By this time he is skeptical about his prospects in Nepal but he still, deep down, wants to return and find a home there. He finally summons strength from a Langston Hughes verse—"What happens to a dream deferred?"—and returns to Nepal, this time heading straight to Kathmandu.

He is both disappointed and rewarded by the city. In depicting Kathmandu, Gurung has captured the city's fluid, shifting character. Gagan's initial thrill at the cosmopolitan veneer of some parts of the city quickly gives way to disillusionment at the deep-seated chauvinism which marks Nepali society. Lacking local contacts, family support, or citizenship papers, he finds himself again and again knocking up against native xenophobia and parochialism. His attempts to find work are wrought by a migrant's insecurity. Yet Kathmandu is not all heartache: he is also embraced by kindly strangers, including Bahuns. Over time, as Nepal enters a democratic era, Gagan befriends more and more members of ethnic groups who are slowly organising against the cultural hegemony of Chettris and Bahuns. The novel ends, somewhat abruptly, on a political note, with Gagan entering active politics as a member of the All Nepal Native People's Organisation, a forum of 'native' Nepalis of 'Mongoloid' origin. Fighting for his rights as a 'native' Nepali, he belongs.

Previous reviews of *Echoes of the Himalayas* have tended to criticise it, in my view unfairly, for exaggerating Nepal's ethnic tensions. To be sure, the author's portrayal of the *janajati* movement is simplistic; for current *janajati* rights discourses are more complex and wide-ranging than the 'natives' vs 'Brahminism' polemic that dominates *Echoes of the Himalayas*. In places Gurung tries to acknowledge the complex nature of Nepal's ethnic

relations: he is careful, for instance, to be very fair in portraying individual Bahun characters. Still, the novel keeps slipping into the kind of racist jargon which tends to trivialise other more legitimate grievances that *janajati* populations suffer: for example, issues such as discrimination in Nepal's constitution, official language policies, census counts and distribution of social and economic justice receive far less mention than the facial features of 'natives' and Chettri/Bahuns.

Despite this reductive quality, *Echoes of the Himalayas* is a fun, refreshing book to read. The author's sensibility definitely stands apart as new and invigorating—perhaps because most of Nepal's literature is a bastion of Bahun writers, and the issues raised in this book are hard to find in Nepal's Nepali-language literature. Indeed, Nepal's English-language literature stands apart in that it is authored equally by Bahuns, Chettris, Newars, Gurungs, Tibetans, migrants from Sikkim and Darjeeling, and long-time expatriates from all over the world.

There are, sadly, a few shortcomings in *Echoes of the Himalayas* that could keep it from being widely read. Though many passages, particularly descriptions, read very lyrically, the novel is mostly written in a simple, functional prose which can read flatly at times. Foreign colloquialisms pop up oddly in characters' dialogues. The plot and pacing are erratic in places; and the rushed end betrays signs of novelists' fatigue. Yet those who sympathise with Gagan's muddled outsider-insider relationship to Nepal will enjoy the book for its content. And those who seek a greater diversity of voices in Nepal's literature will enjoy the novel. Viewed in the larger context of Nepal's literature, *Echoes of the Himalayas* must be lauded for the cosmopolitan sensibility it contributes to our literature. ♦

Echoes of the Himalayas
DB Gurung
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DB Gurung

RCT, and football triumph

MUKUL HUMAGAIN

After almost half-a-year in hiatus, big time club football returned to Nepal with the hosting of the Birthday Cup. Ranipokhari Corner Team (RCT) lifted this year's Birthday Cup defeating Belgaria Sports Club by a solitary goal. In the final played at Dasharath Stadium on Monday, RCT gave its supporters a New Year gift by winning this prestigious domestic tournament. Started 27 years ago to mark the birthday of King Birendra, the Birthday Cup is held annually around this time of year.

RCT had to wait 27 years to lift the Cup for the second time in the history of this championship. Its earlier win was in 1973 when the tournament was organised for the first time. With this tournament signaling the beginning of the football season in Nepal, RCT couldn't have asked for a better start. After winning the ANFA Coca-Cola National League in 1999, RCT was of late struggling to win major tourneys. Widely regarded as one of the best in Nepal, RCT was promoted to the 'A' division 38 years ago. But success has always eluded them, as time and again they faltered when it really mattered. The club made it to the finals of the Birthday Cup for two consecutive years in the 90s but never went on to win. With this win, RCT is back in the reckoning.

For two other domestic football



The Birthday Cup was welcome relief from ANFA squabbling, and a great start to the football season.

giants, Manang Marshyangdi Club (MMC) and Mahendra Police Club (MPC), the Birthday Cup was a sore disappointment. Both reached the semifinal stage but failed to move on from there. Last year's winner, MMC lost to RCT while the MPC team went down to Belgaria Sporting Club of Kolkata.

RCT went into the semifinal without any major hiccups, defeating Naxal Yuwa Mandal, Galaxian Club and Sikkim-11 with relative ease. Nirajan

Rayamajhi was instrumental in these successes in the early phase. The 22-year old Rayamajhi scored three consecutive hat tricks to pave the way for RCT. The semifinal clash with Manang Marshyangdi Club (MMC) was the first major hurdle for RCT, which they won 2-1. MMC has dominated RCT in the past, but this time RCT managed to defeat their opponents with a golden goal by Narayan Manandhar.

In the final, RCT played a much better game against Belgaria

Sports Club of Kolkata. In particular, its defense was much better than earlier and goalie Ramesh Lama played his best match of the tournament with some superb saves. Rayamajhi looked subdued in the title clash



as Ramesh Gyawali scored the match-winning goal in the final. Belgaria Sports Club, an 'A' division Club from Kolkata, didn't play especially impressive football at any point in the cup. It was given a quarterfinal entry by the organisers and went on to the semifinal stage by defeating the Three Stars Club 1-0. Though it won the semifinal in a tiebreaker 4-3, it was only after two MPC players missed their chances in the penalty shootout. MPC, who had brilliant run in the domestic circuit last year, was let down by its key players in the tiebreaker against Belgaria. In the other semifinal, MMC, last year's winner, had to play a much-improved RCT.

For RCT, this triumph means a lot. Not only has its reputation as Nepal's leading club been enhanced, but it also gives them confidence as the new football season begins. "For us it's a perfect start," says club chairman Bijou Narayan Manandhar.

For football lovers, this tournament has also been some relief from the turmoil that has plagued Nepali football management. The Ganesh Thapa-Geeta Rana controversy dominated the football scenario, and it was with this tournament that a football loving public finally saw some good football in the Valley. The successful completion of the tournament has also helped Geeta Rana demonstrate that she is capable of running Nepali football. It was first major tourney that the Geeta Rana-led ANFA has organised after she was promoted to president of the association in October. All 'A' division clubs of Kathmandu participated in the tournament. Teams from South Korea, Bangladesh and Maldives were expected to take part, but apart from two Indian teams, no other foreign team participated. ♦

The man with the golden foot

He has a knack for scoring hat tricks. And the Birthday Cup was no exception. Though he failed to score in the last two matches, Nirajan Rayamajhi made history in the Birthday Cup with three consecutive hat tricks in three matches. The 22-year-old RCT striker had a wonderful tournament with 12 goals to his credit. No other player has had such a run in recent times.

A member of the Nepali national squad, Rayamajhi was promoted to the senior team of RCT three years ago. Since then he has never looked back. One of the key members of the RCT strike force, Rayamajhi has been instrumental in RCT's successes over the years. He has been named best player in the tournaments that RCT has won in last two years. Last year, in the Martyrs Memorial League, he scored 9 goals against Bansbari Club.

Rayamajhi has been included in the national side for a year, but has yet to play a stellar role in any international tournament. A fan of Nepali striker Hari Khadka, Rayamajhi hopes to be one of the best strikers in the country. His track record shows he is quite capable of doing so.



ALL PHOTOS: MIN BARACHARYA

VACANCY

Regional Director, Panos South Asia

Panos South Asia is a regional information and communications not-for-profit organisation based in Kathmandu with a country office in New Delhi, India. Panos South Asia works with the media, policy-makers and international agencies throughout South Asia to provide information and stimulate debate on developing issues.

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OFF THE BEATEN TREK

by RAMYATA LIMBU



Walking on clouds

Arlene Blum is a scientist who climbs mountains. Read all about her adventures in her next book.

Climbing mountains and conducting scientific research (things women traditionally "didn't do") gave Arlene Blum a lifetime of challenges and adventures. "It's given me much to write about," says Blum. "The stories I tell, both in the lab and on a mountain, are the result of a similar process. One has a vision of what one wants to do. Then, a group of people works together to achieve that goal, whether it's solving a scientific problem or climbing a mountain."

An mountaineer with a doctorate in high physical chemistry, Blum is in Kathmandu to work on her memoir *Molecules and Mountains*. Her first book, *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*, about the 1978 American Women's

Himalayan Expedition on Annapurna I was recently reissued by Random House Publishers. Back in 1972, when Blum had the idea of organizing the first women's expedition on an 8000m peak, none of the highest peaks in the world had been climbed by women.

But by 1974, three members of a Japanese women's expedition had climbed Manaslu, the long-awaited first ascent to an 8000m peak by an all-female expedition. Four years later, Blum's own expedition to Annapurna put two women on top. In 1978, two women and two Sherpas stood on the summit of Annapurna I, twenty-eight years after Maurice Herzog's first eight-thousand climb in history in 1950. The celebrations were short-

lived because a few days later two women on the second summit team fell to their deaths. In *Annapurna*, team leader Blum chronicles the personal commitment and the triumph and tragedy of the expedition's journey.

Blum then started working on her next goal: the great Himalayan traverse across Bhutan, Nepal and India. In 1982, she and travel and adventure writer Hugh Swift became the first westerners to complete the 4,500 km trek. Starting from the eastern border of Bhutan, Swift and Blum, climbed up and down the Himalayan range up 6,000m passes and down to river valleys at 600m, gaining and losing an average of 1000m each day to reach Ladakh.

Eager to share her cross-cultural experiences with friends back home in Berkeley, Blum started the Berkeley-Himalayan Fair, an annual event which attracts 5-6,000 people to enjoy dal-khat, momos, song and dance, and arts and crafts from the Himalaya. "One day, I saw a few people selling arts and crafts on this huge field in Berkeley and I had a vision of something bigger." The 18-year-old fair is sponsored by the City of



carcinogenic chemical used as a flame retardant on children's sleepwear.

Today, she's traded university teaching and research, and high-altitude climbing to focus on family and sharing the leadership skills she's gained leading over twenty Himalayan expeditions with organisations worldwide. "Once you have children you don't want to engage in life-threatening sports. It's a personal choice," says Blum whose numerous awards include a gold medal from the Society of Women Geographers, an honour given to eight other women, including aviator Amelia Earhart, anthropologist Margaret Mead and Mary Leakey.



Arlene Blum and adventure writer Hugh Swift during their trans-Himalayan trek; Blum walking on the clouds to Thaulagiri

Annapurnas and Everests"-Blum's metaphor for important and difficult goals.

Based on her experiences leading successful scientific research and mountaineering expeditions, as well as a synthesis of current research on leadership and team development, her clients include corporate and high-tech companies like Nestle/Carnation, Hewlett Packard, and IBM. Blum will be shuttling between Kathmandu and Bangalore for the next five months sharing her team-building skills with Indian and American computer professionals. "We will look at how

leading Ministries and private industry.

Participants were encouraged to share their vision, to make a commitment, an action plan. Almost a decade later, at least one of those participants is realising her dream.

Ranjin Yanjan's vision to transform Kathmandu into a green beautiful place by having companies adopt a city block or a neighbourhood is flowering fast as she continues to nurture green traffic islands in the city's choked interiors-beyond molecules and beyond mountains. ♦

HAPPENINGS



WHAT, NO CHAIRS: Legal eagles from the Nepal Bar Association count votes on 15 January in elections in which 4,000 lawyers all over the country voted.



SAFETY MARCH: School children march along Durbar Marg on 15 January to spread awareness about earthquake safety on the anniversary of the Great Earthquake of 1934.



FLYING THE FLAG: Ranipokhari Corner Team pose for a victory photo after winning the Birthday Cup, repossessing the trophy after a gap of 27 years.

sharp



Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

Now that the Prime Minister has won a Vote of Overconfidence and gone off to Pokhara to check out the scene-scenery, what we are not understanding is who is going to handle the Ministry of Animal Husbandry back in Kathmandu. Flying home earlier this week, I was told in hushed tones by

it violates the Covenants of the International Treaty on the Disposal of Hazardous Wastes which this country has ratified, and they go about as if they own the place.

As anyone who has ever husbanded a female rhino in Meghali will tell you, a great deal of care and training needs to go into nurturing a relationship. In every marriage there has to be compromise, accommodation, and, yes, a commitment to live together (till reincarnation do you part) even if you want to punch the spouse in

The wild boar menace

the authorities at the Tribhuvan Multinational Airport that wild boar have been spotted digging for truffles in the vicinity of the VIP apron. It is time for the authorities to get on a war footing and leave no stone turned upside down to wipe out the boar menace once and for all. That is if they can first sort out the dog menace, the vulture menace, the earthworm menace, the monkey menace and all other vertebrate, invertebrate and extraterrestrial menaces that plague our main airport at the present time in this nation's glorious history. This is a job for crack units of the Paramilitary Taskforce of the Ministry of Animal Husbandry, no one else can handle it.

But Kathmandu's problems pale in comparison to the hazards faced in remote corners of the kingdom. Try, for instance, to persuade a fully-grown one-horned rhinoceros cow to vacate the runway at Meghali, or talk a herd of yaks out of crossing the runway to get at the greener grass on the other side at Syangboche. Just try it. You will soon realise that higher mammals in our country have the freedom of the wild ass: they graze where they want, they drop droppings with wanton disregard for whether or not



the proboscis every time he snores. It is the same in political marriages: there has to be give and take. If someone is giving then some other one must be taking, if not then there is no Big Deal. This is why the Minister of Animal Husbandry is a crucial post during the Pokhara Cattle Fair (slogan: "You scratch my back, and I'll stab you in yours") where livestock will be auctioned to the highest bidder in the run-up to the next general election. Many prize specimens will change hands as the non-stop partying gets underway.

OK, boys, enough fun and games. Time to get this show on the road. ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

Three Sisters



Lucky, Dikki and Nikki are an inspiration to many Nepali women whose vision of the world these three sisters have helped nurture among the mountains. The bright, witty sisters have one mission in life—to empower women and help them cope with modernity, while at the same time preserving their culture and heritage. How do they do this? They make them walk the Himalaya. At their small trekking agency—Three Sisters' Adventure Trekking in Baidam, Pokhara—they not only assist women trekkers and employ Nepali women guides, but also conduct free trekking and guiding training for their Nepali *didi baine*. "We used to do it at our own cost. But since last year, we have been receiving some assistance from the Nepal Tourism Board," says Nikki. Already they have trained 56 women, 15 of whom have joined their crew. At present,

another training programme is going on in Pokhara. Though it was only two years ago that they were formally registered as an agency, it is more than six years since the trio started working the mountains. Lucky started first, and Dikki and Nikki followed suit after being instructed in trekking and climbing at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling. The sisters want to bring Nepali women into the trekking community. "Our main objective is to employ women and provide women trekkers with quality, genuine trekking. We want to share with them our adventurous spirit," says Dikki. The young women say they haven't had the time to think about getting married, as the work they do is more enthralling than any social obligation. To remain outdoors, to be one with nature and absorb the energy of the mountains is their life.

"Everyone should trek. It has to be taken as a part of life, like the way we have done," they say. Lucky says her happiest moments are when she has a 360 degree view of the Annapurna panorama from Annapurna Base Camp. "It's always enlivening to see that," she says. "A guide is an ambassador of the country. Any foreign trekker coming here expects the guides to know about almost everything related to nature, the environment, flora and fauna, culture and the mountains. We train and educate Nepalis and our foreign guests the same way—we tell them everything we know that they're interested in, anything that will enrich their stay in Nepal," they say. Lila Karki, their mother, is one happy and proud person. "It's good to see their work ethic and hearty spirit. It makes me feel very happy," she says. Phone in Pokhara: 061- 24066

shangrila ad

ambassador
whisky