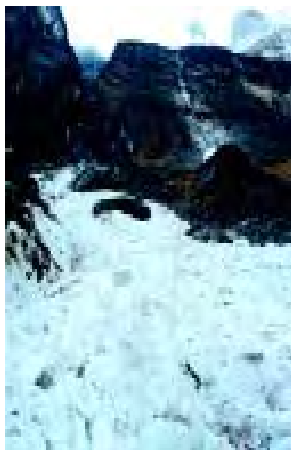


IN THE ANNAPURNAS 10-11



LOVE IN
THE TIME
OF AIDS

6



EXCLUSIVE

Haze capital

Kathmandu is to become South Asia's "haze monitoring capital" by the end of this year, Klaus Topfer, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), announced last week. We're told the idea of monitoring aerosol concentration over the South

Asian landmass was born after two Indian scientists—one a Nobel laureate—on a mountain flight noticed brown clouds at a higher level than they were supposed to be.

Hence the need to monitor haze overland, where it comes from and how it affects the hundreds of millions of South Asians. ICIMOD may provide local assistance to UNEP to set up the centre—good move.

The UNEP chief also launched Nepal's State of the Environment (SoE) report, prepared with the help of the Ministry of Population and Environment (MOPE), ICIMOD and a battery of "experts." The 150 copies of the SoE were rushed through press for the release just for the UNEP chief's press conference. We're told the report was prepared according to "UN guidelines"—no wonder it lacks both passion and commitment. Besides proof mistakes we found the report also lacks good data and a 'point of view.' Clearly nothing has been learnt from New Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment's classic State of the Indian Environment reports. Good NGOs can better monitor the environment. Are there any Nepali greens worth the colour willing to take up the challenge next time?

Politics extreme

Girija Prasad Koirala is cornered but not cowering yet. The last parley at his dear friend Krishna Prasad Bhattarai's place yielded the expected results. Bhattarai asked Koirala to resign in the presence of opposition leaders. Koirala responded that the subject was something that should be discussed in the party, not at Bhaishapati. We're told nothing will happen until 8 April, the deadline by which the ordinances to set up an armed police force and appoint regional administrators have to be approved by parliament. Then, round two will begin—a plan is on to table a new law to set up the two new institutions.

Give and Take

The government got a low pass from donors last week.

BINOD BHATTARAI

Reporting progress to donors is like submitting homework to a class teacher. But unlike in a classroom, there are more than a dozen teachers and only one student: His Majesty's Government of Nepal.

This complicates matters at donor meetings like the one last week at the Ministry of Finance. The government presented a report on aid and reform it had promised at the annual Paris donor consortium meeting last year.

Nepal has received over Rs 191 billion in aid since 1950, over Rs 63 billion in grants. There has been dramatic progress in basic health indicators and in education, but the country is still at the bottom of the heap. Nepal is the poorest and least equal among even poor South Asian countries. The way we treat women, we are only slightly better than the Taliban. So where did all that money go?

Donors are the first to admit that they have flip-flopped on policy over the decades. They got us to try this, and they got us to try that. Pouring money did not solve the problem—it just deepened dependency. Donors want us to come up with a strategy, but we are so addicted to aid that we can't figure out what we want anymore.

"Ours is a case of a nation's inability to articulate what we want," explains Sudhindra Sharma, a Nepali sociologist working on a doctoral thesis on foreign aid. "There is confusion created by conflicting demands, and unless we are clear in our heads about what we want aid for, more delay will lead to more confusion."

Everyone agrees we don't need another aid strategy. There are enough research papers and reports made over the years gathering dust in the ministries and on donor shelves. Donors and government officials say the real problem is efficient aid utilisation and policy questions that are tied up with political will, which in turn is linked to political stability.

Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat came out of the donor meeting on 19 March with a "low pass". It has been only a month since he became minister, so he had an easy alibi. He reiterated his personal commitment to Nepal's Development Agenda agreed on in Paris last year, but admitted frankly that he didn't have much progress to show. And the donors grilled him:

- The Danes, Germans and Norwegians were worried about security, which they felt was growing into something larger than a law and order problem. They wanted frank discussion on the insurgency and how it

was affecting development.

- The Swiss wanted stricter corruption control, and an action plan for clean up.
- UNDP's one-point agenda was more real decentralisation, both in laws and actions to push grassroots decision-making.
- Another donor thought maybe we need more centralisation, given the vacuum at the top.
- The multilaterals were worried about delays in the financial sector reforms and legislation to push them.
- Another asked why the government had not rejected the Army's proposal to open a bank.
- One bilateral donor was unhappy about the negligible role of the private sector and slow progress on privatisation.
- All agreed that the Maoist problem was not just a security issue but a crisis of development, and the solution was negotiations not force. Some even offered to help in mediation.

If this was donor dictation, then you can't blame Mahat for feeling a bit confused. Especially on decentralisation where he says revenue collection has actually gone down after local government was given the authority to tax constituents. Aid works best when donors look at the overall direction and not poke their nose every time there's a delay here or there.

"We want to take full charge of our development," he told us. "Only that way we can adjust the modality and timing to the local situation." Ideological and policy differences, conflicting priorities among donors doesn't help—especially for a country, which pays for over 65 percent of its development budget through aid.

Said one donor representative present at the meeting: "People said nice things as they do in such meetings but some did speak about schedules that had slipped. The overall tone was supportive, but we were concerned about delays in fulfilling past promises."

Mahat argued that it was difficult to show results in the present climate of political uncertainty driven by "assertive vested interests". Donors were not surprised: how can aid be an island of efficiency when everything else is going to pot? But they are worried that governance is faltering dangerously in the face of strikes, parliament boycotts, Maoist violence and the ruling party's ability to do everything but rule. Kathmandu-based diplomats and donors are becoming increasingly impatient and blunt in expressing public concern about the present situation. "Something has to give,

this is getting from bad to worse," one senior foreign diplomat told us on condition of anonymity.

Even so, the general donor assessment of last week's meeting in a stuffy Finance Ministry room was better than expected, partly because they were surprised that a document had actually been prepared. They are convinced that the Finance Ministry and the National Planning Commission are serious about reforms, but their worry is that this has not percolated down to line ministries. "We had promised in Paris to table new laws for banking," says an MOF source. "Our inability

to do that has been noted by donors and that will ultimately affect aid we are expecting."

And this uncertainty does not bode well for an economy so dependent on external assistance. If foreign aid declines like foreign investment, it would be disastrous: not just for development but also for the Kathmandu elite

that depends on Kathmandu's "aid economy" for everything—from NGO consultancies to house rentals.

Finance Secretary Bimal Prasad Koirala summarised it: "There are problems but donors in general are still positive about aid. We can overcome problems if donors allow us to take full charge in the driver's seat." So, let's do it. ♦



SURHAS RAI



WHAT WOULD BP HAVE DONE?

It is at times like these that you want to ask: what would BP Koirala have done if he were alive today? And it is a hard question to answer. But there are a few things we know for sure BP would *not* have done:

He would not be fighting tooth-and-claw with fellow-leaders within his own party and allow the whole country to grind to a halt. Given his stature and leadership qualities, he would not be trying to divide and rule to improve his own political standing. As a frugal and simple man with high moral standards, he would not allow allies and relatives to loot the land in his name. He would not suffer fools, nor would he put up with mediocrity and incompetence. He would not allow his own or other parties to hold the Nepali people hostage over petty politics. He would not be sidetracked from building a minimum multi-partisan consensus on this nation's intolerable crises in health care, education and employment. As a committed social democrat, he would not endure a return to authoritarianism in any form, and he would work actively to prevent it. He would not play politics with the Maobadi issue, and would not let others do so. He would not believe in a military solution to the insurgency, and would campaign to address the inequality in income, opportunity and hope among Nepalis who have been neglected and kicked around for too long. In the spirit of his lifelong principle of National Reconciliation, he would not be pushed into the trap of confrontation and conflict. He would not be pushed into the defensive in relations with neighbours and donors, and would put his house in order so they would not be tempted to tell us what to do.

The tragedy of BP Koirala's legacy is that this thinker, statesman and politician is mis-regarded as the "intellectual property" of the Nepali Congress party, and neglected by the left and the right. So instead of being a Nepali icon, BP has remained a party icon. This is a tragedy because it slots this statesman into the narrow confines of his party. At a time when Nepal has democracy without leadership, government without governance, we miss the commanding yet non-authoritarian persona of BP.

The royal coup of 1961 demolished democracy and landed Prime Minister BP Koirala in jail and exile for 16 years. BP died in 1982 before his dream of restoring democracy in Nepal was realised—it took a decade after his death for that to come to pass. Today, another 10 years later, BP must be looking down at us and shaking his head. "Look at what you have done," he must be saying, "after winning everything you squandered it all." It is just as well that BP Koirala is not alive to see what we did with his dream.

So, does having something good to say about B.P. Koirala make us all 'Kangresi'? No, and that is the point. It does not and it should not.

LAW OF THE LAND

If there is one country in the world that is a living example of Parkinson's Law in action, it is Nepal. Work expands to fill the time necessary to do it in. We were ridiculed when we refused to celebrate the five-day week when it were announced—obviously Nepali bureau cats were not suddenly going to work like headless chicken on roller skates with their pants on fire. They just kept on doing whatever they didn't do in record slow time, the only difference being they got two days off in the bargain in which to moonlight. Then the government increased their salaries thinking it would curb corruption. Nope, didn't work. Now, the Sunday off has been scrapped for some essential services. We don't think it will make any difference. Murphy's Law is also applicable here, if anything can go wrong, sooner or later it will. There is a gaping hole on the footpath on Darbar Marg, shouldn't we warn pedestrians about it? Oops, too late. Then there is Girija's Law, nothing is patched up unless it is patched up in my favour. So, here comes Prachanda's Law: you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.



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STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL

Their state, our elite

Somewhere there are still peoples; somewhere there are still herds—but not here, my brothers. Here there are states.
— Friedrich Nietzsche

NEW DELHI – Here at the edge of the Thar desert and in the desolate expanse of Indian babudom springs the oasis-like campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Bubbling with fresh ideas, fermenting with diversity, this is where the verdant trees of reason sway. While the rest of India hitches on to the globalisation wagon, this is where people are still passionate about frugality, where blind consumption and wastefulness are frowned upon and "self-sufficiency" and "ideology" are not bad, empty words. It is a place where the old dreams still live.

Yet, even here, in the very seat of non-conformism, the attitude towards relations with Nepal reflects official conservatism. A colonial approach towards Nepal straddles the ideological divide of the Indian power elite. The ruling saffron coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party flagrantly uses the so-called Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) threat from Pakistan to regularly bash Nepal. Sonia Gandhi's Congress still carries with it the big stick of the trade blockade that her husband imposed on Nepal in 1989. Red Indians of various hues use more benign terms, but scratch them and the party line shows through. Leftie Prabir Purkayastha put it bluntly this weekend: "The problem of Nepali water or power is that Nepal is too sensitive while India is very insensitive." Well put, comrade, but your flippant tone hurt. This statement is no less patronising than the over-bearing disposition of the *babus* and *babunis* of South Block. The uniformity in the views of Indian ruling classes towards Nepal makes you wonder: should we blame ourselves for our fate?

Dr Bhekh Bahadur Thapa apparently thinks so. At a reception that he hosted at the India International Centre in honour of our own leftie stalwart, Jhala Nath Khanal, our Ambassador to the Delhi Darbar was as reckless as only a very cautious person can afford to be. Being the suave diplomat that he is, he qualified all his remarks as "personal and off the record." However, his demeanour clearly betrayed his real intention—he wanted his views made public. "Go ahead, and if you ever quote me, I'll deny ever having said any such thing," he seemed to say with his hearty laughter. The camaraderie between our elite and the Indian state annoys Dr Thapa no end. Things are stitched up, and he is left twiddling his thumbs. Good thing it leaves him time to put in some golf.

Just about all Indian Embassy officials who have ever served in Kathmandu must have armies of sincere supplicants for life. Senior Nepali ministers have no hesitation calling upon their friends in South Block in a clear breach of protocol. Had these 'friendships' been reciprocal, it could have been justified as an example of the depth of people-to-people relationship between our two countries.

In reality, what often happens is that the *babus* flaunt their friendship with the powers-that-be in Nepal, and taunt Embassy employees when they have to deal with them on official business. Demoralised and dispirited diplomats moan: "All negotiations between New Delhi and Kathmandu always take place directly. We don't come in the picture. It's only when things go wrong that we are called upon to do damage control. Or take the rap as convenient scapegoats." If all positive motivation is rooted in self-esteem, then clearly our Barakhamba Road office is not properly primed.

The expectations of middle-class Nepalis also help shape the Indian elites' attitude towards Nepal. While we resent their backslapping big-brotherly arrogance, we seldom hesitate in asking for small favours or special treatment. JNU, for instance, has started charging Nepali students "foreign" rates: the tuition fee alone is now about \$600 per semester for social science courses and \$850 per semester for the natural sciences. You'd have thought that given the way we bend over backwards to assert our independence vis-à-vis India, Nepalis would welcome being treated like any other foreign country. But no.

A left-wing Nepali student raised this issue with Sita Ram Yechuri, the firebrand politburo member of Communist Party of India (Marxist) during fraternal talks between comrades of the two countries last week. Replying to the petition, Comrade Yechuri proclaimed pompously: "Nepali students should not be asked to pay more than Indians." But rest assured, brotherly magnanimity extracts its price elsewhere. It is easy to name ten senior Nepali officials whose children study in India on official scholarships. Respect is not bought at bargain prices. When the king's nominee in the Upper House was rumoured to have lent his mobile phone to an ex-envoy on a 'personal' visit to Nepal, Kathmandu suddenly took notice of the true face of the individual infamous for his habitual India-baiting. But such

dualism in dealing with India has always been the norm with our ruling elite.

We want to have our roti and eat it too. We want to keep crowing about Kalapani, and still save the Mahakali treaty. We want to scrap the "special relationship", but continue worshipping the seer of Puttaparthi. We want to cosy up to the Indian elite without having to put up with their huddled masses. We want to be treated like foreigners in India, but want to pay Indian rates on trains and in universities. This enigma of distance between two close neighbours produces the paradox of yearning for the hug, while fearing an embrace.

Our priority perhaps ought to be sending our soldiers to fight the insurgency, but we hurried instead to deploy our army to police the border. Despite the "control of smuggling" excuse invented by our Finance Ministry, it appears certain that this decision was taken at India's behest to check the flow of goods that it does not want to enter its territory. The flip-flop over the licence renewal of Spacetime Television demonstrates the limited freedom we have in framing our own policies and exposes how Indian intelligence apparatchiks have started believing their own rumours.

We aren't an Indian protectorate. Not yet, anyway. We have always been independent, and would like to live with that belief forever. Hence we are reluctant to accept that the rest of us are condemned to live with the complete sovereignty of an elite that considers itself to be the state. Dr Thapa can keep practising his golf: our Pandeys have their Rajans in New Delhi and vice versa. And all of us who continue to crib about Indian hegemony should realise that true independence can only come with a greater sense of self-esteem. ♦



BP

When he found out that there wasn't much time left to live, Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala narrated his recollections over a period of seven months in 1981-82. The BP tapes were recorded by Advocate Ganesh Raj Sharma, who transcribed and later published them in book form in Nepali three years ago. The following is an excerpt from his foreword to the English translation of *B.P. Koirala's Atmabrittanta: Late Life Recollections*, being released today in New Delhi.

When he learnt that he could be dead within six months, BP came with Shiva Dhvaj Basnet straight to my residence, where Daman Nath Dhungana, Radheshyam Adhikari and I were deliberating some philosophical matter. He joined our discussion for a while, and then took me to an adjoining room and told me what the doctor had said. BP then rejoined the group and enthusiastically talked for about an hour about divinity, religion and human behaviour. Here was the best example of BP's attitude to life: he did not seem more worried than if the doctor had identified some common ailment. The others did not even know that he had come straight from hearing what was essentially a death sentence. Over the next nine months, speaking practically from his deathbed, Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala spoke into a tape-recorder and shared a great deal of his thoughts before two listeners: Shailaja Acharya and myself.

While in exile, BP sought the views of both supporters and opponents on the contemporary issues confronting the Nepali people. The political analyses and decisions he made then were thus neither isolated nor unilateral. And it was his ability to give expression to the entire nation's hopes, aspirations and sensitivity that made his words echo in the far corners of the country.

Since the very beginning, I have been aware of those who did not appreciate my privileged access to BP in

preparing these Recollections. BP himself was alert to the possibility of distortions in how he would be projected after his death. That was why he decided, when he realised that he would not be able to write his own memoirs, to present his Recollections through the medium of his voice. Once he started speaking, he would get spirited and his voice would match the mood of his recollection. I remember once getting myself so carried away by the intimate details of the Pokhara sojourn when he was a personal guest of King Mahendra's, that I excitedly turned the tape-recorder off and asked him, "So how did your relationship come to sour so unexpectedly?" He replied, in obvious bewilderment, "That is exactly what I have not been able to understand!" Till his last moments, I must report, BP had not been able to reconcile the contradictory nature of the late king's attitude towards him, at once both friendly and hostile. Indeed, the toughest and saddest episodes of BP's political life had all to do with King Mahendra.

Even though BP had said he would make available to me all his diaries and many other unpublished manuscripts, I did not have faith that the insular circle around him would allow me that access. So many of his wishes had remained unfulfilled because of this, I knew. BP himself obviously had his doubts, for he told me to trust only [former deputy prime minister] Shailaja when it came to accessing

those papers. In a sense, therefore, these Recollections are the result of his lack of faith.

In seeking the right time to publish this material, I had to take several things into consideration. BP's last political strategy had succeeded in re-orienting the Panchayat system from its old track, but he was gone before he could do more. Even though the political atmosphere was more open by the time of his death, it was not benevolent enough to allow publication of this manuscript within the country. Meanwhile, I was not agreeable to suggestions that this work—by someone who gave his all for the nation—be printed in India, to be imported to be read by his own people.

I believe there must be a search to recover whatever is possible of the documents relating to BP. For



example, the then Bagmati zonal commissioner, Surya Prasad Shrestha, interrogated BP when he was taken straight to Sundarjal Jail after alighting from the plane on 30 December 1976 when he returned with the call for national reconciliation. The text of that interrogation must be with the government, as it is extremely important in both political and legal terms. The court proceedings are easier to find, but the related government papers remain locked away in obscure shelves. The tapes made during the interrogation must be located and transcribed, for I can say with confidence that no revolutionary has defended himself more eloquently and with such moral conviction as BP did while under military detention. I was personally a witness, on 30 December 1976, of BP's principled stand in front of the government interrogators. His was a defence based on unequivocal spiritual strength, and I remember well BP's wrathful mood and his sharp-edged arguments. I was privileged that day to countenance BP's stirring fearsome incarnation at Sundarjal Jail.

That interrogation took place for all of seven hours across the jail's dining table, and was recorded in a powerful tape-recorder. These and other episodes are parts of history and no government has the right to make them disappear. Sundarjal Jail should be converted to a museum to maintain its place in Nepal's history, and the authorities must locate and make public the full record of the defence made by BP while surrounded by the military at Sundarjal. If the government has any sensitivity towards a national leader of the country, it should do this.

But if BP's personal papers have not been protected even by those near to him, perhaps it is too much to expect the government to have been more conscientious, particularly during the most recent periods of political turmoil. Nevertheless, unlike individuals, government has continuity and perhaps it is not inappropriate to rest some hope on the existence of these and other materials related to B.P. Koirala, and it too should be properly sensitive to the fact that the BP Papers are a part of the nation's heritage. Other than make a plea based on morality and good sense, there is not much one can do vis-a-vis the royal palace, however. ♦

(B.P. Koirala's Atmabrittanta: Late Life Recollection's will be on sale in Kathmandu from Sunday, 1 April.)

The king and I

The king [Mahendra] had mixed feelings of love and hate towards me, I think. I will take some time to explain my relationship with the king. He definitely became concerned upon seeing the extent of my popularity among the people, how I worked as prime minister, and the very momentum of events. But that was also at a time when he began to speak in praise of me. He had to completely revise what might have been his preconception, that here was a man just like all the rest who had gone before. The king was impressed when he saw my work ethic, by the debates I used to have with him, the discussions we used to have in trying to establish some principles of governance, and my ambitions. My plans and ambitions, which I used to share with him, are the same ones I speak of these days in public during rallies.

Once, the king asked me to explain my aspirations. I told him they were to provide a standard of middle class living, such as that of my family as a minimum for all the people. "How long will that take?" he asked, and I replied that it would require me to win elections three times and that I would work towards that. I used to bring all kinds of matters before the king so that he would not nurse a grudge. However, whenever he addressed some public meeting, the king invariably said something hurtful against our council of ministers. I would then have to respond. In public, he would show himself to be in opposition to me, but in person he would try to make up for the damage.

He took me on a tour, and I accompanied him even though it was not necessary for the prime minister to go, but I went. During our travels, he was able to observe our party's popularity. Of course, the king was personally popular. Wherever he went, the public would come out to watch the pomp and festivity. There would be film shows in the evenings, and the people would come for that as well. There would not be many politically inclined people present, and I thought the king would not have liked that. However, the king also developed some empathy for me during that period, and he did understand that he was not dealing with a charlatan.

The king also showed me courtesies. I had to leave the tour in Dang and return to Kathmandu in order to make preparations for an official visit to India... I was to leave the next day and the airplane had already arrived at Tulsipur, Dang. The airport was some distance from where we were camped, and the king arranged for me to have a meal with him that evening. We used to have our lunch separately, but in the evenings we used to gather for drinks and so on. He called me that day, and said, "You are leaving tomorrow; let's have some fun today."

During the programme, he announced, "Okay, everyone recite some poem or the other." Now, I could not recollect any poem, but then remembered a short one by Shelley, and I recited it. The poet addresses a lover:

*We look before a laughter
And praying for what is not;
Our finest poems are those
That are made of saddest thought*

I then remembered a poem from my school days, and recited that one too:

*I vow to thee my country
I recited what I remembered, and then the king said, "Shall I recite one too?" the poem he recited was beautiful and full of emotion. I still remember some sections:*

*As you leave us
And visit their big cities
You may even delight in them.
But we will tarry by these rivers, caves and chautaris
And remember you.
Don't you forget us
For we cannot forget you.
As I wipe the sweat from my brow
In the chautari, tired
Then I will think of you.*

It was a beautiful poem, and it was addressed to me. Obviously, he would not have expressed such emotions if he had not liked me.

(From B.P. Koirala's Atmabrittanta: Late Life Recollection's, Himal Books, 2001)

FISHING SKILLS
Charity does not solve the problem of poverty. What we seem to be doing in Nepal is begging, begging for



donors to take care of our problem the way they think best. Since we cannot keep

our house in order, outsiders rule with "555 foreign funded projects" (*Mahat's report*, #35). I agree with the anonymous foreigner (*What's really wrong?*, #35) that we should be able to say "... if you want to help us it will be on our term and only where we feel we want help." But it is not to be. Instead we read *A tale of two wars* (#35), one of the manifestations of poverty in Nepal that is portrayed so touchingly by Barbara Adams. The ten days special medical camp, organised by a donor funded project, in Mangalsen only reveals the problem, not a "sustainable" solution. Barbara's write up implies that this is the way for donors to go about solving Nepali

problem. The camp was simply another charity: a piece-meal approach, which provided "fish to the beggar", not the fishing skill.

**Durga P Ojha
Tangal**

ROYAL NEPAL
It seems to us that the Lauda Air deal is really being blown out of proportion. What's the big deal? Everyone knows that all the different parties, when in power, have all been raping RNAC and the country. It is no big secret that previous and present RNAC bosses are very corrupt fellows. Having a lot of



friends involved in the aviation field, I know it for a fact that the present one is up to his neck in it. If he does that just to move a pilot's file, just imagine what he's going to do when it comes to moving a whole aircraft. Why don't you expose these guys with a hidden camera? Thank you for all the "masala" in your news...keep it up. All my friends here enjoy reading

Nepali Times.
**Ganesh Man Koirala
UK**
PS: Don't laugh, this is my real name. My family were big fans of the freedom fighters.

MAOBADIS
It appears the Maobadis in Itahari aren't content with an anti-corruption agenda and want to foray into the fashion business. Doesn't commanding women students not to wear short hair contradict Maoist demand no 19 (Nepali Times #30) that patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against should be stopped? What's next, female circumcision?
**Name withheld on request
Itahari**



CORRECTION
Due to an editing error, THE WRONG PHOTOGRAPH ACCOMPANIED THE NEPLITERATURE COLUMN (#35) on the poet Manju Kanchuli. The correct photograph of Manju Kanchuli is presented here. The error is regretted.
The picture accompanying *A tale of two wars* (Barbs, #35) should have been credited to the Achham DDC. Ed.

Learning to climb



Ice climbing training in Langtang

RAMYATA LIMBU

When four-time Everest summiteer Lhakpa Sherpa decided to take part in a basic mountaineering course organised by the Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) last autumn, people wondered why he was doing it. But Lhakpa did not care. "Climbing Everest a couple of times doesn't necessarily teach you the basic,

technical aspects of climbing that are essential for any mountaineer. Neither does it give you a proficiency certificate," says Lhakpa. "Experience, alone, doesn't count." His instructor Iman Gurung nods in agreement. "For a 40-something climber, Lhakpa is extremely strong and fit. He was a bit weak on the knots and the rock climbing aspects, though," says Gurung who spent a month instructing 32 trainees in the basics of climbing in the rugged surroundings of the NMA

mountain school in Manang.

Gurung should know. He started out on the lowest rung of the expedition ladder—as a coolie when he was 15, then a kitchen boy, a cook, and finally a 'Sherpa'. Realising the necessity of technical training, he completed the Basic and Advanced Courses through the NMA and is one of a dozen or so Nepalis to hold a diploma from the ENSA (Ecole Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme) in

To secure the future of Nepali expedition leaders and climbers, we need formal training programmes—and they appear to be off to a good start.



Rock climbing training in Thame

Chamonix, the hub of mountaineering schools in Europe. This means Gurung is qualified to be an assistant instructor for the Advanced Mountaineering Course and a Master Instructor for the Basic Course run by Nepal Mountaineering Association.

The next step up would be a course endorsed by the Union Internationale des Associations de Guide de Montagne (UIAGM)—a professionally certified, internationally recognised guiding system. But that is not that simple. "It is a very complex process to get the UIAGM rating," says Tashi Jangbu Sherpa, president of the NMA and an ENSA diploma holder. "It requires developing a course of study within the country and then getting the UIAGM to endorse the course." So far, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Austria, Canada, Peru and New Zealand run UIAGM-certified courses. Slovenia recently joined the band.

"It's ironic," says Gurung, who will accompany a French team attempting Everest from the north side this spring. "Despite having the

majority of 8,000 m peaks and a wealth of manpower at the mid level, Nepal doesn't have a single UIAGM certified mountain guide," says Gurung, who's set his heart on becoming a UIAGM-certified guide.

His wish may come true soon. As part of a French-Nepali co-operative effort ENSA and NMA signed a five-year memorandum of understanding (MoU) in January which highlights ENSA's role in assisting the NMA to design a syllabus suited to Nepal—the emphasis of which would be more on high altitude climbing skills, and weather-reading skills rather than being able to climb a grade six or seven rock face. The NMA, on its part, has committed itself to registering a national official diploma for Nepali guides in keeping with UIAGM standards.

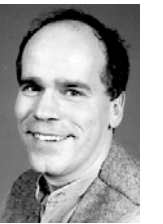
"The UIAGM rating is extremely necessary to give some direction to mountaineering as a profession in Nepal, to develop an industry," says NMA's Sherpa. A UIAGM-certified course, an equivalent to a Masters, normally takes an ENSA diploma holder about three months to complete and requires a broad

understanding of history and geography, navigation, meteorology, advanced climbing and rescue techniques, and organising and executing expeditions.

So where does that leave the hundreds of learnt-on-the-job climbers like Babu Chhiri Sherpa and Appa Sherpa? "Such climbers would fit somewhere around the ENSA diploma level but would have to take a couple of extra credit courses such as in navigation," says Sherpa. Whether the NMA can streamline this information, provided by the French, the Slovenians and the Austrians at various points, to a growing number of potential trainees in diverse situations remains to be seen. "During the earlier stages when we first introduced the mountaineering courses, we had to look for applicants, coax trekking companies to send in their staff. Today, we're flooded with applications and have a hard time rejecting people," says an NMA official. Over a hundred people applied for the 32 places in the NMA's basic mountaineering course in autumn 2000.

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



Agnostic turns cyberprophet

There's something energetic and committed about this corner of south India that even dedicated cynics like me can't diminish.

BANGALORE: This is a place where my agnostic views of information technology come under severe strain. Every one here is a cyberprophet, a budding millionaire, the next Bill Gates. I don't exaggerate. Even the poor physically handicapped man running the telephone kiosk outside my hotel ("Only Local Calls, Proceeds to Crippled" reads the sign) has big plans. "Saar," he told me in halting but surprisingly good English, "Soon we'll have two computers. Then I'm opening an Internet cafe. Big money saar, better than telephone calls."

Indeed there must be money in 'net surfing. There's a cyber cafe on every corner here. Some are slick, franchises run by big companies. One of them, Satyam Infoway, aims to have 10,000 cafes all over India by 2005. Others are tiny family-run places that used to be public call offices. There's evidently much demand. I spent half an hour looking for a place to download e-mail the other day, turned away several times from places with every terminal full. And unlike Thamel, the browsers are not Swedes or Australians reporting on their latest Lonely Planet adventures to friends and family far away. In Bangalore, local students are the backbone of the Internet cafe trade, followed by the small businessman still awaiting a telephone line from Indian bureaucrats unaware that their days as gleeful dispensers of petty annoyances are numbered.

I fell into conversation with a young woman at a Satyam i-way cafe that had a free terminal. She was typing up a resume and browsing various high tech sites for news of jobs. She had a slight American accent so I assumed she was from a rich family, educated abroad, and back in Bangalore for a holiday or a parent's lucrative posting with a multinational IT firm. Wrong on all counts. Sudha had never been beyond the state borders of Karnataka. She learned her English at a local vocational college, and her father was a



civil servant from a fairly humble, lower middle-class background. I asked her if she was among the desperate hordes of Indian graduates who are applying for American visas to work in Silicon Valley and make a trillion dollars. No, Sudha was applying for jobs in Bangalore, "because it's home, and because there are so many companies. If I want to work for Microsoft, Sun, Java, Oracle or Cisco, they're all here. But I want to work for an Indian company."

More and more, this is what you hear as India's IT boom enters another phase with much more potential and a lot more challenge.

Bangalore, Hyderabad and to a lesser extent, Chennai, stormed into prominence in the early 1990s as sources of cheap, skilled labour to do the offshore data processing of western and Japanese companies. Then Bill Gates and other American IT barons realized that India produces more engineers than any ten other countries, more and more of them working in software. So they opened branches in India to work on software and to solve the specific problems of business clients. Again, the bottom line was value for money. That market is becoming overcrowded now, and not because of stock market crashes and the bursting of the IT bubble.

Now Indian companies have to start becoming world players with their own software and ideas, not just a source of offshore labour and expertise founded on other peoples' technology. There is a still an economy here founded on cheap copies of foreign intellectual property and no matter where you stand on that issue, it's a barrier to South Asian success in the next generation of information technology. The young woman in the Internet cafe wants all the right things—to stay at home and presumably contribute to local development, and to be part of an indigenous, cutting-edge company. She wants to work in a masala version of Silicon Valley. She probably will some day.

There's something energetic and committed about this corner of south India that even dedicated cynics like me can't diminish. We'll be hearing a lot more about Bangalore in the years to come. ♦

“So far, the training has been operated on an *ad hoc* basis. There’s no concept of continuity. The final goal of the NMA should be to create structures which after some years will be able to conduct training internally,” says Max Santner of Eco Himal, an Austrian development agency that is working towards establishing a mountaineering training centre in

aid instruction at the Kunde Hospital, and ice training, including the ascent of Lobuche, in the Everest region. About 60 to 70 percent of the trainees are employed during the trekking season. Since 1999 Eco Himal and the NMA have also been training women. Presently, the third group of Outdoor Female Leadership trainees are on a trek in Helambu where they will be taught

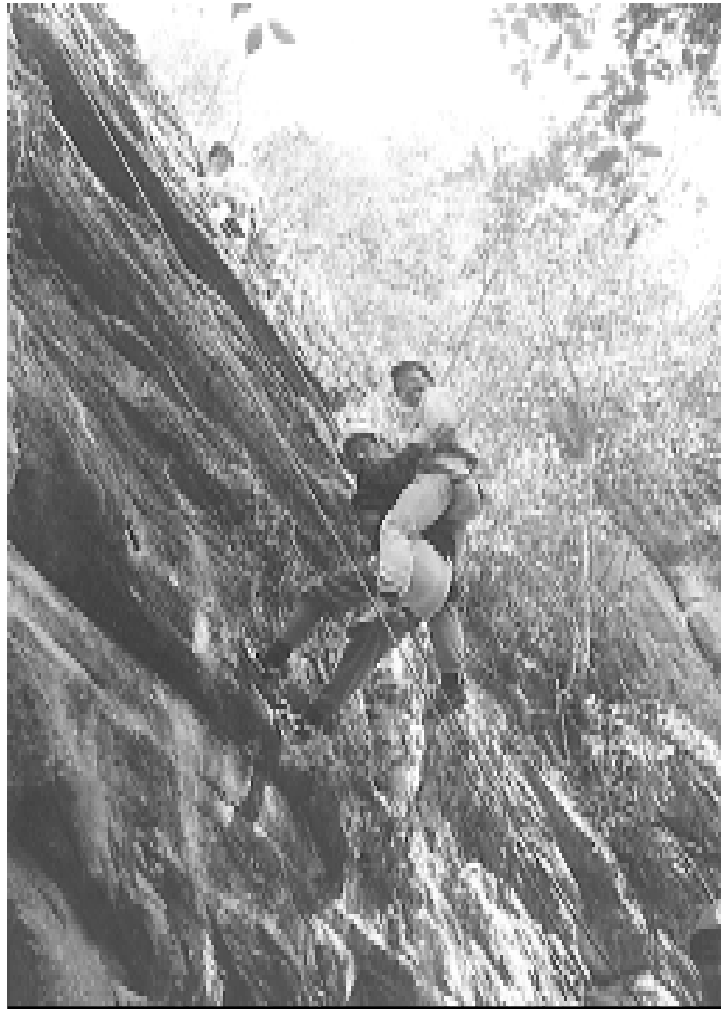
Sony Sherpa a 19-year-old college student in Kathmandu. “Normally, parents aren’t keen on letting girls be away from home, especially overnight. I thought this was a great opportunity.” “When I saw the information on the Eco Himal website, I was really excited and wanted to be involved in the project,” says Hawse, whose non-profit

training to more than 500 trainees since 1979. The French, namely the ENSA, have been involved in advanced training since 1984 and recently trained 17 climbers at Kanzin Gompa in Langtang. The ENSA has also agreed to provide a quota for three outstanding Nepali climbers from 2001. Two will be sponsored by NMA, and the third by the French Embassy.



NEPAL MOUNTAINEERING ASSOCIATION

Advanced rock climbing training in Langtang



NEPAL MOUNTAINEERING ASSOCIATION

Rescue training on a rock face in Balaju

Thame, Khumbu. “The area is ideal because the climbers are training at an altitude that simulates the actual local environment they’ll be working in.”

So far 59 climbers, including two women, have been through the advanced training conducted jointly by Eco Himal and NMA since 1998. It involves attending environmental awareness classes in Kathmandu, rock climbing and theoretical lessons in Thame, first

the basics of setting up and managing campsites.

What started off as a half-hearted experiment has today evolved into a well-rounded training programme where volunteers like Angela Hawse, a high-altitude mountain guide from the US, and climber and tourism entrepreneur Nimi Sherpa will be guiding trainees like 19-year-old Sony Sherpa. “My father is in the trekking business. But I’ve never been on a trek,” says

educational foundation, The Wind Horse Legacy, is sponsoring the training of ten of the women. Hawse, who was on the south summit of Everest in 1998, dreams of organising a joint American-Nepali women’s team to attempt a peak in 2002. “Maybe Ama Dablam,” she says.

Meanwhile, in Manang, the Slovenians have been helping out with the NMA’s mountaineering school and providing basic climbing

Between the Slovenians, the French, the Austrians and Nepali instructors, they have trained nearly 900 Nepali climbers in the basic and advanced courses organised by the NMA. The challenge for the mountaineering body, now, is to formalise a course at a higher level. NMA President Sherpa is optimistic, “It all depends on how well ENSA and NMA work, how long we take to prepare the syllabus and get it endorsed by UIAGM.” ♦

Bandh, again

Here’s something to note for those making plans for the weekend of 6 April. In line with their tradition of protesting against the “incomplete” revolution of 1990 that reached a climax on the same day, the Maoists have called for a general strike on Friday. A statement signed by Maoist Chairman Prachanda, has “called” on all transport, educational institutions and markets to shut down. The Maoists also charge the government of ignoring their proposal to form an all-party interim government.

The long road home

Officials from Nepal and Bhutan began screening the identities of refugees Monday to kick off a process that analysts say could take years to complete. Members of 10 families were brought to the screening centre on Monday and only two were screened. The officials first oriented them on how to fill up the different forms required for the exercise. Progress on Tuesday was seven more families. “Things are moving faster today,” said SB Subba of the Bhutanese Refugees’ Representative Repatriation Committee (BRRRC). The Khudunabari camp holds over 12,300 asylum seekers. In all there are 15,025 families, adding up to 99,099 individuals living in seven camps in Jhapa and Morang districts. Refugee groups have distributed copies of the required forms in camps and hope that the screening will move faster once people know what sort of questions they are going to be asked. There’s another problem though: there’s no arrangement for feeding the people who come to the verification centre, which needs to be addressed if the process is to take the entire day. We’ve learnt that the bus carrying the refugees is making two trips instead on one.

Everest clean-up

An exclusive club of Nepali mountaineers says it wants to clean up the upper reaches of the world’s highest mountain. The membership list of the newly-formed Everest Summiters Association that wants to pick garbage from the peak reads like a who’s who of Nepali mountaineering—Pemba Doma Sherpa, the first Nepali woman to climb Everest from the north; Appa Sherpa, 12-time climber of Everest, and Babu Chhiri who holds the record for sprinting to the summit. The criterion for membership to this new club—having climbed an 8000m peak. “Previous clean-ups have been done at lower altitudes and Base Camp, few people can go higher” says climber Kaji Sherpa. “We’d like to use our ability to climb higher to clean the mountain.” So far 984 climbers, including 202 Nepalis, have climbed Everest.

Water strategy

One more strategy is in the making, we’re told. About 200 people specialising in different aspects of water use and management got together last week to give final shape to a strategy on long-term use and management of Nepal’s water resources. The plan is to chart development for 25 years. Groundwork on the strategy began in 1996 with the support of the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency. The plan is to be reviewed by the Water and Energy Commission and National Water Council. Approval by the two bodies will take the strategy to the cabinet for final approval.

Love in the time of AIDS



"We are the first Nepali Couple with HIV/AIDS to get married"—Sharan Chhetri

I was born in Kalimpong and an away from home at a very young age and tried earning my livelihood in cities like Delhi, Dehradun and Bhardwaj. Later my mom called me to Kathmandu. She had married a different man. But I could not last with my tyrant stepfather for long. Mother also became an alcoholic. Then I got frustrated and kept company with all sorts of people.

When I was around 18, I started selling movie tickets at Jai Nepal Hall. I had rich friends. It was after one of them died in a motorcycle accident that I started drinking. I never drank before, even when my friends urged me I would refuse. I used to hate the stuff. My friends would count how many glasses of liquor they could consume. If one said, "Hey, I've had 15 glasses," another would boast, "That's nothing, I've already reached 22." One glass would be enough for me. When people would smoke cigarettes, I would tell them, "Please, don't blow smoke my way." That's the kind of person I used to be at one time, a nice, polite boy. Yet this nice boy also became a hated thug.

When I was working as a scalper at the movie theatre, I fell in love with a girl called Bidya. Her family owned a small

teashop. Our love affair lasted about four years. We talked about marriage. But since I was a Chhetri and she was a Newar, her family objected. We didn't meet for a month. Then Bidya committed suicide. Her family told others that she had died of meningitis, but I suspected suicide. Her body was cremated Pashupati temple. I hid in a corner and watched her body burn.

After this event, my life took a very different turn. I couldn't do without liquor. I started meeting women. As a scalper I had saved around Rs 22,000. My

Dasain. The man who would become my father-in-law called me to his house. His daughter was also present. He asked his daughter, "Do you want to marry this man?" She said, "Yes." Her father continued, "He doesn't have a job or a home. How will you live?" She answered, "I'll live with him even if all I have is hot water for meals." So he put *tika* on both of us. The marriage "ceremony" was over.

Since I didn't have a place of my own, I stayed with my wife's family for a few days, but moved into a rented room soon after.

HIV-positive.

I am now 33 years old. I have had AIDS for four years. People like us who have AIDS or who are HIV-positive have established an institution called Prerana (Nepali for "inspiration"). I am the vice-president [now chairman]. I work to educate people about AIDS. I am ready to sacrifice my life for the benefit of others.

But things are not going right. I was very sick until a few months ago. Asha, my wife, thought I would die soon. But divinity comes strangely into one's life. A person named Pol *dai* came

I used to hate alcohol. I never smoked. That's the kind of person I used to be at one time, a nice, polite boy. Yet this nice boy also became a hated thug.

intention was to buy a second-hand tempo. I am also interested in music. I used to own a guitar and other musical instruments. But I started drinking too much. I quit scalping tickets, but couldn't find any other job. I spent all my savings.

But I had to do something, had to eat. I found a job repairing radios. While working there, I fell in love with another girl, and we got married in a strange ceremony. It occurred during

Unfortunately, the radio shop where I worked was sold, and I was once again unemployed. My wife worked in a garment factory. I began drinking again, and the money my wife earned was no longer enough. We didn't pay rent for three or four months. I had borrowed some money to pay the rent, and I gave it to my wife. Later, she couldn't find it. She suspected I had taken it and spent it on drinks. But I hadn't taken the money at all. Naturally, we had a huge fight. I was very angry so I beat her and even attempted to stab her with a knife. But she managed to escape. Soon after, she left me. We had two sons, they live with their mother. I was married for about seven years.

After my wife left me, I was having sex regularly with two women. But I fell sick a few months later. When I went for a check-up, I discovered I had syphilis. I took medication and was feeling fine, but I fell sick again. When I had a check up again, it turned out I was

looking for me. Don't know how. He was like a god to me. He had me treated at Patan Hospital. And I am better now. At the moment, I am devoting my time to reviving Prerana. The organisation has collapsed because there was no one to look after it. The Chief District Officer demands to know where we spent our money. We don't know how or where it went. Perhaps some friends misused it.

I am very open about having AIDS. My ex-wife knows I have AIDS. I gave my name when I was once interviewed by a local FM station. She heard my interview and found out I had AIDS. She called me the next day and berated me for making it public. She said, "So you have AIDS, but do you have to tell everybody about it?" But what I say is that those of us who have AIDS have to be open about it. We shouldn't lie. This is my advice to my friends.

I got married to Asha about a year ago. She, too, is HIV-

True to their names, Asha and Sharan represent a marriage of hope and refuge.

SALIL SUBEDI

A year has passed since Asha, 22, married Sharan, 34. They are the first HIV-positive couple in Nepal to get married. The ceremony was performed at the Guhyeswori temple in the presence of a small group of friends who were helping them produce a book called *Positive Life*—a compilation of oral testimonies of 15 young Nepalis about how they contracted HIV/AIDS. That day, they visited Asha's old grandmother, mother and godfather to seek their blessings.

They are happy together. But just two months into the marriage things started getting tough—societal pressure is always hard to handle, and money for food, shelter and medicine were scarce. Their only direct resource of livelihood, Prerana, an organisation they established to assist and help 'positive' people move on positively with their lives, didn't function for a year shortly after Asha and Sharan were married. They are now trying to get it back on track.

Asha and Sharan live in a dingy mud house in Dilli Bazaar and they are lucky to have a kind landlord—they have shelter, even though they haven't been able to pay rent for a few months. This winter was cold, and perhaps that's why both were ill. "I almost had no hope of seeing Sharan alive this summer," remembers Asha. It is a tough battle—when Sharan gets better, Asha is sick, and vice versa. But they still take pleasure in living. Sitting on their bed, the only seat in their house, sipping tea, watching Sharan light a cigarette, I found myself laughing more heartily than I'd done for a long time. Sharan's intriguing sense of humour and Asha's quick responses were too life-affirming for the old room to remain depressing.

We continued laughing as we walked down to Naag Pokhari. "One day I lost *nani* (Asha) in a cinema queue. I looked around. Couldn't find her. But suddenly I realised she was standing at the back. She's so small," laughs Sharan. Asha replies: "Wait one day, I'll really shrink and you'll look for me the whole day." Food and cash are a problem, but this couple survives on faith. Their room is filled with small pictures of poubha-style Ganesh and Tara, and photographs of friends. They have a small cassette player and a black-and-white TV.

Sharan's neighbourhood friends love him. They sometimes offer him *raksi* to lift his spirits. Says Sharan quietly: "Sometimes I take it. It's okay if you drink within limits. Earlier I used to argue when my wife scolded me. But these days, I don't do anything to make her feel angry and sad, because I love her very much."

Smiles Asha: "He's a very good husband. We fell in love because we understood each other so much."

positive. About eight years ago, three of us—Asha, I and one *didi*, Kopila—started Prerana so that those of us who had this illness could come together, share our stories and help each other. Kopila died last year. Asha

used to tell me from the very beginning, when we first met at Prerana, not to take drugs or drink. Later, slowly, we spent time together, talking about our lives. When I was preparing to go to a rehabilitation centre in Pokhara, Asha tearfully

bid me goodbye. She also asked me to get well quickly and come back to her and to phone her regularly from Pokhara. That was when I realised that she loved me very much. In fact, Asha proposed marriage. I accepted. We are the first Nepali couple with HIV/AIDS to get married. ♦

Sharan's testimony from *Positive Life*. *Positive Life* is published by PANOS South Asia in both English and Nepali and is available at Patan Dhoka Kitab Pasal, Patan Dhoka.

(Sharan has nearly sorted out the problem with the Chief District Officer's office and renewed Prerana's registration. Now the couple are mobilising every resource they can to bring the organisation back to life.)



A great leap backward

Can a country with a split personality ever break free from the cycle of eulogising and criticising?

What's really wrong? by "A Foreigner" (FEEDBACK, #35) compelled me to really wonder whether we Nepalis are congenitally predisposed to falling short of our potential. Our fatalistic karma-driven heritage repeatedly clashes with the blame game our unmet democratic desires constantly prompt us to play. Can a country with a split personality ever break free from the cycle of eulogising and criticising? A national time-out is probably what we actually need. Take a great leap backward, count our curses, and we just might be able to see where all the blessings lay in disguise.

During the bad old Panchayat days, we just couldn't quit blaming the system and its active leadership for all our woes. That's why the Jana Andolan showed no sign of achieving its goal of overthrowing the non-party system until one group of protesters branched out from the main demonstration to attack the statue of the personification of that polity. In the heat and dust of the moment, we lost our sense of proportion. All that took place in that memorable late-night palace meeting was the deletion of the term "partylessness" from the Panchayat constitution. However, we jumped to so many different conclusions that we still don't know who blinked first. The result: more than a decade later, we are still left wondering whether to count Lokendra Bahadur Chand as the last Panchayati prime minister or as the first head of government under the restored multiparty polity.

From Day Two, we were carried away by promises of Singaporean prosperity made by our long-impoverished new leaders every step of the way towards negotiating a new constitution. The issue of whether a democratic prime minister had the absolute right to dissolve parliament took a back seat to the exigencies of completing the draft of the constitution before the political road took a sharp turn to the extreme right. When the multiparty leaders elected to govern and oppose started implementing their promises within the jurisdiction of their own kith and kin, we started complaining against the multiparty system, and all its active, passive and indifferent leaders.

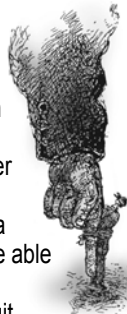
With the Berlin Wall having just fallen and the ground still shaking with the thunder of a new version of liberation theology, it was probably too early for us to realise the cardinal truth of the day. The restoration of organised politics also meant there would be more parties entitled to the national loot long monopolised by the hard and soft versions of the disorganised panchas. Let's not pretend we weren't warned of what was coming our way. Go back to the speeches of then-prime minister Marich Man Singh Shrestha, particularly that fiery one he delivered in Birganj, on why the people shouldn't be fooled into following the Congress-Communist-driven multiparty chariot of ire. The core argument, of course, was that a democracy ushered in at a time when South Block was punishing us for our decision to have bought a couple of anti-aircraft guns from our northern neighbour might vest sovereignty in the people, but it would almost certainly take it away from the country.

The string of commentaries in the two government-run newspapers (mostly under bylines that were previously unseen and were never again to grace those pages) tried hard to establish why it was the duty of every son and daughter to save the system that was best suited to the country's soil, air and water. However, when the 400,000 active panchas who were supposed to rise up in defence of the system didn't have time for that kind of pontification, how could you expect to sway the people on the street who had already made up their minds about throwing bricks, stones and pebbles on anybody or anything that contained the slightest trace of partylessness. Since the erstwhile East Germans and West Germans are re-evaluating the meaning of the fall of the wall and are learning to live with the consequences, perhaps we should be doing some introspection about our own political change. The congressisation of national institutions, comrades with questionable credentials, corruption-oiled elections, arms and aircraft commissions, village communes outside the control of the CDO, they all come with the territory. However, this doesn't necessarily mean we can no longer prevent our healthy scepticism from succumbing to morbid cynicism. When the Maobadis have come to realise the need for formulating an indigenous model for revolution, why can't we accept the evolution of a Nepali model of multiparty democracy? The stand-off in parliament could then be seen as democracy both in action and inaction, depending on the political mood of the day and the season of the session.

Then the prime minister (who insists he will not set an unhealthy precedent where the opposition parties are vested with the authority to change the head of the governing party) and the opposition (who argue that a healthy parliamentary majority cannot be used to cover corruption) can both be right. Parliamentary deadlock will have become an archaic entry in our political dictionary. So what if our ruling, opposition and nominated legislators can't discuss national issues in parliament? Our honourable gentlemen recently proved that they were more than capable of doing so in the presence of a former Indian ambassador on a private visit in keeping with the spirit of the 1950 special-relationship pact almost every Nepali loves to hate. (The rules have changed, though. In those days, the personal involvement of Jawaharlal Nehru was regularly required to facilitate reconciliation among our feuding leaders. Today, a retiring Ministry of External Affairs official, who probably never expects to rise above the position of joint secretary, can handle such things by borrowing the mobile phone of the palace's main representative in the Upper House.)

If you think this plea for political sanity is part of a conspiracy hatched by an unholy alliance of the extreme left and the extreme right against our hard-won democracy, then here's what you can do. Take another look at the transcript of the accusations made by the palace while dismissing the BP Koirala government 40 years ago in *satra sal*. Doesn't it read like an advance copy of the text today's *pratigami* reactionaries would use before rounding up the current crop of multiparty leaders?

As George Santayana might have said about the Nepali people, why are those forced to relive history condemned to forget it? ♦



The freedom to stay indoors

To all the women who come to me I give my "medicine"—a talk on what menstruation is all about and why it makes no sense to stay outdoors.

I used to be among those women who used to spend a week every month out in the *chhaupadi goth* (shed) whenever I had my period. Not any more. I not only stay inside the house and carry on my normal activities now, but I also have many, many converts in the district.

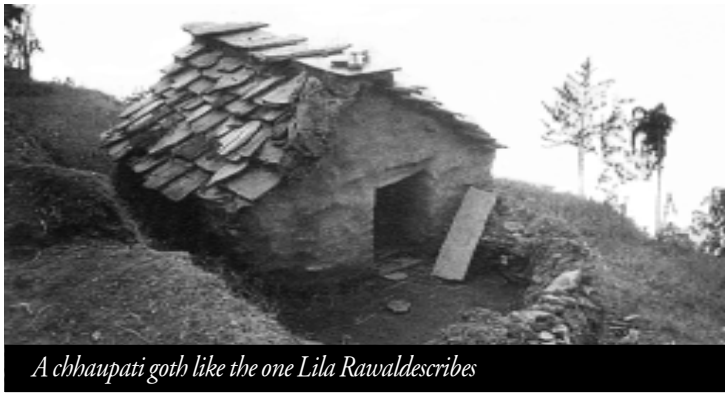
It all started during the Beijing conference. During one meeting when everyone was discussing problems they faced, I shared with the other delegates my own experiences of having to stay outdoors during menstruation. I told them we did it so that the gods wouldn't be angry, and that no mishap would befall our family—fire, snakebites, barren fields and livestock, and attacks by wild animals. Everyone was surprised that such treatment was meted out to women for a perfectly normal physical cycle of the female body. But there was one delegate from Nepal, Angur Baba Joshi, who prodded me to face the matter head on and take certain hard decisions. It was her logic, and her conviction that the shakti inside each woman is so immense and pure, and nothing to be ashamed of, that convinced me to take some bold steps.

I took up her challenge and made up my mind there and then that I would not spend my menstrual days in the *chhaupadi* shed anymore. It was with this determination that I returned home. But the day after I arrived, before I had time to explain my resolve to my husband, I got my period. I calmly explained to my husband that I had *chhau*, but that I would not go outside. He took it matter-of-factly. So I went around the house doing my work, cleaning the hearth, wiping the floor. Then I think my husband caught on and he cornered me and asked me why I had lied to him about being *chhau*. I said I had not. I had to show him my soiled

napkins to prove to him that I was indeed bleeding.

For a while all hell broke loose. He called me names and wondered what new-fangled ideas I had picked up in Beijing. So I took him aside and explained the whats, hows and whys of my decision. I also told him firmly that I was very determined not to spend a day in the shed any longer. He saw my point and grudgingly agreed to have me stay indoors.

That morning he ended up cooking the meals. I was sitting aside watching him cook. Just then a village elder entered the house and seeing us in our reversed roles commented,



A chhaupati goth like the one Lila Rawal describes

"Why is the *budha* cooking and the *budhi* watching?" My husband replied, "Oh, it's my turn now... she'll cook in the evening." That evening another relative turned up and asked the same thing the old man had. My husband told him, "Oh, it's my turn now, she'll cook in the morning."

For the next three months, in order not to put my husband in an awkward position, I did not declare that I had my period at all. I used to do all the work that *chhau* women are not supposed to do, except religious and sexual activities. My husband later requested me to let him know when I had my periods. He said he didn't mind cooking. And so we carried on.

Then the villagers started becoming curious and suspicious.

They had begun to notice that I had not been visiting the shed. "Oh, Lali Rawal has done some treatment in Beijing to keep menstruation at bay," they said. So I told them that I was taking *dabai* (medication). Then the women in the neighbourhood started pouring into my house to ask for *dabai*. *Dabai* you asked for, *dabai* you will get, I told them. Only my medication was a lecture. To each of those women I gave my *muntraduan* on what menstruation was all about and why it made no sense to stay outdoors.

I lectured them on the hygiene aspect, on how they should take good

hygiene, and that I would not be responsible for any untoward incidents if they didn't. I not only have converts, I even have "disciples", who have taken over my "conversion" task in other areas. In my *ilaka* alone there are 21 households where women no longer go to the shed.

If I have been able to convince women to stay indoors, I have also managed to ruffle a few feathers of some organisations. The Red Cross, for example, has been building nice cabins that double as *chhaupadi* sheds. But my point is, whether you build a palace or a cabin, no matter the level of comfort, a *chhaupadi goth* will always remain a *chhaupadi goth* in spirit. It will always be outside, and women will always have to move out. There will be no change in their status as long we keep them in any kind of *goth*. So I vehemently oppose these kind of interventions.

I have travelled to all the 75 Village Development Committees (VDC) in my district advocating against using the shed. Even INGOs use me as a "shield" resource person to take across their message of gender equity. Now in every VDC there are at least four to five "convert" households. As for myself, other than getting directly involved in religious rites, I lead a near-normal life inside my home during my periods. I have even started cooking and milking cattle during those days. This *chhau* is a "curse" we have cast on ourselves... and we have to cast it away. I will strive even harder to make the practice of *bauhiru sarney* (moving outdoors) a thing of the past. ♦

Lali Rawal and her husbands Padam Bahadur Rawal are District Development Committees member in Achham. Rawal is 50 years old and has two sons.

(As told to Rupa Joshi via telephone from Achham.)

COSMIC AIR

BIZ NEWS

Total Quality training

Shiv Khera, founder of Qualified Learning Systems, New Jersey, is passing through Kathmandu 21-23 April to conduct the third workshop in the **Winning with Surya** training series organised by Surya Tobacco (P) Ltd. Surya's "Is there a winner in you" training programmes bring to Nepal leading experts in management and personal development to conduct short workshops. Khera's firm specialises in motivation techniques and enhancing management skills.

Until now over 15,000 people around the world have attended Khera's motivational workshops. He's best known for his ability to equip managers with the skills, qualities and attitudes they need to excel in today's competitive business environment. "The workshop is about identifying inherent skills and using them to build confidence and competence," says an STC press release. Khera focuses on how the right values affect organisational productivity and how better teamwork can ultimately lead to greater job satisfaction and increased commitment to the workplace.

"Most people have dreams... not goals. If you don't know where you are going—any road will take you there," says Khera. His workshops, honed with over 25 years through research and experience, are essentially about turning vision into action. Over 300 employees of Nepali companies have participated in Khera's earlier workshops. STC says this third round is being organised to meet the demand of senior and middle-level managers who were unable to attend the past rounds.

Sample topics to be discussed include: overcoming negative emotions, building winning teams, three steps to motivation, discipline and persuasion, communicating to win, creative problem solving, turning weakness into strengths and prioritising values. Overall the workshops are about controlling things instead of letting them control you, says a course brochure. The key is doing the right thing for the right reason. The three-day workshops normally cost about Rs 40,000 in India. Surya is offering the courses to Nepali managers for Rs 10,000.



New public issue guidelines

The Securities Board, Nepal has issued new guidelines aimed at systematising the public issue of shares. The new guidelines come into effect on Nepali New Year, this year on 14 April. Companies going public will now be required to show that they are sound investments. "There are separate guidelines for issue managers who will now need to ensure that companies comply with the new rules," says Damber P Dhungel, chairman of the Securities Board. One measure of the soundness of companies is that they have strong financing—at least up to 50 percent of capital borrowed—as proof that the projects have been screened with due diligence. Companies with lower bank borrowings will be required to have issues underwritten prior to going public. "Essentially, we're trying to say that only companies with sound track records and audited financial statements can go for public issues," adds Dhungel. Other adjustments to the rules require companies to make shares available for purchase within two months of the approval of the issue, and distribute shares to owners within 90 days of the closing of the offer. The Board has also raised the minimum number of shares a person can apply for from 10 to 50.

Rupee tumbles

The rupee tumbled by Rs 0.25 against the greenback last week due mainly to adjustments in the exchange rate of the Indian rupee against the dollar. The dollar's value was bolstered by the US Federal Reserve's decision to lower interest rates by 0.5 percent. The Indian rupee closed at Rs 46.68: US\$1 Friday. Banks here were selling US dollars at Rs 74.60 per dollar Saturday, up from Rs 74.25 the week before.

Kulekhani-III

The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) and the Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JICA) have agreed to begin detailed studies for building the Kulekhani III Hydroelectric project. Previous studies by the NEA estimate the project will be capable of generating 38-42 megawatts of power, mainly from the tailrace waters of the two earlier projects that generate power from using waters from the Kulekhani reservoir. The initial cost estimate of Kulekhani III is about Rs 3.87 billion.



Public expenditure review

The public expenditure review commission has submitted its final report to the government pointing out specific areas where costs can be cut. One suggestion is to cut the number of ministries from the present 22 to 19 and keep the government out of areas it doesn't need to be in. Another says that foreign loans be obtained only for projects that have a minimum return rate of 15 percent. The commission, formed on 31 August 2000, has also recommended that foreign loans be barred from corporations that have accumulated losses and those that have not audited their books within nine months after the end of the fiscal year. It also suggests keeping security and defence budgets to about seven percent of the total and downsizing the government bureaucracy by as much as 22,000.

Himalayan Expo



Over 200 companies from thirteen countries are exhibiting products at the 11th Himalayan Expo being held at the Bhrikuti Mandap exhibition hall on 20-25 April, organisers say. The foreign companies that have confirmed participation are from the US, UK, Germany, Israel, China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

Among the highlights of the show are to be the Nepal-USA Pavillion that is to bring together 23 companies. One stall is to offer information on educational opportunities in the US. Another major group exhibiting would be from Britain. The British Pavillion will have 22 companies and organisations exhibiting their products and services. Among the British exhibitors are the British Council that is organising a film festival as part of the Expo. The organisers expect 70-80,000 visitors to the show. "Our target is to increase the number of business visitors of about 40,000 by about 10 percent," organisers say.

ECONOMIC SENSE

by ARTHA BEED



For art's sake

Tax-law reform is essential to make support for the arts an interesting proposition for the private sector.

amid the widespread coverage of our dysfunctional legislature and a general business slowdown, some interesting and exciting times in the Arts have passed by, almost unnoticed. The past month witnessed a series of events—plays staged by Aarohan and Sarwanam, the satirical excellence of the Ma-Ha duo, a performance by a regional musical group, and art and photo exhibitions that attracted quite a few. Fellow columnists and friends in the arts have been asking this Beed to examine the role of the Nepali private sector in the field of the arts. As World Theatre Day is being celebrated this week, it's a good time to ponder questions of support for art and culture.

Historically, Nepali arts and theatre were patronised by the rulers and there have been few instances of businesses being involved in their promotion or development. The business community did undertake activities in the social development field, but these were mostly religious and cultural activities within communities. The loosening of the bonds created by the *guthis* and the absence of financial support have since affected the arts greatly.

There have been efforts from the private sector to support the arts, but there are many who feel that not enough is being done. One of the problems that many arts and theatre groups are facing in Nepal is that companies which have the financial muscle—and often willing to come forward and help—to support their endeavours are mostly

tobacco and alcoholic beverage companies. There are some who find it difficult to accept that the issue at stake is promotion of the arts, and that the source of the financial support is unimportant.

We need to learn from examples elsewhere in the region, like ITC supporting music centres in India. There has been tremendous support from these companies in highlighting the importance of arts, keeping interest alive in this age and helping make the field more professional. It is essential to realise that in Nepal there are few choices and if the objective remains to make the arts prosper here, then the source of funding becomes secondary.

The other important factor is the willingness of the private sector. Taxation laws in this country are again a big hindrance. If private companies and individuals are inclined to contribute, there is no added

incentive for them to actually take that extra step—unlike in other countries, here there are no tax breaks for those who support the arts. Making contributions and then paying a tax on it is absurd, and does not make sense to anyone who may be inclined. Philanthropy is rare, and businesses won't give until they receive something in return. Tax-law reform is essential to make supporting artistic endeavours an interesting proposition for the private sector.

Limited legislation is the other major stumbling block in the legitimisation of arts-related undertakings. Nepal unfortunately does not have any Acts relating to the formation of trusts, and so all efforts must come either from private ventures or social service organisations. The system of forming trusts is widespread internationally. In most countries, where the arts have not thrived with the support of private ventures, they have through trusts. If the formation of trusts was to find legal support, initiatives in drama, music, literature or any other form of art would surely grow, and finally be institutionalised. Together with a system of tax breaks and incentives, there could be an ideal partnership between the arts sector and the business community in preserving, sustaining and furthering the development of creative forces in Nepal. ♦

Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com



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ALL PHOTOS MIN BAIRACHARYA

MUKUL HUMAGAIN
It's probably high on most golfers' wish list: teeing off at 1,000 m with the breathtaking spectacle of the world's highest mountains a few kilometres away, and waterfalls and canyons below. Or setting down to a putt with monkeys and deer regarding you superciliously. Your golfing fantasies could turn into reality—Nepal has the potential to be the highest, most spectacular golf setting in the world.

Over the last few years, golf has become increasingly popular here. There are courses opening every year, competitive golf is doing well, with events like the Surya Open International and the domestic PGA Carlsberg championship, and there are some exciting Nepali putters like Deepak Thapa, Deepak Acharya and Toran Shahi. We could give Asian and Scandinavian destinations that use golf to attract high-spending luxury tourists a run for their money. Golf is booming in Japan particularly, with an estimated 13 million Japanese playing on 1,820 courses. India, Indonesia, Taiwan and South Korea are following the trend, as is the Philippines, where there are 40 courses.

Nepal is ideally positioned to attract travellers to the region as, say, a stopover between New Delhi and Bangkok, or as part of triangular packages including Thailand, Hong Kong and Singapore. A stop in Kathmandu en route to a golf resort in Thailand or Malaysia would add variety to a winter golfing tour—after all, in January it's much warmer here than in Frankfurt or Stockholm. And golf is also a good way to get more Asian visitors. According to industry estimates, there are one million golfers within four hours' flying time of Kathmandu, and many more a little further afield in Japan. The best thing about this segment of tourism is that volume isn't everything—groups may be small, but they make up for it by having more disposable income than most others.

Golfers are always on the lookout for new, interesting courses. A diversity of playing fields, each with its own character and challenges will attract enthusiasts, and perhaps even repeat visitors. There are seven courses in Nepal. The Royal Nepal Golf Club at Til Ganga, known until 1965 as the Gauchar Golf Course, is the oldest and most popular course in the country. This 9-hole, par-28

course run by Le Meridien Hotel has been greatly instrumental in making the sport popular in Nepal.

Pokhara has two courses, and there's a third coming up. The Himalayan Golf Course is the brainchild of Major RB Gurung, formerly of the British Army. Just seven km from Pokhara's centre, it is the result of three years of planning and hard work. The course, designed by Gurung himself, is in a spellbinding amphitheatre-like setting of a river canyon with views of the Annapurnas. The clubhouse stands 250 ft above the canyon. The Green Canyon Golf Club Executive Golf Course at the Fulbari Resort and Spa, also in Pokhara, is a challenging nine-hole par-three course, which attracts business travellers and passing tourists.

For beginners in the Valley, there's the year-old Bafal Hill Golf Centre, which is basically a driving range. But the cream of the crop is the two-year-old Gorkarna Forest Golf Resort, inside the Gorkarna Safari Park—Nepal's only international-standard course. It's a 6,715 yard 18-hole par-72 course with lush fairways. Once a royal game sanctuary, the thick forest teems with deer, peacock, wild boar and monkeys, and Scotland's world-famous Gleneagles Golf Developments designed the course to make best use of the spectacular setting. The setting of the Valley's two major courses, the Royal Nepal club and the Gorkarna resort, couldn't be better—away from the noise and dust of the city, with easy access to cool forests.

Here's what golfing in Nepal has going for it: scenic courses, relatively pleasant weather all year round, and a significant price differential with the cost of playing in Europe, the US and east Asia. What's wrong? Tourism entrepreneurs and the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) haven't yet grasped that this could be a viable and lucrative new

venture, attracting the top bracket of travellers. There have been a few golfing tours here, but all have been organised by tour operators overseas. Snow Leopard Nepal Golf Reizen, a Netherlands-based travel



agency brought two groups of tourists here for golf vacations last year, and earlier this month, a group from the UK's Sonnig Golf Club were here. Enthusiasm is gradually building—last December

a 35-person group chartered a Boeing 747 for a three-week golfing trip. They stayed here two days and played at the Gokarna resort.

What Nepal needs now are more world-class courses and a good marketing strategy. Robin Marsten, managing director of Summit Hotel, himself an avid golfer, says: "Nepal can be promoted as holiday golf destination. Golf should be part of tour packages." The Fulbari Resort and the Gokarna Forest Golf Resort have tried to do precisely this. The



Gokarna Forest Golf Resort started a vacation club last year. A one-time fee of Rs 320,000 entitles members to seven nights at the resort every year for 25 years, besides allowing them to swap holidays in the

manner of time-share resorts at over 1,800 affiliates of Interval International USA worldwide. The Fulbari has started modestly, and all it offers currently are discounted rates for guests who want to tee off.

Things are moving in the Valley, clubs like the Royal Nepal are planning to upgrade their facilities, and there's a new course being developed, the Army Golf Course east of the Guhyeswori temple in Pashupatinath. These are good signs, but Nepal still has



a way to go before it becomes one of Asia's premier golfing destinations. First people must know that there are golfing opportunities here, and that these are being upgraded. ♦

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Cyber Cafe at Jawalakhel

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ABC, and a trek to

USHA RAMASWAMY

One evening on my very first trek in Solu-Khumbu, as I sat shivering by the stove at the end of a hard day, I asked a fellow trekker why he'd chosen this rather self-punishing form of holiday. For, besides all the joys of being in the mountains, you have to work very hard, and all the time, a trek is in fact a working holiday. His answer: "Look. Last year I lay on a beach in the south of Spain, drinking beer. And you know how I felt at the end of each day? Empty. Nothing. And my business worries and other anxieties didn't go away either. In fact, I just had more leisure to worry. But this, *this*, takes you not only away from it all, but also out of yourself. Not only is it beautiful and enjoyable, but you're so tired that there's no room for worry. Every moment that you're not marvelling, you have to think what's to be done next. It's a real break. And you feel fulfilled at the end of it."

In a life lived with little artistry and less heroism, and hardly any physical challenges, a trek in the Himalaya offers redemption of a kind—at least for a while. The smallest acts of will-power necessary to get through each day (washing your face in icy water) requires more courage and resolution than you think. If, at times, you feel life lacks direction or purpose or fulfilment, these few days provide, however illusorily, a little of each. If there doesn't seem any drama, any *grandeur* in your life this is one chance to experience it.

The trip to Annapurna Base Camp, or ABC as we (ahem) trekkers call it, is not an easy walk. As the tragic avalanche this week showed, there are a few spots near Deurali that are exposed to avalanches coming off the flanks of Hiunchuli which funnels accumulated snow and huge blocks of ice down gullies to the trail. (see box, facing page). The highest altitude is 4,130 m, and you reach it on the fifth or sixth day, so altitude sickness is rare. If you begin, as I did, at Khare at 1,100 m, and carry on steadily, not scorching along but not ambling



Annapurna Base Camp with Annapurna South in the background at left.

Were we going to be snowed up at Annapurna Base Camp as often happens on this route? And how were we to cross the avalanches, those dogs of Hades, at the mouth of the sanctuary? Was this time, early spring, a bad decision? Should we have heeded warnings of snow danger and started a fortnight later? It was too late now, none of us were going to turn back.

either, you'll get there on the morning (or afternoon) of the fifth day.

As we walk up from Khare, our old friend Machhapuchhre pops up to our right and the familiar face of Annapurna South looms to our left. We get into Landrung at about 5.30pm, check into a hotel that offers that rare facility: an attached bathroom. (This business of a private bath can become quite an obsession with some trekkers, and we shall see how it affected me later.) On this run only Landrung, Chomrung and Ghandrung provide this facility, which answers a Frequently Asked Question.

The walk to Chomrung on the opposite hill is a little more difficult than the first day, though the trail is as lovely—thickly forested or cutting

through terraced cultivation. Yellow jasmine and blue gentians are in bloom this time of year, field and forest are a tender green, the air nippy and full of bird cries, trills and long fluting calls. It's always a good idea to start early to do the hardest climbs before the day gets hot, and we were off by seven. Chomrung's *Moonlight Guesthouse* offered sun-heated hot showers—a welcome relief after two days of trekking. That afternoon we were quite a crowd in the dining room. Trekkers returning from ABC, looking relaxed and fulfilled and trekkers going up, eager and full of questions. The returnees raved about the views, and boasted not a little about surviving near misses with avalanches and knee-

deep snow, and the cold.

By this time, the sky, leaden during the day, clouded over the Annapurna South, Hiunchuli and Machhapuchhre peaks. A thin drizzle began, and grew to serious rain. Our apprehensions grew too—would the weather clear the next day or would we have to tramp in the wet? When the rain turned to snowfall, I was really alarmed. Were we going to be snowed up in base camp as often happens on this route? And how were we to cross the avalanches, those dogs of Hades, at the mouth of the sanctuary? Was this time, early spring, a bad decision? Should we have heeded the holy book—*Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*—and started a fortnight later? It was too late now—none of us

was going to turn back. There was nothing to do but pray.

The next day dawned, chill and...clear! We had a long walk ahead, my guide Dinesh and I were making for Deurali—the last stop before Machhapuchhare Base Camp (MBC, pronounced "embassy"). Chomrung is the last village on this route—from here there are only lodges operating during the season. The steep and narrow trail rises and descends steeply, the rocks are huge and sharp, but the trail passes some of the prettiest country I have ever seen. Tall rhododendron trees bursting with buds, bamboo thickets, deodar, yew and fir. On the slopes pale purple wild primula bloom, like stars on the grey-brown

rock, lighting our way and easing our climb. Just before Doban (at 2,340 m) we saw a most beautiful, early blooming rhododendron tree—ablaze with red blossoms. From here onwards, it is holy ground, no meat is allowed, everyone has to turn vegetarian.

Hinko Cave is actually just a huge rock overhang and guards a frozen avalanche, a jumble of ice, which must have tumbled down from Hiunchuli's east face recently. I slipped twice and slid some feet on my backside, but we got into Deurali safely by late afternoon. The lodges had two guests, one with his nose pierced and the other with his ear pierced, both sporting flowing red locks.

On Day Four, Dinesh took the long route to MBC, as he wanted to skirt the areas of avalanche danger. The word 'avalanche danger' is heard a bit too often during this trek, and that is because the route clings precariously to the side of the Modi Khola gorge, exposed to snow, ice and rock that gravity brings down. The craggy cliffs loom on either side like chocolate pyramids dripping cream. Being a bit tired of *daalbhut*, the chocolate wedges look enticingly like food. But from time to time, the snow-cream would cascade off the mountain with a thundering sound. Dinesh assured me you needed very heavy snowfall for really dangerous avalanches. Despite his assurance I was relieved to reach the safety of MBC, which turned out to be a group of four lodges on a glacial moraine. Machhapuchhre grew steadily as we progressed, and by now towered over the other peaks. We picked the first hotel which turned out to be the Gurung Co-operative, an odd name for a lodge—they're almost all of them some View or the other, or Fish Tail or Heaven or Paradise or, of course, Annapurna.

The proprietor of the Gurung Co-operative was a cheery character, sporting a pair of iridescent sunglasses, and given to fits of manic laughter. Too late I discovered he was also fond of his drink. Nobody else was staying in this lodge—most trekkers having gone on to ABC. I was too tired and also terrified at the thought of a recurrence of altitude sickness. That left me with a whole day in the company of porters and kitchen staff and other trekkers.

Over the years I have come to recognise trekking types. The sturdy, cheery ones are Australian; the garrulous, good-looking ones with the gorgeous tans are South American; the noisy, shabby ones are Israeli; and the ones wearing spiffy, co-ordinated trekking outfits, usually bright yellow, blue or red, and smelling as if they've stepped out of Sak's, are from the US of A. If you hear excited twittering, you can be sure there's a flock of Taiwanese approaching. And we mustn't forget the grim, crabby one who unabashedly stares at all the goings-on—she's Indian. Also she's the only one who says politically incorrect things like, "God! Can't you guys learn to make a decent *daal*?"

As the day drew on, the sky became heavy with clouds, and my worst forebodings came true. It was going to snow. And *how* it snowed.

pepsi

basics

Mildly at first, but it grew heavier and heavier till all the peaks, indeed the landscape itself, was obliterated. I stared out of the window at the dismal weather. Dinesh kept trying to comfort me that it augured well for the next morning, but I'm sorry to report I had by this time lost my faith in Dinesh. He'd say things like, "Just a fifteen-minute climb," and it would take me half an hour, or "It's not so steep," for what would turn out to be a murderous hill. Mr Gurung, who sat downing quarter bottles of Khukuri rum (the most popular tippie in these parts) all evening, came up with an original piece of wisdom. "It's full moon tomorrow," he declared, "so the sky will certainly be clear."

It was still snowing when I went to my freezing room clutching the cleanest blanket in the hostelry and my hot water bottle (for which Mr Gurung charged Rs 70). Wearing sweat pants over trekking pants, yak-wool socks over cotton socks, flannel shirt over T-shirt, cap, sweater and jacket—everything warm I possessed, I wriggled into my sleeping bag. And, keeping the blanket as far away as possible from my nose, listening to the shuffle of snow on the roof, I tried to sleep.

At 5.15 am on Day Five, Dinesh

After an hour we sighted ABC—another group of lodges 400 m higher. By this time my fingers, although protected by gloves, had grown painfully numb. It took a heater to thaw me out fully, and hot chocolate to reassure me I was whole and healthy. Only then did it dawn on me that...I'd done it! I'd reached ABC. Dinesh beamed. He'd done it: he'd brought off a picture-perfect day. We rewarded ourselves with a honey-smothered pancake apiece.

Then followed the longest trekking day I have ever experienced. I got it into my head to make for Chomrong—a journey that is usually split into two or three days—all because I wanted a room with a bath. Dinesh asked worriedly, "Are you sure you can do this?" I was obsessed with a bath, and I said yes. We retraced our route, this time taking the short-cut through the avalanche-prone area around Deurali. Dinesh had been emboldened to try it as he figured there hadn't been enough snowfall to start an avalanche. But when we crossed it, we heard an ominous rumbling and he panicked. He hurried me, I slipped and fell, and he had to

drag me across the last few feet. A little bit of powdery snow cascaded down the gully. The only other unpleasant bit left was the icefall near Hinko Cave and I resigned myself to sliding on my backside once more. Then we were through! Now the rest of the day was just a matter of endurance. We took just three breaks, two for hot chocolate and one for lunch at the Bamboo Lodge.

At Sinuwa, the last stop before Chomrong, where we had to decide whether to push on or stay, I began to get a little embarrassed about my pigheadedness—which is an extreme form of determination. I imagined people telling each other: "There goes that crazy Indian woman who's looking for a *bathroom!*" The next two hours drained my last bit of strength. Finally, there were the lights of Chomrong, tantalisingly close, hospitably beckoning—but on the *next hill*. To reach it we had to descend more than a 1,000 m, cross the Modi Khola river and ascend the same height. But, to cut a long story short, I got my own bathroom that night.

The next day was downhill all the way, and ended with a walk by the river through a feathery deodar forest. Back in Kathmandu to hot water taps, and a private bathroom, even a *choice of bathrooms*. Back to deafening car horns, garbage dumps, diesel fumes and noise. Back to insanity. It was all over, in point of fact, bar the shouting. ♦



The avalanche crossing at Deurali.



Machhapuchhre Base Camp.



Enroute to Machhapuchhre Base Camp.

woke me. "It's clear," he whispered excitedly. I leapt to the window and sure enough, it was a perfect morning. All the peaks were whitely, shiningly outlined against the dawn sky, and an unmarked snowland spread as far as eye could reach. Off we went, wrapped and muffled against the light breeze, waving our torches, the only living things in the still silent expanse. The first things to stir this morning. But someone *had* been before us, Dinesh pointed out pug marks that trailed off to the glacier. It was a leopard.

The crunchy, sugary, new snow was not difficult to traverse, just a little slippery on the steeper parts. The views got more and more dramatic. This is the grandeur. Then the magical moment when the sun rose to gild the Annapurna peaks. Gold, white and blue. A celestial awakening. Imagine you're in a white bowl, the sides of which are made of some of the loftiest peaks, overturned on this is another bowl of cobalt blue. That is the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Annapurna avalanches

DEB MUKHARJI

The trek to the Annapurna Sanctuary is among the most rewarding with its exquisite forest trails and stupendous views of the high Himalaya. Besides the breath-taking views from Machhapuchhre and Annapurna base camps, one will always remember the bamboo, oak and rhododendron (besides many others) forests between Sinawa and Machhapuchhre base camp.

In the Lonely Planet guide, Stan Armington cautions about the avalanches from Hiunchuli and Annapurna South which "come crashing into the valley with frightening speed and frequency". In fact, between Hinko cave and

Bagar the beauty of the gorge is palpably tinged with apprehension because you know that just behind the granite tips of the cliffs above you is the unseen vertical east-face of Hiunchuli whose avalanches could spill over the rocky ramparts of Modi Khola without

notice and a sudden deep rumble wiping out everything in the way. You see evidence of this as you cross the swathes of destruction which have flattened and uprooted forests and the vast tracts of ice deposited by more recent avalanches. ♦



Debris of an old avalanche.



A minor avalanche descending into Modi khola from the western slopes of Machhapuchhre.

USHA RAMASWAMY

DEB MUKHARJI

USHA RAMASWAMY

USHA RAMASWAMY

DEB MUKHARJI

Drug price wars and patent rows

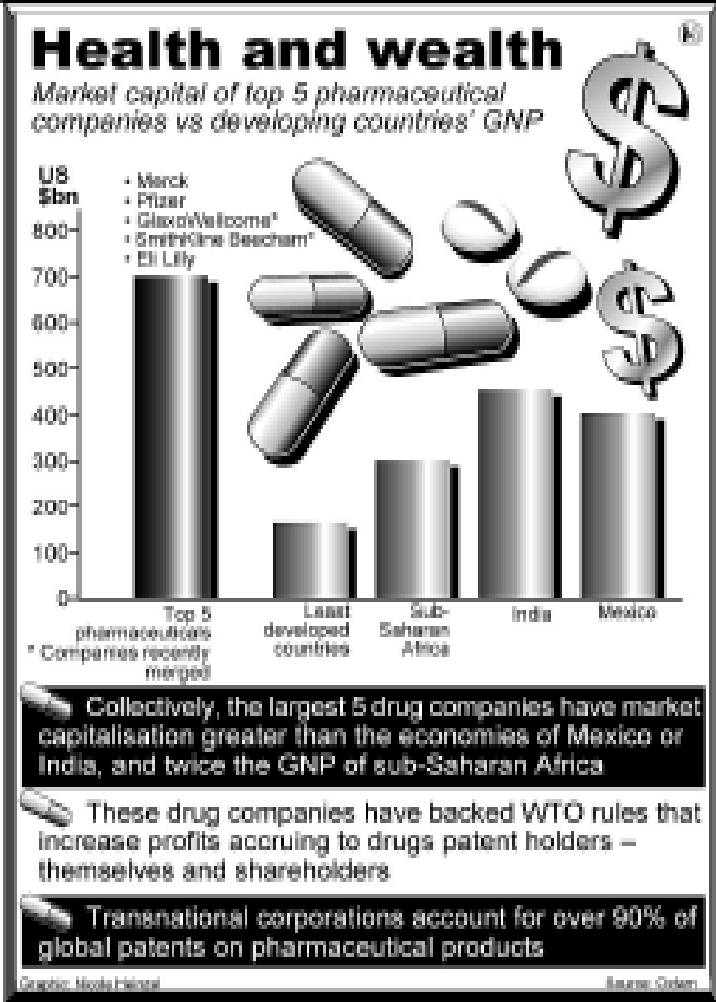
Pharmaceutical giants slash AIDS drugs prices for Africa to counter bad publicity and because an Indian firm may be competition.

DWIJEN RANGNEKAR
IN LONDON

American drug manufacturer Bristol-Myers Squibb has made a timely gesture as the legal fight between the world's largest pharmaceutical companies and South Africa remains on hold until mid-April. The New York-based company announced it was slashing the prices in Africa of two AIDS drugs, Zerit and Videx, from \$20 a day to less than \$1. The offer is the latest move in a game of one-upmanship in the pharmaceutical industry.

It began 8 March when another American drug company, Merck, announced it would offer its AIDS drugs to developing countries at a discount. Merck's anti-retroviral drug Crixivan will cost a patient \$600 a year, while Stocrin will cost \$500 per year. These drug giants are responding to adverse public perception of the pharmaceutical industry—in part due to a court case launched by 39 drug companies to stop the South African government from importing cheap copies of drugs to fight its AIDS crisis. Their offers are also a reaction to the entry of Cipla, an Indian manufacturer of generic drugs, with its proposal to sell South Africa inexpensive copycat versions of eight AIDS drugs at knock-down prices.

But such moves are not a substantive or long-term solution to the problem of patents and drug access. Nor are they an effective means to resolve the issues raised by the court case in South Africa, adjourned until 18 April. Merck itself hoped its offer will deflect criticism and demonstrate that patents are not an obstacle to drug access. The offer, which follows an earlier, more generous, deal between Pfizer and the South African government, aims to spur other companies into similar action. But other companies remain wary. At one extreme is Switzerland's Roche, which says it



has no plans to reduce drug prices.

Governments in developing countries are equally concerned. Thailand and Brazil have programmes designed to enable wider access to some AIDS drugs. The Brazilian government has told Roche and Merck that it may licence other companies to produce cheaper versions of their AIDS drugs if prices are not substantially reduced. In this entire melee, the response of South Africa's Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang is pertinent: "Even if a satisfactory agreement could be concluded with Merck or any other company, this would not erase the need for this country to ensure access to affordable medicines."

At the heart of the affair is the question of whether particular

products, such as drugs, and sectors, such as health-related technologies, require special treatment separate from binding World Trade Organisation (WTO) obligations that would allow degrees of flexibility to tailor national legislation to national priorities and needs. Such considerations for national flexibility in designing domestic policy raise issues concerning the type of action and the limits to such action, given that the country is a member of a multilateral global trading system.

Equally relevant is the issue of limits on "reasonable" return and profits for patent holders, and to what degree this right should be considered sacrosanct. A murky mix of these questions are at the core of the legal challenge to South Africa's 1997 Medicines and Related Substances

Control Amendments Act. In effect, the act incorporates two key provisions in TRIPS: Parallel imports, which allow importers to buy drugs from the cheapest sources available regardless of whether they have consent from patent holders, and compulsory licensing, which allows the government to license companies to produce cheap versions of the patented drugs. The big pharmaceutical companies reject both provisions and have responded by exerting pressure from outside.

European Commission President Sir Leon Brittan reportedly wrote to the South African government warning them that its legislation "would appear to be at variance with South African obligations under the WTO agreement on TRIPS and its implementation would negatively affect the interests of the European pharmaceutical industry". The US response was more direct and aggressive—it placed South Africa on its watch list for potential trade sanctions.

Taking their cue from these actions, the 39 companies launched an appeal to stop the government's importation of generic drugs at cut-prices. It is in this mess that repeated offers of cut-price or free drugs must be placed and examined. The generosity of Merck's offer aside—itsself questionable since Cipla's prices are lower—are such one-off deals the solution? Clearly some pharmaceutical companies prefer this route rather than allowing governments the legal freedom and flexibility to act.

Consequently, there is no systematic basis on which a government can act in response to public health emergencies such as the AIDS crisis in South Africa. In particular, the aim is to undercut a government's effort to use the TRIPS provisions allowing compulsory licensing and cheap drug imports. The outcome has grave implications on how the provisions of TRIPS concerning national flexibility in responding to public health emergencies are interpreted. The battle is also likely to blow the lid on other issues like the strategies of drug pricing, the true costs of inventing a new drug and the practice of securing patents. The legal challenge by the pharmaceutical companies might well be an erroneous decision. ♦ (Gemini)

Chemical Britannia

Taking cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy and even heroin is not dangerous but extremely enjoyable, according to a controversial BBC television programme to be aired this week.

In dozens of interviews on Chemical Britannia users explain why the popularity of drugs is escalating, despite the overwhelmingly negative message in schools, the media and from government. Debbie Christie, the executive producer, who used drugs in the past, said: "It's an issue that needs airing. It's a responsible piece of television showing why people take drugs—which is because they like them, not because they are pushed them."

Presenter Mat Southwell, a former NHS employee, says he has taken ecstasy for 12 years, and still does so regularly. He enjoys drugs and argues they should be legalised. "While alcohol is socially acceptable, people are being put in prison for the chemical equivalent of buying a round of drinks," he said.

However, the programme was lambasted as irresponsible by John Griffith, chief executive of the group Drug Abuse Resistance Education, which works in 500 schools to warn children of the dangers of drugs. He said: "It's very disturbing—it makes people think there are benefits to taking drugs."

In the UK, all drugs were legal, and used routinely across society, until 1860. The former Prime Minister William Gladstone and Florence Nightingale used opium, while Queen Victoria used cannabis. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a graphic description of Sherlock Holmes injecting drugs with a syringe as a normal way of relaxing.

Southwell insists this is a simple matter of human rights: "Individual freedom linked to social responsibility lies at the heart of our democracy. I absolutely assert my right to take any mind-altering substance, be that ecstasy, alcohol, heroin, tobacco or cannabis. No one, least of all the state, has the right to tell me otherwise." (The Observer)

Mbeki goes to Havana

Johannesburg - South African President Thabo Mbeki left for Fidel Castro's Cuba over the weekend, seeking to cement a relationship with one of the foremost backers of the armed struggle against apartheid. Mbeki's four-day day visit to Havana is the first such official trip to the communist-ruled Caribbean island state by a South African head of state.

The objective is to build on economic, health and educational ties between the two states, officials said. Cuba trained fighters and supplied weapons to the exiled African National Congress (ANC) in its battle against minority rule and poured thousands of its troops into Angola against white South African forces who were supporting a rebel army.

Mbeki, who succeeded former President Nelson Mandela in 1999 as the country's second democratic leader, has urged an end to the decades-old US economic embargo against Havana. The South African leader is scheduled to deliver a speech at the University of Havana on the Millennium Programme for the Renaissance of Africa, a policy goal crafted by Mbeki together with President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Algeria's Bouteflika, South African officials said. (Asian Age)

Germans split on right to be proud

The Right beats a patriotic drum as a troubled nation faces history.

KATE CONNOLLY IN BERLIN

A bout of soul-searching is troubling Germany as it tries to define the acceptable face of patriotism in a country where nationalism still has an ugly resonance.

The debate, which reaches parliament this week, comes at a time when more than ever the German identity is under challenge and the mark, the currency associated with its finest postwar achievements, is about to be subsumed in the euro.

What began as a squabble has polarised into a national debate. Centrist and left-wing politicians habitually shun patriotic rhetoric, but the mainstream conservative opposition has increasingly adopted the mantra of the extreme Right—*Ich bin stolz ein Deutscher zu sein* (I'm proud to be German). When Laurenz Meyer, general secretary of the opposition Christian Democrats (CDU), used the phrase in a magazine interview he was accused of "having the mentality of a skinhead" by Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin.

The 70-year-old President, Johannes Rau, was caught up in the debate. Asked on TV whether he too was proud to be German, he said he was "happy and grateful" to be German, but that he "couldn't be proud of it". He explained: "One cannot be proud of something one has not achieved oneself. It is not an achievement to be German, simply luck." Thomas Goppel, general secretary of the Bavarian Christian Social Union, said Germans should question whether Rau was patriotic enough to lead Germany.

But Chancellor Gerhard Schröder appeared to back his friend. "I am proud of the achievements of people and of the democratic culture. In this sense I am a German patriot, who is proud of his country," the Chancellor

told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Rau later tried to quell criticism by developing his ideas to say that he was "proud of that which we have achieved in Germany since 1949 and after 1989", referring to the country's postwar rebuilding and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Fritz Kuhn, head of the government coalition partner, the Green Party, has accused the conservative opposition of trying to win the support of the far Right.

But the political row is far more than a linguistic challenge about expressing love for the fatherland without using the forbidden phrase. The conservatives hope that it will help them to unseat the Social Democrats in the upcoming elections in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate. According to conservative politicians, the extreme right-wing German Nationalist Party (NPD) approached the CDU last week asking if it could join its election campaign to hand out its "I'm proud to be German" stickers. The CDU refused the request.

Christoph Boehr, standing for the conservatives, has asked voters to sign a petition calling for Trittin's resignation. "He is totally indifferent to Germany's culture, history and identity," he said. Schröder angrily retorted: "No one has a monopoly on patriotic beliefs." He has called for a parliamentary debate on German patriotism which will take place in the Bundestag this week.

The "pride debate" is seen as the successor of a debate on German *Leitkultur*—the high points of national culture which conservative politicians are keen that foreigners should study. In hardly any other country is national pride such a controversial topic as in Germany, with its difficult recent history. Newspapers concluded as much last week as they dedicated whole



'Bomber', a right winger, teaches his kids in East Berlin.

pages to patriotism around the world. They observed that it was a particularly bad time for British patriotism.

The popular tabloid *Bild* concluded that the country had much to be proud of and a past for which it had responsibility. "Germany has a rich cultural heritage and a varied past. It is our duty to carry the responsibility for this: for Goethe as well as for Hitler, for Gutenberg and Frederick the Great. We should defend our free, humane Germany and be really proud of it," the paper insisted.

Commentators say the fact that Germany is holding the soul-searching debate at all is a sign of the democratic maturity of a country which less than six decades ago was ruled by a dictator. Although the assertion of national pride has become the motto of the Right, the Turkish-born Green MP, Cem Özdemir, has tried to invert it into a symbol of inclusiveness. His website shows images of a black German citizen wearing a T-shirt carrying the phrase *Ich bin stolz...* ♦ (The Observer)

“The Taliban are not Afghans”



Fading into history? An Afghan woman with her belongings

The international reaction to women’s rights and refugees in Afghanistan has not matched the war of words over the Bamiyan desecration and Osama bin Laden.

NADEEM YAQUB IN PESHAWAR

Half-a-dozen teenage girls frantically hide their books under the rug as two bearded soldiers storm a house in Afghanistan. The girls are not supposed to be reading books. One of the soldiers breaks into Urdu, Pakistan’s national language, in a political reference to the influence

Islamabad enjoys over the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The girls beat up the soldiers. And the audience breaks into claps. These days, happy endings on anything to do with Afghanistan happen only on the stage. This was a skit staged in Peshawar recently to mark International Women’s Day—8 March—after Afghan

supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar’s order to destroy two 1,500-year-old statues of the Buddha in the war-battered country. The status of women and the threats against non-Islamic religious artefacts have one thing in common: they show an intolerance that, some long-time observers say, is uncharacteristic of Afghanistan

and its traditions. The Women’s Day function was organised by a group of politically-active Afghan women who have had to seek exile abroad and who want to return Afghanistan to its traditions of tolerance. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which fights for the rights of Afghan women and democracy in their country and oppose fundamentalism, would dearly like to see the end of the Taliban. Since coming to power in 1996, the Taliban has systematically and brutally barred women from attending schools or working outside their homes. They have been denied access to health and they can only appear in public wearing a traditional head-to-toe robe. A recent UN report accuses the Taliban of continued flagrant violation of women’s rights. The report, rejected by Taliban Foreign Minister Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, cites testimonies from refugees saying women and girls have been abducted by the Taliban. The report quotes refugees relating stories “of abduction of women, rape, infliction of the punishment of stoning, lashing and other forms of inhuman punishment.” Women from Kabul, Mazar-e-

Sharif and other northern towns have also given accounts of forced marriages to Taliban members in the report. “When families refuse, they take the women and girls away by force,” it said. Amid all this, the role of Pakistan has come under renewed focus. During the brief on-again-off-again tussle over the Bamiyan statues, Pakistan twice urged the Taliban to rescind its demolition decision. A foreign office spokesman said: “Pakistan attaches great importance to and supports the preservation of the world’s historical culture and religious heritage.” But many political observers in Peshawar, a hill town bordering Afghanistan, believe things are not so straightforward. “I believe whatever is happening in Afghanistan is the handiwork of outsiders,” Afrasiab Khattak, chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, says. “Pakistan wants to scrap Afghan identity and give Afghanistan an Islamic identity which suits Pakistan better,” adds Khattak, who spent several years in Afghanistan during the military rule of Gen Zia ul Haq in Pakistan in the 1980s. Professor Rasool Amin, an Afghan scholar, holds similar views. He says Afghan society was a moderate one until the Taliban arrived there from seminaries in Pakistan. Iran and Saudi Arabia too had their own interests, the latter massively encouraging the “Arabisation” of Afghanistan.

“In schools children are taught history which gives them identity. But the Taliban have replaced schools with *madrasas* (Islamic seminaries),” Professor Amin says. “We have been Muslims for the last 1,400 years and we kept our symbols and cultural identities. The Taliban are not Afghans. Therefore, they don’t care about such things.” But the Taliban are used to having their way. While international outrage on the Bamiyan desecration was loud, world reaction on women’s rights issues is rarely that forceful. Similarly, concern over the refugee issue—Taliban policies have driven millions out of Afghanistan—has not matched the war of words over Osama bin Laden, the Islamic terrorist wanted by Washington. The UN sanctions were imposed against the Taliban mainly because it failed to hand over bin Laden. That meant that the Taliban could continue abusing women’s human rights with impunity. The bitter truth, say commentators, is that the world community’s interest in Afghan issues has waned with the closing of the Cold War. According to rights campaigner Khattak, Afghanistan’s woes mounted when Western powers abandoned the country after Russia’s withdrawal. This allowed the regional players to swiftly step into their shoes and create an Afghanistan after their own images. ♦ (Gemini)

Nadeem Yaqub is a freelance journalist based in Peshawar.

Corporate muzzle for media

The Thai PM is under attack over issues of press freedom and corruption, casting shadows over his political future.

TOM FAWTHROP IN BANGKOK

The political future of Thailand’s newest prime minister, media tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, has been cast in doubt as controversy over alleged news manipulation and a pending corruption case overshadow his January election victory. The controversy goes to the heart of freedom of press in Thailand, which has been achieved after a long and hard-fought battle against a series of military regimes. In 1992, pro-democracy activists were gunned down in Bangkok, but the military-controlled TV stations released fabricated news reports and suppressed footage of the carnage. Consequently, military leader and prime minister, General Suchinda Krapayoon, resigned, Thailand returned to democracy and elected a civilian government, which pledged to enshrine press freedom in a new constitution.

Thai media has flourished since 1992, with a proliferation of new radio stations and the establishment of ITV—Independent TV—to provide professional and critical news coverage of the region. ITV pioneered investigative television reports on corruption, and dared to document atrocities committed in Thailand’s 1976 military coup, winning a number of awards for the quality and independence of its coverage. Today, press freedom is under threat again, say some journalists—this time from corporate control by Shinawatra. “Thaksin wants total control over information,” says Thai Journalist Association (TJA) president Kavi Chongkittavorn. Such comments come after 23 journalists were fired from ITV’s news department by the prime minister’s telecom giant, Shinawatra Corporation, which acquired a 41 percent controlling stake in ITV last year. Long before the election campaign started in December 2000, Shinawatra’s company fired respected ITV news chief Thepchai Yong, replacing him with a corporate manager with no previous media experience. Journalist Karuna Buakamsri, who was later fired, said Shinawatra Corporation’s new appointment blatantly interfered in ITV’s election coverage, pulling out any news items unfavourable to Shinawatra’s Thai Rak Thai (Thai love Thai) party. “The critical news approach of ITV, this is what Thaksin is most afraid of,” Buakamsri said. In January, seven journalists signed a joint protest statement deploring censorship and interference by the station’s chief executive, which included pressures and threats on journalists who insisted on critical reporting. All seven were immediately fired. Since then another 16 journalists—who had formed the ITV media workers’ union—have also been sacked. “It’s like fighting Goliath,” said Sakoldet Silapong, one of the fired reporters. “We know we are not going to win easily, but we will fight to the end.” The 23 journalists are now engaged in three separate court actions against ITV’s management. They have filed wrongful dismissal compensation claims and

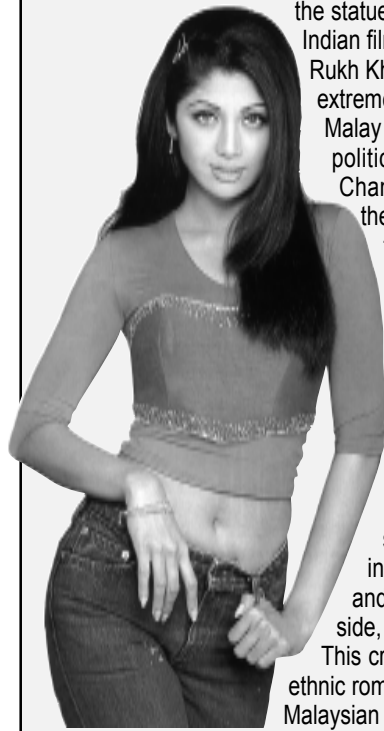


Food stall owner tunes into portable TV set in Sukothai, Thailand

a challenge to a corporate ban on union activity in the Labour Court, and a challenge to blatant violations of the Thai Constitution, which guarantees press freedom in the civil court. The Shinawatra camp defends its controversial investment in ITV as a purely business decision, a curious claim given that the company lost \$18 million last year. It also claimed that the 23 journalists were dismissed because of “economic considerations—having less news and more entertainment to attract more viewers and advertising revenue.” TJA’s Chongkittavorn, also editor of the English-language daily *The Nation* and founding president of the South East Asian Press Alliance, argues that the prime minister’s strategy of increasing corporate control over the media will seek to neutralise or co-opt print media as well. “Only the Thaksin-friendly media will get access to advertising from state agencies, so the more critical newspapers will be starved of revenue,” predicts Chongkittavorn. But financial clout and corporate control are not everything in a changing South-east Asia, where corrupt leaders are increasingly being challenged and ousted from power. In spite of Shinawatra’s popular mandate in January’s general election, press freedom and corruption have cast shadows over his future. The PM is also facing a corruption investigation over making false declarations about his financial assets. Some of his assets were transferred in the name of his servants. On 19 January Thailand’s highest court formally accepted corruption charges against the prime minister—and if convicted he could face a five-year ban from holding political office. The case is likely to be decided before the end of the year. A key factor in Shinawatra’s bid to stay in power and head off the corruption case in the months ahead is his near total control over the nation’s TV stations, of crucial importance in moulding public opinion. The battle to defend press freedom takes on an ever-greater relevance with Thai courts and judges not enjoying a tradition of an independent judiciary. Hope is not lost, however. The newly-formed National Counter Corruption Commission surprised most with its success in convicting the powerful Interior Minister Sanan in the last cabinet, forcing him to resign—proving that money can’t always buy power. ♦ (Gemini)

Blame it on Bollywood

The Malaysian government is moving to counter the “negative influence” of popular Indian movies on Malays, including the possibility of importing Arabic movies for screening on TV networks here. The move comes after the Malaysian Council of Islamic Jurists (Mufti) said that Indian movies, which are hugely popular here, are having a corrupting influence on the majority Malay population. A Council spokesman claimed the movies have a strong influence among poorer Malays who have much spare time to watch television, and exposed viewers to excessively passionate scenes that lead to incidents of incest. The government immediately announced a study into the social impact of Indian movies in Malaysia and persuaded television channels, which show Bollywood movies almost every day, to limit screenings from April. Likewise, the government says that it will import Arabic movies and ask TV networks to screen these to balance the Indian influence. Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob recently told a gathering of leaders of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party that these movies should be welcomed by Malaysia’s Muslim viewers because they were produced by Muslim countries. The Mufti members are also believed to be concerned about the statues, images and idols of Hindus in Indian films. Bollywood stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, who are extremely popular especially among Malay women, are Muslims. Opposition politician and Islamic scholar Dr Chandra Muzaffar says one problem the Muslim clerics see may be that these actors’ taking part in Hindu rituals in the films. The clerics are also worried about what to them has been the increasing incidents of Malay girls marrying Bangladeshi migrant workers in the country—because they are seen as lookalikes of the Bollywood superstars. Muzaffar dismisses these simplistic arguments. “In factories in the countryside, Malay women and Bangladeshi men work side by side, while Malay men shun these jobs. This creates the environment for inter-ethnic romances,” he says. The number of Malaysian women marrying Bangladeshis has already prompted the government to clamp down on the hiring of migrant workers from Bangladesh. “It (Bollywood) is wrongly identified with another community in our midst—people of Indian origin. Hollywood and western culture are not,” observed Chandra. The clerics’ call has also come at a rather awkward time for the Mahathir government, which has been strongly wooing the Bollywood film industry in recent months to entice it to use Malaysia as a location for shooting films. (IPS)



Dunai hangover

Prakash Jwala in Budhabar, 21 March

On the night of 25 September, 2000, Maoists attacked the district headquarters of Dolpo. This attack caused huge losses. Last month, I got a chance to visit Dolpo and understand the situation there. This article is an attempt to portray whatever I saw and experienced in Dolpo.

Dolpo is a land beyond the Himalaya, filled with high mountains, deep ravines. No proper transportation facilities have been developed there because of the high terrain. But even among so much difficulty Dolpo is a beautiful land. The land is filled with all sorts of herbs that have medicinal values such as the miracle herb *yarchagumba*, *jaatamaasi*, *paanch aunle*, and so on. The future of Dolpo could look bright if these resources could be properly utilised.

The land is like a separate kingdom on its own. The residents of Upper Dolpo who don't even understand or speak Nepali have a completely different lifestyle, language. The people are not only backward in terms of politics, economy, and society but are also lagging in awareness. Due to the lack of education social evils like the caste system, and numerous superstitions still exist in plenty there. The economic hardships, social discrimination and the political dominance by influential people have frustrated and angered the Dolpa-pas. This frustration and anger has been a major advantage for the Maoists. The Nepali Congress has shown the same dominance that the rulers in the Panchayat era displayed. Leftist parties were weak in Dolpo before NC and RPP leaders went into the CPN-UML party. Although the Maoists are now active in this region, the once politically weak region is still a CPN-UML stronghold. The Maoists could never establish a proper organisation in Dolpo. The Dolpo-pas who went and worked in the nearby districts of Jajarkot and Rukum have come back as Maoists and it is these people who are now active here. Although Dolpo is not a Maoist stronghold there have been a few important activities. Besides the Dunai attack there have already been two other attacks that left three policemen dead and several others wounded. Deserted police posts have been burnt, people abducted, workers of the CPN-UML beaten and robbed, businessmen and others extorted.

But these attacks have also caused losses to the Maoists. When they attacked Tribeni Chowk in 1997, three policemen died but a commander of the Maoists, Duatal Bikram Gharti, was also killed. Local Maoist leaders Nanda Neupane, Prasad Budha, Chandra Bahadur and five others were murdered by the police. The assassination of the main leaders of the region during the initial phase of the revolution made it difficult for the movement to spread. Some are still being held prisoners.

The Maoists have tried to link Dolpo to Rukum and Jajarkot which are under their control. The Maoists consider Dolpo as being under their control only because of the harsh geographical terrain and the weak presence of government forces. Dolpo is also financially beneficial to the rebels. Yarchagumba, the miracle herb, which is found in plenty in this region is harvested by the local businessmen. The Maoists tax the businessmen at Rs 2000 per kilo of the herb. The rebels also buy the herb from locals at Rs 7/8 per piece and sell it at Rs 20/25. Approximately 4-5 quintals of the herb is harvested in Maajpal Maikot. The Maoists have been able to tap this resource for their finances.

The violence has had a bad impact on the people. Activities of other political parties have been stopped, locals have been heavily taxed, there is plenty of misuse of firearms, but they have also done some productive work. Campaigns against alcohol and gambling have been started. Bigamists and frauds have been brought to trial, and schools and roads constructed.

As soon as Dolpo is mentioned Dunai comes into mind. Even six months after the incident there is still talk of it. The Maoists have defined this as a historic achievement. This was indeed a big incident. Fourteen policemen lost their lives, three buildings of the district police headquarters, the jail, and two bridges were destroyed. The bank in Dunai lost some Rs 6 million as well as some arms and ammunition. Papers in the tax office were burnt. Nineteen inmates from the prison in Dunai were freed. The Maoists also seemed very concerned about not harming the general public or destroying private property. One example of this was the carefully planned and meticulously operated attack on the Dunai jail which lies in the middle of private houses. But the people of Dunai take this as a sad incident and still remember it.

However highly the Maoists take the Dunai incident, in the long term it is bound to affect them negatively. Winning is not the most important thing in a war, sustenance of the victory or the prize is equally important. The Maoists attacked Dunai but were not able to keep it under their control. This incident also proved that the hit-and-run strategy adopted by the Maoists causes more damage than good. Severe effects of the Dunai incident are now beginning to come out. As a result the army can now be brought out of the barracks. Likewise, the creation of the Armed Police Force and the handing over of the security of many district headquarters to the army by the government is a direct result of the attack. This has proved how the attack has been more harmful to the Maoists. Dunai is still barren: walls are still lying as they were after the attack, the jail is still a heap of rubble and even the district police headquarters has not been re-built. The bank has moved to a room in the guest-house. The promise made by the minister to make a funds available for reconstruction and return the money of the people back has still not been fulfilled. Even the Maoists have not returned the money and gold belonging to the people taken from the bank. The Dunai attack hangover still lingers.



PADAM GHALEY

Kowtowing to Rajan

Desbantar, 25 March

देशान्तर साप्ताहिक

The representatives of the people are unwilling to sit down together and discuss issues relating to the well-being of the people. Ironically, when a joint secretary-level staff member of a foreign government arrives, our leaders are willing to go to his hotel to meet him. Even someone nominated by the king to the Upper House, and who considers himself a nationalist of high stature, also went to visit the official. He even gave the foreign official his mobile phone to use for the duration of his stay here. We don't know what interests are at play.

Former Indian ambassador KV Rajan's five-day visit (March 15-19) not only showed that parties like the CPN-UML and the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) that are aspiring to come to power need India's support, but even led people to wonder if the king also needed the backing. Otherwise, there was no reason for someone like Ramesh Nath Pandey, who calls himself a royalist, to present his mobile phone to Rajan (who is retiring from government service soon) and be there to offer his services. Rajan himself wanted to keep his visit a personal one.

The most interesting part of the affair concerns political leaders. Not just the general secretary of the UML Madhav Kumar Nepal and its powerful leader KP Oli, even RPP president Surya Prasad Thapa overlooked protocol and rushed to the Soaltee to meet Rajan. He then met the Prime Minister at Baluwatar. It is hard to tell what



KV Rajan

the outcome of these secret meetings with Rajan will be, but the events have made one thing clear—the leaders have shown their voters that the 'remote control' for Nepali politics is not within the country.

The situation is strange. One group that claims to be the true representative of the poor people has taken to the jungle, is making bombs and is ready to chop off the heads of other Nepalis. It is not ready to listen to those who have opinions different from theirs. The CPN-UML has the potential to provide leadership and is in parliament, but is unwilling to listen to explanations from the ruling party. The leaders of the RPP, the Nepal Sadhbhavana Party, the National People's Front and the Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party are in the same position. Nepalis never learn to love and trust their compatriots. Why do the leaders prefer to trust foreigners rather than their own party members or members from opposition parties and their colleagues from other parties?

The Nepali press claims to set the agenda for debate but journalists, both senior and junior don't hesitate to sing *Jana Gana Mana* under the Indian tricolour and

collect their monthly cheques to write about the acceleration of ISI activities in Nepal. An official at the secretary level can confound the leaders of Nepal. Self-proclaimed intellectuals compete to organise seminars by inviting guests short-listed by the Indian embassy. The blessings of Pashupatinath cannot sustain this country for long if the brains of intellectuals who supposedly create the opinion needed to run the country can be bought. How can one expect the leaders to safeguard the sovereignty of 23.9 million Nepalis if a nod of the head from across the border can form or dissolve a government and even establish or topple a political system? How can the future of Nepalis be safe when their elected leaders cannot sit together for five minutes to think about the country's problems? Maybe out of the fear that if they lost power it cannot be regained without approval from across the border, even the nominee of the constitutional monarch went to seek assistance. What could be more shameful than this for Nepalis who have always been told that they were never colonised?

Untouchability still reigns

Budhabar Saptahik, 21 March

बुधवार

Sanu Babu Bishwakarma's problems have now become public. Sanu Babu had refused to wash the tumbler he had used at a tea stall. This led to 'high' caste people abusing him and even threatening and beating him up. He then went to the district headquarters, Banepa to complain, but no one listened to his problems. He then came to Kathmandu looking for justice. A team was immediately sent from Kathmandu to look into this matter.

Twenty-five days ago, Sanu Babu refused to wash the tumbler that he had used in Kaji Lal Udas' shop. Udas asked Sanu to wash the tumbler, but Sanu refused saying that he had paid for the tea. When Sanu refused a second time and was leaving, Udas abused him and got two of his friends together, and these people then thrashed Sanu till he was unconscious. Sanu cried for help but no one came forward to help him. He was unconscious for over two hours and later his father came and took him away. This time, Sanu and his father were both attacked by Udas and his friends.

Sanu filed a case at the local police station and hoped that justice would be dispensed, but in vain. Instead of helping him, the policemen threatened him, abused him and asked him to go away. Sanu then went to the district police headquarters in Dhulikhel, but there too, no one was prepared to help him. Instead the police stated that Sanu had been beaten up by his father, accused him of filing a false case against Udas and fined him Rs 10,000. Sanu also had to pay Rs 1,080 for the food and alcohol that the police consumed while he was at police headquarters.

Exactly a year earlier, Bail Bahadur Sunar of Sindhupalchowk had been fined Rs 33,000 by the police for refusing to wash a tumbler he had used in a local restaurant. At that time the local Dalit community protested strongly and action was taken against the police officer Indra Bahadur Tripathi. The police are again displaying the very same attitude. They are not acting in

accordance with the constitution of 1990 and the Muluki Ain of 1963. Human rights organisations, Dalits and other social organisations are raising questions concerning the working and attitude of policemen. They say the police are not acting properly and are, in fact, working against the national interest. A public programme was held recently in Kathmandu to discuss the matter and to take steps and actions against all people and organisations that show such attitudes. These groups have asked the government to look into the case and to take strong action against everyone found guilty. Cases are going to be filed against the guilty in the district court in Kavre. In spite of all the turmoil this incident raised, no action has been taken against Udas.

VIP treatment

Jana Ahwan, 23 March

जनआह्वान

The office of the civil aviation ministry at Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) has sent a letter to all aviation companies asking them to provide refreshments to outgoing and incoming VIPs. The office says the concerned companies will be responsible for all VIPs passing through the airport.

Sources say an aviation industry veteran has stated that airlines will be able to provide all facilities to VIPs as befitting their stature, but will be unable to provide refreshments. The letter states that refreshments should be provided within 20 minutes of the arrival of the VIPs. Airline sources say that airline staff will be busy with their work, and there will be no one to provide refreshments to VIPs. If the airlines are to start providing refreshments to these people, chaos will set in and all flights may be disturbed. People working in airlines say they are capable of and will provide all other necessary help, but refreshments should be the government's responsibility.

Maoists vs ML

Saptahik Bimarsa, 23 March

साप्ताहिक बिमार्श

A major dash seems to be taking place between the Maoists and the CPN(ML) concerning the bandh called for 6 April by the student wing of the ML. As soon as the Maoists came to know of this, they got in touch with ML leaders and requested them to ask the students to withdraw the bandh. The ML leaders refused to do this and this is now causing problems between the two parties. The Maoists then got in touch with the ML students and asked them to withdraw the bandh but the students also refused.

The ML students have reacted very strongly against this attitude of the Maoists. They feel that the Maoists have a very condescending attitude and always try and force their way. In reply to the Maoist request, the ML students instead told them that they should support the bandh, and in return, the ML would support the bandh called by the Maoists on 7 and 8 April. The Maoists have retaliated by calling for a bandh on 6 April. This is the first time that two political parties have called for a bandh on the very same day and people are finding this very strange and difficult to digest. This has led to problems between the Maoists and the ML and it seems that no one is prepared to give way.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

Between my recent prison experience and the ones from the Panchayat era, I did not find any difference.

—Krishna Sen, editor of Janadesh, in an interview to Jana Ahwan, 23 March



The opposition is showing off. Why don't you go and sit there, Sher Bahadurji?

नेपाल समाचारपत्र

Nepal Samacharpatra daily, 25 March



"Onon on on"



Hounds on the trail.

Twenty-two years after the Himalayan Hash House Harriers began, the hares and hounds are venturing further afield.

ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

he Himalayan Hash House Harriers (HHHH)—something to do with cannabis in the Himalaya, you think. Wrong. The HHHH, like 1,500 other hash groups around the world, are a bunch of sweaty runners who participate in a mad weekly non-competitive dash across the

countryside with the lure of beer at the end of the line. The idea of "hashing" came from the rather dubious English custom of fox-hunting where the Lords dress up in full hunting regalia, let a fox loose and set a pack of hounds after it. At the sound of the bugle, the Lords and Ladies gallop after the hounds,

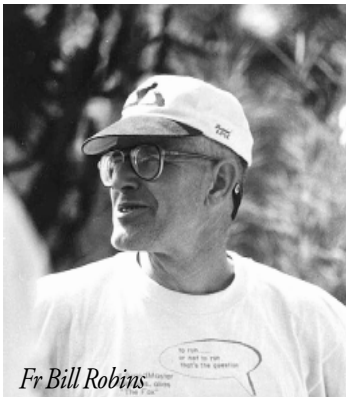
trying to hunt the poor animal down. Hashing's the same, but all the participants are human. The fox here is called the hare. He starts first and marks the trail for the hounds with shreds of paper. Besides littering, the hare's objective is to set up a good trial run and fool the hounds by marking the path with confusing signs. The

hounds start 15 minutes later, and try to play catch-up with the hare but usually don't. If they do, the hare must stand everyone a round of beer. The average run is 5-8 km long and lasts 45 minutes to an hour. Run over, it is customary for the tired hare and the hounds to retire to the nearest pub and engage in intensive rehydration therapy. The first hash started in October 1938 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by expatriate Britons, one an ex-British Army official. The "hash" here does not refer to smokeable resin. The official story is that the Selangor Club in Kuala Lumpur was called the Hash House because it served a lot of, well, hash browns. This was the unspectacular imperial beginning of a beer-drinking club with the runs and a great deal of arcane technical terms comprehensible only to veterans. The idea spread, and since the sun never set on the empire, hashers have proliferated to just about every corner of Planet Earth. The Himalayan Hash House Harriers was started on 15 October 1979 by Keith Robinson, who founded the Kuala Lumpur, Belait (Brunei) and the Dacca Hash, with Roger Binks, founder of the Cyprus Hash. That's over two decades of the highest hashing in the world. The highest run the HHHH had was at Lauryabinayak, below Gosiankunda, at 15,000 ft. There have been hash treks to the Solu Khumbu as well. Today, hashers



Guzzling beer at the end of a run.

can be any nationality and are from all walks of life and all ages. There are even some septuagenarians, keeping pace at a decent trot. The basic idea behind hashing seems to be just having a good time, and feeling like you're getting exercise in the bargain. "It's just a way to relax and build companionship," says Fr Bill Robbins, who's been running since 1983. Says 40-something Ashok Bhattachan, one of the few Nepali hashers: "At our age having some company on a run is more relaxing and fun." There aren't many Nepali runners, but the HHHH is open to all. "There are no bars at all, anyone and everyone is welcome to join," says David Potter, the present Grand Master, as the organiser is called. Initially the runs were gender-segregated, but years after universal suffrage, hashers around the world decided that their sport, too, could use some desegregation, and men and women run side by side today. This is called a Mixed Hash, and even families are known to participate. Potter is encouraging this sort of radical behaviour, mainly to counter the



Fr Bill Robbins

rather "laddish" image the activity is saddled with. The only rule in hashing is that there are no rules. You don't even have to finish the run. Rs 200 gets you all the beer you can drink and Rs 50, soft drinks. In fact, now that numbers are rising, the Grand Master even manages to provide snacks. The Himalayan Hashers have covered almost the entire Kathmandu Valley. Their weekly runs are usually held on the outskirts of the Valley, areas few Kathmanduites normally venture to. ♦ For inquiries contact: davidpotter@apon.wlink.com.np Global website: www.gthhh.com

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ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES

❖ **Kathmandu Film Archives and the Nepal Russia Film Society** present **A Letter to Heaven** (Chinese with subtitles). Russain Cultural centre. Friday, 30 March, 5.30 pm. Tickets Rs 50 at Mandala Book Point in Jamal, Momo King branches; Pilgrims Bookstore, Thamel, and Martin Chautari, Thapathali. martinchautari@mos.com.np. 240065

❖ **Nepali and Hindi movies** online ticket booking at www.nepalshop.com

EATING OUT

❖ **Exotic coffee and Nepali food** Jatra houses a café, reading room, a dark room, craft shop and an art gallery. Saat Ghumti, Thamel. www.jatranepal.com 433859

❖ **Movenpick ice cream** Exotic desserts at the new ice-cream boutique on Darbar Marg.

❖ **Weekend Buffet Lunches** at The Café overlooking the pool. Rs 850+tax. 11am onwards. Hyatt Regency. 491234

❖ **Organic vegetable market** and lunch Special vegetarian organic lunch every Sunday at the Summit Hotel, Kupondole. 10am-12.30pm. Rs 350+tax. Also enjoy Summit food week-round at the Patan Museum Café. 521810

❖ **Everest Hotel Bengali food festival** at The Far Pavilions. Entertainment by Anil Karki. 23 March-1 April. Saturday Splash, buffet with a free drink and swimming. Adults Rs 555, children under three ft, Rs 299, nett. BBQ at the Ropes Lunch 12 noon-2.45pm. Dinner 7pm-10.45pm. Brilliant views For reservations 488100

❖ **Shangri La Hotel's** Chinese restaurant Tien Shan has a new chef. 7pm onwards daily.

❖ **Indian Thali** at the Pilgrims Feed 'N' Read Restaurant in Thamel (next to Kathmandu Guest House). Also enjoy South Indian dishes, Tibetan snacks including Thukpa. 5pm-7pm amidst the garden ambience of flowers, trees, and marble sculptures by Akhilesh Rai. 424942

EXHIBITION

❖ **A Festival of Photography** "Photographs of Mustang" by Hungarian Normantus Paulius, "Photographs of Nepal" by Japanese Kioji Masuo, and "Great Moments of World Championship in Athletics". 19 March-2 April. Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited.

DANCE

❖ **DJ Bishwas** every evening at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency. Live Jazz Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Latin nights Friday and Saturday. Hyatt Regency, Taragaon. 491234

❖ **Sunday Night Fever** Free dance classes every Sunday by dancemaster Andreas Lehrke. Salsa, swing and more. The Piano Bar. Hotel Yak & Yeti. 8.30pm. 248929

MUSIC

❖ **Fever at the Jazz Bar** Cadenza (Tuesday and Thursday), live Irish band (Friday) and solo piano the rest of the week. International cuisine and drinks, espresso, cognac and cigars. 412999

❖ **Live shows at the Red Onion Bar** Various bands every evening. Lazimpat. 416071

❖ **Unplugged guitar Syabru Lama** at the Coffee Shop, Hotel de l'Annapurna. Every evening 7.30pm-10.00pm. 221711

❖ **Jazz by Cadenza** at the Upstairs lounge, Lazimpat. Every Saturday, 7.30pm-10pm. Rs 200.

❖ **Kishore Gurung plays classical guitar** at the Chimney, Hotel yak & Yeti. Every evening 8.00pm onwards. 248999

❖ **Classical Sitar** Pilgrims Book House auditorium, Thamel. Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays 7.00pm to 8.30pm. Rs 300.

TALK

❖ **Commodities, identities and the aura of the other** Talk by anthropologist Dr Peter Moran on the relationship between religious pilgrimage and tourism among Western travellers at Baudhanath. Monday, 9 April, 5pm. Royal Nepal Academy. For more info contact Dr Ram Dayal Rakesh at 231791 or Marianna Kropf at saiktm@mos.com.np. 271018

DRAMA

❖ **"The Kite"** Indonesian play by the children theatre club, Aakhyan on the occasion of World Theatre Day. Sunday, 1 April, 3pm. Nepal children organisation, Naxal. Free entry.

EVENTS

❖ **Freinds of the Bagmati River** meeting to discuss bringing life back into the waters of the Valley. Dwarika's Hotel. Wednesday, 4 April, 4.30pm. 479488s

❖ **Poetry Reading** Young poets read original works in Nepali and English. Open house. Every Thursday 4pm. Jatra, Saat Ghumti. Thamel. 433859

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com

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QUICKWORD 26

by CROSS EYES

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- 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.

Across

- Musically rendered praises (4)
- Study in world's freeway capital (4)
- Hag, etc (5)
- Partly or prudish rose (4)
- Consumption increase, perhaps (3,2)
- Hurt and angry (4)
- Malady cleaves badly (3)
- Ideas, in March (2)
- Eloquent in an apiary (3)
- Aqueous fantasies (6)
- Paleface protection (6)
- Pastor's motorcycle action (3)
- Older Strontium (2)
- Dispense with (3)
- Writing of the highest order (4)
- Jam session, practice piece (5)
- West African musical paradise (4)
- French recipient (5)
- Flair and energy (4)
- Annus, horribilis perhaps (4)

Down

- Ponds cream (4)
- Big dipper to the gazers (4)
- Christmas, in the carol (4)
- I knew this antelope (3)
- Delivery, and back up (3)
- Five shillings, and an uneasy head (5)
- Pizza dough, perhaps (5)
- Me former, charge card (4)
- Cut time in Porsche (6)
- Felt anxious and distressed (6)
- Switch position (2)
- Air Traffic (2)
- Calyx part, please (5)
- Screamer's throat dangler (5)
- Where you are expected to ape inhabitants (4)
- Old Germanic character (4)
- Cerebral spark (4)
- Dear doe (4)
- Once the oldest profession, now a _? (3)
- Consider the plaything (3)

QUICKWORD ANSWER 25

C	P	S		A	B	A	T	E	R
L	E	T		P	E	L	O	T	A
O	R	E		S	A	L	O	N	S
M	I	L		I	E	U		T	A
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A	T	H		E	N	A		S	E

Of the seven correct entries, the lucky winner is **Deepak Adhikari**.

INFOCOM Online

To send in your entries, please fill in the details below and fax to 977-1-521013, or email to crossword@himalmedia.com. Entries can be dropped off at Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur.

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NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

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Tue

28-10

A divine sleep in stone

Did such perfection, daring to transcend the bounds of mortality, arouse divine rebuke?

It happened some fourteen centuries ago. Dislodged by a powerful earthquake, a part of the mountain called Shivpuri came crashing down; a vast and terrifying tumble of rock and earth that bore down upon the settlement below, completely burying it. Little could survive. Temples and houses were made of perishable mud and wood. Even memory was destroyed. The rains fell during their season and grass and forests grew. In time, men returned to clear the land unaware of the history below their feet. A farmer snarled his crude plough against a buried rock and when he chipped at it, it bled. In troubled awe, he cleared the soil away to uncover first the carved head of a stone colossus, then a reclining body and then a bed of coiled serpents on which it rested. Water began rising from the earth as he dug deeper, until it seemed the huge image floated on the surface of a pond. People heard and crowded to worship this strange god that had risen from the ground. It was recognised as Vishnu, but confusingly it was named

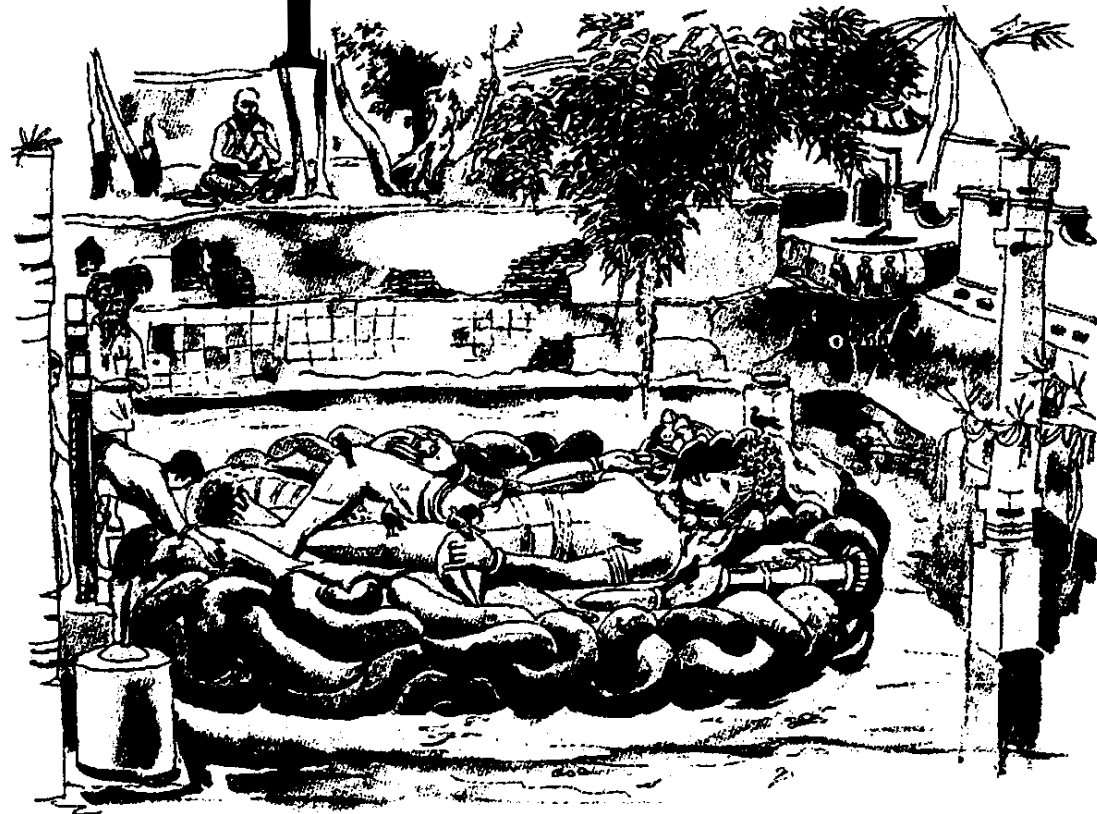
Budhanilkantha, which suggests Shiva.

There are other legends. When an earthquake ravaged the mountain, the image had only recently been consecrated. In fact the anonymous Lichhavi master who carved it from a single enormous rock had hardly laid aside his tools when disaster came. Were the gods displeased? Did such perfection, daring to transcend the bounds of mortality, arouse divine rebuke? Later, and even legend hesitates to say how long afterwards, the buried god appeared to King Dharmagat Dev in a dream so vivid that he was able to direct a search party to the spot where it lay. But the image was hardly uncovered when the mountain fell again and the reclining Vishnu was once more buried. When it was being excavated for the second time, a workman accidentally chipped the divine nose and it bled. But one remembers that almost every early sculpture in the Kathmandu valley suffers a broken nose, a relic of the short-lived but savage assault by the forces of Shams-ud-din Ilyas of Bengal in the early fourteenth century.

Legend also has an old Brahmin ascetic, Nil Kantha, responsible for having the image installed. But why, one wonders, did he give his Shivaite name to an image of Vishnu?

The confusion still exists. As I stood sketching beside the pond, my pad resting on the surrounding wall, small groups of Nepali and Indian visitors piled up beside me and almost the first question asked on seeing the great image was "What is it? Vishnu or Shiva?" Adding to their uncertainty were a number of Tibetan lamas who sat chanting under nearby trees. They made colourful offerings of ceremonial silk scarves and marigold chains, bouquets of incense sticks, fruit and tormas (small pyramids of dough stamped with impressions of Buddhist deities), and coins. A Nepali guide explained to a family of Bengalis that the great image had not been made by man but by the gods themselves and he went on to describe how it had risen from the earth.

In the flurry of conversation that followed, a scholarly-looking gentleman pointed out to one and all



that such a wondrous creation was indeed divine. If they looked carefully at the supple chest, they could easily imagine that the image breathed. I was reminded that once, many years ago when carved stone fountains, now dry, used to pour clear mountain water into the pond, the ripples flowing across the surface heightened the illusion of breathing and I had watched fascinated not only as the great chest rose and fell, but as the vermilioned mouth smiled and the handsome face changed its expressions. Even now, a young man standing beside me remarked, "See, Vishnu smiles; he is happy today." And later, a tousled sadhu told me in a burst of wrinkled laughter that the god who was peacefully sleeping was about to wake. His eyes were moving.

There are always flowers banked above the crown of the image, and vermilion on its forehead, about its eyes and mouth and outlining the clothes and jewellery it wears.

Vermilion stains the water of the now stagnant pond. Devotees mount a ramp to touch their foreheads to the massive feet, collecting some fragment of offerings made by others before them. In turn, they offer flowers and rice and coins that others will collect. Pujaris bathe and anoint the great face. More vermilion. Dramatic touches of saffron. There are always pigeons to accept the rice that is offered.

Yet another legend attaches to Budhanilkantha. King Pratap Malla, who ruled in the seventeenth century, dreamed that if he or any of his descendants gazed upon the face of the reclining Vishnu, they would die. So no ruling monarch may visit this famed place of pilgrimage, but to allow them some idea of what they are forbidden to see, two similar but much smaller images were made and installed in the water garden at Balaju and in the grounds of the old Malla

palace in Kathmandu.

Both lack the brilliance of the Lichhavi original and the magic of its surroundings: the ancient rest houses and the hamlet of Budhanilkantha and the fields strewn with black boulders like enormous cannon balls that fell from the mountain called Shivpuri. From one like these was the great Vishnu Narayan carved. From another, a Buddha image that stands unattended and hardly known in a field not far away. What other treasures lie buried beneath the great swell of earth that was once a landslide, we may only guess at. Nepal's leading public school and a rapidly growing suburb of Kathmandu reach across it. Perhaps someone digging a modern foundation will strike rock, and the rock will bleed. ♦

(Excerpted with permission from *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, Harper Collins, 1994.)



MIN BAURACHARYA

ESSAY

by PETER J KARTHAK



KUMARI ALE

Once upon a time, 44 years ago, I was in love with Banira Giri, for three agonising years. It was love at first sight on the wet Chowrasta *maidan* in Darjeeling.

I was 14 and in grade seven in 1957. I was one of the youngest students of Turnbull High

School. We'd just been promoted from our half-pants *kattu* juvenility to the status of full khaki trousers. The fateful occasion was Bhanu Jayanti, the annual grand celebrations dedicated to the Nepali Chaucer, *Baje*, which took place every year sometime in the rainy month of June.

Our venerable teachers, Indra Bahadur Rai and Ishwar Ballabh, in their many avatars as teachers, leaders and writers, chaperoned us and choreographed our assemblage at the spacious Chowrasta ground to enjoy the spectacle and participate in the celebrations. The other Nepali-curriculum schools of Darjeeling also joined in, their long and disciplined queues just like ours.

The programme began with choruses, solo songs and speeches steeped in Bhanu lore. Then a young and excruciatingly beautiful young woman climbed suavely up to the stone podium and stood by the statue of *Adi Kavi* Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, watched over by another statue, a full-figure image of Dhir Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana.

This poetess was Banira Giri. Word spread through us infatuated lot that she was from Kurseong, that little town between the plains of Siliguri and the high hills of Darjeeling. That Kurseong possessed many beautiful women was well known to us. But a diva in real flesh and blood from there was standing in front of us that day. Clad in a red sari, with painted lips and impeccably styled hair, Banira stole our hearts that day and drove us crazy.

Came 1958, eighth grade and another Bhanu Jayanti. Off we went to Chowrasta again. Banira was there again, this time in a pink sari, with

painted lips, her hair down her red cheeks. She recited her poems and then went away again, leaving us heartbroken. The Bhanu Jayanti of 1959 found us in ninth grade. Banira came, wrapped in a shiny blue sari with a white blouse, painted lips and a fashionable hair-do. She recited her poems and went away, leaving us terribly forlorn.

1960. We had graduated from school and had gone to college. There were other beautiful Baniras there to take care of. But that was not the end of the original Banira Giri. Her visage and memories lingered with me. Whenever I drove by Kurseong, I thought of her. Whenever I was in Kurseong with my musical ensemble, I looked for Banira in the audience. But she was nowhere. This was such a one-sided quest, an unrequited romance where all I got was a rain-check. My love had disappeared.

It was only last year that I first saw Banira Giri face to face. We have met only four times so far, and have talked on the telephone five times. So much for romance!

But before the 40-year hiatus I thought about some things: How come Darjeeling's female "artists" were all so intelligent and beautiful in those days? I didn't care then, nor knew, about Banira's poetry, her feelings and emotions, styles and stylistics, nuances, images and verisimilitudes. I just wondered: How can such brains, wisdom, beauty and guts come together in the same person?

There were many brilliant beauties in the Darjeeling of those days. Dev Kumari Thapa wrote enticingly and was beautiful. Lakki Devi Sundas, was another ravishing writer. Lila Ghising was a mesmerising and stunning dancer. Shanti Thatal was a captivating bombshell who drove everyone crazy with her artistic and technical singing. Lhamu Lama, another heartbreaker sang wonderfully. The list is rather long.

But Banira Giri was the first poet who brought the true sounds of Nepali verse libre to my ears. Another point of note is that Banira has been writing poems—apart from writing in other genres, too—since the 1950s. The finest cuts of the two gems—her verse libre and long poetry—have found place in a recently translated anthology, *From The Lake, Love*.

What I find unique is the participation of many nationalities in the translation of Banira's various poems originally written in Nepali over the years. There is Wayne Arizis, a long-time American resident in Nepal who has translated and edited the anthology. Other translators are Chael Hutt and Ann Hunkins. Then there is Manjushree Apa, an important Nepali writer, translator and critic. Many of Banira Giri's poems, translated and included in *From The Lake, Love*, have had also received international recognition and appreciation. India's *Pratibha*, *Pratibha India*, *Debonair*, *Indian Express*, *Legegraph*, and *Kavita Asia*, Japan's *Shinchu*, France's *La Revue*, Pakistan's *Dawn*, *Alam-E-Niswan*, *Akhbare Khawatin*, and *Himalayan Voices* of California and *South Asian Literature* of New York, USA have all published Banira's poems.

Reason enough for all of us to take interest in the collection of poems, *From The Lake, Love*. As for me, I have given up the ghost of romancing Banira Giri, and turned my attention to reading her Nepali poems translated painstakingly and with such dedication by an international crew interested in Nepali poetry as espoused and developed by Banira Giri for nearly five decades. ♦

From the lake, love by Banira Giri. 2000. Him Shikhar Publications, Kathmandu. 132 pages. Rs 300



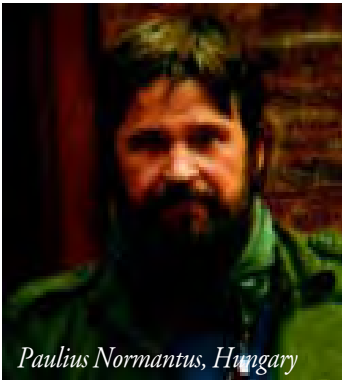
Persistent Seeing

Photography shows us that the seen and how one sees are inextricably linked. Where vision and composition bring a distant place or another way of life into view, meaning resides with the object seen. Kioji Masuo from Japan and Normantus Paulius from Hungary speak dialects of the same language—that of someone from far drawing close to his subject. The distance crossed in their encounter is calibrated by the persistence of their endeavor. Kioji Masuo, photographically engaged with Nepal for many years, draws close with the widest of angles, allowing a distance in depth, while Paulius Normantus, an intrepid celebrant of

present and what daily life and custom present to him. A trace of beauty qualifies many of his photos. In Picking Tea in Ilam, a woman bends to fill her basket with leaves of green tea. Linked by labour in a line winding through fields of green, other women bend to fill their baskets. Each in their own place, the nearby hills emerging through mist. In A Maithili Woman, Janakpur, a sitting torso is all we see. The woman's tattooed hands, firm and sure, sketch on rice paper figures echoing the walls of her house. Her sari is as rich as the reds she uses. When a man nears, we are told, she covers her head. Here she is not seen hiding, but revealing, through her art, how she works and lives.



Kioji Masuo, Japan



Paulius Normantus, Hungary

Himalayan cultures, keeps his distance, establishing a layered perspective that speaks with the widest of possible contours. Kioji Masuo is a lucky photographer. Along the lanes and byways of Nepal, as unaffected as a neighbour who might drop in, unannounced, he accentuates the

Paulius Normantus hews his vision with rock and air. Poet of light, opponent of confinement, he sounds space for its limits and recognizes the human in its place. In Mustang, a breath away from Tibet, 4,500 meters up, with sheer rock cliffs where no path leads, a simple 10th century



KIOJI MASUO



PAULIUS NORMANTUS

Kioji Masuo from Japan and Normantus Paulius from Hungary speak dialects of the same language—that of someone from far drawing close to his subject. The former comes close to Nepal with the widest of angles. The latter keeps his distance, establishing a layered perspective.

monastery where meditators dwell in summer. In these pinnaced heights, hand-shaped stone holds our eye. Unapproachable place of worship, where only seeing can take us. Here, where distance reduces to abstraction or silence—peaks, shadow-modulated formations, wind-eroded lands and the vastness of

the sky—the manmade appears, shaped as the earth has been shaped by the elements, a stupa, a gumpa, clearly human, clearly a part of the land. In western Tibet, near Kailash, soft hills, low mud houses, two figures, small, yet undiminished, talk to each other in passing. In Kumbu, in northeast Tibet, an old lama, weary from his day of

worship, red cape warming his back, pauses on the way to his room. We cannot see his face, but his presence is felt. In another photo a monk's hands, rosary and robe are all we see. Surrounded by scenes of stark contrast and unaccountable vastness, there is no thing more gentle than these folded, self-contained hands. In addition to the work of Kioji

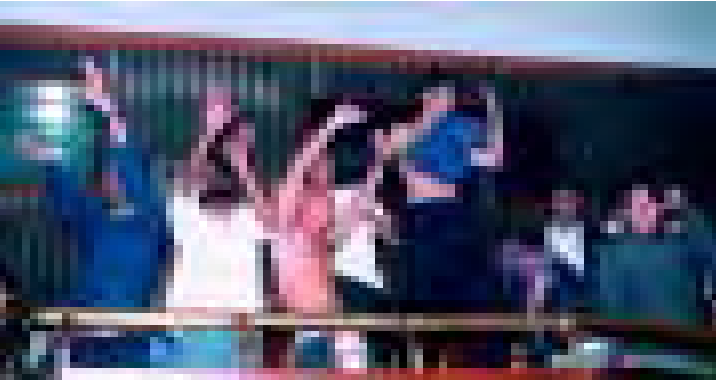
Masuo and Paulius Normantus currently on display at Siddhartha Art Gallery, the Mulchowk Galary in the courtyard of Baber Mahal Revisted is showcasing a selection of photos titled *Great Moments of World Championship in Athletics*. ♦ Festival of Photography until 2April at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited.



HOME FOR THE OLD: Dr BN Rana, a Nepali-German doctor, introduces Prime Minister Koirala to foreign delegates at the inaugural of the Senior Citizens' Home in Godavari.



STOPPED BY COPS: Riot police block the anti-Girija opposition rally on its way to Singha Darbar.



JUNOON OVER JUNOON: An ecstatic section of the audience at the concert by Pakistani pop group Junoon.

Sharp



Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

There have been calls from all and sundry that the Nepali media should also create a big hungama by using hidden cameras to expose shady deals involving the import by our armed forces of semi-automatic horse poo excavators to prevent the four-hoofed members of our gallant cavalry from fouling the streets of the capital during the annual Ghode Jatra parade. However, we think this would not only be against national interest, but would also seriously undermine the morale of our military which is currently conducting sensitive manoeuvres using live hepatitis vaccines on guinea pigs. Besides, we in the Nepali media are concerned about the ethics of entrapment, and we are not sure if similarly tempted we would not take the cash and run. If someone in a dimly-lit room tried to get us to buy night-vision equipment to help us navigate home after work through pitch dark streets maybe we would not reluctantly refrain from saying no.

But such is the clamour from the public for exposes, that we are forced to fall back on our favourite prey and use concealed candid cameras to probe Royal Nepal Allegedly Corrupt (RNAC) to uncover yet another boring scandal involving the quality and quantity of vegetarian pakoras served on the Delhi sector. The tapes reveal dramatic details of why the airline is bankrupt: some senior night officials of the Tourism, Industrialism and Socialism have been caught by our hidden camera sneaking away souvenirs like airline blankets, dessert spoons and a Rolls Royce RB-211 engine. This is an outrage: why didn't they take both engines? How did they know the other one wasn't worth anything? It seems our national flag carrier has for a long time not been carrying flags at all, it has been carrying a lot of crew-members on long all expense paid holidays.

There is a small problem with using hidden cameras to expose corruption in Nepal: our kleptocrats love to be on camera. Half the fun is openly film them going about their dark and nefarious deeds. ("Hey, everyone, I'm on TV quick, look! Call notes from that South African arms dealer.") When even honest officials pretend they are corrupt because they want to be seen as team players, then you have a real problem. More drastic measures are required, and we have been asked to come up with some suggestions:

- The Mao Baddies' deterrent method. Make the bad guys pay a 100 percent duty on all kickbacks, have their hair and eyebrows shaved, and require them to wear a necklace of shoes to work.
- Vaccination. When graft enters a pandemic stage there is no other way but for the Ministry of Communicable Disease and Broadcasting to vaccinate civil society and not-so-civil society against the corruptococcus bacteria on previously-announced National

The fhit hits the san

Immunisation Days. Vaccinated individuals will stop showing symptoms like greasy palms, and be resistant to greed and malfeasance. Booster shots are required every year.

- Genetic Engineering. This method isolates the gene for kleptomania and replaces it with one for generosity and sacrifice taken from an adult sea horse. With advances in bioengineering, therefore, the day is not far when honesty and integrity in public officials can be successfully cloned. We must carry this out before the fhit hits the san during next year's Ghode Jatra. ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY



Flower child

Every morning in a cosy brick house across the Sanepa section of the Ring Road, over 3,000 plants glory in the morning light at the loving wake-up call of their guardian Rita Sharma. She chats and meditates with them, in this flower-powered environment she shares with her two daughters and husband.

"I call them *Maharani*," she says, pointing to the 1,500 or so African Violets (*Saintpaulia*), the crowning glory of her collection of flowering and non-flowering plants. They fill every conceivable space in her small garden, and adorn walls, cupboards, staircase, windowpanes, and terrace in her home. "They are fragile and sensitive to abrupt changes in weather. They have to be handled delicately, only then will they bloom," she says of her floral queens from the Usambara mountains in Tanzania.

You can lose yourself for an entire day at the Sharma



house, communing with plants, looking at the bees, imagining wonderful romances between the plants under Rita's gentle eye. "Every



ALL PHOTOS: SALLY SUREDI

day is a busy nurturing day. After I chat with the plants, I clean them, move them around, make sure they aren't suffocating, and have enough food and so on," says Rita, who has been inspired by her travels within and outside Nepal.

Some of her charges require a little more focused attention than others. Her African violets are in a small greenhouse on the terrace, where she first lets them grow in small ice-cream, peanut and sausage containers, and then moves them to larger pots. "I make use of everything possible. It's not just about what you use, it's the care and time you devote," she says. And no, she does not have a gardener.

Rita Sharma was a cabin attendant with Royal Nepal for five years. She quit 12 years ago to be a "housewife entrepreneur". Apart from nurturing plants, she also designs intricate patchwork bedcovers. Two tailors from Thankot help her with production,



and their work can be seen in many hotels and resorts in Kathmandu and Pokhara.

"I have recently started selling flowers, especially to housewives. Let them also share the passion that I share with plants. It might inspire them to be entrepreneurs," she says. Rita's had no professional training in horticulture or design. "It is an addiction. I can't think of spending the rest of my life not surrounded by plants," she says. ♦