



RAFTS AND KAYAKS
10-11

**FIRST TANGO IN
KATHMANDU**
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NEPALI ORCHIDS 9



EXCLUSIVE

The nation speaks

Two years after Himalmedia tried to gauge the mind of the nation, we've gone back to the Nepali people to find out how they assess the state of the state. The Maoist insurgency has become more virulent, the government has been at standstill, political infighting is worse, and parliament is paralysed. So, what do Nepalis think? We asked 4,000 respondents in the nationwide survey:



- if they think the insurgency is the main problem facing the nation, or are they more concerned about Kalapani
- if it is belief in ideology that is behind the support for the Maoists or is it fear, and how the problem should be resolved
- if the country is going downhill and what's taking it there
- if Nepal's democracy is threatened and where that threat is coming from

Other questions: how the armed forces should be handled, whether the constitution needs to be re-jigged, and which party they would vote for if fresh elections were to be held today. The results will be published in *Nepali Times* and *Himal Khabarpatrika* on 13 April.

Now, the good news



Latest figures from the Nepal Tourism Board show that

despite hotel strikes, deteriorating security and riots, 16 percent more tourists visited Nepal in the first quarter of 2001 compared to the same period in 2000. It could be tourism is finally on the rebound, or it is possible that last year was so dismal anything would be an improvement. Or it could be both. Either way, the number of Indian tourists also picked up in the first three months of 2001.

Rukum Kot

BINOD BHATTARAI

A little Nepal died on Sunday night. Newars, Magars, Chhetris, Bahuns, highlanders and Madhesis, from different parts of Nepal were among the dead on that remote hilltop outpost in Rukum. Some of the policemen were apparently butchered execution-style, after they had surrendered. Nepal's political history does not have a recorded parallel to Sunday night's death toll. Only the infamous Kot Massacre of 1846 saw more deaths on a single night.

An upsurge in Maoist activities was predicted, but the Chaite Dasain carnage surpassed all expectations. Also unexpected was the frontal assault on the fortified barracks—the first major offensive since the Dunai attack last September prompted the police to pull back from hot spots. The dispirited policemen manning Rukumkot were sitting ducks. It was a week of bloodshed:

- Maoists kill 31 policemen in Rukumkot, take 23 hostage and leave 14 hurt, no rebel bodies recovered
- Maoists kill five policemen in Maina Pokhari in Dolakha district; police down three
- Maoists set off two minor blasts in Kathmandu Valley
- Maoists kill two policemen in Mujung, Palpa, no rebel casualties (Another

eight policemen were killed in a road accident while rushing to Mujung)

- Maoists destroy an outpost in Darkha, Dhading district, loot arms

The rebels have now upgraded their capacity to outflank police and pick targets at will. The National Security Council met on Tuesday to plan a response. "Because the government has been unable to form the Armed Police, it was agreed that the army should be engaged in six districts at least," a source told us. The Royal Nepal Army, stationed at 16 vulnerable district headquarters after Dunai, now may even move into the countryside. Rukumkot is situated six hours away from Musikot where the Army is stationed. "We've now agreed that troops should be engaged wherever there is a need," the source added. The Army will begin taking positions in Rukum, Rolpa, Salyan, Jajarkot, Pyuthan and Kalikot if King Birendra, the Supreme Commander of the army, gives his assent. The big question now is whether he will do that. Sections of the Army believe an anti-Maoist war is unwinnable, and will plunge the country into a brutal civil war.

Nepalis from almost every ethnicity and caste group have been killed in the five years of violence. Chhetris head the list, with Magars following a close second, and then Bahuns. But most of those killed have something in common—class. Those on the frontlines are poor village youth promised better lives by the Maoists, and policemen who can't find any other jobs and don't have the clout to prevent a posting in insurgency areas. The official death toll in five years now stands at over 1,600, and tens of thousands of others are internal refugees.

The killings came at a time when the government had just complied with the rebel demand for talks by releasing the names of over 300 captured Maoists, and had begun taking the captives to court. The Maoists' Second Convention in February had adopted a new doctrine called Prachanda Path, named after its leader, which put forward a proposal for an all-party meeting to agree on an interim government to formulate a "peoples' constitution". Many had seen these moves by both sides as signs of moderation. So, was the Rukumkot offensive a sign that the Maoists aren't interested in talks, or was it to goad the government to the negotiating table?

"Neither side is about to talk at this stage," says Gopal Siwakoti Chintan, a human rights activist and an advocate for dialogue. "Maoists, because they think they are winning every battle. And the

Massacre



After the killing fields of Rukum, are we headed to the negotiating table, or more bloodshed?

SUBHAS RAI

THE HEAD COUNT



According to the Human Rights Yearbook Documentation Centre of the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), there has been at least one insurgency-related death in 52 of the country's 75 districts since February 1996. About a third of the total deaths took place in Rolpa and Rukum.

Killings by the police peaked during the flushing-out operation, Kilo Sierra II, in 1998. Maoist casualties were highest in 1998 and 1999 and it took the rebels two full years, and 662 deaths, to regroup. The Maoists have been attacking police posts and mauling the police at will since early 2000. Since then, the police have been entirely on the defensive with Maoists having killed about 100 more people than the police. Since January 2001, the figures are more lopsided. Maoists have killed 75, and the police only 19.

Commenting on the Rukum incident, a human rights activist just back from the insurgency-hit districts told us: "They had been quiet for some time, and this round of attacks may have resulted from the leadership's compulsion to provide the armed cadres with some action. All this is happening because talks are just not moving forward."

The rebels are also taking more prisoners. The government says Maoists have taken 412 so far, of which 26 had been killed. It also accuses the Maoists of withholding the whereabouts of 131—a number that has gone up since the Rukumkot attack. Maoist prisoners are reportedly sent to labour camps, something which even human rights groups don't talk about.

government does not have a mechanism to meet even their basic socio-economic demands, let alone the major ones."

What complicates the possibility of peace talks is that no one seems to have a clear idea of what the Maoists want. Certainly, there is the much-publicised list of 40 demands, but events of the past five years have made it almost irrelevant. The government, too, has a position: it is willing to negotiate everything within the framework of the present constitution. At the moment the only thing that may be achieved by sitting down at the table is for both sides to agree on rules of civilised warfare.

The reason for the stalemate is that just about every political force in this country—Narayanbhatti, Singha Darbar, the communists and factions of Congress and splinter groups—are all using the insurgency for petty party wrangling. None of them seems to want to give the other advantage of taking credit for a peace dividend. It is this shortsightedness and a power vacuum at the top that is obstructing the search for a solution.

Perennial infighting in the ruling party has paralysed the government, allowing the main opposition UML to go for its jugular. The

UML has successfully brought the winter session to a halt, sabotaging the government's effort to pass a bill to create a paramilitary force to fight the Maoists. UML leader, Madhav Kumar Nepal's first comment on Monday was not to condemn the attack in Rukumkot, but to say that it was yet another reason for the prime minister to resign.

The government is boxed in. It can't get a stronger police, and without that, the Maoists, who consider themselves to be on a winning spree, will have no inclination to talk. Government officials say the Rukumkot massacre is another reason why the paramilitary needs to be set up quickly. Ram Chandra Poudel said this week: "Police are being trained and it will take some more months for it to be ready." But he is being optimistic, he presupposes that the legal complications will be sorted out. The ordinance to set up the force will become defunct unless approved in parliament by Sunday. Caught between indecisive and fractious political leaders in Kathmandu and Maoists on the offensive, it looks like the Nepali people will have to witness many more Rukumkots before the two sides feel it has got to the point where they have to talk. ♦



26 CHAITRA

In the spring of 1990, the Nepali people got together to regain what had been forcefully taken away from them almost thirty years ago. It was a People's Movement in its true form. All sections of society rose in unison, and broke the chains of a tyrannical system. And then we called upon the political class to build a system to suit our democratic aspirations.

In retrospect, it appears that our faith was highly misplaced. We should have prompted and monitored our leaders better. It is little short of miraculous that democracy still survives, though barely so, despite the abuses it has been subjected to over the years by the political class. Our politicians turned out to be pygmies with pretensions of being giants. It has been a decade of shattered dreams, lost hopes and wilted aspirations.

Our leaders have failed to deliver everything they promised—peace, governance or development. In fact, they haven't even tried seriously. The ruling party seems unwilling to rule. The opposition appears incapable of offering alternatives. The ultras haven't come to terms with the reality of a small country not being able to afford a drawn-out war without serious consequences to its sovereignty. By brutally killing innocent policemen on duty in Dolakha and Rukum, the Maoists displayed the ugly face of mindless violence. And then there are the *chakka jams* and *bandhs* to put up with. We all seem to be in a tearing hurry to reach the precipice and fall off it.

The executive is not functioning. The legislature is being held at ransom. Much of what goes on in the name of the fourth estate appears to be fanning the fire of confusion all around. True, the judiciary is still functional, but it can never be a substitute for governance. A case in point is the court order asking the government to reinstate Tilak Rawal to the post from which he was unceremoniously sacked. The verdict is clearly based on the merits of the case, not on those of the individual concerned. And now it is the government that will have to face the consequences.

At times like these, it's tempting to fall for easy options. The no-option option of "either the Royalists or the Maoists" that is being bandied about is clearly a trap. Anything worthwhile is never that clear-cut, seldom so easy. Reality is far more complex and requires constant effort. The old dictum—eternal vigilance is the price of liberty—is as true today as when it was first enunciated by John Philpot Curran over two hundred years ago.

The way out is perhaps backwards, but not to the place we have left. We need to go back to basics and embrace the principles that fuelled the People's Movement and made 26 Chaitra possible. The goal of Nepali democracy has to be the upliftment of the last man in order to enable him to become a respectable citizen of society.

Democracy entails government by the majority, but of and for *all* the people. The mechanics to achieve that goal are still intact. An independent election commission, the rule of law, and periodic elections have shown that we are capable of being masters of our own destiny. All we need to do now is to make sure that the vital ingredients missing from our democracy—accountability and sincerity—are restored to make it really effective.

We have seen that just hoping for the desired to happen doesn't lead anywhere. That is perhaps the most important lesson to remember this 26 Chaitra. All of us have to become the change that we want. Back to basics, then.

PSY-OPS



KIRAN PANDEY

This has been a good week for photo-ops. And psy-ops. Our leaders first had battle-hardened pictures of themselves taken at a memorial service for slain policemen in Rukumkot, chatting up the hungry cameras. The irony of this self-serving publicity amidst carnage was lost on everyone, including the cameras. And then we saw the greatest example of domestic ingenuity since the Nepal Army used leather canons against the invading British. The CPN (UML) this week paraded the first-ever Nepali-built aircraft and took it around town for wind-tunnel testing (see picture, left). We don't know if the honourable prime minister was impressed with the aeronautical skills of the comrades. If we can manufacture effigies of 767s, it will only be a small step to make them fly. Or, at least glide. The point our dear comrades were trying to make is unimportant, since they've been trying to make it for the last six months. And to counter this over-exposure of an Austrian charter operator, we won't mention the L word in this space. Ever again.

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STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL



Socialism by any other name

The confusion among India's left movement seems to be giving our Nepali comrades a glimpse of their own future.

NEW DELHI - BP Koirala's *Atmabrittanta* is now available in English. Having been the captain of the ship, it was perhaps natural that BP should record his journey on the struggle for democracy in the choppy waters of Nepali politics. But the book is more than just that: it is studded with interesting insights into international trends and events that buffeted Nepal. One such is his disillusionment with the international socialist movement, and at one point, he appears exasperated by the socialists' preoccupation with "projecting their image".

BP is even more dismissive of Indian socialists who sought his help to fight their elections. For Nepali readers, it is reassuring to learn that the Indian socialists supporting the democracy movement in Nepal were merely paying interest on an old debt—the Nepali Congress government had extended financial assistance to them in the 1960s. Had BP been alive, would he have been asked once again to help revive the socialist movement in India?

Indian socialists are in disarray today. The one-time Young Turk Chandra Shekhar has retired to his designer farm in Bhondsi. The party of George Fernandes was led by a former Miss Miranda House caught on camera promising a quid pro quo for a cash donation to her party. The atrophy in the socialist movement has pushed the likes of Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan into caste-based power politics. The socialists in India have sunk so low that they look towards rank opportunists like VP Singh for leadership, while those who did not want to put up with all this mess have quietly opted out.

However, between bouts of ideological constipation and rhetorical diarrhoea, Indian socialists are still capable of showing flashes of political common sense once in a while. One such was the People's Conference against Globalisation they organised in New Delhi on 21-23 March. The meet turned out to be a rainbow gathering of reds of every hue, greens of varying shades, and the blue and white collars of activism and academia. The flaming red of Bihari Maoism, the romantic pink of Awadhi socialism, the rosy crimson of Malayali Marxism and the blushing scarlet of Bengali Leninism were all there—agreeing to sit together, but refusing to

take a united stand. Like their comrades elsewhere, Indian leftists are also divided by the same ideology. One participant counted at least 22 streams of communists and about fourteen factions of socialists recognisable at the national level in India. By the end, the acrimony between different factions of the left was so intense that all they could agree upon was to disagree on all substantive issues. No wonder then that the final resolution is full of pious intentions, but little or no common programme for united action.

Even the academics appeared wary of taking the bull by the horns. While people like Aijaz Ahmed, Jayati Ghosh and Vandana Shiva pontificated endlessly about the pitfalls of globalisation, no one cared, or dared, mention, let alone denounce, the all-powerful C-word—Capitalism. Since globalisation is merely the third leg of the capitalism stool (with the other two being liberalisation and privatisation), slashing wildly at globalisation with machetes is not going to yield a political programme. The issue of globalisation may please the Global Greens, but it fails to inspire the common woman on the street. It was such flirting

with fads that once prompted AJP Taylor to term Fabianism the "socialism of snobs". In place of Marx's faith in the proletariat, Fabians put their faith in the nobility of the labour elite. It is because of a similar attitude that the socialist movement in India consists primarily of towering leaders without any followers.

Indian communists too are treading a similar path. Leftist leaders with giant egos learn to lord over the presidium, and leave to set up separate houses as soon as their supremacy is questioned. This is a common trend in South Asia's left movement. A participant from Pakistan expressed it most eloquently when he pointed out the tendency among his comrades back home to "build separate mosques with their one-and-a-half bricks".

All this must have prompted the Nepali delegation to start playing unity games in Delhi. In the lobby of the venue, comrade Jhalanath Khanal of the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) was seen trying his best to entice self-proclaimed 'independent Marxist' Hari Rokka back to the fold. Comrade Jhalak Subedi of the Communist Party of Nepal (ML) was mellow in his criticism of his party's bugbear, the CPM (UML). Delhi-based sympathisers of the Maoist movement in Nepal were being civil to both UML and ML leaders. The confusion among the leftists of India seemed to be giving our comrades a glimpse of their future. Unfortunately, there was nobody from the Nepali Congress to learn lessons from the disarray in Indian socialism.

Does the left-of-centre really believe that its ideas are truly worth fighting for? If it doesn't, then it will continue to be squeezed in the middle by the ultras of the left and the right. To dream of rainbows is one thing. But to prove that LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) is pure gas, all forces with leftist inclinations need to form a broad-based coalition and go back to the people. More than a decade after the restoration of democracy, shouldn't that be the common minimum programme of the forces that made the People's Movement a success? But this question can only be relevant if the Nepali Congress still considers itself to be democratic socialist, and Communist Party of Nepal (UML) continues to believe in pluralistic Marxism. ♦





MIN BAURACHARYA

"The issue about unmet deadlines is nonsense"

—Ram Sharan Mahat

Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat spoke to NT about the mid-year economic figures, donors, and the prospects for the rest of the year.

framework of our policy. There is the Ninth Plan, other government documents and the draft aid policy. Donors don't pull us in different directions. That said, it's true this does not work perfectly in practice.

But that policy framework has not been finalised yet...

Yes, but there are other documents to work with and it does not mean that we don't have any policy for aid. You have the Ninth Plan document and the agenda for priority actions presented at the Paris meeting.

You have new deadlines for meeting missed commitments. Are you confident they can be met, especially looking at the Rastra Bank?

Events taking place at the central bank don't matter much. Disruption at the top management does not mean the things won't move. There are people at the working level. Our policy has not changed.

Yes, but it does not make people very confident...

Confidence is about perception. I have been in touch with the concerned people, including international agencies, and they have not indicated that they are worried.

They may not have said that directly but how can you let a government fiddle around with an institution as important as the central bank?

There must be continuity. Something went wrong in the past but that does not mean that we continue to live with that problem. We should now worry about how the situation can be improved.

Development spending remains low and regular spending, high. Yet you still predict five-six percent growth.

Six percent growth is very possible because the non-agricultural sector has expanded and agriculture is good. Growth is not a function of public investment alone. We have a bumper crop. Exports are good, so is industrial production and the services sector. Our predictions are based on the survey of the National Accounts Division of the Central Bureau of Statistics. Development spending is only a small part of the total picture. Again, even that is not very low but at a comfortable level. Secondly, data on direct payments made by the donors to suppliers and contractors are not reflected by the treasury accounts. After those numbers come in, by year-end, you'll see development expenditure is not as bad as it appears.

You mentioned at the donor review meeting that you had reports on only about 180 projects. Why can't you make donors report on time?

The donors don't have to make reports. The reports did not come from government institutions and departments for many reasons—delays in beginning the projects or because they may not have begun to spend when the report was prepared, delays in account keeping.

The army is patrolling customs checkpoints to check revenue losses, but the central bank's recent figures show that collection isn't far off target.

The revenue target for this year is high. There are leakages and revenue policing is inadequate. We don't have as many trained people as we need. We

thought that it would be useful to make use of army personnel on secondment—to act as revenue police for the short term. The army won't be there forever and when there they will work on a rotational basis until we have our own properly trained and equipped revenue force.

But that alone does not take care of the revenue collection problem. There is large-scale income tax evasion. I have begun tightening collection and have already issued special instructions to revenue officials. We have a work plan to speed up collection and to get new taxable areas inside the net. There are also the non-tax revenues where you need to make extra efforts for collection. The revenue picture is not always clear in six-month statistics, because advance payments could have been counted.

Despite growing exports, businesses are not confident about investing. One reason is security and another is delays in duty-drawback payments.

There are problems with the duty-drawback scheme. Until last year there was no system like the one we now have. Export businesses used to import raw materials duty-free under bank guarantee. The drawback system requires them to make payments at customs points and get reimbursements later, based on the certification of the export. The problem is an insufficient budget and it will be rectified soon.

How soon?

First, we'll try to expedite the payments. Second, we expect to make some policy changes, which will take time. I can't say when the problem will be resolved but I take the concerns of the exporters seriously.

What about security, any new plans to address it?

Security remains a problem. That is why new foreign investment has been shy.

India is taking bold steps towards liberalisation. How do you plan to tell investors to come to Nepal when they may soon be getting better deals in India?

Investors get a better deal in Nepal. Why do you think they come to a small market like ours? We have to provide new foreign investors extra incentives. They will come if we have a comparative advantage.

But right now maybe we're beginning to lose that, dividends are taxed when India is slashing them...

But our corporate tax is still much lower and import tariffs are still very low. Here, everything can be imported under the open generalised licence and access to foreign exchange is easier.

Now that India is offering other advantages, such as policies dealing with labour, what changes can we expect here?

I've formed a working group to study the implication of the budgets of neighbouring countries to see how we have to cope. We are studying the implications of the Indian budget and will adjust to the new situation in appropriate ways. ♦

Where is the country heading—politically?

I hope better sense will prevail among all political forces. Nobody will benefit if we resort to extra-constitutional methods or ignore the constitutional process. That will only strengthen the hand of those forces that don't believe in the parliamentary process. Mainstream political parties should follow the letter and spirit of the constitution and resolve their differences within its framework.

Economically?

The general indicators are not bad. There is good growth, foreign exchange reserves are sound, export is satisfactory and so is growth in the non-agricultural sector. Inflation is also at a record low level. The main problem is on the finance and the fiscal side. The government's liabilities have increased tremendously, especially recurring costs. Such increase will be unsustainable over time. The wage, pension and security bills and debt-servicing obligations, and non-plan expenditure have all increased. Capital efficiency is low. Even though there has been some growth in revenue, internal resources have not been able to match growing expenses. Mismanagement of public enterprises and institutions are other problems. We need to strengthen general governance, administrative and management ability. Some of our principal exports may be facing problems very soon and new investment has to be attracted.

Last week we said you got a "low pass" from donors—some might say an achievement in these trying times. How did you manage that?

It was not a question of a "low pass"—you have been very unfair. Nepali media tends to belittle government performance and you are no exception. *(Laughs.)* The meeting was held on our initiative, not because donors wanted it. Its purpose was to understand each other better, exchange ideas and to reiterate our commitment to reforms now underway. Donors appreciated the way we have been moving. You cannot expect things to move in a mechanical way, particularly under adverse circumstances—adverse political conditions are not very helpful. The overall political development and societal situation reflects on the performance on the economic front.

We've learnt that though donors went away smiling, privately some of them are unhappy that things are not happening. How do you explain that?

Like what? Give me specific examples. People are critical about security in the rural areas. But you cannot blame a finance minister for that.

You have missed the deadlines for bank reforms and we hear the loan from IMF's Poverty Reduction Growth Fund (PRGF) has been delayed because of delay in preparing the interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper...

The PRGF has been delayed. The IMF representative told me that though all documents required for it are now ready, they need time to study them. We're on a tight schedule now. That's why we couldn't put our PRGF proposal to vote on 9 April. On our side, the preconditions for the PRGF have more or less been met. But things can't happen mechanically. You've seen the financial sector reform process, the problem of the board of directors at Nepal Bank Limited where decisions could not be taken on time. The time frame was not realistic. It has taken much longer than expected to appraise the bids for the [management of the] Rastriya Banijya Bank though people have been working day and night. Producing results is much more difficult when social and political issues are mixed up.

So do we assume that nothing has gone off the rails as yet?

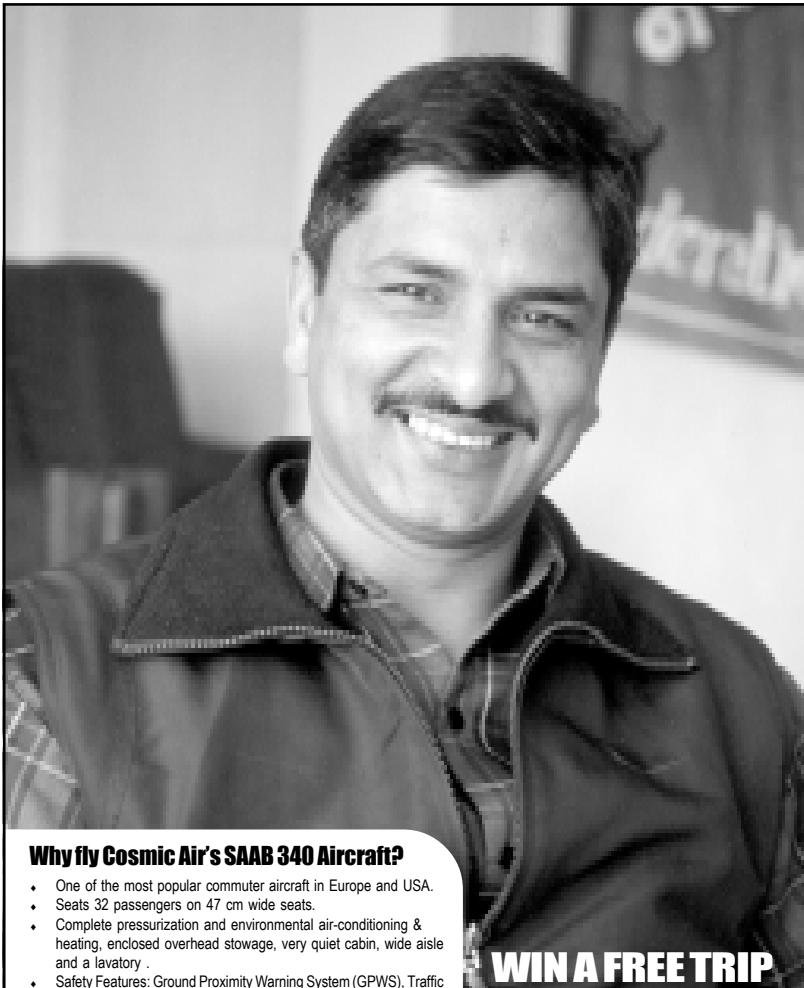
Generally, yes. The issue about deadlines not being met is nonsense. Deadlines cannot stand alone, they are influenced by social and political issues. Take the management contracts. You know the position of the trade unions, you know what the Public Accounts Committee has said and what the board of directors of the Nepal Public Limited have been doing. It took a lot of persuasion and work to get them to agree to the plan and they have nominated their representatives to appraise the bids. These issues were not anticipated while setting deadlines.

How critical are donors about missed deadlines?

We are more concerned than the donors about meeting deadlines and finishing work as soon as possible in order to produce results. For donors, often the project may be the only one they have to worry about. For us a project's failure is a failure for Nepal as a whole. It's important that we own our development programmes, because more than anybody else we want projects to work. We don't initiate projects because donors tell us to. But I accept that there are weaknesses and problems. We should have been working faster, with greater efficiency, but for this there must be commitment from all sides.

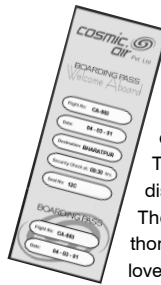
Donors have different priorities, how do you satisfy all of them when you don't even have a policy on foreign aid?

We have a policy—all donor concerns and priorities have to fit within the



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Micro-credit's mixed blessings



ALL PHOTOS: HEMLATA RAI

The notion that micro-finance is an effective means of increasing access of the poor to institutional credit and that it works for everyone, everywhere, is under increasing scrutiny.

HEMLATA RAI

It is only 6:30 am, but the 23 women members of the Kopila Saving Group of Hasuliya VDC in Kailali District have already gathered together for their monthly transactions. Today, they will deposit their compulsory monthly savings of Rs 10, pay interest on loans (of under Rs 5,000) they have taken and some might apply for further loans. They are not all literate, yet they apply for loans and repay them on their own.

This early morning exchange at Hasuliya would gladden the heart of Prof Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi economist who devised micro-finance as what has

long been tossed around as the magic tool for poverty alleviation. There are over one hundred NGOs in Nepal working with rural communities to improve their access to institutional loans. They encourage people to come in groups and collect the scattered resources available in their own villages so they can make use of those funds when the time arises.

But the notion that micro-finance is a really effective means of increasing access of the poor to institutional credit is coming under increasing scrutiny. Even people involved in micro-finance doubt if their strategy is actually reaching the bottom 5-7 percent of the poor. Their concentration on areas that are accessible and often not that poor

have not only caused programme overlaps (some women in Chitwan were found to be participating in up to three savings and credit groups), but has also limited opportunities for the rural poor. But to their credit, Nepali advocates of micro credit are at least honest in accepting that the availability of easy loans to the poor is only one aspect of reducing poverty and improving their social position, instead of projecting it is as the panacea.

Government policies are in place to encourage the micro-finance sector; the rights granted to NGOs by the Financial Intermediary Act to distribute loans to the rural poor is a rare legal arrangement found worldwide to improve access of the

rural poor to institutional loans. Another government policy requires all commercial banks to invest at least 12 percent of their total loan portfolio to priority-sector lending like agriculture and at least 3 percent of this amount must go to the deprived sector.

Yet for all of the government's interventions and the involvement of the non-governmental sector studies show that the desired results are some way from being achieved. A Nepal Rastra Bank study shows that about 80 percent of the agriculture credit is still sought from the informal sector (basically village money-lenders) where the interest rate is as high as 60 percent against about 20



percent in the formal sector and up to 25 percent in semi-formal sectors like the NGO-supported savings-credit organisations. Despite the healthy policy guidelines, the insensitiveness of banks is blamed for this state of affairs.

The Agriculture Development Bank of Nepal (ADB/N) is one of the first finance institutions to reach out to the poor. The success of its Small Farmers' Development Programme that provides collateral-free loans can be attributed to the fact that it allows both women and the very poor to avail of loans. That is significant in a country where almost 70 percent of rural farmers have less than half a hectare of land, and women don't have legal property rights.

Most of the NGOs which act as financial intermediaries and also other micro-finance institutions focus on women. Some of these genuinely want to improve women's access to micro credit, while others seem to prefer women as their target groups because a 'gender sensitive' approach to poverty reduction appeals better to donors.

Micro-finance has effectively established that women can also be sources for the expansion of family businesses, but their reliance on male family members has not been effectively reduced. Women are still dependent on their husbands, fathers and, in some cases, sons to decide if they should apply for loans. "As my husband did not give me the money I needed to deposit as my compulsory weekly saving, I

had to sell a hen given by my mother when I delivered a child," says Sanu Devi Pudasaini of Gita Nagar in Chitwan.

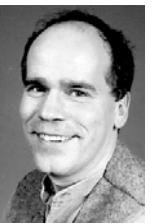
Though families rely on their women to get loans and other financial services from micro-finance institutions (MFIs), women still have to ask men for the amount they require for their group's compulsory savings and to pay the interest on loans. And, in the savings groups too, women's voices and leadership are often neglected as long as there is participation by men. On the other hand, as these loans are directed only towards agriculture-related enterprises operated from family homes, critics like economist Meena Acharya claim that micro-credit has helped the "domestication of women" in that it has increased the workloads for women.

The micro-finance sector has other problems as well. As most of the MFIs are donor driven it has created heavy dependence on donors, risking the health of micro-finance services in the country. But the phenomenon is global. The World Bank estimates that only one percent of the total MFIs in the world are sustainable, all others are heavily donor-dependent. As a way out of this dependence some of the MFIs and micro-finance intermediaries have expanded to attract funding from commercial sources.

At the same time, donors demands for a professional approach rather than a welfare-outlook is pressuring MFIs to

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



Patriarchal means poor

A place that doesn't value women's contribution and lets men get away with sloth, arrogance and general misbehaviour is doomed to deprivation and backwardness.

My wife has a simple solution to many of the world's problems, from poverty to drug addiction, crime to traffic jams. "Just shoot twenty-five per cent of the men, and then put the rest on notice, shape up or you're next," she says, usually with a waggle of a finger in someone's face. The percentage varies, according to how annoyed she is with the world's male population on that particular day.

She has a point, even if her remedy seems more likely to cause civil war between the genders rather than improve men's often ghastly behaviour. We are a rum lot, we males. We are the warmongers, the rapists, the thieves and the fundamentalist zealots. We drive our cars badly, spend huge sums of money on drugs, alcohol and tobacco and drop dead from self-induced diseases at an alarming rate. We smash property, indulge our worst emotions in the name of politics and cause trouble for others almost as a matter of course. Years of experience in the poorer parts of the globe have convinced me that there is a direct relationship between the status of women and the level of poverty in a country or society. If one is low, so is the other. It is self-evident.

A friend returns from remote western Nepal and speaks of women who work nineteen hours a day, doing all of the family labour. Men sit around, listening to radio news bulletins and debating the political situation in Kathmandu. They pay attention to their wives when they need something, ignore them otherwise. They buy booze with money earned by women. Drunk, they often beat up the very person whose earnings they've squandered. A place that doesn't value the contribution of women, and lets men get away with sloth, arrogance and general misbehaviour, is doomed to deprivation and backwardness. Patriarchal means poor. It's that simple.

The good news is that the upcoming census in Nepal will enquire into various aspects of the lot of women. For it is only awareness of the ground



reality that can lead to reform. Even the most socially blinkered cannot deny data gathered painstakingly in villages, towns and cities across the kingdom. Asking women about their lives and making that information public will lead to real change. And development won't be far behind. The

value of work done by women is classified, in traditional societies, as a social commodity, not an economic one. This includes toiling in the fields, raising children, and preparing food. Selling surplus farm produce and handicrafts are borderline "work" but nothing done by women is as important, according to tradition, as what men do.

"Little more than a pack animal" is how one activist friend describes the reality for women in west Nepal. That is probably the country's worst case scenario but even the more egalitarian places here are far from social equality and dignity. As a result, an entire society remains poor and underdeveloped. Half of the population (and the census should tell us if Nepal is still one of the few places in the world where women don't live as long as men) downtrodden, a nation wracked by poverty and underdevelopment. Some day we may discover that the two facts are not unconnected. Not just in Nepal either, but everywhere. The debate over women's property rights, now sadly obscured and possibly scuttled by the parliamentary impasse, is about more than who gets a share of the family farm. It's about human rights and modern, universal values like equality and respect for others merging with what's still relevant in tradition. Fixing what's wrong, keeping what's still right as a constant, transparent process.

What really worries me is that the slow pace of change might lead to more women thinking like my dear wife. I sometimes ask her how she would choose who lives and who, er, doesn't. "Simple," she says, usually with an unsavoury grin, "I close my eyes and go 'eenie, meenie, minie mo....'" ♦



display efficiency in credit management. Three of the bigger NGOs that have replicated Bangladesh's Grameen Bank model are already developing into development banks. But their institutional health isn't always good news for their target groups. "International experience shows that when an MFI develops into a bank, they usually shift their focus from the poor to where there is profit," says Namrata Sharma, Managing Director of Centre for Micro-Finance, an organisation working for the development of MFIs in Nepal.

The dependence of MFIs on donor money is perpetuated by the very nature of the measures these institutions adopt to overcome the shortcomings of commercial banks in serving the poor with credit. ADB/N and commercial banks are accused of being anti-poor in terms of their collateral-based lending and their non-communication with the poor. As opposed to the detached attitude of banks towards their smaller clients, MFIs approach and encourage the poor, especially women, to initiate income

generating activities and monetary transactions, and that in turn boosts their confidence in taking credit. However, this 'client confidence' is a fragile phenomenon that needs continuous backup to maintain. "The poor and the marginalised are willing to take risks, but continuous success of their investment is needed to maintain their confidence. As soon as they suspect that the credit they have taken is not yielding, they backtrack," says Harihar Dev Pant, Executive Director of Nirdhan Utthan Bank that started as a micro-credit NGO and later turned into a development bank.

But for all that, micro-credit activities are more successful in the tarai plains than in the hills. Experts point out that is because the tarai enjoys easy access to a market where micro-credit clients can get immediate returns for their products. However, that may not be the sole reason for confining micro-finance activities to the plains. The problem lies in operational technicalities as well. Since MFIs



have to have regular interactions and build rapport with their clients they look for easier modes of transportation, which the tarai offers. There is also the fact that donor agencies demand efficiency in their operation and fund management, and the hills yield slow results. Yet, they face the paradoxical situation that though their recovery rate is over 95 percent (against the ADB/N's repayment rate of 45 percent) and though they charge higher interest rates, they are still running losses. For instance, the Gramin Bikas Bank, a Nepal Rastra Bank initiative that lends only to poor women, enjoys a 98 percent rate of recovery yet suffers a fast erosion in its capital base due to a high 10 percent overhead cost.

However, the main reason MFIs are confined to the tarai is a lack of creativity. Since the majority of the NGOs working in the micro-credit sector borrow the concept and model of the Grameen Bank that was designed for Bangladesh's urban slums, they are suitable for Nepal's tarai only. So far, they have not been able to modify the concept to meet the needs of the hills although the success of the Small Farmers' Cooperatives Limited (the SFCL, which is what the Small Farmers' Development Programme becomes when the management is handed over to the local community) shows that people in the hills to are willing to take risks.

Then there are the semi-formal groups, which operate across the country but have limited outreach

and limited opportunities for expansion. Their growth is constrained by the limited financial skills of the members, unavailability of the capital needed for expansion and a lack of creativity in investment plans. None of the savings and credit organisations we met had made investments apart from issuing loans to members, although some of the groups had already collected amounts that could not be utilised by their members. Also, since generally most group members invest in similar projects, competition among them is so intense that the price of their product declines. For instance, 27 of the 31 members of Bishal Chowk Women's Community Bank in Bharatpur raised layer hens and because of that neighbouring Bharatpur Bazaar saw the price of eggs plunge from Rs 130 per crate to Rs 90.

However, the main challenge to micro-finance activities for now seems to be from the Maoist insurgency. Units of the Small Farmers' Cooperatives Limited alleging that they charge the poor high interest rates; the Nirdhan Utthan Bank has put a hold on its plan to expand to the hills because their staff have been mishandled; and the Gramin Bikas Bank has slowed down its expansion to rural areas after some of its branches were vandalised. Quite ironic that, since the Maoists are all for increasing women's participation in social life, and micro-credit was proving to be one way towards that end. ♦

BP's books

For readers who want a unique perspective on the political evolution of South Asia from 1940-1964, two books by Bishweshor Prasad Koirala, Nepali statesman and litterateur, are now available in English and in Hindi. *Atmabrittanta: Late Life and Recollections*, a 324-page memoir of Koirala's life (in English), begins with his family's exile during the Rana regime, his political sensitisation in Banares and the start of his political activism along with the luminaries of the Indian National Movement. The 260-page *Jail Journal* (in Hindi) consists of the jail diaries of BP from 1960-1964, part of the time when he was incarcerated at Sundarilal Jail after King Mahendra ousted him in a royal coup, bringing BP's brief tenure as prime minister (1959-60) of Nepal's first elected government to an end.

Both books were released by Chandra Shekhar, former prime minster of India and a long-time friend of Nepali Congress leaders, at a function in New Delhi.

Yen for Melamchi

The \$464-million Melamchi Drinking Water Project got a much-needed boost when the Japanese government committed to loan assistance of Rs 3.29 billion to provide WHO standard potable drinking water to the Valley.

The amount, from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, will be used to construct a water treatment plant near Sundarilal, where water obtained from the tailrace of the 26-km tunnel constructed under the Melamchi Diversion Scheme component, will be converted into safe drinking water, which will ostensibly cut down the high prevalence of water-borne diseases among Valley residents every year.

While donors, including the lead donor agency ADB, have agreed to extend their support, the World Bank is keeping mum about its share of \$15 million—for the privatisation of the Nepal Water Supply Corporation.



No more money

There's bad news for the country's 'political sufferers'. Sources say the Finance Ministry has rejected former prime minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai's request for additional funds for the Committee to Provide Financial Help to Political Sufferers of which he is the chairman and sole member.

Bhattarai, whose committee was to wind up its work by 2 May, has asked the Ministry for Rs 50 million to disburse to nearly 650 political sufferers before the May deadline. About 8,500 people have applied for funds from the committee since it was established in 1991.

The committee has doled out a total of Rs 170 million to 3,658 people from various parties who were either jailed, exiled or underground during the Panchayat period. Families of those killed are also entitled to the funds. Nepali Congress leaders and party workers have received the bulk of the money—more than Rs 120 million.

Over aged

Senior bureaucrats, worried about being indicted for falsifying their ages, are in a scramble to retire even as they "correct" their ages on their personal documents. As the Centre for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority investigates cases where senior government officials have reduced their ages on paper to gain a few more years in the civil services, reports say at least 300 officials have "corrected" their ages.

The Corruption Control Act 1961 says those guilty of such action can be imprisoned for 2-6 years or fined or both. They would also have to resign from their posts and forsake their pensions. Senior civil servants began reducing their actual ages on paper after the new Civil Services Act 1992 made it mandatory for civil servants to retire after 30 years of service. The Act was amended in 1999.

Outstanding achievers

The applause was resounding as Nati Kaji Shrestha and Kolli Devi Mathema accepted The Tuborg Outstanding Award—2057 amidst a glittering ceremony in the capital. Accompanying the accolades, the result of a lifetime devoted to music, was a cheque of Rs 100,000 each. A fit-looking Baikuntha Manandhar, Nepal's marathon man and Babu Chhiri Sherpa, the fastest man up Everest, shared centre-stage with the musical duo. Three-time gold medal winner at the South Asian Games, Manandhar continues to hold the Games' marathon record. Babu Chhiri, who climbed Everest in a record 16 hours and 56 minutes last spring and stayed for a record 21 hours on the summit in 1999, is in the Guinness Book of World Records.

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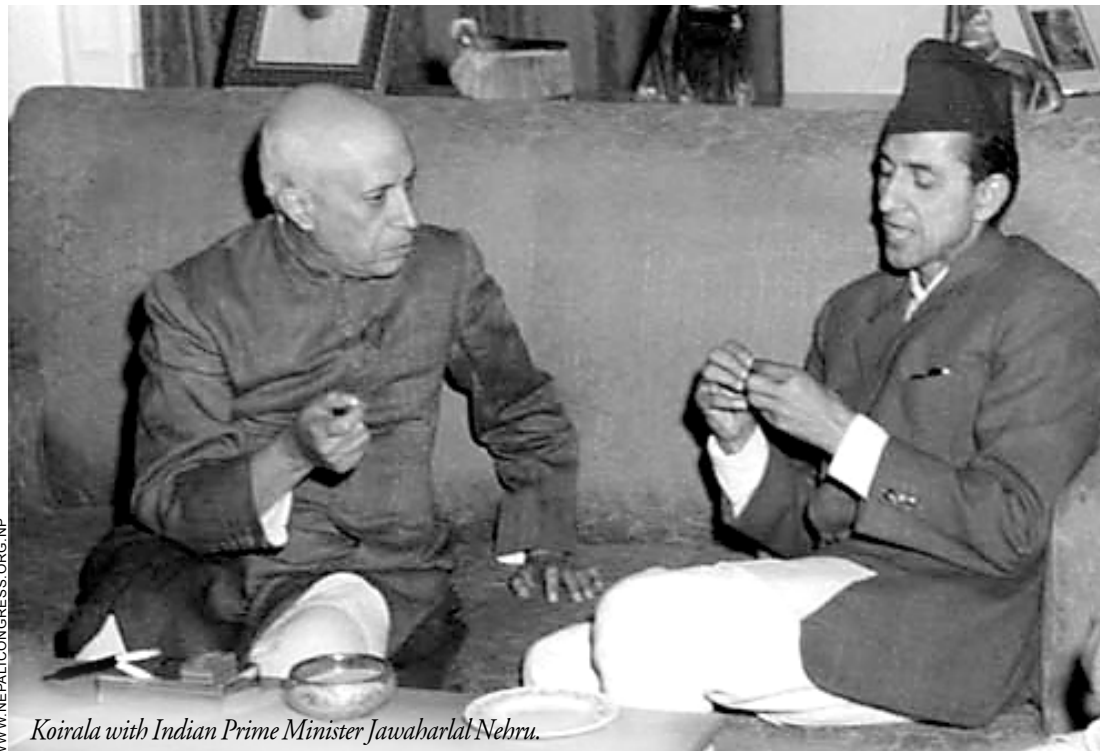
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Understanding BP



BP Koirala

To understand BP we need to de-deify him. Not subject his every move to Khrushchevian denunciation, but acknowledge that he was a human being with all the attendant foibles.



Koirala with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

"Does having something good to say about BP Koirala make us all 'Kangressi'?" you ask in your editorial (What would BP have done, #36). It is a sad commentary on the state of our politics that such a question should even be asked. However, I believe BP himself created the conditions that make the question infinitely relevant.

BP Koirala may have come as the best blend of intellect, foresight, probity and fortitude in a leader that Nepal could ever hope to see. But the fact that this attractive admixture was just too good to be true became evident early on. BP immediately established himself as a highly polarising force in Nepali politics. For a full understanding of BP and his contributions, we need to work harder to de-deify him. This does not mean that every political move he made must be subjected to Khrushchevian denunciation. The

reference point for any meaningful discussion, however, is an acknowledgement that BP was a human being with all the attendant foibles and frailties.

While discussing what BP might have done amid today's national malaise, we also have to go back to the much older debate over whether the events of 15 December 1960 would have taken place had Subarna Sumshere Rana been invited to form the government. We also cannot avoid asking ourselves whether BP's decision to return from exile in India with his national reconciliation policy in 1975 was actually the direct outcome of his understanding of the impending geopolitical changes in South Asia and the implications for Nepal. Can we really ever be confident that the national reconciliation slogan was not BP's clever exit strategy from Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's attempts to

restrict his pro-Jaya Prakash Narain activities during the Emergency.

Having met BP a few times as a student, I was struck in particular by his sharp memory. On one occasion, he simply picked up on a conversation we had had two years earlier. His personal warmth and I-fel-for-you demeanour, in my view, was in marked contrast to the nature of his politics. Was BP overly arrogant and implacably self-righteous when it came to his political convictions? I don't know whether he possessed those traits in any greater measure than most of us do. I don't think BP was so naive a politician as to deliberately let a sense of intellectual superiority pervade the discussions he held with colleagues and contemporaries. Nevertheless, there must have been something in the man that never allowed a close associate like Ganesh Man Singh to move any closer than "Koiralaji"

while addressing a leader almost every other Nepali knew by different variations of his first two initials.

Moreover, when you consider that BP's closest aides were either lifelong allies in good times and bad or the primary source of his political downfall, there are grounds to question why his aura left no room for those wishing to live in the grey area. BP succeeded in projecting himself as the man of the people, but he could not live up to the public perception that he was tailor-made for the moment. BP's rabid anti-communism, flowing from his firm conviction that no other Nepali political force could represent the true free will of the people, was a major obstacle to the full blossoming of democracy, which has left its poisonous effects to this day.

The main beneficiary of BP the anti-communist was the Panchayat

system itself. While the Nepali Congress in exile was oscillating between its policies of armed struggle and peaceful agitation, the communists were tacitly being encouraged by the panchas to expand their organisational base inside the country as a counterweight to the Congressis. The result: the panchas didn't face too many problems in turning the results of the national referendum of 1980 in their favour. I cannot abandon the belief that the best-organised communist group of the time, the Marxist-Leninists, voted in large numbers to retain the Panchayat system simply to forestall the emergence of a BP-dominated multiparty system. Since BP's early endorsement of the referendum result, over the initial opposition of important party colleagues, was guided by his willingness to compromise with the rightists than with the reds, it served to breathe new life into the partyless polity.

As the hardliners consolidated their position in what was supposed to have been a reformed Panchayat system, BP's options in reaching an accommodation were obviously limited. Although BP was too human not to have felt a sense of betrayal until the very end, he was too consummate a politician not to have understood that politics was the accumulation of deception and prevarication. I wonder what course history would have taken had BP lived at the time of the Jana Andolan. Even if he had succeeded in shedding his legendary anti-communism to join hands with the United Left Front to overthrow the Panchayat system, would the comrades have trusted him enough to go the full distance? Personally, I am still willing to believe that BP would have been Marich Man Singh Shrestha's greatest ally. His youngest brother already had one foot on the Panchayat boat and his eldest son did try his best to help the Jana Andolan Pratikar Samiti.

In terms of BP's political philosophy, democratic socialism or social democracy, however you put it,

has been at the core of Nepali political sloganeering in one form or the other from the time of Padma Shumsher. It was enshrined in the Panchayat constitution and today's ultra-rightist *pragamis* would be in no hurry to renounce it if they manage to get back to power. If the election manifestos of all political parties look the same, it's not a coincidence. Nepali political realities dictate the formulation of the same set of policies and campaign promises, albeit with wider liberty when it comes to the choice of language. That's why politics has always revolved around personalities. And that's why a clearer understanding of BP the person becomes vital to the current debate.

Going through BP's *Jail Journal* and *Atmabritantana*, one goes on a rare journey to the bottom of Nepali politics. But there are abrupt jerks that obscure a clear understanding of the man. The narratives are replete with profound contradictions and enigmas. For instance, the jailed ex-premier repeatedly refers to a supporter who, by the way serves as the palace's principal nominee in the upper house of parliament today, in highly flattering terms despite his apparent realisation that the young man may not have been acting as an intermediary in an entirely above-board manner. In doing so, BP may have been demonstrating a rare ability to appreciate a person's personal qualities in isolation from his possible motives. However, BP himself made a monumental misjudgement by failing to understand that King Mahendra, too, possessed the ability to dissect the multiple elements of one's personality and manipulate each one of them in keeping with that person's values, attitudes, needs and expectations. In the end, BP was left wondering why a king with whom he thought he had established a fairly good rapport would move not only to oust him but also subject him to the suffering of imprisonment. To many, the answer was obvious early on: it was BP's politics, not his personality, that put the king off.

BP's single-minded effort to present himself as the embodiment of the Nepali aspiration for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was perhaps his greatest drawback. This consistent effort alienated his allies in other political parties and intimidated his adversaries. More importantly, it overwhelmed his supporters in the Nepali Congress in such a way that the surname Koirala, and any proximity to it, has become the shortest cut to the top of the party hierarchy. In death, BP eventually succeeded in transforming himself into the personification of the Nepali quest for personal freedom, which, whether we like it or not, remains his greatest legacy. An ideal does not lose its intrinsic worth just because it isn't universally idolised. In this sense, you are correct: you don't have to be a 'Kangressi' to say good things about BP. ♦

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Living in fear



Many say the rampant crime in Bara and Parsa districts, the face of modern, industrial Nepal, is thriving because of an active nexus between criminals, political parties, the police and the local administration.

MOHAN MAINALI/
CHANDRA KISHORE

Dance restaurants in Birgunj do not have dances any more. There are singers who belt out songs, but the dancers are missing. It is not because no one is interested or that there are no dancers available. Until some time ago, restaurants used to be packed with all sorts of people. The local administration concluded that they were hangouts of criminals, and banned dances in the restaurants in an effort to clamp down on crime.

But has that made any difference? The police now question anyone out after 11 pm. Even those with licensed weapons are not allowed to carry them around at night. The local administration has ordered that transportation of all goods be stopped between 11 pm and 4 am, and the police have been given the right to fire on those who flout orders. The police patrol the Birgunj-Pathlaiya road at night. Yet, there is no sign that crime is decreasing in these areas. In fact, it is on the rise.

Labourers are looted in factories. Kidnapping has become common. People in Bara and Parsa live in perpetual fear since they don't know who will be kidnapped next. Even the police do not feel safe in these areas.

The Birgunj-Pathlaiya area was the most attractive place in the country to set up factories. Over 250 factories, large and small, have been set up here and they conduct billions of rupees worth of business. Over 25,000 people are directly employed in these factories. This is also the most important entry and exit point for cargo in the country, all the more now with the development of a huge dry port in Birgunj. A Trade Promotion Centre was to be set up here soon. But that is now past and the future of this once-very-

prosperous area looks bleak.

The Chief District Officer (CDO) of Bara, Dolak Bahadur Gurung, does not deny outright that crime is on the rise and slowly taking its toll. The local Superintendent of Police (SP), Shyam Krishna Tamrakar, thinks otherwise—he says the crime rate is neither very high and nor is it rising very fast. It is the nature of crimes that has become serious, and criminals have become very strong and to a greater degree than people had earlier suspected, he says.

On 3 February, a prominent local businessman, Shrawan Kumar Rungta was almost kidnapped, sending shockwaves throughout Birgunj. That came just 10 days after five dreaded criminals had been shot dead by the police in the jungle near Nijgad.

Who are responsible for these crimes? “The Maoists?” Last year, Maoists attacked installations of Surya Tobacco, Nepal Lever, Colgate-Palmolive and other multinational companies for the simple reason that these companies represented a form of “neo-colonialism”. And they had no hesitation in claiming responsibility for these attacks. It was after those attacks that the crime rate shot up, but no one believes that it is the Maoists who are behind the other crimes now taking place.

CDO Gurung says there is nothing to link the Maoists to these crimes. There have been incidents like the attack on Nepali Congress Minister Surendra Choudhary's house, but these were motivated by political reasons. People in the area like to make a distinction between such attacks and others of a criminal nature.

Umesh Chandra Thakur is director of the Triveni Group which suffered heavy damage in the past year, but he does not see a

Maoist hand in it. Industrialists Rajendra Khetan and Padma Jyoti, who have been campaigning for better security in these areas for long also say attacks on factories are not the work of Maoists. Jyoti's spinning mill was attacked thrice in the past year.

As in other places, this area too has its share of labour problems. Because of this there are those who believe that attacks on factories could be the handiwork of dissatisfied workers. But this theory has few takers. Thakur admits there is a problem between management and labourers but it is not so bad that workers would carry out criminal activities against the factories.

The border

One thing is certain—people near the border areas are the easiest and most common victims. Dacoits and smugglers from the Indian side commit crimes and escape across the porous border, making arrests very difficult. But that works both ways. Sources say that over 200 dacoits and smugglers have moved to the Nepal side and are living here under political protection. Political parties need criminals in their fold to provide muscle power and money during elections. District president of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Gopal Giri, says all political parties have criminals in their ranks. However, district president of the Nepali Congress in Parsa, Rajendra Bahadur Amatya, denies that his party shelters criminals. But when asked about the famous Indian dacoit, Tuntun Singh, Amatya admits to having heard that Tuntun is being provided political shelter.

Tuntun Singh had been living in Birgunj for the last year and a half, when, one day, people from India came on motorcycles and shot him dead on a Birgunj street in broad daylight. People from Birgunj say

Tuntun was a good friend of former Nepali Congress minister and now leading dissident, Khum Bahadur Khadka, and that Khadka had met Tuntun a few days before he was killed.

Not only Indian dacoits, people who have been sentenced to 20 years in prison also receive political patronage—among them are Asarfi, Sattan and Rajbali. District president of the UML, Ram Chandra Shah, asks how these people move around freely if they aren't protected by the ruling party. Shah says that these criminals always try to be close to the ruling party. That, however, doesn't mean that only the ruling party shelters criminals. No party is clean; it is just that criminals find it more convenient to cosy up to the party in power.

The alliance between politicians and criminals started during the Panchayat regime but has become more widespread in the years since its demise. And it is getting stronger every day. A prime example is Jalim Miya of the Nepali Congress. No one in Parsa is prepared to accept that he is even remotely a political personality, but he was at the recent Congress convention in Pokhara, representing Bara District. He is very active in the party, has a lot of political influence and knows all the Congress big guns. The point is that he is a known criminal and has several cases filed against him, but remains untouchable.

The opposition is not far behind in befriending criminals. Inar Yadav is a powerful person in the district UML. Cases are pending against him in the courts, but since he is a member of the UML, nothing can be done. Triloki Choudhary of the UML was arrested for dacoity, but all the UML did was ask him to vacate his public post. No other action was taken.



Clockwise from left: Factory guard with spear—the one-line defence against gun-wielding dacoits; dacoits killed by the police in Nijgad; and a factory in the Birgunj-Pathlaiya sector.

Everyone realises that all organs of the state, political parties and police, are hand in glove with criminals. UML's Shah says that people had met the earlier Inspector General of Police (IGP) and asked him to take action, but he refused on the grounds that these very criminals were helping the administration provide security to the people. He said the police would only take action once they started causing problems for the administration.

The police do accept that there is political interference and that this disrupts the working of the police. But locals and businesspersons are not ready to blame the police or the local administration for these problems, although that seems more because they do not want to get into trouble with the police.

Now it seems the Maoist issue too has begun to cause problems for the police. As long as the police are busy running after the Maoists, criminals have a field day. Businessmen do not see a very bright future if such a situation persists. Industrialist Khetan goes to the extent of saying that if there is no change in the situation, it won't be long before civil war breaks out.

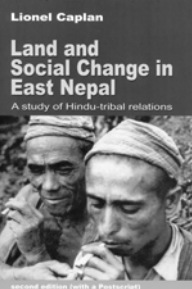
Last year, after Maoists attacked factories in the area, the business community had met local authorities and requested security for people and businesses. They even made recommendations to the government on what could be done to increase security in the country. Finally, the government is getting ready to act and has formed a committee to come up with an effective policy and take action. But since the Finance Ministry was not represented at the meeting, it seems unlikely that there will be funds to fulfil the committee's recommendations.

The easier recommendations have already been implemented in Parsa and Bara. One was to provide mobile security forces at night and to give these forces wireless sets. The cost of all this was to be borne by the private sector, but substantial improvements are yet to be seen. In fact, the problem has spread to nearby industrial areas as well.

As another dimension of the same problem, political workers from all major parties now routinely enter factories, ask for donations, beat up workers and destroy machinery. The distinction between criminals and politicians is getting blurred by the day. The politician-criminal nexus is getting stronger, and without strong and resolute action by the government, such as allowing the criminal justice system to run its course, things can only get worse in the future. ♦

(Translated from Himal Khabarpatrika, 12-26 February, by Anup Adhikary.)

NOW AVAILABLE



The long out-of-print classic *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A study of Hindu-tribal relations* by Lionel Caplan is now available in bookstores. This second edition contains a new chapter in which the author describes changes after the abolition of the *kipat* system.

A pioneering analysis of Limbu-Bahun relations that combines depths of historical understanding with intensive anthropological fieldwork. Caplan argues convincingly that cleavage between these two communities arose not so much from cultural difference as from confrontation over land. In particular, Caplan offers a valuable analysis of the *kipat* system of communal land ownership. His detailed investigation demonstrates that in east Nepal land was inextricably linked to social change, and provides essential historical background to the debate on relations between *janjatis*, caste Hindus and the Nepali State.

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DRONA RAJAURE & DILLI RAM DAHAL
THIS THOROUGH AND WELL-CONCEIVED STUDY HELPS FILL SEVERAL GAPS IN THE LITERATURE ON ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN SOUTH ASIA... ADDS TO OUR COMPREHENSION OF THAT AGE-OLD PROCESS UNDER WHICH NON-HINDU COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH ASIA HAVE BEEN SLOWLY BUT EFFECTIVELY SANSKRITISED.

LEO E ROSE

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BIZ NEWS

Mid-year economics

Consumer prices are at an all-time low and exports continue to grow. Development spending has slowed down and regular expenditure is growing faster than the pace of revenue collection. That's the summary of the central bank's seven-monthly report on economic performance.

The National Urban Consumer Price Index grew by two percent in comparison to the 4.6 percent growth in mid-February 2000. Prices were kept low by a slump in food and beverage costs, down by 2.6 percent compared to the 1.2 percent growth in the same period last year. Prices in the non-food group also grew slowly compared to mid-February 2000.

Though exports have continued to grow, the rate of growth has slowed down. The growth in mid-February was 21.8 percent compared to 41 percent in the same year-earlier period. Exports to India grew by 29 percent and sales in overseas markets by about 16 percent. The slowdown in exports resulted from a downswing in garment and carpet sales. Pashmina sales continued to grow, reaching Rs 5.82 billion in mid-February. The trade deficit has shrunk by about three percent, mainly due to a slowdown in imports.

The government spent more money up to mid-February compared with the spending last year. Most of that money was spent on recurrent expenses, mainly pensions and salaries. Regular spending shot up by almost three times the money spent on development projects. Development spending grew by about nine percent while regular expenses grew by 24 percent. The high spending and low internal revenue generation has led to a budget deficit of Rs 5.91 billion, which was plugged by issuing saving bonds and treasury bills, and foreign cash loans (Rs 2.6 billion). The government also overdrew Rs 1.8 billion from the central bank. By law, overdrafts from the Nepal Rastra Bank have to be brought down to Rs 1 billion by the end of the year.

The Balance of Payments surplus, based on numbers until mid-December 2000, was Rs 4.57 billion. Despite the narrowing of the trade gap a decline in net services income has led to a current account deficit of Rs 3 billion. The foreign exchange reserve in mid-February was Rs 106 billion, enough to pay for imports for 11 months.

Unions challenge strike ban

Nepal Independent Hotel Workers Union and the Nepal Tourism and Hotel Workers Association have jointly petitioned the court seeking an annulment of the government's decision banning strikes in hotels and tourism businesses. The government banned strikes in hotels on 15 March, the day hotel workers demanding a 10-percent service charge had begun what was to have been an "indefinite" strike. Unions say the new government rule is against the provisions of the constitution and the labour and trade union acts. The petition also claims that the right to protest is guaranteed by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and conventions of the International Labour Organisation.



New pack for Dabur's Real

Dabur Nepal has begun marketing the Real Mango Nectar, a fruit juice brand in 200ml consumer packs. The company says Nepal's market for non-aerated drinks is 0.5 million trays per year and it hopes Real Mango will help the firm get a 20 percent share of that within a year. The competitors in this segment are Frooti and Rio. Real Mango comes in 27 packs per tray and each 200ml pack retails at Rs 15. Dabur Real Mango manufactured in Nepal is also exported to Indian markets.

NIC may lose Rs 500m

The Nepal Telecommunications Corporation (NTC) says it could lose up to Rs 500 million this year because a large number of international calls are being diverted off its network by users of Internet applications. The state-monopoly says there has also been a drop even in local telephone usage (hence revenue) after the government began licensing of Very Small Aperture Satellites (V-SAT) users and service providers.

Employees at the telecom monopoly—which is in the process of being de-bundled into a group of smaller companies—say Internet Service Providers (ISPs) use V-SAT applications not just for data transfers but also for voice-telephony, a charge the Nepal Telecommunication Authority (NTA) says is unfounded. NTA adds that it has begun monitoring V-SAT usage.

The cost of a bandh

Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) says 191 incidents of bandh-like activities took place in fiscal year 2000/2001, leading to disruption in tourist arrivals for a total of 950 hours.

On average about 2,200 tourists visit Nepal during the tourism season and stay for a little over 12 days. By that count a day-long bandh affects the plans of 27,280 tourists, NTB says in an advert pleading organisers to think about other forms of protest. The tourism receipts in 1999, which was a good year, totalled Rs 11.76 billion. NTB says Nepal could lose about Rs 30 million each bandh day, a severe blow to an industry that contributes 3.5 percent of the Gross Domestic Product and 15 percent of all foreign exchange earned. The industry also employs over 200,000 people.



ECONOMIC SENSE

by ARTHA BEED

A litigious country



The world's largest economy can get away with being fond of the courtroom, not us.

One of Bhupi Sherchan's most popular poems, "Yo hallai halla ko desh", calls the country a land of rumours. An improvisation today would say "Yo muddai muddai ko sahar"—a city full of litigation.

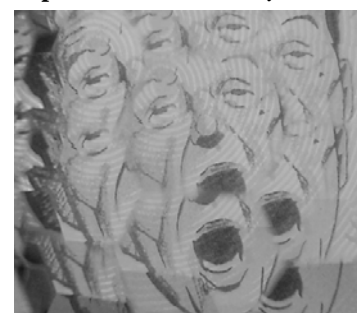
The reinstatement of Nepal Rastra Bank's governor by the Supreme Court has added another dimension to the power of litigation. A non-functioning government saddled with intra-party rivalries and inter-party feuds has resulted in the legislature becoming yet another inefficient system. The executive is practically controlled by the legislature as appointments to key posts revolve around the power centres at the legislature. An ineffectual parliament cannot make the executive work, and so everyone is now resorting to the judiciary.

Sustaining business and economic activities and encouraging their growth requires a suitable, conducive environment. The strength and core competence of business lies in doing business, not in getting into legal entanglements. Currently there are scores of issues of national and economic importance that are awaiting the verdict of courts. The hotel owners went to court, and now labour is fighting a legal battle. The dealers of Indian vehicles who understand only the nuts and bolts of automobiles are deep in a judicial saga. It has been months since they've

been able to conduct business. The cellular licence holder is also concentrating on understanding the towers that is the judiciary rather than communications towers. Writs and petitions have now become the Nepali way of operating.

The sad fact is that the judiciary, which has thousands of cases to handle, is often pressurised to hear cases of national importance. Due to the stringent time lines they are presented with, they have to give preference to such cases over and above others pending. So, now we're even interfering in the work of the judiciary. Hundreds of our citizens face problems now, as the courts are forced to spend their time on issues of "national importance" at the expense of their duty to serve the common person.

Historically, our society has loved litigation. This has generally been associated with the division of ancestral wealth and stories of long drawn-out legal battles between brothers or with uncles remain an important facet of our society. Citizen



groups and other socially accepted bodies decide such cases. This habit of getting into litigation for even little issues is embedded in our national psyche and being replicated on a national level. Every day there are more cases being filed in courts across the country.

The world's largest economy can get away with being fond of the courtroom, but too many instances of legal battles in our case may not give the right signal to business and foreign investors. Fighting things out in court must be taken more seriously than it is now—and be only the last resort. To reduce the instances of the legal mess, it is important that before any act is promulgated a thorough study be made to anticipate and iron out provisions that might prove contentious. For instance, there is a case pending which will decide whether the two percent Tourism Service Charge is applicable also to Nepali citizens, because domestic tourists do not come within the ambit of the legal definition of tourists. All that is needed to avoid such situations is proper homework.

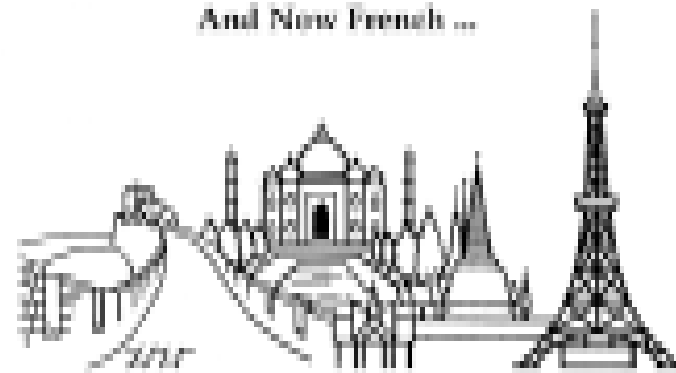
The legislature must function and the executive must be alert, the judiciary should be the last resort. If the judiciary is going to be the form of governance, then the legislature might as well allow the courts to run the government and the country. ♦

Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com

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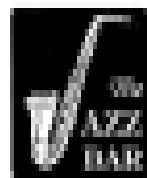
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Orchid power

Orchids could prove to be the backbone of Nepal's floriculture industry.

SALIL SUBEDI

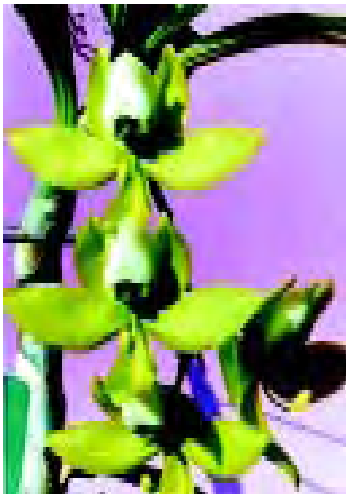
If you have only marvelled at the rhododendrons in bloom, you've probably missed the orchids. These epiphytes and terrestrials, rather innocuous looking for most of the year, are on their annual bloom, and

Dendrobiums, Oncidium, Phalaenopsis, Paphiopedilums, Vanda, and Renon. "Local orchids have definitely gained a foothold in the market compared to imported ones in the last two years," says JB Tamang at the Cut

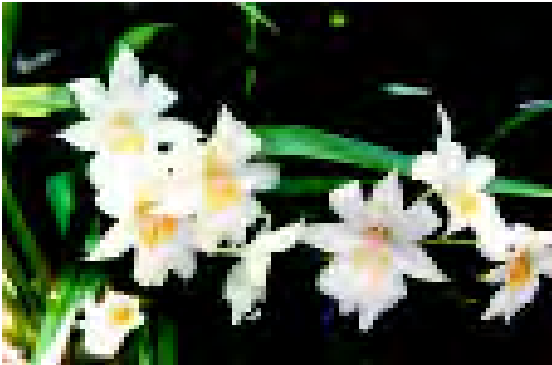
Herbarium and Plant Research Centre in Godavari has been conducting experiments on tissue culture propagation. The results have

dealers in Thailand, Korea, Taiwan and Japan and Nepal's chamber of commerce has also identified the Middle East, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan as possible export markets. Entrepreneurs say that all it now requires is a committed collective effort. "We are looking for ways to start a joint venture to tap the international market for our flowers," says Rai. The sixth annual floriculture exposition this year, at the end of April, will have foreign investors and floriculturists participating, he says. But before going international, the industry needs basic requirements like cold store and transportation facilities, a good marketing strategy and financial assistance for floriculturists. Though the horticulture industry has received priority, entrepreneurs

say government policy is not clearly defined. Unlike for other agricultural enterprises, there are subsidies for transportation and packaging floriculture products but most entrepreneurs say this hasn't really impacted businesses, which are usually small scale. A fund set aside by the government to grant loans of up to Rs 25,000 to floriculture entrepreneurs has also not been really effective. "Even for a small loan one has to go through a lot of legal hassles like bank guarantees, approvals and so on," says Standard Nursery's Shrestha. Most flowering plants and flowers were brought in to Kathmandu from Darjeeling and Kalimpong. "Now the floriculture industry has developed so much we



can even cultivate new hybrids of exotic plants like orchids. Now all we need is a culture that appreciates and understand the aesthetics of plants and flowers like orchids," says Shrestha of Standard Nursery. ♦



Nepal boasts an estimated 450 varieties of *sunakburi* from the plains up to an altitude of 2,500 m. About 350 are classified as ornamental orchids, but only 20 percent of these slow-growing perennial herbs are grown, collected and sold—in the 150 or so nurseries registered with the Floriculture Association of Nepal (FAN).

But orchids are slowly becoming popular in Nepal, and efforts are on to try and market them systematically. Floriculture in general has grown hugely in Nepal in the last 15 years. "It is definitely encouraging. It has not even been a year and I have a good market. At least one in ten people asks about orchids. It has to do with a growing interest in exotic flowers," says Usha Rimal, who has a nursery in the Balaju industrial area.

But there's a difference between asking and buying, and the market for orchids hasn't really grown significantly. "People prefer cheaper and easily available cut flowers like carnations, gladioli and roses," says Jyoti Pradhan of Women in Floriculture (WIF), which has an outlet in Kamaladi. Mid-January to mid-May is the orchid flowering season in Nepal, but it is uncertain how much the market will pick up this year. The president of FAN reasons: "They require time and are difficult to grow. And since orchids haven't gained mass appeal, nurseries don't see immediate returns."

Orchids are also more expensive than other flowers—an orchid stem with flowers can cost up to Rs 100, compared to Rs 20 for a cut rose. It means that only people with a real passion for the flower will buy it. "Normally people who buy flowers don't care whether it's an orchid or something else as long as it looks beautiful and fresh," says Santosh Ballav of Wizard's Fresh Flower Shop in Kamaladi. That said, it isn't much of a risk to stock orchids, and it does make good money-sense to buy them, as they keep their bloom for about a month in favourable circumstances. The most popular varieties here are Cymbidiums, Cattleyas,

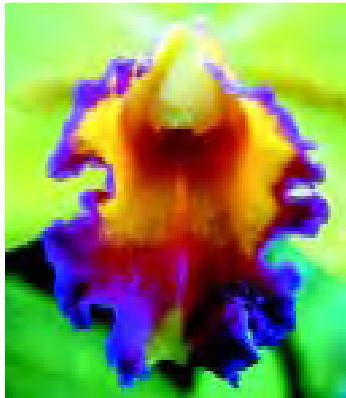
Flower Wholesale Market facilitated by FAN. This reflects an increasing capacity of Nepali nurseries to produce better quality flowers. The drawback is time-consuming growth and a yearly bloom, and so imports bring in profits without much effort. "But imported orchids can bring in diseases that harm vegetables, citrus and deciduous trees and plants," remarks Basudev Karmacharya of the National Herbarium and Plant Research Centre in Godavari. "We must produce enough for the local market and slow the rate of import," he adds.

Experts say that in the long run ornamental plants like orchids could be the backbone of the floriculture industry, especially with a good international marketing strategy which ensures that local people also benefit. If orchids at a city florist's cost a bit, locals now use *sunakburi* as fodder for their cattle. FAN president Rai is positive about the prospects for orchids and other flower exports from Nepal. "We don't have any special programme for promoting orchids in particular. But we're optimistic about the growth of the flower business and orchids will play an important role," he says.

Nepal, at the moment, is at a vantage point in terms of meeting the international demand for orchids as most countries have stopped exports to prevent extinction of some species and to prevent hybridisation and the dilution of others. It's been three decades, for instance, since India banned exports. Most of India's orchids are found in the tropical forests of the north-east and the western ghats, and indiscriminate extraction for export had put several species on the threatened list.

Until locals don't see a profit from the plants they now feed their cattle, they don't see conservation and propagation as livelihood options. Government efforts in identification, documentation and conservation too have been feeble, and it is only through initiatives of private nurseries that orchids are being preserved and marketed. However, the National

been implemented by the Department of Plant Resources to regenerate over 50 species of orchids. Nepali enterprises have established links with large Asian orchid



Nepali kayakers go exploring



PICS: RAM HARI SILWAL/DHRUBA SHRESTHA

A team of four Nepali kayakers explored the Likhu Khola in Okhaldhunga last month. This was the first time that a river in Nepal was explored by Nepalis. The river is extreme and only for experts. With a put-in at 1,700m and finish at 400 m, it is one of the steepest rivers ever run in Nepal. It was an unforgettable experience for all involved.

Ram Hari Silwal, the leader of the expedition, grew up next to the Trisuli river where he started his rafting career at twelve. He is now twenty-five and is one of the most experienced raft-guides and kayakers in Nepal. Kayaking has taken him to ten different

countries where he's been on serious expeditions. Late last year he kayaked the well-known grade IV Dudh Kosi, with an international team. With all this experience behind him Ram has the confidence to explore Himalayan rivers, and wants to inspire other Nepali kayakers to do the same.

The other kayakers on the expedition were Dhruba Shrestha, Binaya Lama and Indra Thapa. They are all river-guides and amazing river runners. This team has worked together on Himalayan rivers over the years. They know each other's skills, they've been in challenging situations on the river together and are good friends—an ideal team for the expedition.

Achyut Gautam, a raft guide who grew up in Leti, a small village close to the Likhu Khola, and I walked the trails along the river valley. Gautam planted the seed of this expedition in Ram's mind—without him, it wouldn't have happened.

The expedition took ten days. We started from Kathmandu 15 February, taking the local bus to Jiri. From there we walked along the Everest Base Camp trail for two days to our starting point in Kenja. Two porters carried the four kayaks and in every village they were asked what they were carrying. Some thought they were submarines, and one person guessed they were flying machines. Some people

Four Nepali kayakers just explored the Likhu Khola for the first time. INKA TROLLSAS, who walked the valley trail alongside them, believes more such expeditions are needed.



remembered having seen such boats before, when a few foreigners came along this route on their way to explore the Dudh Kosi.

The team was terribly excited and couldn't wait to get to the river. None of them had seen it before, and no one had any idea what it would be like. The expedition's knowledge of the river came from maps and advice from people from the area. At Kenja, the river looked great for kayaking. Ram and his team had picked the perfect time of the year for the expedition.

It took five days to get down to the confluence of the river with the Sun Kosi. The first three days were very difficult. The river is steep, and the many landslide areas in the valley made both the kayaking and the walk challenging. Many of the rapids were dangerous and a lot of them were not navigable—the team had to walk around them. Other parts of the valley were beautiful, with romantic gorges, waterfalls and caves. The next two days were an easy paddle down the river, and the trails along it also became less dangerous.

The expedition was self-sufficient, which meant that sleeping bags, shelter, first aid, food, cooking pots, etc, were carried in the boats. The boats

were heavy and very difficult to control, and it was only the expertise of the team that averted many possible accidents. It would have been impossible to fit enough food in the boats for the whole trip, so we camped close to

villages where we could get some food. The people around the Likhu Khola were extremely friendly and helpful.

The river trip ended in Harkapur, where to our surprise the army had just finished building a road. This was good news—no more walking, and navigating the way back would be someone else's responsibility. Twenty-three hours, a breakdown and a minor crash later, the bus arrived in Kathmandu.

There's much scope for future expeditions by Nepali kayakers, and they are necessary if the rafting industry is to grow. In the high season the rivers are positively crowded. There are "traffic jams" on the upper Bhote Kosi—inevitable when a couple of hundred tourists are rafting the river the same day. There are thousands of unexplored rivers in this county and plenty of kayakers to do it.

What is needed for future expeditions is financial support. It will be in the interest of rafting companies and the Nepal Tourism Board to support Nepali kayakers in exploring their own rivers. The Likhu Khola expedition cost Rs 45,000, and 80 percent of this was funded by the kayakers themselves. ♦

Do dams really threaten rafting and kayaking in Nepal?

Economically Nepal might be a poor country but in terms of natural water resources, Nepal is the second richest country in the world after Brazil. The masses of fresh water that run through the country is an important resource and can be used in many ways. The first that most people think of is the construction of hydropower projects. People talk about the possibility of generating enough electricity to not only meet Nepal's needs, but also to export it, which will earn the country much-needed foreign exchange.

Kayakers and people in the rafting industry almost uniformly oppose such suggestions. There are even petitions going around Thamel demanding that dam-building be stopped. It seems to me that signing such a petition is like saying there should be no development work in Nepal.

The Likhu Khola expedition showed us what the building of a dam means to many people in remote parts of Nepal. It doesn't only mean electricity. It means that a road will be built to their village. And with a road comes the possibility of getting to a hospital without walking for days, or getting work in different places, getting newspapers and being connected with other people in ways that are difficult now.

What if rafting and electricity companies were to work together? It might sound crazy but it could be possible. There's a perfect—and most likely unintentional—example by the Leti Bridge on the Likhu Khola. There are plans to build a dam on a 3-km stretch where rafting and kayaking are impossible. Downstream of the dam, rafting will remain an option. Of course, such an undertaking will be very difficult, but it isn't impossible.

—Inka Trollsas

pepsi

Inka Trollsas is xxxx

Shooting Nepal's rapids

JANAKI GURUNG
Adventure tourism in Nepal has gone through many fads. Today there is bungy jumping, para-gliding, hot-air ballooning and even skiing down Everest. But back in the 1960s, when organised trekking was just beginning, some of those who had to plod through semi-tropical valleys on their way down from the mountains thought it might be fun to sit in rubber rafts and take a ride down Nepal's wild rivers. For many years, it just remained a wistful dream—no one could actually drum up the courage to get into the raging uncharted torrents in flimsy inflatables.

One person who wanted to give it a try was Col John Blashford-Snell of the British Army who at that time was commissioned by Emperor Haile Selassie to find a better way to get ore from the gold mines of the Blue Nile to the more accessible roadheads in Ethiopia. Shooting the rapids of the Blue Nile in inflatables in 1968, Col Snell and his team found out the hard way that it was difficult enough to get out of those rapids alive on a raft, even without being laden with gold. Then in 1974, Col Snell was asked by some adventurer friends to bring one of his Blue Nile rafts to Nepal to see if he could use them here. Sure enough, they were brilliant, and the roller-coaster ride was so thrilling the team returned the next year to shoot the Trisuli. There were no trained Nepali rafters in those days, so the expedition used the only people who were game: Sherpas. Recalls Snell: "Sherpas are great climbers, but the trouble was, they couldn't swim. They said we'll climb Mt Everest anytime, but this is madness."

The Trisuli rafting expedition of 1975 went so well, and it was there that the history of white water rafting in Nepal can be said to have begun. Snell remembers one Christmas Eve when their raft capsized on the Narayani and they were beached next to the river. They were celebrating with a Christmas feast of biscuits and Khukri Rum, when shepherds

came down from the surrounding mountains and invited them to their homes. "It was particularly apt that shepherds should come down to rescue us on Christmas Eve, and it was the best dal bhat I have ever tasted, then or since," he recalls.

From such humble beginnings, the rafting industry today has grown beyond recognition. The Nepal Association of Rafting Agents (NARA) says some 26,000 people went on organised white water rafting trips in Nepal in 1999, and this number is growing by about 15 percent a year. The Association says rafting today



Col John Blashford-Snell

makes up about a quarter of the tourism-generated revenue and employs over 2,000 Nepalis. Some of the larger NARA members can earn as much as Rs 6 million annually.

Autumn is the best season for rafting because the rivers are still high with the monsoon run-off. February-May is also good because of melting snow. Most rivers in Nepal are Class III-IV, which in the international classification for rafts and kayaks is moderately difficult. Depending on the remoteness and the difficulty of a river, costs can vary. A two-day rafting trip along the Trisuli can be as low as \$70, while a nine-day trip on the Sun Kosi can cost \$ 350.

But there are problems: the proliferation of fly-by-night rafting companies has brought down standards and profit margins. Security is a concern, too. But the longer-term threat to white water rafting is the inevitable trend towards building hydroelectric power plants along Nepal's rivers. Already, the



ULTIMATE DESCENTS

"The Sherpas said we'll climb Mt Everest anytime, but this is madness."

fabulous rapids of the Marsyangdi have been blocked by the reservoir and intake areas near Abu Khairani. Mid-sections of the Kali Gandaki, after it takes its great swing eastwards, will never be the same again for rafters with the commissioning next year of the 144-megawatt Kali Gandaki A Project.

But there are organisations like the Nepal River Conservation Trust, headed by Megh Ale, one of Nepal's foremost professional rafters. The Trust organises development projects, livelihood activities and water supply systems for villages along rivers. Col Snell is happy that organisations like the Nepal River Conservation Trust and other professional rafting agencies are turning their attention towards conservation. "It's good the initiative to create awareness about the potential benefits of white water rafting has come from within Nepal."

Chhedyup Bomzan of Drift Nepal says he does not oppose dams, but if rivers are blocked there will be no rafting. Says Bomzan: "We may not be the biggest contributor to tourism, but if rafting is hit, other businesses will also be affected."

Col Snell says the trend in Nepal is towards run-of-the-river schemes and not high dams, which offers hope: "A hydropower plant will block off certain areas of the river, but the river still has to flow, and there can be special provisions for rafters."

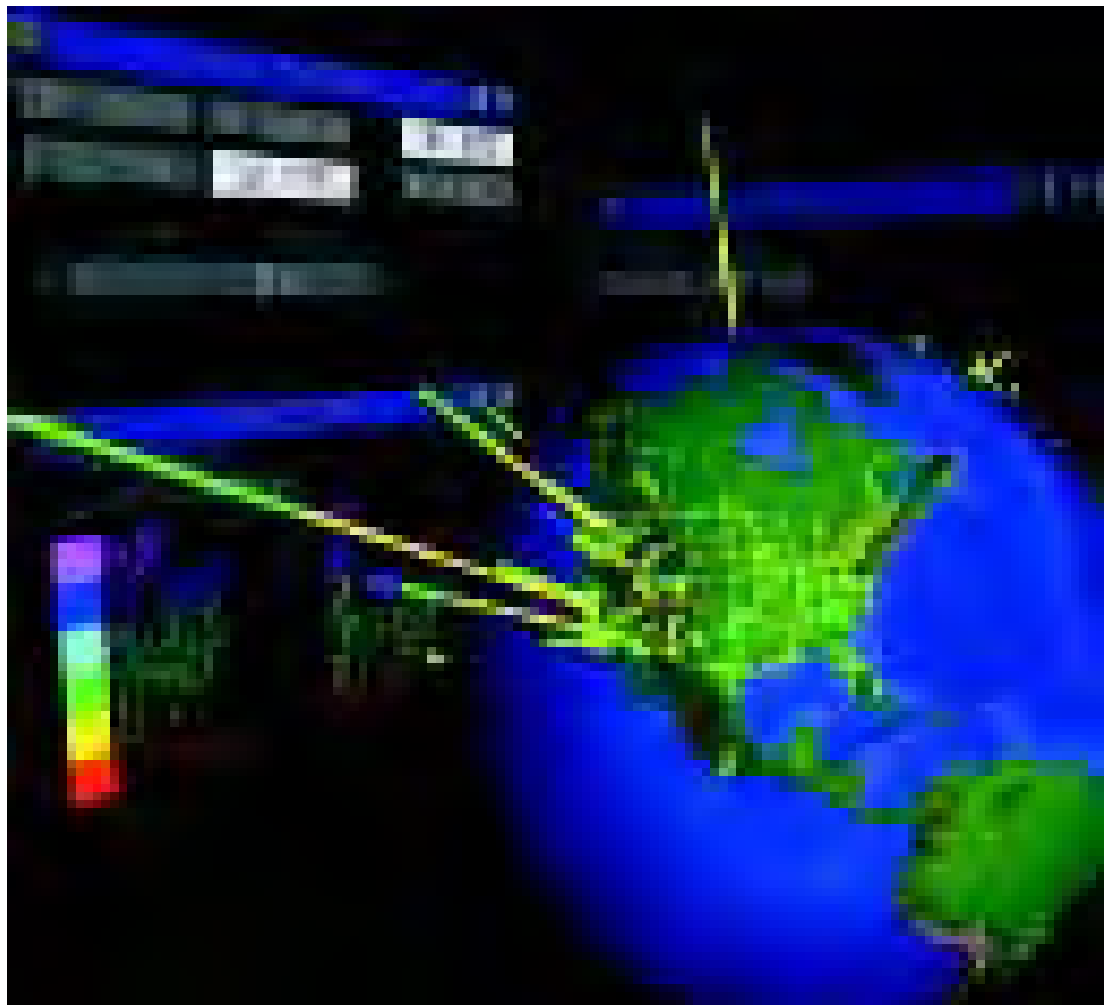
Col Snell is now chairman of the England-based Scientific Exploration Society, which conducts ecological and conservation exploration in various parts of the world, including a study of Bardia's wild elephant population. ♦

WAVE



ULTIMATE DESCENTS

Mapping the Internet



The geographers of the Net claim the task of mapping the web is as complicated as unravelling the human genome.

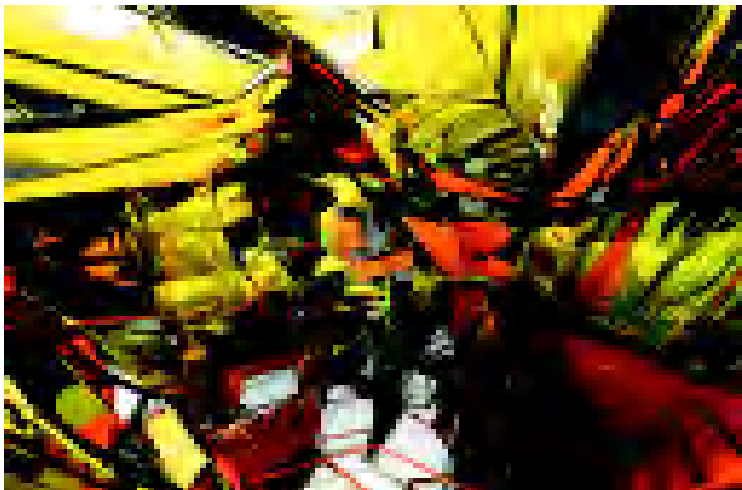
TIM GUEST

We call it the web, but is that the right description? What does the Internet look like? A British company working on the problem it calls "linkrot" (the estimated 10% of all hyperlinks that lead nowhere) decided the only way to tackle the issue was to map the entire web. Using 40 separate one-terabyte

servers, LinkGuard is close to completing the map, which it compares in complexity to the human genome. It claims the map will allow people to examine for the first time how clusters of websites link and interrelate. But this is not the first attempt to map the Internet. Many others have worked on the problem, right from the first sketch of a single

Arpanet node in 1969 (See www.cybergeography.org/atlas/arpanet1.gif). The issue is not as simple as it might sound: after all, what is the Internet? Is it the cables? The servers? Or something less tangible? At www.cybergeography.org/atlas, Martin Dodge, author of *Mapping Cyberspace*, curates a museum and gallery with a huge range of approaches, from conceptual atlases through geographical charts to maps of individual websites and surfing patterns. The most immediately fascinating are the range of artistic interpretations at www.cybergeography.org/atlas/artistic.html. Scrolling down, it is clear how much these works of art have shaped the way we picture information-space. From the familiar, pioneering light-cycles and Master Control Program of Tron, the classic science fiction film, and later glittering green information-corridors in *The Matrix*, it also reveals startling discoveries such as hybrid actual-virtual constructions of 'transarchitect' Marcos Novak. Breathtaking towers of information are grafted on to actual glass, steel and light at www.centrifuge.org/marcos.

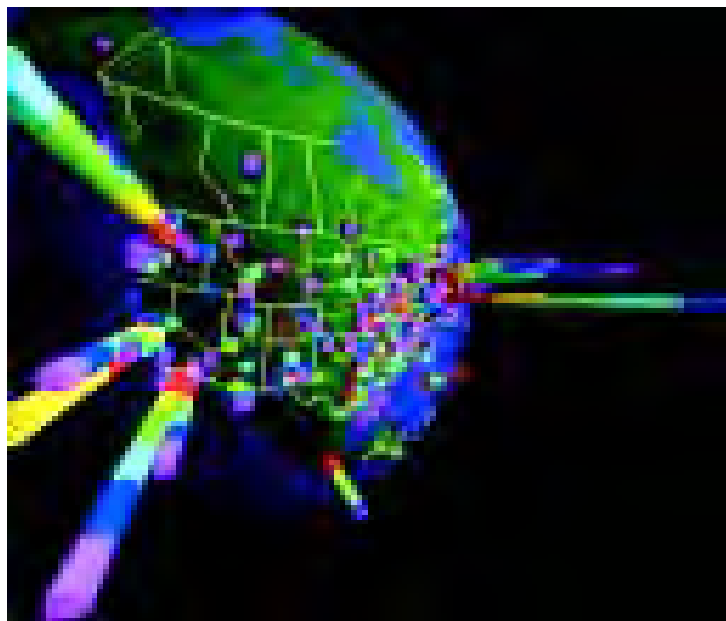
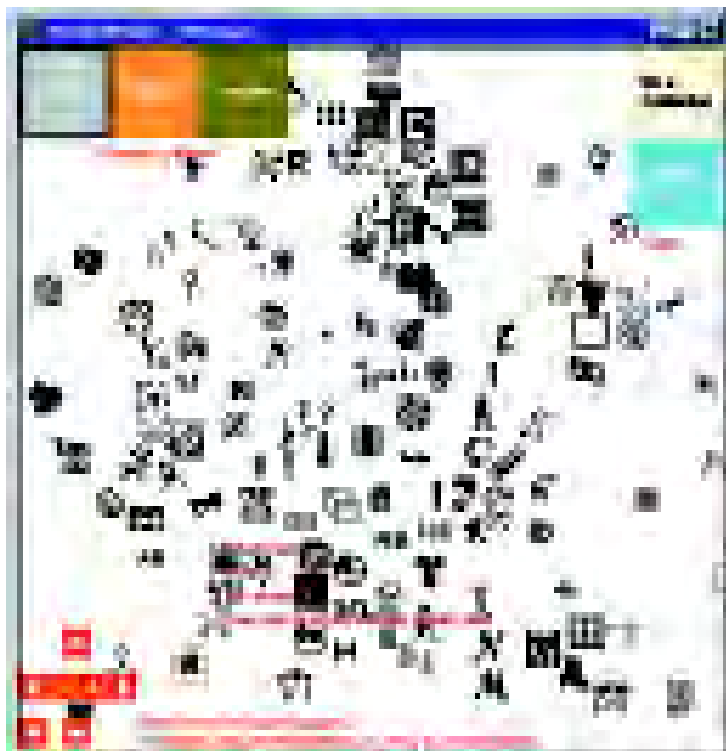
The site also reminds us that the concept emerged from a much older imagination-technology: the book. When William Gibson first described console cowboys jacking into cyberspace, it sounded much more thrilling than the reality of what we now know of as browsing HTML pages. Researchers are exploring ways of returning to the drama of Gibson's vision by modelling the Internet as a world unto itself. At <http://map.net> you can explore an internet web directory mapped on to a 3D visual landscape—a kind of Luke Skywalker buzzes Yahoo!ville. How long it will be before games companies extend their interfaces



to let you browse the web and shoot your friends at the same time? Games are, of course, already blossoming into virtual worlds: so much so that online geographers have started to map them. At <http://awmap.vevo.com> is a fascinating series of satellite images of the development of Alphaworld, a truly virtual 3D world constructed entirely by its members. What's

most interesting about the pictures, given that the members are able to build the landscape in any way they choose, is how much these top-down images resemble the street-plans of real cities. Gibson's far-reaching vision was surprisingly simple: a city made from light. But there are plenty of people who see no reason why cyberspace should look like our experience of

the real world. Artists such as Mark Napier of art collective Potatoland have developed interfaces that stray as far as possible from the everyday conception of the internet. Shredder is a net-art feature that takes a web page of your choice and mashes it up into something else entirely. It's also possible to combine approaches: to trace the connectivity of the internet over a geographical map of the world as we have pictured it since Magellan. At www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/casa/martin/internetspace/gallery.html images from Martin Dodge's own work are shown on the geographical locations of IP address density, in the UK and elsewhere: a visual illustration of the epicentres of the new economy. His gallery also points to http://socrates.berkeley.edu/%7Ezook/domain_names/ to view images from Matthew Zook's work on domain name ownership by geographical location. The visual awkwardness of some of these maps echoes the difficulties solved by Harry Beck in the 1930s, when he revolutionised the map of the London Underground by fudging the actual locations of the stations. Certainly the prettiest maps of the Internet are those that have nothing to do with where the websites are based: Bell Laboratories and the Cooperative Association for Internet Data Analysis have some of the most colourful examples. The real beauty of all these maps is that they tell us that despite the garish colours, over-use of Flash animations and misspelt text, the web is still full of the future. ♦ (Guardian)



The return of Dr Strangelove

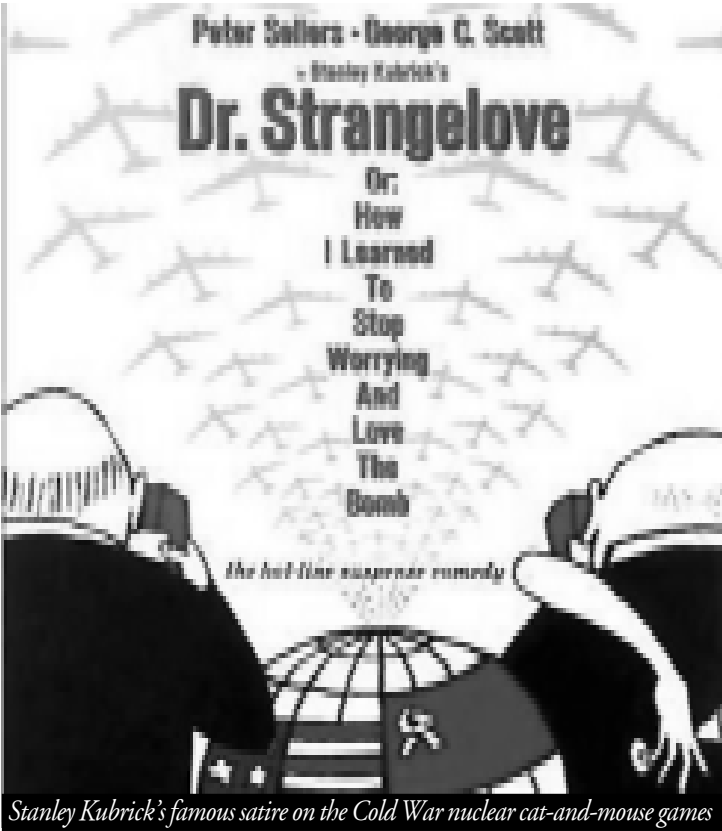
ABID ASLAM IN WASHINGTON

The news evoked the Cold War years. An American FBI agent arrested in the woods near Washington for passing secrets to Russia. Within weeks, the White House and Kremlin announce tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats.

It even eclipsed the sensation caused by *13 Days*, a rare political film from Hollywood, released earlier in the year, about the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Russia under Krushchev was said to be positioning nuclear warheads minutes' flying time from Washington. It nearly took the world to the brink of a nuclear war. But the Cold War is over. So why pick a fight with Russia?

So what if the Soviet Union no longer exists, says George Friedman, founder of Stratfor, an intelligence-gathering firm—suspicion between the former rivals lives on. “On the one hand, Washington and Moscow are collaborators, building a new, liberal Russia, part of the US-led international system. On the other hand, the espionage war continues unabated.” US President George W Bush, he adds, is saying “that Russia, as a power with dependencies on the United States, should not engage in espionage efforts of this magnitude.”

Former Russian Prime Minister



Yevgeny Primakov counters that the US “cannot do without Russia. This is why it is impermissible to talk to us as if we were a banana republic.” Russian dependence on the US has declined—“investment is no longer flowing into Russia, Russian motivation to please the United States has declined,” Friedman notes.

President Vladimir Putin is trying to reassert Russia’s influence in international affairs, primarily in its former states. He has also vowed to clinch new arms deals with Iran and oppose US plans for a national missile defence system. Putin, a 20-year KGB veteran, welcomes EU efforts to develop a defence capability

Fifty Russian diplomats have been expelled, old Cold War warriors are returning to key positions in the cabinet. Just bluster, or is a chill wind really sweeping through Washington?

independent of the US-dominated NATO and wants to expand Siberian oil and gas exports to Europe. “An argument in Russia is that Putin represents the only effective, functioning entity in Russia: its intelligence and security apparatus,” says Friedman. “Washington may be signalling that it knows all about Russian espionage... and that Putin is not nearly as clever as is supposed.”

Other experts say Bush is trying to distance himself from his predecessor’s preference for avoiding quarrels in the hope of keeping Russia on track to the US free-market model. After a reasonable interval Bush’s policy might look quite similar to Clinton’s. Similar conjecture surrounds Bush’s other foreign policy challenges, including Iraq, the Korean peninsula, and China and Taiwan. Bush’s initial noises are belligerent, to show—as one Democratic Congressional aide puts it—“we’re tough, we’re really, really tough.”

A mellower future aside, some in Washington worry about Bush’s sub-cabinet appointments. His latest nominees for key posts include John Negroponte, as US Ambassador to the United Nations, and Otto Reich, to head the State Department’s Latin American operations. Both are veterans of former arch-conservative President Reagan’s partly covert war against Nicaragua’s left-wing Sandinista government in the 1980s. They avoided prosecution when Reagan’s successor, Bush Sr, pre-empted investigations of the so-called Iran-Contra affair, in which weapons were illegally sold to Iran and the money used to fund anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

If the US Senate confirms their appointments, the men will join what Foreign Policy in Focus (FPIF) calls a “rogues’ gallery” of political and intelligence operatives with shady pasts. The appointments are seen as intended to isolate moderates like Secretary of State Gen Colin Powell, who also figured in the Iran-Contra scandal. In contrast to Vice-President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—Nixon-era foreign policy hawks—Powell supports continuity with Clinton’s foreign policy and shows no enthusiasm for the national missile defence system.

White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer says Bush’s actions reflect a new “realism” in US foreign policy. To the casual observer, that “realism” might seem redolent of the Cold War nuclear cat-and-mouse games famously satirised in Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 *Dr Strangelove*—a mad scientist keen to drop a nuclear bomb over Russia. Some Russians see Washington’s stance as an excuse to abandon the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Bush says he will abrogate the pact if Russia doesn’t agree to changes allowing Washington to build a national missile defence.

Defence Secretary Rumsfeld has twice called Russia a “proliferator” of nuclear arms—rhetoric not heard from such a senior US official since the end of the Cold War. Bush also reportedly plans to slash funding in 2002 for US programmes that help pay for the safekeeping and destruction of Russian nuclear weapons. Critics see the funding cuts as risking an irreversible shift from cooperation to confrontation on disarmament issues. Dr Strangelove, we presume? ♦ (Gemini)

Mutiny island, tourist bounty

ANTHONY BROWNE

For more than 200 years it has been famed as one of the most remote communities in the world. Its legendary history has inspired several films. Its population of 42, all descendants of the mutineers of the Bounty, only have contact with the outside world through the occasional passing ship, mail that comes once every two months and a single satellite telephone.

There is no harbour, no landing strip, and their nearest neighbours are almost 1,300 miles to the east. It has a courthouse that has never seen a trial and a prison that is used for storing three life jackets. But now Pitcairn Island, a volcanic outcrop girdled by crashing cliffs and surrounded by untouched coral atolls has voted to end its isolation and join the outside world. Islanders have agreed to let a New Zealand construction consortium turn it into a major tourist destination, with two airports, its own airline, a four-star hotel and two lodges.

Tourists will be tempted by the empty beaches on the uninhabited atolls, lagoons, scuba diving, the UNESCO world heritage site of the nearby bird sanctuary island of Henderson, and the rusty anchor of *HMS Bounty* in the capital Adamstown. But most will probably come just to gawk at the locals and soak up the legend.

Though welcomed by most islanders, environmentalists warn the development could devastate the island’s unique plant and animal life. Mayor Steven Christian, a descendant of chief mutineer Fletcher Christian said: “The community decided to go ahead and see what happens. It shows that someone out there is thinking of us, and giving us a hand along in the world. We hope



First Mate Fletcher Christian led his rebels to isolated Pitcairn Island in 1790. Two centuries later their children hope to rejoin the world.

something good comes out of it.”

The plans, by Wellesley Pacific, involve an international airport with a 1,200-metre runway on the island of Oeno, one of the last undisturbed coral atolls in the world. Two aircraft would connect it to Tahiti and New Zealand. Oeno would have a four-star hotel with 30 beds. There would be a second runway on Pitcairn itself, and two lodges. Changes would be made in Bounty Bay so that boats can land, and Pitcairn would have a small fishing industry with a processing plant. Roads would be improved, sewage and water systems installed.

Wellesley has demanded exclusive development rights for the islands, but says it will give the inhabitants 10 percent of profits. Its development brochure says: “Difficult and expensive access has made involvement in a larger and exciting world almost impossible. The wonderful hospitality, humour, courage, personality and sense of community of these people must not be detrimentally affected.

Theirs is a way of life that is unique and an international treasure.” The company has promised to have no more than 30 visitors at any one time.

Executives from Wellesley held two meetings with islanders, the first of which was hostile. By the second, the islanders were more welcoming. The deputy governor of Pitcairn, a British official based at the High Commission in Wellington, New Zealand, visited the island to talk over the impact of the plans. In the referendum last week, 22 adults voted in favour, and only six against, most of them older people concerned about the impact of tourism.

But most islanders are worried the community will soon become unviable if nothing is done. The population has dwindled from around 230 in the Second World War. The island used to be a regular stop-off point for ships and made money selling handicrafts. But the decline of liners and growth of air transport has left Pitcairn even

more isolated, with just three visiting passenger boats in 1997.

It earns foreign currency by selling Pitcairn stamps, which used to be popular with collectors. But now collecting has fallen out of fashion. Pitcairn children usually go to school in New Zealand when they are 16—and increasingly they refuse to return to the island way of life. Christian said: “Pitcairn is on its last legs. If anything can attract our youngsters back, this development is it.”

Two square miles in size, Pitcairn is a rugged volcanic outcrop with a half-crater rising to 300 metres, girded by coastal cliffs. It is the only inhabited island of the British colony of the Pitcairn Islands, which also includes Henderson, Ducie and Oeno. The islands were inhabited by Polynesians between 800 and 1600 AD, and then abandoned. They were rediscovered in 1767 by a British naval officer, Philip Carteret, and Pitcairn was named after the sailor who first sighted it.

Its present inhabitants are descended from the eight mutineers of the *Bounty*, and 12 Polynesian women they brought with them in 1790. On a voyage from Tahiti to the West Indies, the crew, led by first mate Christian, mutinied against their dictatorial captain, William Bligh, and set him and a number of sailors adrift in a long boat. Bligh eventually reached land, while the mutineers sailed the *Bounty* to uninhabited Pitcairn where they scuttled the ship.

They avoided the death penalty because their community was not discovered until more than 20 years later. In the mid-nineteenth century they were moved to Tahiti, but many of them eventually returned to their isolated island. Soon that isolation itself looks like becoming history. ♦ (The Observer)

International Criminal Court

An international criminal court capable of trying suspects on genocide and war crimes charges should be ready in The Hague by next year, one of its key advocates said over the weekend. But Philippe Kirsch, chairman of the ICC preparatory commission and the driving force behind the court, said that it would not be able to try crimes committed prior to the court’s creation. “Asking states to approve a court which would have been able to look at past crimes would have been a pretty tall order,” Kirsch said.

His comments came even as former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, who has been indicted by the UN War Crimes Tribunal, was fighting off arrest on domestic charges of corruption and abuse of power. The UN court accuses Milosevic of crimes against humanity for atrocities alleged to have been committed against ethnic Albanians by forces under his command in Kosovo in 1999.

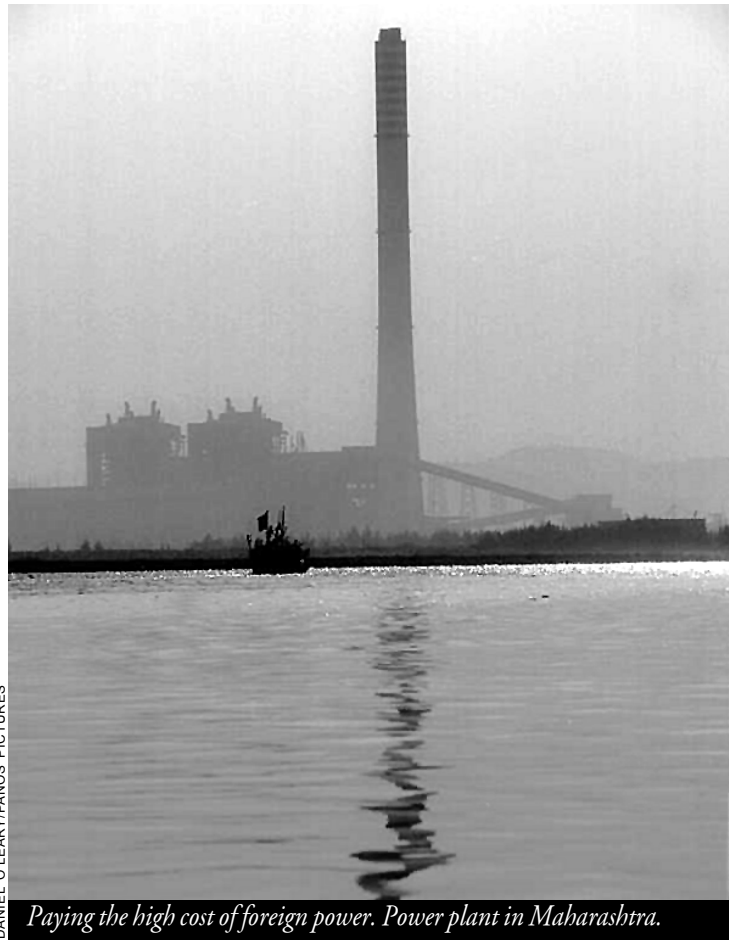
The ICC will be a permanent court based in The Hague and would replace ad-hoc tribunals like those that have been set up to deal with crimes committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. It would have powers to try suspects on charges of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and aggression, once that offence is satisfactorily defined.

Canada’s Kirsch, who spearheaded the approval of the court’s founding statute at a conference in Rome in 1998, said the bid to put the ICC on its feet was gaining momentum. “Twenty-nine countries have now ratified the statute which is more than four times the number that had done so a year ago,” he said on the sidelines of a strategy meeting of ICC proponents. “In March 2000, there were seven and now there are 29 so obviously there has been exponential progress. 139 countries have signed the statute which is the first step towards ratification so it seems clear that within a year or so the statute will have entered into force and the court will exist.”

Sixty countries must ratify the statute for the court to come into being. Among those that have already done so are G7 powers Germany, Italy, France and Canada but the glaring absentee from the list is the United States, one of only seven countries including China and Libya, which voted against the statute in Rome. (Asian Age)



An anti-Milosevic poster



Paying the high cost of foreign power. Power plant in Maharashtra.

DARRYL D'MONTE IN MUMBAI

A power struggle in western India is heating up, fuelled by court cases, allegations of exorbitant charges, rumours of corruption, political posturing and calls to pull the plug on a \$1.9 billion electrical plant.

The row re-ignited early March when the Maharashtra state government fined Enron—one of the world's biggest electricity, natural gas

and communication companies—an \$86-million penalty for failing to provide electricity on demand at its new gas-powered plant at Dabhol, 300 kilometres south of Mumbai city.

The fine came after the Texas-based multinational tried collecting millions of dollars from India's federal government when the state government failed to meet its financial obligations under a controversial power purchase

Power Play

The largest power contract in Indian history continues to be mired in controversy, and is costing the state dearly.

agreement signed eight years ago.

Enron was among eight power projects given the nod in the first wave of economic reforms in India in the early 1990s. The giant MNC today provides electricity to Maharashtra through its Indian subsidiary the Dabhol Power Company (DPC), which operates the Dabhol power plant with gas imported from the Middle East. India's leading industrial state is not short of electricity but lacks 'peak power'—when demand surges during factory hours.

The 20-year power purchase agreement requires the state-owned Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) to pay Enron \$18 million a month in a fixed 'charge for capacity' even if it does not purchase any electricity. It pays another 8-11 million dollars for actual power it buys. Altogether the multinational takes home \$35 billion over 20 years—the largest such contract in India's history and one of the biggest in the world.

What annoys critics is that the fixed 'per unit' cost to the state government of nearly Rs 8 (\$0.16) for

every kilowatt of electricity (which adds up to the \$18 million dollar monthly charge) is a whopping three times higher than what is offered by other local sources. MSEB's own gas-based plant at Uran, near Mumbai's new port, is lying idle and can produce power at a little more than 4 cents a kilowatt.

Enron's rates don't bode well for a state that is going through a severe cash crunch. MSEB, which is blamed for being inefficient, ran up losses of \$350 million in the last financial year. And its cheque to DPC for \$5.4 million bounced in mid-December.

All of this should be no great news to the state government, which ignored warnings when it first negotiated the deal with Enron in 1993. Back then, critics predicted that consumers would have to pay a high price for electricity. India's Central Electricity Authority, which supervises state-run electricity boards, had reservations. Even the World Bank, which often advocates privatisation of utilities, refused to fund the project, arguing that the Dabhol plant would

equal only a fifth of MSEB's capacity and affect its finances.

Despite the objections, the then chief minister Sharad Pawar of the Congress party pushed through the project and a deal for a first phase 740-megawatt plant was signed in 1993. Then 1995 state elections saw the Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena alliance come to power, and accused Pawar of corruption over the Enron case. The new regime first cancelled and then re-negotiated the agreement after Enron chief executive officer Rebecca Mark flew to India for a meeting with a top Shiv Sena leader in Mumbai. The result: the tariffs were not lowered but Enron earned the new administration's blessings for the plant's second 1,444 MW phase.

Now a Congress coalition is back in power. New chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh spoke in January of cancelling the contract, but has since changed track—now he too is talking of re-negotiating rates.

Enron defends its charges by blaming the MSEB for not using more of the DPC capacity to reduce overall costs. Currently, MSEB uses only 53

per cent of DPC output. Enron has advertised in local newspapers that costs would amount to \$0.08 per kilowatt if the MSEB used 90 per cent of the plant's capacity. Neil McGregor, DPC president and CEO rejects calls to scrap the Dabhol plant at this juncture, saying it would send "conflicting" signals internationally. "The state government will also have to bear in mind the opportunity cost of doing away with the project, especially when the state is facing an acute power shortage," he said. He suggests that the government could direct its Power Trading Corporation or the National Thermal Power Corporation "to purchase Dabhol's power and incorporate it in the national pool and sell it to various states."

The MSEB is considering a tariff hike, which will further antagonise consumers. But, according to the state energy minister, it would have to pay \$4.1 billion in compensation if the project is scrapped. There is a cheaper way out: a clause in the contract states that if the court detects illegalities in the contract, it can be set aside.

As many as 16 public interest lawsuits have been filed against the DPC project since 1994—each focusing on the legality of the power purchase agreement. All but one, filed in the Supreme Court by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), have been rejected. The courts have cancelled similar contracts in precedent-setting cases in Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey. In Pakistan's case, it was with Enron. ♦ (Gemini)

OPINION

by MIYSUO NAKAMURA

Islam and democracy

Islamisation and democratisation have been developing hand in hand in South-east Asia in recent decades. These trends are converging to promote and strengthen Islamic civil society in most of the South-east Asian countries, regardless of the differences in the Muslim majority-minority equation.

Indeed, Islamic civil society has been one of the essential components in the recent popular demands for democratisation, which in turn is making possible a greater public role for Islamic civil society. In Indonesia in particular, where the fall of Suharto's dictatorship was followed by the guarantee of the freedom of expression and association, political parties as well as non-government organisations and people's organisations have flourished enormously. South-east Asia contains the world's largest population of Muslims—about 200 million, or roughly one-sixth of the world's total, a much larger proportion than the Arab Muslims.

Numerous significant social developments in the region's Muslim communities have contributed to the assertiveness of Islamic civil society: rapid economic growth, the emergence of the middle class, the resurgence of Islam, and growing popular demands for democratisation, all in the context of the increasing globalisation of the world economy and the use of information technology.

While most of the Muslim populations in the 10 nation-states in South-east Asia share a common heritage deriving from Malay Islamic civilisation and languages, they differ greatly from each other in many other aspects, most profoundly in their experiences of colonisation and de-colonisation. The development of pro-democracy movements that recently culminated in Indonesia and Malaysia deserves special mention.

In Indonesia, nationwide student demonstrations and urban riots from March to May 1998 forced President Suharto, in power since 1968, to step down. Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie assumed the presidency, promising democratic reform to strengthen civil society. After the June 1999 general elections, Abdurrahman Wahid, chairman of the largest Muslim voluntary organisation in Indonesia, was elected the fourth president of Indonesia.

This development represented a dramatic turnabout: a civil society leader was made the head of state. Today the newly-reborn democracy in Indonesia is faced with the challenge of whether a civil society leader in power is capable of overcoming the resistance and sabotage of conservative elements at large in implementing the agenda of reform.



An Islamic civil society leader as head of state, and the lady in waiting.

Islamic civil society in south-east Asia is asserting itself aided by rapid economic growth, an emergent middle class and growing popular demands for democratisation.

In Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, the former leader of the Malaysia Islamic Youth Movement, who had been designated by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad as his heir apparent, was gathering political momentum by introducing the idea of civil society into the political arena of his country. In the mid-1990s, civil society became the catchword for trans-ethnic aspirations for a democratic, transparent and accountable government, challenging the established alliance of oligarchs among the three major ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese and Indians.

With the downfall of Anwar following his arrest in September 1998, and subsequent conviction and imprisonment, "civil society" has become a forbidden term in public in Malaysia, though it is used continuously by the opposition. At a time of political and social ferment in the region, it must be remembered that Islamic, or any other religious, civil society is potentially exclusive, and can stimulate the countervailing rise of other civil societies based upon other religions. The extent to which a particular civil society encourages social harmony or, conversely, foments inter-group conflict depends on the depth of its commitment to democratic principles.

A number of Islamic intellectuals and political leaders in South-east Asia are emphasising that Islam and democracy are compatible and that Islam acknowledges pluralism as a basic human condition. It is hoped that this view will prevail in Muslim South-east Asia and eventually in the entire Islamic world. Meanwhile, we should be prepared for the development of a variety of Islams and for internal strife among them. ♦ (IPS)

Mitsuo Nakamura, a retired professor of cultural studies at Chiba University in Japan, has written widely on Islam and Indonesian issues. He is the author of the recently-published book, *Islam and Civil Society in South-east Asia*, published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Superpower troubles

Washington - India's "rising ambition" to be a "global superpower" will lead to its continued nuclear standoff with Pakistan, strain its relations with China and complicate its ties with Russia, Japan and the West, the US National Intelligence Council has said. John C Gannon, chairman of the Council, added: "Global trends conflict significantly in India. Huge population and technology-driven economic growth virtually dictate that India will be a rising regional power. Unevenness of internal economic growth, a growing gap between rich and poor, the fractious nature of its politics, all cast doubt on how powerful India will be by 2015," he said.

"As India's population grows to over 1.2 billion by 2015 and Pakistan's from 140 million now to about 195 million, the challenge to governance clearly will not be helped by great investment in nuclear programmes," he said. The Council, which briefs the US president daily, includes members of all US intelligence agencies. "In 2015, dynamism will be strongest among so-called emerging markets, especially in the two Asian giants, China and India," Gannon said. "Internal conflicts stemming from religious, ethnic, economic or political disputes will remain at current levels or even increase in number. The UN and regional organisations will be called upon to manage such conflicts," Gannon said. (Asian Age)

General Overambitious

Islamabad - Pakistan's military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf has decided to bring in a controversial constitutional amendment empowering the country's president to dismiss an elected government and dissolve parliament. Musharraf gave a broad outline in this regard to two legal experts during a cabinet meeting, the Dawn said. "The amendments may come a few months before October," it quoted sources as saying.

October 2002 is the deadline set by the Supreme Court for Musharraf's government to hold elections. The restoration of article 58(2)(B) of Pakistan's constitution is bound to raise controversy as the same article was voted out in 1998 during the regime of Nawaz Sharif. Presidents in the past had used it to dismiss elected governments.

The amendment includes empowering the president with several powers, to be executed in consultation with the proposed seven-member National Security Council (NSC), consisting of Pakistan's service chiefs and civilian officials. It would also empower the president to appoint service chiefs. These powers were transferred to the prime minister through the 13th amendment during Sharif's regime.

The military regime denied reports that it plans to change the constitution, generating concern that it is seeking to cement its place in power. An official statement said media reports of the cabinet debate on the 1973 constitution, suspended after the 1999 military coup, were premature and speculative.

Speculation over constitutional amendments increased after Musharraf said he had no plans to retire as chief of the army in October this year. Sources in his government have said time and again that the easy option left for him to remain in power was to get elected as president by the national parliament and the provincial assemblies. They have said that he could bring in the necessary constitutional amendments to empower himself with more powers after getting elected. (Asian Age)

“There never was such a situation”

Former minister and senior Nepali Congress leader, Jaggannath Acharya, in *Saptahik Bimarsha*, 30 March

In my 52-year-long political life, there has never been a situation like the one we are facing now. Politics is moving the wrong way. After democracy was restored 11 years ago, I now see there is no leader with the vision. It is not only the Nepali Congress leaders who lack vision, all political parties of the day are the same, whether they are in parliament or not. If there is no vision, how can anyone expect any positive action to be taken? After the advent of democracy, some work has been done in communication and transportation, but it is just too little to talk about. I am not saying that nothing has been done, but that more could have been accomplished. Politics has now become a very dirty field, and the rot has set in. Religion is being misused for short-term gains, society is tearing at the seams and nothing looks positive today. Lawlessness has set in. This is not a good sign. This is not going to benefit the people or the nation.

In such a short time, nothing positive has happened. The state of the nation is deteriorating rapidly and this is surely everyone's concern. People have become frustrated and they are losing their self-respect, and everyone is terrified. People should get serious now and seek a way out of the present situation. The tragedy is that party workers have started aligning themselves with their respective leaders, they do not care about anything, and only follow what their leaders say. All leaders in all parties have become very egoistic. This has not benefited the country. No sector seems to be functioning properly. Now it has become such that the Maoists are running some parts of the country, other parties are either in the House or on the streets. Even in such a situation our leaders do not realise the magnitude of our problems and act. When are they going to put their brains to work?

I came back to the country with BP [Koirala], when he began his national reconciliation move. Today, it is not enough to just find consensus in the party. It isn't only parties represented in parliament that are capable of running this country. Parties outside parliament too have to get their act together, find a consensus and act fast. If a consensus is not reached fast, then forget the future of democracy, because even this country's prestige is going to go down the drain. It is sad that the party that struggled the most for democracy cannot run the country because of constant infighting. This is really very sad. Earlier, the infighting used to take place about issues, policies and thought. BP and Matrika Prasad used to be at loggerheads on the basis of their political philosophies and ideologies. Today, it is because the present leaders have not been able to provide relief to the country, have not been able to implement programmes. It is of concern to everyone that there are quarrels for posts and positions within the Nepali Congress, but if the party elections had been conducted in a proper manner, then this problem would have been solved. Today the infighting is not for political philosophy or ideology but for positions and posts, for money and the power it brings with it. This is not going to benefit anyone.

Even if Koirala and Bhattarai are perceived to be people without vision, who can the people turn to? This is a very serious question. Bhattarai tried to do something earlier but that proved unsuccessful. We should still thank him for taking a step, though. I feel that the consensus of parliament is not going to be enough now. Now you have to take the consensus of forces outside parliament too. We have to look for an all-party solution and agreement. If we do not make this move now, we should not expect a solution. The situation will not improve and everyone will be all for the worse. By saying this, I do not mean that the Maoists and the ML should have the kind of government they want. Now all political parties, all intellectuals, civil servants and other people, whether inside or outside of parliament should get together and work. If we cannot do that, democracy will be in danger. If we come together and work together, then this country will benefit tremendously. If corruption is controlled or destroyed, then we will achieve a lot in the fields of tourism and agriculture. We can make full use of our hydropower capabilities and sell power to India.

If our leaders had vision, in the past 11 years we would have made great progress and the country would not have been in such a sad state. Now it is very difficult for the Congress to take proper care of the country. This is because everyone has become self-centred and selfish and looks out for themselves only. Why did the Panchayat regime go? Not because there were so few Panchas, but because they were showing the same attitude as the leaders of today. Trust is a lost commodity. I am not saying that democracy will not remain. All I am saying is we have to act now and act together fast.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

I have tried to dislodge Girijababu from the government several times. I have learnt many things from him but the one thing I have not learnt is how to oust somebody from his post.

—Sher Bahadur Deuba in *Ghatana Ra Bichar*, 28 March



Morality!!! Who is he to show off by using a term that does not exist in the Congress dictionary?

दृष्टि Dristhi, Weekly, 3 April

Hamal's darbar at Libang

Budhbar Saptahik 28 March

बुधबार

Any first-time visitor to Libang will always enquire about the darbar that has come up there. People are interested to find out more about the owner of the darbar in Libang. The owner of this darbar was a very ordinary person until 1995. He came from a very poor family and was almost a non-entity in Libang. This person is none other than the former minister and present MP Surendra Hamal. Hamal has been an MP since 1994 and until a fortnight ago was a minister too. It is well known that Hamal is very close to the Maoists and the Maoists have, directly or indirectly, helped him during general elections. Now in the span of seven years, Hamal has become a millionaire.

Amrit Bahadur Gharti, District Development Committee (DDC) president of Rolpa, who is also from the Congress says, "Until a few years ago, Hamal was poor and his financial



MIN. BAJRACHARYA

status was not very strong. Now in such a short time he has constructed a palace in a place like Libang. Just imagine what he must have built and collected in Kathmandu. There are many people who have worked with me for a long, long time and our financial positions have not become much better. All of a sudden, Hamal has become a millionaire. Either he must be earning more than Rs 100,000 a month, or this is all due to corruption. This is what the general public in Libang thinks."

Incidentally, Hamal has built a very big house in Ghorahi in Dang, and another big house in Khungri Village Development Committee (VDC) in Rolpa too. He's bought a lot of property in Kathmandu as well. Some people in Libang sarcastically remark that perhaps Hamal built the big building there to keep an eye on the Maoists. It is said that Hamal had earlier said that if he built a house in Libang, people would definitely say he was corrupt and had made his house with his ill-gotten wealth. It seems now that people are going to accuse him of being corrupt anyway, he might as well build a very big house.

Peoples' militia throw away guns

Budhbar, 28 March

बुधबार

It has been learnt that the Maoists are facing a very big problem. They have established their government in some districts of the country. To control these districts they formed a "peoples' militia", which is the equivalent of a police force. Now, it seems that many members of these peoples' militias are giving up their guns and going to India in search of work. They say that it is not possible to live with guns stolen from the police nor is it possible to earn a living by looting local people.

Some time ago, Dal Bahadur Buda, Purna Bahadur Buda, Rudramani Pun and Chitra Bahadur Gharti, all members of the peoples' militia in Dhubidanda VDC of Rolpa, gave up their guns and migrated to India in search of work. Apparently, they are currently in India.

According to our sources, nine other militia members in another village in the district have also moved to India. The identity of these nine is not known yet. Migration of militia members to India is slowly on the rise. This is resulting in increasing frustration among the party cadre, and is giving rise to questions about the People's Movement and the People's War. The Maoist top brass are doing all they can to suppress this information and not let it spread among the party cadre.

Future plans of Maoist students

Janu Ahwan, 30 March

जनआह्वान

The 15th national convention of the All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) was held recently. The third full meeting of the organising committee was also held under the chairmanship of Devendra Parajuli 19-21 March. On 26 March a press release issued by Parajuli, the head of the students wing of the Maoists, stated: "Since the second meeting we have greatly grown politically and ideologically, and the struggle has also grown. We have achieved a lot in this time. We have achieved a lot in terms of local agitations, week-long bandhs, the Hritihik Roshan incident and elections to different students' bodies. The ANNSU (Revolutionary) was very successful in the elections to students' bodies. This success has led to the growth of the party cadre and the students' political thinking, their understanding of party ideology and philosophy, their capabilities, their leadership skills, and their grasp of international events and political thought. It has also led them to understand the defeat of the reactionary opportunist movements and organisations and has proved that these organisations are not there for the benefit of the common man. These achievements have raised the party and the morale of the party cadre to an all-time high. This was the assessment of the party meeting."

The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist-Prachanda Path philosophy has now been completely accepted by the students' organisation. This will help in providing direction to the great people's liberation war that is taking place. This will also take the students' body to greater heights. This will help strengthen the party organisation, destroy the cancer in the education sector, and deal with the struggle against fascist organisations. Keeping this in mind the students' body has drawn up a plan concerning their activities for the next six months.

Some of the decisions made are:

- 500,000 new members and 50,000 new party cadres will be recruited. 7,000 new party committees will be formed.
- Meetings, gatherings and workshops will be held.
- The 16th convention will be held in Kathmandu this September.
- The issue of revolutionary education will be studied and a peoples' debate will be carried out.
- The struggle to abolish the singing of the national anthem in schools, the struggle to abolish the lump-sum payment of school fees and

the compulsory teaching of Sanskrit will be continued.

- The struggle for the nationalisation of private schools will continue. The struggle to make all schools self-sufficient and reliable will be carried forward. The fees of all private educational institutions should be decreased by at least 50 percent. More facilities must be provided to all schools and the rights of the teachers and other employees must be guarded.
- The party must struggle to rid colleges of all their problems and increase the efficiency levels of these colleges.
- The problems of the technical colleges must be solved and they should be allowed to function properly.
- The struggle against corrupt people, against the system of commissions and against the blatant misuse of power must be carried forward.
- The 15-point demands will be modified and grouped with earlier demands and then presented. If these demands are not met, then a 15-day or an indefinite bandh will be called for.
- The government should invest in senior secondary education. The struggle to make this happen will continue.
- The number of colleges affiliated to Tribhuvan University should be increased and a separate university for technical education should be established.
- The struggle for students to get a 50 percent discount on all essential commodities and services will continue.

Maoists establish bank

Punarjagaran, 27 March

पुनर्जागरण

The underground Maoists have been running cooperatives for the past year in Rukum and Rolpa. Now they have established a bank in Jajarkot and have called on all people to conduct their business with this particular bank.

This bank, in Dandagaon in Jajarkot, is a cooperative bank which all the people from the village have invested in. This bank provides loans at 13 percent and pays 11.5 percent dividends on deposits. Branches will soon be opened in Khalanga and Lah VDCs too. The primary areas of concentration will be the collection and processing of herbs, honey and ghee, the development of the wood industry and raising goats. This is the first bank that has been set up by the Maoists.

Last year the Maoists opened a cooperative financial institution in Jaljala VDC of Rolpa which was active in Jaljala and four neighbouring VDCs. That cooperative granted loans at 15 percent and paid eight percent on deposits. Immediately after this, the Maoists opened a second cooperative in Sisne VDC in Rukum. Both these cooperatives were primarily involved in vegetable farming, cattle-breeding and cottage industries.

The minimum amount required to open an account in Maoist-run financial institutions and banks is only Rs 1,000. Such financial activities come after the establishment of a Maoist people's government and people's army in these districts. The Maoists have established their own courts, land revenue collection offices, and other offices required for governance.

Rape in eternity

the loveliest women in all of Kathmandu valley are undoubtedly Ganga and Jamuna, the two life-size gilded statues that grace a courtyard of the old Malla palace at Patan. They stand as lissomely poised as Bharatnatyam dancers, bejewelled and bare-torsoed, their skirts draped about their legs in a manner suggesting movement. Divine dancers. Sister goddesses of mighty rivers that bear their name. Givers of bountiful harvests. The answer to the prayers of a saint of old. Visions of a Newari artist who epitomised all that is beautiful in women. Did he use a model? Was there a woman so exquisite in all the land? No one will ever know. The centuries keep their secrets well, or have carelessly forgotten them. Now the ravages of modern time threaten the very existence of these lovely goddesses who should delight the worshipful and the merely curious as long as their city endures.

Ganga and Jamuna once wore jewelled headdresses and gilded scarves. They held symbolic objects in their hands and behind them were screens of fabulously worked metal.

I wonder whether they would not look better left as they are: two lovely women who have borne with fortitude the rape of the centuries.

There were gems in their belts and necklaces, their armbands and bangles. Their coiled hair was painted and some believe there was colour on their eyes and lips. All this has gone. There remains a suggestion of their golden scarves. Their heads are bare, the objects they held are remembered only by the spikes that supported them. Ganga, the object of my sketch, has a deep dent above her right knee and metallic bruises where her scarf has been rudely pulled from her shoulder. But still she smiles resting lightly upon her tortoise, a vision of triumphant beauty.

Ganga and Jamuna stand beside the entrance to a seventeenth century temple to Taleju, the royal goddess. Vandals have stripped the door and its *tonina* of almost all their detail. The little which remains gives an idea of how fabulous the original must have been, a concourse of deities and mythical beasts that somehow failed to guard themselves against human assault. Somewhere scattered about

the globe, they give pleasure to those who own them and perhaps tell, in their isolated way, of the glories of the Malla palace of Patan from whence they came. One would wish them back, of course, in the main courtyard called Mul Chowk, where kings of old held court and worshipped. All about are buildings of intricately carved and painted wood. Struts supporting the pagoda roofs depict many Bhairabs and Matrikas. From latticed windows, ladies of the court watched the proceedings below, and one can still imagine their whisperings and laughter. Do the golden sisters ever speak?

For me, the Mul Chowk at Patan is a sad example of a disease that has swept the world, not only endangering the temples of Nepal, but the art of every land. A visitor from England told me of how in the royal chapel of Windsor there are now almost as many guards as tourists, because given half a chance, your blue-rinsed lady and your jean-clad youth will snap marble fingers or toes from the

statues on royal tombs. We were in Mul Chowk when he said it, not a guard in sight.

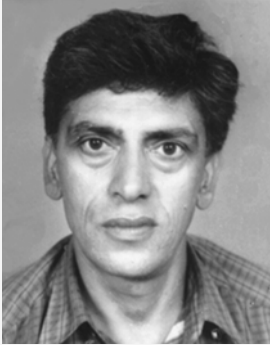
Bamboo scaffolding now creeps across the magnificent façade of Patan's old palace. Foreign and Nepali experts are helping to restore one of the country's greatest treasures, but short of a miracle they may have arrived too late. True, there are craftsmen in Patan who still can produce great works of art, who can copy with skill and restore with brilliance. But is there a master who can return Ganga and Jamuna to their original magnificence? And sneakily, I wonder whether they would not look better left as they are: two lovely women who have borne with fortitude the rape of the centuries. Two heavenly creatures who remind us of an age when Patan was the city of artists. A city called Eternity Itself. ♦

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



NEPALITERATURE

by MANJUSHREE THAPA



Narayan Dhakal AN OUTSIDER'S KATHMANDU

no contemporary writer evokes the outsider's experience of Kathmandu more skilfully than Narayan Dhakal. In his stories, novels, and essays, Dhakal shows—often with excruciating, painful honesty—how it feels for rural migrants to be adrift in an indifferent city, bereft of any sense of belonging or community.

This early story shows Dhakal at his most lyrical, depicting the city metaphorically as a machine relentlessly churning out some strange, inscrutable civility. It is the title story of Dhakal's collection *Sahar Yantra*.

THE CITY MACHINERY

The city stands proud, its forehead decked with multi-hued civility. It has in its possession some profound slogans, which I didn't understand early on, or at any time.

I came to the city as a traveller. Since then I've been roving its every footpath and alleyway, curious. I'm hungry.

At this particular juncture, I was soaked through with sweat. The entire sky was covered by a sparse layer of clouds. The crowd was swelling. I stood like a traveller-corpse in its midst. I've never known where I began. Neither is it known where I'll end. But the city is far more mighty and cunning than we. It has stolen many opportunities from me. It has endangered the futures of many travellers. The city owns a pair of cymbals. No one in the world screams louder than it.

My own shape, at any time, always remains in obscurity.

At some point I found myself joining the tail-end of a queue at the city centre. That's right, I've never been able to trace my form at all. I have to survive: other than this, I have no other resolution, reaction or counsel. I don't have the historicity of the city. That's why I'm hobbled, I'm diseased. Carrying a diseased life, I have to drag on with profundity, like an obedient pupil.

When I first entered this city I became anxious about the insignificance of my travel. I hadn't come here the way western tourists leave home, in order to experience the splendours of nature. A whole desert was spinning in my head when I arrived. I had no trait to help me take up an urban trade. Perhaps that was why the city mistrusted me. Neither did I have the kind of house that ardent nature lovers own, a house that would allow me to wander the city without fear. I had no sense of beauty to offer the city.

Suddenly, at that point, what was happening was that all the people around me were beginning to look at me suspiciously. I was lessening within myself. No one else had joined the queue till then. A few people had been scared away by the length of the queue, and a few people were loitering about without getting in line. From time to time, they all looked at me in exactly the same way.

An idler asked me, "You look new to this place! When did you come?"

"It's been a few days," I gave a short reply, and turned the other way. For a while I faced the sky, and patted my gaunt face.

The crowd was thickening. By and by, two females came and looked from the queue to me, then exchanged glances and laughed. They

joined the queue behind me. Perhaps they too wished to survive. Perhaps they were aimless travellers like myself. For a while I was overcome with happiness. But this thought didn't prove correct. I found out later that they didn't feel any of the terror of being homeless. They were mechanical pieces of this city machinery.

And then what happened was—I spent a long time absorbed in thought. I was thinking about life. It is my weakness to think in this way. In the meanwhile I had become one of the unfortunates of the city. I had no idea that the queue had moved five paces ahead.

"Oh mister." From behind, the two girls scolded me in English.

"Hajoor." My face had no form at all.

"You don't know how to behave?"

"Hajoor."

A terrific noise and laughter erupted from all four directions. Time was five steps ahead of me; there were five steps between me and time.

The females behind me thundered, "Doesn't the hick even know how to say sorry?"

Again I was shoving my face towards a deep hole. I was looking at my own presence, shapeless in the fog. My vision became darker and darker.

"Move along, quick. *Be hard and fast.*"

"Hajoor."

"Really a poor boy."

"Really a poor old withered man."

After that they took five steps, moving up mechanically to join the tail end of the queue.

Now I was two steps behind the queue.

The crowd threw up all kinds of violent sounds: "Look at him. Such withered cheeks! *Really a poor old withered man.*" Everyone started to look alert.

Pointing to the two females, a man behind me shoved me out of the queue. "Eh *mister!* This is my place. I was behind them from the start."

I accepted my impotence and went to stand behind him.

Suddenly a commotion erupted behind me. "Eh *mister*, eh *mister*."

An intrigue had started against me in earnest. Among many reasons for such an intrigue was perhaps the fact that my face gave no indication of good breeding. My face was like that of the poverty-stricken. The city perhaps saw me as a sign of danger. In this sense I was even an outlaw. Or my ways didn't match the city's; there were no city civilities to be seen in my eyes. In any case, an intrigue had been hatched against me. The two females who had wedged in front of me were smiling at me slyly, as though they'd discovered my prime weakness and wanted to demoralise me. I was gritting my teeth in anger.

After a while I went to stand in front of the females. "This is my place," I sputtered.

"Is your name written on it to say it's yours?"

"Everyone knows I was standing here till a while ago. You skipped ahead and took my place."

There was no fear in their voices: "We haven't encroached on anyone's place."

A kind of crowd had formed around us. After a while, a machine part showed up. "What's happening, what's happening," he sputtered.

I pointed in front of the girls. "Everyone knows that was my place."

The machine part turned to the queue. "Is that right, was that his place?"

The queue replied, "We don't know."

"But that was my place."

Enraged, the machine part took me by the neck and threw me out of line. "Off with you, bastard, goon." Emptied of emotion, emptied of thought, emptied of sensation, I had been discarded.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I stood seven paces from the queue, in an impotent form. The queue was long. Out of primordial terror, I couldn't return to hang onto its tail end. Those two females were hurtling off with food trays, looking at me slyly, as they had before. My hands and feet were shaking peculiarly.

At that time a spruce, natty group was heading to the site where food was being distributed. A few city parts stood in front of the queue, at the site where food was to be handed out. They were giving the queue a lesson in orderliness:

"Please approach with civility. We are eager to be at your service. If you are patient, we will have no difficulty serving you."

Another machine part addressed the natty group. "And why are you not in line? Please come through the line."

An angry person in the natty group shouted wildly: "We've never, in all our lives, stayed in control lines. Why should we do so now? We'd rather not eat. We'll stay hungry. Isn't that so, friends?"

The city parts suddenly began to aim looks at each other. The countenance of the natty group was as pure and clear as the sun. The city parts were dumbfounded at their intrepidity.

From another corner, another sound struck my ear: "Rebellion! Buck up, rebellion!"

I turned to face that side. A few intellectual looking people were heartily supporting the natty group. A storm of crisis was encircling the city parts.

A short while later, a shrewd machine part approached. "Oho, I didn't recognise you. Intellectuals such as yourselves."

Another machine part also showed up. "Why should you trouble with queues; queues are for the people." At that time I silently memorized the word 'people' and looked at myself and at the crowd.

"Please approach, please approach, please approach."

The intellectuals were at the peak of victory. I watched on resolutely. Perhaps because their opinions had been established, this was a historical start for them. The atmosphere was filled with joy. The city parts were gleaming with happiness. The entire crowd and the queue was turned to them.

I was being tormented by the urge for a cigarette. I took out a stub that had lost all its tobacco, and headed towards the intellectuals. They were exhaling smoke from the long cigarettes stuck in their mouths.

"Hajoor, allow me to light my cigarette."

They were unnerved by my request. "Hunh?"

"Allow me to light my cigarette."

"Eh—no. Please light it elsewhere."

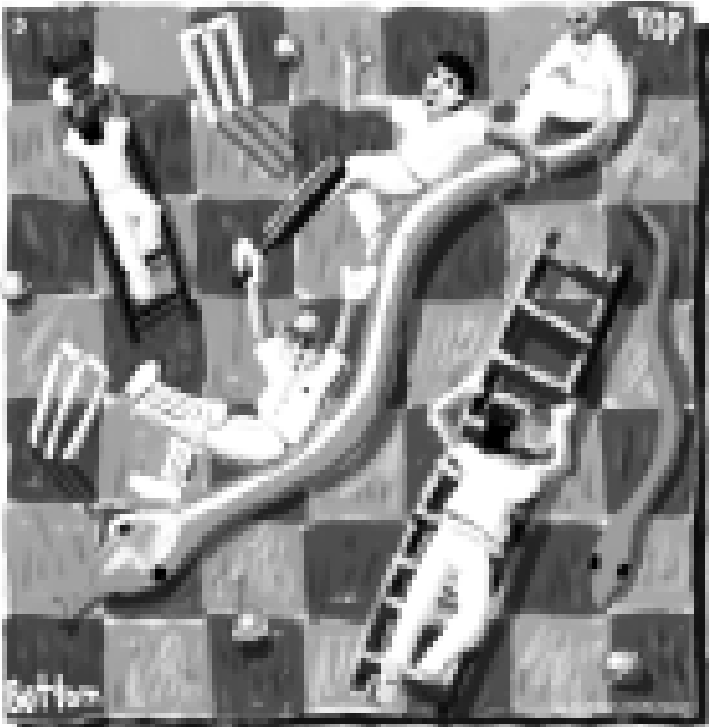
"Hajoor." I stared at them in surprise. Their eyes had all at once become like an aggressive tiger's. They looked me over from head to toe.

"Nonsense! Disorder! Don't you know any manners? Why are you standing there?"

My whole body quivered with the tremors of an earthquake. I left there limp. I couldn't last there long, so I mechanically crossed over to the wide road.

There was a crowd in the road, and in that crowd, violent eyes were stalking me. ♦

How the arrogant have fallen



Australia's 16 straight test and 10 one-day win-run was rudely halted in India where the hosts handed the favourites a shocking 2-1 defeat. No cricketing nation can call itself world-beaters until it proves itself in South Asia.

BARNEY REID, IN MELBOURNE,

In less than 10 days—actually in three very bad afternoons—the mighty Australian team, proclaimed by some as world cricket champions, were made to bite the dust.

Any side that can win 16 test matches on a trot must be doing something right. Hostile, accurate and disciplined fast bowlers, sending down ball after ball at torrid pace to cowering batsmen, backed by Shane Warne, supposedly the best leg spinner in the world, gives Australia a most formidable attack.

And there is no better fielding side in the world—the game's best all-round fielder is batsman Mark

Waugh. So when the team reached India in January for a three-Test series, the only question mark for those who dared doubt the superheroes was over their batting, which had displayed a weak underbelly at critical times.

But then the aggressive left-handed batsman Adam Gilchrist, the team reminded itself, had carried the middle order through impossible situations several times during this successful period. India? No sweat.

But 16 consecutive test wins, no matter how impressive it may sound, must be accepted with some caution. For 11 of these victories were achieved at home. Wins at home are dulled by factors such as home-town umpiring

decisions plus inside knowledge on how much water has been poured into the pitch before a game. The latter, of course, affects decisions on whether to bat or bowl if the toss is won. Many tosses were won and opponents invited to bat—enough to worry the sceptics.

Away from home, the only sides Australia beat were the comparatively weaker Test playing countries—Zimbabwe and New Zealand. To be regarded as 'champions of the world', series wins in the sub-continent and in South Africa are mandatory. With neither included in the string of 16, the tag of Undisputed World Champions, though close, required a bit more work to make it stick.

It was all right to start counting the resurgence of Australian cricket following the wins against Zimbabwe. But to conveniently forget a loss to lowly Sri Lanka in September and October 1999 as a temporary aberration stamped the team with a new arrogance.

This arrogance was typified by the sniggering smiles of fast bowler Glen McGrath and the rude sledgings of batsman Ricky Ponting. The West Indies, under the captaincy of Clive Lloyd and then Viv Richards did prove to be undisputed World Champions. They beat all the test-playing nations both at home and away between the mid-1970s and late 1980s. But they were never arrogant.

In contrast, on the eve of their departure to India, both captain Steve Waugh and McGrath were talking about increasing the tally of wins with a 5-0 drubbing of England at the Ashes encounter in England this summer. India was only talked of in passing—a 3-0 victory over India was preordained. It didn't turn out that way,

although the Aussies won the first test easily.

The turning point of the tour was Steve Waugh's decision during the second Test at Eden Gardens in Calcutta to invite the Indians to follow on. Another day and a bit at the crease and 300-odd runs would have given the Indians the impossible task of scoring nearly 600 runs to win or to bat out over five sessions on a deteriorating pitch, to survive.

So what prompted the decision to enforce the follow-on? The self-same arrogance. Why play a five-day test when one can finish it off in three and spend a couple of days relaxing by the pool? The first test had been wrapped up in three days, so why not the second. No one could have possibly foreseen the VVS Laxman innings of 281. An innings of such magnitude will probably never be seen again. But unfortunately for Australia it did happen.

Several instances of Aussie arrogance have been seen during the past 12 months. The worst and most insulting act of arrogance towards the opposition was, arguably, the blue tinted hair-do sported by Collin Miller in the Test against the West Indies in Sydney in January this year. Would he have come up with that idea had he not been successful in the preceding Tests or if it were the Australians who were losing at that point in the series? It looks doubtful.

Was India the beginning of the end for the Aussies? Unlikely—Australia will bounce back, but hopefully with less of the arrogance displayed over the past 12 months. ♦ (Gemini)

BARNEY REID played cricket for Sri Lanka. He later played cricket in England and Australia and is now a cricket coach and freelance writer based in Melbourne.

Kournikova

Anna Kournikova has yet to win a singles title. She hasn't even played competitive tennis since February because of a foot injury. But even in a dot-com economy downturn, Internet company higher-ups are still throwing cash at Kournikova. The Russian tennis star is endorsing Terra Lycos, operators of the lycos.com Web portal. They plan on a new commercial in heavy rotation during the NCAA men's basketball tournament. Kournikova's compensation wasn't disclosed,



but remember, she once told a group of drooling teens, "You can't afford me, boys." Steve Fund, Lycos' vice president of brand marketing, says she's "the only celebrity I know who had a virus named after her," referring to the recent e-mail virus that infected millions of computers. And here's more big news for so-called "Annamaniacs", devoted fans who made Kournikova the Internet's most popular athlete: Her site, kournikova.com, might make a comeback even before she does. Lycos is negotiating with her representatives at the Octagon sports agency to take over production of her official site. The tennis star's site was previously handled by Broadband Sports, which went out of business earlier this month. (Sports Features)



John Hopoate of the Wests Tigers gives an opponent the "wedgie".

An Australian rugby league player quits after he uses particularly unsportsman-like tactics on the field.

An Australian rugby league player, John Hopoate of the Wests Tigers, quit the game after he was banned for 12 weeks for putting his finger up players' bottoms. Hopoate was cited and charged with "contrary conduct" by the National Rugby League judiciary after the North Queensland team led by Paul

Bowman filed a complaint. Hopoate fought the contrary conduct charge but pleaded guilty to a minor charge of striking. Hopoate was also involved in a vicious brawl with opposition player Glen Morrison which led to him being sin-binned. Hopoate is the first player accused of inserting his finger in another player's bottom since Bradley Clyde claimed a

Rough play

British back did it to him on the 1992 Kangaroos tour.

Hopoate had claimed he was only trying to pull up the shorts of the North Queensland players. The National Rugby League disciplinary committee disagreed and found the Tongan player guilty of unsportsmanlike interference. NRL judiciary commissioner Jim Hall described the case as the worst he had experienced in his 45-year involvement in rugby league. "I've never come across a more disgusting allegation than I've had to deal with now," he said. He looked at video footage and heard testimony from Peter Jones, Paul Bowman and Glenn Morrison of North Queensland, who all claimed Hopoate had inserted his finger into their bottoms during play.

The former international insisted he had just tried to give Jones and Morrison a "wedgie"—pulling their shorts up their bottoms—to make them play the ball quickly. He also claimed he did not put his finger up Bowman's bottom. Jones said: "It wasn't a wedgie. That's when your pants are pulled up your arse. I think I know the difference between a wedgie and someone sticking their finger up my bum." Bowman said: "There was pressure there. I know he wasn't doing it accidentally. He was

definitely pushing. I was disgusted. I couldn't believe it. I know it's a tough game, but there's no room for that." Hopoate's defence lawyer said Bowman had slowed play by holding Hopoate's leg after a tackle. Bowman replied to the QC: "If I held your leg, would that give you the right to put your finger up my arse?"

The club was to appeal the decision, but decided not to. Hopoate apparently lost more than 10 kilograms in the past week through worry and today tendered his resignation, almost certainly ending his controversial career. The former Test winger received a payout from the Tigers, but his career in rugby league looks over with officials from the other 13 NRL clubs today saying they would not be chasing his services. He is also unlikely to play overseas, with only five games this season, he is ineligible to play in England. "I sincerely regret that anything I may have done has caused stress, anxiety and disappointment to everyone involved with the Wests Tigers. I am distressed to think that I have been the centre of a controversy creating intense media attention that has reflected adversely on the image and morale of the Wests Tigers club," Hopoate said in a statement.

Meanwhile, coach Terry Lamb is set to become the latest casualty in Wests' crisis. The rookie first grade coach admitted this week that he was aware Hopoate had been using his finger during matches. During Hopoate's hearing, he had said that it was reasonably common to be touched in the region of the testicles. Lamb, who

in 1986 became the first player to play in every game on a Kangaroo tour of England and France, today said he knew of Hopoate committing the act on St George Illawarra skipper Craig Smith earlier in the season. A Sydney newspaper claimed Lamb had replayed the incident during video sessions and laughed at it with players. ♦ (Rugbee.com)



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The passionate Argentinean dance form has come to Kathmandu.

ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

So you saw Marlon Brando in *Last Tango in Paris*. But what is the tango, really, other than a quaint relic of the last century, like the foxtrot or the waltz. A simple answer: a language to communicate your innermost emotions to your partner. There's nothing quite like it. One almost needs to be born doing the samba, or "winding", Trinidad-style. The salsa and the merengue are a bit, well, bubbly. Tangoistas, as one might want to call them, insist their dance is capable of expressing every feeling known to humanity. Die-hard dancers may take the passionate and introspective art form as their ideology for life, but there are also people known to saunter into a class or on to the dance floor for an evening, dance, enjoy it thoroughly and not obsess. Not bad for a dance that originated in Buenos Aires' back-alley brothels and bars in the late 1800s.

Immigrants from all over the world were moving to Argentina. They were met by the music of Argentina's native Indians, which is similar to much Andean music with its wind instruments and the charango, an Andean stringed instrument. Argentina never depended on mining or plantation agriculture, so descendants of enslaved Africans weren't as involved in the development of Argentinean culture. But, like in neighbouring Peru or Brazil, the sounds of their quarters was one of the elements that gave rise to the tango. The tango was invented by lonely immigrants and people who know the dance often remark on the sense of loss and nostalgia that pervade it, and how it is a way to express the range of human emotions. Some even see it as a way of addressing and working out issues that cannot be addressed publicly, like state violence and

economic exclusion. It's ironic, then, that it is now identified with the upper class and is as much a symbol of Argentina as Borges, Maradona and maté. But these are also qualities that make it a universal obsession. "I prefer the tango to any other dance because it is about everything we could ever feel," says Truss, a Dutch woman who has been attending the free Sunday night lessons by Andreas Lehrke at the Yak and Yeti. A professionally trained dancer, Lehrke, a German, lived and travelled in Argentina for several years, and in the process lost his heart to the tango. Lehrke took his first dance steps with a German folk dance group in Hannover and later received intensive training in modern ballroom and Latin American dances. He studied music in Cologne, where he was also trained in ballet and modern dance. His first experience of tango was as a musician in a tango show. Then, one of the dancers wasn't available for a few performances, and Lehrke filled in, learning the choreography in just a few days. Impressed, Lehrke decided to visit Buenos Aires. He went numerous times and met and studied



with several "Maestros de Tango". Lehrke started teaching dance in Cologne in 1990. He may have fallen in love with the dance in Argentina, but Nepal is where Lehrke has applied his knowledge—three-and-a-half years ago, this multi-cultural dancer came to visit a friend here. It didn't take long for him to decide to live here and teach Nepalis to tango. It's unfortunate for Lehrke's dreams that there are far more expats than Nepalis in his classes, and that Nepalis who do come are more into doing the cha-cha, the swing or the salsa. Sangeeta Pandey regularly attends the classes and she too prefers to salsa and swing, rather than tango. "Tango for me is a bit too serious," she

says. Lehrke is trying to get people to shake off this impression: "The tango does not necessarily need to be taken so seriously—although there are people who live it as the philosophy of their lives." He's referring to his two companions Doña Piedra and Luis Rodriguez who will be here 11–13 April to do a workshop on tango and give a recital on 14 April. The duo is apparently so dedicated that they "live tango, sleep tango." Piedra is trained in various African dances, modern dance and classical ballet. She worked as a choreographer, dancer and actress for several years, but since the early 90's she'd been devoted to the study of tango, developing and directing

several stage productions and teaching internationally. Rodriguez has studied with famous tango masters and participated in numerous shows including choreographing a production of *The Threepenny Opera* at the Municipal Theatre in Wuppertal, Germany. "Social" tango is not as melodramatic as the tango on stage, and Lehrke feels that's the way it should be. "Tango should be enjoyed and it's not always possible to be so serious," he says. The tango workshop will try to do exactly this—erase all that anxiety and bring more people to the dance. The more the merrier. After all, it takes two to tango. ♦

HAPPENINGS



OUTSTANDING NEPALIS: Awardees at the Tuborg Outstanding Award 2057, 2 April—(l-r, in white shawls) athlete Baikuntha Manandhar, climber Babu Chhiri Sherpa, musician Nati Kaji Shrestha, singer Koili Devi.



PROTEST BY FIRE: Members of the CPN(ML) student wing demonstrate at Tinkune-Koteswor demanding 50 percent student concession on transport, 1 April.



BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: To mark the 11th anniversary of the declaration of the Free Zone of Patan during the 1990 People's Movement, the CPN(UML) felicitates those who provided shelter to activists then.

Sharp



Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

If there is one trait that makes us stand out in the international community of nations, it is the Nepali's ability to spot a dark cloud behind every silver lining. You can trust us to see another tunnel at the end of the tunnel, to harbour suspicions that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is actually a potty full of poo.

What makes us such chronic pessimists? Psychoanalysts have put forward many theories to explain

Greener pastures

why we have convinced ourselves that the grass is always greener on the other side. To begin with, it is. Take it from me, our grass is overrated. They have far better grass out there. On a recent grass-sampling trip it suddenly dawned on me that there is no reason for all this negativity since Nepal is finally taken seriously by the rest of the world. While in the old days someone with a Nepali passport would not even deserve a second glance, these days being a Nepali gives us special treatment at airports around the world. And it begins even before we reluctantly bid farewell to our beloved motherland.

Getting a visa is a process a bit like being stopped at the gates of heaven: St Peter wants a complete inventory of all your worldly possessions, a listing of all the sins you have ever committed in your current life, and wants to know if you have a passport that is valid for at least six months. At the pearly gates you are asked if you are, have ever been or intend to be a member of the Communist Party (ML-PP/M) and if the answer to any of the three questions is yes, then you can go to hell.

Once you get your visa you head straight for the airport because St Peter might change his mind. And it is after



immigration that Nepalis travelling abroad are now eligible for a free body massage. This is a new public service to make all Nepalis feel relaxed and stress-free as they embark on a journey to greener pastures. Our airport masseurs are so professional they even go through your wallet and count your money for you. The gender-segregated massage parlours are curtained off and you can request the reflexologist on duty for a heavy muscle-toning rub, a medium-intensity tickle of the armpits, or a special scratch of a hard-to-reach itch ("A little to the left. Slightly to the right. Lower. Up a bit. Yeah, ahhhhhh.")

When we get to the other side, immigration officials fuss over Nepalis like we are VIPs on a state visit. They study every page of our passport as if they were reading the latest John Grisham novel. And as soon as they find out that we are from the land of Lord Buddha, Arniko, Sagarmatha and the nine-coloured impeyan pheasant, they take us to a special cubicle to get to know us even better. There they engage us in a metaphysical conversation with deeply philosophical questions like: "What is it you are doing here?" to which you answer: "I am on a spiritual quest for the meaning of existence, for the roots of altruism, love and compassion." Or they look into our eyes and want to know "How long are you going to stay?" and we reply: "What is time, if not a twinkling of an eye, a measure of our mortality?" They want to plumb the mysteries of their own and our existence, the *raison d'être*, the *joie de vivre*, and the *hors d'oeuvres*. And the last existential question: "Do you have any grass on you?" Your answer: "Sorry, didn't bring any—thought it was greener on this side." ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

Rakshya

30-year-old Rakshya Pandey wants to show that when it comes to media production houses, Nepalis are up there with the best of them.

The media production scene in Nepal is a motley crew of visionaries and the visionless. It would be great if there were more of the former and less of the latter, but unfortunately what we mostly see are commercials with mediocre production values. Some are different, noteworthy for their superior concept and professional execution. That is when one spares a thought for the people behind them. Like Rakshya Pandey, who owns and runs Vista Entertainment, "Nepal's first complete media production house".

Vista Entertainment is nine months old, and has already done six commercials for some of the top brands here—Wai Wai instant noodles, De Max beauty soap, and Aqua mineral water. The difference, as Rakshya puts it: "We're not just an ad agency. We are a fully operational one-stop production house that does everything from concept

visualisation to actually producing the story." In just the short time that it has been around, Vista is already a success story, and a good example for young entrepreneurs.

Rakshya has an MBA degree from Philippines Christian University and is planning on a Masters degree in economics. At 30, and without any business background, Rakshya could well have been a cog in some multinational, clawing her way up. But she preferred to come back to Nepal and try her luck here instead. "When I finished my degree I was offered a job in a big multinational corporation in Singapore," she says, without name-dropping. She has dabbled in this and that—been active with an environmental group and taught marketing—but she never strayed far from the marketing communications field. After her last job in advertising she realised this was her calling. "There are no well-organised professional



MIN BAIRACHARYA

production houses here and the sad part is that even the few that are here have foreign nationals as the top brass. I want to prove that Nepalis can do it too," she adds.

Rakshya is certainly off to a flying start. She plans to produce television serials, do some social marketing and maybe even try her hand at films. And aside from all that she is an inspiration for Nepalis studying abroad—come back to Nepal where their skills and commitment can be put to the best use. ♦

FAIR AND LOVELY