

EXCLUSIVE

Meanwhile

The government's land sale ban has paralysed parliament and partially eclipsed the Maoists' alcohol ban, although reports of raids on shops and distributors have been reported after last week's arson attack on a distillery in Nepalgunj. The Maoist women's group is negotiating with the government, and also separately with breweries and distilleries. The negotiations appear to be centred around payoffs for calling off the ban. The government is too busy preparing for talks with the Maoists that may start over the weekend to pay much attention.

It also doesn't have time to notice that Maoist trade unions, too, are gearing up for action next month. The General Federation of Trade Unions (GEFONT) says: Enough is enough, labour rights cannot be won through violence because there will be nothing left to fight over.

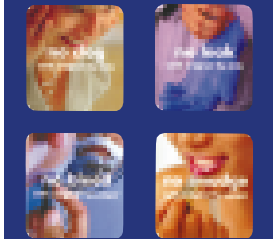


Conversion guide

Flummoxed by Nepali area units? A quick conversion guide:

1 bigha	=	0.677266ha
1 ropani	=	0.05185ha
1 bigha	=	20 katthas
1 kattha	=	20 dhurs
1 dhur	=	4 kanwas
1 ropani	=	16 anna

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**BINOD BHATTARAI**

As an erstwhile socialist, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba believes that the answer to Nepal's poverty is to take land from the rich and give it to the poor.

A radical land reform plan would distract the peoples' attention, bring in the main opposition UML on his side, and prepare the groundwork for talks with Maoists.

So, after discussing the plan with his party general secretary, he ordered a nationwide ban on land registration that would hold until a new law to set a ceiling on holdings was passed.

It would have all worked fine, but Deuba failed to foresee that Nepal has changed from BP Koirala's days. Today, the rich are no more the big zamindars of the tarai: they are the urban nouveau riche, fattened on corruption and smuggling. The ban on land sales hit everyone, not just the landed class.

Deuba's plan comes for a hearing at a special bench of the Supreme Court on 31 August. The land law is being drafted while parliament has been unable to do business because of disruption caused by Sadbhavana and the RPP.

A chain reaction of panic swept the spooked business community. If it was land now, they reasoned, could cash and assets be far behind? Businessmen reportedly carted out hundreds of millions of rupees through unofficial transfer channels to India and abroad for safekeeping. There was a partial run on the banks, and the Rastra Bank governor had to go on national TV to assuage the public.

# Capital fright

## Land redistribution may just redistribute poverty.

"There has been no bank run, there is no need to worry, we have enough liquidity to handle any crisis," Nepal Rastra Bank governor Tilak Rawal told us. The banking system has Rs 177 billion in deposits of which cash holdings stand at Rs 47 billion, another Rs 14 billion in treasury bills. Even so, banks and clients have been hit hard by the freeze on collateral-secured credit. Rawal is trying to convince the government to relax the rules for certain transactions without diluting the objective of land reforms.

Private bankers are pushing panic buttons. Said one: "The longer this drags on, the worse it will be for the economy. Everything will be standstill." Another financier was more worried about the government's motive for the move. "What is it trying to do, take everyone down to the lowest common denominator?" he asked.

Agriculture economist Ram Prakash Yadav was one of the main architects of Nepal's 20-year Agricultural Perspective Plan, and finds it hard to believe that all political parties believe that lowering land ceilings is the way to go. "That may not be worth the political risk because there may not be enough land to distribute in the first place," says Yadav.

His 1999 study on land tenure shows only 8,000 households held over 10 hectares of land in 1991, down from over 14,000 households in 1981. At that rate of fragmentation due to inheritance and

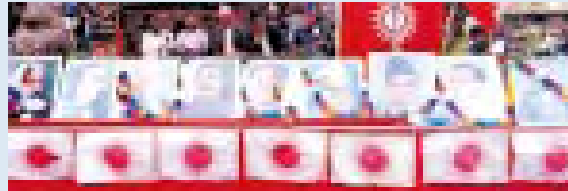


other reasons, the number of households today with more than 10 hectares may be no more than 3,600.

Keshav Badal of the UML, whose study six years ago is the blueprint for the government's reform plan, recommends bringing down the ceiling to three hectares. This he said would free up

200,000 ha for redistribution. "If only the government had courage, we could prepare a bill for it within a week," Badal told us. But will such redistribution increase productivity and harvests? Many disagree with Badal-onomics. Said one: "Further fragmentation will only redistribute poverty."

# LEFT TO THEMSELVES



## A united moderate left would be a formidable force in future elections, and may even counter the Maoists.

to get remarried to the Marxist-Leninists (ML) after a four-year divorce. A monolithic left party would be a formidable force in next year's local elections, and it could also woo back some cadres who've strayed into the radical fold. Since there are scant ideological divisions, it may be fairly easy to achieve.

"Theoretically, there's a great possibility of unifying with the Marxist-

Leninists who, like us, believe in people's multi-party democracy," says Raghuj Pant, a UML MP. "Talks have also been positive with the Nepal Communist Party United."

On the national front, the UML is also cosying up to the Nepali Congress government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, and managed to get him to push for a freeze on land sales prior to a land reform law. Both the

Nepali Congress and the UML appear to be hoping that this will take some of the wind out of the sails of the Maoist agenda at talks. What they may not have anticipated was the huge backlash from the smaller parties and a major crisis of confidence in business. As pressure builds up, and parliament is stalled, Deuba has hinted privately at meetings with his party's lawmakers that they needn't worry since the bill will never be allowed to pass.

On return from Siliguri, UML supremo Madhav Kumar Nepal said he had made it clear to Chairman Prachanda that his party was not interested in establishing a republic. Neither was it interested in forming a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. One senior party source told us: "What we said was this: if you want changes in the constitution let us form a committee then we can have an interim government to hold elections. Let's do it the democratic way."



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## MORE RADICAL-THAN-THOU

At exactly the time Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba was speaking to parliament last Thursday and his words were carried live by Radio Nepal and Nepal Television, in the village of Rampur in Dang Valley Maoist cadre were harvesting maize. They had changed the traditional ratio of dividing up the crop, and were busy awarding two parts to the tiller and one part to the landlord. The landlord sat on his porch and watched, the tillers looked dazed. In the background somewhere, Deuba's voice carried over the radio as he announced his "revolutionary" land reform edict. There is a race on before the government-Maoist talks for everyone to be more radical-than-thou. When the prime minister pretends to be a revolutionary, what will the real revolutionaries do?

This has been a Deuba quirk all along: it's difficult to figure out whether he is incredibly smart, or incredibly daft. His moratorium last week on all land transactions until a new bill on land reform is announced was probably meant to be a flanking manoeuvre to pre-empt the Maoist agenda before talks, and bring the main opposition UML fully on board. If that was the case, it may have been a deft move. And the UML and Nepali Congress MPs sitting silently together while parliament was disrupted this week by sloganeering minor parties was a sight to behold. The irony of it all was not lost on the UML which till not too long ago was itself gheraoing the rostrum and preventing the speaker from speaking bringing the House to a standstill for two months.

But what if land reform is only a half-baked plan that the prime minister hadn't even cleared with his own party leadership? That appears to have been the case, given the immediate backlash from within his own party, from the tarai-based Sadbhawana and the centre-right RPP, all of which depend on the landed gentry for their rural support base, either in the tarai or in the hills. Much as we would like to believe that Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is a true radical

who is speaking softly and carrying a big stick, there are many who are beginning to think that he is being taken for a ride by everyone: the UML, the smaller opposition, the Maoists, and his arch enemies within his own party.

A less conspiratorial and more likely explanation is that Deuba just hasn't done his homework, and could not foresee that he was stirring a hornet's nest. Responding to a run on some banks and a slew of writs, the Supreme Court has called a full bench to debate the issue from 31 August. A full bench means the honourable justices consider this a constitutional question.

Deuba is being disingenuous. In the party's chambers he has apparently been telling angry MPs to cool it, since he has no intention of ever implementing land reform. It is just a ploy, he has told them, an edict like that will never get past the Supreme Court, and it will get the UML on his side before the Maoist talks. It doesn't look like too many MPs are buying that. The UML and ML are too busy being interviewed on state and private radio singing hosannas of the government and asserting that only the zamindars are opposed to land reform.

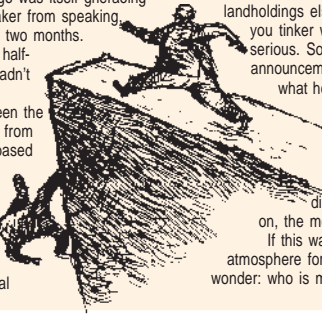
There is no doubt that given Nepal's skewed landholding pattern, there is need for reform. But there are ways to do it, and there are lessons of history—the devastating famines that followed the collectivisation in the Soviet Union and China.

The loss of economies of scale with fragmentation of landholdings elsewhere. Land reform is not something you tinker with, or play politics with. It is deadly serious. So the problem with the prime minister's announcement in parliament on 16 August was not what he did, but how he did it.

By announcing a ban on land sales, he has already set the ball rolling.

But he didn't follow it up immediately with a bill tabled in the house or with a timetable for implementation. It will be difficult to roll back, and the longer it goes on, the messier things will be for the economy.

If this was a grand plan to create a favourable atmosphere for negotiations with the Maoists, then we wonder: who is manipulating whom?



### STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL



# The Chicken Neck

## I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

-TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Farmers in the tarai look at overcast Bhadra sky with a mixture of hope and fear. If it rains, rice grows green and strong. But if it pours, young plants go pale under the fierce sun, and then decompose in waterlogged fields. But hope is always stronger than dread.

Bhadra is the month of worry, and this year it is worse than usual. Tarai farmers face the consequences of the freezing of their only property—the land. Sher Bahadur Deuba suddenly got the brainwave that he could steal the Maoists' thunder by announcing revolutionary land redistribution measures.

The actual land ceiling is unlikely to affect more than 10 percent of the population if and when it comes into being, but the freeze on sales and transfers of land holdings affects everyone. It is difficult to find real-life examples of someone letting go of a bird in hand in the hope of getting two from the bush, but Deuba has just done it. And it will be his own Nepali Congress that will face the consequences of his decision.

The haves have now been shaken out of their complacency. Exposed to extortion by Maoists, and having bought their peace by cheating taxes to pay protection money, traders and industrialists had thought it would be business as usual even under the shadow of the terrorists' guns. The planned arson by a Maoist mob at a distillery in Nepalgunj showed that when the government accommodates insurgents without first displaying its own power to enforce peace, the result is anarchy.

When a weak government and strong rebels meet to talk peace, even more extremist warlords are inevitably born, who assume the

mantle of "real revolutionaries". This week's run on commercial banks, and an unusual rush to transfer funds abroad through the informal hundi channel was caused as much by the fears of freeze on large personal accounts as by the dread that Maoists may renew their extortion. People had already lost faith in the government, now they have decided that even the Maoist leadership cannot be trusted to control their cadre.

Last week, Chairman Prachanda received an audience a procession of overground communists at his den in Siliguri. Since our southern pals claim to know everything that happens inside the smallest madarasa in the tarai, it is highly unlikely that they have not been aware of the honoured guests in their strategic Chicken Neck. The fact that the Maoists have safe havens in Indian territory has affected their image back home. So was their rabid anti-Indianism just to hide the shame of being at the mercy of their benefactors?

The Maoists had claimed that they had an understanding with Narayanhiti under King Birendra. Then Koirala's Home Minister Ram Chandra Poudel had revealed that the Maoists' *paramdham* (heaven) was Nimal Niwas. And now it has been publicly confirmed that the bases of the "people's war" lie beyond our southern border. So, what are the many Nepalis who believed Maoism was born out of their misery going to do now?

Karl Marx: "The redeeming feature of war is that it puts a nation to test. As exposure to the atmosphere reduces all mummies to instant dissolution, so war passes extreme judgement on social systems that have outlived their utility." Well put. The Maoists waged their propaganda

war so effectively that our leaders lost even before they started fighting.

Nepali intellectuals fell for Maoist slogans of social justice hook, line and sinker, knowing that instant justice dispensed by the gun is the worst form of despotism. The media crawls on all fours, pusillanimous politicians make pious noises against terrorism in public, but privately many are still paying protection money. Of the police and army, after Holeri the less said the better. It is unreasonable to hope for peace and stability when all the institutions of society have failed so miserably. In the end, there is nothing as oppressive as the tyranny of a soft state. It is unlikely that anything substantial will emerge out of talks between C-class Maoists and politically expendable government nominees. In any case, it seems clear now that the government's talks should actually be with New Delhi and Narayanhiti. Just like in 2007.

After this period of relative calm, the short-term prognosis is the possibility of more intense violence. History has a habit of springing nasty surprises on nations that do not value peace. If and when mindless violence begins again—and let us pray that it doesn't—the countdown for Deuba's fall from grace and power will commence. As Deuba completes his first month in office, his highly secretive advisers will do well to remember an old axiom of politics: nothing destroys legitimacy like a dramatic failure to fulfil expectations.

The silver lining in the menacing clouds looming on the national horizon is the common Nepali's weariness with this senseless war. The mask has come off the Maoists, the Nepali people have realised that deliverance does not lie in a proletarian utopia designed in Siliguri.



by TIRTH UPADHYAY



# Least favoured nation?

## It is not in Nepal's interest to hold bilateral trade with India hostage over five export items. Keeping the 1996 treaty is much more important.

The Nepal government, political leaders, bureaucrats and industrialists, all want our 1996 preferential trade treaty with India renewed in its original form, without review and changes. The 2-5 August round of secretary-level negotiations between the two governments failed, and as per the provisions of the treaty, India has officially proposed a review. This week Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh promised to keep by the spirit of the treaty, but failed to clear the air. It is now sure that the treaty will not be automatically renewed. Time is running out for Nepal as the treaty expiry date approaches on 5 December.

The bone of contention is the issue of the "surge in export of certain products, particularly vanaspati *ghni* (hydrogenated vegetable oil), zinc oxide, acrylic yarn, steel pipes and copper wires, which India has said is displacing its domestic manufactures. Among others things, India wants Nepal to impose voluntary export quotas on these products, or else it will impose quantitative restrictions on Indian import of these products. Nepali authorities pretended not to be aware of the Indian demand and continued singing solo that the treaty had benefited both countries since India's export to Nepal has also grown and therefore it should be renewed automatically.

Nepal may have a point. But it cannot criticise India for non-cooperation. We need to do some soul searching ourselves and analyse the economic benefits that have resulted from the expansion of the industries producing the five problem products. As is evident now, this has been the main hurdle for the treaty's automatic renewal. The five problem industries add very little value in Nepal, and it could very well be that we are re-routing semi finished imports, as India alleges. Was the refusal to be flexible on these products worth sacrificing the treaty?

There are lessons from our recent history of trade relations with India about how we can ensure long-term benefits. During the 1970 and 1980s India had protectionist policies. Most Nepali industry of the time were those whose products found markets in India through illegal channels. Nepal benefited from customs and other duties on imports that were re-exported to India. But as was expected, the "benefit" was not to last, and the industries began crumbling the moment India liberalised trade. Many of our currently "sick" industries are relics of that era.

Synthetic textiles, iron rods, vegetable oils and electronics are industries that can never benefit Nepal. There are many reasons, but the inavailability of local raw materials is one. Encouraging such industries will not contribute to the Nepali economy because they will never be able to achieve the economies of scale necessary to become cost-efficient and compete with manufactures from India. Their existence will continue to be determined by subsidised duties in the form of an effective zero duty on raw material imports.

Some political and trade lobbies argue that imposing quotas or quantitative restrictions are tantamount to encroachment of Nepal's sovereignty. Wrong. Trade and industry are not a matter of politics, they are governed by rules of economics, which boil down to a simple theory of comparative advantage. As things stand, because India is

the stronger trading partner, failure to renew the treaty will damage the Nepali economy more. Just look at what happened in 1988/89 when the trade and transit treaty was suspended for a year and we lived through a blockade. Nepal had to airlift kerosene from Bangladesh, and was given salt for free by China, that could not be brought to Nepal because of prohibitive transportation costs.

The Indian demand for imposing voluntary restrictions on exports of a particular product or a group of products is not unique. It is a practice that is global, and is often used by trading partners. Japan has voluntarily limited the number of cars it exports to the United States of America. Again, exports of Nepali garments to the US take place under pre-approved quotas.

It is in Nepal's interest to address Indian concerns while maximising benefits to us, and get the treaty renewed without further delay. We have already shown how unpredictable we can be to investors even with an agreed treaty by causing India to seek a review in the first five years. We did not self-

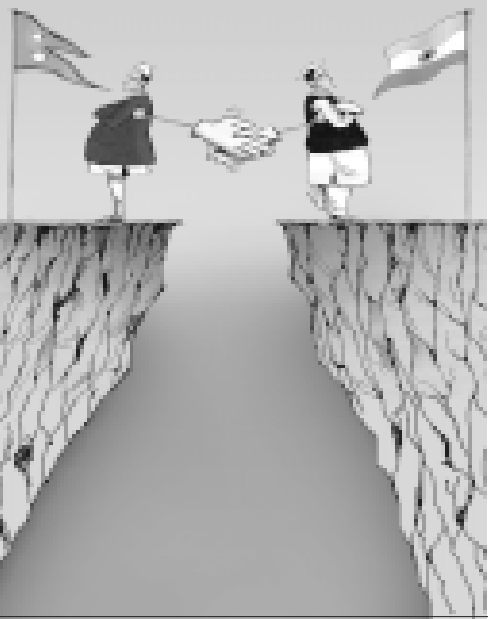
correct flaws which we knew were there all along. Investors look beyond the five-year horizon and such immaturity will do Nepal no good.

We need to urgently put our own house in order and make efforts to get more foreign direct investment, including Indian, into Nepal. Sizeable investment can lead to larger interdependence of the two economies and the same industries can serve as pressure groups to iron out little rifts that crop up from time to time. They may even lead to Nepal getting a more favourable treaty. Nepal will also earn lead time to build up its own industrial base while that happens.

The US-Japan dispute over American photographic paper imports is another example with lessons for us. In the early 1990s, the dispute reached a stage where the US president had to announce stopping Japanese imports within 24 hours. Japan retaliated by threatening to stop export of aircraft spares to the US, threatening to cripple its aviation industry (Boeing alone imports about 40 percent of its spares from Japan). The two sides then sat down and within a week they had found a solution that was acceptable to both sides.

Nepal needs to take a similar attitude: do a serious, non-jingoistic review of where we have failed and sit down with India at the earliest to iron out our differences. Any delay will only add to the uncertainties of investors wanting to come to Nepal, which already is becoming known worldwide as a place where the politics is unstable and where there are Maoists out to disable whatever little industry the country has.

*Tirth Upadhyay is a senior partner with KPMG.*



## LETTERS

### ABORTION

While some Members of Parliament and others argue that legalising abortion would create an imbalance in our "social harmony", I ask what sort of harmony is it when women (especially poor women) bear the brunt of an unequal legal system? As Dr Aruna Upstey says in "Silent state violence" (#55) this argument is absurd in a society supposed to be based on a constitution of equal rights for all. Reproductive rights are the rights of women, and most lawmakers in our country are male, so it might be difficult for them to understand. It is not just abortion that should be legalised, but any other issue that can help improve the dire legal status of Nepali women.

**Sujala Pant**  
Shanghai, PRC

And, as usual, it is the well off who can get an abortion in a clean, safe, modern medical facility in Kathmandu, and get away scot free as long as they have the money. I know. My house keeper decided to have an abortion. She returned to her home village in Nawalparasi to have the procedure done by a local village woman. The haves win over the have-nots everytime, and the women are the biggest losers.

**Maggie Namjou**  
Vermont, USA

### INDOSUEZ

Binod Bhattarai's "Scramble for Indosuez" (#56) and his line

"divesting in Nepal is almost as difficult as investing" are very pertinent. Nepal has to simplify political and bureaucratic procedures if it is serious about attracting foreign investment. The insurgency is already a big disincentive for foreign investors. The article also quotes me on the subject of minority shareholders' rights. May I clarify that in all past deals the interest of such shareholders have been totally ignored. The Stock Exchange Board, the Rastra Bank and other regulatory authorities must make it mandatory in the Indosuez deal for the new buyer to guarantee the minority shareholders to buy back their shares at the prevailing market price if they wish to sell.

**Tirth Upadhyay**  
KPMG

### BIG BROTHER

Pratyoush Onta's "What to do when Big Brother knocks" (#55) is a schizophrenic analysis. The rationale behind foreign direct investment (FDI) is to import advanced technology and capital which will eventually boost a country's exports and have a positive impact on the economy. Hi-tech industries which require huge capital and resources are generally invited in the name of FDI, and Nepal has so far followed this trend. But FDI in the sensitive Fourth Estate is a different matter. Is FDI necessary to teach Nepali journalists to write articles and editorials, as Onta states? I am not convinced that an Indian-owned newspaper will help us in

narrowing the trade deficit and create mass employment to give a boost to our economy? Nepal does not need FDI to publish a daily newspaper in Kathmandu. The other question is: why does Big Brother want to enter our relatively small market where other national dailies are still running at a loss? Onta's argument that the foreign media's compulsion to survive on Nepal's advertising market is quite ridiculous.

**Gopi Sarmah**  
New Road, Pokhara

By leaving out a point in my letter (Letters, #56) you have completely diluted my main message about Pratyoush Onta's piece on foreign direct investment in media. If FDI was to succeed in mauling Nepali bichar, then people would stop investing in RAW, ISI, CIA, et al. Besides, these agencies will have a very easy job in achieving their goals by having their operatives write in newspapers. Moreover, you have also abridged my name by deleting the letters "FCA" from my name.

**Ratna Sansar Shrestha, FCA**  
Senior Chartered Accountant & Corporate Lawyer  
Kathmandu

It was refreshing to see wide ranging debate being initiated on the almost taboo subject of Nepali nationalism with BP Giri's "My nation, right or wrong", #54 and Pratyoush Onta's "What to do when Big Brother knocks", #55. Unqualified Nepali nationalism, as Giri points out, often stifles rational

debate on important issues and most political parties inflame public sentiment. Why should we take pride in our independence when we cannot run the most rudimentary administration with any degree of competence? It does not matter that Nepal has never been colonised if we allow our country to go down through incompetence and corruption. Onta is persuasive. However, there is no denying that an individual or an identified organisation can have decisive influence on the national thinking if they have sufficient control of media. Whether that has any detrimental effect on the nation is a separate matter.

**Suresh K Kafle**  
Manchester, UK

### YEAR ZERO

CK Lal in "Tunak tunak tun.... tarara" (#56) purports to quote the conversation he had with me at the Nepali Times Anniversary Reception. May I clarify the actual content of our conversation? Mr Lal stated, apropos of Indian Army's recruitment of Nepalese nationals, that India was recruiting its "cannon fodder" from Nepal, because she did not want to send her own people to die in Siachen. I replied to this "Do you really believe that a country of one billion people has difficulty in finding people in its own country to join the Army or die for the country?" Mr. Lal responded by asking why India was continuing its recruitment of "poor Gurkhas from the Nepalese hills" into the Indian Army. I reiterated that India could

recruit her own people, but that the recruitment of the Gurkhas from Nepal was a matter of convention and tradition dating from the British period, which was now continued out of India-Nepal friendship, and that it was wrong and unfair to call the Nepali Gurkhas "cannon fodder". It is deeply regrettable that a columnist of Mr CK Lal's outstanding abilities and reputation should have chosen to so distort a conversation for whatever point he was trying to make.

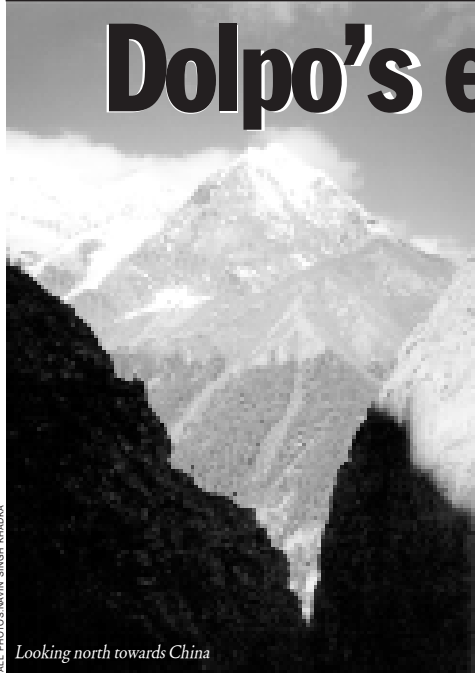
**Nagma Mallick**  
Indian Embassy, Kathmandu

CK Lal's article on India-Nepal relations is poignant. It shows how our relationship with India has become unequal by our own shortcomings. While we are all very happy to bash India, we have not realised that India has a very committed and professional cadre of workers, particularly in the Ministry of External Affairs. Why should these people have to always treat Nepal with favour? Special favours are a privilege, not a right. And we have not provided any favours to India. If anything, we are the first to bash our "big brother". We should be able to match up to India, not by currying favour, or by

**Shanta Dixit**  
Patan







Looking north towards China

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA  
IN DOLPO

The Shey-Phoksundo National Park is a conservation success story. A protected area for endangered wildlife like the musk deer and the snow leopard, and rare fauna like *yarchagumba*—sometimes called the Himalayan Viagra. Even at the best of times there was no way anyone could watch the country's largest, 3,555 sq km national park in this rugged, arid land adjoining Tibet. But with the Maoist insurgency, police have pulled back, rangers don't go out patrolling anymore, the army stays in the barracks, and poachers are having a field day. After Maoist militia raided the district headquarters in Dunai a year ago killing more than 20 policemen, law enforcers in this

trans-Himalayan reserve have quietly abandoned their duties for fear of Maoists. After the massacre, policemen in Dolpa were confined to the district headquarters. Officials of the Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation, who were not recalled, took to staying indoors in their quarters at different park check-posts. "You never know when you will meet the Maoists. And we do not have any arms to defend ourselves," one park ranger confided to us. It is the same story at the Suligad barrack near Dunai, originally stationed here to protect the park. A high-ranking army officer there admitted there is no more patrolling. "We are avoiding a possible confrontation, since we know the Maoists are



An abandoned police post near Dunai



Phoksundo lake

## The insurgency doesn't only claim human lives. Rare species are falling prey to poachers emboldened by poor patrolling.

well-armed and roam the park's jungles." In any case, the troops at Suligad today have a different mandate—they are perched on a small hillock overlooking Dunai Bazar as a back-up security force. "Our focus has been changed for now," admitted the officer. For poachers, the good times are here again. Strict conservation and patrolling over the past 20 years have raised the population of endangered animals like musk deer and snow leopards, and rare herbs. Musk deer are having a particularly hard time of it, especially in Lower Dolpo. Poachers trap the animal, remove the musk glands, also called "pods", and sometimes even the flesh. Then, they simply leave the animal there to die. Rangers and game scouts tell of finding traps with deer skeletons in them. Since

1998, officials at the Sekpa check post of the Shey-Phoksundo park have discovered more than 500 traps meant for musk deer, and game scouts say they have found fifty of these on the steep slopes directly below the Suligad barrack in the last six months alone. Musk, traditionally used to make some of the most expensive perfumes in the world, has a market value in Dunai of over Rs 30,000 for 50 grams. Middlemen operate openly. Just last week, says Santaram Thakali, chairman of a Dunai NGO, there were two dealers in town with musk and the half-plant half-larva aphrodisiac *yarchagumba* they had collected from the mountains. If poachers have a free hand in the inhabited areas of Lower Dolpo from Dunai to Phoksumdo lake, what goes on in

the desolate upper reaches of the park is anybody's guess. There is not a single law-enforcement agency in this area, and even police officers deployed to guard the Jufal Airstrip, the entry point into Dolpa by air, admit that many residents of Dolpo and neighbouring districts regularly get up to the high passes of Upper Dolpo to collect *yarchagumba*. Buyers are easy and fast to find, even at such high altitude. Locals picking *yarchagumba* don't even need to bring it back down—the Tibetan plateau is just a day's walk from passes like Jengala, and smugglers regularly cross back and forth. The local market value for a piece of *yarchagumba* is between Rs 25-35—far lower than the Rs 500 per piece the government decreed when it lifted the ban on its

collection last year. "That was an absurd decision," said Dhan Rai, Manager of Northern Mountain Conservation Project, run by USAID and the WWF in Dolpo. "The government is losing revenue because legal sales are low, and at the same time there has been significant ecological disturbance because natural resources are being plundered in search of the stuff." The snow leopard, which is found above the snow line, is also an easy target for the more intrepid poachers. Many villagers in Upper Dolpo say they often see strangers in this high altitude area driving "well-packed loads" towards Tibet, which borders the arid mountains to the north of Upper Dolpo. "The poachers take hides and snow leopard bones to China. It is lucrative business, there is no one to stop them here" said Phinjo Namage

by DANIEL LAK



# Last orders, please

## Whatever the revolutionary women of Nepal may think, banning alcohol here won't dry things up. It will enrich a lot of Indians.



was re-legalised by his son-in-law and heir, Chandrababa Naidu. The fact that Naidu's party was home to the state's top bootletters was conveniently overlooked as ministers swore adherence to the spirit of prohibition, if not the letter of the law. Delhi, ludicrously, earns bags of rupees from liquor and beer sales yet spends some of them on maintaining a "Department of Prohibition" to push abstinence and orange juice on an unsuspecting populace.

Most famously, the United States of America went officially dry for 13 years, from 1920 to 1933. The prohibition era came after decades of hard campaigning by advocates of temperance, many of them women. Our revolutionaries here in Nepal might spend some time looking up the activities of one Carrie Nation, president of a Kansas chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She and her crusaders specialised in bursting into saloons with axes and smashing kegs of whisky, as drinkers fled into the night screaming for the police. Carrie Nation died in 1911 and America banned booze nine years later. But prohibition failed dismally on all counts. Americans drank more pure alcohol by the end of the era, and the government lost hundreds of millions of dollars. Gangsters, many of them my fellow Canadians, flourished as rum runners and smugglers. Canada actually repealed its own prohibition laws in 1919, knowing full well that Washington had just authorised an irresistible, if illegal, business opportunity. Whatever the revolutionary women of Nepal may think, banning alcohol here won't dry things up. It will enrich a lot of Indians, though. What better border for smuggling booze that the long porous line through the tarai. Nepal's neighbours, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, are awash in strong drink and gangsters already. I can imagine them—like Canada in 1919—anticipating the gold rush. In the end, the poor will be hardest hit by prohibition: lost jobs, lower government revenues and dangerous home brew. We foreigners, rich Kathmandu-wallahs and other elite types will still have our Chardonnay at sunset, our single malts after dinner. If I'm wrong, I'm buying the next round, ban or no ban.

# in danger again

Ghale, vice president of Saldang Village Development Committee (VDC). The village has a snow leopard conservation committee, which estimates there is a population of about 215 of the rare cats in Upper Dolpo. A teacher from Rumai village near Dunai was visiting Khasa in Tibet and told us he saw residents of Palam village in Lower Dolpo sell two snow leopard pelts for Rs 8,000 each. As tiger bones are getting harder to come by, Chinese apothecaries have started using the bones of snow leopards and other big cats as well.

It isn't only outsiders who are poaching. Padam Budha, chairman of the Buffer Zone's User Committee at the Shey-Phoksundo VDC, says he doesn't see as many Chinese nationals coming to the area to kill snow leopard and blue sheep as he used to. Many villages in Upper Dolpo are abuzz with rumours that there are "professional hunters" among their own numbers. People mention a man called Heeru from north Dolpa's Vijer village. They say he has killed at least five snow leopards in recent years and has been able to sell pelts, bones and even teeth to businessmen in Tibet. "We have seen him walking around this area with his gun and bow," locals at Saldang said. "He has been walking away scot-free, and he boasts that he will carry on his illegal hunting."

We put this to the district authorities in Dunai. They said they knew all about this hunter in Vijer. "But no department official has the guts to go and arrest him," said an officer. He and his colleagues are scared and talk about the atmosphere of lawlessness. They are particularly afraid of anyone they have take action against in the past. Maoist or not, there is the tacit fear of retaliation. Locals say the entire village of Tinje, in the northeastern part of Upper Dolpo has been a particularly bad snow leopard poaching area. A visitor to Tinje might easily be offered a pelt for Rs 12,000. "They even approached us when we were there for a survey of snow leopards two years ago," said Rai of the Northern Mountain Conserva-



Horses romp through meadows in Upper Dolpo

tion Project. When asked how they came to have the animal's pelt, the would-be salesmen said they skinned a dead snow leopard or simply bought it from someone else. The highlanders know well that snow leopards and other animals in the area like blue sheep are protected species. "We cannot kill them because the department of parks and conservation has explained to us that their numbers need to grow," says Ongdi Lama, the priest at Shey Monastery. "These days we cannot even keep guns like we used to earlier."

Last year an estimated 50 snow leopards were killed in Shey alone. Not all were poached, villagers also kill them before they kill their livestock. "In the last six months the *syavo* (local name for snow leopard) has killed more than one hundred sheep and baby yaks in this village alone," said Chhebang Tashi, of Saldang. Leopards kill livestock out of hunger because of depleted natural prey like blue sheep. The cats are also moving down to well-vegetated areas in Lower Dolpo in search of prey. "It is very risky to leave our animals in the meadows unaccompanied by shepherds these days," said June Karki, a Game Scout at the department of parks' Sekpa Check Post who lost three yak calves to snow leopards this year. "If we were allowed to keep guns I would have wiped them out," said Dhondul Buddha of Nando Valley near the Saldang VDC. "In the last six months they have eaten six of my

sheep and I am expecting worse this winter." Residents of Dolpo are demanding compensation for the damage snow leopards cause. "There has been talk about compensating us," says Thinley Lendup Lama of Saldang, who played the lead role in the Eric Valli film, *Caravan*. But as long as locals regard snow leopards as a menace they will not see any reason why poachers should be caught, they are just doing them a favour by killing the predator. Officials of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation say this is one reason controlling the poaching is so difficult. "The poachers, aided by villagers, know many secret routes," a senior park official said. "And anyway, what can we do when even the army has stopped its patrols." Things will only get worse as long as law-enforcement and park officials remain indoors and if plans go through to open up Upper Dolpo, now a restricted area, to tourists. Villagers will benefit, but with no one to regulate the increased human traffic in the area, and potential retail clients for poachers and *yarchagumba* collectors right in the area, the situation in the park could get even messier. Local participation in any future tourism or conservation endeavours could be the place to start, but for now, residents of Dolpo are simply tired of protecting themselves from snow leopards, Maoists and all the problems that come with this rough terrain.

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## The debate continues

Dr Ram Sharan Mahat is back from the Dragon Kingdom and we will know how successful he has been from the pace of the joint verification process of refugees in Jhapa in the following weeks. The official Bhutanese line is that it is committed to verifying and repatriating refugees, but it was not what its National Assembly said recently. "The Assembly has taken a stand against repatriating refugees, or wants to take back only the fewest possible," says SB Subba, chairman of the Bhutan Refugees Representative Repatriation Committee (BRRRC). The Jhapa-based organisation has been urging the Nepali government to skip verification and go directly into categorisation of refugees as Bhutanese or non-Bhutanese nationals rather than wait for the screening be over. Since refugee verification by a 10-member Nepali and Bhutanese team began in April in Khudunabari, one of the seven refugee camps in east Nepal, 940 families have been verified. 1,957 refugees call the Khudunabari Camp home. So far, 5,913 of the nearly 100,000 refugees living in Jhapa have been through the process. At the current pace, the process could take as long as six years.

Bhutanese refugees in a camp in Jhapa

## Gagged

The Family Planning Association of Nepal (FPAN), the country's biggest non-governmental organisation has cause for concern. FPAN officials are worried that US President George Bush's resurrection of the Global Gag Rule (Mexico City Policy of 1984), which bars foreign organisations from using US aid to advocate abortion law reforms, may affect reproductive and family planning services the association provides to thousands of couples in Nepal. Nearly fifteen percent of the organisation's annual funding comes from the US government, and FPAN officials fear they may have to downsize and shut down three model family planning clinics because the US has said it wont deliver the promised allocations for fiscal 2001. Nepal, which has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world—539 of 100,000 live births, fifty percent due to unsafe abortions—has refused to comply with the Gag Rule. While FPAN officials are looking for alternate sources of funding, they are also hoping that the Global Democracy Promotion Act recently passed by the US Senate will block the US government from implementing the Gag Rule.

## Sacrificial lamb

No *chyangra* (Tibetan goats) from the Chinese this Dasain, says the Food Corporation. Nepal is said to have decided to stop taking the Tibetan goats China gifted Nepalis every Dasain, something which has been going on for the last 30 years. The sale of the 2,000 goats brought in Rs 2.5 million annually but the governments says the costs of importing and tending to the herds had become about just as high. The end of the *chyangra* is part of an attempt by the Ministry of Finance attempt to stop taking small grants that make donors look generous but have little or no effect on the nation's economy. Some government officials are worried though that the move might be construed as an insult and affect the centuries-old relationship between Nepal and China. Our prediction: higher meat prices this Dasain.

Tibetan sheep during last year's Dasain

## Unsafe no more

Finally, some good news for travel trade professionals. Following the Maoist-government ceasefire, a number of foreign missions have updated their travel advisories—Nepal no longer figures as a troubled destination. While embassies continue to advise their nationals to exercise caution, avoid organised crowds and demonstrations, and maintain a high level of personal security while in Nepal, the country no longer figures on the 'unsafe' list—except for some Maoists-occupied areas, of course. "Sure, that will help," says a travel professional in Thamel. Quiet for the past two months, the city's tourist hub is slowly coming back to life with foreign visitors. The country can only hope the peace holds.

## Too much of a good thing

The Home Ministry's Department of Narcotics Control and Disaster Management has logged 129 deaths due to floods and landslides since this year's monsoon began in mid-May. In addition, 18 people have been injured and 42 have been listed missing. A total of 1,597 families have been affected and goods and property worth Rs 7.4 million have been destroyed due to the rains. Last year's losses tallied over Rs 1 billion. Department officials are still adding—they say the numbers are likely to rise, because the monsoon is here for another month.

## A joke or a pass?

We don't talk about it, but perhaps we should begin now. A survey conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on sexual harassment in Kathmandu's workplaces reveals that sexual harassment, though still a taboo subject for most, does occur here, and is increasingly being recognised as such. Of the 62 people who responded to the interviews, more than half of the female employees said they had experienced some sort of sexual harassment at work. The highest percentage of harassment was found to take place in the garment and airline industries. The survey says that most women who are harassed remain afraid to speak out about it for fear of social humiliation and losing their jobs. The *Muluki Ain* has laws touching on sexual exploitation, there is no specific legislation on sexual harassment. Of the organisations surveyed, the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Taragon was the only one that had sexual harassment as grounds for departmental action. As more and more women of the Valley go out to work, the lack of legal recourse open to them in the event of sexual harassment is an issue that will stay with us.

## Film South Asia

Forty-five films have been selected for competition at the world's only festival of South Asian documentaries, scheduled for 4-7 October. The films cover diverse issues, from identity politics to sexual questioning, spiritual quest to diasporic angst, playful profiles to historic re-evaluation. The films are largely from India, which remains the pre-eminent producer of documentary films in South Asia, but Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan aren't far behind. The films include *Bengalis in the World of Fish*, *King for a Day* (a candid look at Clinton's visit to Dhaka), *Ramlila* (about street theatre in Delhi), *She Wants to Talk to You* (about Nepali women in America), *Shere Punjab* (about a *dhaba*) and *The Life and Times of Lachman Magar*, a profile of a naughty old man, and one of few films selected from Nepal.



from p. 1

Nepal told Prachanda that his party was prepared to bring about radical reform within the present constitution and he would work with the Maoists only if they abandoned the armed struggle and sought a peaceful political solution within the present constitution. Prachanda is said to have stuck to his gun: an interim government, a new constitution and the new republic.

Given the pressure from within his own party, Nepal was bound to say what he did. Interestingly, the ML and other smaller left parties who also went to Siliguri agreed to the constituent assembly idea.

Nepal's self-professed priority now is to urgently forge left unity with whoever is willing to join, but he will want to have Bamdev Gautam's ML on board. He firmly believes that alone will allow parliamentary parties to stick together behind the constitution and counter the Maoists. "Without unity this country is headed for political economic and social ruin," he said this week.

The UML has taken the initiative to spearhead the negotiations which have been intense and long-drawn. In letters sent to its left counterparts, the UML said left forces that shared common principles, thoughts and a working policy should unite. The letter also stressed the need to form a united left forum on issues of common interest.

While a UML-ML remarriage appears inevitable, left watchers say the closest the other satellite communists will agree on is to be more nice to each other and agree on issues like price rise, the citizenship bill and land reform. The smaller left parties are

# ANYONE LEFT OUT?



ideologically closer to the Maoists than with the moderate UML/ML combine. They accuse the UML comrades of abandoning communism, and also the left's main mantra of republicanism. Left leaders who went to Siliguri told us privately that Prachanda was even agreeable to climbing down on his call for a "peoples' republic" (like China) and settle for a "bourgeoisie republic" (like India). And he thought it may be feasible since the public mood towards the monarchy and had become ambivalent after the royal massacre.

The more hardline of the moderate left like Lila Mani Pokhrel's Samyukta Janamorcha (United Left Front), Chitra Bahadur KC's Rastriya Jana Morcha (National Left Front),

Comrade Prakash's Ekta Kendra (Unity Centre), Mohan Bikram Singh's Masal, and Narayan Man Bijukchhe's Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party believe in a republic. But they are critical of the path of armed struggle of the Maoists. They would probably find the idea of a "bourgeoisie republic" a worthwhile concept. After all, it's not going to happen immediately they all just want "to work towards it".

The ML and UML still stick to the Madan Bhandari formulation of an ideology of *janata ko bahudaliya janabad* (people's multiparty democracy). Left analysts say it is therefore logical and just a matter of time before reunification. The ML has got weary of being in the political wilderness (it does not have a

single seat in the Lower House despite having received over three percent of the national votes in the 1999 elections). Bamdev Gautam knows his party doesn't really have a future without coming to some kind of an agreement with the UML. The bargaining now is what is each side willing to give in and give up. A tight-lipped Gautam told us: "I'm not saying anything now. We have given a three-member committee our party's mandate to talk to the UML. They would know better."

The ML at present, is a national party with little political clout, and has nothing to lose but everything to gain by reuniting with the UML. The UML on the other hand needs the ML's radicalism to become a more influential political force for fighting the increasing influence of the Maoists. Both also have their eyes on next year's local elections and the general

elections thereafter when they should be big enough to face the Nepali Congress on the one hand, and the Maoists on the other.

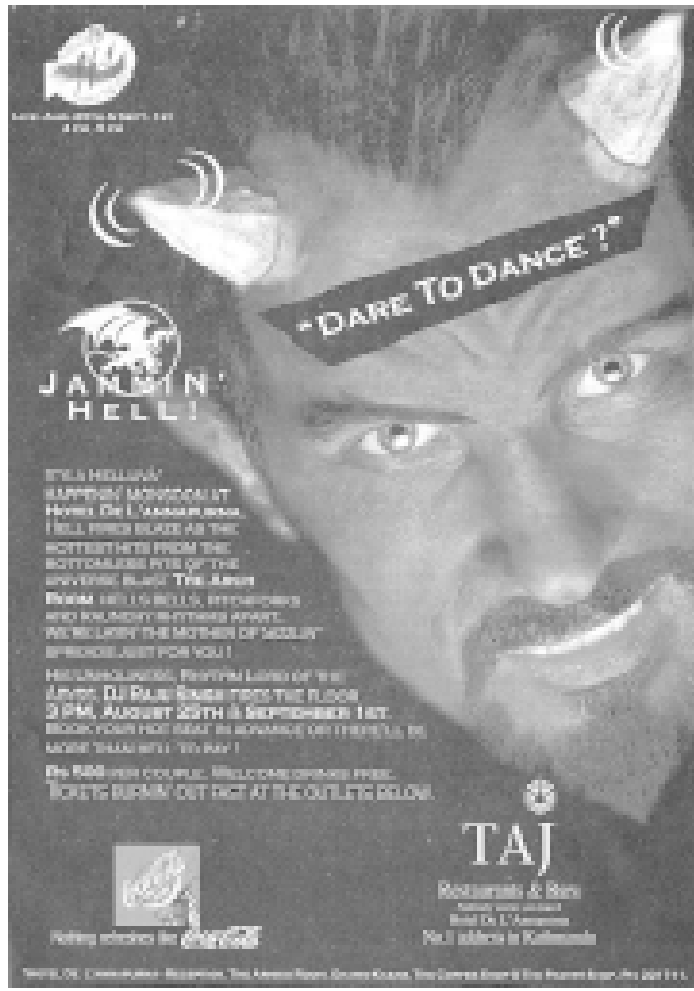
But there are still the clashes of ego and personality differences to contend with. Leaders in both parties are also wary of how reunification will affect the balance of power among the various factions in the UML. Nepal and his deputy KP Oli who don't see eye-to-eye on many issues are competing to woo Bamdev Gautam. And on the ML side, some of Gautam's supporters who think the UML has sold out communist ideology are none too happy with all this talk of reunification. Both parties would also need to take into account what their powerful student wings think. The ML faces an even bigger challenge of its students defecting to the Maoists as has happened in places like Terathum.



Gautam



Nepal



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# Put children on the agenda



**The needs and rights of children can form a common basis for understanding and agreement in future talks between the government and Maoists.**

mean in practical terms?

1. At its most fundamental, it would be desirable for each side to make a basic commitment to the protection of children (defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child as people below the age of 18 years)—that under no circumstances will children be in any way targeted, exploited, recruited as combatants, or used as messengers or sentries, for example.
2. Places where children congregate—schools especially—should be declared safe zones which no soldier or combatant will enter or occupy for any purpose, and which should not be used as recruitment centres for child combatants.
3. It is important to recognise the "humanitarian imperative" of guaranteeing the right to humanitarian assistance of any civilians—

If there is one shared hope for

Nepal's future, it is that all children should be able to get a good quality education in a safe learning environment. As it is, too few Nepali children have this opportunity. Teacher training needs a radical restructuring and the appointment of teachers needs to be depoliticised. Solidarity around a concerted national effort to improve the quality of basic education and to help all children gain access to good schooling would be proof that both sides are committed to investing in the future, and not mortgaging it to their own political ends.

children among them—trapped in any conflict zone.

Declaration of a common commitment to the nation's children would send a clear and simple message that has not so far been heard—that whatever happens in Nepal, the involvement of children in conflict, whether as actors or as victims, is not acceptable.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000, requires governments to ensure that children under 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces and that members of the armed forces under the age of 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities. It also states

that armed groups "that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of 18 years".

In Nepal, the government has stated that while young Nepalis can enlist from the age of 15 years to follow military training, nobody under 18 years of age can be recruited into the army. However, Amnesty International and others have reported "a rising tide of recruitment of children by the CPN (Maoist)". The latter's own reports have cited the "substantial contribution" of children to the "peoples' war". What could encourage the Maoists to review this practice?

Today, in the northeast of Sri



# Make or break

**While preparing for talks with the Maoists in good faith, the government must also plan for negotiations not getting anywhere.**

fundamental issues: the constitutional monarchy and the continuation of parliamentary democracy.

The people are fed up with the violence, intimidation and arson being committed in the name of the "peoples' war". The constituency is for peace, and if free of coercion, the people will back the forces of freedom and democracy as against totalitarianism represented by the Maoists. Should there be a failure of the talks, the forces of democracy backed by the army and other security organs will have no option but to quell the insurgency with decisive force.

The Maoists, on the other hand, began their revolution with a populist call for social and economic reform. Unfortunately it has degenerated in many areas into a free-for-all of threats and blackmail. It is possible that the Maoists will provide better governance than we have had in the past 11 years. Sure enough, they have been exploiting the weaknesses of parliamentary democracy and its inability to deliver basic services to the poor. But the very problems that drive their revolution today will be the ones that bedevil them if they come to power.

The ranks of the jobless are swelling, the economy is stagnant, investment is down to zero, and there is no sign of hope, because the political class is mired in corruption and selfish bickering. The law and order situation has deteriorated. And the Maoists have just moved into the vacuum taking advantage of the disarray in government and the political order. They are now using the truce to hold open mass meetings and declare parallel "peoples' governments" in new districts. So far, aside from not attacking police there has been no let-up in their activities.

But it is apparent that the Maoist tactics of spreading terror, not only in the police force but increasingly now among unarmed civilians through the use of brutal force, has turned many away from their revolution. The Maoists may also not easily get the cooperation of the international community if they succeed in setting up a one party dictatorship.

Securing a majority of seats in parliament by a single party does not necessarily ensure political stability. We have seen three governments in two and half years, largely because of political infighting within the Nepali Congress. The

present system of electing representative of parliament gives all to the winner and nothing to the losers. The Nepali Congress with only 33 percent of the popular vote has over 50 percent representation in parliament and runs the government single-handedly. The CPN-ML has over three percent of popular vote but no representation in parliament.

Keeping in mind the political reforms that are needed, the Maoists and the government now need to negotiate a peace deal keeping the interest of the nation and the people above political and partisan interests. At present, the stance of both the government and the Maoists appear on surface to be intractable. The Maoists' three substantive demands: the establishment of a people's republic, the setting up of a constituent assembly, and the drafting of a new constitution are unacceptable to the government. The constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy are non-negotiables.

So, is there a way out? The government can easily meet most of the other 40 points the Maoists have put forward, and many of them have been addressed in Deuba's 17-point agenda. But the

government should now also be prepared to hold mid-term elections, and agree to form a new government comprising of all political parties including the Maoists. It must consider tinkering with clauses in the constitution if that helps ensure better governance. The role of the army and its command certainly needs to be more clearly in line with constitutional monarchy.

The government must now also plan for the eventuality of the talks failing. It must start immediately to coordinate the activities of its security organs and be physically and psychologically prepared. If the Maoists believe that "power flows from the barrel of a gun," then the government must counter it with "if we want peace, we must be prepared for war." The onus of avoiding a wider war is on both sides. Should negotiations fail, the country would be polarised between democratic forces and forces of totalitarianism. We would then slide into civil war, and the spiralling unrest is bound to attract foreign intervention. This would undermine our sovereignty and ultimately lead to the dismemberment or annihilation of the Nepali nation.

**Ajit NS Thapa is a member of the Nepali Congress General Committee.**









# Magical mystery tour



## Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims celebrated the Srawan full moon on the shore of the Dudh Kunda.

**JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BERTHOD**  
**4** August. 5.30am. At the very beginning of the day, as the sun peeks above a blanket of monsoon clouds which give a mystical touch to this holy place. A shaman is dancing to the drumbeats of his dhyangro among a big crowd of pilgrims whose tired bodies shiver in the cold morning. This is Dudh Kunda, the Lake of Milk, 4,400m up in a remote corner of Solu Khumbu, far from the main trail leading to the slopes of Mt Everest. Hardly anybody comes here the rest of the year, but today caravans of Sherpas, Tamangs, Rais, Chettris, Magars, and Bahuns have gathered here for a very special occasion: today is Janai Purnima, the full moon of Srawan, the auspicious day to

come and pray to the numerous deities which inhabit the holy waters of the lake.

Dudh Kunda is the younger sister, the *maili bahini*, of Gosainkunda in the Langtang region, where Shiva is worshiped today on the occasion of Janai Purnima. At Dudh Kunda there are perhaps a thousand pilgrims and a few dozen shamans who have come to make contact with invisible powers. They offer a means to these hill people, mostly farmers, to try and influence the actions of spirits whose control is beyond the ordinary person's reach, but whose powers to affect everyday life—health and family harmony are understood here to be as essential to survival as sunshine and rain.

The shamans, called *dhami*

here, have been walking with their fellow villagers for two or three days up the slippery paths and in the rain, to reach Dudh Kunda, whose majestic setting makes anything, even an abundance of resident deities, seem a matter of course. Three giant peaks, Karyolung, Khatang and Numbur, soar up from behind the lake to 7,000m almost guarding this holy spot and keeping it safe.

Srawan is generally considered a month of sickness and trouble. The gods have gone to the underworld, leaving humans defenceless against the attacks from the forces of the netherworld. For Buddhists and Hindus alike, it is a special time for worship. A famous *puranic* episode relates a big battle between Indra, the god-king of

heaven and Bali, the demon-king of the underworld. On the full moon of Srawan, Hindus celebrate the day when Indra's guru Brihaspati gave him the extra strength he needed to win over Bali by tying a *rakshya bandhan* on his wrist and chanting sacred mantras. For Buddhists, this is the day Buddha, as Sakyamuni, was victorious over the maras, the difficulties and drawbacks he had to face on his way to nirvana before becoming the Enlightened One.

Dawa Sherpa, from the village of Hewa in the Tarksinu area, is one of these Buddhists. He arrived to Dudh Kunda a couple of days ago with his family and four yaks to run one of the eight temporary teahouses on the shores of the

lake. These sheds, with walls of wood or stone and plastic sheeting for a roof, are enough to protect the pilgrims from the rain and shelter them at night. For the last thirteen years, Dawa has come every year to Dudh Kunda to run one of these resthouses. This year, he even got a permit from the government in Salleri to run two tea-shops.

On the night of the full moon, *chhang* and *raksi* will flow freely in Dawa's tea shops. The Dudh Kunda Mela is not only a pilgrimage, it is also a big festival of dancing, singing and sharing the pleasure of being here together in this cold night lit by the bright moon, on the shore of Mahakunda a few metres down from where the snow never melts.

It is 5.30am and two hours ago, most pilgrims were taking a purifying dip in the icy but sacred waters. Now, wrapped in their blankets, they are making offerings of rice (*acheta*),



incense, lights, flowers and coins. They sprinkle milk from small bamboo containers as the gurus recite mantras to call upon the deities who live in the lake to bless them. Around them, the *dhami*, who have been dancing all night long, are encircling the lake—they will require strength from these

invisible powers to protect themselves and heal their patients in the coming year.

Dokshe Maila, a Tamang *dhami* from Nunthala village, is one of them. He has come to Dudh Kunda to fulfil a promise he made to his guru Banesh Kandal who was revealed to him 35 years ago in a dream.

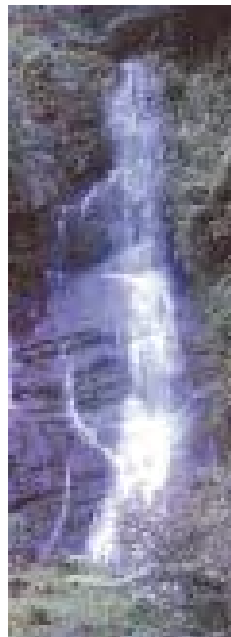


Maila was ill before he began this pilgrimage, and prayed all night long in Nunthala. Then he brought his promise of rice, flower and coins wrapped in a clean cloth to the lake, followed by a dozen of his fellow villagers.

He is wearing the traditional costume of shamans here, a full, pleated white skirt falling to his feet, necklaces of dark-red seeds and bandoliers of bells criss-crossed on his chest and back. He has a head-dress of white, green and red strips of cloth, braided to form a circlet on his head and falling loose behind his back. Two of his relatives follow him beating large, double-headed drums called

*dhyangro*, covered with the skin of a mountain goat. Maila, barefoot, dances and hops over the rough stone trail in rhythm with the drumbeats. Like the other shamans here, Maila is the leader of his fellow villagers, outside any strictures of caste, the only master of the invisible powers who manifest their presence through the trembling of his body.

The sun rises higher into the sky, bathing the lake the mountains and clouds in a golden monsoon glow. This is where heaven and earth meet once a year: at Dudh Kunda on the full moon of Janai Purnima.



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**GAURAB RAJ UPADHAYA**  
**PALUNG, Makwanpur** - IT this, IT that. It is even in the UNDP's latest Human Development Report. There's been endless debate the world over recently about democratising access to information technology, but few instances of development agencies figuring out where they stand on the issue—and trying to make it work. We followed one such story in Nepal.

Palung is in Makwanpur district, near Daman, about a five-hour drive south-east of Kathmandu. It is an ordinary sort of small town. And yet something in it stands out—its four-year-old audio tower. The Community Communication Program (CCP) has been operating the tower as well as a communication centre for the Village Development Committee (VDC) since 1997.

Mandate for the Future (MTF), a global Internet youth forum, wanted to make information technology accessible to young people across the world—including in Nepal—to empower them by helping them understand the world and times they live in. Mandate the Future, together with Worldview International Foundation, decided to set up communication centres including Internet access across the country, two in Nawalparasi, one in Dang, one in Dhulikhel, and another in Palung. For Palung, they found an ideal partner in CCP, and began the program here last November.

What makes the project interesting is that technology is used as a tool—the community decides to what end—and not simply an end in itself. First, youths from different neighbourhoods, were picked to act

# The Palung story

**An IT project in Makwanpur explores the possibility of getting young people talking and planning—for their future, and that of their village.**



and at any time. It is also a great alternative to expensive long-distance telephone calls, and the CCP has also decided to install a printer.

Participants agree overwhelmingly that more than anything else the project has given them a sense of the value of communication within their own community. One young woman said this was the first time she realised that she could discuss matters that affected the quality of her life with older people, and that they would listen.

All this did not start with computers, though, but with the audio tower. The tower was useful enough earlier, broadcasting news and local announcements, but after discussing the possibilities of the technology they already had, the youth of Palung have diversified and increased programming to include advice and discussion on sanitation, community health and agriculture.

And yet, it is the lone computer that has created and sustained interest in the project—it is the only reason many residents of the area allow their children, especially their daughters, to participate in the project and the meetings it entails. About 25 youth leaders—14 women and 11 men between

the ages of 15-25—conduct a fortnightly discussion on radio programming and networking possibilities over the Internet that would bring benefits to local people. They are coming up with more ideas for income generation and self-development. Of course, there is a lot that can still be done, says Bijay Bhatt, program manager at Worldview International. "This is just the beginning, we will have to see where all it takes us."

The program is not out of the woods yet—the erratic power supply and frequent computer breakdowns are problems they will have to find solutions to soon. Recently, the computer was out of order for almost a month, and had to be brought to Kathmandu for repairs. The main drawback in the implementation is one that has plagued many such projects—the users were not trained to use the computer, they had to learn everything on their own. They were taught how to access the Internet, but not how to use search engines efficiently. One participant recalls how trying to find some urgently-needed information over the Net once took more than an hour and cost Rs 300. And, of course, there are times when a phone call has to be made, but someone is online. And

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# The tone of debate



"Watch yourself carefully, think how you could be seen in the eyes of others." I was taught this in grade school in Tokyo. Today this view is less widely shared in Japan. The same seems true in neighbouring countries, where Japanese attitudes are criticised stridently.

A harsh debate over a new history textbook for high schools in Japan has prompted me to think about how the tone of a debate shapes perceptions. Nineteen years ago I lived in Seoul as a language student when the first protests against Japanese textbooks occurred. Korean-Japan relations have since improved significantly, despite politicians' sometimes thoughtless talk about Japan's past. As the result of numerous prime ministerial apologies for Japan's former colonisation and aggression in Asia, economic and grassroots exchanges

are today a part of relations between Japan and its neighbours. During his 1998 visit, President Kim Dae Jung boosted reconciliation between our two countries. The soccer World Cup in 2002, which Japan and South Korea will jointly host, should be the crowning symbol of friendly relations, in contrast to a century ago, when Japanese imperialism was on the march. Instead, the dispute over the new textbook has taken centre stage.

Although it passed official examinations by the government, which insisted on numerous revisions, the textbook clearly glorifies Japan's history. Not unreasonably, Koreans and Chinese object to its use, particularly as they see it as aimed at justifying Japan's old wars against them. But this overstates the book's importance. It is one of eight possible textbooks, and

## Korea and China's reaction to perceived Japanese slights could provoke just the nationalism they dislike.

no public school district adopted it, because local committees rejected its message. That demonstrates that unhealthy nationalism is not supported by Japan's majority.

Japan must be careful in writing textbooks, but what country would bow to outside pressure where the education of its children is concerned? Numerous exchanges between Japanese and Korean grassroots organisations were cancelled by the Korean side because of this dispute. Perhaps these cancellations were a type of sanction on Japan, but such attitudes are considered "overly emotional" by Japanese, and may provoke a resurgence of the very nationalism Koreans loathe. If the Korean people had continued the exchanges and discussed their objections to the textbooks in friendly discussions, Japan's people would have respected them more.

Japan's good faith was in question again when Koizumi recently visited the Yasukuni Shrine. He says his visit was to mourn for Japanese soldiers who died in WWII. But such visits, like history textbooks, have a complex history, dating back to 1985 when then Prime Minister Nakasone made an "official visit" to Yasukuni, ignoring domestic opposition. He was forced not to repeat the visit because of severe Chinese protests. "Class A" war criminals from WWII are

enshrined there alongside rank and file soldiers, and the shrine is a symbol of Japan's past militarism for Asian countries. Koizumi can hardly expect understanding, but the way countries objected stunned many Japanese. China's foreign minister said to Japanese reporters after meeting Japan's foreign minister: "I told her to stop the visiting." In Japanese, this carries a very strong connotation of command, which may further stoke Japanese xenophobia.

Perhaps Koizumi intended to call attention to a perceived Chinese insensitivity to Japanese concerns. China's rapid military build-up and obsession with nuclear missile development are hard to understand for Japanese, who see their country as contributing greatly to economic assistance to China. Manipulating symbols to send diplomatic messages rarely works—symbols are imprecise and their meanings easily distorted.

Koizumi's visit may only further stimulate China's military build-up. Here is a glimpse of the sad downward spiral among neighbours that once gripped this region. Koizumi must do all he can to prevent that unfortunate spiral from repeating.

(Project Syndicate)

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# STRONG TALK, STRONG ACTION

ISLAMABAD—Three days before Pakistan celebrated its Independence Day, a bomb blast killed and wounded children, women and men in Gujrat city, Punjab province. Punjab and Karachi have borne the brunt of terrorism since 1995, when it assumed crisis proportions. This incident followed a series of high-profile terror acts that killed a senior government official, a prominent politician and a public figure, all between 26-31 July.

In early August, President Gen Pervez Musharraf was upset enough to proclaim: "I feel like donning my commando uniform again, going after the terrorists and personally shooting them." In his 14 August Independence Day address he announced a series of measures to combat terrorism.

First, Musharraf announced a ban on two extremist organisations, a warning to two others that they would be on the 'watch list' for six months before any further action would be taken, and the arrest of 200 persons suspected of membership in these outfits. Second, the government amended the anti-terrorism act to enhance the judiciary's powers to try terrorists swiftly. The Supreme Court, for instance, announced it will take only a week to dispose of appeals in cases where terrorists have been convicted but not punished for years. Third, a police transformation plan has been launched at an initial cost of about \$100 million in new fund allocations to modernise antiquated police apparatus. The plan also envisages separating police prosecution and investigation of cases by inducing new prosecutors and recruiting new police investigators.

In the last six years, three governments, two civilian and one military, share a 'continuity of failures' in containing terrorism that can now strike anywhere, anytime in Pakistan. On average, every third day an act of terrorism hits Pakistan—a bomb blast or the target killing of a person not due to personal enmity. Since 1995, there have been over a thousand victims of target killings by terrorists in Pakistan, and more than 700 bomb blasts with hundreds of casualties. This adversely affects the revival of the economy, Pakistan's image, and the people's confidence in the state by violating the most fundamental of human rights—the right to live.

Such criminal acts recur largely because their perpetrators get away with impunity. A sluggish investigation system, a slow judicial procedure and plain incompetence to take the terrorist issue head-on have all contributed to this. The response of regimes, civil or military, is almost predictable, starting with an impotent rage and strong statements like 'terrorism will be crushed,' or 'terrorists deserve to be shot,' followed by long meetings on 'law and order' with 'directives' to 'launch an operation' and ending with agreement on more 'severe punishments.' There is now a



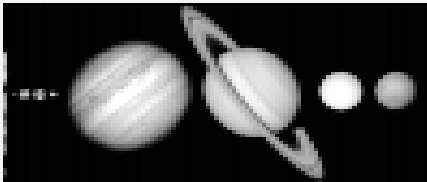
## Pakistan must treat terrorism as more than just a 'law and order' situation.

'standard operating procedure' of government response to terrorism—the Federal Government expresses its 'concern' but says 'law and order is a provincial subject,' and so a provincial problem. The provincial government blames it on a 'foreign hand,' implying that as there are 'foreign policy aspects' to terrorism, the Federal Government must tackle it at the 'higher level.' Intelligence agencies say containing terrorism 'is not our mandate.'

Terrorism has afflicted other democratic societies who have overcome it without violating fundamental rights or declaring an emergency. How did Italy smash the Red Brigades, the Germans the Baader-Meinhof, the Japanese the Red Army? How did the Americans trace the Unabomber after a 20-year pursuit? Pakistan needs a strategy to combat terrorism by treating it as a national security threat that is today the biggest source of domestic destabilisation. There is no outfit trained to tackle terrorism, so a special, permanent Anti Terrorism Task Force must be established with investigators, intelligence specialists, political analysts, psychologists, and technical experts. This force should function as an information-cum-action centre, collecting, analysing information and ordering action. That is the only long-term way to contain the biggest threat to Pakistan's stability. (IPS)

## Star-crossed academia

NEW DELHI—Astrologers rule the lives of many in India, but when Murli Manohar Joshi, India's minister for human resource development and science and technology, deemed Vedic astrology a science and ordered Indian universities to introduce degree courses on it, he fell afoul of orthodox academia. "We, the members of the Indian scientific community, feel the proposal by the University Grants Commission (UGC which funds universities and pays salaries) to introduce Vedic astrology and Vastushastra (the science of residential properties) is a giant leap backwards, undermining whatever scientific credibility our country may have achieved," the dons petitioned Joshi. Joshi, who once taught university physics, wants to "safronise" education in India, in keeping with the ideology of the ruling BJP. He has purged key



positions in respected academic institutions of "Marxists," replacing them with 'Hindutva' supporters. Institutions like the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi, which did not accept a new director chosen by Joshi, were starved of funds and the salaries of employees cut off. The Vedic astrology course is seen as a similar move. Critics say that in any case there is little 'Vedic' about Indian astrology, which has borrowed heavily from Babylonian and Greek traditions. But Joshi will not relent. In June, he found an ally in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, which dismissed a petition challenging the constitutional validity of the plan. India's Constitution forbids religious instruction in any institution wholly maintained with state funds. (IPS)

## Human shields

NICOSIA—The Israeli army can no longer be sure Palestinians are the only ones to suffer when it shells their homes and blockades their towns and villages. Since June, around 70 international volunteers have moved in to the West Bank as human buffers between Israeli forces and Palestinian civilians. These 'peacekeepers', mainly from Europe and the US, have joined over 200 locally based international peace activists in a well-organised campaign against the Israeli occupation. The West Bank-based International Solidarity Movement (ISM) was formed last year when the Palestinian Intifada began, and is made up of Jews, Muslims and Christians. They sleep in Palestinian homes, help demolish Israeli blockades, watch Israeli checkpoints and join in demonstrations. Sixty-five foreign 'human shields' took part in protests against Israel's 10 August seizure of the Palestinian headquarters in occupied East Jerusalem. Strict secrecy is maintained about where the activists stay so the Israeli army cannot have a fire free zone. This policy puts volunteers at risk, but, says Huwaida Arraf, ISM spokesperson, "The Israelis don't want a public relations disaster on their hands." Neta Golan, an Israeli ISM member, observed, "It would be more upsetting to the IDF [the Israeli army] to hit one of us than innocent Palestinians." (Gemini)



# He: ML, She: UML

Jana Aastha, 15 August



The husband is a ML leader, the wife is a UML MP. He, Khagendra Nepal, is a member of the central committee of the ML, and head of the Nepal Road Transport Workers Association, and the ML's trade union. She,



Sushila Nepal is an MP representing Lalitpur-1, a central committee member of the UML's women's wing, and head of the women organisation's Bagmati operations. Anyone would have imagined an estranged relationship and family life because they belonged to rival parties, but the couple has proved all wrong. Yes, they do have tiffs, sometimes, but overall they have managed to remain a satisfied couple.

When Sushila was the candidate of the UML from Lalitpur-1 in the last elections, what did you do?

Khagendra: She was nominated as the UML candidate from Lalitpur-1, while I was campaigning for Bam Dev Gautam in Kathmandu-1. The party had sent me there. I had made my party promise me that I be allowed to return home every evening. It was not possible for my wife to return home everyday and this is why I had made the request.

Do the two of you discuss politics?

Sushila: In the beginning we used to have some differences. I asked him not to support the break-up of the party (UML), he had asked me to join the ML. We both have realised that those days created some problems for us, which affected our two daughters to some extent. Our daughters used to request our guests not to discuss politics when they came visiting. We therefore decided that we had to find some common ground. We compromised and now we have no problems.

Isn't it difficult for politicians not to discuss politics at home?

Khagendra: For us, the compromise was for not discussing current issues. We did discuss broader issues, the revolution in Nepal, the issues of class and other principles and philosophy, etc. We never got angry at one another, and never had any hard feelings. Tensions mounted when we began to discuss current affairs. We would realise that and cool off immediately. Sushila: We definitely used to have discussions, but once things became combative, we would control ourselves. If the discussion really got heated up, one of us would immediately leave the room and that was the end of the discussion.

How did you feel on the day the party split?

Sushila: The day the ML was formed, there was a meeting of the Lalitpur district committee. Since I am the District Development Committee president, I was also there. There was a newspaper there, which said that the party had split and named all friends from Lalitpur who had joined the ML. My friends told me that my husband's name was on the list. I felt as if disaster had struck, and thought that maybe I could talk him out of it. Immediately after that, I heard that he had attended the district committee meeting of the ML. I realised at that moment that he would never change his mind. On the one hand my party was being divided, and as if that were not enough, my family was also being divided. I was very tense when I returned home that evening. As soon as I met him I asked, "What have you done?" He replied with great enthusiasm, "I've joined the ML."

What would you have done if you had been asked to campaign in Lalitpur-1?

Khagendra: That would have created problems and this is why the party did not send me there. My leaders also suspected that if they put me in Lalitpur, I might return to the UML fold, so they did not let me campaign there. The UML leaders had the same doubts about my wife.

Did your husband try to stop your candidature?

Sushila: No, my husband has contributed greatly to my success, the position I hold today is all because of him. He has always been my inspiration.

How did you feel when your wife won and your party lost?

Khagendra: As a husband I felt good, happy. Also, I had sacrificed a lot for her party earlier, so I was happy because of that reason, too. From a purely political point of view, there was no reason for me to be happy. The day she won, I did not leave the house.

How did you feel?

Sushila: They broke a party that if we had remained undivided, we may have won a majority. It came as no surprise that they did not win a seat. But I was not angry at all. I felt lousy when I realised that his party had lost.

The other MPs had their wives waiting for them with flowers and garlands, but I did not have my husband. You can imagine how I felt.

You must have been received with garlands when you arrived home?

Sushila: Yes, once I reached home he did that, but he was not at the counting centre.

Was it difficult for you, when you realised that your party did not win even one seat, while your wife's party won many?

Khagendra: I was definitely not laughing when she won. My first priority was my wife and I was happy, although I could not comprehend the fact that my party was whipped. Despite my wife winning from the wrong party, I welcomed her when she returned.

"We think that the entire talks cannot be kept secret. It might be essential to be discreet about certain subjects during talks. But I think the peoples right to information must also be respected."

Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Coordinator of CPN(Maoist) Talks Committee in Janadesh Weekly, 21 August



Wife: "You're drunk again, huh?" Husband: "Has this woman turned into a Maoist or what?"

Drishti, 21 August

## King Gyanendra and Puskar

King Gyanendra quoted in a write up by Puskar Lal Shrestha, editor of Samacharpatra, 19 September

"We can't have a republic here just on the wishes of the king or the Maoists. The people's choice should come first. I myself am bound by the constitution. The monarchy has been abiding by every word of the constitution. In a similar manner, other political parties should also function within the constitution. I don't think all are functioning within the framework of the constitutional provisions..."

"Puskar, unlike my brother, I cannot just sit and watch the country and the people slide into this situation. Yes, I will not digress from the path to the multiparty system my brother took. But I cannot just sit back and watch the suffering and pain of the people. That is why I am thinking of doing the most a monarch can do under the constitution for multiparty democracy."



## Road to development

Shirana Bilesh Times, 15 August

BNP OPS

Excerpts from an interview with Jivan Bahadur Shahi, Humla DDC. You are constructing roads now, aren't you? Yes, under the leadership of the District Development Committee (DDC), we are constructing a road from Simikot, the district headquarters, to the Tibet border town of Hilsa, almost 65 km away. It is not a tarred road but the residents of Humla are very happy. A 22 km stretch, the Hilsa-Yari sector, has been completed.

What will the benefits be?

Transportation costs will decrease immediately from Rs 55 rupees a kilo to Rs 15-20 per kilo. Secondly, if we give food to the Chinese at Tatopani, they will provide us with food in Taklakot. This will bring down costs drastically. Chinese goods are very cheap and we will benefit from that too. Tourists going to Kalash Mansarovar will also be able to use this road, bringing us more benefits. With roads, we can begin tourism businesses.

What is your DDC's budget?

Humla is a Class III district. This means we have no means of income. Until now we had only a few tourists. We used to earn almost Rs 600,000 per year. This has now stopped because of the Maoist problem. The government provides us roughly Rs 800,000 and that is it.

How do you manage the small budget?

Whatever you do, you cannot stop development. We looked to the north and



realised that the people in Tibet had seen more development. They have four-wheel vehicles plying their roads, they have tourists and their life is pretty comfortable. So we asked, "If it can happen there, why not here?" In the beginning we wanted to make just one kilometre road. The World Food Program gave us food and we provided labour. Work then started and the government gave us Rs 1 million for Rural Road Development, which we also put into this road. Initially there was a lot of opposition, but after all, vehicles ply at 17,000 feet in Tibet, and Humla is at just 14,000 feet—surely we can make it work. Now the government is going to provide another Rs 10 million.

Your term is soon going to end. Will your successors carry forward with such programs?

Earlier I was concerned about this, but now it seems that all agree with my line of thought. They have realised this is the thing to do.

## Land reform

Chitaphal Weekly, 19 August

UML formed a land reform committee under the chairmanship of Kestav Badal, a central committee member, when it was in power (1994-1995). The commission recommended that major reforms be carried out in a very scientific manner. The government, which has now called for land

reform, has based its actions on this report. Clause five of the report deals with permissible holding ceilings. The report says there is more unequal distribution of land and there are more landless agri-workers in the tarai than in the hilly regions. Land reforms were last brought into effect in 1964. Under the scheme, ceilings for agricultural land were fixed at just over 17 ha in the tarai, four ha in the hilly regions and 2.59 ha in the Tibet border town of Hilsa, almost 65 km away. It is not a tarred road but the residents of Humla are very happy. A 22 km stretch, the Hilsa-Yari sector, has been completed.

The Badal report points to flaws in the 1964 land reform program, because it did not take into consideration that in the lower hilly regions three crops can be grown every year, while in the upper hilly regions there can be only one crop/harvest a year. Land reform was considered more successful in the tarai than in the hills. The 1964 program affected only 1.5 percent of the country's arable land. The program was not very effective because it was not implemented in all districts at the same time, measurements were not proper, political will was lacking, administration was weak, and eventually, many other problems cropped up.

The Badal commission recommended that the ceiling for agricultural land be based on five criteria. It further recommended that the ceiling should be set at three hectares in the tarai and the inner tarai, two hectares in the mid-hills, four hectares in the hilly regions, 0.5 hectares in the Valley. Household land should not be more than 0.5 hectares in all urban areas. It also recommends a progressive tax system for land in urban areas. Until fiscal 1996 it was estimated that almost 100,000 ha of land was available for distribution, but now it seems there may not be so much after all.

## Siliguri parley

Chitaphal Weekly, 19 August

Exiled Maoists met communist other communist parties secretly in Siliguri, India, recently. The present political situation and the government-Maoist dialogue were the main topics of discussion.

Those who attended the meeting with Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai were UML's Madhav Kumar Nepal and Isvar Pokharel; Ram Singh Shishir, general secretary of Masal, Prakash, general secretary of the Ekalta Kendra, Narayan Man Bijukchhe of the Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, Lila Mani Pokharel of the Samyukta Jana Morcha and Bam Dev Gautam of the Ma-Le party. This is the first time that leaders of the left parties and the Maoists met after the peoples' war began. The meeting, which lasted four hours, is considered by all to be a very important one. When asked about it, Madhav Kumar Nepal said only that he was there as he was invited to a program. The Maoists have not

commented on the meeting yet. The other participants are also tight-lipped.

Word is that Nepal's leftist parties are uniting. The ML general secretary has also issued a statement to this effect, is that happening?

The UML has stated that it is ready to unite and work with leftist parties who share a similar line of thought. This is a positive step and we have accepted the proposal. It is necessary for all left parties to unite on common principles. The UML has realised this. Different left parties are also re-aligning and re-focusing. The Maoists and their supporters are also trying to find common ground with the Masal and Ekalta Kendra (Unity Centre). The communist forces are polarising into different blocs now. This process has to be carried forward. Differences should be ironed out and addressed for the sake of unity.

Has your principled stand been addressed in the process?

You should remember that when the ML was formed, the philosophy of party members did not conflict with that of UML. Even now, it doesn't. The ML was formed by people who believe in people's multiparty democracy (the same policy as that of UML). Some party members were dissatisfied while still in the UML, but we kept back our differences because there were many issues on which we agreed. One example is the Mahakali Treaty. Then the UML leadership became very conservative on such policy issues, it was incapable of tackling them. It was unable to take into account the different opinions and eventually decided to sack senior party leaders that dissented, which was reason for the formation of the ML party. There were no major differences on the main party line.

What is the reason for the shift in the UML's attitude towards ML?

There are many. First, the Maoist movement has weakened our grassroots support. Both parties realise that there will be nothing left at the grassroots if they do not unite. Secondly, the Maoists, too, were coming above ground, and other left parties were also uniting and it would be easy for a united UML-ML to take up the emerging battle of ideology. The leadership in both parties realised that there was barely any difference between them on core issues and that a united party could better face the emerging challenges better.

People say that the real reason is the upcoming local elections...

That's only natural. If two parties have the same philosophy, and they can win the elections by uniting, then why not? Not to do so would be a mistake.

Will you join the UML if unity does take place?

I won't be in that party. I will not be a part of the UML-ML unity. That is very clear.

So you will not join the UML, even if the ML and the UML join forces?

That is very certain.



# Poor preparations, high expectations



ALL PHOTO: MIN. BAJRACHARYA

**MUKUL HUMAGAIN**  
Two years ago, the national sports scene was active as could be. The eighth South Asian Federation Games in 1999 brought in athletes and coaches from around the country to the Dasrath Stadium in Tripureswor, National Sports Council officials were busy making last-minute preparations for the Games and the whole country was awaiting what promised to be a sporting extravaganza. It all went smoothly. The stadium looked impressive and lived up to the hype surrounding it. Best of all, Nepal won 64 medals including 31 gold. It was widely acclaimed as one of the best sporting events ever organised here.

Two years later, and less than a month-and-a-half before the ninth SAF Games are

scheduled to start in Islamabad, Pakistan, Nepal's preparation looks dismal.

After months of debate over the budget for the Games, selection and training camps, the Nepal Sports Council (NSC) has finally chosen athletes to participate. And with just six weeks to go, the Council still does not appear serious about giving them a sporting chance at the Games. Nepal will participate in 14 sports. For three of these, boxing, taekwondo, and karate, the closed training camps got underway in mid-August. Official approval for the rest of the sports was only granted earlier this week.

The reason, as always, is finance. Despite Nepal's success at the eight Games, the budget for participation in the upcoming

Games is surprisingly low. NSC officials are reportedly still pursuing the Finance Ministry for a budget increase. According to Kamal Khanal, the NSC's administrative chief, over Rs 40 million is needed to prepare and equip the teams properly for the Games. The Ministry of Finance has so far promised just Rs 10 million. Finance Minister Dr Ram Sharan Mahat directed NSC officials to focus only on events that Nepal could win medals in and send as small a team as possible. The NSC agreed, and only 165 players have been selected to go to Islamabad, but this figure too might go down after the ministry actually hands over whatever it eventually decides to give. In addition to the 165 competitors, there are 65 officials and coaches.

The boxing, karate and taekwondo teams are in

relatively good shape because they won the most medals in 1999. NSC officials say closed camps for the 11 other events will begin as soon as, you guessed it, the budget comes through. Until then athletes competing in these events have been paying for their own food, lodging and equipment. "We have less than a month to prepare for the event, our per diem has been drastically reduced, and they still expect us to perform well," said one athlete bitterly. The NSC has sent a circular to all the participants directing them not speak to the press outside the presence of the head coach, threatening them with severe action if they do so. Most of the athletes we talked to had similar complaints. For the last SAF Games, athletes trained for five months, and received a daily allowance of Rs 450. This time around they have a shaky schedule, uncertain participation

and a daily allowance of Rs 250 for people from outside the Valley and Rs 100 for those from here.

The selection process for the Games was not terribly impressive either. The events were held in such a hurry that many believe the NSC was simply going through the motions to say it had done so. First there was talk of the National Games being the basis for selection, but the games were cancelled due to the palace massacre. The NSC then said regional games would be held. When this did not happen, they pulled out their favourite "no budget" excuse. In the end all that took place was a discreet and remarkably lackadaisical series of games that did nothing for the sporting and team spirit of the athletes or Nepali sports-lovers. Athletes were even asked to pay their own expenses during the selection process. As a result, many hopefuls from outside the Valley stayed away, and the majority of those who tried out for the teams came from the Royal Nepal Army and the police.

The big three—boxing, taekwondo and karate—have been used time and again in talking about Nepal's sporting potential and to get funds from various bodies, but events in these three sports have been reduced which effectively reduces the number of medals we can hope to win. Back in 1999, Nepal had good trainers from abroad for taekwondo and karate, but not anymore. What's more, nine out of the 15 sports in the Islamabad Games will not have women's participation. These include karate and taekwondo in which Nepali women had managed to bring in quite a few golds during the last SAF Games.

Things are as dire in the other sports. For one, the NSC has not even decided in which events the teams will participate in their particular sport. Participants lack not only trainers, but also equipment. Wrestlers don't have mats and so are using those owned by the Nepal Judo Federation. The International

Nepali athletes, who did so well in the last SAF Games, have little chance to shine this time around due to official apathy and budget cuts.



## CULTURE AND SOCIETY

### OPINION

by MARTIN MACWAN

# Untouchable apartheid



Dalit activists wearing posters at a protest outside the UN Palais de Nations in Geneva, May 2001.

**Discrimination against Dalits is a South Asian problem, and arguing over semantics will not get us anywhere.**

For decades, India championed from afar the anti-apartheid cause and supported America's civil rights movement. But now India stands poised to block discussion of caste-based discrimination against its own 160 million Dalits, a Hindi word meaning "the oppressed", which refers to its underclass of "untouchables" at the UN World Conference against Racism (WCAR) to be held in Durban later this month. Employing the same tactic used by defenders of apartheid and of America's Jim Crow laws, India's government argues that "caste is an internal matter."

The last Indian census based on caste identity, conducted in 1931, found that 20 percent of India's population consisted of Dalits—a generic term for people deemed filthy and impure to touch, approach, or merely see in daylight. Current statistics suggest that the proportion of untouchables, known as "scheduled castes" in constitutional jargon, has since declined to 16 percent, reflecting the fact that many Dalits have embraced Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Sikhism. But even as converts to religions that claim to renounce caste discrimination, stigmatisation of the Dalits continues. In South India, for example, separate Christian churches exist for Dalits, a practice copied from Hinduism.

Indian officials have been notably Janus-faced about caste discrimination. In January 2000, India's president, KR Narayanan, himself of Dalit origin, conceded that while untouchability has been legally abolished, "shades of it remain in the ingrained attitudes nurtured by the caste system." Barely four months later, however, India declared unequivocally at the WCAR's first preparatory meeting that caste discrimination had been relegated to the past.

India's constitution does, indeed, abolish untouchability. But a lack of political will has rendered formal prohibition little more than a legal fiction. Fifty percent of Dalit children (and 64 percent of Dalit girls) cannot complete primary education in part due to humiliation by teachers, while

poverty remains widespread as land reforms have gone unimplemented. A 1997 survey by Navsaran, a private research group, found that Dalits legally owned 6000 acres in 250 villages in Gujarat state but did not hold physical possession of any of that land. According to the Indian government's own data, over 800,000 Dalits are engaged in the dehumanising practice of manually handling human waste—a caste-based role reinforced by the World Bank's financial support for construction of dry latrines.

Even more disturbing, untouchables continue to be subject to widespread violence, particularly when they transgress caste traditions. In a case concerning 79 Dalit families that were ostracised for 27 months in the village of Devaliya, India, the National Human Rights Commission concluded: "When young Dalits assert their right to equal treatment, attempt to protect their dignity and that of their women, or resist the perpetration of atrocities committed against them, they are often branded as 'extremists', falsely implicated in alleged crimes, and killed in staged encounters. When they resist as a group, wholesale killings, arson, mass rape of their women, and parading them naked through the village are regular occurrences."

A recent study by Human Rights Watch supports this finding of systematic, premeditated brutality when Dalits challenge caste discrimination, with women suffering particularly savage retaliation. During massacres of Dalits in Bihar, a north Indian state, Dalit women were shot in their vaginas. In the South, hundreds of Dalit women are victims of Devdasi, a system of prostitution in the name of religion which upper-caste Hindus are quite happy to exempt from the practice of untouchability.

Employment quotas favouring Dalits have, of course, improved their life prospects—but not by much. Dalits and low-caste tribals, who together comprise 23 percent of India's population, fill only 5 percent of civil-service jobs. High-caste groups, in contrast, account for 25 percent of the population,

but fill 89 percent of such posts (as well as most top jobs in politics and business). Yet even this minor curtailment of upper-caste privilege has led to two bloody riots since quotas were introduced, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Dalits.

Alarmed by the potential embarrassment it faces because of its denial of systematic and violent discrimination against Dalits, India's government now claims that caste is not race and therefore has no place on the agenda of the UN conference in Durban. Fortunately for India's Dalits, the UN's Human Rights Commission rejects this argument, holding that "the situation of scheduled castes falls within the purview of article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination."

Dalit leaders contend that if caste discrimination in India violates that Convention it should be included in the Durban conference's draft declaration under the heading "discrimination based on work and descent," a formulation introduced by Barbados and Switzerland. But the WCAR's drafting committee faces strong pressure to reject this demand, and not only from Indian officials. Similar caste-based discrimination, including bonded manual labour, is rife in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, which applaud India's bogus hairsplitting.

But the purpose of the UN meeting in Durban is not to haggle over the semantics of caste and race. Its mission is to develop means to combat discrimination based on descent, so that what India's government—what any government—claims is an internal problem does not become an eternal condition. Having backed the opponents of apartheid and Jim Crow, it is sad that India rejects accountability for the ongoing human rights disaster caused by its entrenched social order. (Project Syndicate)

Martin Macwan, a Dalit activist, has been awarded the Robert F Kennedy, Gleitsman and Human Rights Watch awards and convened the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights in India.

### BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

# This land is my land... (and I'm a woman)

Last month, while most of the country was watching the Maoist hostage drama unfold in Rolpa, legal history was being made in Kathmandu. On 17 July, the Parliamentary Law and Justice Committee approved the controversial eleventh amendment to the Nepal's *Muluki Ain* (Civil Code), allowing women to retain ownership of parental property after marriage. Eclipsed by issues of national security, this ground-breaking clause, popularly known as the Women's Bill, provoked relatively little discussion in the national dailies. Particularly intriguing are the results of a survey conducted in all of Nepal's fourteen zones by the Law and Justice Committee earlier this year. If true, these findings once and for all dispel the myth that rural Nepal is an intellectual backwater where progressive ideas are unwelcome: eighty-five percent of those questioned were in favour of women retaining property after marriage. That's a great many progressively-minded villagers.

One man who was certainly reading the papers with great interest was Dr Devi Prasad Kandel, author of *Property Rights of Women in Nepal*. The release of this book dovetails nicely with the historic changes in property rights law, and with hindsight, a number of Kandel's assertions appear to be prophetic: "The status of Nepali women legally seems to be strong but institutionally and practically it is very weak" (page 76). The book is divided into seven chapters and progresses from general issues to more specific examples. The best chapters are definitely the latter, which deal with the intricacies and details of Nepali property rights. Chapter one is weakened by ungrammatical errors and generalities such as: "women cover near about half [sic] of the world's population" (page 1) and "the position and status of Iranian women...is that they are totally under male" (page 5).

In chapters two and three, it becomes apparent that Kandel relies heavily on secondary sources and previous works on the subject. Early in the preface the author informs us that "all the available source materials relating to the topic...have been collected, scrutinised and analysed". And despite an occasional nod in the direction of ethnic diversity, Kandel clearly subscribes to the idea that Nepal is a "Hindu State" and consequently that "Nepalese society, undoubtedly, is conducted by the Hindu philosophy" (page 17). While this statement may apply to large parts of the country, there are still many regions in which disputes over property and inheritance are resolved according to local non-Hindu traditions. According to Kandel's analysis, Sherpa, Limbu and Tharu women "were and are more free than the woman [sic] of other communities in Nepal" (page 20). While his aim is true, more specific examples would have been instructive here, particularly since the situation in hill villages is not always so simple. By the end of book then, one feels genuine compassion for Hindu women and their lot, and wonders why the author didn't focus more on the position of women from non-Hindu groups if they indeed have, as he describes, greater "control over their marriage portion" (page 59). The author's indifference to the cultural characteristics of specific *janajati* groups is made apparent when we are informed that the Sherpa, Rai and Limbu "are culturally, socially and ethnically akin to the Tibetans"

**As the Women's Bill edges closer to becoming law, a new book describes the relevant provisions of the *Muluki Ain*.**

(page 75). In this vein, a particularly uncomfortable typographical error occurs on page 75, turning "Mongoloid" into "Mangaloid", a slip which should be corrected in any future edition.

The strongest sections in the book are chapters three and four which outline specific features of the *Muluki Ain*. For those (like myself) who haven't read the Civil Code from cover to cover, let alone all the amendments, these details make for fascinating reading. One learns, for example, that a man may remarry if his first wife becomes incurably insane (page 22), that the *Ain* of 2020 BS legalised inter-caste marriage (page 25) and that "half of the property of any person who commits rape shall be confiscated and... given to the victim" (page 73). A particularly interesting ordinance in the sixth amendment seems to acknowledge the possibility of child abuse and incest when a daughter is adopted: the girl must be under ten years of age, and the "gap in the age of the father and the adopted daughter should be at least 20 years" (page 36). An insight into male aggression, and the provisions made for female victims thereof, is offered by the section concerning the amount of property a husband is obliged to give his wife should she become "lame" or lose "any part of her body by frequently being beaten" (page 39). These chapters are genuinely informative and educational, and read rather like an annotated Civil Code.

A further angle of *Property Rights of Women in Nepal* is its social and political action plan. In common with other Nepali books on social issues, strongly worded assertions are compressed into a single page in the conclusion, with little or no guidelines about how to achieve these noble aims: "the traditional belief in the superiority of man and inferiority of woman should immediately be obliterated" (page 76). It would be hard to disagree.

The provision for women's property rights in Nepal is a delicate issue, not least because of the recent legal changes in this domain. We can only wait and see whether last month's Property Rights Bill will prove to be, as the author suggests, "a headache for the state first and then...a challenge against Hinduism" (page 32). Aside from the few limitations described above, Dr. Kandel should be given full credit for bringing these concerns into the open and for providing an analysis of important sections of the *Muluki Ain*.

**Property Rights of Women in Nepal, Dr Devi Prasad Kandel, Ratna Pustak Bhandari, Kathmandu, 2058. 86 pages, including 6 pages of Nepali language appendices. ISBN 99933-0-213-9. Rs 110.**

(Mark Turin is completing a grammar of the Thangmi language and is a member of the Himalayan Languages Project at Leiden University in The Netherlands.)

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MUSIC

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EXHIBITION

**Kathmandu: the City and the Valley** Exhibition of photos by French photographer Teddy Seguin. 24-31 August (except Saturdays), 9am-6pm. Alliance Française, Thapathali. 241163, 242 832.

MARTIN CHAUTARI

**Classic Literature Discussion Series 8: Gopal Prasad Rimal's Aama ko Sapana. Pandit Dr Banira Giri**

Unless otherwise noted, presentations are in Nepali. Participation is open to all. 28 August, Tuesday, 5.30pm. Martin Chautari, Thapathali. 256239

For inclusion in the listing send information to [editors@nepalitimes.com](mailto:editors@nepalitimes.com)

NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA

Check out this sharply defined imagery from a Pacific weather satellite of Typhoon Pabuk over Japan. The eye of the storm is clearly seen. Off on the horizon is the subcontinent with a strong monsoon pulse over central India clearly visible. The heavy rains this week were caused by a low pressure system finally dragging moisture in from the Bay of Bengal in more normal amounts to eastern Nepal. This monsoon pulse will be followed by a brief lull with cloudy days, brief sunny spells and night rain. From next week, rain will tend to be more localised and coming down in sharp bursts. That is till middle of next week when the new monsoon front should be upon us again.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

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YAK YETI YAK

by MIKU

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ENTERPRISE

24 - 30 AUGUST 2001 NEPALI TIMES

19

Tapari over Tupperware

Leaf plates are getting trendier by the minute—and they are great business for people with few resources.

environment.

People in Kathmandu don't have the time to make their own *tapari*s with leaves bought from Asun, as they used to in the days of no television, sinecures and a shocking amount of leisure time. Sunmaya Tamang still sells bundles of green sal leaves for Rs 5 each, but complains that her customers are now demanding fewer raw leaves, which make her more money, and more ready-made, perfectly-shaped *tapari*s. "People don't have the time any more, or perhaps the younger generation doesn't know how to make them," she says, hurrying to finish an order for 100.

The "factory" where Min Bahadur and Priti Maya cater to this new laziness is owned by Ganesh Neupane, who says he has also come a long way. He started off with a Rs 9,000 loan at 16 percent from the Micro Enterprise Development Program (MEDEP) to buy the die and the machine. MEDEP is a project that helps

neighbouring Nawalparasi. The floor of the room—more a shed, really—is strewn with bundles of leaf plates and the cuttings that come off the machine that presses and trims the plates into shape. It is a fairly simple, if energy-intensive process. Min Bahadur and Priti Maya place a bunch of the stitched ur-plates, as it were, on the machine's die, where one hefty pull of a lever "stamps" them into shape. The couple is paid 10 paisa for every *tapari*, and each stamps out around 500 well-shaped leaf plates everyday. Together they earn about Rs 3,000 a month, money their family of four desperately needs. "It is a lot of hard work, but the money is a great support—we could barely manage before we started doing this," says Man Bahadur, flicking the sweat off his forehead.

*Tapari* making is a pretty sound profession, because demand for the traditional disposable plates keeps growing, especially in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur. Traditional Newari feasts where *tapari*s are essential, are far from dying out. What's more, many of the Valley's elite are also using them at their soirées to show their concern for the

those living below the poverty line to be independent and is funded by the UNDP and supported by organisations like the Agricultural Development Bank, the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) and the District Development Committee (DDC).

MEDEP spends Rs 5,700 per head on average to support micro-enterprises like *tapari*-making, candle-, bamboo rack- and pickle-production, to name a few. People with MEDEP loans are taking home about Rs 3,500 a month, and provide a monthly income to others like Min Bahadur and Priti Maya. And *tapari* is the star of this show.

As word of the business has spread, more people have been asking about the possibility of setting up their own businesses. Nawalparasi already has four *tapari* factories, one of which was reportedly sold for a handsome profit by the owner who wanted to start something bigger. Yadunath Bhatta from Nuwakot has also recently bought a machine and die. He will pay around Rs 24 for a bundle of 100 unfinished plates from the women of the area, pay two people to give them their final shape, and then sell them for Rs 50-75 per 100 ready-made *tapari*s.

"This industry has economic, environmental and social advantages. It is cheap to set up, doesn't require other raw materials and it plays a major role in our social life," says Rajan KC, program manager of MEDEP in Nawalparasi. Ganesh, Min Bahadur, Priti Maya and Yadunath Bhatta couldn't agree more.

TEEJ FUN: Fasting women dressed in red saris dance the day away at Pashupati on Tuesday, 21 August.

HERITAGE TAX: Tourists visiting Hanuman Dhoka on 17 August, puzzled at a sign announcing a new fee to enter the city's historic core.

ABOVE THE CLOUDS: View of Kathmandu Valley from an early morning Buddha Air flight during a lull in the monsoon on Monday, 20 August. The night's rains have washed away the haze and Langtang looms in the distance.

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Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

At the drop of a hat

Nepali women, who according to the latest National Census hold up approximately half the sky, staged a successful 24-hour relay hunger strike this week in order to wish the men in their lives more health and wealth. So there is nothing left to do for those of us who still call ourselves men but to also go on a solidarity liquid diet and raise our glasses collectively to the future happiness, prosperity and relentless progress of womanhood in general and ladies from Nepal in particular. Only if the fair and not-so-fair sex move hand-in-glove will we be able to turn Nepal into Afghanistan in the not so foreseeable future.

While our red wives went singing all the way to Pashupati to pray for us, we took out a torch procession from Bhotahity via Asan to Thamel at which point the julus turned into a mass meeting at one of the more popular watering holes where we proceeded to tank up. I wouldn't say that any of us were exactly sloshed by evening, but we were definitely not feeling any pain.

While one group of women was praying for divine intervention to make their respective husbands less like dorks, another group in Nepalgunj was busy showing the entire nation what a bunch of arsons they are. It is hard to say which group of women has been more effective in making Nepali men more socially responsible. But it would be safe to assert without fear or favour to either method, and taking into account the need to

address the national past-time of Nepali males to make perfect jackasses of themselves at the drop of a hat, that there are pros and cons to both the ultra-violent method as well as the more peace-loving way of hunger strikers for achieving the goal of gender empowerment for all sexes by the year 2020. OK, you can stop twisting my arm now.

Whatever the case, we are already seeing results of the vice squad's dry drive: the All Nepal Independent Men Above Legal Drinking Age (Revolving) have gone underground to take part in a thriving bootlegging business selling famous Nepali brands cleverly disguised on store shelves as disinfectants and medicines. The ads have also been changed to pass on the subtle message of the real contents inside:

Moonshine Raxi: "Use as varnish, nail-polish remover, or motorcycle fuel. Not!"

Khukri Rum: "Stomach ache? The runs? Take two pegs four times a day after meals and get your tummy back on its feet."

Mt Everest Whiskey: "Instant relief from altitude sickness. Works at any elevation—even at sea level."

Iceberg Beer: "Remove acne with this rehydration therapy. What you taste is only the tip of the iceberg."

Ambassador Vodka: "From plenipotentiary to proletariat. Try out our amazing duty-free hangover."

Rangeela: "Aromatic massage ointment for aches and pains. Apply liberally and go oink oink."



NEPALI SOCIETY

Karan's wild side

A snake he discovered on Phulchoki was named after him in the Russian Journal of Herpetology. He's discovered or been instrumental in the discovery in Nepal of 26 new herpetofauna (frogs, lizards, snakes and such cold-blooded delights), of which seven were forms of reptilian life the world had never seen before. But the latest discovery of this modest Nepali herpetologist have been larger creatures with rather more endearing personalities: the *kyang* or Tibetan wild ass and the *ghola* or Tibetan gazelle in the trans-Himalayan region of upper Mustang.

If you're interested in biodiversity or conservation in Nepal, you already know we're talking about Karan B Shah, associate professor at Tribhuvan University. Karan has traversed Nepal, whether working with the National Geographic Society filming snow leopards in the wilderness of Dolpo, conducting feasibility studies for the Manaslu

Conservation Area, or simply enjoying being on the wild side. But, Karan insists modestly: "From the time I started my student life up to now—I have considered myself a student and will continue to do so." Karan is happiest packing his bags and following a distant mountain trail, picking up lizards, worms and training his binoculars at a distant slope looking for blue sheep.

While surveying the Upper Mustang Biodiversity Conservation Project of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMNTC) Karan discovered evidence that the *kyang* and the *ghola* might well be native to the area. This is the sort of thing a would-be Himalayan Jane Goodall would go to town on. But the unassuming Karan, ever the researcher, says: "It's not about 'discovering' things, it simply means research has never been carried out in the region." The Tibetan wild ass and gazelle were not thought to exist in Nepal, but because upper Mustang has few human inhabitants and much the same environment and landscape as Tibet, conservationists had earlier



Karan with the snake named after him "Karan's Pit Viper", and (below) a rare picture of wild ass in Upper Mustang.

suspected there might be herds of wild ass that migrate across the border.

Karan was born in Dadelhura, studied in Bombay and has an MSc from Tribhuvan University. Currently on a sabbatical at the Natural History Museum in Swayambhu, Karan is a regular source of expertise for international conservation outfits.

All this has left little time for Karan to finish his PhD. He has trouble finding a supervisor who accepts the kind of work he does. Good luck with the gazelles, Karan.



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