



EXCLUSIVE

Peace for food

A 25-nation Asia-Pacific ministerial conference on agriculture is taking place in Kathmandu next week in the run-up to the World Food Summit in Rome in June. High on the agenda of both meetings will be the crisis of food security in the world's mountain regions. Chronically food-deficit hilly regions of the world, including Nepal, are now also being wracked by conflict. This is worsening an already bad food situation, says Jacques Diouf, the

head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). "Mountain areas are home to most of the armed conflicts in the world as well as many of the poorest and least food-secure populations," says Diouf. Without peace, we cannot reduce poverty. Without peace, we cannot ensure secure food supply." (see also p 4-5)

Truly Asia

Malaysian Airlines, which has been planning to fly into Kathmandu from later this year is trying to bring forward its starting date to July after Singapore Airlines decided to suspend operations. "We want to come in as soon as possible," says Subodh Rana, of Marco Polo Travels, local agents for Malaysian. Nepal already has some 30,000 workers in Malaysia, numbers likely to grow. Initially, Malaysian hopes to extend two of its 4-weekly Dhaka flights to Kathmandu.

Anti-privatisation?

By blowing up two power houses belonging to the Butwal Power Company, Maoists have sabotaged its privatisation. The repairs at Jhimruk (12MW) alone will cost over Rs 250 million. The powerhouse at Anchi Kholia (5MW) is also considerable. A consortium of winning bidders had pledged Rs650 million for BPC before the attacks, and are awaiting a damage assessment report.

Weekly Internet Poll #33, to vote go to www.nepalnews.com

Q. Should the government have announced rewards for the capture of the Maoist leaders?

Yes 72.4% No 26.1% Don't know 1.5%

Total votes: 1498

Weekly Internet Poll #33, to vote go to www.nepalnews.com

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See-saw war



BINOD BHATARA

Since Lekh is a thickly forested ridge at 2,500m protected by sheer cliffs to the south. At the western foothills of this range is the Magar village of Thibang, up north-east is Gam, the cradle of the Maoist revolution.

Rolpals have known that the Maoists had a major base up there. The security forces, working on intelligence, had for the first time started probing the western reaches of Lise from Thibang. A unit of 28 policemen and 72 soldiers were out on patrol at eight in the morning on 2 May. They made contact with a large group of Maoists and reportedly killed more than 100 of them, including Dill Man Thapa, a local commander.

Acting on a tipoff by a captured female



prisoner, they then headed further up the mountain towards Ghantidhara, where top Maoists were reported. At about 2:15pm they came under heavy fire. The unit radioed for air support and kept on fighting. A massive hail-storm, made it impossible for helicopters to land. By 6:30 the soldiers had run out of ammunition, and they retreated with their five dead.

JITENDRA RAUT IN LONDON

Lawyers representing ex-Gurkhas filed a petition at the Royal Courts of Justice in London on Wednesday charging the British government with discrimination in pay and pensions against Nepal soldiers. If upheld, the 20 cases could benefit over 30,000 veterans and 6,000 Nepal widows. Compensation claims could total £2 billion. The court will decide in the next few weeks if the Gurkhas have "an arguable case".

The Gurkhas are represented by the barrister, Cherie Booth, wife of British prime minister Tony Blair and prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba arrives in London on Saturday. Due to both reasons, the issue has received wide coverage in the British press. Booth did not appear at the press conference on Wednesday but Phil Shiner of Matrix Chambers told us Booth thinks the Gurkha case is "strong and morally in on their side".

There are about 3,400 Nepal soldiers in the British Army. Up to 60,000 have died in the past 200 years while fighting for the British in various wars. They say that while conditions have improved over the years, they are still not treated at par with British soldiers on pay, pensions and other basic rights.

The ex-Gurkhas, represented by the Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen's Organisation (GAESO), say they have an air-tight case. A 1947 truce agreement between Britain, India and Nepal grants all soldiers equal treatment. But two days after the pact was signed British and Indian officials sat down and agreed to a bilateral deal, which is what governs payments for British Gurkhas today. Nearly 55 years later, the Gurkhas say they want to be treated equally and their sacrifices recognised.

The British government has maintained that although there are discrepancies in pay and pensions which have been narrowed, the Nepal soldiers get extended home leave and other benefits not provided to British nationals in the army.

The lawyers will try to prove that the Gurkhas are victims of racism in the military, and they base their case on four violations of the British Human Rights Act (1988):

- They are allowed to live with wives only for 3 of the 15 years of service, something that does not apply to British soldiers
 - All soldiers are treated as Hindu, although there are non-Hindus in the ranks
 - Promotions are racially tinged, and
 - There is discrimination in pension payments.
- GAESO's Padam Bahadur Gurung told us: "All we are asking is not to be treated as inferior human beings. We want recognition that we have fought loyally for British soldiers, and demand only the same rights." Many British citizens seem to agree. A former paratrooper and now Mayor of Islamabad, said in the 30 April issue of the Daily Mirror: "It is scandalous that these people should be treated as second class citizens."

UNILATERAL

An email message from Maoist leader Prachanda Thursday proposed a unilateral one-month ceasefire effective 15 May. The first part of the statement is a trade against the United States, and it blames Nepal's "feudal autocrats" for going to Washington to seek help and "involve foreign forces into the country". Prachanda sees a grand American design to "encircle China and weaken India". The statement blames the United States for "trying to turn Nepal into another Vietnam". Prachanda says his group is even willing to join in future with other parliamentary parties, but warns: "If during the ceasefire period the government continues its suppression, then we will be compelled to launch a fearsome, final war." Although the message does not bear a signature, human rights groups say it is authentic. The email has also come through the same channels as previous messages which have not been refuted. This unilateral ceasefire offer comes 17 days before the present state of emergency is due to expire. There has been no immediate reaction from the government, but a reiteration of the demand that the Maoists disarm before any future talks is expected.

By next morning, security sources told us, the scene of the battle had been picked clean, there were no bodies and no weapons but the ground was soaked with blood. The army then advanced further up to the ridge and came across the Maoists' main base with bunkers, food supply and training grounds, reportedly the hideout of rebel leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara.

They laid siege to the heights, but the Maoists being much more familiar with the terrain, fled along the ridge north-east towards Gam. And that is where, in an audacious counterattack, they stormed an isolated army-police garrison on Tuesday night at eleven o'clock. From there they believed to have dispersed into Baglung in the east and Rukum up north.

It took only 90 minutes to overrun the Gam base. Many of those who survived were executed. The final death toll is not clear, but 60 of the 140-strong force were said to be outside the base when it fell. Thirty-five charred bodies were found on Thursday when reinforcements finally arrived. Eighteen injured soldiers, police and a civilian flown to Kathmandu on Thursday afternoon (see pic).

MPs from the State Affairs Committee (SAC) of parliament who visited Rolpa last week described the area as a war zone. "It feels like Lebanon," says Prakash Jyela. "We are convinced the security forces are doing their best, but there is a severe lack of helicopters." MP Hridaya Ram Thani, SAC chairman, agrees. "They need support to make their campaign more effective."

It is now clear that the lack of air support to enforce the cordon around Lise was a critical factor that allowed the Maoists to break through and flee along the ridge to attack Gam.

The security forces had been expecting a major attack in the area, and the presence of large numbers of rebels on Lise, they say, was indication they were probably preparing a raid on Libang. This time, they also wanted an attack to coincide with Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Washington visit. ♦

Ayo Gorkhali



Cherie Booth to the rescue.

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IN A SOFT STATE

Wonder if Aung San Suu Kyi knows what's in store for her. After the euphoria of democracy is over, she will discover like us that fighting for freedom is in some ways easier than making it work. Why? Power will power fall its ultimate test of putting in people in office who will make the difference to the lives of citizens.

It's called the Musharraf Syndrome. And it afflicts all who blame freedom for poverty and political mismanagement. Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew once went to the Philippines and lectured the Filipinos that they remained poor because they were free. In a soft state, he said, democracy needs to be guided—especially in its formative years. Laws and values need to be put into place that institutionalise sharing resources for the common good, creating equal opportunities even if economic equality is not possible. The surprising thing was that a lot of Filipinos agreed, just as Pakistanis fed up with Nawaz and Benazir rationalised their praetorian intervention.

Here, too, there is rampant talk these days about subcontracting this country off to Elder Statesman Lee so he can make us in the image of his city state. After a couple of chitots pegs others have been overheard to say: "Someone needs to do a Musharraf."

Things are bad, yes. And this leads many to the authoritarian temptation. Paradoxically, it is a temptation that seems to strike not the rulers so much as the ruled. Citizens in many young democracies have lost faith in their flighty leaders. They look for a relatively easy and (they hope) painless way out, and are not at all for the "certainties" of strongman rule. Some Russians are going for Stalin, though he has been a renaissance of former communists in the ex-Soviet bloc.

As democracy falters, extremists move to fill the governance vacuum. Foreseeing conflict and anarchy, the people then request a return to authoritarianism and a lesser evil. It is a search for a saviour that is borne out of desperation and extreme disillusionment with those who have misused and wasted the popular mandate. This is the seduction of authoritarianism: a psychological syndrome to which those who live in decaying democracies are prone.

The goodness with which we greeted the restoration of democracy has long given way to apathy and cynicism. In fact, somewhere along the way, we got complacent and forgot that democracy isn't a trophy to lock up inside a glass cabinet. Democracy is like a rubber band, you have to stretch it to make it work. And that means having an alert citizenry, a proactive civil society, a media that flexes itself and takes freedom to its limit. But that takes hard work, it is much easier to point out what is wrong than to do something to set things right. It is a lot less tortuous to be cynical. All this has brought us to a point where it is now fashionable to ignore Lee Kwan Yew or Musharraf. Such talk is infectious, and it has paralysed us with low self-esteem and fatalism.

As democracy is threatened as it is now by those who want to usher in a dictatorship of the proletariat, we need to strengthen democracy, not dismantle it. If democracy did not work it was because it was not used properly. There were mistakes, perhaps inherently wrong with it. The antidote to a faltering democracy is its more sincere and honest application, and a citizenry that forces its elected leaders to display more accountability and commitment. At no point is this more important than when conflict threatens our freedoms.



The heart bows to the coping mechanism of the mind. I begin to catalogue Maoists had thought to themselves, the chances of "collateral damage" in the middle of a forest is minimal, or the figures may have been inflated for propaganda value (the security forces badly needed a victory).

I seek for the ever convenient excuse of the urban middle class, who lyber about things that you can do nothing about: What has to go on, no matter what. Lenin was right, it is one death that is human tragedy. Any thing more than that is a statistic. The more the number, the more numbing the fact.

I plant a Jerusalem Birch in the flower pot, pluck a wild from the garden fence, take the dog for a walk, buy bread, milk, vegetable, take the dog to school. He has his job cut out for him, and I can wait with the dog's lead.

This government is unlikely to approach

the frustration. Since it's impossible to make sense of the clouds hovering over Roly, I try to see the silver lining instead—the Maoist insurgency began in Boda, and it's symbolic that the beginning of fear should also happen there. Life goes on despite a deep, dull ache in the heart.

A friend suggests that I applaud the government of Dr Narayan Khadka as the Vice-Chairman of National Planning Committee.

donors for an outright loan write-off. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's priorities are different in Washington: his eyes are firmly set on the promise of \$20 million worth of "Pon-nethal" some to fight "terrorism." Then there is the possibility of another \$20 million for development. It's a lot of money, as much as what the South African space cadet paid to get ten days on the International Space Station.

Along with S/C Khadka, the Singh Dharma think-tank will have Dr Jagdish Chandra Pokharel, Dr Shankar Sharma, Dr Minendra Rijal and Dr Prakash Sharma. The good doctors are all graduates of prominent US universities, and not even one of them is what Nepal Congress stalwart Pradip Rijal would call an "organic intellectual," these being intellectuals who gain wisdom indigenously and not through their Harvard case studies.

At the day progresses, reports from Roly keep pushing the casualty figure up. But Kathmandu is a well-shielded Valley, even grief can't get past Thantok.

A receipt at the Rasthali in the evening, the buzz is the brand of Har Prasad Pandey's car. During the cocktails hosted by the management of Kantipur Television, discussion veers effortlessly from Nepal's Maoists. The idea would be to devalue the Prachanda Path to the status of Prachanda Thought, and ultimately name "Prachandism" that shades Maoism to Nepal conditions. That is the logical growth cycle through which revolutionary ideas mature into political philosophy.

However, we cannot be too sure if the Prachanda Path will follow that path. It is a creative offspring of the Maoist-Leninist-Maoist praxis. It is an attempt to find an ideological mould in revolutionary history for Nepal's "people's war." The revolution has now degenerated into terrorism, especially if you don't agree with it. It is a creative offspring of the Maoist-Leninist-Maoist praxis. It is an attempt to find an ideological mould in revolutionary history for Nepal's "people's war." The revolution has now degenerated into terrorism, especially if you don't agree with it. It is a creative offspring of the Maoist-Leninist-Maoist praxis. It is an attempt to find an ideological mould in revolutionary history for Nepal's "people's war." The revolution has now degenerated into terrorism, especially if you don't agree with it.

Maybe the times have come to be a brave warrior for peace. To be courageous enough to call for an end to this senseless violence. The dog of Kathmandu has the courage to stop the war. Can the political leadership of the country stand up for peace?

The monarchy in Nepal has taken different turns over 323 years of history. And it is a symbol of national unity and integrity. But the role played by the political parties has not exactly promoted this unity and integrity. Now Nepal is facing serious problems with terrorism. It is our bad luck that after the restoration of democracy, our leaders have failed to live up to their duties. Corruption, politicisation and incompetence. In our opinion in this critical situation, it is only the people of Nepal who can save the country. We must be able to accept and accept "sidi."

● If the present Nepal government thinks that foreign money and military aid will solve the problem, they are wrong. We must be able to accept and accept "sidi."

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Prachanda Path is the newest thing in creative Marxism. So said Maoist ideologue Dr Baburam Bhattarai, in his book *Prachanda Path and After* (Harvard University Press). The Prachanda Path. Since that treatise came out last year, a lot has happened. It is interesting to try and find a correlation between the assassinations, attacks on elected village bodies, destruction of infrastructure, the latest posturing for dialogue, and Baburam's words.

For revolutionaries, there is an ideological explanation for every event. Everything can be explained by dogma, and the party line has a justification for all outcomes. Through the red-intellectual class party ideology, there is a rationale for every action. The same is true for the Shining Path with the use of the word "path," Comrade Prachanda has tried to take his movement into the post-Mao world and make it a guiding philosophy for Nepal's Maoists. The idea would be to devalue the Prachanda Path to the status of Prachanda Thought, and ultimately name "Prachandism" that shades Maoism to Nepal conditions. That is the logical growth cycle through which revolutionary ideas mature into political philosophy.

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My Maoist friend says that Mao waited no less (17 years) before launching his Cultural Revolution, and this was one of the main reasons why socialism could not take firm root in the mainland. Our comrades say they have incorporated cultural changes into the revolution from Day One of the insurgency, and learning from the Shining Path experience are confident that they can accelerate this social transformation.

But what type of cultural revolution are the Maoists talking about? And what of Comrade Prachanda himself? When he said in an Indian newspaper interview last year that he had a secret crush on Nepal actress Karishma Munsharui, it was a dramatic departure from the communist doctrine that even art forms have a class basis, and native idols like Karishma reflect bourgeois values.

In contrast, the leadership disciplined "deviations" who they say have undermined the cultural purity of the movement. Two years ago, Comrade Alok (Yan Prasad) was expelled from the party for his forswearing, purging enemies within the party by murdering them and stealing money. Dinesh Sharma was charged with committing the cardinal sin of "long-term war" with "armed rebellion" to achieve their goal in a telescoped timeframe.

Prachanda said, "The new for certain is that it is not Maoism. The Prachanda Path also makes a significant departure from the political military strategy. Mao said revolution in the Third World would be a long-term war. However, our comrades depart from this doctrine and pin their hopes on a fusion of "long-term war" with "armed rebellion" to achieve their goal in a telescoped timeframe.

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"The food security situation in the western hills has greatly deteriorated."

Nepali Times asked Douglas Coutts of the UN's World Food Programme in Kathmandu about the impact of the insurgency on Nepal's food supply.

Nepali Times: How bad is the food situation in Nepal?

Douglas Coutts: It is logical that there would be a problem this time of year. This is the dry season, the food stocks communities build up in the winter in the western hills and mountains will be down. The farmers there don't have the land holdings and soil fertility to grow enough food to feed themselves. They buy the balance. We do know that the commercial market routes have been severely affected by the conflict, and that there have been many incidents where the military and the Maoists have blocked food going into certain areas. I am not talking only about our food, but food blocked by either side from the merchants. In many of the bazars, we have reports of drastically rising prices of staples.

How much worse is it than is normal for this time of year?

Before you had a scarcity problem. Now there is a new and very serious element. In the past, depending on where you were, how much land you had and how many mouths to feed, you would have a few months of production for your family and opportunities to earn income to buy the rest. The unrest has affected the traditional coping mechanisms of communities. Men used to leave to work and come back with cash or food. Much of that traditional migration is affected. Many of the men are often supported by both sides when they travel. We gather the fear element is so high many who would otherwise go to find work are just staying put.

Have farming practices changed?

We're getting conflicting reports. Some talk about farmers actually growing less. They worry about it being taken. From our experience globally, in this type of conflict, it is typical that food stores are often plundered by insurgents. We hear from the government that Maoists in many areas are having problems, and are really desperate for food generally.

So people are just not growing food?

There is obviously more food insecurity, much more than before. Communities probably also have fewer income-generation activities to earn money to buy food in the markets. The food, again, is not readily available and is more expensive. You add all that together and I think it is logical to say that the food insecurity situation in the hills and mountains in the west has probably greatly deteriorated.

In other countries famines have followed conflicts? Is that possible here?

In our business we use the word "famine" very sparingly. It is with great caution that I would even utter the word. Famine is sort of the final step of a long process. It is a state where people are literally dying on the streets, it means all the coping mechanisms are gone. A full-scale famine is rare. There are many warning signs along the way and to famine. Long before a famine you'd have an increase in deaths during the difficult periods—in the west that would be during winter and the lean season. Children, elderly people, others who don't have substantial food supply during the difficult period would be the first to die. A well-nourished person would recover from. That would be the first

warning sign. Those who tend to last longer are typically males in the prime of their life. The young and the elderly, pregnant women, breastfeeding women have higher calorie requirements. That's a key indicator to observe throughout this conflict, or at the end of the conflict, or after. The other sign is migration. We are told that there are people migrating even as we speak, it seems to be primarily because of their security situation, not only food.

Gives us a ballpark figure for the population with shortages of food?

It is very hard to define. We have about 45 percent of the population below the poverty line—a government figure of people who consume 2,000 or less kilocalories each day. The highest percentage of that 45 percent you'd find in the areas we are talking about. The people in so high many who would otherwise go to find work are just staying put. There are some everywhere, but there are more income-generating access opportunities elsewhere than in the hills and mountains. Then we look at the percentage of people who earn one dollar a day on average and spend 70-80 percent or more of that on food. People die not because of lack of food but because of diseases they develop when they are weakened by less food over a sustained period. We know that there has been an increase in TB rates, that's an indicator of food shortage. TB is an opportunistic disease and affects people who are at risk. We know for a fact that TB rates in the mountains have increased. Put all that together, and that would indicate we are getting into a problem.

Can we then say that nearly half of all Nepalis face food shortages?

This is where we have to be careful. We don't want to look at it that way. Start at the national level. Nepal is technically a food-deficit country, but produces surplus pretty regularly. The issue for us is not the national food production line. That only tells half the story. The issue is access to food. The very interesting thing about Nepal is that access is determined by income and geography. It's so difficult to produce enough food to feed your people, lots of countries don't. But they have cash to buy food. Here people's access is critical, and further complicated by geography, which is why we came with "food for work". The people we target are the poorest of the poor in the hills and mountains, the most food-insecure and most affected. They have no interest in working for cash because they have to buy high-priced supplies. That's how you know we are targeting the right communities. People up there are spending so much of their income on food anyway, and are interested in such kinds of programs.

Security

RAMYATA LIMBU

A Maoist on one of four Nepalis will go to sleep hungry today. The same will happen tomorrow, and the next day. That makes Nepal, in terms of proportion of undernourished, the hungriest people in South Asia. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation says Nepal adds 400 more people into this category every day, 150,000 more hungry people every year.

These figures are based on statistics several years old, and food security experts say the situation is sure to have got worse since then because of the widening insurgency, especially in the chronically food-deficit mid-western region.

The production, distribution and storage mechanisms simply aren't working, and hunger is spreading at an alarming rate. Ten years ago, there were 3.5 million underfed people in Nepal, 19 percent of the population. Today that number is five million, 23 percent, according to the FAO's latest global food insecurity survey.

The FAO will be holding its Asia-Pacific regional ministerial conference in Kathmandu 13-17 May, where the country's worsening food security situation is expected to be highlighted. If the insurgency is not brought to a rapid resolution, and if farm productivity is not improved Nepal is moving towards having one of the most serious food crises in Asia.

Our food production has remained more or less stagnant, though there have been occasional surpluses. The problem is, these increases, when they occur, do not translate into more food per head. The surplus is used to pay for growing food difficult, it impedes the government's ability to move food stocks around the country.

That was the situation before

the declaration of the state of emergency and the escalation of the conflict in November last year. The FAO maintains that widespread poverty and slow food production which is not keeping pace with the growth in population, are the reasons for the increase in hunger in Nepal.

Even before the conflict intensified, 39 of Nepal's 75 districts suffered chronic food shortages. Sources who have recently over-flown mid and far-western districts told us that terraces are fallow even in the districts that should have begun cropping. With the violence spreading across the countryside and the general sense of insecurity, many have fled their villages. Of those who remain, many don't have the manpower to continue farming, or have eaten the seeds. Others may have just not planted this season's wheat since they think it will be looted by insurgents anyway.

In remote mountain areas like Humla, local food production is sufficient for only four months of the year. The people of the district also have few opportunities to earn money to buy food. The result is that every household in the district has to rely on some alternative, largely the food flows in from the government, itself plagued by poor logistics, disrupted flights and now the Maoist insurgency. Says Maya Lama, a resident of Torpa in Bargarua VDC in Humla, "We have not seen a plane in some months."

Last year's crop, which was this year's loan "been planted" yet. It is not unusual to see people waiting in long queues at the food corporation offices at the district headquarters for coupons to obtain subsidised food. The local crop—potato, barley, buckwheat—barely lasts a few months.

"The increase in household food insecurity is worrying," says

and food security

Nepal is the only country in the region where hunger is increasing. Now factor in the insurgency.



Food distribution in Mugli last year (above), and an aerial view of fallow fields in the mid-west.

tye farming in their strongholds, but everyone is too busy fighting to tend to farms," says Tuli Gautam of the Agriculture Department Market Development Directorate.

Even so, there are some in government who do not completely agree with the FAO's projections. "The FAO doesn't take into account Nepal's food habits and consumption, the indigenous varieties of food, and local preferences," says one official who did not want to be named. "You can't base a report on rice, maize and wheat alone."

In general, Nepal's food grain production has been increasing in recent years, thanks to good monsoons and improved services. But food production is not keeping pace with the increase in population. Between 1990-2000, Nepal produced rice, wheat, maize and millet. But barley production has fallen every year since 1995. For many mountain communities, increased rice production doesn't really matter, barley is their staple.

Jivan Bahadur Shahi, chairman of the Humla DDC, says the focus should now be on promoting indigenous cereals such as barley and millet, and encouraging crops like potato, pulses and legumes. "People are forgoing their roots and tubers, it is difficult."

It is also to obtain an accurate picture of the state of agriculture in no-go Maoist-affected areas. "One does hear of the Maoists carrying out coopera-

value and to grow far more income. "We get technicians who are knowledgeable about rice, but don't have an inkling about buckwheat or barley. I've often told planners, give us water, good irrigation systems, not rice. Shahi is optimistic that a road being built in Humla, under the WFP's Food for Work Project, will allow villagers to exchange local produce like apples, walnuts and medicinal plants for rice from the plains.

It is clear that although the security situation has made the food situation worse, even if the conflict winds down, the structural problems with Nepal's agriculture will persist. Nepal's farmers are already hurt by their inability to compete with the economy of scale of Indian products. The open border has allowed a backlog of cheap Indian rice to enter Nepal. "We haven't reached our production potential," says Thapa. "But even if we increased the yield, where do we store it, how do we distribute it, how do we market it. We don't have these mechanisms in place."

Some years ago, the government opened grain exports to Bangladesh, in the hope that it would get support for a long-term agriculture plan from the ADB. Before that could be implemented properly, the government reversed its decision.

The ADB-backed 2001 Agriculture Perspective Plan hopes to improve irrigation, fertiliser, markets and roads and targets a five percent growth in agriculture, largely cereals. It hopes this will reduce poverty to 14 percent, and narrow the regional imbalances in food availability.

But this appears unlikely. Last year, the agriculture sector saw a growth rate of 4.33 percent. This has led to food dropped to 1.71 percent. What is now clear is that even if the food distribution channels are clear, there won't be enough to distribute. ♦

Minister-turned-Maoist

Yet another former minister has surrendered to the administration, this time on charges of being a Maoist leader. On 7 May Govinda Nath Upreti surrendered to the Kavre District Administration Office after appearing on a fresh list of Maoist leaders wanted by the security forces. Upreti drove alone in his private car to reach the Kavre headquarters in Dhulikhel, and was not stopped even once by the security personnel guarding the highway. The district administration has taken him into custody for further interrogation.

Trying to climb high

Desperate to attract more mountaineers, such as those now choosing to climb in Pakistan, where the fees are cheaper and there are no Maoists, the government has decided to make changes in the royalty structures and simplified the procedure for obtaining permission to climb big mountains. The new regulation has reduced the royalty to \$25,000 for a team of under seven members from the previous \$70,000. They've also annulled the provisions that required that foreign climbers had to be recommended by their national alpine clubs or embassies. The new rules also say that mountaineering activities will be allowed throughout the year.

The regulations also display a new sensitivity towards Nepal who work on expeditions. Youth under 16 will not be allowed to climb, and all support staff on expeditions will have to be provided accident insurance. Finally, in response to numerous complaints, the government-designated liaison officers will no longer be required to accompany expedition teams up to base camps and will have their allowances cancelled should they stop working with an expedition.

ISDP worries

The National Planning Commission is reconsidering the implementation of the Integrated Security and Development Programme (ISDP) in districts affected by the insurgency. The NPC is awaiting assurance from the Royal Nepal Army that the security situation is stable enough for the development package to be implemented in the 13 worst affected districts. During his appearance at the parliamentary committee for state affairs earlier this month Chief of Army Staff Prajwal Shumshere Rana requested the quick implementation of the ISDP.

The government had selected Gorkha, Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan, Jagatkot, Kalikot and Panchthar for first phase of the ISDP, but implementation was suspended following the declaration of the state of emergency in November. The programme was implemented in Gorkha on a trial basis one year ago.

Finally, some good news

Nepal's population will increase by 10 million by the year 2020, family planning and fertility, said USAID director Rebecca Rohrer at the launch of the 2001 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey. The survey reveals a marked reduction in the average number of children born to a Nepal woman. The decrease, 0.9 less than the five 15 years ago, represents a nearly 20 percent drop in fertility. The main factor contributing to the decline is a doubling in contraceptive use among non-pregnant women between the ages of 15-49, up to 39 percent from just 15 percent in the late 1980s.

Infant mortality rate has also come down significantly—from 103 to 64 deaths per 1,000 live births. This goes together with advances in health care. Five years ago, just over one in three children were fully immunised, today 60 percent are. Vitamin A supplementation now covers 81 percent of the under-five children, up from 51 percent five years ago. But it is still probably too early for celebrations. There are other problems in our health sector that could easily drag us back—87 percent of deliveries take place in the absence of trained birth attendants, and less than half of all women are immunised against tetanus. Over half of all Nepal children are shorter than the normal birth-for-age, and a fifth are severely malnourished, says the survey carried out by New ERA for the Family Health Division of the Ministry of Health.

At the same gathering Health Minister Shraw Singh Bhadrany said the figures would be taken seriously and promised the following a gender sensitive approach to health care delivery, decentralisation of public health service facilities, and increased participation of communities, local governments and private sector to improve the overall health scenario in Nepal. It only it were that easy.

HERE AND THERE

Things considered

Unlikely as it may seem, there's been some well-informed debate about Nepal on American airwaves.

It's Sunday afternoon as I write this, and the prime minister's plane is roaring overhead, off to pay homage in Washington and London and court some cash from the parliament of the war-torn country. The few private jets flying send their trails of passengers higher and yon. It's merry and warm, a pigeon perches on my balcony, keeping a wary eye on the cab below.

Hard to know what to make of things now that I'm back in the Himalayan landscape, in North America and Europe, mean lagging on the Internet—everyday—and checking out newsgroups on the road this paper and all the others. Another reminder of our yam-like status between the two bodders was a copy of Samant Upadhyay's *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, prominently displayed in my local bookshop store. I bought it to read on the plane home.

It's probably good thing Prime Minister Deuba is meeting President Clinton this week in Washington. The CEO of America Inc. was infamously the man most ignorant about foreign affairs in the run up to the presidential election in 2000. Post 11 September, he no longer needs an atlas to suss out corners of the world. He even knows about our troubles in Nepal and is investing in ways to resolve them. Forty million dollars in aid, and a military intervention, with at least half for the military. That's an interesting intervention at this point in the struggle and one that I'm worried isn't being properly examined and debated here.

It is in America though. A ringing telephone in my father's kitchen last week turned out to be a producer with National Public Radio, America's superb listener-supported alternative to the deck of mainstream media. Somehow, "Talk of the Nation" had tracked me down in exotic Ulsbridge, Ontario, Canada and this week, the listeners were getting all they may ever want to know about Nepal and the Maoists. I was there as a journalist, so I refrained from offering opinions, but the surprisingly well-informed listeners didn't.

To a person, they all oozed fear that the Bush administration was being too black and white in its wording of the war on terror to include Nepal and the

Maoist insurgency. That's what they felt the White House was doing with its request for extra military assistance for the authorities here, and they didn't like it. I pointed out that the official American line, that democracy is under threat

must be supported, has more than a ring of truth about it. But people like Professor Catherine Marks, a Nepal expert from Cornell University, and a listener named Usala, calling from Providence, Rhode Island, were having none of it. "Our money," Usala said, "was the former Peace Corps volunteer who'd kept all through the Kanali area over the past two years" should be the target on furthering war and violence. It should be spent on making peace, encouraging institutions like the courts, parliament and the human rights groups. "We have spent decades providing weapons to developing countries and all that happens is the enriching of shareholders in American defence firms."

A fearful point, probably made from a left-of-centre ideological perspective, but a thoughtful one nonetheless, especially coming from an American. It's probably a good idea for a person who clearly loves their country. She deplored the Maoists and their violence but wondered about the rural poverty she prevalent—until recently—in Kathmandu. Professor Marks concurred. She too is widely travelled in the far-west, far more I dare say, than many of the elite in this city, especially more than I.

Debate is the key thing here. No side is absolutely right, no one is utterly wrong, save those who urge violence and only violence as the answer to our problems. People need to start talking about how to resolve those who they need to disagree and then move towards common ground. That's democracy, that's pluralism, that's the only way forward. That American phone-in program needs a version in Nepal, and it needs to be broadcast nationwide as the people of this time, troubled land have their say.

By the way, Professor Marks and Usala from Rhode Island both speak fluent Nepali and are more than willing to share their opinions with people here. ♦

(www.npr.org, Talk of the Nation Programme, 29 April 2002)

by DANIEL LAK



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Foreign hands

“L...enders flay foreign interference.” Policy capable of accommodating all... joint action urged to end economic woes.” Newspaper headlines mirror the magnitude of the nation’s political and economic turmoil. Commentators call on forces within the political system and outside to sort out their differences internally. There is growing apprehension that deepening domestic differences would give foreign hands wide legroom in Nepal.

Amid such a tense atmosphere in January 1990 a communist-socialist brigade arrived from New Delhi to address a political conference in the centre of Kathmandu. The moral support Indian political leaders from across the spectrum extended to Nepal’s banned political parties infuriated the panchayat government, already reeling from New Delhi’s virtual trade and transit embargo. Nepal, fed up with decades of enforced isolation and months of economic hardship, had no time for the patriotic pleas emanating from the official media.

In a matter of weeks, the 400,000 foot soldiers the panchayat system bragged about disappeared without a trace. The term ‘people’s representatives’ suddenly carried a ring of authen-



ticity. Even the most die-hard defenders of the panchayat system acknowledged that Nepal was desperate for democratic change. What troubled many was the return on investment some foreign benefactors might demand.

Twelve years later, the greatest beneficiaries from the Chakrabarti conclude are raising the loudest voices against external interference. Those who consider foreign policy as war begun by other means concede that nations have to maintain an arsenal that

includes everything between political policies that injure and economic policies that cripple the adversary.

True, the Ranas were tricked into signing the 1950 peace and friendship treaty through false promises of political protection. But you can’t blame India for completing a diplomatic assignment with such flourish. If Nepali politicians in the 1950s felt compelled to publicly express their gratitude to every official visitor from across the southern border, they were reflecting

As long as we retain our capacity to rail against foreign meddling, the outlook for the nation remains bright.

the inherent character of the changes of 1951. The desert nature of the panchayat system granted its diplomats greater room for manoeuvre. The Kalapani controversy and the secret 1965 accord with India govt. public trust system that punctured the myth of the panchas’ unwavering patriotism an entire generation of Nepalis were raised on.

But a fairer debate would have to probe how the withdrawal of Indian military checkpoints bolstered the place-driven offensive to assert Nepal’s independent identity. It is easy to denigrate Nepali nationalism as a direct manifestation of anti-Indianism. But when you start depicting varying hues of a purported persecution complex on the other five nations of South Asia, there is a need for a more exhaustive evaluation. (I often wonder, though, how the national debate would have been framed if we had an open border on the north and all of our rivers flowed in that direction.)

Critics of foreign interference today overlook how drastically the rules have changed since 1990. Many who rejoiced at Asquith, Piusch’s decision in Britain on a Spanish warrant for the killing spree he presided over as president of Chile several years earlier missed the finer points of the internationalisation of sovereignty. After 11 September, 2001, poverty-induced resentment has been designated a vital threat to affluent societies. US President George W Bush’s new approach to foreign aid has made a direct connection between poverty and terrorism. (Considering that last fall’s attacks were led by multimillionaire Osama bin Laden and carried out by people of privilege, however, this premise might need further testing.) The right to self-defence from shadow non-state parties has redefined the human rights and non-interference. How could one of the poorest countries of the world not have become a playground for external elements?

In modern times, foreign troops have entered a country either looking for those who invited them or have ended up as permanent guests. The peace that follows the thuds of foreign

jackboots cannot be placid. But if external military support is what you need to regain normalcy, its probably not a bad idea to involve more than one country. The experience of Lebanon, which has more fault lines than Afghanistan, could prove instructive to Nepalis.

Our legislators complain that foreign military advisers are being allowed into places like Rolpa and Gorkha that are off limits to Nepalis. It’s probably meaningless to argue that aliens wouldn’t have descended on the Maoist front lines if our MPs had spent more time in their own constituencies. So we have to look at the bright side. As long as we retain our capacity to rail against foreign meddling, the outlook for the nation will remain good. In the meantime, we probably should try to ward off external handers where we can. A new study has found that solid Indian banknotes circulating in northern India could spread chronic tonsillitis, pneumonia and tuberculosis. Don’t you think it’s time our government required shoppers and cabdrivers to return the change in Nepali currency? ♦



UML’s prescription

United Marxist-Leninist economists this week revealed their cure for Nepal’s budget blues, stressing that government should not let recurrent expenses cross Rs 50 billion. “We cannot let expenses gallop ahead in the name of security,” Bharat Mohan Adhikari told reporters. “There’s also reconstruction to think about.” For the time being, the UML wants government to show that it is serious by reducing its oversized cabinet, curtailing foreign junkets of ministers and public officials, and even lowering salaries of ministers, MPs and public employees. Government estimates that economic growth this year may be around one percent, forcing it to borrow heavily just to meet the recurrent spending.

Terrorists scare away tourists

The gloom and doom in the tourism industry is getting gloomier. Tourist arrivals collapsed to dip in April and unlike in past years, the Nepal Tourism Board’s numbers now show just how badly Indian arrivals have plummeted. Overall arrivals were down by 46 percent by end-April, which included a 35 percent drop in Indian tourists and a 49 percent dive in the arrivals of non-Indians. April, marred by the five-day Maoist strike, saw arrivals drop by 49 percent. Arrivals from the main markets—the US, UK, Japan and France—were already down by about 50 percent on average. The Japanese seem to be the bravest, their arrivals have fallen least steeply, “only” by 34 percent.

Railroad talks

Officials from Nepal and India met 1 May to talk about a long-overdue rail agreement, but failed to find a way to get the rail-link between Raxaul and the new Indian Container Depot at Birganj operational. The ICD at Birganj, built with a World Bank loan, was completed early last year, but Nepal has been unable to use the facility due to delays in getting the rail agreement finalised. The two sides decided to keep talking.

CNI chair

The Confederation of Nepalese Industries (CNI)—a group which claims to champion the cause of “real” investors—announced its formalisation last week. Binod K Chauhan chairs the group, whose membership is Vijaya Shah.

One-year-olds

The Nepal Life Insurance Company (NLIC) entered its second year last week and is set to expand operations in Birganj, Pokhara, Nepalgunja and Butwal. NLIC says it has enlisted 8,600 customers, who’ve paid up over Rs 72.5 million in premiums. The value of the policies sold in the first year adds up to over Rs 1.25 billion. The New Business Age, also completed its first year of operations last week, after splitting from the parent magazine that publishes without the “New” prefix.

Jo-Jo

Two-syllable noodle names aren’t exhausted yet. A Pokhara-based company last week launched Jo-Jo, the latest Ramen brand. Jo-Jo claims it is manufactured by a Nepali-made manufacturing unit called by sister-concern Pokhara Machine Tools. This is one of the companies owned and run by Hari Prasad Pandey the “Gandhi communist” who made headlines last week by courting arrest for bribery (see “Mea Culpa,” #92).

Sulochana Shah, a trained mathematician, owns and runs Formation Carpet, a successful exporting venture. Shah is also general secretary of Rugmark International, which campaigns for good business/production practices. Nepali Times spoke with Shah on her business values and the state of the industry.

doing business have obviously made a difference. Today we have almost 300 workers employed in four factories. Now I am also actively involved with Rugmark.

What is Rugmark?
Rugmark is an international trademark registered in Madrid. It certifies that a carpet is made without using child labour. There are six board members representing the producing and importing countries. At the moment, the importing countries are the US, UK and Germany, and others are in the process of coming in. The exporting countries are India, Pakistan and Nepal. I am also general secretary of Rugmark International.

Are the changes taking place in the industry helping some bring some sort of a revival?
It will certainly come back to life, but not with the approach the industry had before. People are more conscious about quality now, and I’m happy about that. In the past there were hardly any carpet industries that had day-care centres. We had one in our second year. Today, according to Rugmark, there are at least 15 different companies that have day-care facilities for workers’ children. You have to share your income with your workers, you have to be ethical, to survive.

How has Rugmark helped the industry in Nepal?
Rugmark International has certified about 400 carpet factories in Nepal, which means they don’t use child labour. Rugmark has helped put a stop to this some extent. More than fifty percent of carpet factories in Nepal don’t use child labour, and there are still some who want no part of this. These are days when even businesses have to help in the overall development of social rights by running ethical, by respecting human rights, labour rights, and the environmental impacts. I’ve practised corporate social philosophy since I started this business. Now it is slowly changing in the industry. Those who incorporate similar approaches will survive.

What can government do to help the industry?
The government should be very particular when registering factories. The government of the Federation of Nepal Commerce and Industries (FNCI) should continuously analyse the world markets. Eighty percent of our product goes to Germany, but if we send them their demand, how can they consume it? The Nepali mentality is to copy whatever is successful. The carpet crisis didn’t happen only because of child labour, but due to over-production. The government should be strong in enforcement and continuously monitor markets. When the world is talking about

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Running on empty

Just over a year ago it seemed as if Kathmandu had finally figured out how to deal with one of its largest, most obvious problems—air pollution. The city went to get a modern public transport system that would decrease pollution, and also be safer and more comfortable. Valley residents happily leapt on to the microbuses and the three-wheel battery-run electric vehicles (EV) and welcomed the banishment of the diesel engine three wheelers, among the worst polluters.

In 1998, when the electric limps first came to Kathmandu, there were only ten. Today, there are 600. But almost a decade after the Global Research Institute designed an EV suited to Nepal’s roads, the industry is still struggling. With the kind of early-morning advantage and the new regulations Kathmandu should have been the EV capital of the world, and other cities in the country should have also adopted the system. The failure of the industry to grow is a classic case of how the inability of the government to implement its own policies, and the internal wranglings of the private sector, can sour the bright prospects of a timely idea.

The EV is internationally recognised as the least polluting of all modes of transportation. Its speed and range-of-travel restrictions don’t matter in Kathmandu, given the relatively small size of the city and the slowness of its traffic. EV’s run on rechargeable electric batteries, which means that the industry, with its over 600 vehicles, is potentially an excellent customer for the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) during off-peak hours.

When the pollution row was at its height, the government was forced to give out loans and tax breaks to importers of EVs. It did that, but with little else. More than 600 electric motors, of which has batteries that need to be charged for up to eight hours every 130 km, only have recharging stations. Constantly changing traffic regulations and enforcement left to the whims of individual traffic policemen mean that there is no parking space for the tempos in the city, except outside the RMNC building. As a result, the 18 routes the EVs now ply could be reduced as the vehicles are forced to keep to just inside the Ring Road, and beyond it.

Bimal Aryal of Martin Chautani, one of the main advocates for the bringing mode EVs into the city, says he isn’t surprised that they have come to this pass. “The government does not show any special concern towards the development of this potentially enormous industry. We have been trying very hard to show the comparative advantages of not just encouraging this sector but also investing in it and yet the government gives a blind eye,” he says. Ashok Pandey of the Nepal Electric Vehicle (NEV) has another complaint, “Why can’t the government have more interest in this sector? They seem supportive, but then the Finance Ministry imposes new taxes every year.”

The private sector hasn’t exactly displayed entrepreneurship or vision either. The recent shortage of batteries and deterioration in their quality,



discouraged many EV owners from further investment. This in turn was a disincentive for manufacturers to pay attention to research and development. Most industry insiders say that all of this could be taken care of if there were appropriate regulations in place. “But for that,” says Hridaya Narayan Manandhar president of Nepal Electric Vehicle Charging Association NEVCA as well as the Electric Vehicle Association of Nepal, the umbrella organisation, “we need to lobby with the government, and you can’t do that if you aren’t financially strong. We aren’t in that position yet.”

Both sides want the other party to break the deadlock. While they wait, Valley residents are slowly sliding goodbye to the idea of a modern city clean with cleaner air. ♦

VANDANA PATEL

Enough is enough



Why the suspension of the Singapore Airlines flights isn’t surprising.

The Beed is depressed. 1 day has not been a good day for the tourism industry. Last year’s Nayabhat incident led to the unfolding of a series of complicated events. The fallout has been widespread, and we’ll see an instance of a year to the day much of this began. Singapore Airlines is suspending flights as of 1 June. For an industry already reeling under local problems and the global aftermath 9/11, this could not have come at a worse time. We have talked to the press, even ensured that big names are quoted in the media sharing our woes and perhaps meeting concerned airline authorities. We will not hear a word from the government or the Nepal Tourism Board. For the chattering classes it’s yet another chance to do what they do best—pontificate on the downside prophecies after the second crisis.

We still have not gauged the impact of the suspension of SQ flights. What will happen to Nepal as a destination? Lifelines is gone, even other European carriers are not flying regularly. When a potential tourist in North America jumps in “Destination: Kathmandu” on a travel website, the only option that will show up is “Thai. People are busy, their lives run to perfectly calibrated schedules. They need more options to seriously consider Nepal as holiday spot.

Barring places such as Patan, the credibility of a destination depends on the credibility of the carriers that fly there. With Singapore Airlines’ flight gone indefinitely, Nepal is isolated on

the tourist map. If we were doubted the gravity of the situation, it is time we woke up and smelt the rot. It isn’t simply the low loads or the technical problems of landing large aircraft at Nepal’s only international airport that have led to international carriers pulling out. Nepal has never been a very profitable destination for any airline, given the unpredictability of the weather and the seasonality of travellers. For large airlines Nepal operations have always been losers. As for technical issues, flights to popular destinations tolerate hurricanes and even dubious equipment. There’s more to this than meets the eye.

Most carriers have been complaining for some time of the high pace of landing and steep ground handling charges, coupled with inefficient management. The services provided at the airports are poor—carriers find it difficult deal with the staffed stations for the express purpose of assisting them. Fuel prices are high and quality has been a problem. Many carriers have been raising their rates for a long time, but the lackadaisical attitude of our beloved government agencies and authorities has brought things to a point where carriers are seriously wondering

whether there is any point at all flying their flag in Nepal.

The tourist industry—all of it, all its multifaceted multi-specialist associations—needs to stand up and show their solidarity and help get Singapore Airlines flying again. As we know, the government will wish to wait for a dove-kindled consultant to tell them that this is a serious matter. The Beed overhead that there is a team being put together by the tourism industry to make a case and convince Singapore Airlines to restart flights. But for that to work, government needs to wake up.

We boast of 50,000 MW of potential power and have developed one percent of that. We have agreements for more than 60,000 aircraft seats per week, but end up utilising a minuscule portion of that. The Beed knows how to harness this column source. But does the NTB ever consider what its role would be if there were no tourists? Would they be happy simply providing full-page ads to local dealers?

Readers can post their views at artha@edhoo.com



“The only way to survive in business is by being ethical.”

What else do you do? We registered Lotus Holdings in 1998. We started by investing in companies that were weak financially, and helped in their management. Our first investment was in Lotus Papercoat. We invested 50 percent, so we wouldn’t dominate the business. We went in to support agriculture, education, power and infrastructure development. We haven’t been able to invest in all areas, but we will soon. We are trying to form a development policy the private way. The dividends, when they come, won’t be much. But we don’t give up. We pick investments that follow rules and regulations, have proper documentation, and we have 12 people in Everest net, which we’ve invested the most in, six are MBAs, smart, young and creative. You have to create a new system. We are very ambitious, we have a thousand dreams at least we’ll realise a hundred.

You’re an academic now doing business. How did this happen?
I got two Master’s degrees in mathematics, from TU and from Germany, in 1971. My husband and I studied and worked there until we met some high-profile Nepalis who asked us to come back and work for the Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology (RONAST). We came back and started working at RONAST but soon found that people were unwilling to accept our new ideas. RONAST had the cream of the country—the medical doctors, the PhDs, the engineers—but they didn’t care about Nepal. That hasn’t changed. It was frustrating, and after three years I quit.

In 1987 I started working with the Organisation for Participatory Development, but on a voluntary basis. As I’d just started my mushroom farm with a small loan from the Agricultural Development Bank. The NGO sector was equally struggling. Some years later, a German friend asked if I wanted to start a carpet business. The industry was facing a lot of problems with child labour then. My mushroom farm was doing well, but in 1991 we started Formation Carpet. The idea was that my German friend would do the marketing and I would oversee production.

How difficult was it to get into a business with already a bad name in the market?
Carpets were the biggest source of export income for the government. I took the carpet business as a challenge. We started with 10 workers and five workers. The crisis had already started and I wanted to save the industry.

Open sesame



Sikkim is opening up, getting a new airport, and finding its own identity.

JANKI GURUNG

903, a time for intrigue and explorers. Francis Younghusband, in his obsessive quest for Tibet, makes the journey from Darjeeling into Sikkim, dressed in Marching Orders, breeches, gaiters, brown boots, flannel shirt, khaki coat and forage cap.

Just to get to Rangpo, now a bustling little border town between West Bengal and Sikkim that does a thriving trade in cheap petrol and cheaper booze, he must cross the Teesta by a none-too-reassuring suspension bridge and make his way through the dense forests of the Eastern Himalayan foothills, all the while worrying about "a haunting suspicion of fever".

He arrives in Gangtok three days later, crossing a cantilever bridge and cutting through bamboo and elephant herds, enchanted by the sight of untold varieties of

orchids. Further charm awaits him in the Sikkimese capital in the form of the Chogyal's brilliant wife, Yeshe Dolma, "an uncommonly slim little thing." Younghusband, who was, after all a bit of a lunatic about Tibet, steeled his heart against her alluring ways and moved up towards Nathu La, one of the two main passes to Tibet, now more notable for its connection with the 1967 war between China and India, than as a 4,392-foot high hippo on the old Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route.

Younghusband could make that journey in four hours by car today. Come 2005, he could even land in Pakyong, 35 km south-east of Gangtok, on board a regular flight. The overbearing army presence in Sikkim, particularly as you go up north towards the popular tourist site of Yumthang, is a little disconcerting (though no more than in our own capital), and there are

plenty of restricted areas that require more paperwork in triplicate than you'd imagine, but an airport here will almost inevitably result in a real boom in tourism.

Bhutan is expensive, and as for Nepal, well, last month in Gangtok we met more than one foreign tourist who'd cancelled a planned trip here in light of their embassy's travel warning, and gone instead to Sikkim.

For the wealthy—or desperate—a four-seater chopper already flies once a day between Gangtok and Bagdogra, an airport with connections to Calcutta and Delhi. Bagdogra will mean a many-fold increase in Sikkim's tourist arrivals, which currently stand at 30-50,000 foreign and 300,000 domestic tourists annually, and rising by something like 20 percent every year. There is only one direct, open surface route between Sikkim and the

rest of the world in the rather ugly form of Siliguri—the National Highway 31A, a splendid effort by the ubiquitous Border Roads Organisation. The roads built by the BRO are superb all the way up to Nathu La, but the real charm of the route lies in the organisation's adventurous forays into the English language. There are slogans plastered every couple of metres along the highway. (Eg: "Better late than late.")

The airport is little more than a clearing just over some 100 m sq right now, and standing on the outskirts of Pakyong, a pleasant-looking large, green village, it doesn't seem possible that an airplane could ever land here. The runway will be 1,600 m long and can accommodate a 50-seater ATR 72. The airport, which is to handle as many as 100 passengers at a time, will allow goods and passengers to travel faster, in higher volume, and more reliably.

But talk to young Sikkimese, especially in Gangtok, and you realise that for them the airport is about more than making moolah—it's about finally, after 25 years after being incorporated into the Indian Union, being a real part of the country. Enough, they say, of being some exotic outpost, even if Sikkim is known for producing an international-standard footballer, Bhadrachand Bhutia, and possibly the most urbane villager ever in Bollywood, the brewer of Dansberg beer, Danny Denzongpa, even if the state's own tourism board doesn't hesitate in still calling it a kingdom (as in flower kingdom).

This, after all, is a state that has in two successive elections voted to power Bawaan Chamling, a man with a couple of pet peeves. Cut through all the mandatory noises about defence and foreign hands, and ignore for a moment his real passion for what he calls "radical humanism". (See also "India is integrating with Tibet, and so the other way around," #89.) You hear him loud and clear. First, he points to that fillet line in the Indian national anthem that goes "Punjab, Sindhu, Gujarat, Maratha", and says with the wild-eyed conviction of a man who knows he is tilting at windmills: "It is a matter of great offence to Sikkim, which is an indivisible part of another country, is mentioned in our national anthem." He believes it should be replaced with Sikkim. He has another, more modest suggestion. At least after the Indian rallying cry of "Kashmir to Kanyakumari" in "Kashmir to Kanyakumari to Gangtok."

When in Sikkim, be sure to:

► Drive up to the stunning, mirror-like Tsomgo Lake at 3,780 m and three hours from Gangtok, get yourself photographed in Tibetan dress also a yak sporting a carpet that says, to make certain you are absolutely sure: "Welcome to Tsomgo". Marvel at the fact that electricity is taken for granted even at this height, and that a light switch can turn on more than just one 10 W bulb.

► Drive further up to a curious little shrine a little lower than Nathu La, dedicated to one Harbhajan Singh, in full army man, in death baba. Ignore the rabble and imagine not Younghusband in 1903, but thousands of Tibetans arriving everyday across one of the passes visible from this road in 1959. Some Tibetans who live in Sikkim say the route is still used by people fleeing the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

► If you really, really want to, get permission in Gangtok and drive up five hours to the border at Nathu La. But if it has rained in recent days lower down, be sure to hire a vehicle with snow-chains, or the persnickety Sikh army men will tell you, with a crinkle of their sunburnt faces and a twirl of their moustachios, that they can't allow you up for fear you'll be stuck there and they'll have to carry out yet another rescue. Once on the pass, possibly the most amusement is derived from the sight of dazed-looking Indian tourists, mostly Bengalis, who can't believe they are at the border with China. And that they have just shaken hands with a member of the People's Liberation Army. Too thrilling for words.

► Notice that on this drive, as on any going north in Sikkim, as the vegetation changes from subtropical bamboo to alpine rhododendron and then grasslands, so too do the composition of the scattered buildings and the population. Huts with the regulation flyt-snotted children playing outside give way to brilliantly-painted, aluminium-roofed army barracks with the boys in green industriously parading, firing the water pipes that clog up every night, playing flyt-bell or, if you are a woman, dropping everything to ogle you with undisguised longing.

► Alternatively, you can drive half-an-hour from Gangtok to any number of wonderful vantage points such as Ganesh Tok in the morning for breathtaking views of Gangtokhanga. A 13-day Kangchenjunga trek would be well worth your while, shorter than on the Nepal side and by all accounts, Maabadi-free. So would a slightly longer trek along the Singalila ridge that separates Sikkim from Nepal. The latter takes you through rhododendron forests and past waterfalls and mountain lakes, and offers view of everything from Everest to Chomolhari, ending right across from Gangtokhanga.

► A trip to Yumthang, at 3,782 m in northern Sikkim, requires dedication and patience, but any travel agent in Gangtok can arrange a trip to this place of green, flower-caped meadows with yaks everywhere and snow peaks strutting their stuff. En route to Yumthang is Kabi Longkoo, where Sikkimese history began in the 13th century when the Lepcha and Tamak chiefs signed a treaty of brotherhood.

► Imagining the intrigues at the Rumtek Monastery is another worthwhile exercise, especially when every third person gives you a different number of competing Karmapas and feeds you stories of thousand-car-long processions in favour of the Sherpa Karmapa. Or something like that—there are far too many stories. For other, more spiritual experiences, there are a number of monasteries, some very old and venerable indeed—Phodong Monastery is supposed to have been blessed by the Guru Rinpoche and Tashiding was built back in 1717. Pemayongtse is devoted to the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism, the "red hat" sect founded by Padmasambhava.

► Drink Temi tea. Kilo for kilo, the highest grade of Sikkimese tea is more expensive than Darjeeling. It is grown at a higher altitude and on a much smaller tea estate that only cultivates the Finest Tippee Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe.

The last seven years have been good for Sikkim. This has been a time of high achievement for the state that became part of the Indian Union in 1975. Following are some of the numerous strides the state has made in the social, economic and environmental sphere:

- The crime rate in Sikkim is the lowest in the country and the Union Home Minister has declared Sikkim the most peaceful state in the country.
- The Sikkim Planning Commission has been constituted to give a new lease of life to the planning process in the state.
- The Sikkim Human Development Report 2001 and Sikkim: The People's Vision have been published.
- We have set a target to increase Sikkim's growth from 12 percent to 15 percent.
- Sikkim has been included in the North-eastern Council as its eighth member.
- Policies are in place to spend 70 percent of the total plan budget to develop Sikkim.
- Chief Minister Pawan Chamling has voted the Greenest Chief Minister in India.
- A new law is being enforced that requires all official papers and documents to also list the mother's name.
- Reservations for women have been introduced: 33 percent in Panchayats and 30 percent in government jobs.
- For the first time, a woman has been inducted into cabinet and the SDF has appointed a woman member as Speaker of the State Assembly, Zilla Adhyakshyas, Upa-Adhyakshyas and chairpersons of different government undertakings.

- We have set a target to improve the literacy rate to 85 percent from the present 70 percent during the Tenth Five-Year Plan.
- The foundation stone for an airport was laid in Pakyong by Indian Vice President Shri Krishna Kant in April 2002.
- Scaling of Mt Kangchenjunga and seven other sacred peaks is banned.
- One tourist centre is being developed in each Gram Panchayat unit in the state.
- To develop tourism in Sikkim, we have started consultation with national- and international-level industrialists and non-governmental organisations.
- Sikkim hosted the South Asian Conference on Eco-Tourism in January, 2002.
- The transport system has been modernised with the introduction of a helicopter service. Eight more helipads are under construction.
- An MoU has been signed for a five-star hotel in the state.
- Airstrips are being constructed.
- Projects are underway for better connectivity in the state through district and village roads.

- The concept of a Model Village was developed and work started to promote village tourism. These villages will have all modern amenities such as water, electricity, road links, CC topall, PHSC, school, VLU centre, VLO centre, cooperative societies, bookstore, cafeteria, stockman centre.
- Devolution of power—10 percent of the state's annual plan budget goes to the Panchayats.
- The government has exempted people from paying tax on timber from personal holdings.
- Efforts are being made to exempt Sikkim from Direct Taxation Laws.
- For the first time, a Sikkimese has been appointed to the position of Advocate General by the Sikkim Democratic Front government.
- Sikkimese people have been appointed to constitutional positions such as Ambassador.
- Efforts are on to have Sikkim's Limbu and Tamang people included in the list of Scheduled Tribes.
- Equal respect and tradition for Sikkimese cultures and traditions. Demands for the inclusion of Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

- **Rajya Van Samrakshan Evam Parayaran Puraskar** was constituted to encourage preservation of nature.
- For the first time, a Sikkimese has been appointed to the position of Advocate General by the Sikkim Democratic Front government.
- Sikkimese people have been appointed to constitutional positions such as Ambassador.
- Efforts are on to have Sikkim's Limbu and Tamang people included in the list of Scheduled Tribes.
- Equal respect and tradition for Sikkimese cultures and traditions. Demands for the inclusion of Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

- Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Sherpa, Mangar, Newar and Sunuwar languages have been recognised as state languages.
- Arrangements have been made to teach Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu languages in all schools up to college level. Gurung, Tamang, Newar and Sherpa are taught up to school level.
- We have been successful in granting the status of Other Backward Castes to Jogis, Thamis and Dewas.
- 10 percent of seats are reserved in higher education to the Chhetri, Bahun and Newar communities, who are not included in the list of

Sikkim

Seven Years at a Glance



- Other Backward Castes.
- Chief Minister Self-Employment Scheme launched: Three-year interest-free loans and two-year interest-free loans will be given to educated unemployed women and men respectively, with up to Rs 100,000 for graduates and up to Rs 50,000 for class XII pass.
- Participatory democracy: strengthening the Panchayati Raj, to decentralise power to the people.
- To bring justice to poor people, Lok Adalats have been constituted in all nine subdivisions of Sikkim.
- To simplify the justice system, the following courts have been constituted: Atrocity Court, Court of Human Rights, Family Court, Hindu Marriage Act Court, Consumers' Court.
- A Single Window System has been launched in the state administration.
- We have created a new Information Technology Department for the state.

- Sikkim has been a frontrunner in India in the field of telecommunications.
- Forty information centres have been set up across the state.
- We have prepared projects to give highest priority to Information Technology.
- We have launched a number of websites on Sikkim. (sikkim.nic.in, www.sarkantel.com/sikkim)
- Free medical treatment and facilities to people and all government employees.
- Small Family Scheme has been introduced.
- There has been an unprecedented increase in pay and salaries of government employees under the Third Pay Commission. Wages of labourers and Muster Roll employees have increased by 100 percent.
- Poor women labourers employed by different departments are now entitled to get maternity allowance and maternity leave.
- Affix cows, piglets and quality seeds are distributed free of cost to poor people to help them become self-sufficient.
- Senior citizens travel free on buses.

- Senior citizens who do not receive old age pension benefits are given 10 kg of rice.
- The government provides land to the landless and provides an outright grant of Rs 20,000 to homeless people to assist them to construct houses under the Rural Housing Scheme.
- Subsidised rice is provided to poor people.
- Poor farmers are exempted from paying toll tax for their products brought to the bazaar for sale.
- Rural households get 50 percent rebate on electricity.
- The cooperative movement in the state has accelerated, to observe 2002 as "Cooperative Year". An Apex Cooperative Bank has been established.
- All children are vaccinated against Hepatitis B.
- Children in schools receive a mid-day meal.
- Education has been made free till the college level.

- Textbooks and exercise books are being distributed free of cost up to class XII.
- School uniforms are distributed free of cost every year in class V.
- Compulsory computer education has been introduced in schools. Environment education is being introduced.
- An engineering college, a medical college, and a science college have been established. Efforts are being made to establish a university in the state.
- Study series for an authentic study and research into all spheres of geography, history, culture, environment and society of Sikkim have been set up.
- The government has constituted various state awards carrying Rs 1,00,000 each under categories such as literature, social service, performing arts and sports.
- We have accorded due recognition to our rituals of Dhami-Jhanki, Bijwa, Phendang, Bhunthang, Janapa etc, based on animistic traditions.
- A temple and a guesthouse have been constructed at Bodhaya, Namchi.
- Work has begun on the installation of a huge statue of Guru Rinpoche at Shampudutta.
- We have decided to install a 108 foot-high statue of Lord Shiva at Sakti, Namchi.
- Work has begun on the construction of a ropeway at Gangtok, from Deorali to Tashiding and Namchi to Sakti/Dara.
- The city bus service has been introduced as a cheaper means of transport for the public in general.

ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITION

♦ **Football** on show Posters, national team jerseys, equipment, football newspapers and magazines, stamps, memorabilia, photographs and lots more. Also surf websites of the Nepal Football Fan Club, the British Council, and World Cup sites. From 26 May, British Council, Lanchaur.

EVENTS

- ♦ **Second National Drama Festival** organised by Bal Chetana Samuha (with Save the Children-UK). 10 May, 2PM, Rastriya Sabha Gita.
- ♦ **Phillips Saturday Bowling Tournament** Each bowler rolls three games, the bowler with the highest average score wins Phillips CD players. 18 May, 7PM onwards. Rs 500, or ten percent less for entries before 13 May. Bowling Boulevard, Kantipath. Register at mg@kml.com.np
- ♦ **Friends of the Bagmati** A group of concerned activists with the aim of cleaning up the Bagmati River. Membership open to all. friends@thebagmatinepal@yahoo.com.
- ♦ **Extended-Festival of War** based on episodes of the Mahabharata. Annual drama production of Studio 7. 10/11/12 May at the Nagda Theatre, Hotel Yak & Yeti, 15 min. tea. Rate Rs 700, reduced student tickets available. vajra@mos.com.np. 271545

MUSIC

- ♦ **Club Rumba** Latin band, salsa food until midnight on Thursdays. Early bird discounts between 9-9:30PM, buy one, get one free. Hotel Shangri-La. 412999
- ♦ **Dinesh & Pema** Live every Friday 7PM-9PM, Himalaya Cafe, Thamel. 262526
- ♦ **Beate Nite** Tribute to the late George Harrison. 12 May, 6:30PM. New Orleans Cafe, Thamel. 425736
- ♦ **Himalayan Feelings** live every week at Dwarika's Hotel's famous Friday night sekaua. 478488
- ♦ **Down Memory Lane** Wednesday nights with Teesta. The Rox Bar at the Hyatt Regency Kathmandu.
- ♦ **Live music** by Catch 22, Friday nights at the 40,000 1/2 bar, Rum Doodle Restaurant, Thamel. 414336

DRINK

- ♦ **Metre of Malt** Single malt Scotch exhibition. Shot on the rocks, or 12 single malts economically packaged for Rs 999. Piano Bar, Hotel Yak & Yeti. 248999
- ♦ **Beer Mug Club** Talk beer, drink beer. Monday nights, Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 491234

FOOD

- ♦ **Coke week** Coke-infused sweet and savoury culinary delights for lunch and dinner. Until 17 May, The Fun Café, Radisson Hotel. 411818
- ♦ **The Tharu Kitchen** Dithli (steamed rice dumplings) with a variety of jungle sauces and hot coriander chutney. Jungle Bess Camp, Bardia.
- ♦ **Ice creams & Sorbets** Single, double or triple scoops of ice creams and sorbets, some with alcohol. The Café, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu
- ♦ **The San Miguel Brunch** Brunch, live music and unlimited draft beer. Rs 600 plus tax. Saturdays, The Fun Café, Radisson Hotel. 411818
- ♦ **Wood fired pizzas** at the new Roadhouse Café. Completely redesigned with separate bar seating and coffee bar. The Roadhouse Café, Thamel.
- ♦ **Cakes, Bakes & Baguettes** Pastries, puddings, oven-fresh breads, Shangi La Bakery, Home delivery available. 412999
- ♦ **Krishnarjan Restaurant** 350+ courses of ceremonial Nepali cuisine in authentic setting, Dwarika's Hotel. 478488
- ♦ **Weekend Brunch** Rs 36 per head, special package available with bowling. Oriental and continental lunch or dinner by the pond. 1905 Boardwalk, Kantipath. 225272
- ♦ **Vegetarian Specialties** and day-evening meals at Srupa Vegetarian Restaurant & Terrace, Boudha. 480262
- ♦ **Saturday Live Buffet** with unlimited draft beer and live music by the Rusty Nails. The Fun Café, Radisson Hotel. 11:30AM-2:30PM, Saturdays. 411818
- ♦ **Authentic Thai food** Everyday at Yin Yang Restaurant. 425510
- ♦ **Paddy Foley's Irish Pub** A wide range of drinks and food. Live music on Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday nights. 410636.

GETAWAYS

- ♦ **White rhododendron getaway** at the Horseshoe Resort in Mugu, three hours from Kathmandu. Two days of rhododendron walks in forests, package tours at \$30 per day, all meals and sauna included. Email resort@horsesh.wink.com.np
- ♦ **The Great Godavari Getaway** Special weekend packages including room with breakfast and dinner, 25 percent discount on health club facilities. Godavari Village Resort. 560675
- ♦ **Chiso Chiso Hawana** Summer package with two days, one night with breakfast, dinner, transportation and activities. Rs 1,500 per person with twin-sharing. For Nepalis and expats only. Club Himalaya Nagarkot. 414432, 680083
- ♦ **Secret Garden** Use of new pool, overnight accommodation plus breakfast for two for \$99, Dwarika's Hotel. 479498
- ♦ **Bardiy's Best** Four days, three nights, jungle activities, transfers and food from the menu at Royal Bardia National Park. \$120, all-inclusive. jungle@escapenepal.com. 061-23402
- ♦ **Summer Splash** Use of pool 15 May - 15 July, 10AM-5PM Over 18 Rs 4,000 plus tax, school children under 18, Rs 2,000 plus tax. Hotel de l'Honneur. 227171
- ♦ **Taste the difference** Cosy Nepali-style house on an organic farm in Gumbhu, south of Thimi. Up to Rs 1,200 per person per night including meals. aaa@wink.com.np.
- ♦ **Shivapuri Heights Cottage** 30 minutes from Kathmandu, special guides to monastery, peak and reserve. Rs 1850 per person with dinner and breakfast. Rs 925 per child 5-14 years, children under five free. info@escapenepal.com

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

NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

A major cyclone in the Arabian Sea, which has now moved off the coast of Oman signals the first stirrings of the monsoon. The plains of north India are baking, with temperatures now nearly reaching 50 Celsius. But respite is still a month away. For Kathmandu look for localised thunderstorms, and the duration of these will depend on the moisture content of the westerlies. These will slowly give way to pre-monsoon showers, mostly in the afternoons. The maximum and minimum temperatures for Kathmandu will now rise to more normal levels.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
30-16	29-17	29-16	30-16	30-16

YAK YETI YAK

by MIKU



BOOKWORM

The Chronicle's Daughter Kishore Thakral
Ravi Dyalal publisher, New Delhi, 2002
Rs 480
The metropolis of U Belly, bounded by the mighty Sculpis and the daunting forest of No-Know, is the setting for this satirical chronicle of events, intrigue and upheaval. U Bellians believe they have nothing to complain about, until the Chronicle's Daughter questions received wisdom, leading to one Revolution, then another. The times are contemporary, the political philosophies and systems recognisable, their outcomes destined.

Truth, Love and a Little Malice: An Autobiography Khushwant Singh
Viking and Ravi Dyalal Publisher, New Delhi, 2002
Rs 720

In a career spanning five decades as writer, journalist and editor, Singh's views have always been provocative and controversial, but also deeply perceptive. Singh has been witness to most of the major events in Indian history—from Independence to Partition to the Emergency and Operation Blue Star. He chronicles these and his professional and personal triumphs and failures in law, writing, politics and marriage.



Plain Tales from the Raj

Charles Allen
Abacus, London, 1975/2000
Rs 725
Charles Allen's classic oral history of the Raj puts together the reminiscences of all kinds of British and Anglo-Indian actors to illustrate the unique experience of British India, both in its Edwardian summer, as seen by the privileged *chota sahibs* and *missy bahas* dotted on by innumerable servants and the sometimes painful years of its decline and eventual capitulation.



On Secret Service East of Constantinople: The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire Peter Hopkirk
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994/2001
Rs 580

Under the banner of a Holy War, masterminded in Berlin and unleashed from Constantinople, the Germans and the Turks set out in 1914 to foment violent revolutionary uprisings against the British in India and the Russians in Central Asia. This most sinister version of the Great Game is set out in epic detail here for the first time, recounted through the adventures of secret agents and others who took part in it.



Courtesy: Mandala Book Point, Kantipath, 227711, mandala@ccsl.com.np

CLASSIFIED

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CULTURE



Sikkin-based Anupama Subba, who plays the title character Numafung.

ALOK TUMBHAHONGHEY

Imagine a regular Bollywood film attempting to portray something like a generation gap, or changing values in a family with three generations. What do you see? A doty grandmother, deeply conservative and highly ridiculous parents, and children who simply want to drink, smoke, burn down the dance floor and wear short, shiny clothes.

Now imagine a Nepali film that chews all of that and meditates on change through something more basic—language. In Nabin Subba's Numafung, the oldest family members speak only Limbu, the second speak Limbu and Nepali, and the youngest speak only Nepali.

It's a sign that Nepal film directors are finally starting to mature, separating themselves from Bollywood's trend of gratuitous sex, violence and slapstick, producing truly original works that depict the real Nepal. After the 2000 success of Tsering Riktar Sherpa's Mukundo, Numafung is another film that makes you want to sit up and rub your eyes in disbelief.

Numafung is the story of how a Limbu girl finally decides to take change of her life after learning from the suffering and pain that her earlier misdirection gave rise to.

Numafung, which in Limbu means 'beautiful flower', is based on the story *Kashur ki Ghar* by Kazim Khandagva.

First-timer Anupama Subba essays with style, passion and just

A beautiful flower

Nepali cinema is growing up, and what better way to do it than through the character of Numafung.

Ramraya Tumok, do more than passively bear witness to Numa's life slowly going out of her hands. They show, by standing up for her, that they don't buy the argument that such rows between husband and wife are "trifling", as Girihang tries to convince her and. And so Numa, realising that someone at least is on her side, eventually musters up the courage to take control of her life.

All of this comes to the viewer through the eyes of Numa's younger sister, Lojina, whose attachment and loyalty to her sister are apparent right from the first frame of the film, where she is picking a white chrysanthemum to put in Numa's hair. Young Niwahang Limboo, in reality a pigtailed Gangtok schoolgirl, slips easily into the role of a young village girl whose prophetic nightmares offer an insight into the innocent mind. As the story progresses from one chapter to another, the titles that appear on the screen are those from Lojina's point of view, as is obvious when a title comes on describing Girihang as *Mote Ribben*—fat brother-in-law.

The story is compelling, as is the manner in which the characters are developed, and the backdrop of Nagi village in Panchthar district is spectacular, with magnificent views of the Kumbhakarna or Mr Jannu. All of this more than makes up for the choppy editing. Director Subba agrees and says, "Technically, we haven't been able to achieve good quality, but I believe in learning by doing. I'm sure in due course we will be able to produce films of excellent quality."

Subba already has three feature films to his credit. His first, Tarewa, was a telefilm in Limbu language, and his second, Khamgi, which was about a Sherpa community, did the international circuit, even winning the Jury Award at the 1997 Graz Film Festival. Numafung isn't just another commercial film being airy, it is as much a well-researched ethnographic document



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Cover Story: THE FACE OF TIBET



Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit



At this precise moment, you wouldn't want to be in the shoes of this robotic rat with electrodes sticking out of its brain which went through field trials recently to successfully negotiate a maze while being steered by a remote control joystick. As far as we know this is the first time in rodent history that a sentient being has been

Scientists at New York's Downstate Medical Centre in Brooklyn, according to an article in this week's issue of the journal *Nature*, have trained lab rats to make port or starboard turns by tickling their port or starboard whiskers respectively, and then rewarding them if they obey (and I quote) "with a pulse of euphoria in their pleasure centre."

Nature magazine does not divulge which body part of the said mice these pleasure centres are located in, or whether the scientists monitoring the volunteer roborats also treated themselves to pulses of euphoria in their pleasure centres. But this is how it works: strapped on the rat is a tiny knapsack with an antenna for receiving radio signals in the very high frequency range and a small microprocessor that sends

electrical pulses to its brain that gives the rat the illusion that it is having a good time when in actual fact it is getting an acupuncture of its cerebellum.

Asked about the ethics of all this poking around, the Brooklyn scientists denied that it was an infringement on the basic rights of rats, and maintained that during the experiments the rats got written guarantees to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Here in Nepal, our main goal should be to find the appropriate applications for these rapid strides in science and technology. By this, I mean we should see if we can't install some of these sophisticated pieces of equipment on our street dogs and turn them into traffic cops. Of course, the Hounds of Handisgaon will need some training, and we will need to do something about canine Robo Cops being temporarily distracted by the passage through the Singha Durbar intersection of the Municipal's garbage truck.

However, with practice, we are confident that our robotic mongrels will be alert enough to know when southbound traffic is backed up from the statue of King Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great all the way across town to the statue of Voice Emperor Narayan Gopal. Then, all it will take is a short electromagnetic signal on the dog's right whiskers to trigger his motor receptors to lift his right hind leg. Oops, sorry. Wrong electrode. Let's try this blue wire here on the left whisker. Dzat, why is he sitting on his butt and offering me his left paw?

All right, there are still some teething problems with turning our street dogs into Robo Cops, but as science advances we will lick this problem and can move on to the more urgent task of installing these devices on to the skulls of humans who hold high office. Politicians equipped with electrodes attached to the greed centres of their brains have, in recent field trials, successfully rebuffed offers for "breakfast money" from tycoons.

When the bribe offer is made, scientists manning a joystick from a relatively safe distance of 100 yards, send a signal by remote control to the public servant's pleasure centre and transmit him a quick multiple orgasm. Nine out of ten times that this experiment has been tried out in the lab, the official has turned down a hefty bribe. So there we have it, the answer to the problem of graft: replace greed with lust. ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

Sangeeta's first love



"A lot of people thought I was nuts," laughs Sangeeta Thapa, remembering the early days of the Siddharth Art Gallery. "They couldn't understand why a 25-year-old mass communications and anthropology graduate just back from America was ready to give her life to art." So why did she? "Art is my first love," she says simply.

Seventeen years ago, when Sangeeta saw the work of artist Shashikala Tiwari at the Sitabhavan Gallery in Naxal and the October Art Gallery of the Vajra Hotel, she fell in love with it immediately. The two met and talked, and a couple of years later, in 1986, the friendship turned into a partnership when they opened the Siddhartha Art Gallery on Kantipath.

"My father is my inspiration. Wherever he went, he always bought art. He always took me to exhibitions, cultural events, the theatre," explains Sangeeta speaking of daddy, the banker Himalaya Sumshere Rana. Since the age of five, she knew she was born into art. At eight, she had already sold her first painting, and at nineteen, she produced her first major work. But then in art school, Sangeeta says she realised that she didn't want to paint all her life. "There was so much going on in the world, outside, and I didn't want to be isolated from it."

And so Sangeeta decided that there had to be a way to combine her passion for the

creative media with her sense of social consciousness. The gallery has been a perfect medium, as has Infinity International, an event-management firm that Sangeeta is a partner in. She has used her networks in both spheres to help raise funds for earthquake relief and the maternity hospital, bring the Pakistani band Junoon to the capital in March 2001, and organise "protest" shows like the one on the Bamiyan Buddha last year. "Artists can catalyse social change," she says with conviction.

The Gallery moved to Baber Mahal Revisted, and has hosted over 150 shows. Exhibitions there are a regular fixture on the arts calendar of a town that doesn't have too many cultural outlets. Sangeeta strives to bring more and better shows from all around the world to Kathmandu, and sometimes even ventures out like she did last month with an exhibition in Janakpur aimed at encouraging local artists. The current exhibition, entitled, *Made in Janakpur: A Mithila Yatra* is a collaboration between the gallery and the Janakpur Municipality, and is a benefit exhibition for the Janakpur Women's Development Centre.



Her next project is called *Art for Peace*, and she says: "Even if you can't change politics, you can contribute as a citizen, always remembering that you are Nepali, first." ♦

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