



Destiny has brought the graduates of a small school in Gorkha together again.

The class of 1970 stands out because its graduates have lived and led Nepal's recent history. The chief ideologue of the Maoist movement, Baburam

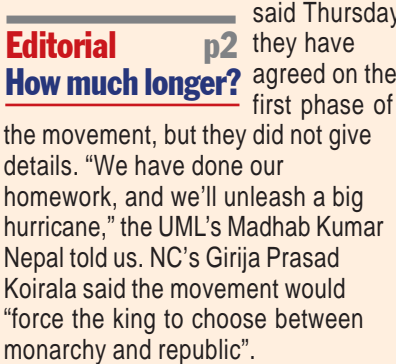
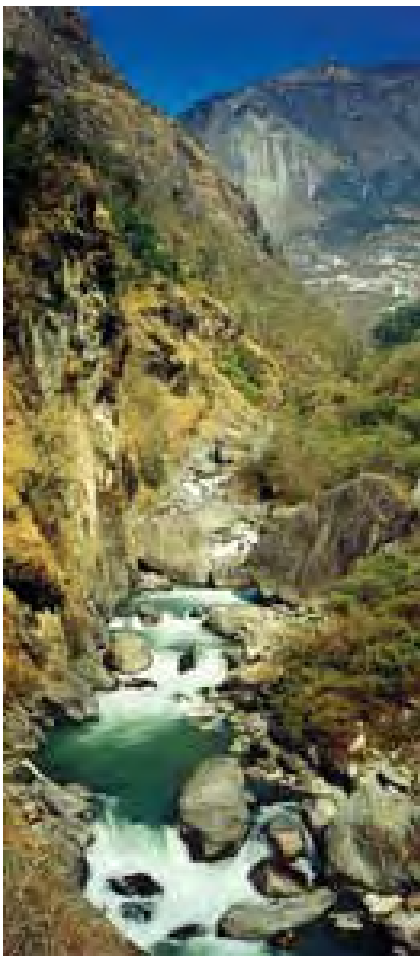
Today, in a dramatic instance of history coming full circle, the two are members of negotiating teams from opposite sides in proposed peace talks to end seven years of conflict.

American investors threaten retaliation if the government doesn't buy excess power from Bhote Kosi.

The NEA says it has not paid Bhoite Kosi for the extra power. "Anything added outside the contract is being deducted," an NEA official said. With an installed capacity of nearly 500 MW in the national grid, the NEA has a surplus of about 30 percent of its power during the monsoon. According to an auditor general report, the NEA incurred a loss of over Rs 1 billion in fiscal 2000-01 buying power from Bhoite Kosi and the other private joint-venture project at Khimti. The NEA pays nearly half its entire revenue to buy power from just these two private sector producers. It shells out nearly double per unit to Khimti and Bhoite Kosi than it pays Butwal Power Corporation, which was recently privatised. ♦

Siddhartha Rana of Himal International Power Corporation, the Nepali partner in Bhote Kosi, told us he had heard about the threats made at the meeting in Washington, but such

The NEA is now coming under pressure from the American shareholders of the Texas-based Panda Energy, one of the two US investors in the scheme, who threatened to use their clout with the





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How much longer?

Let's get this straight. The political parties don't trust the king, and vice versa. The Maoists and the monarchy don't trust each other. The political parties also don't trust the Maoists, but issue broad threats that they will get into bed with them against the monarchy while in the same breath accuse the Maoists and the monarchy of being anti-democratic. Both the Maoists and the monarchy of political parties treat the royal cabinet with contempt. Try to untangle that.

In this rigmarole, the political parties have got their student fronts to close the country down for days on end in a display of Bihar-style political stamina. It's a bit disingenuous for our politicians to refuse to take responsibility for the burning of libraries, museums and books at universities and colleges. Come on, they don't do that even in Darbhanga.

It is an even greater sign of moral bankruptcy to declare a bandh 'successful' just because the populace has been cowed down into shutting up shops by arsonists and window-smashers, to call factories, schools and bus companies to close down, or else. How is this any different to what the Maoists did? Now, every little rump faction can go around the city in a hailer-equipped three wheeler to declare a bandh whose 'success' is preordained.

Is this country genetically programmed to self-destruct? Watching our monarchy descend into anarchy it certainly looks like it. The paradox here is that none of this needs to happen. Things were looking up after the ceasefire was declared. It showed conclusively that there is no military solution to this crisis, and it brought shaky, but genuine, hope among the people about the future.

This can translate into support for a restoration of the democratic process with an all-inclusive interim government to prepare the ground for local and parliamentary elections. On the road to that goal, there has to be an agreement about constitutional changes. So, where is the problem?

The only one we can see is that the various power centres can't agree on who gets powerful portfolios in the interim cabinet and are willing to jeopardise the peace process in order to get plum posts. Even if the main political parties were asked to decide on the composition of an interim cabinet, we all know what will happen: it will look at a pack of hyenas tearing up a kill. The king has seen that this prime minister is not going to deliver, he is looking for a replacement. But will his choice be acceptable to political parties who have declared Peoples' Movement II from 4 May? The names of compromise candidates are being leaked. Surya Bahadur Thapa met the king and immediately air-dashed to New Delhi amidst an officially-inspired flurry of edits about the monarchy in the Indian media.

The ex-chief justice and a constitution framer Bishwanath Upadhyay said this week the political parties are like the river Ganges. "It contains raw sewage and rubbish, yet it is still a holy river." It's true, our political parties are septic tanks and most of their leaders are sleaze bags, but we are stuck with them. And we must believe in the peoples' power to vote out the crooks and bring in a new crop of leaders. We have to reinstate the process that restores the peoples' right to choose their rulers. Otherwise they may want to go directly for constituent assembly elections to decide once and for all what to do with the monarchy.



STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL



Easy come, easy go

Nepalis are condemned to suffer more interesting times.

In the politics of patronage, players rise and fall like ninepins, but the rule of the game always remains the same. The iron rule of any absolute rule is that there are no rules at all. So when two weeks ago, faded comrade Devi Prasad Ojha, jaded business-person Mahesh Lal Pradhan, and the yellowed bureaucrat Dharma Bahadur Thapa were shown the same door through which they had entered the ante-chamber of state power, no tears were shed.

After all, the trio of neo-reactionaries knew what they were getting into when they decided to ride the express bus of Clause 127 to Singha Darbar. By now, even Lokendra Bahadur Chand must have realised that every new dawn brings another portentous day in Baluwar. Sher Bahadur Deuba was thrown out because he had failed to hold parliamentary elections within six months of the dissolution of the Lower House. Chand has been in that hot seat for longer, and he hasn't even tried.

Narayan Singh Pun must be doing some serious thinking as well. From being the one-man team ushering Maoist negotiators around town, the good colonel has been demoted to a mere member. That's a mighty fall for the high-flying helicopter pilot, but Pun is a survivor and knows the controls too well to complain. He is a practical man who offered his services to Girija Prasad Koirala and then to Sher Bahadur Deuba, and then dumped both to join the royal government.

Subtlety is not Koirala's forte, but the force of his argument hit home when it made even a seasoned and superannuated scribe like Ramesh Nath Pandey fumble for

words. All that the government spokesperson could mutter in response was that a showpiece has its uses. Indeed, it does. It allows dummies to pretend that they are for real.

Considering this cabinet's irrelevance, it is astonishing why there is such a rush to get into it. From R K Mainali of the UML to Bijay Gachhedar of the Deuba Congress, all kinds of exhausted personas are getting their labada-suruwals pressed. Since a minister's job in the present context is like that of a day-labour hired to perform designated tasks under a faithful supervisor, what do they seek to achieve by being inducted into this cabinet?

The Chand cabinet was unabashedly 'non-political' from the day it was formed, and it became 'unconstitutional' as soon as four main political parties of the still surviving Upper House raised questions over its legitimacy. After having entered into negotiations with the Maoists to scrap the existing constitution itself, the government has now become amoral as well.

Morality gets a stretch in any armed insurgency, and the political position of Maoist negotiators is getting rather shaky. All circumstantial evidence indicates the vanguard of the rebel force has already entered into some kind of a secret deal with the *ancien regime*. By the time Lenin's 'untutored rabble' realise that they've been had, it will be too late for them to do anything about it. And they will do that with a vengeance.

The people will allow the team of Comrade Baburam Bhattarai to cruise down the Raymajhi Path and then let them join the new corps of Royal Communists. The very thought of a

revolution going to rot is revolting. But reality can't be wished away. Comrade Pushpa Kamal Dahal's statement this week (*see p 12*) has done nothing to allay the public fear that the Maoists are hand-in-glove with the reactionaries.

National politics is brimming with all kinds of anomalies these days. Maoists seem to enjoy almost absolute power with no responsibility, while the emasculated mainstream political parties are expected by society to act responsibly. Meanwhile, the 'government' is merely an instrument of the ruler, lacking legitimate political authority, and thus free from all moral responsibilities.

Whatever be the unintended consequences of stifling democracy, one thing is for sure: the onus of delivering peace doesn't fall either on this government or the political parties. It is the Maoists who are the problem. So no one expects any solutions from them. Under the circumstances, King Gyanendra is solely responsible for everything that has happened in the country after October Fourth simply because he hasn't made any attempt to share political authority with any one else ever since.

Poised between post-insurgency ennui and pre-movement euphoria, the state of the state is drifting amidst the waves. But enduring peace can't be pursued without first restoring democratic order in the country. There is no sanitised short cut to the slow and messy process of mass politics.

It's never too late to correct a mistake, but time and tide doesn't wait for us. Today, the students have taken to the streets. No one can predict who will be at the gates next. ♦

NATION

Maoist manifesto

The Maoists issued a 75-point manifesto just before the breakdown of the last truce in November 2001. In language straight out of 1960s China, and containing seeming contradictions about land appropriation and individual property, the document calls for "nationalisation of the property of bureaucratic capitalists and brokers", "freeing national industries from the shackles of Indian monopoly

reactionaries" and warns that anyone who "played the role of counter-revolutionists...shall be deprived of all political rights for a certain period". All land titles will be "null and void", all forms of prostitution will be banned. The manifesto pledges to close Gurkha recruitment, stop INGO financing, and wants to set up a "South Asian Soviet Federation". An unofficial translation of selected excerpts:

United Revolutionary People's Congress Nepal's Minimum United Policy and Program

CHAPTER 1 Fundamental Policies

1. The principal purpose of the new people's congress is to institutionalise a people's republic. The fundamental tenets of the new people's republic are to end all forms of exploitation by national capitalists, imperialists and expansionists in the leadership, the unity of labour and peasants, and the enforcement of the dominance of people's rule over class enemies...

3. Absolute sovereignty shall be vested in the people and guaranteed by a new constitution comprised of representatives elected through adult franchise by an interim government...

4. All fundamental and political rights of the people such as the right to speech and expression, to elect and be elected, and to own or disown religion, and freedom of movement will be guaranteed. Employment, education and health shall be guaranteed...reactionaries who played the role of counter-revolutionaries and acted against the interest of the nation and the people shall be deprived of all political rights for a certain period...

7. The nation shall entirely be made sovereign, independent, self-dependent by ending all semi-colonial and neo-colonial agreements including of the treaty of 1950, and freeing the nation from loans imposed by imperialists and expansionists. All citizens shall be provided employment opportunities by closing the Gordha Recruitment Centre and running [it] as a national college. The rampant exploitation of imperialists over water resource shall be ended and it shall be used for the common interest of people.

8...An appropriate balance between private, united and joint ownership or the collective ownership by the state of prioritised industries will be maintained...there will be no nationalisation

of individual property, except in accordance with the law...

CHAPTER 2 State System

11. The people's assembly and people's committee's government shall be formed in four tiers: central, autonomous region, autonomous district, and village/municipal level...

12. The people's assembly shall be vested with the supreme legislative and executive power, not the bourgeois parliament. It shall be representative of all groups, castes, people of all areas and representative of the people's military...the people reserve the power to recall their representative if they are dissatisfied with their performance.

13. The national conference or people's congress shall exercise the power of a national people's assembly until such time as the election of a Revolutionary United Front can be held. This election is to be held based on adult franchise where the people's assembly, labour, peasants, the people's military, lower capitalists, national level capitalist, ethnic communities, women and immigrants will be represented...

17. All laws, orders and judicial systems of the old reactionary rule shall be repealed and terminated...

CHAPTER 3 People's Military and People's Security System

22. A united people's military force shall be formed with the participation of the main force, subsidiary local force and militia to dismantle the old reactionaries' rule and to keep the people's rule safe. The supreme commander of the people's military shall be the president of the central committee of the communist party...

CHAPTER 4 Agriculture and Land Reformation

26. The peoples' revolution will have an agrarian revolution as its main goal. It will

end feudal, semi-feudal and bureaucratic means of production and develop a national capitalistic means of production under which land will be distributed to the landless and poor farmers...no expropriation of the land belonging to rich people and absentee landlords shall be made...

32. The help of the local level revolutionary peasants shall be obtained to determine the character of landless, poor, semi-feudal and feudal, to prepare actual land records, and to mobilise the community as a whole...

33. Land expropriated from feudal and capitalist bureaucrats shall be distributed to local farmers without any discrimination and such land will be their private property...

36. Land shall be distributed equally to the representatives of peoples' government as it is distributed to other peasants. A special priority shall be given to the families of martyrs...

37. All documents pertaining to land loans, ownership and transactions shall be declared null and void until land reforms come into force and the people's government issues new land deeds...

38. Cooperatives shall be promoted to increase production, for the maximum utilisation of labour, and to contribute to economic growth...

CHAPTER 5 Industry, Finance and Infrastructure Development

40. There is no possibility of national economic transformation without rapid national industrial development...industrialisation shall be taken ahead with nationalisation of the property of bureaucratic capitalists and brokers, and by freeing national industries from the shackles of Indian monopoly to achieve rapid economic development...

44. The trade in essential items and foreign trade shall be in the hand of state whereas other trade shall be in the hands of the private sector. The monopoly by the

Indians of the trade sector shall be terminated...

46. Exploitation and misery within the country and nation shall be liberated from foreign loans. Financial institutions will be free to carry out lending transactions in rural areas but the interest rate will be controlled...

48. The imperialists' financial intervention caused by ngos and ingos shall be ended...

50. Small-scale hydropower projects will be prioritised as against large projects.

CHAPTER 6 Culture and Education

52. Education shall be made free, compulsory and fair...

54. A special consideration shall be given for the preservation and development of culture and art...priority shall be given to people's military and people's forum for dancing...a ban shall be made on vulgar literature and films.

55. The peoples' right to free speech and expression will be protected. The publication of factual newspapers will be encouraged...

CHAPTER 7 Health and Social Welfare

57. Health services shall be free for all citizens, and the health sector's development shall be emphasised in rural areas...

CHAPTER 8 Questions Relating to Caste and Region

60. All castes and languages will be treated equally...in the new rule problems shall be settled in accordance with the policy of autonomy...which shall have exclusive powers over matters relating to the people's military, foreign relation, finance, communication, international trade and basic industries etc.

61. If there is more than one caste in an autonomous region, there shall be proportional representation of each caste...

62. All marginalised castes shall have a

right to be recruited in the people's military and the militia shall be formed under a command centre for local security...

64. Local level autonomous rule shall be formed in high mountainous regions like Karnali, Seti and Mahakali which are neglected and suffer unbalanced development...

65...The tarai will be a separate autonomous region where languages like Maithali, Bhojpur, Abadhi are spoken and different ethnic groups live. All types of discrimination in the tarai shall be stopped, and the long pending problem of citizenship shall be resolved in a scientific, judicious way.

CHAPTER 9 Women and Family

66. All types of patriarchal exploitation over women shall end, women will have equal rights to men in all areas. Sons and daughters will have equal inheritance rights over ancestral property. All sorts of prostitution including badi, jhuma and the social evils will be stopped. There will be strict punishment for those engaged in the trafficking of women...

CHAPTER 11 Foreign Policy

72. The main thrust of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of Nepal shall be to preserve the nation's freedom and sovereignty and to defend the people's rule, to promote the happiness and prosperity of its citizens, to support national freedom movements against imperialists and expansionists all over the world...

74. A strong relation shall be extended with different revolutionary groups and national freedom movements that are fighting against Indian expansionism, the main external enemy within South Asia. And, an effort shall be made to form a South Asian Soviet Federation with revolution in all countries.

LETTERS

STUDENTS OF HISTORY

Why is it only in Nepal, the most trivial issue engulfs the nation with strikes and protests? (Editorial, 'Time out', #141). The oil price hike was due to the rampant corruption and political interference at the Nepal Oil Corporation by previous UML and NC governments. The student wings of these very political parties are now leading the charge with anti-social activities. Here we have political parties now actively taking part in dismantling the education system by whipping up the students into a frenzy. Parties, leave our kids alone.

them of politics, so our students can get back to their studies. PS: I hope none of these selfish political parties will be included in the peace process. They are the main reason why Nepal is still the poorest country in the world.

Pravesh Saria, Chicago, USA

LOSE-LOSE

Re: Daniel Lak's 'The thunder of hooves', #141. The war in Iraq is, for all practical purposes, over. President Bush is once again riding high in the opinion polls, Secretary Rumsfeld feels vindicated for his stand on sending less troops than his generals recommended, and the American public's anger for 9/11 has at last found a mark to vent itself on. What America has done (and will be doing) in Iraq reminds me of an old Nepali

saying about the witch and the witchdoctor being one and the same person. After having caused all that death and destruction, the US is now poised to begin the task of rebuilding Iraq. It is not difficult to guess who the beneficiaries of this American 'kindness' will be. Not the Iraqi people, that is for sure. US and British companies will no doubt get most of the post-war construction and other repair work of Iraq's damaged infrastructure, all paid for by Iraqi oil, of course. Food for oil before, oil for rebuilding now. And what about the oil itself? Who might get the rights to develop and manage it? Back in America, fresh jobs in the defence industry will be created when the Pentagon orders replenishments for all the missiles and bombs used up

during the war. Win-win situation for one, lose-lose for the other.

SS Pal, Kathmandu

BP KOIRALA

I don't know about your other readers, but I wait avidly for your fortnightly installments from BP Koirala's jail diary. Many of the details may sound mundane (health worries, washing, etc) but what do you expect in the diary of an incarcerated man? The last episode from 24 March ('I have suddenly become a political being', #139) is a fascinating transformation of the man once he is put into solitary confinement. When the going gets tough, the tough get going, and here we see the true greatness of BP as a man. His nationalism, selflessness and belief in democracy and freedom

shine through clearly. I wonder what BP would make of the present day confrontation between his successors in the Nepali Congress and the monarchy. Would he have joined the king in his effort to defuse the insurgency, or would he have tried to corner the king and raise the republican banner? It is clear that BP's brother, niece and his political descendants do not have his vision and experience. They can't see beyond the next corner, and the party badly needs someone of BP's statesmanship and vision. Since Kishunji is still not breaking his vow of silence, maybe someone from the younger generation should speak up for a party that is a sad shadow of its former self.

BP keeps mentioning Shailaja Acharya as the one he trusted to take forward his vision, and we see in the past 12 years that she has conducted herself with integrity and spoken out with boldness even against her own party for its short-sightedness and corruption. Maybe she should make herself heard, and put country before party. And that goes for other young turks in the other parties as well.

Pratap Shah, Biratnagar

CATS

Contrary to what Nanda Rana says in 'Cat Man' (#141) conservation is not simply a management issue or a business. It is an issue intrinsically linked to values, ethics and most importantly, a sense of being a part of nature.

Badri Rai, email

Boys from Gorkha

from p1



CLASSMATES:
(From l to r)
Baburam Bhattarai,
Upendra Devkota
and Krishna
Pokharel pointing
out the bullet holes
in the wall of his
school in Gorkha
where Maoists tried
to kill him two
years ago.



"We were torch-bearers for our generation, extremely competitive," says Devkota before his face darkens with the memory of his classmate. "You don't say one person is better than another just because he got more marks in the SLC 30 years ago."

Bhattarai came Board First and Devkota was Board Second in the 1970 SLC exams. The two have not met since Bhattarai went underground eight years ago. "He's serving the old regime, I'm serving the new regime," Baburam Bhattarai tells us, smiling. "We are in opposite camps." Years ago they were in different camps too: Devkota and his friends from Bohoragan and Bhattarai and his friends from Kaplung were rivals.

Krishna Pokharel was in Baburam Bhattarai's group. "Gradually Baburam and Upendra didn't even want to talk to each other because Baburam wanted to stand first and Upendra was competition." Devkota and Pokharel were leaders of different groups in school, while Bhattarai had his nose in his books and by all accounts was a serious student.

Pokharel recalls: "He (Baburam) was always afraid of the teachers, he wanted to be obedient... he was the most obedient student in the school." Thomas Varughese, who was principal of the school and his wife Mary who taught the boys Math, English and

Science, both agree. "Baburam was extremely disciplined, very sharp and he had a phenomenal memory," recalls Mary Varughese, "Upendra was the more vocal one." But both were eager to learn, and soaked everything in. (See box, p 5.)

The rivalry between the two groups took on a political dimension. The poet and TU lecturer Sita Ram Adhikary was two years senior, and remembers Upendra Devkota's older brother as being attracted to communist ideology. In school, he says it was Devkota who appeared to be more influenced by communism than Bhattarai, and started a student union in school to oppose the authorities. Baburam, reportedly did not join the union. Surprisingly, Bhattarai who had a slight pro-Congress leaning in school went on to become a revolutionary, while the left-leaning Devkota is now a monarchist.

Upendra Devkota also rallied his friends against Christian activities at the missionary school. "Even in grade five, he used to say that it wasn't proper to have to study the bible and go to church," recalls Pokharel. "He called it religious imperialism, but I don't think anybody at that time even knew what 'imperialism' meant. We used to say we were Nepali Congress and we liked BP Koirala just to oppose Upendra."

After leaving school in 1970, the politics became more serious. Both

Upendra Devkota and Baburam Bhattarai were passionate opponents of the Panchayat system, but differences remained. Pokharel, Devkota and Bhattarai went to Amrit Science College, now Amrit Campus. Bhattarai and Pokharel were roommates and remained close friends.

"In this period Devkota was still very interested in communism," Pokharel recalls. "We used to discuss politics every day on the rooftop of the college. He believed that communism was the best political system for the poor." But because communism did not guarantee personal freedom, Pokharel developed an antipathy towards it—a feeling that has lasted to this day. Baburam Bhattarai wasn't particularly attracted by communism even then, but Pokharel says he was resolutely against absolute monarchy.

After college, the school friends went their separate ways. Sita Ram Adhikary returned to Gorkha to work as a teacher. But being a member of the Nepali Congress-affiliated Tarun Dal he was driven out for his anti-Panchayat activities in 1975. Upendra Devkota became a renowned neurosurgeon, studying and working in Britain and Hong Kong before returning to Nepal. Baburam Bhattarai went to Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi to study architecture and did his PhD in urban planning.

Baburam stayed in touch with his friend Krishna Pokharel in Kathmandu, writing letters that described his political journey. He was impressed by his meetings with BP and Girija Koirala, then living in exile in India. "BP Koirala is the most patriotic personality in Nepal," he wrote. "Girija is the most revolutionary personality." Later, at JNU when he heard that BP Koirala had accepted the result of the narrowly-endorsed referendum on the Panchayat system in 1980, Bhattarai became a communist. "I think Marxism is better," Baburam wrote to Pokharel.

Krishna Pokharel disagreed with Baburam, and recalls: "I also wanted to defeat the Panchayat system, but I accepted the result of the referendum." Bhattarai tried to persuade Pokharel to start teaching communism in school, but he refused. Their correspondence then tapered off.

After the 1990 Peoples' Movement, ideological differences were briefly set aside. Baburam Bhattarai's United Left Front formed a pragmatic alliance with the Nepali Congress, but differences quickly re-emerged and this was to have dramatic consequences for the classmates from Gorkha.

While Baburam Bhattarai and his Maoist comrades launched the 'peoples war' in February 1996,

Krishna Pokharel took out a bi-weekly newspaper called *Darundi*. It was strongly critical of the Maoists, and Pokharel wrote an open letter to his classmate and friend: "Our society has invested so much in you and what are you giving back? I have two friends who are doctors now. One is saving people and one is killing them."

Bhattarai responded in the Maoist mouthpiece, *Janadesh*, calling his old friend a government servant and a reactionary, and threatening that the role of the 'peoples war' was to eliminate people like Krishna Pokharel. That threat was nearly carried out: on 24 January 2001 four Maoists armed with revolvers came to the teacher training college in Gorkha where Pokharel was conducting class. They fired three shots, which missed and Pokharel fought them off.

Sita Ram Adhikary was in Gorkha at the time to vote in the general election. "I heard the shots and ran to the school," he recalls. "I advised Krishna to move to Kathmandu. 'When there is a famine, save grain. When there is disorder, save yourself.' Adhikary told Pokharel, quoting a Nepali proverb. Krishna did go to Kathmandu, but within a year was back in Gorkha to carry on teaching."

While Pokharel was in Kathmandu he witnessed the chaos following the royal massacre. He met his old friend, Upendra Devkota who was now a famous neurosurgeon. "We talked about the palace incident, he had treated Crown Prince Dipendra when he was in a coma. He still had strong convictions, but he is a monarchist now."

For his part, Adhikary is pained by the violence of the past seven years. "I hate it," he says simply, "change comes from the mind not from the barrel of a gun." But he also regrets the path his own party has taken. "I remained a kongressi throughout but I am sad about how our leaders have let us down, our party has lost its prestige."

And what about his school friends? "Upendra is the best doctor I know. He cares for his duty. Baburam is a unique personality, very creative, and kind-hearted. But both are ambitious." The batch of 1970 is having a class reunion picnic this weekend in Kathmandu, but Upendra Devkota is not planning to attend. Baburam did not know about the event, but said, "I'll go if they invite me. I'm proud of my school." ♦

History comes full circle

When Thomas Varughese came to Nepal from Kerala to teach in a missionary school at Luitel Bhanjyang in Gorkha, he knew he wanted to raise a generation of well-educated Nepalis who would be dedicated professionals in their fields.

What he didn't realise is that the values he and his wife, Mary, inculcated in the young minds of the children of Gorkha would also turn them into revolutionaries—especially one particular class.

Two of his brightest students—Baburam Bhattarai and Upendra Devkota—went on to stand first and second in the whole country in the 1970 SLC exams and may soon be sitting face to face across the negotiating table to find an end to the Maoist insurgency. What was so special about the Amar Jyoti Janata School in Gorkha that it produced so many brilliant minds?

"I think we tried to teach the children life values, the concepts of honesty, integrity, social justice," explains Thomas. "You embed these values in a person's mind, you nurture the seeds and watch them grow with the individual."

After leaving Gorkha in the early 1970s, Thomas and Mary set up three schools in Kailali. The Maoists' ideological campaign against the country's education system badly affected the Gorkha school as well as those in Kailali. The Maoists closed



Mary and Thomas Varughese.

down two other missionary schools in Gorkha and Thomas' Kailali school was bombed and torched last year, although the Maoist leadership denied responsibility.

The Keralite couple haven't met Baburam for 15 years. Earlier this month Thomas went to the Maoist rally at Tundikhel to listen to his former student's fiery oration but did not meet him face-to-face. "I was impressed," he told us, "it was a good speech and the crowd was with him." In that speech, Baburam took a dig at his former classmate when he said: "The constitution is sick. There is a doctor in the cabinet, but even he won't be able to revive it." That was a reference to health minister Upendra Devkota, who ironically, had said soon after his appointment that the constitution wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

Mary ran into her student

Upendra Devkota at Bir Hospital last year, and remembers that the doctor knelt on the ground to touch her feet. "He took me around the neurosurgery ward, and said 'it was because you taught me honesty and hard work that I can do this.' He looked like a real missionary doctor!"

In interviews, Baburam Bhattarai has paid tribute to his Keralite teachers, saying it was their simplicity, integrity and commitment that laid the foundation of his life. Thomas and Mary are hoping to meet Baburam soon. What is the one question they want to ask him? Thomas says: "I will ask him, Baburam, where do you think you went wrong?" And he even has an answer for his own question, "His goals are good, but the end never justifies the means. Violence begets violence, he is a smart boy, he should learn from history." ♦

DOMESTIC BRIEFS

Blue buses back

The parastatal Sajha public transport company is back on the roads 15 months after being closed down by the Deuba government. A ceremonial run to Pashupati took place this week by one of the Mitsubishi blue buses. Excessive political interference and corruption had forced the closure of the service which operated Kathmandu valley and inter-city routes in Nepal. The government recently appointed Mukunda Raj Satyal as managing director of Sajha for two years. Satyal managed Sajha during the Panchayat years and oversaw the modernisation and expansion of the service with Japanese assistance. The company has a fleet of 72 buses and a modern maintenance centre at its depot in Pulchowk, and Satyal says 50 of the buses can be made operational with repairs within 30 months. "We want to run an efficient and reliable bus service not just within Nepal, but also to serve Indian cities," Satyal told us.

Tibetan refugees jailed

Eighteen Tibetans, including 10 teenagers, caught after crossing the Nangpa La into Nepal were jailed in Kathmandu this week. The Home Ministry said they would be deported back to China. Two six-year olds and a nine-year old who spent the last three days in prison with the other 18 refugees are said to have been handed over to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) officials in Kathmandu on 19 April.

The refugees were jailed because they did not have the money to pay the fines levied by the Immigration Department for illegal entry. There are 27 other Tibetans serving time in Kathmandu jails. The group of 21 refugees from various areas of Tibet had crossed the 19,000ft Nangpa La pass in Solo Khumbu and were on their way to Kathmandu's Tibetan Refugee Reception Center when they were arrested on a public bus by police last week. Since 1989 there has been an informal arrangement between UNHCR and the Nepali government that the refugees will be allowed to transit Nepal to India. Tibetan refugee groups say there is now a trend not

to honour this agreement, to collect fines and deport refugees back to China.

Student shutdowns

Two days of shutdowns on 20 and 23 April were called by student unions and both were 'successful' in bringing the country to a standstill. The student wing allied with the Deuba Congress acted independently of the other seven unions who enforced the 20 April closure simply because their parent party is waging an independent movement. The Big Seven are now planning to grind the country to a halt again on 28 and 29 April.

Kishor Singh Rathor of the Deuba-backed student union says their movement is against the king's "regressive move" of October Fourth and they want the prime minister reinstated. The Girija faction of the Congress and the UML-backed students are all demanding student elections. The newly-surfaced Maoist union wants their colleagues released and a postponement of polls.

"The student demonstrations have now gone beyond educational demands, they have become mouthpieces of their political sponsors," says educationist Man Prasad Wagle. The trouble worsened when an anti-oil price rise demo was fired upon by police in Butwal, killing a student leader. The postponement of student union elections added fuel to the fire. Angry students set ablaze Tribhuban University's press and the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hall.

Vice chancellor Govinda Sharma had assured students that union elections would take place on the scheduled date of 23 April, but a compromise could not be reached on the issue of detained students. Now the students are concentrating on ensuring the next bandh is a 'successful' curtain raiser for their Peoples Movement II to begin on 4 May with a big rally in Kathmandu organised by the big four parties: Nepali Congress, UML, Jana Morcha Nepal and Nepal Workers Peasants Party.

It is clear the parties are now committed to a make or break struggle. The question is, how soon can the palace force a deal with them on an interim government acceptable to everyone?

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HERE AND THERE

Closure is a good thing

by DANIEL LAK



So Washington is declaring 'victory' in Iraq. This is good. Although a battlefield triumph for the hard-body, hi-tech of the invaders was never in doubt, closure is almost always a good thing. And for the people of Iraq and the media, a declaration of victory means it's time to hold the victors to account, to make them repair the damage they wrought and begin to build this new Iraq that they speak of in almost religious tones. Get on with it boys.

Here in Nepal, we watch the opening of something new, a peace process begins. Will it ever know closure? Not that we should fill ourselves with dread at the outset. There is, this time, something different in the air, a sense that the constitutional bargaining table may be the most profitable battlefield for the nation's political forces. You're a royalist? Justify it. You want a republic? Why? What's in it for the people? Make your argument and make it stick. Then take it to the electorate and convince them too. Closure on Nepal's many, many years of arrested development awaits.

Ah yes, and then we come to development, or should I say Development—for which, it seems, there can be no closure. I cannot think of a single, largescale developmental success in the modern age. This excludes—of course—the achievement of various benchmarks set in meeting rooms and seminars by comfortable, educated people who are part of the process, the ruling foxes of the chicken farm, as it were. Notable successes in Nepal include improvements in literacy rates, maternal mortality, availability of basic health services and so on. But rather than closure, each of these benchmarks achieved serve to underline one glaring notion — international developmental practice thrives in the vacuum of local failure.

For the careerist aidocrat, there can be no success for that means that



one no longer has a job. Failure must be maintained, either by the perpetuation of inefficient programs or the constant moving of the goal posts. Got there in literacy? Right, but how's the gender balance. No? You're a failure, you still need us, Nepal.

For the compassionate and competent in the aid community, honesty serves a similar purpose. In the time of any single development worker's period of assignment, no significant progress can be made on any of the pressing issues that they are here to address. And they know it. From water to legal reform, from children's long term security to economic equity, these are matters that take generations to put right, centuries even. And Nepal has barely begun, thanks to many years of cynical oligarchy, misguided authoritarianism and lately, constant foreign patronage, part self-serving, largely inept.

Careerist aidocrats can never be successful, because that means they will be jobless.

Has the development community managed success on a national level in any other country in the world? Let's remember that most poor nations have been receiving aid and guidance from wealthy mentors for decades. In fact, a surf through UNDP and other web sites seem to show many places getting worse, not better. Largely, I suspect, because the aid bureaucrats are cooking the books to keep closure at bay. Who wants to declare themselves out of a job after all? Especially, a lavish, benefit-saturated, largely tax-free job in a wonderful foreign setting with cheap domestic labour and oodles of local gratitude for the wonderful, compassionate job you do.

This is also why the theory of development grows ever more esoteric and impenetrable to the lay person, and especially to the ostensible beneficiaries. Now no one can tell me that the rural folk of Nepal, or the urban poor for that matter, don't know what's wrong in their lives. And they have some damn good ideas on how to set things right, usually involving education, clean water and transparent politics. But the implementation of such simple, common sense ideas might have one dreadful consequence. I can sense the shudders from bilateral and multilateral meeting rooms as I write this.

Closure. We can't have that. ♦

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OPENING DAY STUDIO 7

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SATURDAY	25	26	27
SUNDAY	26	27	28

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Toni's Nepal

KUNDA DIXIT

Toni Hagen knew Nepal inside out. Literally. As a geologist, he put together the first 3-D jigsaw puzzles of stratigraphic cross-sections of the Nepal Himalaya. He took 15 years to trek 14,000 km across the length and breadth of a roadless country, analysing rock outcrops and mapping the orogenics. But the more he studied Nepal, the more Toni Hagen found his interest veering away from rocks to people.

He was looking for mineral treasures that would turn Nepal into a modern developed nation, but he found treasure of a different kind: the Nepalis' capacity for hard work, their fortitude and cheerfulness. As he got to know them up close and personal, Toni Hagen became a lifelong admirer of the Nepali people.

Toni Hagen died on Friday at his home in Lucerne at age 86, one day before he was to fly to Nepal to attend a conference which on 25 April will premier the film *Unleko Nepal* containing the 8mm visuals he shot 40 years ago. The screening will start a conference by the Social Science Baha on the theme, *The Agenda of Transformation: Inclusion in Nepali Democracy*. The subject matter itself is a fitting tribute to a man who never abandoned his belief that this diverse land can only be governed and developed by decentralised planning and grassroots participation through democracy.

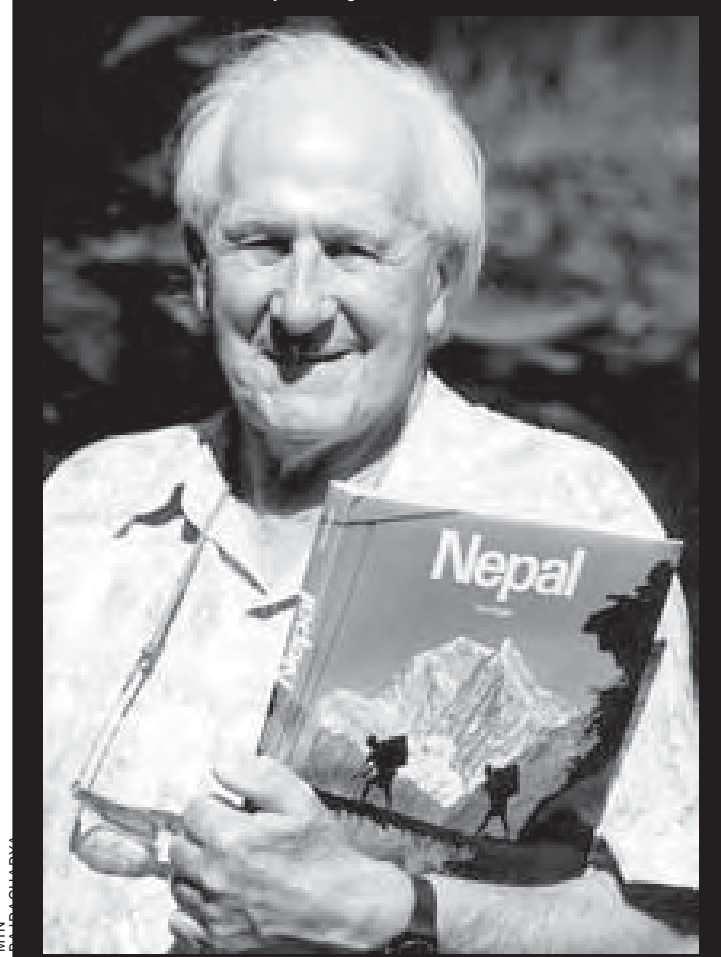
Toni Hagen was a die-hard optimist about Nepal. Many Nepalis are fashionably cynical about their own country, but he was always spreading hope. On a visit in 2000 during the dark days of the insurgency, he predicted that Nepal could come out of the crisis stronger as a nation. When asked why, he replied, "Because I see the younger generation of Nepalis value their freedom, and want to change things."

In the past 50 years, Toni Hagen had unsurpassed access to Nepal's rulers. He knew Mohan Shumshere in 1950 to King Mahendra, BP Koirala, Ganesh Man Singh. In 1981, Toni Hagen met King Birendra in Switzerland and they had a long conversation about development. Finally, King Birendra asked him: "Is it too late for Nepal?" Toni Hagen recalled replying: "No. It's late, but it's never too late."

With his characteristic bluntness, Toni Hagen pushed his conviction that Nepal needed an alternative formula for development. That is why he opposed the Arun III ten years ago in favour of smaller decentralised units. Nepal's present success story with indigenous suspension bridge building was based on his early efforts to help farmers increase income with access to markets. He was a strong advocate for multi-modal transportation with cable cars and cargo-ropeways for the mountains, and thought reliance on motorised transport and highways would be expensive to build and maintain.

Toni Hagen wasn't a utopian Luddite. But he believed in taking one step at a time, mastering one level of technology before moving on to the next. Some of the hydropower projects he first studied (Kulekhani, Kali Gandaki) have now been built. But the cautionary notes he made after studying the possibility of a high dam on the Karnali at Chisapani in the early 1980s are as prescient today as they were then.

Toni Hagen has left us a strong and clear legacy. What he told King Birendra in 1984 when he was awarded the Birendra Alankar Medal for national service was what he told everyone ever since: Nepal needs to be self-sufficient by using local expertise, local financing and technology appropriate for our level of development. "But all this has to start at the grassroots," he told us three years ago. "The people have to participate in shaping their own destiny. No one can dictate to them, and you cannot have democracy through violence and bloodshed." ♦



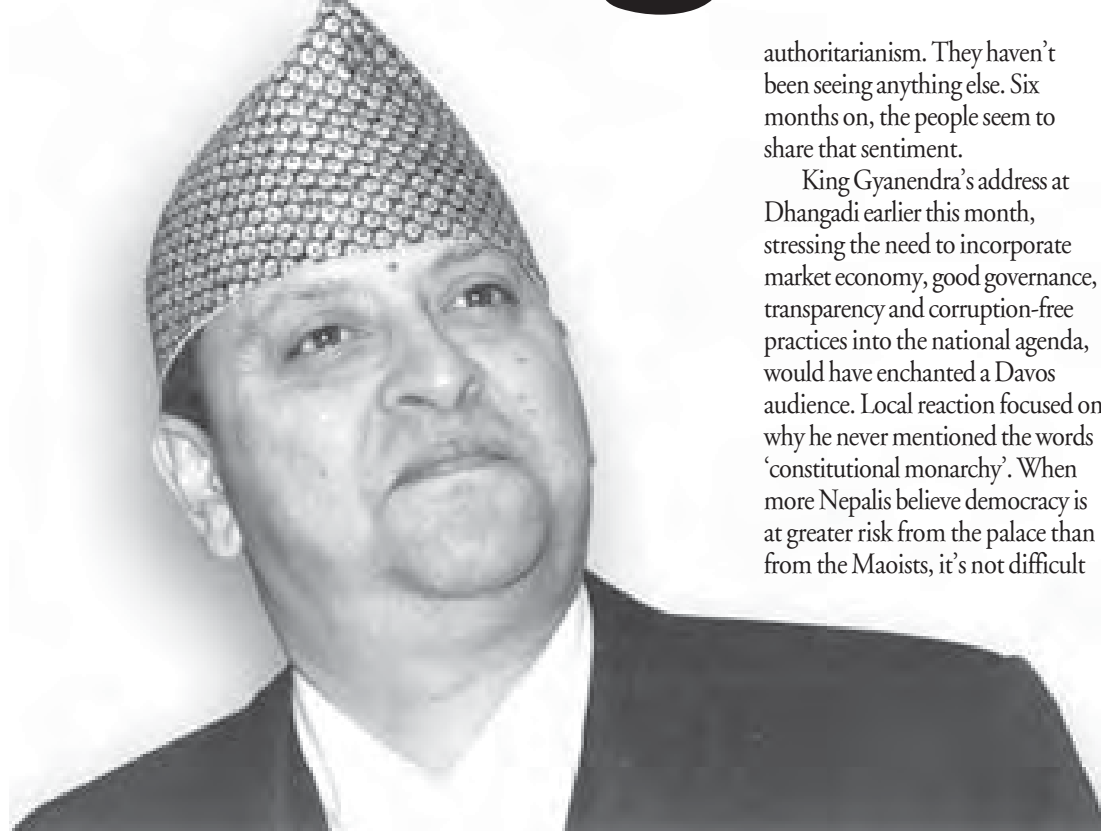
MTN

SOMEWHERE IN NEPAL

by PUSKAR BHUSAL



Kingcraft



When more Nepalis believe democracy is at greater risk from the palace than from the Maoists, it's not difficult to gauge the scale of Narayanhi's PR problem.

Two major public speeches at the eastern and western edges of the country and countless statements reiterating his commitment to multiparty democracy haven't helped King Gyanendra explain why he had to take political centre stage on the night of October Fourth last year.

Critics and supporters of the king's assumption of full executive powers after dismissing the "incompetent" but elected Sher Bahadur Deuba government couldn't help but notice the royal proclamation's uncanny resemblance to the language King Mahendra used in Satra Sal in December 1960. The circumstances that led to his enthronement almost two years ago were tragic enough to provide King Gyanendra a tableau of the challenge he confronted in winning the hearts and minds of Nepalis.

In exercising his constitutional prerogative to be consulted, responsibility to warn and right to

encourage, the monarch concluded that a little more candour with the news media might help. King Gyanendra lost little time in asserting his belief that the personality of the person wearing the crown goes on to define the role the institution plays.

Long before he invoked Articles 27 and 127 of the constitution, King Gyanendra gave clear hints that his patience was wearing thin. Although he lost his job as a royal nominee to the upper house of parliament for offering gratuitous advice, Dipta Prakash Shaha didn't say much as to what the palace subsequently didn't do.

King Gyanendra may have genuinely intended to administer enough shock therapy on squabbling politicians to make them drive democracy and development together. The stunned politicians took a while to make sense of what had happened. Once they did, they saw footprints back to Panchayat-style

authoritarianism. They haven't been seeing anything else. Six months on, the people seem to share that sentiment.

King Gyanendra's address at Dhangadi earlier this month, stressing the need to incorporate market economy, good governance, transparency and corruption-free practices into the national agenda, would have enchanted a Davos audience. Local reaction focused on why he never mentioned the words 'constitutional monarchy'. When more Nepalis believe democracy is at greater risk from the palace than from the Maoists, it's not difficult

century monarchy are shrinking from that task.

The palace has done a poor job of explaining what our leaders have been telling the king all these months. It has been less forthcoming on what the king told the leaders. Bijay Kumar Gachchadar and Jog Mehar Shrestha have managed to convey some of King Gyanendra's concerns. The people don't consider them the most credible messengers. Officially, the only thing we've been hearing is the standard the-crown-created-this-country-so-it-must-save-it-line.

From the public comments and private complaints of people presenting themselves as palace confidants, you can cull variations of the following: for an institution where five consecutive monarchs found themselves prisoners to hereditary premiers for over a century, some misgiving is inevitable. For the palace, it doesn't really matter whether the prime minister draws his strength from a democratic mandate or despotic machinations.

When you count the king as a political force, it's unfair to ask him to play a purely ceremonial role. No head of state should be expected to bear silent witness to the depredations of the political class.

A Hindu monarchy of 22 million people and a monarch of 1 billion Hindus are two separate concepts the Nepali crown has to embody. We have no way of knowing how many of these concerns emanate directly from the crown. The palace stopped issuing politically explicit statements during King Mahendra's reign. If they do reflect King Gyanendra's views, then such concerns are central to the national agenda and would have to be conveyed properly. A candid political debate cannot proceed as long as the mainstream parties pretend they have been extending a favour to the palace by not pressing directly for a constituent assembly and continue to get away with it. ♦

From the outset, the Maoists have explained their incompatibility with the crown through ideological and battlefield ferocity. Conscious of the need to burnish their democratic credentials, the rebels are ready to go along with what the rest of the people think.

What kind of monarchy does the monarch envisage? Those expected to expand on King Gyanendra's vision of a 21st-

ECONOMY

BIZ NEWS

'Unseen Thailand'

Reeling from the SARS scare, Thai Airways has announced a special holiday package for tourism promotion. The deal including a return ticket in economy class, three days, two nights of hotel accommodation and breakfast, and transportation between airport and hotel comes with a price tag of around \$120. 'Unseen Thailand with Thai' was launched 18 April and will last till 30 September. Passengers can choose to begin their journey from Bangkok or from Thailand's 15 domestic destinations. The Thai government has been trying to encourage the Thai people to travel domestically.

Exports down

The slump in tourism is adversely affecting handicraft producers. Exports worth Rs 1.8 billion was exported in the first eight months of the current fiscal year, down 7 percent from the same period last year. The Handicraft Association of Nepal said demand for Nepali handicrafts has decreased significantly from the United States, Japan, Britain and Germany—all major importers. When there are fewer tourists, it is natural for the handicraft industry to take a beating, handicraft producers and exporters say. Pashmina exports declined by 28 percent in the last eight months. Nepal's exportable handicraft include pashmina, woollen goods, silver jewellery, metal craft, handmade paper, silk products, garments, dhaka products, woodcrafts, thangka and ceramics.

Fewer workers leaving

The number of Nepali workers leaving for foreign employment declined by 3.5 percent in the first nine months of this year. The latest data from the Department

of Labour and Employment Promotion shows the number of Nepalis seeking foreign jobs decreased to 75,000 from 77,000 in the corresponding period last year. Malaysia and the Persian Gulf saw the largest drop of 25 percent. "It is an accumulated effect of war in the Gulf, the month-long government ban on travelling to Kuwait, difficulties in obtaining passport, a global economic recession and the recent ceasefire that has made young men feel safer at home," says sociologist Ganesh Gurung, who is studying Nepal's labour outflow trend.

Fire safety

Hitco has begun selling three modular fire extinguisher types in the kingdom. Produced by the Indian firm Steel Age, the equipment is available in three packs of two, five and 10 kg each. The company says the extinguishers are automatic and reduces damage caused by fires. Their products grace many venues ranging from the royal palace to offices, homes and hospitals.



Juicy stuff

With 28 sweet Himalayan mandarins to a bottle of Rasilo, the newest beverage on the market is a homegrown solution to help farmers get direct access to the market and consumers to sample an alternative that is not carbonated, is natural and manufactured with high quality controls. The fruit are transported from the hills to a central processing facility in the tarai and then distributed throughout the kingdom. Rasilo is available in half-litre and 200 ml sizes.

STRICTLY BUSINESS

by ASHUTOSH TIWARI

HAN's controlling hand



Last week, for a half-day workshop on venture capital, a colleague tried to book a hall at one of the five-star hotels in Kathmandu. To get the best rates, he made a few calls, only to discover that all the five hotels quoted the exact same price. Surprised, he probed further and found out hotels were following a directive, recently issued by their trade group—the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN). The HAN, mind you, looks after the interests of the local Nepali owners and partners as opposed to those of the professional managers of Kathmandu's top-tier hotels. And thanks to the political and the financial clout it carries, the HAN has historically enjoyed the kind of price-fixing prerogatives that OPEC members might envy.

Still, HAN's one-price-fits-all directive struck me odd for two reasons. On one hand, thanks in part to the January ceasefire agreement between the government and the Maoists rebels, Kathmandu's newspapers now report that room bookings, even at five-star hotels, are up. On the other hand, just as more tourists are reportedly coming in, Nepali consumers, who brought the hotels good business in the lean years, are being slapped with astronomical fixed prices for halls and banquets. Has the HAN already forgotten how the slump years really played out?

Flashback: Kathmandu's hotel professionals look back and agree that 1997 was the last banner year in their industry. Bookings were up. Preparations were underway for the then Visit Nepal Year 1998. Hotels sprang up. Multilingual seasoned

tourist guides could command up to Rs 50,000 a month. The sky was the limit till things started sliding after an Indian Airlines flight was hijacked from Kathmandu in late 1999.

As global media played up news about the violence in the hilly hinterland, international guests decided to vacation elsewhere, while the infamous "Ritik Roshan Kanda-2000"—which allowed attacks against

Once the managers realised that these hitherto under-served customers could, to a large extent, compensate for the slump in the tourist market, they became bold and creative on their own, and went on to woo and pamper. As a result, they brought in entertainers as diverse as French Can Can dancers and lissome satellite-TV VJs to Kathmandu, and sold profitable

dinners to thousands of Nepalis at obscenely high prices. During the same period, new restaurants that were not members of any restrictive trade-association did roaring business too. Thamel's Himalayan Java, for instance, is always crowded with Nepali customers who appear willing to shell out Rs 100 for a cup of coffee.

Bad decision: Now with its directive, the HAN clings to narrow-minded views even though the profiles of its

paying customers have changed. And so, instead of trusting the judgement of its professional managers, it has forced a monolithic stance that negates the diverse offerings that Kathmandu's five-star hotels offer. Moreover, it has robbed the Nepali customers their right to choose among hotels based on various factors, price not least among the considerations.

The sooner the HAN takes its hand out of the business of fixing prices for its members, thereby controlling even the portion of the pie per member, the sooner it can learn to adapt to the market's invisible hand to increase the size of the total pie for all its members. ♦

dark-skinned Nepalis on the streets—threw cold water on Indian visitors' desire to come to Nepal. The year 2001 was the annus horribilis which with the royal massacre, the imposition of the state of emergency and the war in the hills, while 2002 wound down as the bloodiest year in Nepal's history. Given all this, it is a wonder that our five-star hotels have not gone out of business altogether.

Nepali customers: Professional managers, sans HAN guidance, found a new set of customers right under their noses but had been ignored. These local customers paid in rupees and they paid well, hiring posh rooms and halls for banquets, parties and Friday evening dances.

that. Due credit should be given to film-makers as well, they are taking risks.

Do you personally feel films have a societal role besides just being a box office hit?

We have about 200 film companies here and many of them close down after producing one feature. Not a lot of banner repeat. Everyone wants to come up with something different. But they are hesitant, because there are no rewards yet for breaking away from the pack. So, we have to encourage film-makers who bring out non-formula films like Balidaan, Prem Pinda, Basanti, Seema Rekha, among others. Let's face it, films shape society in a very evolutionary process. What you hear and see in movies have a psychological impact. But our films do not reflect the reality of society so much. They are fantasies and fulfil an escapist role.

Will the viewers market shift from big screen to small screen like what has happened in India?

That will happen in Nepal also. It is in fact already happening. The first telefilm we did for Nepal Television cost Rs 3,000. It took a lot of effort to convince the producer and big name actors from stage to do that telefilm. But within two years, there were 500 people wanted to make telefilms. With the impact of Hindi teleserials have in our society, the trend will come here too. That in turn will impact on the celluloid industry.

How is politics in moviedom?

On major issues, we are not divided, we are united. The film industry is one of the most united sectors in Nepal. But on individual issues there may be some personal differences. But these should not cloud the national agenda.

What next for you?

I am performing a major role, one of the best in my career, for the film Jeeva Rekha. It's almost complete. I have taken an assignment for another film Shreeman Shreemati. Then I will start producing Seto Bagh, the 105-episode mega teleseries for Nepal Television. That was an old commitment. We have already signed the contract with NTV, there will be more than 60 characters. I will have to be extra careful on this one.

INTERVIEW

"No rewards for breaking away from the pack."



Neer Shah is Nepali filmdom's towering personality. After helping establish Nepal Television in 1984, he started acting, directing and producing movies. He started his own cable television network, and will soon be launching his own private television channel, Shangrila Channel.

How badly is the slump in Kollywood affecting you?

It's not too bad. It could be better, though. Last year was very bad because of the emergency and political instability. People had stopped going to movie halls and, night shows were closed. For our part, we also didn't make too many good films. I'd say last year was one of the worst years for the film industry.

What is the post-ceasefire experience?

It's much easier for films to be released. Distributors can send prints to wherever they like. There is free movement for film-shootings. Moreover, people are not too scared to come to the cinemas. Sales have picked up, and there is a new kind of confidence in the film industry now.

Why have Nepali film-makers gone purposely downmarket?

The working class is a market, it has no alternative forms of entertainment. So, our fellow producers might have thought we are catering to their needs and borrowed the Bollywood formula. Front-benchers make the initial collection very strong, but in the long run it leaves no impact. So, if we provide a different taste then even frontbenchers will go and watch upmarket films. It doesn't have to be based on the same formula all the time. There used to be a phase when we replaced up to 70 percent of imported films with local production. That phase is now over, so we have to start turning our attention to a different more sophisticated crowd.

Do these quality producers exist, or are they in the making?

We have to maintain a minimum standard of filmmaking, otherwise we can't compete with imported films. They [Bollywood] have started making films in advanced formats like digital sound, ciemascope and the like. Lots of state of the art equipment are being used because Europe and the US have also become a big market. Here, if we keep on making the same films we were making 20 years ago, we will be nowhere. There are already signs that Hindi films are doing better. We have to go for higher budget films with better technical format.

Can Nepali films displace imported movies, or do you need government help?

Our national film industry does get some tax breaks. But it is not just

The ABC of trekking

ARUNI JOHN with photographs by ANIL SHRESTHA

Have a long weekend to spare? Sick of the city? Bands getting you down? Then the Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) trek is the big break you are looking for. You can do it in a week, but it may be advisable to budget about 10 days for the roundtrip to the sanctuary since spring is avalanche season, and there may be detours.

Unlike other treks, you see mountains from the moment you

start walking and the view never goes away. This makes the ABC trek's reward-to-pain ratio extremely high. The first day is a gruelling, relentlessly steep climb from Naya Pul (trek start point near Pokhara) to the Ghandruk Guest House, the highest point within Ghandruk, perched on a ridge with glorious views of Annapurna South and Hiunchuli.

Lace-thin pancakes with honey, and mashed potatoes with lemon

give you a much-needed energy boost the second morning, as you plunge down to the Modi Khola river basin and struggle up to Chhomrong at 2,060m. This is the great Himalayan rollercoaster, also known as Newton's Fourth Law of Trekking: Every step downhill must be followed by an equal and opposite step uphill.

Mountain View Lodge, just before the popular Captain's Lodge has a fantastic set of triple rooms

The Annapurna Base Camp is the wildest short trek in Nepal. A perfect bandh-getaway.

designed like a solarium with 180 degree views of Annapurna South, Hiunchuli and Machapuchre. After hot showers, you relax on the terrace with cans of beer and mouthwatering chili potatoes, looking directly down at the valley you will be trekking through in the coming days.

Another great bonus of this trek is that it shows you exactly where you're going, unlike other treks that tend to be linear or circuitous, this one simply weaves through the green hills in front of you. There is the incredible hulk of Annapurna South Face, and you think that the night after next, you will actually be at its base. And there is the ever-present forked spire of Machapuchre that looks completely different from the standard postcard view from Pokhara.

Chhomrong to Himalayan Hotel is another long day, with a lunch stop at Bamboo's German Bakery, which boasts a fat cat, coffee and cinnamon rolls. You walk through dense rhododendron forest and strands of bamboo most of the day, where the trail clings to the side of a steep flank of Hiunchuli. Himalayan Hotel at 2,900m is a place deep in the shadows of a narrow ravine, with no mountain views, and just a couple of hotels. This is Gurung country and the villagers love to serenade

and dance in the evenings by the light of the moon.

You get up early the next morning to get some sun and see the glaciers on Machapuchre's western side. After the initial burst of energy, your progress will slow since the day's total height gain will be over 1,200m. Some trekkers break this down into two days, especially if they are feeling the altitude. You make a brief stopover at Deurali where you fortify yourself with hot lemon drinks and garlic noodle soup, before braving the avalanche-prone stretch of the trail that lies ahead.

There is a small shrine to an Australian family killed by an avalanche here two years ago. The porters had worried looks, and you don't feel like lingering in this gully that funnels everything that falls off Annapurna South to the valley below. The avalanches come without warning, and there is an eerie emptiness to this part of the trail, broken only by the thudding noise of a trekker from New Zealand travelling through the trail at breakneck speed. In answer to astonished looks, the long distance runner who trains regularly in the mountains at home, says he is 'running' up to ABC instead of just walking.

At 3,700m on Machapuchre Base Camp (MBC) there is

mountain goat curry and dal-bhat. You are now above the treeline and plod up the barren moor-like landscape, walking along an icy river up to ABC. This last part of the day is less than 400m gain in altitude, but being over 4,000m now begins to make each step a bit of an effort.

All the while, the magnificent vertical wall of Annapurna I looms over the northern horizon. By around four in the afternoon you finally clamber wearily up to a small cluster of lodges and make your way to Paradise Lodge. You look at the ring of jagged ice peaks of the sanctuary over a hot cup of tea and realise that it was all worth it.

This is often said, but we must say it again: there really is no mountain view quite like this. One feels an amazing sense of being within, rather than looking at—this really is the very heart of the mountains, and you feel like a trespasser who has come too far. Looking back towards the mouth of the ravine to the south at the silhouette of Machapuchre, Annapurna III and the beautifully

smooth flanks of Gangapurna, it is strange to see Annapurna South, that familiar mountain that accompanies you from the very beginning of the trek, from behind.

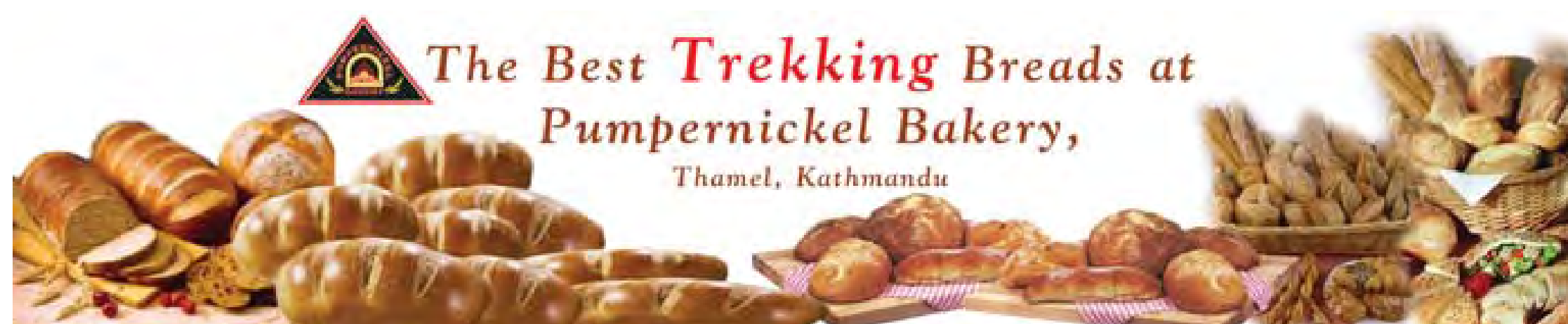
After glorious sunset view photographs are taken, the temperature drops immediately to around minus 4 degree Celsius. Morning brings an almost other-worldly stillness and beauty as you stand on the edge of a glacier looking around at the panorama of peaks. Tent Peak, Fang and Roc Noir are interesting, but all else is dwarfed by the magnificent Annapurna I and the north face of Annapurna South. We relaxed till about 11, breakfasting on pancake after pancake until sadly, it was time to go. Leaving ABC is difficult because it is virtually impossible not to keep turning one's head for one last look at this incredible place.

Back down to Himalaya for the night, and then up the dreaded climb to Chomrong, which passes quickly in anticipation of the best hot shower in the region. Depending on how eager you are to return to bandh-bound Kathmandu, you can manage Chomrong to Pokhara in a day, taking an alternative route past Jhinu Danda hot springs straight down the Modi Khola and back to Naya Pul. If you have a week, grab your backpack and a good sleeping bag—and just do it. ♦

(Aruni John is a Sri Lankan working in Kathmandu, and Anil Shrestha is a media manager whose hobby is photography.)



Clockwise, starting with big picture: Machapuchre from Chomrong, the great south wall of Annapurna I from base camp, Chomrong's garden restaurant, Ghandruk's scenic lodges, the blue hotels at ABC.



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Park Village Hotel & Resort

Dear Karno,

18 April 2003

..... on Tuesday we journeyed out to the Park Village Resort where we were wonderfully looked after by Sunil. The Hoggans left that evening on the RNAC Shanghai flight and being at the Park Resort was a super way to conclude their exciting Kathmandu visit!

The next morning I was able to log some 25 species of birds in, near, or over the Park Village grounds - but no sign of the Golden Oriole or the Paradise Flycatcher. However, the Bottlebrush flowers attracted a host of Gray-headed Mynas and others, to make the presence of birds, with their sounds, a compelling part of the ambience of the Resort. Congratulations on your vision for this property!

Bob Fleming
(Author, Birds of Nepal)

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Balancing act

BUDAPEST— After having firmly sided with Washington on the Iraq war—much to the chagrin of Europe's major nations—the government in Budapest is now at pains to have more balanced relations with both the US and the European Union. This was made clear in a statement issued this week by Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy jointly with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson.

The new tone in Hungary's foreign policy came several weeks after it had joined seven other European countries and signed a letter supporting US military plans in Iraq. The 'letter of the eight' provoked an attack from French President Jacques Chirac, who said that the central and eastern European EU candidates were "reckless, infantile and dangerous" when supporting the US on Iraq.

Hungary opted not to be directly involved in any ground operations in the war but allowed US forces to use the military base in Taszár, southwest Hungary, for the training of Iraqi refugees to participate in civilian action in Iraq and help the country's rebuilding as mediators, translators and guides. In addition to the current efforts to redraw its relations with the EU, Hungary is also eyeing rebuilding opportunities in Iraq. (IPS)

Water divides

JERUSALEM— Although shortages and poor quality of water are common throughout the Palestinian territories, the tensions with Israel run highest in the West Bank where the region's two main reservoirs are located. Since 2000, Ariel Sharon's government has been building a wall, ostensibly to ensure greater security for Israel from attacks by radical Palestinian groups.

But Palestinian sources say the best farmland and water sources are on the Israeli side of the wall. Under the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, Israel must provide 70 to 80 million cubic meters of water annually to the Palestinian population for immediate necessities. Of the 2.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank, nearly 200,000 do not have household potable water services and



are supplied by water tanks. Meanwhile the 6.7 million Israelis consume at least three times as much water as the Palestinians. There are those who believe that with rational management, water could also contribute to unity. Now the political divide over water could narrow with water management and distribution in the Palestinian areas shifting to five public, non-profit entities, run by a private international company chosen through a bidding process. (IPS)

OPINION

The death of death

On television screens we watch a deathless war, but in the midst of life we are surrounded by death.



Once again killing on a great scale has been taking place, this time in a land in which Paradise is said to have once lay—the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Today's killing is no worse than history's countless massacres, perhaps even more restrained. Some suggest that it was necessary to forestall future killings. In any case, it is the sad, solitary privilege of human beings to kill our own consciously, as

well as to commit suicide.

This is so, we can rightfully assume, because human beings are the only beings that comprehend death—that of others as well as our own. We all know that we will die one day. "You are one being among many! Only you hang on to Beauty/And know: you must part," wrote the poet Reiner Kunze. This knowledge penetrates every moment of our lives. *Media in vita in morte sumus*—in the

midst of life, we are surrounded by death—went a medieval song. Heidegger made the knowledge of death key to the understanding of what it means to live.

Death isolates every individual, because there is no such thing as collective dying. Everyone dies alone. Those who realise this are thus tempted to deny any meaning to human conduct; everything, it seems, is futile in the end, because in dying we leave society and society

leaves us. On the other hand, only the knowledge of our mortality provides our existence with its preciousness. If we did not die, everything would lose meaning. Everything we do today, we could do tomorrow.

At a golden wedding anniversary one may wish that, now, everything should really start in earnest. But endlessly? That would immediately ruin everything. Knowledge of the end opens up dimension of meaning, which also makes it possible for some things to be meaningless.

"You hang on to beauty..."—this is the other characteristic that Kunze's poem ascribes to humanity. The experience of beauty is closely related to knowledge of death. Beauty does not derive its meaning from its value for our biological survival or its use for other people, who must also die. What we call beautiful has meaning in itself. It can be human gestures and actions, even when they are futile or squandered on the wrong people. Beauty is resistant to the hubbub of the absurd. For religious believers, as earlier with Plato, beauty is a foretaste of what survives death.

How does society deal with dying and death? With death one ceases to be a member of society. A state can threaten death, but, as many totalitarian regimes have learned, no one is stronger—and possibly more dangerous—than those who have overcome the fear

of death. The threat of death is a powerful weapon. To have to deliver on that threat is always a defeat.

The ritualised culture of death and funerals in the old European tradition was an experience in which society was aware of its limits. By embedding death in rituals, society made its self-questioning into a part of itself. This attitude has a necessary religious dimension—and one that legitimized society. By acknowledging itself as finite and limited, society could think of itself as also sanctioned by God.

Belief in immortality made the opposition between life and death relative. Mortals see death as the gateway to true life, much as a caterpillar might look at a butterfly. As the words inscribed on an execution sword in Munster put it: "When I raise this sword, I wish the poor sinner eternal life."

Our atheist modern age understands the contrast between life and death as absolute. We search for some palliatives, but they are ineffective. "My life continues in the lives of my children," we say, but for an individual this is an empty phrase. We doggedly fight to prolong life, only to find that we cannot win this battle—and are left unable to produce authentic rituals to accompany the end of our existence.

Because our societies have no sense of limits, they strive to eliminate death from our consciousness. More and more often, death takes place in a hidden hospital room. Death is suppressed socially, but the effect is that

individuals' fear of death grows ever greater. Most people nowadays face death never having witnessed the death of someone else!

Next comes a desire to eliminate quietly those who can no longer be seen as members of the social world. Holland, with its euthanasia law, is not internationally condemned; indeed, its killer-doctors see themselves as avant-garde. Suddenly, such killings can't go fast enough. Definition of death as 'brain death' allows one to declare breathing beings dead and to eliminate the process of dying, in order to exploit the dying as warehouses of spare parts for the living. Death no longer comes at the end of the process of dying, but—by decree of a Harvard commission—at the beginning.

The Judeo-Christian custom of burial is rapidly being replaced not by the ritual of an Indian pyre, but by a crematorium, ie, the destruction of a corpse by means of high-temperature machines, a procedure from which the public is excluded. More and more people believe that they are doing their children a favor by letting themselves be buried anonymously "under the green grass" to spare them the costs of the funeral and the upkeep of the grave. The oldest distinction of *homo sapiens*—ritual burial of the dead—is disappearing. ♦ (© Project Syndicate)

(Robert Spaemann is a leading Roman Catholic philosopher and is Professor of philosophy at the University of Munich and the University of Salzburg.)



by ROBERT SPAEMANN

Generals still rule Burma's political labyrinth

LARRY JAGAN in RANGOON

For months now there has been no movement in Burma's fragile dialogue process between the military junta and the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Though they have been in secret contact with her for more than two years—and released her from house arrest in May 2002—the generals have resisted growing international pressure to implement political reform. Repeated visits by UN special envoy Razali Ismail, who brokered the original dialogue between the two sides, have not been able to break the deadlock. Over the past 10 months, few journalists have been allowed into Burma to see the situation for themselves.

But in an interview with Inter Press Service at the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters in Rangoon this week, she said: "If somebody is really asleep it's easier to wake them up. It's very, very difficult to wake somebody up who is pretending to be asleep."

Hopes are now being pinned on the forthcoming visit of Razali Ismail, who has been pressing the regime to allow him to return to Rangoon to restart the stalled talks. Hopes were raised a year ago that a new era of serious political talks were about to start when Razali convinced the military regime to release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. But the expected direct negotiations between the two sides on Burma's political future never got underway.

That public expectation and renewed optimism have given way over the last 12 months to frustration and impatience. "We are doomed to poverty and repression," said Win Tin, who runs a market stall here. Most people clearly see the country's top generals, especially senior Gen Than Shwe, as the ones to blame for the current failure of the dialogue process, but some also feel that Aung San Suu Kyi is also at fault. "Daw Suu has let us down," said a young woman in Rangoon who did not want to be identified, "she hasn't really told us what to do to make change happen". But the dialogue process has produced some results.

The secret talks have led to the release of political prisoners. Some 600 have been released since the dialogue process started more than two years ago. International human rights groups estimate that there are still more than 1,200 political prisoners in Burma's jails. In the past five months, only a handful of political activists have been freed. "The lack of releases is directly tied to the state of the dialogue process," said the UN rapporteur on human rights in Burma, Paulo Pinheiro.

Burma defends its policy by citing security concerns. "In order to maintain security, we have to be very careful in how we release certain prisoners," the government spokesman, Col Hla Min, said in an IPS interview. "But that does not mean that we won't release any more. We will. But we also have to make sure that the country's security and peace is maintained, so we have to do it gradually. Once we are confident that



security and stability will not be disturbed, then we can go on releasing prisoners."

The current failure of the dialogue process is making many countries in the West, particularly the United States and Europe, consider adopting tougher sanctions, to force the generals to keep their promises to introduce political reform. This is something Burma's leaders reject.

"There should be no question whatever about our commitment towards this process of national reconciliation," said Burma's deputy foreign minister Khin Maung Win. "The reconciliation process is very important. We are in a process of transition to a democratic system because we want our country to be developed and modernised."

But since Aung San Suu Kyi was released in May last year, there has been little effort by Burma's top generals to talk to the opposition leader. "I see it very simply," said Aung San Suu Kyi, "the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council, as the military government is called) is just not ready to talk. We've been trying to get the to the negotiating table for fourteen years but they have never been keen on the idea."

"We are in opposition to each other at the moment but we should work together for the sake of the country and we certainly bear no grudges against them. We are not out for vengeance. We want to reach the kind of settlement which will be beneficial to everybody, including the members of the military," she added.

The top generals just cannot seem to bring themselves to meet Aung San Suu Kyi personally and prefer to delay the day when the army has to acknowledge she has a crucial and central role in Burma's political future. ♦ (IPS)

Japan walks tight-rope

TOKYO— Japan continues to walk a slippery political tightrope, this time in balancing its traditional support for the UN and multilateralism and the strategic value it puts on having Washington's backing during these tense times in the Korean peninsula.

Tokyo found itself in a tight spot just before the US-led invasion, caught between its long-time security ties with the United States and pacifist calls at home. Now, in the wake of the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, it is busy trying to find middle ground between sticking by the UN against openly supporting US plans for running post-Saddam Iraq—plans that have been criticised for its insensitivity to Middle Eastern realities.

This is all happening against the backdrop of a Japan worried by neighbouring North Korea's bellicose statements about US 'threats' against it and warnings that it will fight back if Washington treats it like another Iraq, despite the latest reports that Pyongyang may now be open to multilateral talks on its nuclear program.

"The dilemma in a nutshell," said political analyst Kichiya Kobayashi, "is trying to keep Washington happy to defend Japan from North Korea, and at the same time supporting the United Nations so as to prevent such an attack." (IPS)

China comes to terms with SARS

BEIJING— SARS has brought to public attention one carefully concealed failure of China's development over the past two decades—the regression of its rural health care, largely overshadowed by the country's remarkable economic achievements.

Hundreds of millions of peasants in the Chinese countryside have been left without even basic preventive care which they had during the old days of socialism. After the government withdrew from the role of being the free provider of medical services in the early 1980s, when its market-opening measures were stepped up, the worst affected by this shift have been public health services—preventive care, disease surveillance and medical control.

In rural China, the collapse of public health care has been a disaster waiting to happen, say health

experts. The current health crisis might well turn out to be a time bomb that would inflame dormant social tensions in the long-neglected countryside.

A visiting team of World Health Organisation (WHO) experts that did their investigations in Guangdong, southern China, where the first case emerged in November, reported that it had "found an urgent need to improve surveillance in the countryside to head off new outbreaks in rural areas."

"The team observed that many of China's poorer provinces may not have adequate resources, facilities, an equipment to cope with outbreaks of SARS, and underscored that Guangdong's capacity was (actually) exceptional among China's provinces," the report said. (IPS)

India hopes for Iraq contracts

NEW DELHI— India may have passed a resolution in parliament condemning the US-led invasion of Iraq, but it still hopes to recover \$2 billion worth of debt owed by the Saddam Hussein government—and even bag a few reconstruction subcontracts.

Before launching the war in March, Washington canvassed India's support for the war on Iraq, offering in return "fundamental roles" in the physical reconstruction of Iraq as well as in the task of constructing a civil society there. US Ambassador in India Robert Blackwill even harped on India's long-term ties with Iraq, which he said he was confident would make this country welcome in a situation where "not every country will be welcomed".

But India's outspoken Defence Minister George Fernandes has criticised reconstruction activity as a "feast for vultures" and said the destruction could have been avoided in the first place. On Monday, Blackwill, considered to be a close personal friend of US President George W Bush, suddenly resigned giving rise to speculation that his efforts at getting India to back Washington's war on Iraq have not been particularly successful.

Officially, India, which seeks Washington's support in containing "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir by militant groups operating from neighbouring Pakistan, has taken care to tone down its disapproval of regime change in Iraq effected through military force. (IPS)

Talks on hold

COLOMBO— A sudden decision by the Tamil Tigers of Liberation Eelam (LTTE) to suspend its participation in the seven-month old peace talks with the Sri Lankan government came as no surprise to political commentators here, who believe it is an arm-twisting exercise by the rebels.

In a letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Tamil Tiger chief negotiator Anton Balasingham said they decided to suspend participation in the peace negotiations. "We will not be attending the donor conference in Japan in June. While we regret that we were compelled to make this painful decision, we wish to reiterate our commitment to seek a negotiated political solution to the ethnic question," Balasingham said, referring to the Tigers' nearly two decade-old quest for a separate homeland for the country's minority Tamils. Balasingham also said the government had failed to implement parts of the ceasefire agreement, like moving out government military camps from civilian areas and non-military buildings and freeing hitherto civilian areas now dominated by military camps to allow the return of displaced people.



Let's shake on it: Anton Balasingham (r) and GL Peiris (l)

The LTTE pull out of negotiations with the Sri Lankan government.

As a result of this move, the 29 April round of talks in Thailand has been postponed. The rebels' suspension of the talks was triggered by its exclusion from a 14 April conference of donor countries held in Washington, jointly organised by the US State Department and the Sri Lankan government. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said the LTTE was not invited to the Washington meeting because it remains on the list of banned terrorist groups in the United States. The last time a similar donor meeting was held in Oslo in November 2002, the LTTE was a key participant and Armitage was present at that meeting.

Jehan Perera, a respected political commentator and a director at the National Peace Council (NPC), a private foreign-funded peace promoter, said he believed the success of the Washington summit had worried the rebels, who fear they are being marginalised internationally while Colombo's hand is being strengthened. Other commentators said the LTTE move could be a diversionary tactic from last week's clashes between Tamils and Muslims in the eastern town of Muttur. Some also believe this to be another ploy to force the government to recognise the Sea Tigers, a naval arm of the rebels, and allow it undisturbed access in the northern and eastern seas, in an effort to avoid clashes with Sri Lankan navy ships.

Bernard Goonatilleke, head of the government's peace secretariat, said that they were not unduly worried about the Tigers move and that it was most unlikely that the group would pull out completely from the peace process. ♦ (IPS)

Holy cows of Indian politics



RANJIT DEVRAJ in NEW DELHI

Secular-minded politicians in India are discovering that keeping cows off busy roads in this majority-Hindu country is as impossible a task as keeping the sacred bovines from straying into politics at critical moments.

With provincial elections to three major states slated this year the ruling

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has decided to rope in the cow by introducing a bill in parliament aimed at completely banning its slaughter across the length and breadth of this vast and diverse country of more than 1 billion people.

Laying out the 'guiding principles' to India's 1950 constitution, the founding fathers sought to protect the cow, its progeny and other cattle used in agriculture

but, left the actual decision to individual state governments. The uneasiness of the elders was apparent in their attempt to dilute the cow's importance by pledging to 'organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines' with 'steps for preserving and improving the breeds and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milk and draught cattle.'

But it is the attempt to pass

Again, the sacred bovine strays into the political arena.

central legislation on a federal subject that has got the goat of politicians from the political parties that are professedly secular, mainly the opposition Congress and the Left Front, which rules West Bengal and is powerful in southern Kerala—two major states which have large beef-eating populations.

When a BJP member's resolution to introduce a bill to ban cow slaughter was voted into the Lower House on 10 April, the opposition Congress party, members of Left Front and the Indian Muslim League (IML) walked out on the grounds that the house was incompetent to legislate on a state subject. "We are not opposed to legislation to protect cows as such, but we want this to be left to the state governments," said Priyaranjan Dasgumshi, spokesman for the Congress.

"People in different states have different dietary habits and certainly in the north-eastern states beef is regarded as an important source of protein," Dasgumshi said. But with many politicians from his own party keen to be seen as supporting a ban on cow slaughter rather than otherwise, Dasgumshi was careful to stick to the culinary rather than religious side of

beef-eating. In fact, one of the most vocal supporters of a national ban on cow slaughter is Chief Minister Digvijay Singh, who has headed a Congress party government in Madhya Pradesh for two consecutive terms now, or almost 10 years. Digvijay Singh is regarded as one of the Congress party's more progressive leaders and is credited with an overhaul of the state's primary education system. But then, the incumbency factor weighs heavily on him and the BJP in the state is expected to give him a good fight in provincial elections due in November. Two other important states that will go to polls along with Madhya Pradesh are Rajasthan and Delhi. Both are currently run by Congress governments. Rajasthan has moved to arrest fanatic Hindu leaders like Praveen Togadia and also ban public displays of the trident, another religious icon that is associated with Hindu fundamentalism.

In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP has moved to reclaim for Hindus the Bhojshala, a medieval structure whose ownership is disputed by Muslims and Hindus and now used by both communities for prayers. Digvijay has taken a surprisingly

pro-Hindu approach to the dispute. Reclamation of Hindu shrines lost to iconoclastic Muslim invaders over history is a popular and explosive enterprise in contemporary India and one which has paid huge political dividends to the BJP.

In fact, a violent campaign to demolish the 17th century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya catapulted the BJP, an obscure party to until the early 80s, to national power under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee five years ago. Last month, the Supreme Court turned down a request from Vajpayee's government to be allowed to conduct religious ceremonies at the site.

With the temple issue having to be shelved, the BJP has had to fall back on that other popular icon of the Hindu religion—the holy cow. But the Congress party, the main loser in the BJP's pro-Hindu movement has begun to hit back with what has been described by political watchers as 'soft Hindutva' which takes into account the sentiments of Hindus who form 70 percent of the population while hanging on to secular ideology. ♦ (IPS)

Tek Nath Rijal



Rajdhani, 22 April

राजधानी

Kidnapped by Nepali police 12 years ago and jailed in Bhutan for 10 years, the pro-democracy crusader Tek Nath Rijal of the Bhutan People's Party continues to fight for the repatriation of Bhutanese refugees from Siliguri after his release. He believes that one day democracy will dawn in Bhutan. Excerpts of an interview:

What do you think about how Nepal and Bhutan have categorised the refugees?
It should never have happened. This categorisation will never solve the refugee problem. I oppose it.

Is there any guarantee for the refugees' safety and their citizenship once in Bhutan after repatriation?

I warned the Bhutanese king of trouble when Thimpu began to evict Nepali-speaking Bhutanese and revoke their citizenships. Nepali-speaking Bhutanese are not less patriotic than any other citizens—all they demanded was their rights. I wrote four letters to the king requesting him not to snatch away the rights of the people, but he remained indifferent. At present the Bhutanese government has been resettling other communities in the areas we were forced to leave. How can we believe Thimpu will play fair? The Nepali government should have seen through the crafty Druk diplomacy. It seems Kathmandu knowingly fell into the trap. In this light, it is understandable that we are wary of the Bhutanese government's honesty with regard to the refugee problem.

Where will this take the refugee problem?

The Bhutanese government and the refugees should have maintained a dialogue. That was something I always stressed, even when communicating with the king. There can be a third party mediator, as long as they are not part of the decision-making process. How can a Nepali court settle Bhutanese cases? Ever since our movement for democracy and human rights began, more than 2,000 Bhutanese have become martyrs, and above 16,000 families have lost their homes. Will the Supreme Court of Nepal agree to look into these cases? That is why I say we, the refugees, and the Bhutanese government should be directly involved in solving the refugee crisis.

Why do you think you were released from jail?

Bhutan came under tremendous pressure to free me after intense lobbying from activists around the world. Letting me go was a face saving move.

What direction will your movement now take?

We need to know the crux of the problem and convince those who support Bhutan's rulers. The different factions of the Bhutanese movement must unite. There has to be an understanding among these parties.

Has India helped you?

India has not helped directly to solve the problem so far. I'm not aware of any behind-the-scene talks, but I hope India will respect the rights of the Bhutanese. Sooner or later, there will be changes. Any government in Thimpu needs to maintain cordial relations with India.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

The madhes is ripe for the 'people's war'. It is the result of 250 years that marked the ascendance of the Shah dynasty...from monarchy to the first multiparty regime, the Panchayat era to the present multiparty system, all regimes have dominated and oppressed madhesis.

-Matrika Yadav, member of Maoist peace talk team, represents the madhesi community from the southern belt of the country, in *Janadesh*, 22 April.



Director: When a voice says lights, camera action, that's when you begin talking.

पुनरागार, 22 April



"...and finally, the weather report, late afternoons will be gusty, trees will fall, tyres will burn and towards the evening it will rain and the environment for talks may grow bleaker..."

नेपाल समाचारपत्र, 22 April

PM-in-waiting?

Ghatana Ra Bichaar, 23 April

Disappointed with the working style of Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand, the royal palace is frantically searching for someone to replace him. From the long list of possible candidates, the palace has begun to zero in on one name, Shailaja Acharya (*below*), the firebrand leader of the Nepali Congress. She is a corruption vigilante who has blown the whistle several times in the past 12 years. If appointed to the position, His Majesty will get all the credit for giving Nepal its first female prime minister. It is believed that Acharya's appointment to the top executive post will not only subdue the movement of the major political parties of the dissolved parliament but also mollify Girija Prasad Koirala (Shailaja's uncle) who was incensed after the king's 4 October move.

The unmarried leader of the NC, who has time and again vowed not to contest elections, has already had several audiences with the king. The monarch and Acharya are said to be on agreeable terms. However, many in the Nepali Congress are not happy with this development. Some leaders including the party's general secretary Sushil Koirala,



spokesman Arjun Narsingh KC and Krishna Prasad Sitalau among others, have begun to try and scuttle Acharya's path to premiership.

Symbolic act

Punarjagaran, 22 April

During the seven-year insurgency, the Maoists vandalised and destroyed numerous government and semi-government buildings. It was a symbolic act for them: demolishing physical structures that represented the present regime to establish a new one to replace the old. Last week, students burned down the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hall, popularly known as Gandhi Bhaban, on the Tribhuban University premises. But unlike the Maoists, what philosophy were the rampaging students adhering to?

If these students think vandalising infrastructures built with Indian taxpayers' money is the only way to express their displeasure against India, they might as well destroy Bir Hospital and the East-West highway as well. If that is the only way to defend our nationalism and independence there shouldn't be a second's hesitation. If there is some pause for rational thinking, then the behaviour of these students, regardless of their affiliation, should be condemned. The actions of these irresponsible hoodlums make us look uncivilised.

The ruin of Gandhi Bhaban has a deeper meaning than the mere vandalising of any other infrastructure. It could not have been unplanned, the incident took place at a time when we are attempting to negotiate a peaceful solution to free ourselves from violence and terrorism. It portrays us as a nation who stands against the Gandhian values of truth and non-

violence. It is ironic that those very principles were the foundation stones of Nepal's democracy. By demolishing the Gandhi Bhaban, the students have placed themselves squarely on the side of violence and terrorism.

Debt wish

Birendra Rawal in Chhalphal, 20 April

Sundari Devi Chaudhari doesn't know how she will come up with Rs 50,000 that her late husband, Bel Bahadur Chaudhari, borrowed to pay the 'donation' that the local Maoists demanded for the family's safety. Her husband, a former chairman of Pathariya VDC in Kailali, borrowed the money from the village moneylender at 60 percent interest. The Maoists were paid but it failed to buy Bel Bahadur security. On 25 November last year, just a few days after handing over the money, the Maoists killed him anyway. "The Maoists have to either repay the loan with interest or take responsibility for my four children," says a grieving Sundari Devi.

She recently had to borrow Rs 1,000 again from a neighbour so her eldest daughter could appear for the SLC exams. Now her neighbour wants to be repaid as well. With only a hut and small patch of land, Sundari Devi's assets are minimal. She was unable to return to her village after her husband's death, and lives with her children with a relative in Lamki Bazar. "Neither the party that spoke of relief for the poor, nor the government that made high promises came to help," she says angrily. The government announced a relief package for conflict victims but though the local administration sent a list of the affected to the Home Ministry in Kathmandu, victims like Sundari Devi are still waiting for assistance.

No trees

Laxman Khadka in Rajdhani, 18 April

राजधानी

Dolakha's forests are thinning fast because of the increasing demand for timber in Kathmandu and Solukhumbu. Helicopters regularly transport illegal logs to these two high demand regions. After the Sagarmatha National Park banned logging in Solukhumbu, locals turned their timber smuggling operations in the direction of Dolakha. Jungles there became a valuable source of raw materials for the burgeoning plywood market in the Valley.

Demands for both are met from Dolakha's private, public and community forests. Nearly 60 contractors are involved in the timber-logging and supplying business and in the last four years, forests bordering the main roads have all disappeared. An illegal outfit is actively cutting trees down from the national forest. Even corridors chalked out for conservation are not spared from



the axe.

Some far-sighted locals have realised that at this rate the forests will be denuded and are demanding that logging be banned in Dolakha. Even if a law to that effect is put into place, logging may not stop due to enforcement problems. Many forestry officials have not returned after the Maoists burnt down their posts. Ranger Mitra Jirel of Jiri Range flatly denies there is any timber smuggling going on. There are hundreds of logs at the Dolakha helipad awaiting loading. In the past, the police had informed the Chief District Officer about the involvement of the Dolakha district forest office in illegal timber smuggling. Tipped off, the Sagarmatha National Park seized 1,300 cubic feet of wooden planks flown in from the region.

HISTORY AND CULTURE

NEPALITERATURE

by MANJUSHREE THAPA

Ahuti's call to arms

Writing in the tradition of committed Marxist poetry, Ahuti captures the sorrows and struggles of Nepal's most vulnerable subaltern classes: those who are systematically excluded from the sphere of political representation. Women—the invisible majority today—are given centre stage in some of his best works, which in their militancy are prescient, and quite chilling. The poem below, which is in the original language two separate poems of the same title, is found in his collection Tapaswika Geetharu, which translates as Songs of the Devotee.

The Nine-Hued Pheasant and the Daughter-in-Law of the Poor

1

As the pheasant, the nine-hued pheasant leaps from branch to branch, jumping and shaking its comb spreading its wings like a vagrant himalayan breeze scattering a nine-hued rainbow while dancing the open sky—she covers over the colours of her life having lost her dreams as a pearl lost in a refuse pile she sits by the dirty dishes next to the rubbish and looks at the pheasant with spread wings carrying in her eyes tears like the ocean she strokes the cracked wounds on her soles she scoops up dung and scrubs the dishes, a pitiable being: the daughter of the poor, the daughter-in-law of the poor.

She stepped across the threshold as the bride of the house just as in darkness the full moon comes bearing light. Her seven-hued realities and nine-hued dreams were tucked into the corners of her lace-up blouse. She came with the mind of one who buys on credit with uneasiness in her chest, her face, her hands and legs with uneasiness all over, from head to feet. She came like a daughter taking on her father's debts. Her mother-in-law cloaked her with the black shawl of convention.

She trembled before her husband as a mouse before a cat and she gathered the leftovers from his dirty plate always feeling afraid that he may take another wife. Without so much as soaking in hot water the bruises he gives her

she stays up half the night mixing her tears into oil and massages those feet that batter her chest and his thighs, his wrists, his arms. She stamps out her desire. She scoops up dung and scrubs the dishes, a pitiable being: the daughter of the poor, the daughter-in-law of the poor.

The earth cries all night seeking light as the sky roams in the brightness of countless stars. How often her husband changes his attire as the lace-up blouse of her wedding day tears. As her pleasures tear apart like her favorite blouse she bears so many stains on so many parts of her face. She bears rope burns and calluses on her forehead, a stone's cut in her heel the weight of anxieties all day and night. She bears the underfed pockets of blue all over her body the flesh shrunken on the bone, the tears that brim in her eyes. She is like watercress become bland for lack of salt. She cannot tell what is lacking in her life. Becoming teary eyed and coming to a boil when she washes the dishes she opens her heart at the well and at the stone taps and speaks of her suffering. She murmurs, too, in the loneliness. When her mother-in-law cannot stand to see her



she sees in blocks of tears the love of her parents' home and she walks down to her dear parents' home carrying a pack of clothes on one side, another pack on the other without so much as noticing that her fariya has come undone and when in her parents' home her heart is stung by the harsh words

of some villagers, of some brothers and sisters-in-law she picks up the same packs and walks back up to her unfeeling house like a traveler who through all her life mistakes the road like a thirsty person. She makes the rounds of her own people seeking shade, walking this way and that, wandering... Unable to bear anything anymore she beats her chest as a washerwoman beats cloth on the rocks She sits by the dirty dishes next to the rubbish and she looks at the pheasant with spread wings. She tries to fly as the pheasant does, spreading her wings. She strokes the cracked wounds on her soles. She scoops up dung and scrubs the dishes, a pitiable being: the daughter of the poor, the daughter-in-law of the poor

2

I never noticed— When did she start washing her face with moonlight? When did Sanikanchhi start sloughing off the calluses from her hands and feet? Everything is as it is. The barbet moans in the woods, as always.

Our daughters bathe their eyelashes with tears, as always. But like the firefly who disdains the cricket for emptying its life crying and so stays apart, flying alight, Sanikanchhi has stopped the flow of her tears. She has started to speak about her dissatisfactions. She has started to sing songs of justice in folk tunes. She has started to cut to size those who say "Oh, women." I now believe Sanikanchhi, who used to look at the pheasant with spread wings will bloom as a moon that clears up clouds in the sky. Like the sky's offering of dew to the leaves, she will fall upon the darkness, becoming the light of the moon becoming the pearl of life, spreading brightness.

She doesn't flinch at her husband's berating. Neither does she massage his feet. Taking cover as she used to when playing hide-and-seek as a child and feeling slightly abashed, she tries now to read books. She reddens her face and asks questions of those who understand.

She tries to grasp everything: Why isn't the measure of the grain pot full? Why don't the children have proper clothes on their backs? Why isn't there a warm roof to take shelter beneath? She memorizes everything as though they were alphabets. At this year's May Day she straightened her fariya though it was inferior and patched together. She washed her blouse and came to the program and said "Long live" and also "Death to" and when her friend who had been talking with head held high

was taken by the police and pushed around she held her friend, raised her finger and like a lioness roared, "Don't touch her!" I then came to believe Sanikanchhi, who used to watch the pheasant with spread wings —and other suffering girls like her— will one day come to the battlefield carrying guns At the very least the girls who are most fearful will look after their brothers who are in battle and when their houses are searched will hide their husbands' guns

Now Sanikanchhi, like gold that is also touched with fragrance sometimes remembers her friends who are still asleep and sometimes talks to her friends who have just awakened. When her childhood habit of thinking "I can't do anything" tries to obstruct her path she disciplines her soul with stinging nettles. I truly believe the person who flees from obstacles does not live, but dies in each step. But like Sanikanchhi, who disciplines her soul with stinging nettles he too can change the face of the world one day.

BOOK REVIEW

by CK LAL

Looking back with fondness

The author's search begins in the rolling hills of Maryland where she gets all the essentials of a 'perfect' childhood. Her elders, however, have completely different needs. When her family moves to the city with the highest per capita income in the United States, young Susan is brought into the huge and impersonal world of New York City.

Susan finds that she is not a material girl. She hates the regimented life of a cog in the giant machine of an urban space that works like a precision clock. For some, living in the Big Apple is the ultimate temptation. But her soul wants to escape and go somewhere, anywhere.

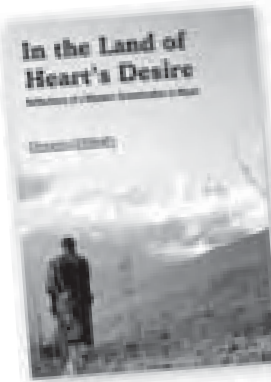
The word 'wanderlust' doesn't quite catch the essence of such an urge to move on, to keep going. To use a Nepali word, the spirit of *jayabar*—a wanderer on an endless journey of eternal search—casts a spell on a girl barely in her teens. Lesser mortals in her place would have chosen to suppress the yearning with the help of stormy relationships, psychedelic drugs or a determined go at the career ladder towards the glass ceiling.

Susan being Susan, yields to her longing and finds herself in Finland. By page 7 of this slim volume, she is 'gomp-a-stomping' in Zanskar. Two pages later, she complains about one of her fellow trekkers to Mustang whose 'prodigious snores set the village dogs barking and the mules braying.' You brace yourself for a roller coaster ride. Then she suddenly arrives in a village in Dolpo, and her expressions get mellow.

The intrepid explorer propels herself from one unusual destination to another. The text jumps from potted philosophy ("When the student is ready, the teacher will appear") to romantic mush ("Over he comes, a good six feet tall, with black beard flecked with grey and snow, obviously at home with the elements"), and sermons from the mount ("Power can be many things") to bitter doses of prosaic realism ("Much of the real Nepal that many tourists seek is desperately poor, and not very romantic. Babies die, children die, women die in childbirth.") at such a pace that it makes an unprepared reader want to come up for air after each page.

The author smothers her readers with her own zing and zest. After a while, you wish you could just put the book away and gaze out of your window at what lies beyond the mountains. The problem of keeping up with the speed of reflections in a memoir is perhaps generic. It's not very often that two complete strangers—a writer and her reader—share the same level of energy and stamina. Susan obviously feels that her explorations are so deep, her experiences so profound, and her knowledge so practical that to deny any of it would be gross injustice to her readers. "Naïve Nordic," says someone who knows her well.

My practical advice to anyone buying this book: don't try the full volume at one go. It's a long way from a log cabin in Norway to Bajhang and you have to take it in controlled doses. The book is illustrated with serene black and white photographs. Paper and print quality of even the soft-cover volume are of coffee-table class. Quite obviously, this book isn't directly aimed at Nepali readers. But then it's not aimed at any other particular readership either. Susan seems to have written this book in order to let it float, not unlike her own fancy-free soul. A good parting gift for visitors, perhaps? ♦



In the Land of Heart's Desire
Reflections of a Western Grandmother in Nepal
Susan Hovik
Mandala Book Point,
Kathmandu
Pages: 152
Price: Not mentioned

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ABOUT TOWN

FESTIVAL AND EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Kathmandu Vendors** paintings by Mark Jordans at the Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4428549
- ❖ **Moments** photographs by Mani Lama. 12-7PM till 30 April at Gallery Nine, Lazimpat. 4436944
- ❖ **Contemporary paintings** by Kanchan Chander 25 April-5 May at Siddhartha Art Gallery. 4218048
- ❖ **Tibetan paintings** till 20 May at Pathibhara Art Gallery, Thamel. 4256004

EVENTS

- ❖ **Open Adoption Day** 1-3PM on 27 April at the SPCAN Karuna Rescue and Rehab centre, Siphel. Directions see www.fospcan.org.np. 4414332
- ❖ **La Cabana Salsa Night** at the Jazz Bar, 8PM on 25 April. Free entrance. Shangrila Hotel. 4412999
- ❖ **Studio 7 presents Babu Raja** at the Naga Theatre of the Vajra Hotel. Tickets Rs 700. 7.15 PM on 25-27 April, 2-3 May and 9-11 May. 4271545
- ❖ **Tennis coaching classes** Club Oasis, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4491234
- ❖ **Reiki Level 1** Healing Workshop at Everest Bookshop, Babar Mahal Revisited. 5541613
- ❖ **Everest Marathon** on 19 May from Everest Base Camp to Namche Bazar. Last date of entry 25 April. E-mail: info@mteverestgolden50.com, 5545900, 4443337
- ❖ **Indonesian Food Festival and Cultural program** 25-29 April at The Café. Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4491234
- ❖ **The Nepal Amateur Open 2003** of the Nepal Golf Association at Le Meridien, Gokarna Forest Golf Course and Spa Resort from 1-4 May, **Inter-Club Tournament** on 30 April. 4451212, 4450444

DRINK

- ❖ **Splash Bar & Grill** Exotic cocktails, panoramic view. Happy hour 5:30-7PM. Radisson Hotel, Kathmandu. 4411818

MUSIC

- ❖ **Live Music** Friday at 5.30 PM, Saturday movie at 4.30 PM. Jivin' Joe's Restaurant, Kupondole. 5528703
- ❖ **Abhaya with the Steam Injuns** 7PM every Friday at Moksh in Hardic Club, Jhamsikhel. 5528703
- ❖ **Live Acoustic Jam** 7PM on Saturdays at Himallatte Cafe, Thamel. 4256738

FOOD

- ❖ **Wood fired pizzas, cocktails and coffee** at the Roadhouse Café, Thamel.
- ❖ **Kids Combo Meal** at all Bakery Cafés. Kids' meals with exciting gifts.
- ❖ **A Margarita Night** Churasqueria BBQ, delicados, margaritas and live music by The Rusty Nails. Rs 699 pp. 25 April at Dwarika's Hotel. 479488
- ❖ **Weekend breakfast:** Smoked salmon scrambled eggs and filtered coffee Rs 100. 9AM-12PM. Thomas Kilroy at 1905, Kantipath. 4225272
- ❖ **Dutch food festival** 24-30 April. Summit Hotel, Kupondole. 5521810
- ❖ **Masala Dosas for Breakfast and Chatamari's for Lunch.** Traditional favourites at The Sunrise Café for breakfast and lunch. Yak & Yeti Hotel. 4248999
- ❖ **Traditional Nepali Thali Lunch** at Patan Museum Café 11AM-4PM. 5526271
- ❖ **Saturday Asian Brunch** at The Café, **Sunday European Lunch** at Rox Restaurant. Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4491234
- ❖ **Saturday BBQ Lunch** at Club Himalaya Nagarkot. Rs 500 per person. 4680083/ 80
- ❖ **The greenest patch** Weekend lunches in the oldest and largest garden in Nagarkot at The Fort Resort. Email: fort@mos.com.np. 226799
- ❖ **Newari Bhoj** Traditional snacks, drinks and meals, outdoors or indoor, in a restaurant designed by Bhaktapur artisans. Lajana Restaurant. Lazimpat. 413874
- ❖ **Tukche Thakali Kitchen** Buckwheat, barley, bean, and dried meat specialities. Also brunch with porridge and pancakes, all raw material from Tukche village. Darbar Marg.
- ❖ **Vegetarian specialities and clay oven pizza** at Stupa View Restaurant & Terrace, Boudha. 480262

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- ❖ **Dakshinkali Package** every Saturday Rs 500+tax. 4370714, 4371537
- ❖ **Shivapuri Heights** a traditional cottage with modern facilities. Rs 1,850 pp. www.escape2nepal.com
- ❖ **The Great Godavari Getaway** Special weekend packages. Godavari Village Resort. 5560675
- ❖ **The Secret of Kathmandu** Overnight package \$99. Dwarika's Hotel. 4479488
- ❖ **Gamcha Organic Farm Guesthouse** Traditional Nepali farmhouse. 6631734.
- ❖ **Writing Retreat** Full board package. Aesthetic living, innovative thinking, creative writing and nature at Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha. 375280
- ❖ **Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge** Special offers for Nepalis and expats. 01-361500 TMPL. Reservations - Nepali/Expat Offer

NEPALI WEATHER VIS-24-04-2003 05:00 GMT

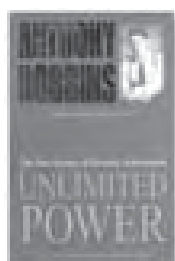
The spring storms will continue across the midhills as moisture trickles in from the west and rises along the mountains due to convection. The heat in the tarai has now started to cross 40 degrees, and this will rise in the coming months. But since direct sunlight is filtered by wind-blown desert sand in the lower atmosphere across north India, it will not be at full intensity. Expect unsettled afternoons across Nepal, brief snow flurries in the high passes and violent thunderstorms in the higher mountains. A westerly front in the weekend will bring isolated but intense storms over the weekend in the valley.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
30-14	29-14	31-13	31-14	32-15

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

BOOKWORM



Unlimited Power: The New Science of Personal Achievement Anthony Robbins
Simon and Schuster UK, 2001
Rs 700

Robbins is often described as the guru of gurus in the self-improvement genre. In this book he teaches that success is habit forming and the habit of success, once learned, is nearly impossible to forget. The reader is encouraged to harness the power of the mind to do, have, achieve and create anything they want.

A Traveller and the Road: The Journey of an Indian Communist Mohit Sen
Rupa and Co India, 2003
Rs 632

Sen's biography is a stirring account of the life and work of a veteran Communist during the last six decades of the 20th century. Through his experience and reading, the author endeavours to work out the theory and practice of those he calls "the new thinking communists". This book is part of his ongoing effort.



Tibet, Tibet: A personal history of a lost land Patrick French
Harper Collins India, 2003
Rs 632

French's 20-year involvement in the Tibetan cause is represented in a book that is part memoir, part travelogue, part history. It is a quest for the true, as opposed to the mythical Tibet. His Tibet is a land of a long warlike past and a complex interlocking relationship with China is illuminated in this book.

Courtesy: Mandala Book Point, Kantipath, 4227711, mandala@ccsl.com.np

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Sun	0615-0645	BBC Agenda
Daily	2045-2115	BBC नेपाली सेवा
Daily	2245-2300	BBC नेपाली सेवा
Sun-Fri	0740-0800	एकैछिन् (रेडियो पत्रिका)
Sun-Fri	0800-0830	डबली (विषयगत अन्तरक्रिया)
Sun-Fri	2000-2030	आजका कुरा (समसामयिक विषयमा बहस)
Sat	0800-0830	शान्ति अभियान
Sat	1930-2000	आचार विचार (धृष्टाचारविरोध सहकार्य)
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ART

Here today, in Europe tomorrow

To stop more art thefts, Nepal needs to start demanding that its stolen religious objects be returned.

JANAKI GURUNG

The 400-year-old manuscript stolen from the Patan Museum last week was probably 'ordered' by an international art trader for a private collector and the theft carried out by local burglars, experts say.

The manuscript was hand-drawn in ink and watercolours in Bhaktapur in the 17th or 18th century and is made up of 21 accordion-like folios containing tantric depictions of the energy centres of the human body (see picture). The diagrams have detailed listings of the chakras and the lotuses which tantricism regards resides in the physical human body. There are seven chakras from the spine to the head arranged in an ascending order of consciousness.

The manuscript, together with two smaller ones which are on exhibit in other galleries in Patan Museum, had been for sale in the antiquity market in Nepal and was bought with Austrian funds for RS 90,000 and donated to the Patan Museum in 1997. Ironically, the Patan Museum Project thought the museum would be the best place to keep it, not just for its historic and educational value, but also so that it would not be exported.

"Since the manuscript has been well documented and published, no reputable museum in the world will buy and display it," said one expert in Nepali religious artifacts. However, once an object like this goes into a private collection, it is usually very difficult to track down. What Nepali and foreign heritage conservationists are worried about is that the manuscript will just drop out of sight since the Nepali government hasn't shown much interest in even bringing back stolen objects which have been identified in Europe and the United States.

A 200-year-old Dipankar Buddha stolen from Patan last year surfaced in Austria five months later after a German art dealer tried to sell it to the

Ethnographic Museum in Vienna for \$180,000 (See 'Lost-and-found Buddha', #94) The gilded cast-copper Buddha mask is on display at the museum where it is worshipped by Vienna-based Buddhists, while efforts are underway to try to repatriate it.

The Royal Nepal Embassy in Berlin is working with the museum and the German courts to expedite the process, but the object is now evidence in a theft case against the art dealer in a German court and cannot be sent back to Nepal until it is decided. The Ethnographic Museum in Vienna has already raised money from donations to pay for flying back the Buddha. But nearly one year later, the Dipankara is still in Vienna and the German legal process is taking much longer than anyone expected.

"Even if the stolen manuscript is found, it will be difficult to get it back," a Nepali historian told us on condition of anonymity. "The reason is that there are very high-up people here who are up to their necks in idol smuggling." If stolen objects start being returned to Nepal, he added, it would send the price of Nepali artifacts crashing down.

Back at the Patan Museum, the special room that housed the manuscript has been closed off with a sign that says it is off limits for 'technical reasons'. The museum is planning to display an actual-size digital print copy of the chakra illustration in the original showcase. There will also be additional information about when it was stolen, and about other stolen Nepali art objects.

An emergency meeting of the Patan Museum board set up a committee to investigate the matter and recommend security measures to prevent future thefts as well as to find ways to retrieve the manuscript. In 90 percent of art thefts around the world, it is an inside job, and part of the committee's job will be to explore this. It will also look at the installation of surveillance cameras, alarm systems and even hiring private guards.

Art historians reckon that the only reason art thefts are less common in Nepal these days is because there is not much left to steal. "The only things still left are those that are too heavy to cart away, or those protected in museums," says one connoisseur of Nepali art. The late Nepali art historian, Lain Singh Bangdel's book *Stolen Images of Nepal* and Jurgen Shick's *The Gods are Leaving the Country: Art Theft from Nepal* present the only evidence of the seriousness of the plunder of 2,000 years of Kathmandu's cultural history.

Based on details from the two books some private western art collectors have started getting

pangs of conscience. In 1999, an American collector decided to returned four idols stolen from Nepal in the 1970s: a 9th century Buddha image from Patan, a 10th century Vishnu from Kathmandu, a beheaded 12th century Saraswati from Pharping and a 14th century Surya image from Panauti. All are now in safe-keeping at the National Museum in Chhauni.

An image of Uma Maheswor which disappeared from Dhulikhel in 1982 was returned to Nepal by Berlin Museum and is now at the Patan Museum since it was believed it would be safer there than at its original site in Dhulikhel. But with last week's theft from Patan Museum, there may have to be a re-evaluation of this. ♦

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Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

The crux of the biscuit is the apostrophe

To the casual observer, it may seem that this country has come to a complete standstill. In fact, it hasn't. If you look carefully, there are still signs of normalcy in the nation's nooks and crannies. For example, despite successive Nepal bands our corner momo shop is still dumping unused body parts of deceased water buffaloes on the neighbourhood garbage pile. As long as Nepal's average per capita consumption of momos stays above the national benchmark for Middle-Income Developing Nations, we know that we're not yet a failed state.

The question I have is: if we are all agreed that we want to destroy the country completely, why fight about it? Let's avoid duplication and pool our resources. I'm glad to report here today that despite a crisis of nationalistic proportions, our leaders are firmly united in their effort to make things worse. (Sworn Statement: "United, we stand. Divided we lie down and go to sleep.")

As expected, the Goodwill Talks went better than expected. They ordered 15 plates of chicken momos and a crate of beer to break the ice, and by the end of it all there was a lot of back-slapping and bonhomie. We need to build on this with a second round of Goodwill Talks to be held at the Naya Nepal Dance Restaurant & Bar (With Cabin Private Limited). In fact, if we keep on partying like this, we will never have to get down to substantive issues so there will never be any danger of talks collapsing.

Still, there will come a time when our unity will be sorely tested. And for that we must remember our National Oath: "Be prepared to fight over the umbrella on a rainy day." That is why we are pleased to announce a series of tripartite conflict resolution exercises so that we can apply ourselves with even more single-minded vigour to the task of national deconstruction. First off, we strongly recommend that the leaders of all political parties take a 10-day residential Vipassana Meditation Retreat at Shivapuri.

For people used to talking all day, the vow of silence will be unbearable at first. Since the ego is the root of all divisiveness, we remove the ego and, presto, problem solved. That, and a diet of fern salad for ten days, should finally allow the leadership of the political parties the path to inner happiness, fulfilment and a universal remedy for universal ills. As a follow-up all participants are required to log six hours of watching Maharishi Channel every day on cable: only by listening to someone even more boring than themselves will they realise the impermanence of existence and the transient nature of the soul in the cycle of death and re-birth. At the end of it, they may even be able to levitate without aides.

As for the peace process, since the government team has finally been selected they can now graduate from playing badminton to volleyball. A Goodwill Volleyball Tournament-cum-Fund Raiser has been scheduled this weekend at the National Stadium. Money raised will go to finance goodwill talks in the coming decade-and-a-half. ♦



NEPALI SOCIETY

Hari lends a hand

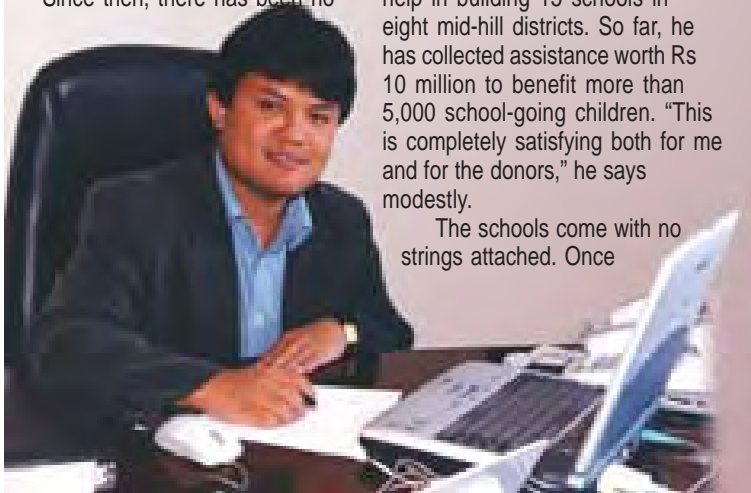
Seven years ago when Hari Man Lama took a group of Japanese trekkers to Daneshwor village in Kabhre, his clients were appalled by the state of the local primary school. Hari convinced them some seed money may remedy the situation. With the Rs 150,000 he collected, Daneshwor got its first proper school building. Since then, there has been no

looking back for this astute Kathmandu-based trekking entrepreneur who has used his business acumen and considerable charm to go on a school-building spree across Nepal. He has persuaded individual donors and philanthropic associations like the Asia Friendship Network and various Lion Clubs to contribute help in building 15 schools in eight mid-hill districts. So far, he has collected assistance worth Rs 10 million to benefit more than 5,000 school-going children. "This is completely satisfying both for me and for the donors," he says modestly.

The schools come with no strings attached. Once

construction is over, it becomes public property and is managed by the village school committees. The Maoist insurgency put a spanner in the works and since 2000 Hari's attempts to take this initiative to other districts was severely restricted. But since the January ceasefire, Hari's work is about to start again.

There is lots to do. Hari grew up in Kabhre's Madankudari village, and has seen how deprivation wastes the talents of Nepali children. He is keen to expand into building rural health posts to help women and children. "Health and education are related: educated children are more careful about their health and good health ensures better education," he tells us. He believes it is the average Nepali's self-defeatist and cynical attitude that keeps the country down. "Too often we give up even before trying because of imagined obstacles. I am convinced we can change and tourism can be aligned to social work." Enough said, Hari himself is living proof that this idea works. ♦



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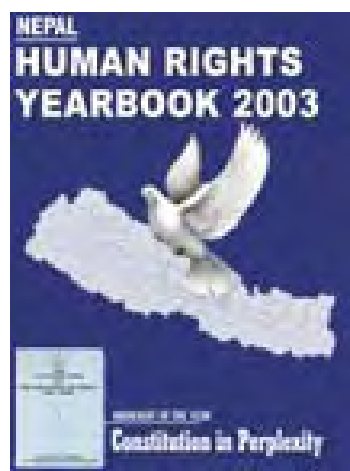
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