

NEPALI Times

#470

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NAYANTARA GURUNG KAKSHAPATI

God Goods

The Goddess Durga for sale? Hardly a surprise. We've been purchasing take-home idols of all persuasions, dimensions and materials since we created god in our own image. The market for new (never mind old) idols is booming, and never more so than in the run-up to Dasain. Still, seeing Durga ensconced in the window display of a boutique catering to Nepal's expats was something of a surprise. The goddess is sitting pretty, as is the diminutive Ganesh in the corner. Here's to beginnings, prosperity and good over evil.

Leaving home



Nepali Times wishes all its readers and partners a happy Dasain, Chhat, Eid. Because of the holidays, there will be no issue of Nepali Times on 2 October. The next hardcopy edition of this paper will come out on 9 October. Log on to www.nepalitimes.com for regular news updates.

Going home



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TIME OUT

And so the blessed break for blessings is finally here. As foretold by all and sundry, nothing extraordinary has transpired these last couple of weeks, and we heave a sigh of relief as we tramp back high on the heady fumes of traffic, having braved the New Road masses, to singularly reticent news bulletins.

Despite the endless speculation, the UML-led government is still intact, the UML itself is still intact, and there are signs Girija babu has accepted these realities for now. Even the historic people's revolt appears to be on the backburner, but if it catches us by surprise, rest assured it will be televised.

Dasain is here! So much has changed these past two decades – we've moved from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy to state-at-war to republic to absolute chaos and we're still not done – but for Dasain, the song remains the same. Perhaps not quite the same. Commercialism is rife, but the festival itself is a way away from being reduced to High Street Christmas. Come Dasain, the Valley itself will empty of thousands of johnny-come-latelys, who will make their joyful way back to home and hearth, mirroring a similar stream of holidayers from India, Malaysia, the Gulf and the West.

Whatever the naysayers bang on about, Dasain remains a quintessentially Nepali festival. Whether you choose to celebrate it or not, when you see the kites flutter in the vigorous seasonal winds, when you see determined-looking family units trooping around your neighbourhood with huge plasters of tika on their foreheads, when you hear the shouts of 'maarra!' from the kauda parlours, for an instant at least, one hopes we'll all remember our connections with this great festival, Bada Dasain, forget our differences and think of them as the diversity that could still make us a great nation.

Dasain is here. Enjoy the eye of the storm while it swirls around us. Who knows, we may even bring something out of it to sustain us through the rest of the year and beyond, if we are wise enough and brave enough to withstand those winds of change that threaten to blow us off course.

It's been a long year. You (and we) deserve a break. Season's greets to all.



KIRAN PANDAY

Bizarre but banal

Everything changes, everything stays the same

This country borders on the bizarre. Sample a few recent events.

For years now, no official PM delegation has left the country without journalist Rishi Dhamala. The fact that he had been charged of abetting a Tarai armed group was a minor irritant this time round. His minister-patrons in the government, particularly Sujata Koirala, got



PLAIN SPEAKING
Prashant Jha

into the act and pressurised the Home Ministry to withdraw the case so that he could travel. Madhesi ministers insisted that if Dhamala could get away without the conclusion of his judicial process, why should the two Madhesi journalists involved in the case languish in jail? They were freed too. The executive used its discretionary powers willy-nilly, just to get Mr Dhamala to accompany Mr Nepal to Uncle Sam.

The Federation of Nepalese Journalists organised a meeting in Janakpur. The FNJ president, Umesh Sah, published a story in his paper calling the meeting 'historic'. Another paper, *Janakpur Today*, criticized Sah's claim, accused FNJ of spreading rumours, and argued better meetings were organised in the past. FNJ – the organisation meant to protect freedom of

expression and defend newspapers against political vandalism – reacted by burning copies of *Janakpur Today*.

Bijay Gachhadar (ex-NC, did not want either CA elections or republic till early last year) and Sanjay Sah (contractor from Janakpur with a dubious reputation) are in charge of the country's infrastructure as ministers of physical works. Mrigendra Yadav (active royalist, among the biggest feudal lords of the eastern Tarai) is the minister responsible for Nepal's agriculture. Ram Chandra Kushahawa (former NC, joined Madhesi politics only in late 2007, lost elections) runs the education system. The 'Madhes' has unprecedented access to power in this government – but this cast of characters illustrates how little that means.

Every few weeks, the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction goes through a ritual. It invites a dozen or so donor and embassy representatives, desperate to spend money and carve a niche for themselves, to discuss the 'discharge' question. A few Maoist representatives usually stroll in and face the rest, as they chat about rehabilitation of the disqualified. Noone knows who is supposed to be negotiating what. Peace Ministry officials look at the donors, the donors look at the Maoists, and the Maoists keep nodding. Either the government or the Maoists then conveniently shifts the goalposts. The donors – as if on cue – scurry off to prepare yet another 'package' that will be mutually acceptable. Everyone goes round and round the peace tree until they all fall down.

Dhamala's case reflects how the state encourages impunity, makes a mockery of the rule of law, and the penchant of the executive for acting arbitrarily in

favour of the powerful. The Janakpur case illustrates the degeneration and pettiness of 'civil society', and the insistence on one's own truth as the only truth. The background of Madhesi ministers highlights how a movement for rights and dignity has been co-opted by old elites who had nothing to do with the movement but are adept at navigating Kathmandu's power politics. And the farcical negotiations on the peace process are representative of how actors see it as a tool to derive political advantage, with noone really interested in ending the transition.

It also shows how assumptions that are often made in liberal democracies do not quite work in practice.

In Nepal, institutions do not follow the rules but the whims and fancies of those in power. Civil society and media, for all their self-righteousness, are not independent actors occupying public space, but thoroughly compromised forces replicating the behavioural traits of political actors. The spirit of the electoral mandate need not be respected. It can in fact be subverted to suit existing elites. And perhaps that is why they are at the forefront of defending 'democracy' as it exists now, as it existed in the 1990s – it allows them to use its loopholes to maintain their hegemony.

The big challenge for the CA was to take systemic flaws and individual frailties into account, devise a system that would change the incentive structure of political actors, and make democracy more meaningful for those on the margins. If current events are any indication, that does not seem likely anymore.

Enjoy Dasain, ruminate, and drink to the absurd times we live in. ●

LETTERS

HOMeward BOUND

I'm glad someone's doing something to fix this country ('Homeward bound', #469). And the help's coming from the most unexpected of places: villagers, not our snooty, college-degree toting city people. It's an ironic twist on the old 'Back to the Village Campaign'.

Prakash Rai, Dhankuta

● It's heartening to note that there are women who are not enamoured of urban living but choose to return home to serve their village folks ('Homeward bound', #469). The initiative described is laudable as it is helping people to help themselves. Trained midwives would go a long way in preventing maternal deaths during delivery. Moreover, they would be in a better position to advise the mother about baby care and see that necessary immunisation shots are administered without fail. What Nepal needs is to provide primary

health care in each and every village so that minor ailments as well as preventive aspects of health care can be provided at the local level. A large number of trained 'bare-foot' doctors at the village level would be highly desirable. One hopes the government, NGOs and the corporates will work towards creating such a force that could minimise the burden on the already sorely tested government hospitals, where these exist.

D.B.N. Murthy, Lalitpur

BLACK DAYS

Exactly right, what will happen to our students ('Black Days', #469)? Politicians forget that the repercussions of their

mistakes and squabbles will be felt for generations, not only a couple of years. We simply can't erase them and pretend they never happened. Students exasperated by all this bad politics will either leave the country or join in the melee. Neither will help us.

Name withheld, email

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Sometimes I wonder whether a world without men would be a better place. Our woman CA members suggest to me that it may ('Leading by example', #469). Women of all stripes, communists

and Kangresis, Maoists and MJF members, have put aside their differences and really taken a big step forward by drafting a charter of women's rights. Men in the same position would still be squabbling over committee memberships and we'd be hit by a whole new set of protests about the supremacy of this or that.

Laxmi Shrestha, email

LETTERS

Nepali Times welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms are accepted, writers who provide their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format without attachments with 'letter to the editor' in the subject line.

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Enduring relevance of Dasain

Ironically, those who gave Dasain pan-Nepal acceptability have begun to call for its boycott

There are supposed to be 330 million deities in the Hindu pantheon, but even the most learned of priests is unlikely to be able to recite the names of more than a hundred. Goddesses are easier to remember as many of them are worshipped under one or another name during Dasain, considered by many the national festival of Nepal. In her various forms, the Mother Goddess embodies all the qualities of the maker, the protector and the destroyer represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh of the male Hindu trinity.

The practice of mother worship is probably pre-Aryan and has co-existed with the tradition of ancestor worship since hunter-gatherer times. In South India, Amma, the mother, is the guardian of most villages. Jai Bhawani used to be the war cry of Marathas just as Bengalis went to war shouting Jai Durga, and



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

the ferocious Kali was worshipped by the warriors of Central India. The enduring appeal of Sati, the mother eternal, has been the distinctive mark of Hinduism in the mountainous regions between Assam and Kashmir. In Mithila, the mother is Bhairavi, the deity of decay who sets the stage for renewal.

In all her forms, the goddess is the embodiment of cosmic energy. She is Shakti, the Supreme Power. Worship of the Mother Goddess is often laden with Tantric rituals. Considering the complexity involved in appeasing female deities, worshipping Shiva is a lot simpler.

Shivaratri has a decent claim to being the national festival of the country, the presiding deity being none other than the Lord of Animals. Indra and Vishnu, too, have been venerated in the Kathmandu Valley since the time of the Lichhavis. Indrajatra itself marks the day when the forces of Prithvi Narayan Shah



vanquished the unprepared warriors of the last Malla king of Kathmandu. The Gorkha court could have easily ordained that their day of victory be marked with festivities. But somehow Dasain established itself as the main socio-religious festival of Nepal.

There are many stories explaining the significance of Dasain. According to Ramayan legends, Rama sought the blessing of Durga to defeat the demon-king Ravana. In another narrative of the triumph of good over evil, Mahisashurmardini trounces an animal demon to free the earth from its excesses. These are interesting stories, but not everyone who celebrates Dasain knows much about them. For most Nepalis, Dasain is *the* festival and that's it.

In Bengal, the beginning of Durga Puja festivities is dated to the early seventeenth century. The Mysore Dusshera too is believed to have begun around the time the Mughal Empire was disintegrating but the East India Company was yet to establish itself. Dasain ensconced itself as the festival of choice of warrior kings in different regions of south Asia, including in many mountain principalities that were to later become parts of Nepal.

Present forms of Dasain festivities in the country are probably of more recent origin. They may have evolved in the barracks of Gorkha regiments where Brahmin priests simplified complex rituals of Shakti worship to suit the temperament of Matwali soldiers. They sanctified eating, drinking, gambling and making merry, all in the name of the Mother Goddess. Shah and Rana rulers merely institutionalised the system back home.

Ironically, those who gave Dasain pan-Nepal acceptability - the Janjatis of the mid-mountains from the east and west - have begun to call for its boycott. In keeping with the Urdu-laden Gorkha Bhasha and the lack of official caste hierarchy within the British and Indian Gurkhas, the *lahures* kept the faith through their own secular celebrations of religious festivities such as Dasain and Tihar. Thus they kept in touch with the idea of Nepal and Nepalis rather than their own ethnic particularities. As long as these indefatigable fighters continue to serve abroad, Dasain celebrations there will retain their secular character. It may not be politically correct to say so in these times, but Dasain is indeed the 'national' festival of Nepal, and it has an international face. ●

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A cruise fit for Pharaohs

As the holidays begin, some Nepalis are packing their bags to go abroad. These days, some are headed to Egypt. Last year alone, about three hundred Nepalis toured the land of the Pharaohs. Jeevan Shrestha of the Egyptian embassy in Kathmandu says, "This is the figure for Nepali residents; the figure for non-resident Nepalis is even higher." More conventional holiday destinations for Nepalis are Goa, Mauritius, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Egypt is the new hot spot. And it's no surprise – about 11 million international tourists visit Egypt annually.

The Middle East can be fun for Nepalis too

Egypt's rich history not only makes it a favourite among tourists, but researchers and historians too. Tourist attractions in the country include the Great Pyramids of Giza, along with the Nile and the Khan Ali Khalil Bazar of Cairo.

A trip to Egypt is never complete without a cruise on the Nile. A train trip of about 15 to 16 hours from Cairo gets you to Aswan Bandargah, where cruise packages are available. The three-day package on the five-star rated SS Karim is the most popular.

Nili Shah, sales executive for Marcopolo Travels, explains that an 8-day trip to Egypt is available for \$700-800, inclusive of a plane ticket and a tour around Cairo, Giza, Luxor and other cities as well as a Nile cruise. It seems the offer is a tempting one. According to Kalpana Shrestha of Gulf Air Nepal, which flies to more than 40 countries, there has been a surge in the number of Nepalis booking tickets to Egypt.

Here's to a future in which Nepalis leave home for the Middle East not just to work, but to play. ●

Sambhu Guragain and Ram Krishna Banjara



Modern day slaves

The ban on domestic workers has not improved the situation of women workers abroad

DEWAN RAI

Sabina Rai (name changed), 27, has not had enough food or sleep since she landed in Dubai in July this year. She starts at 6AM every morning and often works until 4AM the next morning. The work is back-breaking dusting, washing, scrubbing and cooking for a 24-member joint family. As if that weren't enough, she also has to work for the family's relatives time and again.

"It seems I won't be able to come home except cramped in a coffin," she writes to Pourakhi, an NGO working for women migrant

have little freedom, even to return home. Employers sometimes withhold payment for months, even years, and confiscate their passports in an apparent effort to prevent them running away.

Mankumari Rawat (name changed) of Banke district flew to Saudi Arabia after returning to Nepal from a failed three-week stint in Kuwait. Things did not look good from the outset. She was picked up in Mumbai by her new Saudi employer, who told her outright, "You are not being hired just as domestic help." But the illiterate Rawat, who Pourakhi surmises had a history of mental illness and alcohol

is closer to 70,000. They bring in over Rs 20 billion in remittance annually, 11 per cent of the total.

"Migrant worker remittances represent money the country is getting without investing in them at all," says Ganesh Gurung, foreign employment expert and President of the National Network for Safe Migration. "The government should invest in producing skilled manpower to compete in the world labour market."

The government has set up a Foreign Employment Promotion Board for the wellbeing of those migrant workers who have official permission to migrate for labour. A subsidised orientation course is



RAMYATA LIMBU

workers. Sabina is essentially a modern day slave.

Interestingly, she is one of the few women migrant workers to have used Kathmandu as a transit point. The Government of Nepal has banned the migration of women as domestic help. So Sabina submitted fake documents claiming she would be working in a hotel. The ban, in isolation, has done little to help women who are willing to risk all to join the Gulf rush. "Sabina writes to us and even calls asking for us to rescue her but there is no way we can help her," says Nirjala Bhattarai, director of Pourakhi.

Most Nepali women who become domestic workers in the Gulf use Delhi and Mumbai as transit points. They obtain passports from local agents who deliver them to prospective employers. Because of restrictive immigration-sponsorship policies that link their visas to their employers, these women

abuse, went ahead with the deal, hoping for the best.

Mankumari suffered psychological, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her employer until she was dumped in the streets one day. Nepali workers who found her took her to the Nepali embassy. She was transferred to jail for a month pending preparation of travel documents, then deported to Nepal. She recalls having felt "safe" in jail.

Over 90 per cent of the estimated 2.6 million Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf and Malaysia are unskilled. The Department of Foreign Employment Promotion records show 232,965 people left last year, of which 4,642 were women. Government records show there are 20,000 Nepali women migrant workers abroad, but a report by the Nepal Institute for Development Studies (NIDS) claims the figure

available to provide information on the destination, workplace safety and labour rights.

The board has also come up with a rescue package for migrant workers who have lost their jobs to the recession. Of the paltry 224 workers who have claimed compensation, none were women. "It might be that women migrant workers work as domestic help, so they are the least affected," says Sthaneshwar Devkota, Executive Director of the board.

But to claim the package, a dismissal notice, a government labour permit and the recruitment agency's receipts are required. "Most of the women migrant workers sought illegal means because of the government's ban on domestic workers," says Bhattarai. "How can the government be so apathetic towards this problem when women make such a significant contribution to the national economy?" ●



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अब सधैँका साथी

Lucky two



Neoteric Nepal and Paramount Electronics, distributors of Nokia, announced the first lucky draw winners of ‘Nokia yaspaliko Dasain Tihar double babal offer’. The winners Bijaya Lal Dangol and Rakesh Harlalka each won Bajaj bikes.

Climate change

As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility program, WorldLink has joined hands with WWF’s Climate for Life to spread awareness about the changing climate in the Himalaya. WorldLink will be supporting the online communications and outreach activities for the campaign.

Winner

‘Signature Golf Challenge’ was organised at Gokarna Golf Club last week. The winner of the tournament was Jung Chul Pyo with 39 stable ford points out of a total of 81 golfers.

Celebration

FOSS Nepal Community celebrated the sixth International Software Freedom Day on 19 September at Yala



Maya Kendra, Lalitpur. Also, Minister for Information and Communication Shankar Pokharel unveiled ‘Nirvikalpa 2.0’, a compilation of free/open source software.

Working better together

Quality of growth was in the minds of policymakers, development practitioners and academics at the Asia Regional Conference held in New Delhi last week. The conclusion of the meeting was that when economic growth takes place, benefits do not always go to the poor.

By encouraging participants to share what has worked in different parts of Asia, the conference sought to look at ways to



STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari

make growth inclusive of the least empowered and the most vulnerable. The stage was set when growth was described as a situation in which, ideally, “there are higher real wages, lower real food prices, and labour market opportunities for the poor”.

A session in which I took part examined how the private sector, the public sector and civil society organisations can forge alliances to provide social protection measures to the poor.

Civil society: Most development-oriented NGOs work to give a voice to the voiceless so that the concerns of the marginalised are represented in public forums and are addressed. The poor often do not have access to healthcare, childcare, pension funds, shelter and basic amenities such as toilets and water. But as we have seen again and again in Nepal, when calamity strikes, political representatives are not the fastest providers of relief.

Given the range of services that the poor need, well-intentioned NGOs face two choices: forever approach donors for

We have to ensure growth includes the poor



KIRAN PANDAY

funding for various activities, or look for ways to organise the poor. The latter, if done well, gives the poor a chance to form cooperatives and alliances that can create partnerships or bargain with the public and the private sectors for the delivery of services and goods. The NGOs’ value-addition work consists of organising the poor, giving them know-how and connecting them to opportunities that match their needs.

One example that came up was that of Sewa Bank, an NGO-run institution in India that collects deposits from the poor and provides basic money-related services to those not yet included in the financial sector. Likewise, once the poor are organised, NGOs can help them set up health cooperatives that bring doctors and medicines to the villages.

The public sector: An enlightened government can design frameworks and regulations that ensure the poor have access to growth opportunities. Vouchers and

subsidies, for instance, have helped poor children attend good schools. Similarly, microfinance, job market training programs and public works such as road-building have helped the poor access opportunities to participate in the formal economy.

In Indonesia, the poor have not suffered as much due to the present global financial crisis as they did ten years ago. This is because the government learnt lessons and proactively set up coping mechanisms such as employment creation programs and health insurance schemes so workers who lost their jobs were not left to fend for themselves.

The private sector: NGOs and communities have been providing some form of insurance to the poor. In recent times, however, various governments have stipulated that private insurance providers serve the poor. As a result, micro-insurance has come up as a commercially viable product. The aim is to help the poor protect themselves financially from calamities and economic shocks.

Even in the face of limited documentation, commercial providers, working in tandem with NGOs, have ventured to provide insurance. In doing so, they have provided better systems of delivering benefits, the marketing muscle to scale up the number of risk-pooling households, and ideas for product innovation.

In Nepal, there is often a sense that civil society, the private sector and the public sector work at cross purposes. The lesson of the conference was that if they work together with the goal of uplifting the poor, they will do much to reduce the vulnerability experienced daily by millions in Nepal. ●

Castaways

FRAN LITTMANN

Early one morning last week a group of six men stood by the roadside in Bhairahawa, sipping anxiously at cups of hot tea. Ten days previously their villages had been visited by Shailaja C.M. and Dilu Tamang of Kathmandu-based NGO The Esther Benjamins Memorial Foundation (EBMF). They’d brought the astonishing news that the men’s sons, nephews and brothers, who had been given up for dead, had been found in children’s homes in Delhi. The men were now waiting with nervous anticipation to join Shailaja and Dilu on the 24-hour bus journey to Delhi to bring the boys home.

The plight of Nepali children in Indian children’s homes first came to EBMF’s attention earlier this year. According to press reports, 500 displaced Nepali children are living in conditions that cater for only the most basic of needs. Their unwilling residents can expect to be discharged onto the streets, homeless and without prospects, once they reach 18.

EBMF research currently underway seeks to get to the bottom of the situation. What are these children doing in Indian children’s homes, and what can be done about it? The initial impression is that many are child-trafficking victims who end up washed up on these desert islands that masquerade as childcare centres. EBMF’s solution is direct action.

Last week’s trip was the final chapter in a trial run to repatriate a group of these incarcerated children. Visits to two Delhi homes earlier this year uncovered six



ROCKY PRAJAPATI

For Nepali boys rescued from south of the border, this Dasain really could mean the victory of good over evil

extremely wary Nepali children. A needle-in-a-haystack search around Nepalganj traced all six families. News of their children’s whereabouts was met with both elation and suspicion. Hardly surprising. The uncle of one of the boys told of rumours of children being kidnapped and burnt alive.

After the successful rescue of three of the boys shortly after their arrival in Delhi, the hopes of the EBMF team were high as they departed for the Philwari Children’s Home to retrieve the other three boys. The necessary paperwork was in place and

significantly, family members were on hand to claim the boys. In spite of this, the father of 13-year-old Raju Chhetri (name changed) maintained he would not believe his son was alive until he saw him with his own eyes.

The party’s confidence was somewhat shaken upon arrival at the home, where the families were greeted by ominous barbed wire topped walls and patrolling guards. Entry to the premises was denied for two hours until a local NGO interceded. In the meantime even photographs outside the perimeter wall were banned by overzealous

security staff.

Forty-five minutes after finally gaining access, Akash Malla, brother of twelve-year-old Suraj Malla (name changed), reappeared ashen-faced. He had been informed that his brother had run away. The home insisted that Suraj had somehow ‘disappeared’ after being taken to hospital for treatment for a minor wound. Akash was doubtful, as there was a medical centre on-site and the details of precisely when Suraj ran away were sketchy. He had not been permitted to see his brother’s file.

But there was respite for others. After battling seemingly insurmountable obstacles related to apparent identity inconsistencies in the paperwork, as well as the inexplicable absence of a key decision-maker from the home, the case went to Court. When the judge demanded a letter of authority from the Nepal Embassy, Raju’s father announced his refusal to leave the court that day without his son. EBMF’s local partner, ChildLine India Foundation, was summoned. Soon afterwards, following discussion of the provisions of the Indian Juvenile Justice Act, the judge relented.

Five days after their journey began, five freed children reached Nepalganj with their families. Our sense of achievement was soured by Akash having to return empty-handed. His only consolation can be that his brother, one of Nepal’s many lost and trapped children in India, remains firmly on EBMF’s ‘missing’ list. More trips south of the border will follow in an effort to bring Nepal’s children back to their rightful home. ●

For further information www.ebtrust.org.uk



KIRAN PANDAY

Byakul Pathak in *Nepal Samacharpatra*, 18 September

समाचारपत्र

Nepal Samacharpatra caught up with Parmanand Jha this week and asked him about life after the Hindi oath row. Translated excerpts:

Nepal Samacharpatra: Now that the Supreme Court has said you're no longer vice president and the government has withdrawn your official security, how are you spending the days?

"I'm very relaxed"

Parmanand Jha: I haven't been outside my house since 30 August. Like at Bahadur Bhawan earlier, I still meet various people, but at my house. I feel like I'm in a state of house arrest somewhat like the democratic leader of Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi. People are even bombing my house now. I'd be beaten up if I left my house.

How does it feel being holed up at home like this?

I am very relaxed. I've no worries and no complications. I haven't felt the need to go out but in any case I haven't been forbidden from doing so. And my pension as a judge has been enough for two meals a day.

Why aren't you leaving home? Are you humiliated that the government has removed the flag and security from your home?

Not at all. It's better not to have a flag that's a matter of debate waving uselessly atop your home and car. Even

though the government has removed the national flag, the same flag will honour my dead body as the first Nepali vice president. And as far as my post is concerned, I am still the vice president. I was elected by six hundred and one CA members, until and unless those members decide otherwise, noone can expel me from the post.

If you were not retaking the oath in Nepali, why did you make the President and the Prime Minister wait for hours on 30 August?

I had met President Ram Baran Yadav twice and Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal thrice to make my stance about retaking the oath clear. Even when the Madhesi parties suggested I retake the oath in Maithili, I'd flatly refused, fearing another controversy. And on 30 August itself, I called a press conference at 1:30PM to announce that I was not retaking the oath. After all this, I see absolutely no reason for them to have waited. It was just a ploy to put the blame on me.

Illegal logging

Bhola Paswan in *Naya Patrika*, 20 September

नयाँ पत्रिका

Loggers have been bribing office-holders of Community Forest User Groups in Saptari district to help them access timber in the national forests of the region. The loggers agree to leave the community forests alone, but pay commissions to post-holders of the user groups. Illegally logged timber from national forests is smuggled to the Indian market with the connivance of said post-



holders. Although the district boasts 218 community forests, only 12 are operating lawfully, according to the District Forest Administration.

But illegal logging is taking place in community forests as well. Says Nasiblal Yadav of Bhimpheedi community forest, "Corruption has ruined the entire forest user's group."

Only this year, 17 bicycles belonging to loggers and 178 lots of timber were discovered in various forests in Saptari.

Poaching

Thakur Singh Tharu in *Nayapatrika*, 20 September

नयाँ पत्रिका

On Friday evening, Madan and Mahendra Tamang were discovered with 5 kg of dried deer meat at a security checkpoint as they were on their way to Kathmandu. Similarly, Anil Thapa of the Armed Police Force was found with a kilo of dried deer meat at the Kailali border. Thapa had handed a carton of the meat to a bus driver going to Kathmandu and told him that someone at Kohlapur would receive it. All three have been charged.



Transport thugs

Editorial in *Annapurna Post*, 20 September

अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट

Public transport, including Tata sumos and minibuses on the highway route connecting Birganj, Hetauda and Kathmandu have suddenly increased their fares. Unsurprisingly, they've taken advantage of the holiday season, when demand for public transport rises. It's obvious that there's collusion between the owners of these vehicles and government bureaucrats. Businessmen especially are behaving unethically. But the people who are supposed to stop these crimes aren't doing much about it. "They may be illegally hiking prices, but we can't pursue them. The vehicles we have at our disposal are all out of order," says a government official.



Whether it's Dasain or Eid, Chhat or Tihar, people will pay a little extra when they have to. Businessmen are fully aware of this. And it's not just happening on the aforementioned routes. Customers are often told there is no transport available. But wait, if you pay a little extra, perhaps

something can be arranged? Once the customer is resigned to this, suddenly the missing transport turns up. Such is the psychological hold the swindlers have over their customers that the latter actually feel as if they have scored a victory when paying double the price. Sometimes they don't even get a valid ticket for their trouble.

If the government is to save its citizens from such scams, it seriously needs to strengthen its follow-up mechanisms. Businessmen, too, need to understand that cheating and lying is no way to do business in the long term.



Boat: Constitution writing
Signpost: Beware, fall ahead

कान्तिपुर Batsayan in *Kantipur*, 13 September



KIRAN PANDAY

“They are afraid of destroying their vote banks”

The industrial town of Hetauda is dominated by workers from a mix of ethnicities and languages. This heterogenous society in the middle of the country desires equality above all in the restructuring of the state. *Himal Khabarpatrika* spoke to residents on the challenges of constitution writing and federalism.

Himal Khabarpatrika: Why has constitution-writing not been able to gain momentum?

Sobin Thing (Secretary, Tamsaling Volunteer Front): There is a conspiracy underway to make the Constituent Assembly meaningless by obstructing the constitution-writing process.

Surya Chandra Neupane (Nepal Red Cross Society): The Maoists think that they have the right to all the power and that “the losers should run away” while the other parties say, “so what if they are the biggest party in the CA, they didn’t get a majority”. This has affected the constitution-writing process.

Pratap Bista (Central Member, Federation of Nepalese Journalists): The parties don’t understand the political realities. They are still thinking in terms of who lost and who won. Each group is thinking of a constitution that suits their interests rather than a good constitution.

Are the political parties incapable of writing the constitution or is it just that they haven’t been able to focus on it?

Rita Khanal (Nepal Trade Union Congress): Not all the parties act according to the commitments they have made. Civil society has not only been unable to raise its voice but has also been influenced by political

interests. Why hasn’t the media been able to expose the Maoists’ lack of interest in writing the constitution?

Rajan Mainali (Human Rights and Peace Society): It’s not fair to say that all civil society is politicised. The political parties themselves tend to call on civil society when they need to but neglect them otherwise. They are dishonest.

Kumar Tamang (Tamsaling Freedom Front): Ethnicity-based political parties have mushroomed, and the mainstream parties fear they will have to grant ethnic autonomy. There is a suspicion that this is why the parties haven’t given priority to constitution-writing.

Bhagwati Pudasaini (Village Women Service Centre): The pessimism of the leadership has killed the hopes of the people that the constitution will be written. The people have to pressurise the parties.

P.B. Gole Tamang (Nepal Democratic Tamang Society Front): There is no doubt that the parties are committed to writing the constitution. They managed to write the interim constitution, hold Constituent Assembly elections, and declare a republic. And recently they elected the chair of the Constitutional Committee and the army integration committee. This gives us hope.

Everyone is committed to restructuring the state. But they haven’t been able to come to an agreement. Why is this?

Shiva Prasad Koirala (Civilian Support Front): We only have 7-8 months to complete the constitution but the parties are not clear on what kind of federalism they want. The people understood that cross-party

agreement was necessary – this is why they didn’t give any of them an absolute majority. Federalism should also be based on a similar division of power.

Sobin Thing: The Maoists used ethnic and regional slogans but once they were in power they resigned rather than fulfill their promises. The song speaks of a garland of a hundred flowers but some are still trying to ensure the garland is made up of a single kind of flower.

Mukunda Prasad Adhikari (Bar Court, Hetauda): History shows that haste makes a hash of things. We should learn this from the interim constitution. The other thing is rather than the political parties directing the ethnic groups, there is a risk the ethnic groups may control the parties. This could lead to conflict.

Krishna Prasad Dahal (UML): The confusion of the parties regarding federalism has slowed the constitution-writing process. Truth be told, they are afraid of destroying their vote banks.

If federalism leads to trouble is there a possibility of a return to a unitary state?

Keshab Prasad Kafle (Principal, Hetauda Campus): The nation has already decided to go for federalism, there is no going back.

Amrit Kumar Lama (Lawyer): We cannot turn our backs on federalism and democracy. It is because the state did not consider the peoples of Magarant, Tamsaling, Limbuwan and the Madhes first and foremost Nepalis that this problem arose. But these people should also think of themselves as Nepali.

“A strong CA isn’t enough”

Kiran Gurung, UML CA member, Tanahun-3

How did you spend the last year in the CA?

A lot of time passes just meeting in our committees. Sometimes, we have to attend meetings outside our committees. When meetings are delayed, we spend time doing party business and meeting friends.

Unicameral or bicameral system?

A bicameral system is best, because in Nepali society a unicameral system can’t capture the majority of people’s views. That’s why the Form of Legislative Body Committee is heading towards instituting a bicameral system.

Is there a solution to the deadlock on the language issue?

Yes, but only if we first separate Nepali languages from foreign ones. We should make the predominant language the official state language, otherwise the language problems will return.

The problems are adding up. Will the constitution be done on time?

Only if our leaders stop being so selfish and put aside their differences. Otherwise, we’ll never pull ourselves out of this mess.

Should the Parliament or the Supreme Court interpret the constitution?

The Supreme Court, definitely. This way, we can preserve the separation of powers and equilibrium between branches of government. Right now the parties are being very selfish. Leaders need to bring about an agreement soon.

People are complaining that the CA isn’t able to work. What do you think?

Everyone needs to work together to get the constitution done on time, including the big parties, the thematic committees, the government, and everyone else involved. The big parties have equally big responsibilities. After all, the CA is comprised of party members. The leaders have to put aside their differences.



“Big leaders are hurdles”



Mohammad Istiyak Rai, MJF CA member, Banke-2

How have you spent the last year in the CA?

The CA hasn’t been able to work properly because the parties have been stubborn. There’s a lot of disagreement in the assembly. They haven’t been able to advance people’s interests and the cause of basic human equality.

In that case, will the constitution ever be done?

We can make it even in two days. But it’s taken so long because our selfish leaders get in the way, instead of working for the country’s progress. This is why it looks increasingly improbable that the constitution will be written on time.

Unicameral or bicameral system?

A bicameral system would be best but the president should have full executive authority.

What should be the official state language?

Both Nepali and Hindi. Hindi is understood by Maithili, Bhojpuri, Urdu speakers, and people in the hills and the Himalaya.

You have a Muslim first name but your last name is Rai. How come?

I’m Muslim, but in my community, many of those who deal in vegetables are given ‘Rai’ as a last name.

Do you think the country will splinter under ethnic federalism?

No. On the contrary, it will be more cohesive. If oppressed and marginalised groups can lay claim to some province, they will be more likely to call Nepal their own too.



CONTRASTING LEGACIES: Some houses have fared better than others



COMING HOME: The Mugali Thapas take their gods for a spin

The land of

TEXT AND PICTURES BY RABI THAPA

The living culture of the Mugali Thapas stands in utter contrast to the dilapidated houses of Muga

In 'Empty, Stately Thapagaun' (#330), Himali Dixit wondered if modernisation would draw the Mugali Thapas back to their ancestral homes in the hilly backwaters of Muga. The seasonal road from Pakhribas, an hour by bus northwest from Dhankuta, is a significant advance on the days of horses, palanquins and good old-fashioned walking. But if today's professional, metropolitan Thapas are too preoccupied with life in Dharan, Biratnagar and Kathmandu to consider getting back to their roots, what of their children, to whom Muga may seem as remote a prospect as Mugu?

On the face of it, Muga is simply another sparsely inhabited VDC spread across barren, reddish hills...but the two-hour stroll from Pakhribas gives me an idea why my parents are so pleased I'm visiting my ancestral village. The grand brick and mortar edifices the baby boomer generation of Mugali Thapas was born in are visible from hills away. Testament to the imagination and determination of the prosperous men who commissioned them, the Thapa houses are quite outlandish in their scale, relative to the mundanely charming cottages they tower over. In such a way must the Mugali Thapas themselves have dominated the Ghimires, Rais and Kamis they drew unto themselves as they settled

far east of their *Pokhrel*i origins in the wake of the Gorkhali conquest of Nepal 250 years ago.

But what remains of the feudal legacy of the Mugali Thapas? It's not to be found in the shell of former Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa's 40-room mansion, firebombed by the Maoists in 2004, down the hill (*above left, bottom*). Nor is it in the half-dozen mostly abandoned residences that make up Muga's skyline. Close up you see what damage time and neglect have wrought. But tradition dies harder. This year, Thapas gathered by the hundreds for the triennial clan Dewali to honour their clan gods Seto Bara and Bindabasini. The living culture of the Mugali Thapas stands in utter contrast to the dilapidated houses of Muga.

The day before the Dewali, we wend our slow way to Muga. Scores of Thapas and 400-odd rather bewildered sacrificial goats, or *boka*, disembark as a steady drizzle obscures the hills. Long-lost cousins step forward to welcome us. The Thapa men—doctors, engineers, bankers, bureaucrats, farmers and the odd writer—introduce themselves by the names of their fathers and grandfathers, to polite rounds of applause. Then we scatter, glancing up from under our umbrellas at the grey firmament.

We awake on the clearest day imaginable to the



f my fathers



BOKA, BANISHED:
One of 400 goats exits
the corporeal world

delightfully unfamiliar panorama of the Makalu range. By seven, the clan has converged on the simple cottage housing their gods. To the melodic racket of a *panchebaja*, the Thapa *dhamis* (priests) whoop and holler, clashing their cymbals as they hop around the house. As the urn representing Bindabasini emerges from the dark interior, festooned with long strips of red, white, blue and yellow, the womenfolk jostle each other for a holy touch. The men then bring out a veiled hammock, under which a silver basin filled with lighted oil lamps is concealed. Following the stream of joyous devotion, I take turns to shoulder the hammock.

A drawn out *puja* later, the killing begins. With the gods installed in an enclosure of bamboo and leaves, the *bokas* are led to the slaughter. And what a slaughter! A *boka* barely has the time to stare uncomprehendingly at the gory pyramid of heads in front of him before he's seized by the front legs, made to straddle a bloodied chopping block and *chhyaakk!* Down flashes the blade and the animal's head, open eyes unseeing, tongue curling, joins the rest. Its torso, spurting blood, is raised to the lips of the *dhami*, then flung up and out to land where it might in the dust outside, to the exclamations of a sea of villagers. The pagan imagery of the *dhami*, cymbals raised to welcome

each offering, face and white robes drenched with bright gout of the reddest blood, is the enduring image of the Dewali.

It's late when we finish feeding the several hundred villagers present. The hillside is covered in paper and leaf plates, bones and beaten rice. The Thapas haul their offerings home, leaving just as abruptly as they have showed up. Muga is emptied of its festive vitality, once again, just another Nepali village. And what do I feel? Rooted? Muga was hardly even a place of imagined myth for me. What does it mean to me now I have seen something of my past?

In the dimming evening, the empty windows of the Thapa mansions glare at me accusingly. The simple loveliness of the hills gives air to my pastoral longings. Could I, like my uncle Ajit Narayan Singh Thapa, join in the endeavour to educate the local children and nurse one of the Thapa houses back to life (*above left, top*)? Could I also tolerate joining to the age-old system of patronage? Perhaps I will choose to step back into my past, and find some part of my future in it. For now, discovering the land of my fathers is reward enough. ●

WARM WELCOME:
A TIA official goes
through the motions



KIRAN PANDAY

DASAIN FEVER

SUVAYU DEV PANT

An outbreak of the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, could dampen the holiday cheer this Dasain as Nepalis flock home from flu hotspots abroad and fan out into the countryside. The danger is clear and present, but the government hasn't stepped up measures to keep out the deadly virus.

Nepal has remained largely untouched by swine flu despite the heavy toll it has taken in India, where close to 200 people have already died. So far, only 35 people have contracted the virus here, and there have been no deaths. Of these, two were foreign tourists and 28 were Nepali workers returning from abroad. The remaining five caught it from recently returned family members and friends.

These numbers may understate the flu's true prevalence since the spot checks conducted at Tribhuvan International Airport, where the government has a health desk to scan new arrivals for symptoms of the flu, are inadequate.

"They simply check temperatures and have people fill out questionnaires. That isn't enough, we don't know if we've actually detected most cases of swine flu," warns Sameer Dixit, Country Director of

the Center for Molecular Dynamics.

Dixit has joined a chorus of people calling on the government to allow private labs to test for the flu. The government has so far refused to sanction this, out of concern for the costs and the reliability of tests.

"If they offer to do it for free, then sure, they can test. But will they?" wonders a dubious Jitendra Man Shrestha of the Avian Influenza Project at the Ministry of Health.

However, experts are widely agreed that the low official figures are fair estimates.

Epidemiologist Raj Kumar Mahat, who coordinates health desk activity at the airport, says that fewer and fewer people are feverish upon arrival, even as the number of arrivals has jumped from about 2200 a day to up to 3100 a day. The World Health Organization says the intensity level of the flu in Nepal is 'low'.

Yet this may only be the lull before the storm as unknowing carriers of the flu,

which has an incubation time of 7-10 days, come home from abroad this Dasain. Many will return from flu hotspots like Mumbai and the state of Bihar where they work in cramped and cloistered spaces like restaurant kitchens, making them especially vulnerable.

"There is definitely increased risk of an outbreak during Dasain as more people

migrate back to the country," warns Shrestha.

Cooler temperatures, which are favourable to flu outbreaks, could make matters worse. Experts at a regional conference held in Kathmandu on 7 September warned of a 'winter resurgence' of the flu that could sweep through much of south and

southeast Asia, including Nepal.

Ominously, the flu has shown surprising resilience during the warmer spring and summer months. Experts worry that if it's this bad already, we really should be prepared for the winter.

Has the Nepali government stepped up

Swine flu cases may rise this Dasain but the government hasn't stepped up preparations

measures to combat the flu? No. There have been no additions to the health desk at the airport, which hasn't received any special Dasain directives. Dixit says he hasn't come across the government's Dasain contingency plan. And checkpoints along the southern and western borders remain relaxed.

"It's almost impossible to screen everyone that comes across the border," says Shrestha. There are currently 50 checkpoints along the border, 18 of which see a lot of traffic, but seven of these are ill-equipped.

Besides these border checkpoints and the airport health desk, Nepal's preparations include 40 rapid response teams across the country, a number of surveillance teams, and government aid to a couple of prominent hospitals to enable them to provide special treatment and buy the necessary drugs and equipment.

So what else can we do to steer clear of swine flu this Dasain? The age-old mode of greeting people with a folded-hand Namaste may minimise risk of transmission. But in the age of hugs and handshakes this may not go down too well, as some sociable but conscientious types have discovered already. In the meantime, Shrestha suggests, "Wash your hands." ●

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Vegetarianism for vegetables

INDU NEPAL

You know when you dress a slab of steak with some herbs and pepper, and let it sizzle in the pan while the aroma of the marinade fusing with the trickle of fat fills the room? Then you cut a neat little piece and chew it gently, releasing a burst of meaty flavours in your mouth? I hate that taste. Some people have an aversion to broccoli – I dislike meat. That’s why I have been a vegetarian for 15 years. People seem disappointed when they hear this, expecting a cause bigger than myself. Should I be channelling my culinary preference into a philosophy for life? It seems I have already wasted 15 years. I need a cause pronto! How hard can it be? Dasain is around the corner: goats are being herded for the kill

Was the insurgency caused by non-vegetarians?

and vegetarians are up in arms. Ten days ago, the Animal Sacrifice Awareness Campaign – based out of Ram Mandir in Battispatali – organised a rally in Kathmandu urging an end to animal sacrifice. I like this. During Dasain, there seems to be more emphasis on killing the animal than in eating meat. I can support a cause against gratuitous violence. The rally’s organisers believe that halting unnecessary violence promotes peace in society. “The country is in this state because

VEGGIE PEACE: Hindu devotees urge people to go vegetarian and respect animal rights at a rally in Kathmandu



RAM HUMAGAI

murder and violence is so easy. Today you slaughter a goat, tomorrow a buffalo, and who knows, the day after, it could be a man,” says Indra Acharya of the campaign. Wait! What? Was the insurgency caused by non-vegetarians? “Hoina, we are just trying to create a violence-free society.” So, does everyone need to become a vegetarian to achieve that? “Yes.” Was there a direct correlation between George W. Bush’s fondness for Texas barbecue and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Do we collectively need to hear the cry of the goats in our stomachs like Gandhi before we can achieve a peaceful world? This seems a little implausible. I may be a vegetarian, but it will take a meatier argument to convince me. Maybe I am looking in the wrong place.

microbus with 29 other people. So I keep looking. Then I discover the Quan Yin movement, which strives for spiritual upliftment by prescribing five guidelines: no meat, drugs, lying, thievery, or ‘immoral’ sex. The movement’s contact in Nepal, Amit Karki, says meat brings ‘heavy karma’, while the goal is lightness of body and spirit. “We have also been connecting this to global warming. Eighty per cent of global warming is caused by meat consumption.” Bingo! This is what I am looking for: a rational, scientific argument. I visit their website expecting information linking meat-eating to global warming. Instead, I am greeted by an epilepsy-inducing site plastered with photos of the movement’s Supreme Master Ching Hai. I am not so sure I can trust a lady with badly dyed blonde hair to advise me on spiritual upliftment. Furthermore, despite Karki’s claim, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that meat production accounts for only one fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions. Ultimately, I am not sure whether I am even qualified to tell people why vegetarianism is a good choice. I am underweight, have abnormally low blood pressure, and I feel dizzy if I climb more than two flights of stairs. I am also anaemic, like one third of the women in this country. While some movements may lump the consumption of meat with vices like drug abuse and robbery, I think it’s generally accepted that we are, in fact, omnivores. As we cherish people’s choices to rally in New Road, or seek spiritual guidance from a lady with a bad hairdo, should we also not respect their right to choose what they eat? ●

Indecent proposal

Nisha was 22 years old when the Maoists killed her husband and bombed her house. She couldn’t even perform the last rites of her husband as she had to flee Bardia with her in-laws and daughter. For several years now, she has been working alone to support her family in Kathmandu. Whatever she earns goes to her family. In a country where widows are only seen in a negative light, Nisha wants to live in peace with her daughter. She doesn’t expect anything from the state or from society except the right to live with dignity.



INTERESTING TIMES
Mallika Aryal

In the 2009-2010 budget the government announced that it would provide Rs 50,000 to a couple where the man had married a widow. This is one of the most callous, thoughtless and rash decisions the government of Nepal has taken in recent years. As if women didn’t already have enough to struggle against. Marriage is a deeply personal decision, and linking that decision to money demeans women. In Nepali society, widows are considered bad luck, blamed for their husband’s passing and are allowed absolutely no rights. Campaigns by women’s groups have worked hard against such discrimination and have been successful in many parts of Nepal. It hasn’t been easy for the movement: widows have been insulted, spit upon, beaten up and thrown out of homes. However, they have had small successes and the attitude of people has changed in many places. Fathers-in-law have stepped forward and given red shawls to their widowed daughters-in-law, parents have encouraged their single daughters to go out and learn skills and many widowed women in their villages have been exemplars of change.

The government hasn’t thought through its callous decision to put price tags on women

When a government makes decision as big as this without understanding the repercussions it proves how short-sighted those at the policymaking level are. By attaching marriage to money the government is making women dependent on men once again. “A man marries me and we get Rs 50,000. Why do I have to be dependent on any man to feel secure?” asks Nisha. Further, the majority of widowed women have kids. In a society where abuse of children is rampant, what happens to the children of these women when they marry? Will the government guarantee that their children will be safe from abuse and exploitation? The conflict left many women widowed. Government data is limited, but Women for Human Rights (WHR), an organisation that works with single women, says that there are 44,000 widows in the 225 villages of Nepal where it works. If they all decided to remarry, it would cost the government over Rs 1 billion. What about the 3600 other villages in Nepal? Where is the government going to get the money to fund its largesse? And is remarriage the only option for widows? What about those who do not want to remarry? This is a country where girls are trafficked for Rs 5,000, sometimes by their family members, and by sometimes men who promise to marry them and give them a better life. Rs 50,000 is a big jump from Rs 5,000. What the government doesn’t realise is that by attaching money to women, it is indirectly encouraging trafficking. In other countries widows are respected, provided compensation, health facilities, education for their children and even housing. When the husband of a Nepali woman dies, the government does nothing. Only those single women who are 60 years old receive a pension of Rs 500 a month. Most women don’t even know about this, and with an average life expectancy of 66, can hardly count on the pension as old-age support. Providing monetary compensation has its limitations, especially if the widow has children. The government should be thinking about long-term goals – providing skills training so that single women can go out, look for a job and bring home income every month. It should also provide access to education for the children of widows. Due to pressure from groups such as WHR the implementation of the marriage bonus hasn’t started. WHR is in dialogue with policymakers but if push comes to shove they say they will come out into the streets to protest. The government may have lost its way, but thankfully our women’s movement is right on track. ●

Lobsters on land

The sea reaches us in more ways than one

That Nepal is a landlocked country is a truism taught to every school-going child. What the child is not taught is to conclude that therefore Nepal has no ships, no sailors, no whales and, alas, no lobsters.

Thankfully, the shortage of lobsters is now up for reconsideration. Three months ago, the eponymous restaurant opened at Kathmandu's coolest new address – the Sherpa Mall on Darbar Marg.

What one first notices upon entering Lobsters is that it is spacious. Spread over 8,000 square feet, and with more than 50 smartly dressed and eager-to-serve hotel management graduates as staff, Lobsters can seat up to 250 guests at any one time.

All that space, plus the two private rooms where one can also smoke the hookah, seems perfect for corporate heads or family patriarchs looking to a rent a restaurant for their Dasain-Tihar parties. The terrace, which overlooks the goings-on down the street, is usually filled with young professionals chilling out after work. And the outdoor patio is an ideal venue for barbecue gatherings.

Lobsters' indoor décor is



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

soothing and contemporary yet eye-pleasingly understated. In fact, it could be anywhere in Sydney, London or New York. The menu is extensive, but seafood is the obvious draw.

Jumbo prawns, mussels, squid, oysters, crab, red snapper and lobsters go well with the wine and the cocktails available at the bar. Seafood is brought in

from Singapore and Thailand, where it is packed and transported to Nepal in the most hygienic conditions. Right next to the open-display kitchen at Lobsters, there's a cold storage room where the seafood is kept fresh, and new supplies are brought in on a regular basis.

Despite its rapid popularity – the place was full both times we

were there – Lobsters appears to have cultivated two myths in the short span of its existence.

First, that it serves only seafood. Not true. Yes, the restaurant's name gives it a distinctive identity in the sea of look-alike Kathmandu restaurants. But this reviewer, who visited the restaurant with two vegetarians, was pleasantly

surprised that Thai, Chinese, Indian and Continental dishes could be ordered and enjoyed. In fact, the butter naan and vegetables were superb. The management told us that plans are afoot to serve Mexican food.

The second myth is that Lobsters is expensive. But that depends on what you eat. Sure, ordering the signature dish to be shared at your table can set you back by a little more than Rs 4,000, which seems steep even when you are told that's the 'cost price' of the lobster.

But you can have a filling lunch for just Rs 199. On Wednesday nights, the seafood buffet can be had for Rs 750. The price of a non-seafood platter with noodles, for instance, is comparable to that at any other top-flight Kathmandu restaurant, making Lobsters a delight for those who know what food and drinks to order.

The entrepreneurs behind Lobsters must be applauded for their determination to go through with an ambitious concept. They have succeeded with a multi-cuisine restaurant that offers a new dining experience for Nepalis – salt-water offerings in a fresh-water country. ●

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Respect your elders, or go to hell

In recent years, horror films have taken a turn for the grotesque and the sadistic, demanding firm constitutions of their audiences. Fans are now more proud of their capacity to tough out the gore on offer than concerned about whether they're scared witless or not. The humour, fun and the DIY delight, if you excuse the pun, has been bled out of the horror genre.



CRITICAL CINEMA
A Angelo D'Silva

This is all a preamble to how welcome this critic (whose guts flip at the sight of, well, guts) finds the return of Sam Raimi (of Evil Dead fame) to the horror genre, following his tenure at the helm of the Spider Man franchise. Guts stay safely on the inside, but thrills, chills and laughs abound in Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell*.

The one-time ultra-low budget filmmaker now has a much bigger purse, allowing him to add polish even as he relies on insinuation and almost slap-stick action for most of the scares and laughs. After she denies a gypsy woman an extension on her home loan, loan officer Christine Browne (Lohman) falls victim to a curse that decrees that after being tormented by a demonic spirit for three days, it will literally, as the title suggests, drag her to hell.

Drag Me to Hell is a sequence of entertaining, deliciously wicked, funny and often gross set-pieces, (including the now-famous, incongruous smackdown between the toothless old lady hell-bent on revenge and poor Christine attempting to stave her off with a series of stationery implements). The plot, if you could call it that, is propelled by Christine's dawning realisation of her predicament – yes, a malevolent supernatural force is actually going to drag her to



hell – and her growing desperation to save herself. The meek Christine is transformed into a spunky and determined heroine ready to protect the life she has carefully planned, with its aspirations to a middle-management position and a boyfriend above her social station. The success of the film pivots on the performance of its lead, and Lohman delivers wonderfully, capturing the hand-wringing guilt and insecurities of her character, the right degree of disgust at the humiliations she has to endure, and the gritty resourcefulness she eventually comes up with.

Horror movies are often considered modern-day morality tales, and director Raimi has clearly stated his intention to have *Drag Me to Hell* continue in this vein. But even as it operates on the level of the typically thin moralism of the genre ('don't be mean to old ladies or an old witch is going to chew on your face and a demon is going to drag you to hell', in this case), *Drag Me to Hell* is amenable to a deeper interpretation. It probes the degree of suffering we tolerate, indeed cause, in our society for the sake of narrow self-interest or a sense of security. Christine's futile effort to extricate herself from her culpability points to the damning depth of her complicity – and by extension our complicity – to the suffering and anguish of others. In Christine's case, her lack of compassion is dressed up as protocol and business interest that masks her personal ambition, but aren't we all alienated from the suffering of our fellow humans in some way and profiting from their misery? Luckily for viewers who aren't interested in asking questions of such a philosophical bent, *Drag Me to Hell* will prove thrilling and funny as all hell. ●

Drag Me to Hell
Director: Sam Raimi
Cast: Alison Lohman, Lorna Raver, Justin Long, Dileep Rao
2009. PG-13. 99 mins.

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ABOUT TOWN

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EVENTS

- ❖ **Patan Press Club**, meets every Thursday at Dhokaima Café, 6PM, 5522113
- ❖ **Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre**, Tai Chi 10-11.30AM, Yoga 8.30-9.30AM and Meditation 5-6PM weekdays, Keshar Mahal Marg, Thamel, 4410402

MUSIC

- ❖ **Baja gaja**, every Tuesday at Moksh, Pulchok, 7.30PM onwards, 5526212
- ❖ **Live band** every Friday and rooftop bbq everyday at Kausi Kitchen, Darbar Marg, 4227288
- ❖ **Sunday Jazz brunch** barbecue and live jazz music at the Terrace, Hyatt Regency, 12-3.30PM, 4491234
- ❖ **Jazz evening** at Delices de France Restaurant every Wednesday, 11AM-2PM, 4260326
- ❖ **Some like it hot** every Friday BBQ and live music by Dinesh Rai and the Sound Minds, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarika's Hotel, 7PM onwards, 4479488
- ❖ **Happy cocktail hour**, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Jatra Café & Bar, Thamel, 5-7PM
- ❖ **Nepali Ghajals** and songs at D'Lounge Beijing Duck Restaurant, every Thursday 6.30PM onwards, 4468589
- ❖ **Rudra Night** live fusion music by Shyam Nepali every Friday, 7PM at Gokarna Forest Resort, 4451212

DINING

- ❖ **Chocolate, Coffee and Caramel**, every evening at The Lounge, 4.30-6.30PM, 4491234
- ❖ **A cafe's café**, Dhokaima Café, Patan Dhoka, 5522113
- ❖ **Jazzbell Café**, relaunched at Jhamsikhel, 2114075
- ❖ **The Corner Bar**, 5-7PM, 3-11PM, Radisson Hotel Kathmandu, 4411818
- ❖ **Al Fresco**, for home made pasta, steak and freshwater trout, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 4273999
- ❖ **Kakori**, for bryanis, curries and kebabs, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 7-10.45PM
- ❖ **Chez Caroline** for French and Mediterranean cuisine, Babar Mahal Revisited, 4263070
- ❖ **Mediterranean cuisine** every Friday from Greece, Italy and the Middle East at The Café, Hyatt Regency, 4491234
- ❖ **Teppanyaki** meat items and garlic rice at Le Resturant, Gairidhara, 4436318
- ❖ **Plat Du Jour** at Hotel Shangri-La, Lazimpat, Rs 600, 4412999
- ❖ **Reality Bites**, The Kaiser Café, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika's Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM, 4425341
- ❖ **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-La with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards, 4412999
- ❖ **Himalayan Rainbow Trout** at Hotel Yak and Yeti, Darbar Marg, 4248999
- ❖ **Tiger for Breakfast**, breakfast everyday at 1905, Kantipath, 4215068
- ❖ **Stupa View Restaurant**, for vegetarian creations & clay oven
- ❖ **Pizza at Boudha Stupa**, 4480262
- ❖ **Gokarna Forest Resort** for a variety of sizzlers at Tripti bar, 4451212

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- ❖ **Dhulikhel Lodge Resort** offers an overnight stay for Rs 1600 till 30 Sep, 4222389
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- ❖ **Tiger Mountain**, offers a safari at Tiger Tops, Chitwan National Park or Karnali Lodge & Camp this Dasain, 4361500



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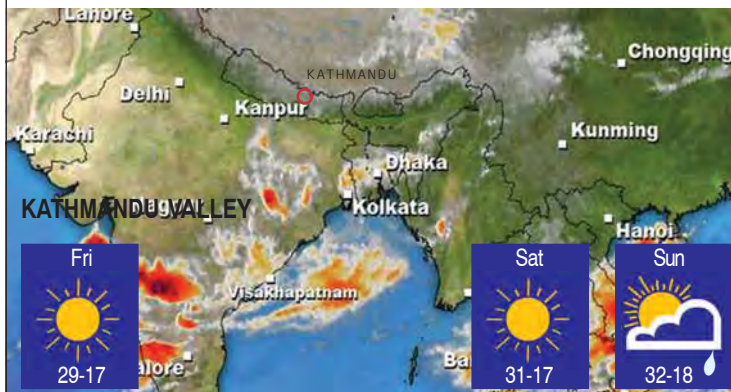
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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

We're in the midst of a monsoon break, which means technically the monsoon is still here although as far as official estimates go it should have ended on Wednesday. Monsoonal winds from the Bay of Bengal are still circulating but owing to dry conditions haven't picked up enough moisture to cause precipitation. However, the winds will moderate daytime temperatures, so expect more comfortable days. Good news for kite enthusiasts, but we may not have seen the back of the monsoon quite yet.



RECIPES

by GRAHAM SYDNEY

Cape Malay Pickled Fish

(Serves 4)

This recipe has both Southern African and South Asian influences and one can use either saltwater or freshwater fish.

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 kg | boneless fish fillet |
| 500g | sliced onion |
| 2 tablespoons | ginger paste |
| 1 tablespoon | garlic paste |
| 2 tablespoons | curry masala |
| ¼ cup | vinegar |
| ¼ cup | sugar |
| ½ teaspoon | red chilli powder |
| juice of 2 lemons | |
| salt & pepper to taste | |
| some flour | |
| some oil | |
| a little water | |

Cut the fish into 5 cm pieces. Season well and dust in flour. In a little oil, brown the fish on both sides and set to one side. To make the dressing lightly fry the onion, garlic and ginger until soft before adding the chilli powder, curry masala and the sugar. Add the vinegar, lemon juice, a little water and season with salt and pepper. Place the fish in the dressing and allow to stand in the refrigerator overnight. Serve with a salad.



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Recently de-classified ads

Since the festive season has begun, the state of emergency has been lifted, and street protests are once more allowed to snarl traffic, we can finally allow previously censored notices from our classified section to the see the light of daytime:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

It is hereby notified to all concerned that this year's Dasain Festival has been postponed. The festival was originally supposed to be held in five phases starting 11 October, but has been put off because of rowdy behaviour by our rulers. All concerned should



UNDER MY HAT
Kunda Dixit

watch this space for new dates, but expect it to be held in April 2003, or thereabouts. Goats and buffalos earmarked for martyrdom will now be

allowed to carry on with their daily lives until such time as they may again be required to be decapitated in the epic struggle of good against evil. For further information, contact the Department of Sacrifices.

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HEALING

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Contact: ursleepy_verysleepy_urasleep@snore.com

POLITICS

Is there a technocrat in you? Do you have what it takes to be in the New Cabinet? Then you may be just the guy we've been looking for, but can't find. Meet us tomorrow morning before dawn at Nag Pokhari for walk-in interview. Bring cv with poster-size photograph. Password: Happy Days Are Here Again.

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SPORTS

Immediate job openings for at least 15 Nepali athletes in the category boxing, shooting and weight-lifting at South Korean sausage factory. Attractive salary, free hot dogs for lunch. Contact: Relatives in the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area.

VACANCY

Chief Executive Joker required for Nepal's top newspaper. Incumbent is losing it.

The Ass is on holiday until the issue of Oct. 9, so we have reprinted an Under My Hat column by Kunda Dixit from Nepali Times #115, 11-17 October 2002. For Under My Hat archives go to: www.nepalitimes.com

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