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NEW YEAR 2058 11

EXCLUSIVE

## Postmortem

The death in one week of nearly 100 Nepalis in the Maoist insurgency shocked the nation and seems to have put pressure on both the government and the Maoists to act. Maoist leaders Chairman Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai have been doing the rounds meeting people like Ramesh Nath Pandey, the king's nominee in the National Assembly, CP Mainali, of the CPN-ML, former-Panchayat stalwarts and other senior figures.

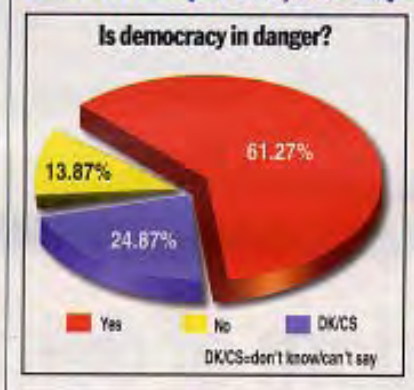
Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has been under great moral and political pressure this week and met the army, police and senior cabinet colleagues to thrash out a new strategy which he took to King Birendra on Wednesday. The king's approval for an ordinance to deploy a paramilitary force will boost morale in the police and (many hope) ultimately force the two sides to get down to talks. Sources tell us the Maoists' meetings with politicos was to send feelers that they want a face-saving way to join the mainstream. The latest offensive was to bolster their bargaining position. Let's see if it will work.

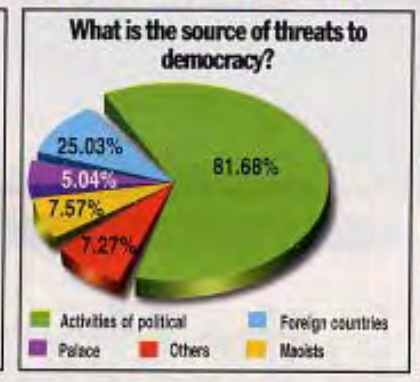
## BLACKOUTS

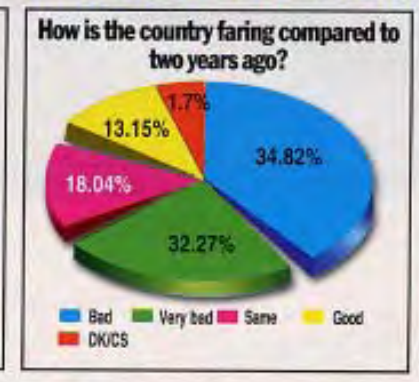
Why again? How much longer? p. 7

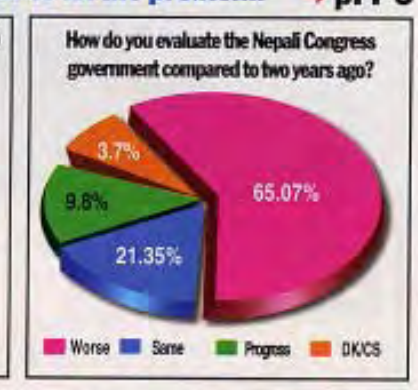
# We, the people

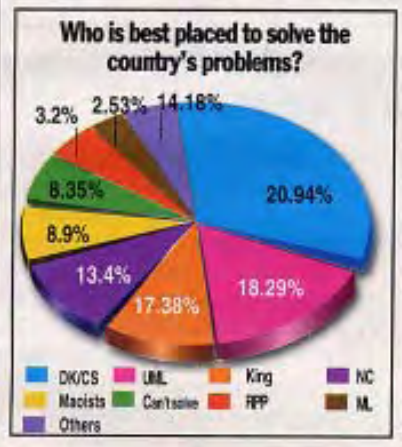
**Two years ago, Himalmedia and ORG-Marg Nepal conducted Nepal's first-ever nationwide scientific public opinion poll in the run-up to the 1999 General Election. The two teamed up again this month for a follow-up survey, interviewing a random sample of 3,902 Nepalis from all over the country (61 village development committees in 20 districts) and from all walks of life. This is what the Nepali people have to say about the state of the nation, this is how they analyse why things have gone wrong, and this what they think the leaders they elected should do to fix the problem.** ➡ p.4-5

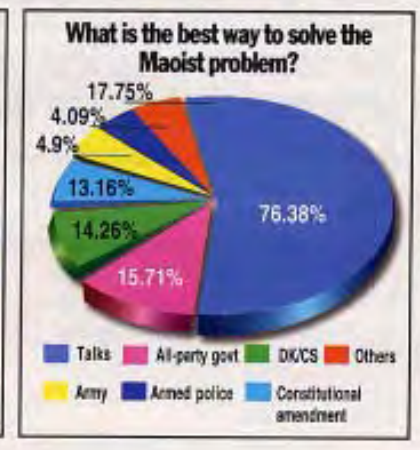


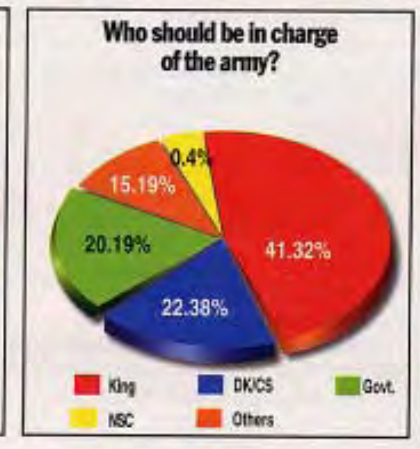



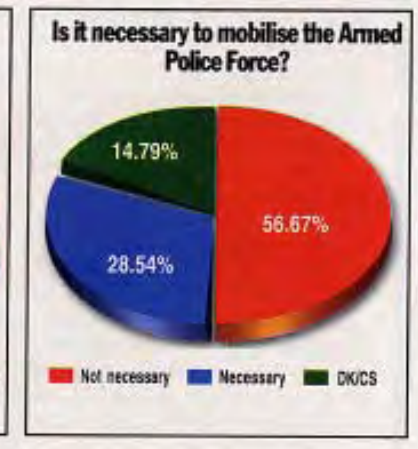



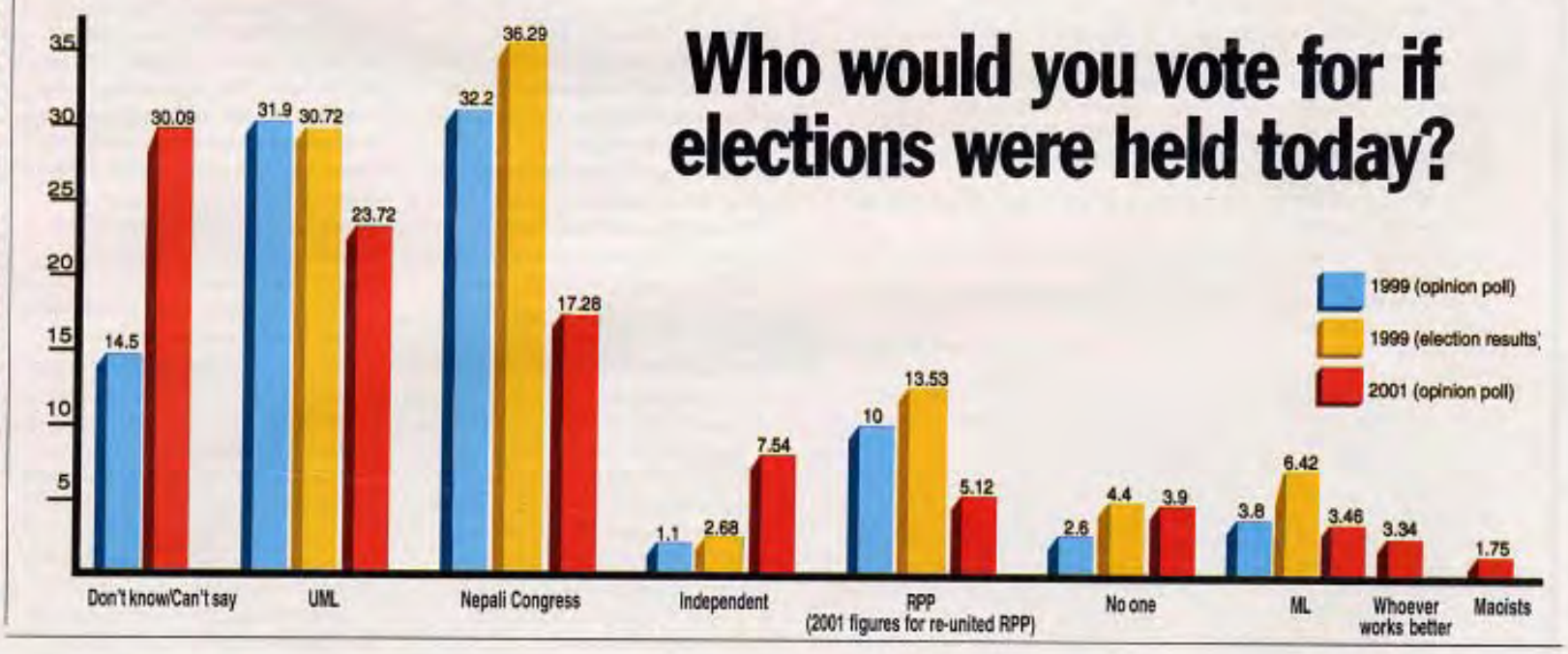

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CHANDRA SHEKHAR KARKI/KANTIPUR

Times

# PEOPLE, POWER AND POLITICS

As 19-year-old school student Kushal Regmi told us recently: "Politics is no way to run a country." That is the wisdom of a young Nepali worried about the kind of future we are leaving behind for his generation. As the year 2057 drew to a close, we in Himalmedia went out all over Nepal with the polling agency, ORG-Marg, and asked 4,000 Nepalis young and old, city dwellers and villagers, men and women, employed and jobless about which way the country is headed.

Politics is not an end in itself, politics in a democracy is the means towards an end. Ultimately, politics must bring people the chance to live secure and more decent lives. Otherwise politics is just a rat race, which is what it has become in this country 11 precious years after the restoration of democracy. (For the kind of hopes we had in 1990, read *Kathmandu Spring* by Kiyoko Ogura, reviewed on page 6).

The result of our survey, and its comparison to a similar one we did two years ago give us a sample of the national mood. And we see dillusionment bordering on disgust. However, there are a few things an overwhelming numbers of Nepalis are sure about: they want peace and security, they want an end to bandhs and chakka jams, and they want development. Above all, they are sick of political infighting in Kathmandu, and blame squabbling politicians for putting democracy in danger.

Every year on New Year's Day, the Nepali people have to listen to messages from their rulers in Kathmandu. Well, for a change this year, the Nepali people are sending a message to the rulers. Our rulers are busy fellows, so we have taken the liberty of summarising below what the people have to say:

- Most Nepalis are against the Maoist insurgency and want an end to the violence through talks.
- Many don't want the army involved, they don't want an armed police force.
- A majority say the root of the Maoist crisis is poverty, joblessness and corruption and that is where solutions should be found.
- Six out of every ten Nepalis think that compared to two years ago the country (and they) are worse off.
- And why are we worse off? Three-fourths of all Nepalis think it is because the ruling Nepali Congress can't get its act together.
- Q: What are Nepal's biggest problems? A: Joblessness, inflation, corruption, peace and security, development. (In that order)
- Sixty percent think democracy is in danger, and among those, most think the threat comes from the inability of political parties and leaders to rule properly.
- If elections were held tomorrow who would you vote for? Thirty percent are undecided, 24 percent would go UML, Nepali Congress would get 17 percent. Only 1.75 percent would vote for the Maoists.
- Nearly 17.4 percent of respondents felt only the king can save the country from its present crisis. He came third after the undecideds and the UML (18.29 percent).

So, unlike what we in Kathmandu think, most Nepalis have not given up on democracy. They still have a hope that elections will set things right. They blame the present crop of politicians for messing things up, and squandering hard-earned freedoms. Two years ago, 79 percent of respondents thought politicians were responsible for giving democracy a bad name, today 82 percent think so. Two years ago, only one percent thought the Maoist insurgency was a problem, today 19 percent think so. The popularity of the Nepali Congress has gone down from 31 percent before the last elections two years ago to 17 percent today.

The moral of the story: the Nepali people know exactly what is going on, they have a fairly good idea what is needed to set things right, they have a list of priorities they want addressed urgently, and they are keeping close tabs on politicians in Kathmandu.

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STATE OF THE STATE

by **CK LAL**

# In the kingdom of dementia

## We seem to have lost control over the organs of social structure that makes us a nation.

bS 2057 was an ugly year. It was a year when Nepal's national conscience was hacked to death. Our reason was lynched. But here in the capital there was no sign of revulsion, let alone outrage. Numbed by apathy and fatalism, our society seems to have lost the ability to feel pain. This is called acute social dementia: losing control over the organs of social structure that makes us a nation.

Intellectuals are society's brain. And they suffer dangerous delusions. They still believe, or pretend to believe, that the Maoist insurgency is a "political problem". Even after 80 policemen were murdered in cold blood within a week, they were from all over Nepal, the dead. And they were sons of the poor, so demoralised and despirited that they didn't put up much of a fight and were slaughtered like Dasain goats—many after they surrendered. Those who rush to compare the armed struggle waged by Nepali Congress against Panchayat with the Maoist insurgency ignore the fact that while democrats took arms to defeat dictatorship, the Maoist killing-spree is aimed at establishing one.

Litterateurs are society's heart. Perhaps it too has stopped beating. Were it functional, we would have heard the cries of those who died in those remote police posts. We would have wept with the widows and orphans of those butchered in the killing fields of Dailekh and Rukum. But our litterateurs have become schizophrenic: they see enemies where there are none and avoid facing the real enemy staring at them in their faces. Writers and poets either escape into cheap jingoism or are silent.

Not that intellectuals, the hands of society, are doing any better. Ever practical, our intellectual class has bought its peace with the insurgents. Learned professors and clever lawyers pontificate ad nauseam about transparency and good governance without pausing to ponder the fact that the number one challenge now is freeing the society from this spiral of violence and counter violence.

One would have thought journalists would rush to show the dangers ahead. Sadly, the eyes and ears of society seem to have taken refuge in "objectivity", the golden middle in which you don't have to make up your mind about anything. It is difficult to say whether the media has been co-opted under duress, or if it has willingly embraced the idiom of violence. There may be honourable exceptions, but by and large, the press has not used the freedom guaranteed by our constitution to protect that freedom from demagogues.

That brings us to the front leg of society—the ruling party that makes the apparatus of the state move ahead. The Nepali Congress has completely failed even to stand up. It has an absolute majority in the parliament, but its prime minister is unable to form a stable cabinet. It has political organisations in every village of the country, but its leaders have no political programme to activate them. With friends like each other, neither Kishunji nor Girijababu needs enemies.

Had the Nepali Congress functioned like an institution, it would have handled diplomacy better, managed the security forces more effectively, and negotiated with other political forces—including the monarchy and the opposition parties—more forthrightly. It has been unable to forge a united stand among all political parties against the stranglehold of the palace over the defence forces paid for by the exchequer. The Nepali Congress leadership has singularly failed to either walk or talk.

The other leg of the state apparatus—the main opposition party—has been no less ignoble. Nepali communists have always colluded with forces opposed to democracy, the *Janandolan* being the sole exception. During 2057, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) functioned more or less like the political arm of the Maoists by paralysing the parliamentary session solely to obstruct the passage of bills meant to fight the insurgency. Whether it was by default or by design is yet to be ascertained, but it has certainly raised questions about UML's commitment to pluralism.

That leaves the feet of the state—the army and the police. The year proved once again that the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) is a sort of business concern. The army agreed to guard Nepal Telecommunications Corporation repeater stations for a fee, it happily came forward to patrol the border in order to 'control smuggling', but it steadfastly resisted all attempts to restore peace in insurgency-hit districts.

The honour of bearing the brunt of the Peoples' War goes to the Nepal Police. Ill-equipped, poorly paid, demoralised, over-politicised and openly criticised it may be, but policemen are among the few who are dying for democracy and the rule of law.

It is said that no historic events have an exact parallel, but no event is without historic precedence either. The brutal killings in the last month of 2057 brought to mind the mass murder of King Rajendra's forces by usurper Jang Bahadur Kunwar near Sugauli in what came to be called *Alau Parva* in Nepal's history. Forces loyal to Jang swooped on the unsuspecting army of King Rajendra and murdered them all in cold blood. Nearly a hundred from the lawful king's army died. This comparison raises a question: does Comrade Prachanda harbour the ambition of becoming another Jang Bahadur? Or is he a Pol Pot in the making?

At a more personal level, I wonder if I will be able to keep writing. After each incident, we proclaimed that it was the precipice. But here we still are. Is self-destruction now the only escape? When the national conscious is dying such a horrible death, can the nation itself survive much longer? Are we waiting for foreign forces to release us from the agony of living in an increasingly brutal land?

A week after the massacres on Rukumkot and Naumule, the birds are singing again, dew still falls and rainbows re-appear. With a heavy heart, let me wish you all a Happy New Year 2058. May it prove to be the year when peace returned to the land of the Apostle of Peace. ♦

# "We are prepared for dialogue with all parties"

–Chairman Prachanda

**Excerpts from a translation of Chairman Prachanda's statement released after the recent attacks on the police in Rukumkot and Naumule.**

7 April, 2001

It is common knowledge that the country is facing a serious situation. It is in this light that the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has approached various sections and pointed out the necessity for talks and dialogue. But the Girija government, instead of taking our appeal seriously and working to create a political environment for talks, has been involved in dramas like the Dinesh Sharma episode, made a mockery of parliament and is preparing, by royal ordinance, to mobilise the armed police force. Using the list of "missing persons", he (Girija) has revealed the names of even those people who are not missing, and has created the illusion that he is prepared for talks even as he tries to save his position through conspiracy.

We do not believe it is possible to solve the country's present political problems by holding talks with the Girija government alone, as it has lost the trust of its party and of parliament. We called for the Nepal Bandh and organised other non-military actions to draw the attention of political forces and the people to the political oppression taking place today. Our call was not guided by personal prejudice. We appeal to all political parties to understand the seriousness of our appeal for dialogue and to take concrete measures in that direction. Taking our appeal lightly and using it to protect the political existence (of all parties) will not work in anyone's favour. We are prepared for dialogue with all parties. It is the duty of all parties to pressure the government to create an environment for talks.

We are prepared to discuss the need for a conference of all political forces, an interim government and changes in the constitution. If the Girija government continues to ignore our appeal and engage in conspiracy and oppression, we are prepared to move ahead with more serious measures, and the Girija government will be held responsible for what ensues. We, the Maoists, are prepared to pay any price for the good of the country and the people.

Prachanda
Chairman

# "Nepal Police was not set up to fight terrorism"

–Inspector General of Police Pradeep Shumsher JB Rana

*What is your assessment of the Maoist insurgency and how has your force fared since February 1996?*

A civilian police force has been fighting the terrorists at the call of the people who have suffered atrocities and crimes. Frankly, the Nepal Police is not set up to fight such a conventional war and is not trained for that purpose. However, with the limited resources and training, we have done a lot to protect the lives and property of the people. Now that the terrorists have started using sophisticated weapons and high power improvised explosive devices, it is increasingly becoming difficult for the police to fight them with obsolete and traditional weapons. However, we will keep on fighting with high spirits in the name of the people till an alternative is available.

*Until the Rukumkot and Dailekh attacks, your strategy for reducing casualties among the police force seemed to have been working. What happened?*

When I became chief, I put forward four priorities: checking corruption, ensuring the protection of human rights, improving police behaviour and culture, and training and development. On-the-job training is an ongoing programme in all field police units, and this drastically boosted the morale and confidence of the police. That was one of the factors that helped to bring down casualties. I agree the Rukumkot and Dailekh incidents were a serious blow to the police. These terrorists have proved to be the cruelest I have ever heard of, they have killed police after taking them into custody. They killed our boys in a cold-blooded and immoral manner after their capture. Close-range shots and multiple bullet wounds prove that. They have used heavy bombs and improvised explosive devices, injuring a large number of policemen before overpowering and killing them.

*The Maoists seem to be better trained than the police, more committed and better at using explosives and war tactics. How are you responding?*

As I said, the Nepal Police was not established to fight wars and terrorism. There is not a single example in the world of a civilian police fighting a terrorist war. We were brought up in a culture of serving the people and helping them by controlling crime, investigating crime with the help of communities. As the insurgency began, a situation arose and the Nepal Police took up the responsibility in the interest of the country and the people to contain the threat. We are a law-enforcing agency, the guardians of people's democratic rights, we don't kill people the way the terrorists are doing. More than three hundred police personnel have been killed by the terrorists in the line of duty—most of them arbitrarily. Police personnel visiting their home and family on leave are being killed and kidnapped. The police are also people of this land. Either way, the pain will be inflicted on this country.

*Do you have any information on who is training the Maoists in explosives and guerrilla warfare?*

Maoists have recruited ex-army men trained in India and Britain. They are helping them build their capability in designing and crafting improvised explosive devices. They are training them in guerilla war and killing police. They are getting their people trained by foreign terrorist organisations. They have collected enough money by looting state property and extortion to finance their training and weapons purchases. They have attained the skills to design and use high explosives.

*Last week saw the highest-ever police casualties. What can you tell us about the battles themselves, and the reason for the high death toll?*

Undoubtedly the Rukumkot Police Base was strategically located. Despite our efforts with quite limited resources to turn a civilian police into one fighting a guerrilla war, there were some shortcomings. The army is a trained fighting force that lives in barracks under strict discipline, it moves in platoons, and companies, and there is a team spirit and high morale. The army has sufficient training and resources, which we are deprived of. Police personnel from different parts of Nepal assemble at a base, and many of them don't even know each other. We are therefore less cohesive, and it is really harder that way. However, my people fought valiantly in Rukumkot and Dailekh. I appreciate the valour and courage they showed. They went down fighting. A minor mistake from our part led to the high death toll. The No 1 post in Rukumkot could not respond properly in time and that undermined the strength of the rest of the sentry points in spite of their courage and bravery. Another reason for the high casualty rate was the massive use of highly devastating explosives, and the execution of captured policemen.

KIRAN PANDEY

*If the government could grant you your wishes, what would be your list of priorities?*

My wish would be to establish a trained, professional and resourceful armed police force in the country that deals with terrorism and other national security concerns. The role of the civilian police should be limited to maintaining normal law and order in the country. And if there is any confusion about the armed police, then there is the ultimate option of using the army to crush terrorism. I have always been in favour of one strong force to fight terrorism, and I fully appreciate His Majesty's Government for bringing in the armed police ordinance. The opposition political forces should also realise the gravity of the situation, and support it (the ordinance) in the interests of the country.

*But by the time the armed force bill comes through, if it ever does, it may take another year. Won't that be too late for you?*

Yes. That may be too late if the country merely relies on the civil police. The present situation demands effective initiatives to be undertaken with immediate effect. The terrorists are building up their fighting capability day by day. I have apprised the government of this reality, and the government is fully convinced about the urgency of the crisis. To tell you frankly, the government has already begun to do the needful in the time it takes for the armed police force to be set up.

*Do you think the Maoists are ready to negotiate? Some say they don't need to, since they seem to be winning.*

(The Maoists) are quite aware that given our geopolitical situation and current global reality, there is no way they can realise their goal. Nepalis are also a peace-loving people. I tell you, the majority of the people in Maoist-affected districts are quite fed up and despondent with the way things are going. The people have understood fully well that even after years of bloodshed, the quality of their lives is not going to improve. In fact, they see it deteriorating and the people of these regions have lost faith. They are supporting the Maoists out of fear of being killed. The Maoists have not been able to win the hearts and minds of the people, and they are losing their support base at a rapid pace. You can see people working hand in hand with the police in Rolpa and other terrorist-affected districts. We have corrected our past mistakes, and regained the faith of the people. I am convinced that in the light of present developments, the Maoists want talks. They are looking for a reasonable way out so they can abandon their underground existence. Look at history: atrocities against the people seldom remain secret for long. They are slaughtering policemen as a bargaining chip, and to gain an upper hand at the negotiating table. But they are desperate to find a face-saving way out, and to make a soft landing. ♦

## LETTERS

**DANIEL LAK**

Writing his column Here and There from Cape Town (#36) Daniel Lak gives away his deep concern and affinity towards Nepal and Nepalis by using the pronoun "we". Most Nepalis are fleeing the country, and here is an expat who has decided to live here, feels for our nation more than most of us. As Daniel says, maybe Kathmandu is not such a bad place after all. But it could do with some improvement. And in Nepal we have places like Marpha which could give a lesson or two in governance to Kathmandu. Democracy has existed in Marpha for the past 1,000 years—and it is the cleanest, most organised and best governed place in Nepal. There is just too much cynicism and hopelessness in Kathmandu. We need to understand the hidden inner strengths of our own country better, and thanks to Daniel Lak for pointing them out. Opportunities don't just exist elsewhere, they abound within Nepal. Let us not let politicians hoodwink us into thinking that there is no hope. Let's find it and just do it ourselves.

*Kapil Tamot*
*Kathmandu*

**CK LAL**

I have a soft corner for Nepali Times and have been a regular reader ever since it hit the market. I don't miss a single issue. Especially I would like to commend CK Lal. He seems to write with equal ease on Sai Baba, the Beatles, or Maoists. His breadth of knowledge and his versatility are truly impressive.

*Prem C Rai*
*Urlabari-6, Morang*

LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) is not simply "pure gas" but pure tear gas. Those with eyes to see can behold the tragic proof everywhere in Third World countries where structural adjustment programmes and other economic regimes of the IMF and the World Bank have been imposed with the active collaboration of the local elites.

CK Lal also correctly talks about the disparities between the democratic socialist and Marxist ideals of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), respectively, and their actual practices. I'd say the deviations from their avowed ideals are so glaringly obvious it takes a special talent to miss them. It is good to know that, as befits a columnist of a vibrant alternative press, Lal, his inevitable political allegiances notwithstanding, has yet to develop that talent.

*Kanden Thebe*
*Taplejung*

**KUNDA DIXIT**

Kunda Dixit blames the Indian Lok Sabha for being copycats in paralysing the house (Under my hat, #36). He is biased. At this point he has completely ignored the fact that Nepal originally carbon-copied the democratic practice from Patna, and successfully implemented it in Kathmandu. Nepalis have actually excelled in implanting free-for-all democracy a la Bihar, and have even improved on it. So who is copying whom? It seems to be more a matter of give and take.

*"Prem"*
*USA*

**FOR THE PIPAL**

As a foreigner from northern climes, I very much appreciate the lush foliage in Nepal. Maybe you will know this temple near

Bhatbhateni with this magnificent pipal tree growing out of its centre. As a house has just been built directly behind the temple (seen under construction in foreground, left), it is not possible to photograph this view anymore.

*Pamela R Johnson*
*Kathmandu*

**GRAVE SITUATION**

Your coverage of the Maoist insurgency and the growing casualty shows that the country is in a grave situation. There is lawlessness and the nation is heading towards anarchy. While the Maoists fight, the opposition party is taking to the streets. Why doesn't the opposition realise that what we need in this time of crisis is unity. They can take to the street some other time. At this point, the important thing is to look for a peaceful solution and save the country, not use the insurgency to score political points. If you can't find a peaceful solution then it is best to mobilise the army because we have seen enough killing of our innocent policemen who are only protecting the people. If you think that using the army will start a civil war, then I would say isn't that what we have now already?

*D Dhungana*
*Australia*

# 70% say things are worse than two years ago, the Nepali Congress

MIN BAJRACHARYA

*Women line up to vote in the 1999 election*

**The Nepali Congress and the UML are the reason for the country's mess. But if they reform they may also be the only hope**

**KUNDA DIXIT**

Between 1994-99, Nepal witnessed one unstable coalition government after another. Political horse-trading was rife, and we saw five governments in as many years. Politics made for strange bedfellows: the left regularly got into bed with the right and vice versa, while the Nepali Congress consorted with everyone. The chronic political uncertainty could have been seen as a sign of a healthy democracy, but all the frequent changes of government and the resulting politicisation and confusion did was bring the country to a standstill. In such a political backdrop, there was a popular perception that if one party could win a decisive majority in elections everything would finally be set right. So, when the elections finally arrived in May 1999, everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Sure enough, the people expressed their wish for a stable centre by giving the Nepali Congress a parliamentary majority. The party formed a government under Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, and hopes ran high.

By late 1999, infighting within the Nepali Congress had made stability seem even more elusive. With the government distracted by squabbling, it had no time to address urgent national problems like unemployment, education, health care, and so on. The Girija Prasad Koirala faction tightened the noose around the Bhattarai government, accusing it of corruption, mis-management and inability to resolve the Maoist problem. Finally, in March 2000, Koirala amassed enough signatures to remove Bhattarai. Prime Minister Koirala came to power under a self-assigned three-point agenda to control corruption, improve governance and address the Maoist problem. But it did not take long for him to be mired in the same political quicksand as the five-decade-long colleague he ousted. Infighting got worse, the insurgency flared, and as allegations of corruption surfaced, governance once more came to a halt.

At the cusp of the Nepali new year, we find Girija Prasad Koirala teetering on the edge. Already under blistering attacks from a determined faction within his party, Koirala has been desperately trying to stave off a campaign by the main opposition UML and other smaller left parties to oust him through street protests over corruption allegations.

Smelling blood, the Maoists launched surprise attacks last week on remote police posts and unleashed a shocking series of massacres of policemen. For the first time since the restoration of democracy in 1990, it is not only the incumbent government that is in danger, but also parliamentary democracy itself.

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According to the results of the Himalmedia/ORG-Marg Nepal survey, six in every ten Nepalis think democracy is in danger, while a quarter of them say there is no danger to it. Among those that feel democracy is in danger, 82 percent think the threats comes from the activities of political parties and their leaders, 25 percent see a foreign hand, only 8 percent see the Maoists as a threat and another 5 percent see a role of the palace. Interestingly, the proportion of people from the mid-West who think democracy is under threat from the palace and the Maoists is twice as high as the national average. Still, the fact that eight out of ten blame elected politicians for endangering democracy with their infighting, corruption and lack of accountability should be a sobering reminder to our erstwhile freedom fighters of how much goodwill and hope they have squandered among the people.

Two years ago, when we asked the same question, only 38 percent had said democracy was in danger. But even then, most respondents (79 percent) had blamed political parties and their leaders, and a much higher 10 percent believed the Maoists were a threat. The most dramatic difference was that two years ago, only 2.5 percent of those surveyed thought democracy was threatened by a foreign power. Did this sudden threat perception (from south of the border?) have anything to do with the December riots?

On the question: How is the country doing in comparison to two years ago, nearly 70 percent feel it is either doing "worse" or "much worse". Eighteen percent think things are about the same and 13 percent feel conditions have actually improved. No surprise there, but what is shocking is when you compare this with the results of the 1999 survey. Two years ago we had

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK

# If it's broken, fix it

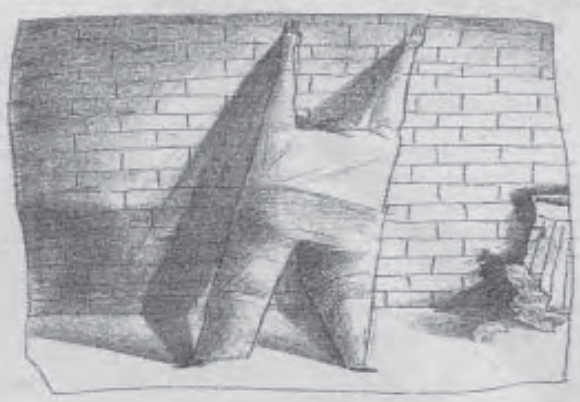
**The search for cause, blame, courses of action that exonerate some while incriminating others overshadows the obvious. Nepalis are dying, discontented, and feeling very much alone in the wider world.**

At the heart of everything lie contradictions galore, contrasts that stymie our need to impose order on the chaos of events. Where that need comes from is anyone's guess. Perhaps religious faith or its primordial ancestor, fear of death and the black unknown thereafter. Perhaps it's a pastime, intellectual aerobics for the bored and borderline psychotic. Or is it all just another hit of the drug of self-deception?

I reflect on this after one of the bloodiest periods in recent history in Nepal. Dozens upon dozens dead, all Nepali nationals, almost all poor and as distant from the urban elite and their cares as the imaginary denizens of Mars. Yet the commercial streets of the capital do brisk business. Beer sales are buoyant. Darbar Square throngs with visitors, marvelling at the architecture, shunning the trinket seller, oblivious to the peril in which the country finds itself. A stone's throw from the killing fields in the countryside, the trekking routes seethe with the children of the western leisure classes, bedecked in fluorescent clothing, arguing the price of a banana pancake, contemplating a career in investment banking back home.

Meanwhile in Rukum, Dolakha and Dailekh, death comes at night, from the darkness of a deep valley or down from forested hills. Men and boys from all over this land sit shivering in fear in flimsy police posts, the thin blue line against... what? I learned this week of a young constable shot dead in one of those attacks. His family told me about him. They had his last letter home, a fluttering and emotional flag of surrender to the besieging forces around him. He had written that he knew death was at hand, and he was reconciled. Three attempts to leave his job, by resignation and later by desertion had failed, he wrote, now it was time to die.

Meanwhile, a general strike renders Kathmandu a habitable city, for once. Its broad boulevards and winding alleys were full of the Himalayan air

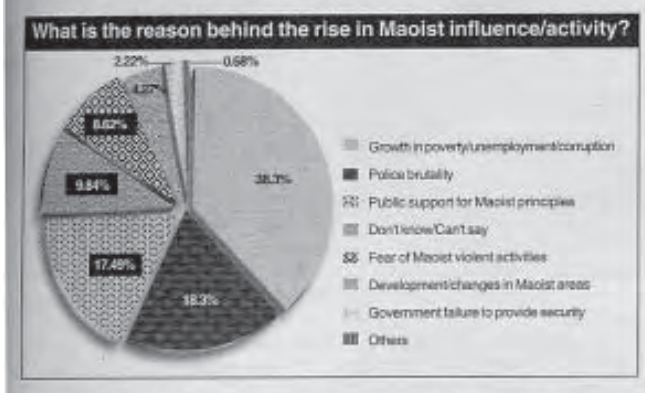


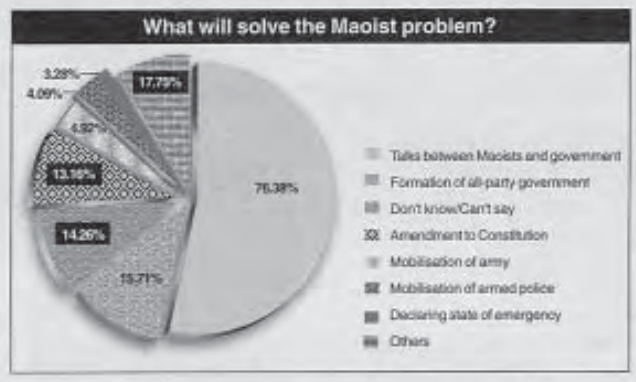
that was once the birthright of a citizen of this kingdom. More than tourists, Nepalis took to the streets that day, not a Jana Andolan, but a grand promenade of friends, families, the curious, those bored by the offerings of Indian satellite television. I walked with my daughter, trying to explain to her why there were no cars, and why her father was gathering gory details of death on a distant mountainside. Passers-by seemed mostly to be silent, neither happy nor angry. Just peering warily down the empty street wondering what was coming towards them.

Someone (perhaps WC Fields) remarked that there were two kinds of people in the world: those who divided us into two groups, and those who didn't. The wryness of the observation conceals great wisdom. Sometimes we are over-concerned with imposing what we think is self-evident yet elusive order. That means we neglect the obvious. The search for a cause overwhelms the effect. I wonder if Nepal isn't now in something resembling that state of suspended animation. That search for cause, blame, courses of action that exonerate some while incriminating others overshadows the obvious. The country is bleeding. Its people are dying, discontented, and feeling very much alone in the wider world. A host of issues and problems have erupted and now demand attention.

Let's not have yet another workshop, seminar or fact-finding mission. Nor do we need to debate history or consult the donors. It's not about neighbouring countries or being someone's victim. Quivering fingers of blame pointed in other directions prove little more than the helplessness of the accuser. A good start might be to acknowledge that now is not the time to apportion blame. I was once told by an old mechanic, who kept cars running long beyond their allotted time, that if something was broken you either fixed it, or threw it out and got a new one. The luxury of having that choice may be the next thing to disappear in Nepal, so let's get moving and soon. ♦

# and they blame infighting in




asked how things had changed in comparison to a decade ago, and only 28 percent said it was "worse" or "much worse", while 41 percent had said it was "OK". It is obvious that the public perceives things are sliding out of control much faster.

There is also a strong correlation in the survey between those who think the country's situation has gone from bad to worse and those who blame the Nepali Congress government of the past two years. A full two thirds of all respondents give the NC a failing grade, and among those who say things have got worse, 76 percent blame internal disputes within the NC for the crisis in the country. Even among respondents who said they are NC supporters, nearly half blame their party for making things worse. What's more, nearly 70 percent of those who back the Nepali Congress and believe the situation has got worse, blame rifts in the party leadership. Going by this, it looks like the Nepali Congress supporters are the biggest critics of their own party. Asked about ways to end the deadlock in parliament, 35 percent feel Girija Prasad Koirala should have resigned, and 31 percent favour talks between the UML and the NC. Most of those who favour talks were, understandably, from supporters of NC and the Sadbhavana Party.

We then asked the respondents why they think the Maoist influence was increasing in the country. Nearly 40 percent blame poverty, joblessness and corruption, 18 percent blame police brutality. (In the mid-West, where the police launched violent crackdowns on Maoists two years ago, the proportion of people who blame police brutality shoots up to 30 percent.)

So, what should be done to resolve the Maoist crisis? Here, the Nepali people seem to have no doubt that a negotiated solution is the only way out. More than three fourths of all respondents wanted the government and the Maoists to sit down at the table and thrash things out. Even among respondents who said they supported the Maoist movement, nearly all said they favoured talks. Deploying the army or mobilising an armed police force are both widely unpopular, with only about 4 percent supporting it. (It is important to remember that the survey was done in the first week of April before the latest series of Maoist attacks on police posts. Given the pattern of the response, it could be that the constituency that wants a negotiated solution could have grown even more as a backlash against the heightened violence.)

And asked who should command the Royal Nepal Army (a provision left deliberately ambivalent in the 1990 Constitution), most respondents (42 percent) said the king should be in charge, half as many (20 percent) said it should be the government and as many were undecided.

From the sample survey, it is clear that the Nepali people seem to have diagnosed the problem, and have formed a fairly clear idea about how to clear up the problems ahead. But who do they want to bell the cat? We asked them: who is best placed to solve the country's present problems? Here, nearly 21 percent are undecided, 18 percent trust the UML (down from 27.5 percent two years ago), and only 13.5 percent say the NC is up to it (down from 26.5 percent two years ago). Over 17 percent say the king should step in, while nearly nine percent would leave it up to the Maoists.

If so, then, who would they vote for if elections were held today? A surprising proportion (30 percent) are undecided, the UML has sprinted ahead with 24 percent, while the NC commands only 17 percent. Independents have 7.5 percent, the re-united RPP has 5 percent and the ML 3.5 percent. Nearly two percent said they would vote for the Maoists, and it is significant that in no district did the Maoists get more than three percent support. Things are not so clear-cut because of the undecideds, and it is possible the NC, UML and even the Maoists would get the undecided voters in the next election (if the Maoists field candidates). What is clearer is that the NC's support base still seems to be much higher in the tarai and the east.

In the final analysis opinion polls matter only when political forces respect public opinion. We have many elected leaders who don't bother about what the people think after they are elected, and are prepared to buy their way into power in the next elections. Then we have leaders for whom the end justifies the means, and who are convinced that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. Both couldn't care less about public opinion—they feel they can do without it. But what this survey and the one two years ago have shown is that the Nepali people are alert, politically savvy, they know who is who, and what they are up to. Nepali people have the courage to be themselves and speak their minds even if they are squeezed between adventurers and cynics. Now, if only we could freely choose the leaders we want, Nepal would finally get the leadership it so desperately needs. ♦

*(The full report of the opinion poll will be available from next week at Himal Association, ph 542544)*

## Everest clean-up

It's climbing time and different groups are planning to pick up trash from Mount Everest. The Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) is among those planning a clean-up, but says it will do the job differently. Instead of organising a clean-up expedition the NMA says it is hiring services of high-altitude Sherpas to bring back garbage left by mountaineers. "A separate clean-up expedition costs an enormous amount of money, it makes more sense to ask expedition Sherpas to bring down what they can and then pay them accordingly," says Tashi Jangbu Sherpa, president of NMA. Sherpa's organisation and the Tourism Ministry have earmarked three million rupees for the clean-up. Last spring, an American environmental expedition which brought back 632 bottles of oxygen and about 4,000 kilos of garbage from the mountain paid Sherpas about $7 for every kilo of trash and $10 for each oxygen canister brought from South Col and the lower reaches. "We'll probably be offering about the same," says Sherpa. Since 1992, the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee requires expeditions bring back combustible garbage to Namche Bazaar, fly out recyclable glass and tins to Kathmandu and ship back re-exportables like oxygen cylinders. Some expeditions, unfortunately, don't.

## Unceremonious retirement

There has apparently been a mix-up in the sudden retirement of Usha Nepal, a senior Home Ministry official who was told she was to retire 30 March. Nepal, a joint secretary who headed the Nepali refugee verification team in Jhapa, was told she had served too long in the bureaucracy. Nepal says she was wronged and plans to challenge the government's records office (Nijamati Kitabkhana) in court. Nepal says she was born in September 1943 and has five more months left with the civil service before she retires at age 58. Sources at Nijamati Kitabkhana say Nepal's personal files show she was born in 1942 and should have retired seven months ago.

On 30 March, the Kitabkhana notified the senior bureaucrat that her retirement was effective 31 August—seven months ago. A case of better late than never? "If they don't correct their oversight regarding my age, I shall take my case to court," says Nepal.

## The Nepali mind

Here are the stats: experts say at least 25 percent Nepalis suffer various kinds of mental disorders ranging from schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, behavioural and psychosomatic disorders. And adequate help is not available. Nepal has just 21 psychiatrists and they can hardly be expected to treat the increasing number of patients. Dr Nirakar Man Shrestha, director of the mental hospital at Lagankhel says approximately 15,000 patients suffering from disorders visit the hospital annually. Two percent of Nepal's mentally ill show symptoms of derangement. The government plan to cope with the problem is to integrate mental health with primary care in sub-health posts and zonal hospitals. Their slogan: "Stop Exclusion, Dare to Care".

## Peace offering

Member of Parliament and former Kathmandu Mayor PL Singh says he's a peace-loving man. Last month he decided to spread his message by carrying to Sri Lanka a statue of the Buddha which he gifted to Dr AT Ariyaratne, founder and president of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka.

## Meat laws

It's not the foot-and-mouth scare but a matter of hygiene. The government is planning to enforce the Slaughterhouse and Meat Inspection Act to ensure butchers slaughter, store and sell their products in clean surroundings. The enforcement of the new Act is expected to push up prices, but would ensure that meat and meat products are safe. The law is bad news for many because the law would also prohibit the widespread practice of selling meat with the skin on—a Nepali favourite. First time offenders can be fined up to Rs 10,000 and repeat offenders could be forced to cough up Rs 20,000, face imprisonment for three months, or both.

## Ganga and Jamuna

Well-wishers of the eleven-month-old Nepali twins Ganga and Jamuna are still holding their breath. After the twins, joined at the head from birth, were successfully separated following a 96-hour operation in Singapore, doctors say it is too early to tell if the girls will suffer brain damage or display other neurological defects, and that the next few days are crucial.

Occurring once in 2 million live births, Siamese twins joined at the head are very rare. Dr Keith Goh, who led the medical team, says successful separations are even more uncommon.

## Dancing for a cause

Almost 50 young people danced for a cause last month. The event, a dance party organised by the editorial staff of *Wave* magazine, was to raise money for a home for the aged, Briddhashram, in Pashupati. Rs 10,000 was raised at Club X-Zone to build new toilets for the 180 residents of the home.

BOOK REVIEW

by MANESH SHRESTHA

# Kathmandu spring

**The book is a blow-by-blow account of the nearly two months when the Nepali people rose against a decadent system.**

On 25 February, a week after the People's Movement of 1990 had been launched against the Panchayat regime, the United Left Front and the Nepali Congress planned "Black Day", a demonstration to begin from New Road. But police presence was so heavy that only the three leaders who were to lead the rally were able to come out on the street.

Almost a month later, on 23 March, the "People's Unity Day" was held and once again demonstrations were planned to start from New Road. The political parties wanted the general public to come out on the streets and join the demonstrations that day. But it was a repeat of Black Day, prompting BBC correspondent Mark Tully to remark, "It seems that...[the] people's movement is over."

Kiyoko Ogura

Barely two weeks later, Kathmandu, Patan and Kirtipur had risen against the establishment and a few days later democracy was ushered in. So what was the turning point of the Movement? Was it the murder of student activist Ram Thapa by 'Mandales' in Bhadrapur's Mechi Campus? Was it the "Blackouts", when Valley residents voluntarily switched off their lights for 10 minutes at 7 o'clock every evening? The declaration of Patan as a Free Zone? Or, even the sacking of Prime Minister Marich Man Singh and the appointment of Lokendra Bahadur Chand in his place?

Japanese journalist Kiyoko Ogura's book *Kathmandu Spring: The People's Movement of 1990* does not address this question. And that is perhaps its greatest strength. The book is not an analysis of the People's Movement, but a blow-by-blow account of the nearly two months when the Nepali people rose against a decadent system that ruled over them. Based on interviews with 1050 individuals from Jhapa, Biratnagar, Janakpur, Chitwan, Kathmandu Valley and Butwal, Ogura's book is meticulously researched and provides a hitherto unknown perspective on those tension-filled days.

"I interviewed practically everyone who was injured and the families of all those killed in Kathmandu," says Ogura, whose sources of inspiration are books like *Is Paris Burning?* and *Freedom at Midnight* by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins. Having been to Nepal several times before, she arrived in Kathmandu on 29 April 1990 because of the scanty coverage of the Movement in the Japanese press. She wanted to see first hand what was going on, and that was why she was also in the historical demonstration of 6 April. It was during the fighting that day that the thought of writing a book first crossed her mind. She came back in 1993 and over the next two years chased up the people she wanted to talk to. A Japanese version of the book was published in 1999, and hit the bestseller list of a major newspaper there.

She writes about how Vidya was shot as she looked out of her third floor window to see what the commotion in the streets below was. The bullet stopped five millimetres from her heart and she survived. Twenty-four-old Raj Man Maharjan was not so lucky. A completely apolitical man, Maharjan was a mere bystander who got killed in Kirtipur, leaving behind a wife and a six-month old child. Purna Man Shahi learned of the death of his son, Gyan Bahadaur, over the radio because he had been taken away by the police for questioning from the hospital where he had brought his son after he was shot in Patan.

Ogura provides such details as why the underground activists slept in their clothes, what Ganesh Man Singh was doing when the blackout started and even what Marich Man Singh Shrestha did after his dismissal. No detail is too insignificant for her and that is what gives the book a distinctive

flavour. For most, however, perhaps the most interesting section is the one that deals with events in the last two days of the Movement—when negotiations between the palace and the opposition were taking place even as the Valley was under curfew. The hurried negotiations, Ganesh Man Singh's uncompromising stand and the quandary the Left found itself in, all add to the action that ended in the dramatic finale of the meeting with the king.

Ogura lives in Kathmandu now as a correspondent for a Japanese news agency and has observed changes over the past decade. Asked to comment on the state of the nation today, she only says, "I feel sad." She does not want to say any more. ♦

## "THE KING SMILED"

*The historic 6 April rally before Singha Darbar.*

After some time they all left for the palace. By the time they reached its west gate, it was already nearly nine o'clock. First, the prime minister was called in to talk with the king alone for several minutes. Then all of them were shown in.

King Birendra was sitting on a chair, wearing a *dhaka topi* and a jacket over his *daura suruwal*. A tiger skin was spread on the floor under the table in front of him. Four chairs each had been placed on both sides of the king. Chand guided the four leaders to the chairs on the right side of the king, and they sat down: [Krishna Prasad] Bhattarai, Sahana [Pradhan], [Girija Prasad] Koirala and RK [Mainali]. On the other side sat [Lokendra Bahadur] Chand, [Achyut Raj] Regmi, [Pashupati Shumsher] Rana, and [Nain Bahadur] Swanr.

Bending forward on his chair, King Birendra addressed them. "Have you come to an agreement amongst yourselves?"

Bhattarai spoke first. "It looks as if we have given Your Majesty some trouble."

The words could be taken as a joke, and the king smiled.

The king confirmed the conditions written in the draft looking at the four leaders. "To lift the ban on political parties. To delete the word 'partyless' from the constitution. As far as I know, you have agreed to these conditions, haven't you?"

Bhattarai replied again. "We are very glad to know Your Majesty is going to restore the multiparty system, but we also want the abolition of the institutions related to the Panchayat system."

The only woman among them, Sahana looked more relaxed than the men in the presence of the king. Ignorant of the niceties of a meeting with the king, she had crossed her legs. After Bhattarai, Sahana also demanded the abolition of the Panchayat institutions.

Next, RK spoke, "The people have been angry not with Your Majesty but with the whole Panchayat system. If Your Majesty tries to preserve the present system even now, I think the people won't be satisfied. Therefore, at least please abolish the Rastriya Panchayat right away."

They repeated their demand for some time until the king said, "We will talk about that again later."

Once the king brought discussions on that issue to a close, the leaders stopped insisting. There was no further mention of the subject. The king promised to form a committee to investigate the victimisation of innocent people during the movement. He also said that the constitution amendment committee would consist of all three sides, the Nepali Congress, the United Left Front and the Panchayat. Then, indicating the ministers sitting across from them, the king asked, "Will you cooperate with them?"

Sahana was shocked. To cooperate with the Chand cabinet meant that the Panchayat government would continue. Finding themselves in a bind, Sahana whispered to Bhattarai, covering her mouth with her shawl, when the king was looking towards the ministers. "*Daai*, the king is telling us to cooperate with these people, but we can't work with the panchas. Since we have launched the movement to overthrow the Panchayat system, we can't do this. Please, *daai*, tell the king to dismiss this government."

Bhattarai also whispered back. "I can't do that, Sahanaji. I can't say we cannot work with them to their face."

"Well then, I'll tell him."

Bringing her palms together in a gesture of *namaste*, Sahana spoke to the king. "We launched this movement with the objective of overthrowing the Partchayat system. For this reason, we cannot cooperate with them. I think the people also wish the formation of a new government."

The king did not utter a single word in response.

They talked for about half an hour and broke up when the king announced, "We close the meeting for today and we shall talk about the rest later."

In the end, the four leaders, representing the power behind the movement, could gain no more than what had been presented by the government. The king's side took full advantage of the opposition's lack of preparation and could easily dodge the only demand they had. Even if it looked like they were compromising their parties' trust, at that particular moment the four leaders could not do anything more.

After the meeting with King Birendra, they were led to another room to be interviewed by Nepal Television. ♦

(Excerpted from *Kathmandu Spring: The People's Movement of 1990* by Kiyoko Ogura. Himal Books, 2001. Rs 325.)

BARBS

by BARBARA ADAMS

# Shanti, shanti, shanti...

**Just who is in control anyway? We have an uncontrolled police force, uncontrolled corruption, the uncontrolled spread of human rights abuse.**

Lately I have become very sensitive to the vocabulary of politicians and their followers. Especially when young, intelligent, politically savvy and extremely critical friends refer to the men they are criticising as "our leaders". How can Nepalis still refer to a bunch of mostly corrupt opportunists who now rule as "our leaders", when as far as we can see there isn't a real leader to be seen on the present political stage. (Off stage, there are Dr Bhattarai and Mr Dahal).

A leader presumably is one who leads, and if we are being led at all it is down the proverbial "garden path". The sooner we stop expecting our leaders to lead, and instead assume the responsibility ourselves of building a better and more just society, the better it will be for the country. Only by taking over the leadership ourselves will we throw off the frustration with which we spend the better part of every day. It is no use dreaming of a Lee Kuan Yew, or a Musharraf, postponing our own responsibility in the process. If wise and compassionate leaders somehow emerge from the squalour we will all embrace them. But let's not wait.

Just who is in control anyway? We at present have an uncontrolled police force, uncontrolled dacoity, uncontrolled corruption, uncontrolled tons of garbage clogging our rivers and bringing stench and disease, and uncontrollable strikes and bandhs. We have uncontrolled flows of dollars sent here by uncontrolled foreign aid, which further corrupts our uncontrollable politicians. These foreign dollars, and 90 percent of the foreign INGOs and NGOs, who use them, if not controlled, will gradually corrupt the nation. We have uncontrolled numbers of foreigners who get uncontrolled numbers of visas, but not the right ones like the International Committee of the Red Cross staff.

Another overused and abused phrase is "shanti suraksha"(peace and security). Their constant repetition of this pleasant reassuring phrase, seems to indicate that they are worrying mostly about "peace and security" for the elite in Kathmandu and other urban centres, so that they can "peacefully" pursue financial gain. If "our leaders" were really worried about peace and security they would long since have come to terms with the Maoists and, instead of killing or jailing anyone suspected of sympathy with the Maoists, have joined the Maoists in bringing about the change for which the people have been longing.

Other inaccurate and over-used words include "empowerment", "decentralisation" and "terrorist". The government has "empowered" the police to kill Maoists who are "empowering" the people, especially the ones government slogans say should be "empowered": women and dalits. In addition, the clear example set by the government of how to rip off the people and steal foreign aid without being punished, has "empowered" proliferating thieves and con men, not to mention the crime syndicates and the mafia, to shamelessly rip off the public every chance it gets, knowing that there is no risk of being punished. Who is "empowering" whom?

"Decentralisation" means giving permission for two more modern well-equipped hospitals (Jorpati and Gokarna) and innumerable private clinics to open in Kathmandu, while the few hospitals in remote areas are mostly rotting and without doctors or nurses. Even the new cooperative bank which is supposed to look after the interest of the 90 percent farmers in this country is going to be located in Kathmandu. "Decentralisaton" means that funds and resources are allocated cautiously from the centre, with firm instructions on how they should be used. Implication: don't trust ordinary people. "Decentralisation" means that after 50 years and many millions of dollars of "development" most poor villagers in remote areas are relatively worse off than they were then.

The phrase "they are just a bunch of terrorists" is used to discredit an opposition whose tactics are no more "terrorist" than the tactics used by the ruling party when it was in opposition. Many of today's leading politicians used to be "terrorists" themselves, even the genial gentleman presently serving as Foreign Minister. This word was even used by ruling party loyalists in New Delhi to explain why this columnist was in exile there: "Because she supports terrorists." In the current context it has become almost an honour to be labeled a "terrorist".

The latest incidents in the increasingly violent Jana Yuddha are tragic. The government should never have allowed the political situation to deteriorate to a stage where such carnage could happen. Maybe our semantics should focus on one main mantra: "Shanti, shanti, shanti..." ♦

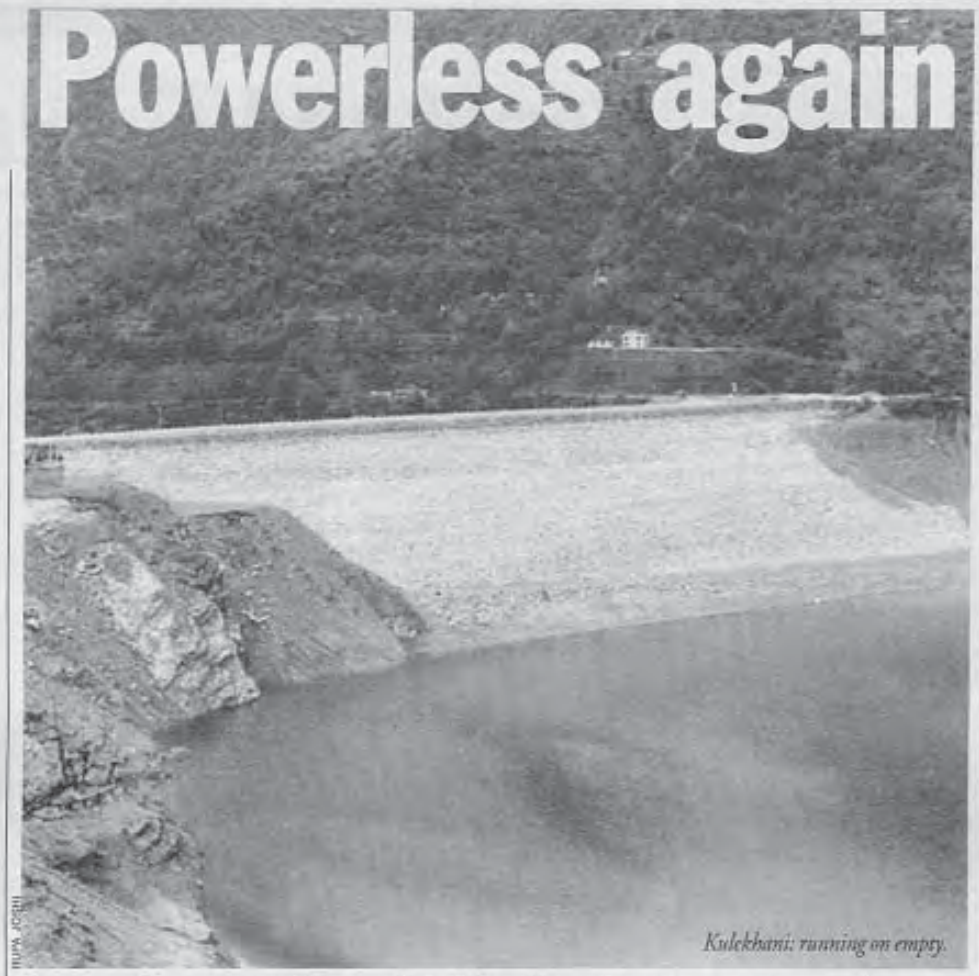
**Recruitment Announcement**

**A British charity is looking for the following staff:**

(1 – 3) Trainers / Facilitators (full- or part-time)
(1) Administrative staff (various duties)
(1) Caretaker / Cleaner (full-time)
(1) Childminder / Crèche supervisor (full-time)

Full details are available from eld@eld.org.uk

# Powerless again



RUPA JOSHI

*Kulekhani: running on empty.*

## Just when we thought blackouts were over, here they come again. The power cuts point to a deeper malaise in hydro-energy planning.

BINOD BHATTARAI

It had become almost too good to be true. The power cuts that plagued one of the world's most hydro-power rich countries were over. In July 2000, the five gleaming new turbines at the Khimti Hydroelectric Project began humming and blackouts were history. Or so we thought.

After Khimti came online, the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) had 60 megawatts more power in its system. Then Bhote Kosi (36MW) was commissioned and there were more megawatts. The post-Arun strategy of the mid-1990s which took Nepal on a course of getting foreign private joint venture partners to build medium-scale run-of-the-river power plants seemed to be working.

But now, NEA has seemingly become the victim of its own success. The run-of-the-river schemes depend on the flow of Himalayan rivers for producing energy and because they have minimum reservoir capacity, cannot supply to meet peak power demand. Combined with this: two years of winter drought which has reduced snow cover in the mountains and unseasonably low average temperatures above the snowline this year have prevented even the little snow there is from melting. That is why we have a power crisis now.

"Either it has to rain or it must become very hot for faster snow-melt," explains Bishnu Bam Malla, NEA's Managing Director. "It has been an exceptionally dry year and there's just not enough water in the rivers to turn the turbines." Malla calls the present four-hour daily power cuts "load management" and not "load shedding"—but whatever the euphemism used, it points to an urgent need for reservoir capacity to store water and energy.

Water pundits like Dipak Gyawali of the think tank, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation, say: "We've been saying a medium-sized storage project for managing supply with reservoir generating about 300 MW of peaking power would have been the ideal for Nepal." But the only project of this scale, the Nepal-Australia joint venture West Seti, has been planned as an export project to sell power to India. At present there are no other storage projects in the pipeline.

So, this week, as even snow-fed Himalayan rivers went dry only two of Khimti's turbines were spinning. It was similar story in other run-of-the-river plants like Marsyangdi, Bhote Kosi and Trisuli. Kulekhani, the country's only reservoir-peaking power station is on a non-snow-fed river and is now bottoming out. There will be no water there till the pre-monsoon showers begin in a month's time. Khimti's generation is down to about 21MW, Bhote Kosi to 17MW and Marsyangdi to about 38MW. NEA is promising another week of power cuts before the snows start melting with the current hot spell, but that is a big "if" since there isn't much snow up there this year to begin with. The base load projected by NEA for this month is 400MW but what may be actually generated is less than 345MW, as against the system's maximum generation capacity of 408MW. Khimti, for example, is generating barely 33 percent of its capacity and Bhote Kosi roughly half of the 36MW.

The medium-term future also looks bleak. Little may change even after Nepal's biggest ever hydropower plant, the 144MW Kali Gandaki A project comes on line in November. The project will have a 5-6 hour peak-hour supply capacity, but it is not a reservoir system and it too will be affected by the spring season's lean flows. This is the irony of Nepal's power system: the rivers run full throttle only in the monsoon when the demand is lowest. In winter and the pre-monsoon summer when demand is highest, generation capacity plummets.

The only way to get out of this vicious hydrological cycle, experts say, is to commission an appropriate medium-scale storage power station, which has not happened so far. Some blame it on mismanagement and corruption. "Lasting solutions would solve the seasonality problem, but that would mean fewer new projects and even less kickbacks," a former NEA employee says. "Hydro-politicians and hydro-bureaucrats don't prefer long-term solutions, nor does the hydro-industry which pays them to continue advocating new projects."

Based on NEA's numbers, this is what the future power-supply situation looks like: provided it begins raining from tomorrow or becomes hot enough for the snow to melt faster:

- The maximum generation capacity would begin to match demand only sometime next month.
- There will be surplus supply up to year 2005, especially during the rainy months. (NEA assumes Kali Gandaki, Chilime and Middle Marsyangdi will generate the electricity for which they are designed.)
- There are no major projects planned thereafter, especially not reservoirs with storage capacity.
- While all this happens, NEA's liabilities, especially money payable to Independent Power Producers (IPPs) for buying more electricity than it can sell during the rainy months, will soar.

So thus the nation stands, suffering power cuts resulting from faulty decision-making, lack of foresight and decisions based on the interest of powerful vested interests that want to retain the status quo rather than serve national interest.

Some critics point to the recent decision by Japan to support Kulekhani III. The idea sounds cost-effective because it would not involve building a new dam and would use the same regulated water cascading through two other powerhouses up the hill. But Kulekhani III will be dependent on the same rain-fed reservoir, which has limited storage and is perennially dry in the pre-monsoon period.

The Middle Marsyangdi (70MW) is another example of a donor-led decision that will be a blunder. Government involvement in this project contradicts its own policy of farming out generation to IPPs. Because the Germans are funding the project (using money committed for Arun-III that was abandoned in 1995 after the World Bank pulled out) the fear is that NEA could end up with very high costs. Donors tend to use such projects to create "markets" to selling their own products (electro-mechanical equipment) and services (consultancies) at exorbitant rates. Generally, the cost-efficiencies overlooked during construction are ultimately reflected in unsustainable interest and principal repayments, resulting in high power tariffs.

"Middle Marsyangdi is a run-of-the-river project and I ask what is the rationale for putting public money into something that the private sector is already involved in," says Bikas Pandey, an energy analyst. "The aid should have been used to build a reservoir."

Kulekhani was built when the country's entire power system had less than 100MW and there was already a mismatch between peak demand and capability to supply. "We should now be thinking of a reservoir to match the system needs when power from run-of-river projects would be much higher," says Pandey.

Although Nepal took large strides in the 1990s with making the business climate favourable for IPPs, there has been little followup and planning to foresee the power crunch after 2005. And despite the increase in power generation, the number of Nepalis connected to the central grid still stands at only 15 percent—about 650,000 consumer connections and 16,000 industries.

Two institutions, Nepal Electricity Corporation and Electricity Department, were amalgamated in the mid-1985 to form the NEA, which was a condition that had to be fulfilled to obtain a World Bank loan for the Marsyangdi project. NEA is again under donor pressure to de-bundle its services. Post-democracy politicians have not been of much help either. Sometime last year a parliamentary committee agreed that NEA's power purchase agreements (PPA) were outrageous and even recommended that the government open PPA negotiations for revision. What they did not tell the Nepali people was that almost every major party in government after the Khimti PPA approved similar agreements to those that came after. NEA still remains the playground for vested interests groups: petty bureaucrats, hydro-policymakers, politicians and donors.

In the name of "optimisation" our hydro-planners have magnified projects that they knew would generate only 21MW of firm energy into a 60MW scheme, an analyst says, alluding to the Khimti project. Ask NEA why that happened and you get statements muddled in techno-speak. Common sense planning dictates building projects that would give predictable energy when you need it the most. What this means is designing projects based on minimum or average flow, and not on floodwater volume.

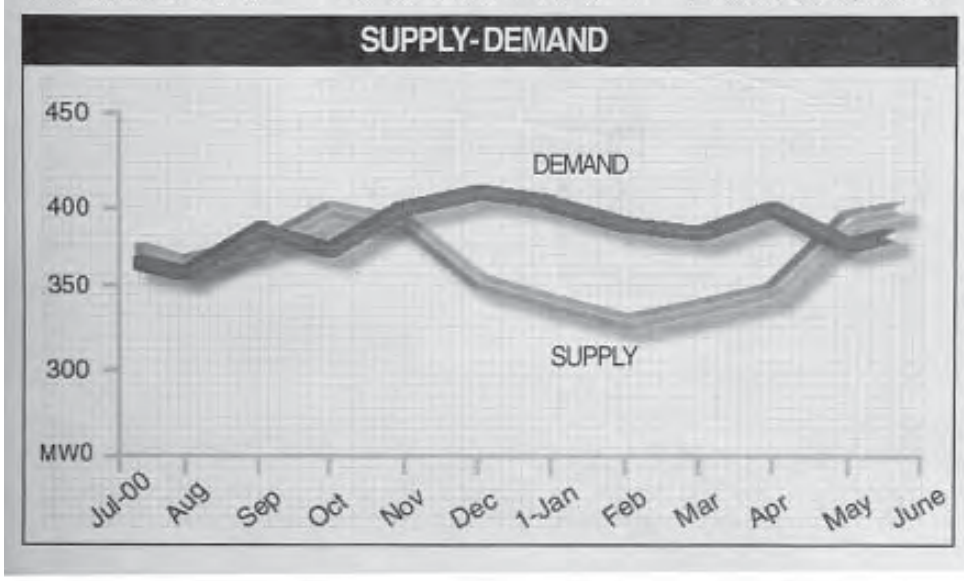
Khimti is one example where common sense did not prevail and if it were to be used as a yardstick even NEA's future projections may be questionable. NEA projects maximum generation capacity to reach 655MW in June 2005, when the base load would be 528MW. But this projection is based on the hope that all upcoming projects Kali Gandaki (144MW), Chilime (20 MW) and Middle Marsyangdi (70MW) will generate maximum power. Seasonal variations and contingencies that result from freak weather—as was the case with the Kulekhani penstock—don't seem to be factored into the projection.

The problem of seasonal supply bites NEA where it hurts the most. It has promised IPPs that it would buy all electricity they generate, including the flood surplus, and it would end up paying even if it cannot sell the power. There is the possibility of exchanging more power with India, even though the price at which power is exchanged is lower than the average Nepali tariff.

The answer, at least for the short-term, may lie in power swaps with India. "Having a grid more interconnected with India to exchange power may be one way to address the seasonal demand," says Sant B Pun, who retired recently as officer on special duty from the Ministry of Water Resources. Such an arrangement could delay the need for a small storage project in the 100 MW range, and buy Nepal time to plan for a larger 300-400MW one that could meet the needs of the system post-2006. But, cautions Pun: "Storage projects cost more money and involve huge resettlement and rehabilitation costs."

There's something else that could be done. Analysts like Pandey say NEA can begin thinking of using surplus energy through a time-of-day pricing scheme. NEA has begun that with some industries but that has to move faster.

We've learnt that new meters needed for billing customers on time of use basis cost Rs25,000 each. A source told us that NEA does not have money to buy all the meters. And the hydro-mafia would not welcome the idea of allowing customers to buy their own meters—all because the massive procurement kickbacks would have to be foregone. Which is a story told all over again. ♦





## General Notice

It has come to the notice of the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ) that some people have opened up an office with a name similar to that of this Forum. We have also learned that the said organisation has been using our name to do business with different agencies and individuals. The group has also been claiming ownership of Radio Sagarmatha and "Aankhi Jhyal", the television programme run by this Forum. We wish to inform all supporters and well-wishers of NEFEJ to check with our secretariat before making any commitments to anyone claiming to represent NEFEJ.

The Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists has two offices, one in Thapathali, Kathmandu and the other in Biratnagar. We use the acronym NEFEJ in English and Ne-Ba-Pa-Sa in Nepali.

We hereby request information about anyone who may come to seek donations in our name (NEFEJ). We have learnt that some organisations and people have been asked for and have given donations—supposedly to us—in the past and would like to advice all to inform us about the misrepresentation. We are confident all will cooperate in our effort to weed out misrepresentation in the name of our organisation.

**Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists**
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BIZ NEWS

## New banking rules

The central bank has issued new directives governing commercial banking, saying the move is aimed at making commercial banks stronger and more capable of withstanding risks. The regulations come into effect mid-July and the Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) says non-compilers will be dealt with firmly—for example, they may be barred from opening new branches or stopped from using the central bank's refinancing facilities. The NRB may also order them to stop taking deposits or extending loans and even take other action as authorised by the new central bank act. Commercial banks are required to comply and amend lapses in any area within six months.

The new rules address capital adequacy, loan classification and general provisions for loan loss, industry concentration limits or single borrower limits and accounting policies and formats.

There was no immediate reaction from different commercial banks we tried to contact, but we have been told that they are studying the regulations and will discuss them at the Nepal Bankers Association and with the NRB. Generally, they fear that both business growth and profits will slow down. There are also doubts whether the central bank will be able to enforce the rules, because its inability to monitor banks is one of the reasons for the poor state of two of the country's largest banks—Rastriya Banijya Bank (RBB) and the Nepal Bank Limited (NBL).

"We are trying to introduce international banking norms which will make commercial banks stronger and better able to withstand risks," a source at NRB says. "We've seen where lax practices can take banks and don't want similar problems to afflict others." The official was referring to RBB and NBL, both of which are feared to be on the verge of collapse. "Commercial banks might worry about the impact on short-term profits, but these regulations can ensure them long-term sustenance," the official adds.

By the new rule, banks would have to allocate more funds for capital adequacy, up from the present four percent on core capital and eight percent (supplementary capital) to five and 10 percent respectively from the new fiscal year. That is to go up to six and 12 percent in the fiscal year thereafter.

Commercial banks are wary about the new risk weights that have been assigned. "We're studying the rules but certain inconsistencies are already evident," a banker told us. "For example the risk weights for investment in government bonds is zero, so the weights for loans against these instruments should be zero. But this is not the case." Another is the risk weight on foreign currency placements in foreign banks that have been assigned 100 percent risk weight. This, bankers say, could lead banks to invest in call placements and expose banks to high interest risks.

The directive on loan classification says loans to blacklisted borrowers are to be treated as bad, without explaining what should be done for exposures against cash collateral or what should be done with borrowers blacklisted by one bank but which have performing loans at others. The directives also come with a four-type classification of loans—pass, substandard, doubtful and bad—as against the previous five, and require one percent, 25 percent, 50 percent and 100 percent provisioning.

There are many details that banks say they would like to take up with the central bank directly and discuss the details. They also say that some provisions are difficult to implement on short notice. One example relates to the single borrower or risk concentration limit, which one bank told us would take time to implement. Some banks even feel the new limit is low.

The regulations come with extensive accounting guidelines and formats for reporting and disclosure, which banks say, again, need clarifications because some are likely to infringe on the confidentiality of clients under risk. Commercial banks will now be required to report to the central bank every quarter, as against the existing annual reporting requirement.

## Mountain Air turns two

*Sivendra Bahadur Basnet*

Mountain Air completed its first year of operation last week and officials are upbeat about their achievements so far. "We've maintained a very good seat occupancy and will concentrate on serving the hub airports better," says Sivendra Bahadur Basnet, Managing Director. Mountain Air's fleet consists of two blue Beechcrafts of the 1900C series that fly with their distinctive mountain livery. Even though the 1900Cs carry only 19 passengers, they come with modern navigation and safety equipment, can climb fast (4,000 ft per minute) and attain a maximum speed of 226 knots, which helps save time, says a company statement. Mountain Air is among those airlines that decided early on not to fly to mountain airstrips, and Basnet says the focus will continue to be on strengthening services to hub airports. "We don't have plans for international operations yet, but we may venture into providing helicopter services," adds Basnet.

## Rush for bonds

Retail buyers rushed to buy National Savings Bonds worth one billion rupees, paying a nine percent interest, on 4 April. The primary sale was to have been open for a week but all bonds were taken up before the end of the day. Analysts say the rush was triggered by the interest offered, which is higher than what commercial banks offer, and the slowdown in the price of blue chips at the stock market.

## NTB gets more hands

The government has—finally—fully staffed the Nepal Tourism Board, the agency responsible for getting more tourists to Nepal. The newly appointed members represent some successful private entrepreneurs such as Shyam Bahadur Pandey, Ambica Shrestha, Yogendra Shakya, Kali Bahadur Adhikary and Bishwo Shanker Palikhe. The Nepal Trekking Agents Association, however, is unhappy that an entrepreneur from its ranks is not among the appointees.

## New Bank, branches

Nepal's 14th commercial bank began operations last week. The bank, which has its head office at Putali Sadak, Kathmandu, has Rs 1 billion as authorised capital, Rs 500 million issued and Rs 350 million paid-up. The ownership dispute the bank has been embroiled in for some time has now reached the Supreme Court.

Also last week, the Nepal Bank of Ceylon (NBCL) opened its seventh branch at New Road and plans another in Narayanghat "very soon." The Bank of Ceylon controls 35 percent of the shares, while another 35 percent is held by its joint venture partners Nepal's NB Group and other investors. The remaining thirty percent of shares are held by the general public. NBCL also has plans to issue another Rs 150 million worth of shares to the public.

ECONOMIC SENSE

by ARTHA BEED

# Nepal and Thailand

**We don't need to keep repeating that we want to be a Singapore. We can start by getting close to where Thailand is.**

Every time this Beed spends a couple of days in Thailand, he can't help but compare it with Nepal. Perhaps the first similarity is that both our national flag carriers started at the same time. The day the Maoists declared a strike in Nepal, bombs went off in railway stations in southern Thailand. The country is grappling with insurgent activity in the south, and the prime minister is fighting a battle both within his own party and with the opposition over corruption charges—much like our own Koiralaji.

People from both countries greet each other with namaste, and in government offices what is passed on folded between the hands is also similar. Monarchy is respected, it has a continuous ceremonial role. Development has been driven by the capital and remains centred around it. Thais love festivity like we do, and celebrate every festival so long as there is eating and drinking involved. Public holidays are innumerable and productivity, especially in government offices, is similar to that here. There are few differences in the socio-cultural ethos.

Thailand has progressed over the years and the sheer size of the population has been able to generate internal demand for industrial growth. The coastline is definitely an advantage and so also fertile land for agriculture. There has been progress despite political turmoil, corruption and scams. The Thai economy, unlike Nepal's, is independent of its neighbours and therefore the risk of foreign exchange rate devaluation is high. The country has not fully recovered from the crash of 1997. Financial institutions have gone bust and incomplete structures dot the skyline. Apartments in downtown Bangkok are available at prices comparable to Kathmandu.

The government, like Nepal's, is grappling with the issue of privatisation. They are now forming a national level holding corporation, to which the shares of public enterprises owned by the government will be transferred before being floated to the public. This interesting way of changing ownership of public enterprises may be a model for Nepal.

Despite all the problems, tourism keeps the Thai economy going. It started with backpackers but now there is a greater share of high-end tourist resorts. The national airline has provided the greatest impetus for the increase—there have been no known scams and this has gone a long way in forming the backbone of tourism. The Nepali tourism industry needs a national airline that is trustworthy, graft-free and growing.

Thailand has been able to open up new destinations every five years. They are not stuck with something like the Kathmandu-Chitwan-Pokhara triangle for thirty years, providing exciting options for tourists to return. The role of their Tourism Board has been commendable in generating and sustaining growth—here, at least, work takes precedence over politics.

It is important to learn from the success stories of countries like Thailand to improve things in Nepal. We don't need to keep repeating that we want to be a Singapore. We can start by getting close to where Thailand is. ♦

*Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com*

The Gastronomic Guide

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# Nepali Sardars

RAMYATA LIMBU

Saturday, 9.30 am, Kupondol. A gleaming green Pajero pulls into the spacious grounds of the Gurudwara Guru Nanak Satsang and Sardar Pritam Singh, a bespectacled grey-bearded Sikh alights and heads for the little alcove that serves as the gurudwara's office. He acknowledges the chorus of *Sat Sri Akaal* from a group of turbaned men, some scanning the daily edition of the *Punjab Keshari*, and others exchanging business notes.

Over forty years after he arrived

Sardar Mahinder Singh

Sardar Pritam Singh

with the first truck in Kathmandu, Sardar Pritam Singh still commands the respect of a community that has been instrumental in developing the transportation sector in Nepal. "I came to attend a wedding at the India-Nepal border when a friend of mine suggested that I start off in transport here," says Pritam Singh who came to Nepal from a pioneering trucking family from Jammu and Kashmir state in India. "When I saw the difficult terrain, so similar to my home state, I knew it wouldn't be easy." A year later, in early 1958, the then 21-year-old Pritam and his younger brother Darshan arrived with three trucks. Ferried from Patna, each set of wheels set in a barge, the vehicles were driven over cart tracks from Raxaul Bazaar to Amlekhgunj and then severely tried on the dusty, unmetalled road from Amlekhgunj to Kathmandu, a distance of a little over 100 km. It took them more than a week.

Others soon followed—relatives, cousins, and like-minded youths. "I liked the place. I thought I'd stay for a couple of years," says Mahinder Singh who came two years later. A BSc graduate from Jammu Kashmir University, the 63-year-old driver and transport entrepreneur has been here for forty years.

There are over 3,000 Sikhs living in Nepal now, about 90 percent involved in the transport business and the others selling automobile spare parts. They live in Dhangadi, Birgunj, Palpa, Syangja, Butwal, Bhairahawa, Pokhara, and Janakpur, where branches of the then New Road-based Nepal Public Motor Service were established. About 80 Sikh families reside in Kathmandu, many of them in Kupondol, close to the gurudwara. Every Saturday, they congregate there to help with the community kitchen, and to listen to bhajans, kirtan, and readings from the Guru Granth Sahib.

Many more people, both Sikh and non-Sikh are expected at the gurudwara on 1 Baishakh, which is also the Sikh New Year. Sikh history says that on this day in 1699, the tenth and last Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created a new order known as the Khalsa.

The guru baptised five volunteers representing different regions of India and different sections of India society and demanded their heads for the cause of *dharma*. They came to be known as *panj pyaras*. The followers of this new order were known as Singhs. They were to wear what are called "the five Ks"—*kanga, kachchha, kada, kirpan, kesh*—and were committed to believe in one god and the oneness of all humanity, forgetting differences among men and women.

"It is this belief that has made it possible for Sikhs all over to adapt easily to new environs and to spread all over," says Rupy Singh, a pioneer of pre-school education in Nepal. "My brother-in-law Pritam Singh and my husband Darshan, were, in a way, repeating history. Their father and uncle, before them, had led the Sikh community from the Pakistan part of Poonch to the Jammu and Kashmir side of Poonch during Partition and started the transport business there."

Before the family bought a part interest in the new Modern Indian School in Kathmandu in 1978, the Sikh community was devoted almost exclusively to the transport business. In fact, no other community had any significant part in this sector, and an entire generation of Nepalis learnt to drive trucks and buses, and to clean and maintain vehicles under Sikhs.

The services of Pritam Singh's family's fleet of 300 have been solicited by the police, the army, the food corporation, and even by King Mahendra. "Whenever King Mahendra and his entourage wanted to go to Chitwan or other places connected by road, we supplied the vehicles. We only charged for the fuel," says Singh, whose community of transporters was instrumental in supplying construction material to vital projects like the east-west highway, and the Sunauli-Pokhara and Narayanghat-Butwal roads.

"We transported construction material for the Trisuli hydel project and started the first bus service from Kathmandu to Pokhara in the early 70s," adds Mahinder Singh. "It was extremely hard work. Earlier, there were no cranes. When a truck got into a ditch, 50 or 60 people had to extract the vehicle, part by part, with jute rope."

Inside the gurudwara in Kupondol

ALL PHOTOS: MIN BAJRACHARYA

**The Nepali new year coincides with the Sikh new year. For Nepal's Sikhs it is a double festival.**

Increasingly, younger Nepali Sikhs like Rupy and Darshan's children, are opting out of the transportation business and heading west for MBAs, PhDs and IT training. The transport trade is now dominated by unions and the involvement of Sikhs is on the wane. "It's a hard line. It's physical work. You have to be up early to check on the vehicles, the routes. If there's an accident, you have to be on call," says Mahinder Singh, who at 63 suffers from bouts of gout and is semi-retired. Both his sons, born and raised in Nepal, are in the US.

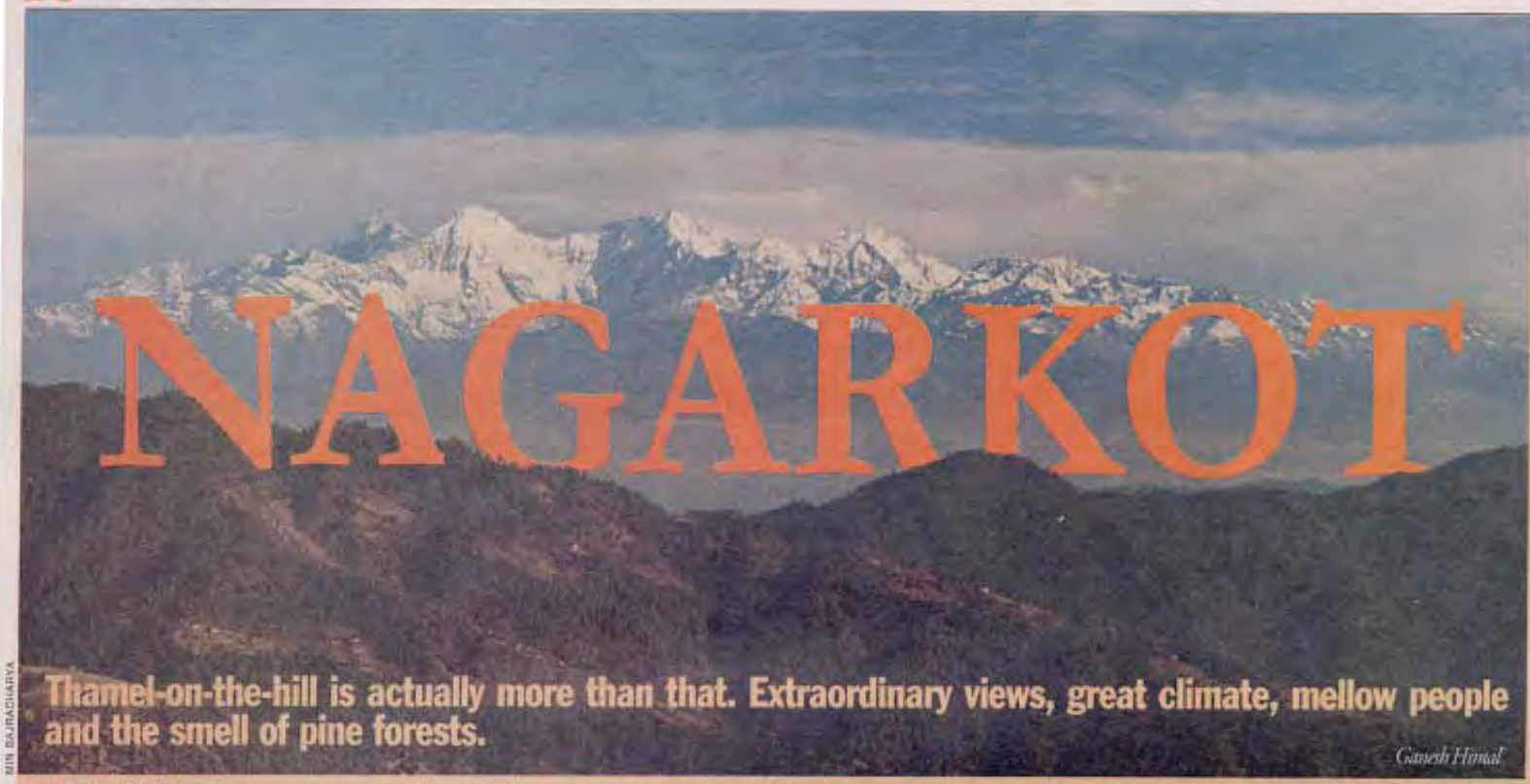
The community today owns 700-800 vehicles. Sardar Pritam Singh, whose son runs a garment business, has about 25 vehicles which he has trained local staff to operate and manage. "The country has looked after us. The locals, the government and the palace were cooperative when we came," says a reflective Singh who switches easily from English to Nepali, and Punjabi to Hindi. "But times have changed. We're older. There are some local problems. Owing to citizenship problems, we can't register property in our names but have to rely on the goodwill of friends. There's too much risk involved. Even getting a driving licence is a problem—one has to be a citizen."

Helping out in the community kitchen in Kupondol

Almost 98 percent of Sikhs in Nepal live in rented apartments. Despite a generation having grown up and been educated in Nepal, insecure families are returning to Jammu and Kashmir. Says Pritam Singh, "We're a working class people. We're only here to work, I mean hard, sincere work. Not imports and exports."

He went about business as usual during the riots last December. "I was roaming around the city and not a single finger was lifted against me. It was a bad time for the country." What does upset him, after forty years of service to Nepal and after being honoured by King Mahendra, is the country's denial of citizenship to him. ♦

# NAGARKOT



**Thamel-on-the-hill is actually more than that. Extraordinary views, great climate, mellow people and the smell of pine forests.**

*Ganesh Himal*

MIN BAJRACHARYA

**JANAKI GURUNG** AND **HARISARAN RAI** IN NAGARKOT

One of the great things about living in Kathmandu is how you can Leave it All and Take to the Hills, just like that. And as Nagarkot is designed specifically for such a purpose, this New Year's Day or Easter break, gather a group of congenial people and ride the gentle hills to the resort town perched on a ridge just over 2,000 m high.

Of course, it's a bit of a misnomer to call the place Nagarkot, since technically most of the resorts and lodges are in Naldun town, which is, technically again, in another district altogether (Kabhre). The towns are seamless, though, and residents of Naldun don't seem insulted that visitors don't know where they are. Cynics have yet another name for it: "Thamel-on-the-Hill" but it has some distance to go before it deserves that appellation. To be sure, there are some ugly constructions, and the scarcity of drinking water is worryingly metropolis-like, but this is more than compensated for by the abundance of pine trees, nice walking trails and, if the moment is right, brilliant views. (That Everest looms large here is an unfortunate urban myth. If you're lucky it is visible two days of the year.)

And don't forget that tour operator Nagarkot staple, Sunrise&Sunset, which is about all you'll hear and think about the 32 km between Kathmandu and Nagarkot. The procedure is as follows: Have a friendly attendant at your hotel thump violently on your door at 5.00 am. (Yes, am. The sunset is in the pm and it is just too disgraceful to require a wake-up call then. Better to miss it and pretend you were communing with your pine tree.) Sleep another fifteen minutes and realise that the bus taking you to the viewing tower—in Nagarkot, a stone's throw from the army camp—has departed and that you were doubtless the object of jeers. Keeping hope alive, run after the sound of the bus. Nothing like a bit of exercise first thing in the morning. Give up, and hop on a bike or walk the three km to the tower. You may have a couple of guns pointed at you on your way past the army post, they are harmless. Ignore them and try not to think about friendly fire. Climb up the ladder to the platform, buy your morning cuppa for Rs 20, and stare hard. You will then be blinded by a wonderful sunrise illuminating, from left to right, the snow-capped peaks of Ganesh Himal, Langtang, Dorje Lakpa, Phurbi Ghyachu and Gauri Shankar. If, for some reason, this doesn't happen, further amusement can always be derived by timing your descent (preferably on motorbike) to coincide with the daily constitutional our men in green indulge in at 6.30am, sometimes armed to the teeth and always in jackboots. If you fail to excite their two (vicious) dogs, you can instead pretend that the dagger looks they dart your way are sniper fire as you dodge and weave your way through a Bosnian minefield, spying on covert training exercises. (A word to the wise: indulge this fantasy only sparingly, because otherwise when the old Nagarkot fort is converted into a meditation centre, as is planned, meditation itself will be impossible—the sounds of the firing range will feel, in your contemplative state, like the just desserts of a life ill-spent. You will have nightmares and be depressed.)

No matter what you're told, never believe that your day in Nagarkot will be nothing but gazing at the sky. There are good walks to be done, and bike trails to be followed. If you're lazy or totally unfit, wandering along the metalled roads is equally rewarding, and makes staying in a resort a little more real. Places like Nagarkot are something akin to university towns, "town vs gown" replaced by "resort vs town". It's good to know, then, that there are some efforts on, at least, to work together as a community. The tourism entrepreneurs have their own worries, especially now that Indian arrivals have dwindled to next to nothing, and address these through the Nagarkot-Naldun Tourism Development Committee. The NNTDC even has a small one-room office in Naldun, across the street from the village development committee (VDC) office, should you have any questions. But they also send executive members to local development agencies and occasionally work with the VDC on issues of common concern like the severe water shortage. Some of the more exclusive resorts have their own sources, but mid-sized hotels are having a hard time—there's always water for guests, but many have to use two or three pumps to bring up the minimum they need. People of the town must pay Rs 10 for a 40-litre can hauled up steep, narrow paths. The NNTDC and the VDC mention a plan to build a large storage tank a 30-minute walk from the bus park, but details are vague.

The small primary school seems to attract a lot of visitors and goodwill, and got a new building five years ago courtesy Taiwanese Rotarians and a contribution from tourism entrepreneurs. Trivia: there isn't a single newsstand in Nagarkot. People don't come here to catch up on world events, obviously. There is no market, which makes it difficult to sell produce, but the hotels are happy to buy vegetables and chicken locally. Not too many people go out in search of jobs, and about 20-30 percent of all hotel and resort staff are from Nagarkot itself.

All of this make it a nicer place to go away to than if it just had wonderful views, bike tracks and pine trees—it actually seems like a pretty civilised place to live in, and most people one meets are wonderfully mellow. Weekend getaways should be just the right combination of getting away and keeping a couple of toes in reality, and Nagarkot will fit the bill this new year. ♦

*Nagarkot's flaming sunsets are spectacular because of the smog over Kathmandu Valley*

MIN BAJRACHARYA

## Seductive Nagarkot

**Two incidents in Nepali history that bespeak the siren song of Nagarkot:**

One took place even as Prithvi Narayan Shah prepared to attack Kathmandu Valley. King Jai Prakash Malla of Kathmandu sent to India for a doughty battalion of warriors and when they arrived full of bristle and aggression he dispatched them to train in Nagarkot. Once there the soldiers succumbed to the gentle breezes, the panoramic Himalayan views and the village belles. Not necessarily in that order. When Prithvi Narayan Shah attacked, Jai Prakash Malla ordered them down to fight. But Nagarkot was too intoxicating to leave and a distinctly lèse majesté message was sent back saying the warriors-turned-inhabitants were having a blast and had hung a metaphorical Do Not Disturb Sign on their rooftop. I like to think that the Nagarkotis one meets today—charming people—are descendants of these one-time fighters, who stay away from Nagarkot only because they must, and then just temporarily.

Fast forward to the Ranas. Dev Shumsher, when he was prime minister, ordered his court to Nagarkot. The only contact he had with the Valley was a cannon he commanded fired at 12 noon on Tundikhel to remind him that the capital and time did in fact exist.

When he was exiled by his brothers he chose to go to Mussorie in India which closely resembled Nagarkot at the time. He urged people to follow him with a single act—he had the beautiful hands of his Rani replicated in stone and metal as the mouth of several fountains that began in Patan Durbar Square, and it is rumoured, lined the old route to Mussorie.

—CB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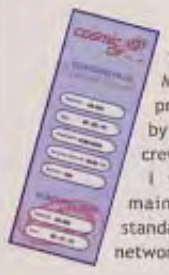

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## Where to stay

The only place with a formal New Year's deal is the brand-new **Naked Chef** resort and restaurant (262309, 680115, nakedchefnagarkot@hotmail.com), which promises all-you-can-eat for Rs 200. This is probably some of the best food in Nagarkot, so it's worth considering even if you're not staying there. There are a number of mid-range resorts, all equipped with restaurants. The **Chautari Keyman Resort** (290875, 225136) is popular and has individual cottages too. If you want to go really low-budget, there are two wonderful places, but don't go there looking for great facilities. **The Hotel at the End of the Universe** (680109, 680011, oasis@umpire.com) is popular and has an unbeatable location, while the tiny two-room **Sherpa Alpine Lodge** (680015, 680126, thupten@wlink.com.np) is the most charmingly furnished and clean budget place you're likely to see for some time.

On the high end, there is, of course, **Club Himalaya** (290833, 290868, club@mos.com.np) with "all mod cons" as they say in the business—jacuzzi, sauna, indoor pool, business centre. **The Fort** (290869, 290749, fort@mos.com.np) is also a nice place, with Newari-style architecture. Possibly the most breathtaking option in Nagarkot, albeit about four km down on the road to Sankhu, is **The Farmhouse** (272719, 271695, nfh@mos.com.np).

# 2058 २०५८

**More than two millennia ago, a new calendar was introduced which had a personal horoscope, and gave out advice on what food to eat, how to avoid calamities and how to unhex oneself from spells. It is still in use today, and is Nepal's official calendar.**

**DUBBY BHAGAT**

Chinese and Gregorian calendars, however interesting and historical, cannot compete with the mixture of myth, religion, homilies, remedies and miniature sketches that lift the Nepali Calendar into the realms of folk art that needs preserving and nurturing. The calendars that depict all you want to know about 2058 BS are doing brisk business in the bazaars of Nepal as the lunar year begins.

It is believed that 2,058 years ago the calendar-maker king Bikram Aditya journeyed to the valley of Kathmandu and asked that his calendar be accepted in exchange for his paying off the debts of the Nepal Mandala. And so a graphic art form was born, one that combines personal horoscopes, what food to eat on different days, how to avoid calamites and advice on how to unhex oneself from spells. And this is still Nepal's official calendar, although it was abandoned long ago in India.

The Calendar lists 41 major festivals this year and at least 3 times that many are to be celebrated on a scale that is merely grand. Examples of romantic belief abound. On 1 September, 2001, Kumari, the virgin goddess of Kathmandu, will anoint the king of Nepal with vermilion on his forehead allowing him yet another year to rule. This is a tradition that goes back some 300 years, and in the past when rulers were not given the goddess' blessing it is believed that tragedy followed.

Not all 22 million Nepalis subscribe to the belief that on 14 November dogs must be worshipped so that man's traditional four-legged friend would bark for his master's entrance into the gates of the hereafter when the end finally comes. But enough do so, and on that day dogs bedecked in garlands are seen sleeping off feasts in the warm autumn sun. This year, 14 November is also the night of Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, who will visit houses illuminated by hundreds of lamps (and, now increasingly, candles and electric bulbs) ensuring a prosperous year. It is believed that the gods and goddesses come in human form to test the hospitality of mortals. That is why the guest is quite literally god in Nepal.

Bada Dasain is the Nepali equivalent of Christmas, Thanksgiving and almost all other holidays in the West rolled into one, and this year it begins on 17 October and ends on 26 October. Dedicated to the Mother Goddess, it is a time when Nepal comes to a standstill. Animal sacrifice is a part of the ritual celebrations when blood blesses everything from airliners downwards to bicycles. Even banks are closed for a whole week 23-29 November, and gambling on a massive scale is permitted in a country which prohibits games of chance for locals. The harmony between Buddhism and Hinduism comes through in the custom that while animals are sacrificed by Hindus, the Buddhists pray for their souls in monasteries across the country.

For the Buddhists there is the holy month of Gunla which begins on 21 July and has the devout walking every day to stupas and temples deemed special by tradition. On 7 May, the Buddha's birthday is celebrated with jubilation and Lhosar the Sherpa/Tibetan new year, which happens on 13 February, goes on for anything from a week to a month. Even a historically insatiable princess has her day in the exquisitely preserved city of Bhaktapur on 14 April, the day when a handsome prince slaughtered the demon that drove the regal lady's passion.

Women in their red wedding saris will fast and bathe in sacred rivers for their husbands on 21 August while their liberated counterparts will use the occasion to push for property rights for daughters and gender equality. Brothers will be worshipped on 16 November, and 15 November is a day when one worships oneself by feasting on special foods to assuage different parts of the body. Then there are particular Saturdays when the God Mahakal, who was caught by a Tantric priest and asked to look after the kingdom, must be propitiated with rum.

So festival follows festival with the incense of one mingling with the drumbeats of another. A colourful and vibrant sense of deja vu prevails as procession follows procession returning ancient gods to a kingdom where faith still prevails, and a sense of joy and innocence are manifest in olden rites and rituals as fresh today as they were when time began. ♦

# Reality of virtual commerce

## How can entrepreneurs in developing countries build locally viable Internet economies that have real value?

MADANMOHAN RAO

Are you e-uphoric or an e-sceptic? Foregoing the middle ground, the reality in between, most people fall on one of these two sides when it comes to discussing the potential of an Internet economy in developing countries. Enthusiasts believe e-commerce will lift the sagging fortunes of all developing nations. Sceptics are doubtful, believing the Internet is merely going to leave the bulk of the developing world's population on the wrong side of the digital divide.

My considered position is that under the right conditions entrepreneurs in developing nations can launch locally viable Internet ventures with real value—but in many of these countries there are very real obstacles to such undertakings. A good start would be to get people from different positions on the spectrum talking to each other. One such attempt was at a recent conference in Bangkok, Internet World Thailand. It featured speakers from academia, government, policy think tanks, and the private sector, and raised some hard-hitting questions relevant to other developing nations as well.

Most important is the question of when the domestic user base in developing countries will reach critical mass. This hasn't happened yet in many developing countries, making it difficult to justify significant investment by new Internet service providers (ISPs), advertisers and vendors. Internet usage in many developing nations is still dominated by academics and techies (what in the industry is called "phase one" of diffusion). Phase two involves more use by teens and young people, followed by young workers (phase three). E-commerce initiatives tend to emerge in a country between phases two and three of Internet diffusion. For instance, with just about a million Internet users, Thailand is currently between phases two and three.

Phase four—full universal access—is still a distant dream for many emerging and even mature economies. It is basic economics: unless there is both sufficiently high online usage and online spending, e-commerce is not a viable option. The current Internet user base in Thailand, for example, does not yet have much purchasing power, says Somkiat Tangkitvanich, research fellow at the Thailand Development Research Institute. Most Thai users are between 20 and 29, so there is potential for increased purchasing power, but only down the road.

Flat-rate ISP pricing and affordable leased lines are still unusual in most developing nations, keeping Internet usage times much lower than corresponding figures for mature Internet economies. This is another major deterrent to advertisers and would-be e-commerce entrepreneurs. In Thailand, leased lines are much more expensive than in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Japan.

Compounding the high fees of service providers is another basic fact that has fervent believers looking a little shifty—PCs and modems are still quite expensive for most citizens of developing nations. To counter this, attention is increasingly focused on Internet access via cable TV modems and mobile phone channels. Focus is yet to translate into cheaper workable hardware, though. The much-hyped Wireless Access Protocol (WAP) isn't really living up to its promise in many parts of the world. There's hope, though—Japan's i-Mode is a good example of breaking the PC stranglehold on the Net market. But this is not a solution either, as it is very specific to the technological and economic realities of Japan, and cannot really be exported to other situations.

It is likely that the next generation of broadband wireless Internet applications on more user-friendly devices at lower costs will open up new gateways to the Internet. In Thailand, wireless penetration is set to overtake the land-line user base by 2003 and has already overtaken the PC user base. In Japan there are already more mobile handsets in operation than land-lines. Many Asian users are expected to gravitate readily to Internet access via mobiles, since they are not conditioned to richer interfaces like PC screens, a factor responsible for the less-than-enthusiastic response to mobile surfing in the US.

Accessibility and affordability are particularly critical problems in rural areas. Pichet Durongkaveroj, director of Thailand's National Electronic Commerce Resource Center, believes it is important to constitutionally ensure that the Internet is accessible to all of a country's citizens. Noble thought, but how is a country like Thailand to meet such a challenge? Thailand is only 30 percent urbanised, but 90 percent of its Internet users are in cities. And the Internet in rural areas has the potential to be about much more than electronically filing complaints with district officials. Local Internet commerce cooperatives could focus on handicrafts, traders, and agribusiness, and provide the required infrastructure and training, Durongkaveroj says.

It is unrealistic to expect domestic markets for e-commerce in developing countries to be anything but small for quite some time, but there could be niches developed for e-commerce locally, and also leveraged from within but for an outside audience—tourism being a prime example in this regard, especially for popular destinations like Thailand.

Exports, such as those of raw materials, handicrafts and gems, also lend themselves to promotion for an external audience, as evinced by sites like Thai-Gems.com. In the case of developing countries with a large diasporic population, services like gifting, investing, and financial remittance to the home country are well suited for the Internet. Expat remittances bringing foreign exchange into the country are part of the business model for sites like Thailand.com, according to its chief information office Ram Piyaket. So while 90 percent of e-commerce in countries like the United States may be domestic, in developing nations that figure could be reversed. Another positioning strategy for emerging economies is developing regional hubs for Internet software and services development, as in Ireland, Singapore and Bangalore.

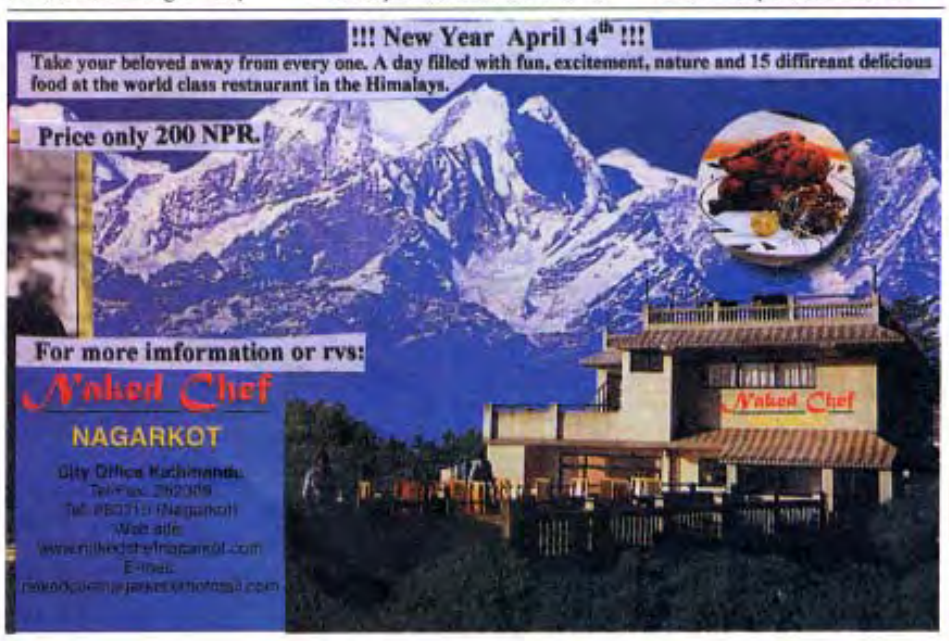
Much of e-commerce infrastructure involves progressive moves on the legislative and regulatory fronts by government agencies and industry organisations, but unfortunately regulating the Internet often turns into a football match, with agencies vying with one another for control of Internet traffic and revenues. It is often impossible to even begin talking about important issues like forming alliances with the banking and financial services system to facilitate activities ranging from local bill payment and online banking to credit card payment gateways and remittance services for expats. In Thailand, retailers, content providers, and back-end infrastructure players like fulfilment firms have recently formed such alliances, says Matthias Goertz, senior manager at the Boston Consulting Group in Bangkok. Other alliances involving mobile Internet access—such as MWeb, Loxinfo, and Siam2You.com—have begun to take off as well.

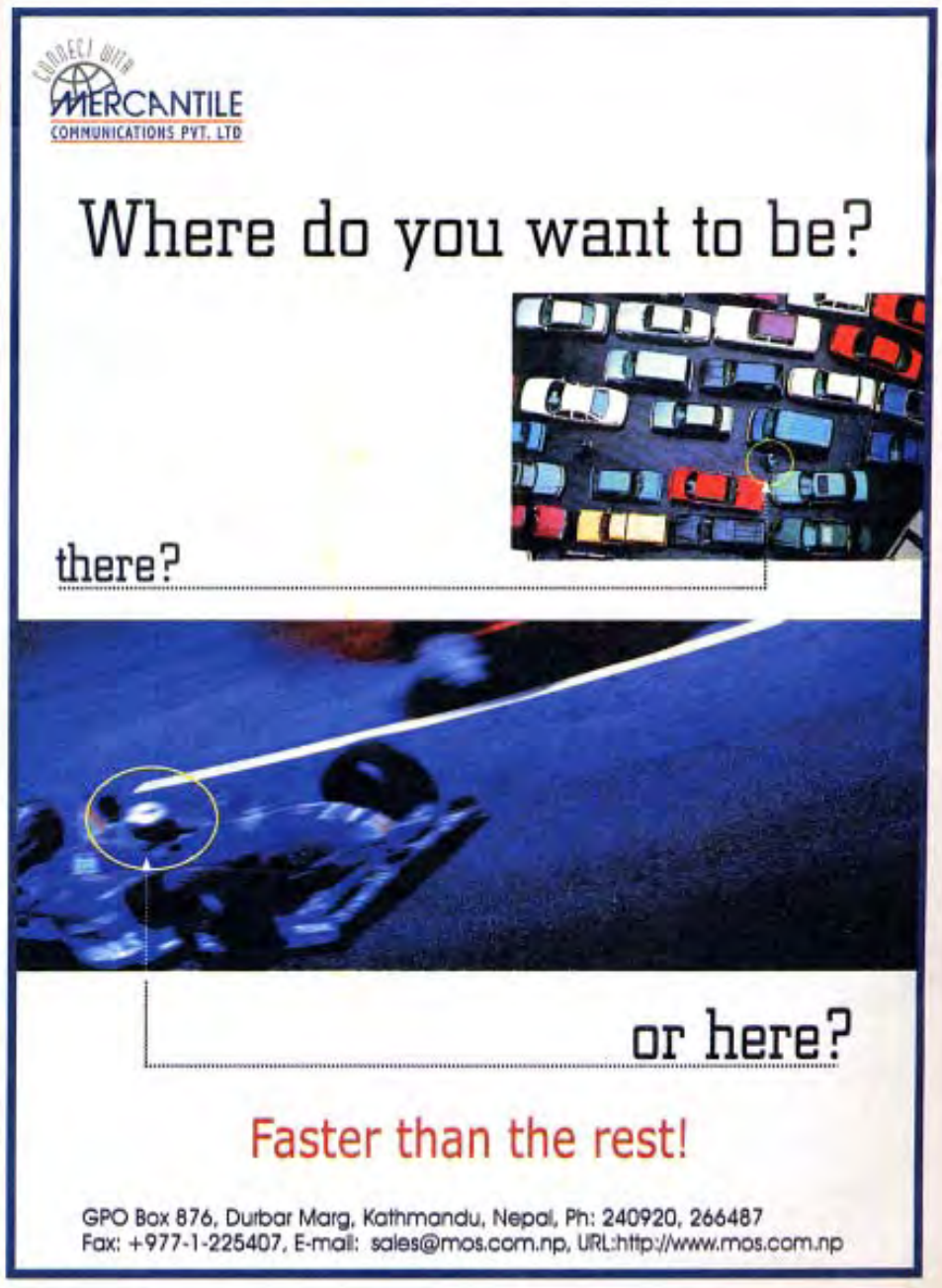
One way to get things moving on the Internet economy front is to provide for better Internet literacy among children—access via kiosks in libraries coupled with education for students and teachers are vital. Virtual universities and distance education have a lot of potential in advanced Internet economies like Australia and Canada, but it will be a while before educators and students in developing nations can find audiences and educational resources online. Initiatives like SchoolNet in Thailand are geared to providing a modest dose of Internet access in government schools.

Today, with the exception of North Korea perhaps, every country in the world has some form of Internet access, at least in major cities. But while virtually all governments of developing countries have taken a tentative first step in opening up Internet access via local points of presence, they have not gone much beyond that in terms of promoting government usage of the Internet or increasing diffusion and lowering access costs in remote parts of the country. In Thailand, for instance, there does not seem to be much political will on the part of the government for international circuit liberalisation, according to Somkiat Tangkitvanich, research fellow at the Thailand Development Research Institute. Thus, gateways to the international Internet will continue to be monopolised by the government's Communications Authority. Governments are also big buyers of products and services and can be big drivers of G2B (government-to-business) and G2C (government-to-citizen) services. But this has yet to take off in a significant way in Thailand, says Cher Chetsanditkhun, vice president of portal MWeb (Thailand).

There are very real opportunities for Internet economies, but a multi-pronged approach is needed. There should be dialogue and cooperation between the various public-, private-, and civil-sector players. Then the Internet market will finally be real for emerging economies. ♦

(International Electronic Publications of the Internet Society *On the Internet*.)

ANALYSIS

by MARK SOMMER

# Playing space cowboy

**The US missile defence plan is fuelled by a renascent American "manifest destiny" ideology and a techno-testosterone-charged Star Wars mythology.**

BERKELEY - What drives the American pursuit of missile defence? The Bush administration promises an accelerated push to place ostensibly defensive weapons in space. But the reasons used to justify this mother of all weapons systems just don't add up.

The costs will be immense. Not only in cash (up to $500 billion over the next 20 years) but also in short-changing the US public's expressed priorities and in alienating allies, provoking adversaries and triggering new arms races. Nor is there any credible threat to justify such extravagant expense. Taken together, the annual military budgets of leading "rogue states" North Korea, Iraq and Iran don't match the cost of the latest US aircraft carrier. So why are so many being asked to sacrifice so much to build something so superfluous?

Part of the motivation behind national missile defence (NMD) is job security for the millions of Americans supported by the Pentagon's largesse. But the pre-eminent purpose of the enterprise, which even the programme's fiercest opponents are reluctant to acknowledge, is not defence at all. It is domination pure and simple: not only to dictate events in any corner of the earth but to secure the entrance to everything that lies beyond. To the extent that humanity's future lies in space, NMD represents a secret seizure of the gateway to the universe by a tiny cabal of generals and politicians whose actions betray the best interests of their own country and humanity at large.

Yet this Trojan horse will not be turned away by the many trenchant technical or strategic objections raised against it, valid as they are. Fuelled by a renascent American "manifest destiny" ideology and a techno-testosterone-charged Star Wars mythology, this diabolical fantasy can only be defeated by evoking a more compelling myth and metaphor that project a higher human purpose for space and galvanise a broad-based movement to reclaim the heavens as a weapons-free global commons.

The Bush administration employs the comforting rhetoric of defence to distract policymakers and the public from divining its true intent. But the Pentagon is transparent in trumpeting domination, not defence, as the driving force behind its audacious plans to claim the entire realm of space as an essentially exclusive US military zone.

In its guiding document, *Vision for 2020*, the US Space Command declares its goal as "dominating the space dimension of military operations to protect US interests and investments". The most striking aspect of the Pentagon's published space war plans is their seamless blending of US military and private commercial interests as if the two were altogether identical. The Space Command estimates that commercial space investments will top $500 billion over the next several years and envisions establishing a potent space-based capability to "negate" any nation or group that would tamper with them. By shaping US space forces to serve as a publicly-financed private security patrol explicitly designed to protect and advance corporate interests, the Pentagon is hijacking the heavens not just for one nation but for a closed club of space generals and government-subsidised, military-serving corporations.

While they have quietly laid the groundwork for this seizure of space for more than a decade, the Pentagon's space warriors have gained powerful new allies in the Bush administration's twin eminences—Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld, a leading proponent of both NMD and a US takeover of outer space, headed a Congressional commission that delivered a report just nine days before Bush assumed office recommending that the US create a centralised "military department for space" of equal stature to the Marine Corps and capable of waging war both in and from space.

There is a law against all this, but it is riddled with loopholes and has never been enforced. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty, adopted as international law at American urging, was reaffirmed last November by a 163-0 UN General Assembly majority. Only the US, Israel and Micronesia abstained. In the wake of Sputnik, the US sought to "de-weaponise space" to prevent the Soviets from getting there first. The agreement was modelled on the landmark 1957 Antarctica Treaty, which banned all military activity on that continent "for all time".

But the treaty ended up banning only space-based weapons of mass destruction, a prohibition that Canada and China are currently seeking to extend to laser warfare. The US, however, now opposes all restrictions on its militarisation of space. "With regard to space dominance," said a former Clinton administration assistant secretary of defence, "we have it, we like it, and we're going to keep it." There is little time left to halt the enactment of this chilling scenario, but to defeat it, we must first debunk the deception that NMD is a defence and the impression that US space domination is inevitable.

A broad-based movement could coalesce around a few guiding principles: space is a sacred realm, a universal commonwealth where human combat has no valid place. The one force potent enough to foil the hijackers and reclaim space for a higher purpose is a galvanised global public forging common cause to command a better destiny for our heavenly home. ♦ *(IPS)*

*Mark Sommer is an author and internationally syndicated columnist who directs the Mainstream Media Project, a US-based effort to bring new voices and innovative ideas to the broadcast media.*

OPINION

by LEON LEDERMAN

# The end of Physics?

**Are there any burning problems left for physicists to tackle or must they accept with grace the close of their science?**

When communism collapsed, people spoke of the "End of History". Some now speak in a similar way of the "End of Physics". They claim that all fundamental issues are understood, that all the great questions are answered. Others suggest that even if some fundamental issues remain, they are essentially abstractions, irrelevant to human aspirations.

Questions about the end of physics are not new. In 1890, buoyed by centuries of successful applications of Newtonian mechanics and the electromagnetism of Faraday and Maxwell, eminent voices proclaimed physics at an end. The decade to follow, however, overturned this exuberance. Radioactivity, x-rays and the discovery of the electron opened up a new world. Soon after, physics reached new heights as it developed the two revolutionary pillars of 20th century physics: Quantum Mechanics and General Relativity. So, will man's hubris be capsized again?

To grasp where physics might go it is necessary to know how far it has come. Physics emerged in the 16th century as a quantitative, mathematically based set of laws through which humans could comprehend the inanimate world. Definitions of space, time, matter and energy became, thanks to physics, precise. Complex phenomena: eclipses, comets, tides, the properties of matter, the stability of structures, the behaviour of light, the processes involving heat flow, temperature, the colours of the rainbow and the more subtle colours emitted by heated substances, electrical charges and magnetism, gravitation and radioactivity were all organised into a small number of "laws of physics".

The twentieth century brought a profound understanding of the properties of the physical world, now considered as "understood" by physics—stars, galaxies, the evolution of the universe as well as biological entities such as proteins, cells and genes. What now remains for physics to achieve? In particle physics and cosmology we are now on the verge of solving problems that have confounded science since antiquity: what are the ultimate blocks of matter? How does the universe work? Our ambition is to find an answer so elegant and simple that it will fit on the front of a T-shirt. Today, however, we only have a powerful, but flawed, summary, the so-called "Standard Model", which reduces all reality to a dozen or so particles and four basic forces in nature.

Why is the "Standard Model" flawed? One obvious flaw is aesthetic—it is too complex. The model does not explain why there are so many fundamental particles and why they differ so much. Another flaw in the standard model is that one of the fundamental forces in nature is not included: gravity. We are still searching for a simple, all-encompassing theory that reconciles all these forces.

This effort is specially important for cosmology where peaceful coexistence between relativity, which is the theory of gravity, and quantum theory is needed to understand the universe's beginning. During the earliest moments after the creation of the universe in the Big Bang 12 billion years ago, the universe was extremely small and dense and the laws of physics governed perhaps only one kind of particle and one force. Unification of relativity and quantum theory is therefore necessary for us to understand the earliest moments of creation, when other particles and forces came into being.

With that understanding, cosmologists will begin to grasp how this dense universe started to expand and why more than 90 percent of its mass remains invisible to our instruments. Over time we will begin to reveal all the essential features of the cosmos to explain how a single event billions of years ago not only created galaxies, stars and planets but the atoms that assembled into living beings intricate enough to ponder their origins and purposes. Some say physics is unlikely to provide an ultimate explanation for evolution. However, I think that application of the principles of physics to chemistry and especially to biology will also assume greater prominence. As biology becomes a quantitative, hard science, physics—in its techniques, computational power and basic laws—will influence biologists more and more.

Indeed, the ultimate role of physics may be to unify all human knowledge. Edmund O. Wilson, the noted Harvard biologist, wrote in his book *Consilience* of the eventual unification of the hard sciences, social sciences and humanities. As revolutionary as this sounds, one can glimpse its possibility through the bridge of human consciousness, because the brain appears to work by the laws of physics and these, utilising the probabilities of quantum science and the complexity of chaos theory, may be amenable to logical analysis.

Will this knowledge hijack emotion, love, music, poetry, art? Or will this scientific union enrich the great glories of the human spirit? Must we fear, with Keats, to "unweave the rainbow?" Richard Feynman, the great theoretical physicist, has offered a simple yet powerful retort: "Does our understanding of the mechanisms of stellar activity diminish in any way our appreciation of the beauty and splendour of the night sky?" ♦ *(Project Syndicate)*

*Leon M. Lederman, a Nobel laureate in physics, is Resident Scholar at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, Illinois.*

## A swearing in at Machu Picchu?

Alejandro Toledo, a US-trained economist with Indian roots, finished first in Peru's presidential election Sunday but fell short of a majority and will face a runoff, according to preliminary results. He will face former President Alan Garcia, a left-leaning populist, in a second round in late May, results showed. Eight candidates were vying to become the successor to disgraced former President Alberto Fujimori.

Toledo, 55, finished second to Fujimori in elections last year but ended up boycotting a fraudulent runoff against the autocratic leader, who fled Peru in November amid mounting corruption scandals. Early official returns representing 11.73 percent of districts gave Toledo 36.38 percent, compared to 25.7 percent for Garcia. Transparencia, a widely respected independent election watchdog group, had similar forecast based on a sample of ballot tallies.

Toledo faced his strongest challenge from Garcia, a discredited ex-president returned from exile, and Lourdes Flores, a conservative former congresswoman. "Today, Peru was the winner. We have obtained a great victory," Toledo told hundreds of supporters at a downtown Lima hotel. "We have won in votes and in democracy, even if we did not achieve the 51 percent."

Toledo, who has a doctorate from Stanford University and has been a visiting scholar at Harvard, is a *cholo*, the Peruvian term for a person of mixed Indian and white blood. He has capitalised on his rise from shoeshine boy to an economist with the World Bank and on the resentment toward the European-descended elite that has long dominated politics in Peru.

Indians make up 45 percent of Peru's 26 million inhabitants and 37 percent are of mixed Indian and white blood. No Indian or mestizo has been freely elected president in Peru's history although several have come to power through military coups. Nearly 15 million Peruvians were registered to vote for president as well as a new 120-member Congress. Analysts said that the widespread corruption found in Fujimori's government had contributed to voter malaise and widespread apathy. Mudslinging and racial slurs dirtied the election campaign, with candidates accusing one another of resorting to sleazy tactics that Fujimori's regime used against his opponents.

Toledo faced allegations he fathered a child out of wedlock and tested positive for cocaine use after a hotel rendezvous with three women. In the closing days of the campaign, Toledo's wife, Eliane Karp, a Belgian anthropologist who speaks the Indian language Quechua, lashed out at "the little whites" in Lima. "A *cholo* government will come whether they want it to or not," she said. Toledo paid homage to Pachacutec, the Inca leader known as the great builder who extended the empire and promised that if he wins he will hold his inauguration at Machu Picchu, the spectacular Inca site in the Andes. *(Guardian)*

# Lasers for glaciers

## The Pakistan government has a controversial new plan—melt glaciers to tackle drought.

**MUDDASSIR RIZVI** IN ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's plan to melt glaciers to deliver water to farmers in drought-stricken areas is drawing fire from scientists, the government's own officials and environmental groups, all of whom have a single warning—don't mess around with glaciers.

The military government said last week that it was considering melting glaciers in Pakistan's northern areas to solve a water crisis that has ballooned into a political problem. The proposal came from the Agriculture Ministry, which is in a fix over severe damage caused by years of drought in predominantly agricultural Pakistan. Pakistan has already suffered more than $1.5 billion in losses through lower crop yields and subsequent food imports, lost employment and low industrial output, the government says.

"The financial losses will climb as water shortages delay sowing of cotton, which in raw and value-added form accounts for more than 40 percent of the country's $10 billion exports," a finance ministry official said. An Agriculture Ministry spokesman said: "Against the domestic requirement of 18 million tonnes of wheat, we are expecting 13 to 14 million tonnes." The government has already barred rice growers in Sindh from planting rice this year for lack of water.

Pakistan depends on water from melted glacier and snow ranges flowing into the Indus to irrigate 80 percent of 21.49 million hectares of farmland through a network of canals. These frozen water reserves discharge an average of 140 million acre-feet of water every year. The rest comes from monsoon rains. The glaciers and snow ranges are located in the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges bordering China and India. Hasnain Afzal, project director of the Snow and Ice Hydrology Project in Lahore says: "There hasn't been any fresh snow in winter 2000 which melts into the river system. The summer of 2001 will see a tremendous decrease in water inflows in the irrigation network."

The military government initially considered using lasers to melt glaciers, but the Army Engineer Corps and Atomic Energy Commission of Pakistan dismissed the proposal arguing they may not be able to contain melting to identified glaciers. The Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency (Pak-EPA) also rejected lasers, saying it may change temperature patterns in an ecologically sensitive area—causing flooding of unimaginable proportions. Pak-EPA director general Asif Shujja Khan, who heard of the proposal, said: "Although we have not been officially contacted, we are looking into the environmental implications. We would certainly order an environmental impact assessment of the whole activity if the government decides to go ahead."

Martin Smith, an official dealing with water management at the FAO said he was not aware of anyone ever having melted glaciers, an important water source, for irrigation purposes. Dr Khalid Rashid, former physicist with the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, totted up figures for an instant mathematical feasibility study. His conclusion: it will take 46 million conventional C02 lasers a full month to melt 30 million acre-feet of ice. But the amount of electrical energy needed to operate the lasers will require 230,000 1000-megawatt power stations. "Melting glaciers is not something we should try," he said. "The Indus valley civilisation [comprising Sindh and Punjab] depends on these glaciers. If we melt them, the whole country will turn dry with rivers running only during the rainy season."

Despite doubts and opposition, the ambitious military leaders have not given up the plan. Instead, scientists at the Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (PCSIR) are looking at melting glaciers by spraying charcoal, which raises the temperature. "We don't know if we will be able to do it," said a PCSIR scientist who did not want to be named. "Currently, we are only surveying the area and glacier hydrology." That certainly is news to Minister for Environment Omar Asghar Khan, who said his ministry does not know about any such plan. "Unless we assess the environmental repercussions of such an activity, we can't go ahead," he said.

What is not in dispute is the urgent need for a solution. Meteorologists forecast Pakistan will have only half the water it normally has for agriculture and drinking until June. "The country has received below normal rains for three years," said Qamaruz Zaman, the Met Office chief in Islamabad. "Last year was the worst—we did not get any rains during the monsoons and hardly any fresh snow in winter." In such circumstances, talk of melting glaciers has raised the hopes of thirsty farmers who have been staging protests in many parts of Pakistan. ♦ *(Gemini)*

# Antelopes into cashmere

**LI XIN** IN BEIJING

An uninhabited swathe of Chinese highland nearly half the size of France has become the arena for a grim battle to save the Tibetan antelope—a world away from the fabulously rich Europeans whose love of cashmere is leading to the slaughter of these animals.

This war against poachers is in the vast snow-clad Qinghai-Tibet plateau where the Yangtze river starts, in the shadows of the Hoh Xil mountains, which rise 5,000-5,600m above sea level and straddle the border of Qinghai Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Nearly 300,000 sq km in area, the region's thin air, perennially sub-zero temperatures, frozen earth and snowstorms make it virtually uninhabitable by humans. This is home to the Tibetan antelope.

The adult antelope—135 cm long, 80 cm tall from hoof to shoulder and weighing up to 60 kg—is covered with a thick layer of fine hair. In the early 1970s an estimated one million antelope inhabited the area, typically in and around marshlands set 4,000-5,300 m above sea level. Their numbers are now dramatically down to 75,000, according to official and non-governmental sources quoted by the state-owned *People's Daily* in January.

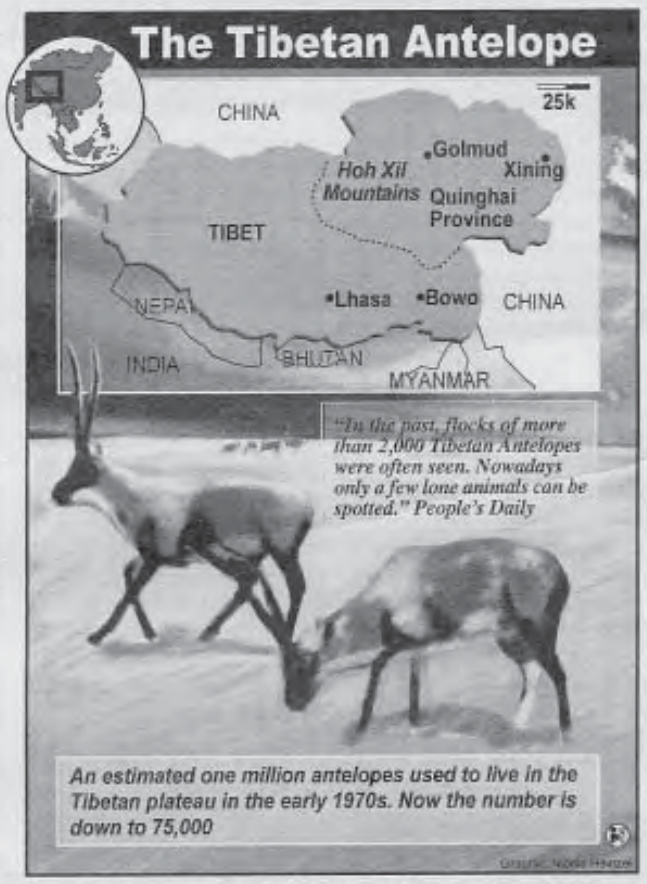
"In the past, flocks of more than 2,000 were often seen," said the report. "Nowadays only a few lone animals can be spotted." Chinese experts warn that the antelope could be wiped out in 20 years. "They will disappear ...unless illicit trading of Tibetan antelope cashmere is stopped worldwide," Liang Congjie, a conservationist who chairs the non-governmental Nature's Friend Association (NFA), said. Liang and others have joined in the fight to save the Tibetan Antelope—some, like Wang Bujun, by accident. In July 1997, Wang, a demobilised soldier, drove to Hoh Xil with friends to enjoy its wildlife. "A man boasted that in just one day, he had killed over 600 Tibetan antelope," Wang said. "They were wiping out the entire wildlife of Hoh Xil. We found many dead foxes and wolves without gun wounds, obviously poisoned to death."

Wang Bujun was then a policeman in his native town, Yuci City, some 1,500 km from Hoh Xil. Following his heart-breaking tour, Wang asked to be transferred to a nature conservation station in Hoh Xil. The station Wang was posted to is named after Sohnan Dajie, a local official whose death in 1996 at the hands of armed poachers made front page news, warned a shocked nation about the poachers' sinister designs and helped intensify the fight against them.

In April 1999, police forces of Qinghai and Xinjiang provinces and the Tibetan Autonomous Region police launched a joint expedition against armed gangs in Hoh Xil. They smashed 14 gangs, arrested 41 members and killed one, seized nine guns with 8,000 rounds of ammunition, 12 trucks and 1,000 antelope skins. In the year after the joint operation, Qinghai police made 58 more arrests and captured 2,147 skins of Tibetan Antelopes, and guns and ammunition. "We have done our best but, given the size of the area, the job can't be done with the scarce resources at our disposal," said an official of the Qinghai Provincial Wildlife Protection Bureau. Until 1998 the bureau had an annual budget of 20,000 yuan ($2,100) for protection of the entire wildlife of Hoh Xil, says the official. "That was barely enough to cover the cost of fuel for the police vans from Xining (the provincial capital) to Hoh Xil and back—about 1,000 km for a single trip," he said.

Qinghai is one of the poorest provinces in China—its average per capita GDP of $3,000 is 10 times less than that of Shanghai, one of the most advanced regions. Punishment for poachers is stiff. Ma Jiqing, a sheep skin trader in Wulan County of Qinghai, was sentenced to 12 years for killing 85 antelope two years ago. He and an accomplice took the skins to northern Tibet, where they sold for 530 yuan ($44) apiece. According to NFA's Liang Congjie, skins are normally smuggled to Nepal and India, via China's Zham and Pulan border posts. Based on the amount of Tibetan Antelope cashmere processed in India, he estimates that at least 20,000 animals are killed every year. Investigations by Chinese police and experts indicate no market in China for Tibetan antelope cashmere. Outside China, however, it can fetch $2,000 per kilogram—a scarf with 300-400 gm of the cashmere can sell for $3,000.

In October 1999, an international symposium held in Xining, expressed "appreciation" for actions taken by Britain, France, India, Italy and Nepal to ban the smuggling, processing and marketing of Tibetan Antelope cashmere and its products. It called for the creation of an international market "without illicitly produced Tibetan antelope cashmere and products". ♦ *(Gemini)*




## At the rate at which they are being hunted for their fleece, experts warn that the Tibetan antelope could be extinct in 20 years.

## A downward spiral

France joined the US in condemning Israel's plan to expand Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The French rebuke was unusually stark by diplomatic standards—it claimed Israel had lost direction since Ariel Sharon took over last month.

As Israeli tanks and helicopter gunships hit Gaza last week, a French foreign ministry spokesman said: "This downward spiral leads to more violence, more destruction and more suffering. The Israeli government has taken a wrong turning." He cited recent developments such as "the provocative announcement of the resumption of settlements in the occupied territories, continuation of so-called extra-judicial murders, military clashes in Gaza and attacks on the safety of negotiators." France has traditionally been more inclined than other countries, to criticise Israel and take a more pro-Arab stance. Palestinian leaders also welcomed the US condemnation of the plan. The US State Department called it provocative.

Sharon's strategy is becoming clearer. Whereas his predecessor Barak took reprisals for Palestinian attacks, Sharon has opted for pre-emptive punitive strikes. Sharon's spokesman said Israel would retaliate "relentlessly from now on and Palestinian security installations will be considered targets as long as security forces fail to prevent attacks on Israelis." The Israeli internal security minister, Uzi Landau, said its forces should hit Palestinian targets "every day, hour after hour." He added: "The price we will exact from the Palestinian Authority will become intolerable." *(Guardian)*

## Where have all the girls gone?

New Delhi - Results of India's latest census seem to confirm what demographers have long suspected—that poverty is not responsible for the country's worsening gender ratio. Rather, prosperity has increased the deep-rooted social bias against the girl child.

Provisional results show a national improvement in the adult sex ratio from 927 women for every 1,000 men a decade ago, to 933 women per thousand men. But any cheer on that account was diminished by statistics showing a drastic decline in the child sex balance, attributed to discrimination against the girl child. The number of girls for every 1,000 boys in the under-six year age group, has fallen from 945 in the year 1991 to 927.

The worst offender is the state of Punjab with just 793 girls for every 1,000 boys in the under-six age group. In Punjab and neighbouring Haryana, also famed for its farm abundance, the adult sex ratio too was less than the national average. While Haryana now has 861 women for every 1,000 men as compared to 865 in the 1991 census, figures from Punjab show a decline from 882 to 874 women for every one thousand men, over the last ten years. Other northern and central India states—UP, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh—too recorded adult sex ratios lower than the national average.

The overall improvement was due to better performance of the southern states, with an average of 968 women per 1000 men. Southern coastal Kerala, India's most literate state, was the only one to show a natural balance favouring women, with 1,058 women for 1000 men.

Demographers and social scientists attribute the sharp drop in the number of girl children to increased reach of modern medical care facilities in the villages which make it possible to determine the sex of the unborn child, leading to sex-selective foeticide. *(IPS)*

# "National government is the only solution"

*Excerpts from an interview with Bam Dev Gautam, general secretary, CPN(ML), Prakash, 2 April*

*Bam Dev Gautam*

***The ML is vocally raising the issue of a national government. Why do you think it is necessary?***

This is a necessity. There are many people who think the ML is raising this issue for its own selfish needs. That is not the case. We have studied the present situation and have realised that this is the only way to move forward. This has become a national necessity, and is the only option left. The nation is also seeking such a government.

***What is the basis for all this?***

We feel the present socio-political-economic system is responsible for all these problems. To get out of the present impasse, something has to be done that will change the present system. If we analyse the situation now, we will realise that the Maoists will not be able to control the whole country and that the present problems will not be solved and the same situation will persist. The king, too, cannot be very active and take over the reins of government. It has been proved that the majority party in parliament, the Congress, has not been able to rule the country or provide good governance. The UML, even if it wants to, will not be able to run the country. The opposition has not been able to chart any position or direction. Now, if you want to safeguard democracy, the rights of the people, the territorial integrity of the nation, then changes have to be brought into the present system. There is no alternative. We have to work unitedly. History always throws up such situations. Nepali history has now thrown up such an opportunity. If a national government is not formed, this country will be destroyed. A one-party government cannot work. We have raised this issue because the Maoists have stated that they are prepared to come to the table and hold a dialogue. We should not miss this opportunity.

***At this point in time, all political parties are demanding the prime minister's resignation. The ML is not asking for the resignation of the PM but is calling for the formation of an all-party government. Is this a ploy to divert the attention of the people or to push the issue of the PM's resignation to the background?***

We were the first to ask for the PM's resignation. We are continuing with our struggle inside parliament too. We are carrying it outside parliament at the same time. All other political parties are asking for the PM's resignation for their own selfish reasons. After Koirala's fall, they want a Congress government of their choice, which they can control. They are spreading misinformation, saying that one Congressman will go and another Congressman will take his place and all the problems will be solved. This is not true. We are not protesting against Koirala's resignation, in fact we are carrying out a struggle for his resignation. The first step should be Koirala's resignation, the second step should be an all-party conference, then an all-party consensus, and finally the formation of an all-party government. We are convinced this is the only way to solve the present problem. Our first demand is Koirala's resignation, and then that parliament should be allowed to carry on with its work.

***The UML has publicly accused you of trying to save Koirala. They say this is why you have raised this issue of a national government.***

The UML is a remote-controlled party bloated with pride. It does not think before it speaks or carries out any action. How much truth is there in what they say? Will the problems of the nation be solved with Koirala's resignation? They themselves say this will not happen. If the problem cannot be solved, then they should present other alternatives.

***The UML is presenting itself as the alternative.***

At the last all-party meeting, when Koirala mentioned an all-party government, Madhav Nepal said, "We do not want mid-term elections or an all-party government. We want a Congress government, but Koirala has to vacate the post of PM and just remain a leader of his party. We will be satisfied with that." This is what he says—is he really trying to project himself as an alternative? He is exposing himself as a puppet of the Congress, as someone easily manipulated by the Congress or a group of people.

***There are a lot of similarities in the issues raised by the ML and the Maoists. Are you joining the Maoists or are they joining you?***

We've already said that the national government should be formed taking all political parties into consideration, so how can you accuse us of joining the Maoists? We are even ready to move forward, hand in hand with the UML. Now, the Upper House has passed a motion calling for a national government including the Maoists too. I do not want to take credit for it. The issue is that whatever decisions the Maoists have taken are good and we should support them. On the basis of the motion passed, we should bring the Maoists into the national fold and draw them into dialogue.

## QUOTE OF THE WEEK

If CP Mainali and Rameshnath can hold talks with the Maoist leaders, why don't the other leaders follow suit? It wouldn't be a political sin. What harm could it possibly cause? Meet them, listen to them, question them, and try to understand them. If you think what they say is justified, accept it. Otherwise don't. But at least listen to what they have to say.

—*Kamal Koirala former MP and CPN (ML) leader* Jana Astha, *11 April*

*The pile on this table are the opposition's demands for your resignation. The pile on that table are demands for your resignation from within our own party. This new one, umm... is from the police force.*

नयाँ सडक *Naya Sadak Weekly*, 9April

# "National government is not necessary"

Excerpts from an interview with KP Oli, CPN (UML) leader and coordinator of the National Agitation Committee in *Dristi*, 3 April

*This time around both the Congress and the UML are celebrating Jana Andolan Day. How are these two different?*

The Congress is not celebrating Jana Andolan Day. Instead they want to show people that there are followers who support their corrupt ways and means. In the same way as the Panchas did earlier, the Congress is spending all the money they have collected through the various scandals in organising these shows. They are collecting people who will toe their line and always support them, no matter what. In

*KP Oli*

the same way, like dictators of many countries did earlier, Koirala too, sensing that his downfall is near, is organising these meetings.

*Despite such strong protests, Koirala does not seem to be ready to resign. What will you do now?*

If he does not resign, we will try and throw him out.

*How can you throw him out?*

Just wait and watch.

*The resignation of Koirala does not seem to be of any interest to the people?*

The people are very much interested in this issue. It is only yesterday that 35 policemen and some Maoists were killed. If you analyse the situation from the security aspect for the past 24 hours, there is no reason for Koirala to continue to occupy that post.

*You have been demanding that the government that will be formed after the resignation of Koirala should carry out some big reform programmes. What do you mean by big reforms?*

Our demands are providing relief to the people, alleviating poverty, instituting reforms in the administration, stopping the Congressisation of everything, controlling corruption in all sectors and providing security to all people. These are some of the programmes we consider important. Major reforms in the socio-political and economic fields are what we mean by big reforms.

*The issue of a national government is coming up too.*

The issue of the formation of a national government is all nonsense. It is not necessary at the present moment, nor is there a possibility....

# Ministers resign on moral grounds

*Ghatana Ra Bichar*, 4 April

Koirala's government is always in the limelight for one reason or the other; it does not matter that his government has made no substantial achievement. Many people feel that his party operates on the whim and fancy of the PM. Party guidelines do not exist. The resignation of many ministers of Koirala's government is providing free and cheap entertainment to the people. Tarini Dutta Chataut, who was the civil aviation minister under Koirala, was accused of corruption in the Lauda Air case. There was pressure on him to resign on moral grounds but he did not think it necessary. He went to the

*Tarini Dutta Chataut*

office of the Committee for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) as a minister and stayed a minister for a long time after being questioned by that Authority. He participated in the party convention in Pokhara where the party workers jeered at him and the PM. After this, the PM asked Chataut to tender his resignation on moral grounds and Chataut did the needful.

When the CIAA pointed out that another minister, Govinda Raj Joshi, was also at fault and he too should have resigned on moral grounds, Joshi did not comply. He said he would not resign even if a great deal of pressure was put on him as it was not necessary. Immediately after this incident, agriculture minister Jai Prakash Anand put in his resignation papers. He too, resigned on moral grounds and his resignation was accepted immediately.

Earlier, another minister, Mahesh Acharya, had quit on moral grounds but his resignation was not accepted and he was asked to continue. People are viewing this resignation business as some form of cheap entertainment.

# Everest spring cleaning

*Chhalphal*, 1 April

The Democratic National Youth Organisation conducted an on-the-spot survey of Purnagiri, where it was rumoured that the Indian government had encroached on Nepali territory. They strongly protested against this land grabbing and assumed that they had given a befitting reply to Indian imperialists. They are now planning more programmes focusing on the issue of nationalism, agitations against anti-nationalist forces and how to deal with them.

In this regard, the Youth Union recently wrote a protest letter to the Indian Embassy saying that India had encroached on Nepali territory in Gularia in Bardia districts. Indian forestry officials posted in the forests adjoining Nepal had dug trenches in ward 12 of Gularia municipality. Before handing in their protest letter to the embassy, a procession led by Gorkarna Bista, MP and leader of the Youth Union, was held. Participants chanted slogans against the Indian government and Indian intentions.

After handing in their protest letter, the students held a public meeting and the chief of the organisation, Rabindra Adhikary, said that although India was a neighbour of Nepal, it has never treated Nepal properly and is always harming or troubling Nepal in one way or the other. He further stated that if India did not take steps to stop this type of behaviour, then the students would react very strongly.

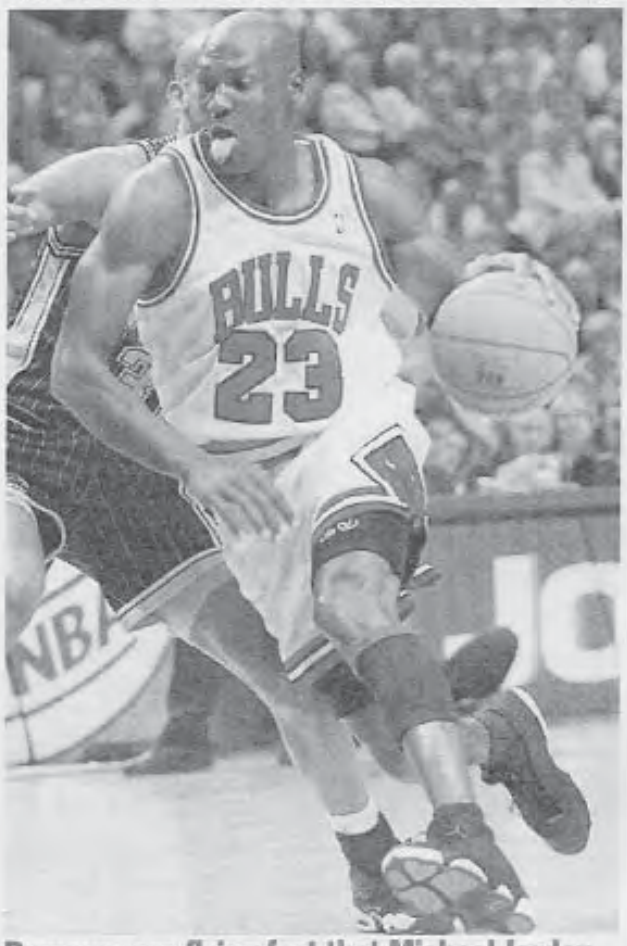
Next, they noted that no one had ever thought of cleaning Everest, which was full of garbage, and decided that the Union would take up the task of cleaning the mountain. In this regard, the union held a press conference in Kathmandu and Bista said that if the government raised questions about the payment of royalty while they were cleaning Everest, the organisation would carry out a struggle against the government and prevent the government from interfering with their work. The Union also said it would soon inform the public about its plan of action for the coming period.

# Bomb hoax and wife's anger

*Jana Aastha*, 4 April

Last Friday an Indian Airlines plane was to depart from Kathmandu for Calcutta. Suddenly it was reported that a bomb had been placed in the plane. The army moved into action and checked the plane thoroughly. No bomb was found and the plane then took off, more than two hours later than scheduled. This is public knowledge. What people do not know is that a major quarrel took place at the airport between a woman and her husband. They quarrelled right at the check-in counter. The man was heard asking his wife not to board the plane. The woman was insisting on leaving. "I am going. I am going, if I stay here you will beat me." The couple's exchange, in Hindi, was recorded by the police. The husband and wife are said to be Indian citizens. Neeraj Kapoor, the man in question had followed, Tosina Kapoor, his wife, to the airport. Tosina was to fly to India without informing Neeraj. As they were quarrelling in the airport, word spread that there was a bomb scare, and this scared all the passengers. The army checked the plane but no bomb was found. The plane then took off. The police swung into action and in the course of the investigation, took Neeraj in for questioning. The police suspect that Neeraj did not want his wife to fly to India and therefore raised the scare of a hoax. Neeraj said that he had requested his wife not to leave as his father was sick—that he had nothing to do with the bomb scare. Neeraj's father, MML Kapoor, is general manager of one of the Choudhary group of industries. The family lives in Kupondol. Earlier Neeraj had requested Indian Airlines officials to stop his wife at the airport but they were not successful. The plane took off and Neeraj landed in police custody. The police say they released Neeraj after questioning him for some time. No one has been able to solve the mystery of the bomb hoax. Tosina is a resident of Asansol, West Bengal.

# Will Jordan be back?



**Rumours are flying fast that Michael Jordan isn't playing ball just to lose weight, but in preparation for a comeback.**

One Washington Wizards owner thinks Michael Jordan is preparing for a comeback. Another Wizards owner thinks it just isn't so.

Opinions on a possible Jordan return were everywhere in Washington DC last week. The rumour that has circulated for weeks gained new credibility when Wizards primary owner Abe Pollin went on television to reveal his "gut feeling" that "the odds are that he's going to come back" and play for Washington next season.

"I didn't think he'd come back when I first heard the talk," Pollin then told The Washington Post. "But when Mario Lemieux came back to the Penguins, it stirred something in Michael." A Jordan comeback would mirror that of Lemieux, one of the owners of the NHL's Pittsburgh Penguins, who ended a three-and-a-half-year retirement in December. Lemieux said Tuesday he has talked to Jordan this month and expects him to make a comeback. "I think it's great for basketball and, obviously, I'm very excited about it," Lemieux said of reports of a Jordan comeback. "He's going to give it a shot and he's working very hard. He's taking his time; he's taking a few months to get ready. But I'm sure when he gets back, he'll be the best player again."

Pollin's words were stunning, given the business relationship between him and Jordan. As the team's president of basketball operations, Jordan is answerable only to Pollin. Jordan also owns a small piece of the Wizards, and he would have to divest his ownership under NBA rules before returning to the court. The man who recruited Jordan to Washington 15 months ago, however, doesn't see a comeback taking place. Ted Leonsis welcomed Jordan to town on Jan. 19, 2000, making him a partner in a group that owns all of the NHL's Washington Capitals and a portion of the Wizards. "He owns a part of the Wizards; he owns a part of the Capitals," Leonsis told WTOP radio. "There would have to be lots of discussions between Michael and me, Michael and Abe, Michael and the league, and none of that is happening. If this was real, I think we would be further down that road."

As for Jordan, he has consistently and adamantly denied the rumours. He recently said he's "99.9 percent sure" he'll never play again, and he rolled his eyes in disbelief when the subject was broached by reporters after he practiced with the Wizards last week. "The only thing this signals is that I'm getting some exercise," Jordan said. Neither Jordan nor his agent, David Falk, returned calls Tuesday. Wizards players and coaches are starting to tire of the subject.

"Michael has been very consistent with his comments concerning the possibility of his return to basketball," coach Leonard Hamilton said. "Until he says otherwise, I have no reason to give my own personal feelings because he's already spoken for himself."

Pollin and others who give credence to the possibility of a Jordan comeback usually cite three pieces of evidence: Jordan's workouts with the Wizards and his admission that he is playing basketball recreationally at a health club, Charles Barkley's statement that he would like to play with Jordan in Washington next season, and Jordan's sheer competitiveness that is fuelled by the knowledge he still had plenty left when he retired from the Chicago Bulls after the 1997-98 season.

The factors working against a Jordan comeback are his age—it's doubtful he can still dominate the game at 38—and his preference to live in Chicago. He would actually have to start showing up for the games if he were playing, abandoning his current routine of staying with his family and running the Wizards by telephone. Then there are the consistent denials from Jordan himself. Although his rookie year in management has been very rocky, he has taken some modest steps that could help turn around a moribund franchise in the long run. "I am working out because I got up to 240 pounds and I'm trying to lose weight," Jordan said last month. "People are taking this stuff way too far, but I can't control what people write or think."

Jordan has a five-year contract with the Wizards. He initially retired as a player in 1993 after winning three NBA titles with Chicago and tried to make a career in professional baseball. But he returned to the Bulls for the NBA playoffs in 1995 and played through 1998, winning three more titles. ♦

FEEDBACK

*by* **AUSSIE EXPAT**

# Bashing Barney

In the midst of all the doom and gloom of Nepal, it was good to have some light entertainment in the bilge Barney Reid has written about the recent Australian cricket performance in India. (*How the arrogant have fallen*, #37)

Obviously Barney has it in for the Australians, and I was trying to work out why. The blurb says that he played cricket for Sri Lanka, and I wonder whether some Aussie fast bowlers gave him such a torrid time that he has hated them ever since. Not enough, I notice, to stop him wanting to live in Australia. The more obvious answer is that he is a freelance cricket writer, which presumably means that he has to write something off-beat to get it published.

Arrogance indeed! Australia lost because of arrogance. One might have thought that a magnificent once-in-a-lifetime innings by a certain VVS Laxman had something to do with it, but no, according to him, it was arrogance. With the benefit of that wonderful gift of hindsight even an idiot like me (not to mention Barney) can see that Steve Waugh's decision to enforce the follow on in Calcutta turned out to be wrong. But not even Barney could have guessed that Laxman was about to play that innings. It has frequently been observed that in a test series a psychological advantage is often gained as early as the first morning of the first test. As Australia had belted India over five previous days, it is reasonable to assume, without citing arrogance, that Waugh had every right to think that India was on the ropes and ready for the knockout punch. It didn't happen that way, but arrogance? Wow, what a brilliant analysis!

However, as Barney raised the subject, permit me to reflect on some recent cricket history. I seem to remember a recent Sri Lankan captain who refined arrogance to an art form. His common trick was to require a runner while batting. This "injury" usually happened when he got puffed after three or four quick singles. Once the runner appeared no sign of injury was to be seen. Hardly within the spirit of the game. And there was the famous occasion when he led his team off the field when he didn't like the umpire's decision. All this, you may remember, with a sickly sweet smile that said "we poor innocent Sri Lankan victims who couldn't possibly do anything wrong." If sniggering is a sure sign of arrogance, as Barney so persuasively argues, Glenn McGrath is a long way behind our roly poly friend.

Arguments about the relative merits of test teams from different periods will always be held and will always be inconclusive. But it is a bit rich that an ex-Sri Lankan cricketer would think to mock the achievement of 16 straight victories. I think that is just behind Sri Lanka's TOTAL victories ever! What is SL's highest number of consecutive victories. Perhaps two? Remember you can't count home matches, or matches against inferior opposition.

Well, Barney, to finish, let me offer my congratulations. You did get yourself published. I am sure that it you get tired of cricket, the editors of the Nepali Times will welcome your services to write about Nepali affairs. With your brilliant journalistic skills, you are sure to be able to offer simplistic analyses and instant answers which even our politicians might be able to understand. You could have Nepal humming along in no time.

***(Name withheld on request)***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SAVING FAITH

by DESMOND DOIG

# Taking toothaches to a god

**There are millions of nails—tiny nails, small nails, big nails, large screws and wedges of steel. Perhaps the nails compare with the size of the toothache.**

If one dares count the coins nailed to the old tree stump, or just the nails of all sizes from small to enormous, and gives up at the ten thousandth, it would seem that Kathmandu is one vast toothache. For, every tack, nail, screw or coin knocked into the shrine means a prayer offered for relief of toothache. Which is amazing when one considers the flashing smiles that greet one everywhere. No well-capped film stars could flash whiter. But there is this old lady with her student grandchild, both hammering away with bricks. I notice the lady is offering something the size of a chisel, and the child just an ordinary nail. No coins attached, but a light is lit when the exertion is done. When done, which will the small shrine bless? One hopes both; the agonising molar and the painful milk tooth. After all, unlike going to the dentist, it is the sufferer who does all the work and the toothache god who effortlessly decides yes or no.

Legend has the god Washya Deo, yet another manifestation of Bhairab, attending a dance recital near the temple of Nardevi in the guise of a tree. How many unsuspecting people, I wonder, crouched in his shade or burdened his branches as they too fell under the spell of the dance? The god stayed transfixed so long that he took root and when eventually he tried to leave he found he couldn't budge. At least his disguise couldn't, so he slipped out of it as he would a shirt, and there the tree remained. A discerning tantric soon discovered its identity and persuaded the obliging god to practise. Over the centuries, the tree has crumbled. Now, just a fragment remains, sheltered by an overhanging tiled roof, and crowned by a crude coronet of oil lamps. Until a year ago, maybe less, a depression in the centre of the stump contained a small golden image. Perhaps some greatly relieved supplicant removed it in a fit of ecstasy or a constant sufferer took it home to compel a cure. Now there are millions of nails, many washered with coins; tiny nails, small nails, big nails, large screws and wedges of steel. Perhaps the nails compare with the size of the toothache. Perhaps there was a time when a convenient hammer was provided at this wayside shrine. If so, it disappeared like the golden image. Now one is obliged to bring one's own or find a brick or stone.

When the dentists began moving in is anyone's guess. It was an obvious place to set up shop. They could either entice the suffering on their way to the shrine or collect them when their supplications failed. The shops are distinctly aimed at those who cannot afford the luxury of the latest clinics or the long wait at government hospitals. Sign boards shout 'DAAT' in bold letters and display painted pink gums and whiter-than-snow teeth in promising grins. There are sets of false teeth exhibited in windows, along with all manner of dental equipment that cannot fail to attract the suffering, particularly villagers from the mountains. One sees them, carrying baskets of fruits or vegetables slung from their foreheads, or handsome woollen rugs over their arms and shoulders, deciding which den of salvation to patronise. Often they are aided by charts, photographs of pretty women with pearly teeth, and pictures of gods.

The shops are open to the streets, the dental chairs often innocent of screens so that an extraction can offer the same morbid fascination to passers-by as a public execution. I am assured that friends of the patient are often called upon to help the dentist when teeth are tough and resistance tougher, but this is something I haven't seen. I have heard suppressed screams welling out of a shop front but cannot vouch whether they were the patient's or the dentist's. They might even have been the protestations of an old pedal-generated drill. Once, when queues at better-known dental clinics were long and late and I suffered a nagging toothache, I seriously considered going to one of these shops near Washya Deo. The white-haired dentist looked expert and kindly, but I funked the publicity and the ferocious array of false teeth piled like petrified bites on glass shelves. Sadly, I disregarded the toothache god, not out of disbelief but embarrassed by the vision of me hammering away on a six-inch nail while traffic came to a standstill.

The area called Bangemudha (*banga* meaning crooked and *mudha* a log of wood), offers other interests beside the toothache tree. Across a small square is an ancient statue of the Buddha, standing without explanation in the main doorway of a house. Its simplicity of line and texture place it in the Licchavi period (AD 300-800). Not far away is the handsome temple of Naradevi, dedicated to the white Kali who was invited by a Malla king to protect his city. All about are old houses heavily ornamented with carved windows and doors of great beauty. In a large courtyard is the sixteenth-century stupa of Kathisimbhu, similar in looks to the hill top shrine of Swayambhunath. This is no coincidence, because the stupa offers similar merit to those who for reasons of ill health or age cannot worship at the great stupa on the hill. Legend has Kathisimbhu built in India near Benares. When it was completed there were none found competent to consecrate it, until a Nepali priest happened along. After performing the complex rites, he set out for Kathmandu. To the amazement of all present and those gathered along the way, the large and magnificent stupa followed him.

On the same street is an ancient window that in a valley of exquisitely carved wooden windows is unique. So unique, in fact that it has been given the Newari name of Deshemoru Jhaya which means, 'the like of which is not to be found anywhere'. That should be enchantment enough, but just a glance away from the pristine window is a small temple to Kankeshwor, distinguished by a large, six-pointed metal star above its mysterious front door. A visiting Jewish general was emphatic, that somehow the Nepalis had appropriated the Star of David. He is not alone in thinking so, just as the swastika is considered an import from Hitler's Germany by many surprised tourists. These tantric symbols of great antiquity are common to Nepali design, but the arguments persist. An eminent Indian once pointed to a bosomy Nepali Tara and declared it to be an Indian god despite my protests. Every person to his own interpretation.

The ornate front door to the temple is always dosed. Entry is made by an unostentatious door nearby, for legend has it that should the front door be opened, it would require human sacrifice. True or not, I doubt that anyone is going to put hearsay to test. ♦

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

BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

# Was *The Hobbit* born in Lamjung?

There are trekkers for whom the journey up the Kali Gandaki valley is less about nature and mountains and more about rock music. Whilst Muktinath beckons to the Hindu faithful, Jomsom is the rather unlikely pilgrimage site for scores of Jimi Hendrix fans every year who believe local claims that the rock legend once stayed in one of the lodges for a few days. Leaving the Annapurnas and returning to the plains of Pokhara, one finds other travellers looking for long-lost signs of the one-time presence of JRR Tolkien, the Oxford medievalist and creator of *Lord of the Rings*. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many still want to believe that Tolkien visited Nepal in the 1930s and that this seminal visit to the closed kingdom formed the backdrop of his magical tale *The Hobbit*. As it is, history tells us that Tolkien got no further east than the French Alps.

Instead of looking for dragons and elves, those seeking mystical travellers' tales would do better to read *The Throne of Stone* by Lt Col John Philip Cross and perhaps even pay a visit to his modest house located at Pokhara's town limits. The ex-Gurkha is known far and wide for his extraordinary fluency in Nepali and his 55 years of experience in Asia. For although Tolkien never came to Nepal, Cross most certainly has, and his compelling tale of how modern Nepal may have been born is distinctly, if unintentionally, Tolkienesque.

*The Throne of Stone* is divided into three sections, respectively entitled *Father, Son* and *Grandson*, which chart the fortunes, misfortunes, alliances and disputes of clans and families across parts of what is now Nepal and northern India. The story is a magical mix of history interwoven with plausible reconstruction, thus fleshing out the dry bones of the past with deftly-crafted and entirely believable actors. Whilst the focus shifts from kings to commoners and from Muslims to Hindus, a central thread of the book concerns the role of the ethnic Dura of Lamjung (whom Cross refers to as *Tura*), "a hill race" whose entanglement in the house of Gorkha, the author suggests "played a full part in establishing the current dynasty [of Nepal], all of five hundred years ago". The plot is engaging, confirming that Cross is a masterful story-teller. Through instructive alliteration and carefully-chosen words, the author holds the reader's attention from the very first page:

"This story is about those far-off days...It answers the long forgotten whys and wherefores of the warp and weft of the past. All the actors on that shadowy and bygone stage were riddled with ritual, saturated with superstition and none immune to omen." (page 1)

Although there is barely a dull moment in over 300 pages, some more squeamish readers may be a little startled by the vivid descriptions of (perhaps unnecessarily) gruesome deaths:

"A myriad flies pulsated and crawled in, around and over the tacky, viscous fluid that was still oozing from a most horrendous of gaping wounds." (page 187)

A hallmark of JP Cross' books is that no single character, tribe or village emerges as fully victorious or exonerated from blame. While the narrator's dislike of the higher Hindu castes is apparent, particularly the Bahuns who are portrayed as "clever men and clever manipulators, [who] dominated the slower hill men..." (page 12), it is genuinely refreshing to read a book in which ethnically Tibetan people are for once not portrayed as happy-clappy Buddhists devoid of guile. In noticeable contrast to the reams of Tibeto-phile musings that appear in the bookshops these days, the narrator in *The Throne of Stone* finds the local Bhotiyas to be hypocritical, calculating and at points downright nasty.

Evaluating oral history is a complicated and political process. Just because a wise old man says so, does it means that an event necessarily took place? As all fieldworkers know, there is no ideology more powerful than the "once upon a time..." story, and readers of *The Throne of Stone* must be careful to distinguish for themselves between plausible history and informed hearsay. Cross has devoted years of his life to collecting and evaluating oral accounts of the unwritten parts of the history of Nepal from the village perspective (what he calls "grey-beard level"), and the present book (his ninth) provides an important outlet for the previously little-known voice of the Dura. As a "reconstructed village version" of what might have happened, then, *The Throne of Stone* is as engaging as it is plausible. But as charming as it is, however, the stories may be no more than stories, and Cross' reconstruction is, after all, only 'his story'. ♦

*The Throne of Stone: A Reconstructed Village Version of the Pre-Dawn of the Gorkha Dynasty, 1479-1559.* John Philip Cross. 2000. Mandala Book Point, Kathmandu: Nepal. 340 pages, Glossary (9 pages) and 2 line maps. ISBN 99933-10-07-7. Price: Rs 550.

***Mark Turin is a linguistic anthropologist writing a grammar of the Thangmi language spoken in Dolakha and Sindhupalchowk.***

## ABOUT TOWN

### MOVIES

❖ **British Film Festival**
**Billy Elliott** Thursday, 19 April, Sunday, 22 April and Wednesday, 25 April
**Elizabeth** Friday, 20 April, Monday, 23 April
**LA without a map** Saturday, 21 April, Tuesday, 24 April
Free screenings, all at 6 pm in Krishna Hall, Gopi Krishna Cinema, Chabahil. Organised by the British Embassy, the British Council and the Nepal Britain Chamber of Commerce. Sponsored by Gopi Krishna Movies, Qatar Airlines and Nabil Bank. 410798
❖ **Nepali and Hindi movies** online ticket booking at www.nepalshop.com

### EATING OUT

❖ **Everest Hotel** New Year Fun Food Fair Rs 1299 per head, Rs 799 for children under three ft. New Year at Galaxy Disco, Rs 1199 per couple, Rs 599 per single female. Panjabi Food Festival at The Far Pavilion until 22 April, with authentic condiments and accompaniments. Barbecue at the Ropes, 12 noon-2.30pm daily at The Sky Terrace. Saturday Splash, extensive brunch buffet with use of the pool, Rs 555 per head, including one soft drink or beer, Rs 229 for children under three ft, including one soft drink. 488100
❖ **Movenpick ice cream** Exotic desserts at the new ice-cream lounge on Darbar Marg.
❖ **Stupa View Restaurant and Terrace** at the Baudhanath stupa. Pizza from a clay oven, vegetarian specialties. 11am-8pm. 480262
❖ **Soaltee lunch buffet** at the Garden Terrace Restaurant. International cuisine, salads, soups, desserts. Rs 700 for full buffet. Rs 450 for soup, salad, dessert. Rs 300 for salad. Rs 450 for children under four ft. Taxes extra.
❖ **Authentic Sekuwa (BBQ)** at Dwarika's Hotel every Friday from 6.30pm. Meats, vegetarian specialities, and desserts. Rs 699 per head, Rs 1,299 per couple, nett. Reservations recommended. Traditional dances in the courtyard. 479488
❖ **Indian Thali** at the Pilgrims Feed 'N' Read Restaurant in Thamel (next to Kathmandu Guest House). Also enjoy South Indian dishes, Tibetan snacks including Thukpa. 5pm-7pm amidst the garden ambience of flowers, trees, and marble sculptures by Akhilesh Rai. 424942

### DANCE

❖ **DJ Bishwas** every evening at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency. Live Jazz Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Latin nights Friday and Saturday. Hyatt Regency, Taragaon. 491234
❖ **Arabian dance lessons by Tania Luis** Tuesdays (11.30am) and Thursdays (5pm)at the International Club, Sanepa. Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays (6pm) at the Kathmandu Centre of Healing, Maharajgunj. 425946
❖ **Sunday Night Fever** Free dance classes every Sunday by dancemaster Andreas Lehrke. Salsa, swing and more. The Piano Bar. Hotel Yak & Yeti. 8.30pm. 248929

### MUSIC

❖ **The Shangri La Jazz Bar** Cadenza (Tuesday and Thursday), Irish music by An Saine (Wednesday and Friday). Special this month French chef Phillippe Carpentier and Narayan Gurung's special menu. 412999
❖ **Jazz by Cadenza** at the Upstairs lounge, Lazimpat. Every Saturday, 7.30pm-10pm. Rs 200.
❖ **Kishore Gurung plays classical guitar** at the Chimney, Hotel yak & Yeti. Every evening 8.00pm onwards. 248999
❖ **Classical Sitar** Pilgrims Book House auditorium, Thamel. Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays 7.00pm to 8.30pm. Rs 300.

### EXHIBITION

❖ **Contemporary Graphic Prints** The Nepal Association of Fine Arts (NAFA) in collaboration with the Indian Embassy and the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) presents 81 graphics by 34 renowned artists like MF Hussain, Laxma Goud and Gogi Saroj Pal. The exhibition earlier travelled to Havana, Lima, Bogota, Panama, Caracas, Venezuela, Hongkong and Dhaka. NAFA Gallery, Bal Mandir. 15-30 April

### MEDITATION AND HEALING

❖ **Japanese light healing** Hirokazu Kobayashi heals Sundays and Wednesdays 3pm-5pm at the Shuvatara School this month. 537551
❖ **Sri Chinmoy meditation** Learn practical techniques from disciple Santosh. Free every Saturday 5pm-6.30 pm at Pilgrims Book House, Thamel. 424942

### MEETING

**Friends of the Bagmati River** Meeting to discuss bringing life back into the waters of the Valley. Wednesday, 18 April, 4pm. Dwarika's Hotel. 479488

### MARTIN CHAUTARI

**Global movement for children and Nepal** moderated by Anil Raghuvanshi, Save the Children, UK. Participation open to all. Unless noted, all discussions in Nepali. 17 April, 5.30pm at Martin Chautari, Thapathali. Tel 246065. Fax 240059. POBox 13470. chautari@mos.com.np

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## BOOKWORM

**The Ancient Settlements of the Kathmandu Valley** Sudarshan Raj Tiwari
Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 2001. Rs 300

Tiwari's book tells the story of the location and identification of the Valley's ancient settlements on the basis of legends, chronicles, inscriptions and historical documents belonging to the Lichchhavi period and the Malla period.

**A Documentary History of Nepalese Quinquennial Missions to China 1792-1906**
Vijay Kumar Manandhar
Adroit Publishers, New Delhi, 2001. Rs 720

Based on original western and Chinese sources, this book traces a detailed history of Nepali five-yearly missions to China, throwing new light on the relations between the two countries.

**Memories of Malgudi** RK Narayan, ed. S Krishnan
Viking, New Delhi, 2000. Rs 792

An omnibus of classics including *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide* and *The World of Nagaraj*.

**The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes** David N Gellner
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001. Rs 1032

Gellner, a Reader in Social Anthropology at Brunel University, engages with Weber's historical, materialist and conflict-oriented approach and draws on extensive fieldwork in Nepal and Japan to attack critical questions in the anthropology and sociology of the two religions.

*(Courtesy Mandala Book Point, Kantipath)*

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## NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

There is a discontinuous band of clouds traveling eastwards from the Mediterranean Sea. Some of these are hovering over Kashmir, but they are nearly spent of all their moisture. A lingering low-pressure area over Tibet has brought rain-bearing clouds but these are blocked by the main chain of the Himalaya and cannot travel to us. However, isolated clouds that do sneak through could bring localized thunderstorms in parts of the Nepal midhills, including Kathmandu. Polarization of the dispersed clouds toward the three low-pressure zones developed in eastern Tibet, southern tip of the Indian peninsula and Rajasthan (India) is in progress. Conclusion: isolated afternoon showers will continue in the midhills with snow flurries at higher altitudes, but in general the pre-monsoon dry heat will intensify with no major rains to break the drought. Thick wind-blown sand will reduce visibility throughout the foothills and tarai.

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# Live and let live

*From left to right: Bobby, Phiroj, Manoj, Nirakar, Bhanu, Manose, Adrian*

## In 2001, the curiously named band 1974 AD continues to make innovative, rock-based Nepali world music.

**ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY**

It is 1974 AD, not 2001 and this is more than time travel. Those who thought Nepali music had died can call off the wake. It is just being re-incarnated. Don't let the name 1974 AD fool you into thinking these fellows are fossils. 1974 AD already burned two CDs and are back on track with their third album, *Satabdi* released on Sunday at a function, and a separate collection of eight fusion tracks unreleased as yet. These two albums are sure to wipe out many misconceptions about Nepali world music. When the band played a few numbers from *Satabdi* at a CD release ceremony this week, the audience swayed in unison, they applauded wildly, they sang along. The band will now be playing live on 20 April at the Royal Nepal Academy Hall.

*Satabdi* seems a sure winner with its upfront rock and lucid and truthful Nepali lyrics. One song from the album is being broadcast on Hits FM 91.2 regularly and is already a hit. Written and sung by drummer Adrian Pradhan and dedicated to his late music teacher and inspiration, Chandra Mohan Ghising, the song has a nice touchy-feely tone. The song is similar to the two big hits the band had last year, *Parelima*, and *Samjhi baschhu*, from their album of the same name. But they also have something for hardcore rock fans, *Baancha ani baancha deu* is loud, energetic and makes clever use of that old staple, the electric guitar. "This is just a simple message to the Nepali people, live and let live," says Nirakar Yakthumba, the band's bassist and vocalist.

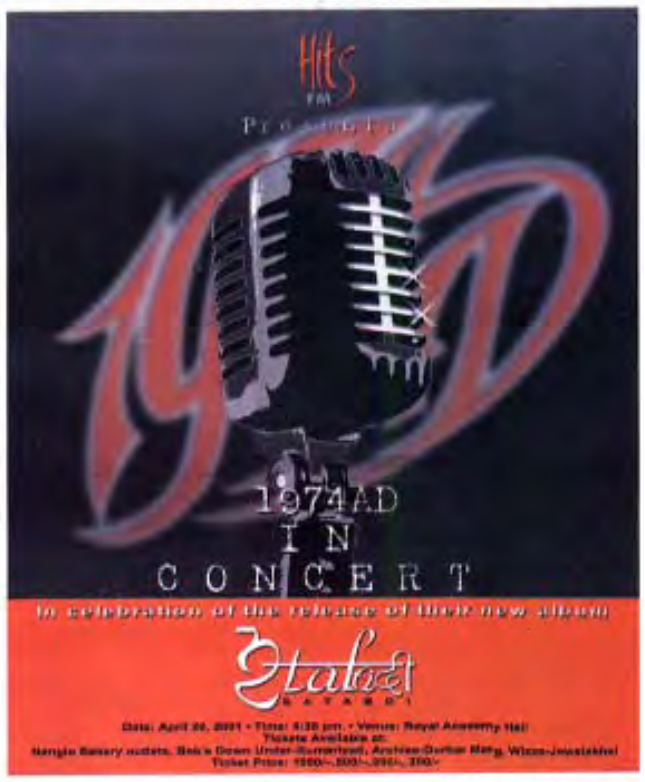
Many in Nepal may not have heard of 1974 AD, they are not on Radio Nepal. You don't see them on Nepal TV. Yet. Next week's concert will be broadcast live on Nepal TV and that is when their popularity is bound to soar. Most of the band came together while teaching at Gyanodaya School in Kathmandu Valley, where bassist and vocalist Nirakar Yakthumba is vice-principal. Their love for classic rock inspired principal and teachers to jam together and eventually gave them their name. Soon, they started playing for friends, and in 1995 they released their first album, *Time Out*. It did well enough, with part-funk and part-rock numbers like *Pot of gold* and *Hey you*, although it didn't break any records.

"The first album was basically for fun," says Yakthumba, "It was only after we performed on stage for the first time that we decided to form a band." Those were early days of Nepali world music, and there were no promotions, none of the fanfare that accompanies album releases today. It was their second album, *Samjhi baschhu*, released in 1998, when contemporary Nepali music was gaining in popularity, that they really struck a chord. A mix of rock, soft rock, and folk and well-crafted lyrics on tracks like *Parelima*, *Deurali bhanjyang* and *Ekai chau*, the album appealed to young and old alike, traditionalists and modernists, and even won a few awards.

They were going along as usual when the third *Sounds of Spring* show at the Soaltee Crowne Plaza came around last year, and they were invited to play, as usual. There they met a music producer, Deepak Rajbhandari, who suggested 1974 AD do a real "world music" album that could be marketed overseas. Manoj KC, lead guitarist of the band, talks about how there were some 30 musicians creating music together. "It was solid fusion," he says of the music they made. Rajbhandari's challenge to the band was to compose eight fusion tracks using as many local instruments as possible. They did a lot of homework and as a result, they've moved away from the standard fusion fare—sitar, table, a flute—South Asian bands dish up. A superbly energising example of just how good much-maligned fusion music can be is *Running on empty*, a track on their new international album, which was inspired by the calls of cowherds in Kosi Tappu. "We've worked really hard on the fusion album—did much research and used almost every type of Nepali musical instrument," says Yakthumba. The album is to be released by Tower Records, one of the largest music retailers in the US. It's uncertain whether it will have a domestic release, but the band is eager that Nepalis hear it.

It's exactly this willingness to experiment that makes 1974 AD such a joy to listen to. The core of the band: Yakthumba on bass, Pradhan on drums, Phiroj Shyangden and Bhanu A on the rhythm guitar, Manoj KC on lead. Others like Manose Singh on flute, Bobby Gurung and Sanjaya Shrestha (of Shristi), both percussionists, keep passing through. Their love of rock aside, the band has fulsome praise for Nepali musicians. The youngest band-member, Manoj KC admires artists like Nabin Bhattarai, while Pradhan likes Bidhan Shrestha for his lyrics and Deep Shrestha for his voice, and Shyangden remembers Nepali bands from Hong Kong. "They were called Hong Kong Band," he smiles. All the songs and lyrics are composed by the band, a far cry from the time when the only famous Nepali bands were those that performed cover versions of English songs. "We managed to set a new trend. Sure, we're influenced by music from the seventies, but we make music the way we like to, in our context, which is unique," says Bhanu.

So what should be done to ensure that bands like 1974 AD can come up in the future too? "They should stop keeping music at the college level and start treating pros like pros. Only then will Nepali music develop," says Yakthumba. He's right, but as 1974 AD's own history shows, it is equally important to have inspiration—and the band is doing exactly that. Whether you know their music or not, go to the concert. You'll see what we mean. ♦




HAPPENINGS

MIN BAJRACHARYA

*GUNNING FOR GIRIJA: Leader of the opposition, Madhav Kumar Nepal, addresses the mass meeting organised by his party, CPN (UML), at the Khula Manch on 8 April.*

MIN BAJRACHARYA

*SMILES ALL AROUND: Comedian Madan Krishna Shrestha at his characteristic best at the release of the book* Kathmandu Spring *on 8 April. From left, author Kiyoko Ogura, former Speaker Daman Nath Dhungana, former minister Bharat Kumar Pradhan and publisher Basanta Thapa.*

AMAR SHRESTHA

*MISS HOPEFUL: A contestant trying to impress the judges during the talent round of the Miss Bagmati contest, 8 April.*

## Under My Hat

*by Kunda Dixit*

# 2058 Horror Scope

Nations, like people, also have horoscopes. It's all in their stars. And, like people, you can tell that some countries are Capricorn while others are Gemini. The Asian Tiger, Singapore, for instance is definitely a Leo while Asian Goat, Nepal, cannot be anything but a Capricorn. And like people, nations also regularly visit astrologers to have their futures foretold, and are allocated auspicious times for their daily four-hour power cuts. National leaders have been known to take advice from astrologers before they announce States of Emergencies, stage coup d états or declare chukka jams. In these dark and uncertain times, it makes a lot of sense that before our armed forces embark on an important mission in the interests of national security to restore peace and stability in Sierra Leone, they should double check if Jupiter is at right angles with Mars in the Seventh House and transiting the trajectory of Intelsat-2B in geosynchronous orbit over the Indian Ocean.

It is also fitting that Friday the 13th marks a grand climax for the successful completion of 2057, which will go down in the annals of Nepali history as the year that we succeeded in making the biggest arsenals of ourselves since records started being kept. In no country on earth have so few managed in such short time to make such huge collective arsonists of themselves. But, being a nation of doubting Thomases, of nay-saying nabobs, of wannabes, have-beens, also-rans and never-wases there will be those among us who will be sceptical about our achievements in 2057 which include: nuturing our own full-blown insurgency, igniting communal riots, unleashing a national level corruption scandal that smells worse than the Bagmati and Tukucha combined, and successfully fighting off an invasion of foreign tourists.

Some jaded cynics will want to keep Nepal in the middle ages: they want to show that Nepal is a romantic, peaceful Shangrila nestled in idyllic isolation in the lap of the Himalaya and famous the world over for its brave Gurkhas and agile Sherpas, for its racial harmony, its soporific leaders, gentle people and man-eating tigers. But it is clear that if we remain like that, then no one is ever going to treat us with respect. We are going to be kicked around by the likes of St Kitts and Nevis who will, when we are not looking, steal our turn to be president of the Civil Society and Sustainable Development Council of the United Nations.

Already, we have noticed some alarming trends: a country which has requested anonymity but is located near the equator and whose national animal is an extinct flightless bird, has already pulled a fast one on us and run off with our geostationary slot while we were engrossed in burning Hrithik's videos. Unless we induct our own Star Wars missile defence system, our territorial integrity and celestial sovereignty is going to be infringed upon more and more frequently. Speaking of which, has anyone actually physically checked to see if Mt Everest is still there?

Given the state our country is in, we now have no recourse but to ask the Royal Nostradamus, Nepal's only first generation Martian, to look at our zodiac signs and let us know what lies in store for 2058:

**ARIES:** Be stubborn, it's not in your interest to learn from your mistakes. Practising mistakes over and over again makes you perfect.

**TAURUS:** Try not to be self-reliant this year, shun self-sufficiency. There is always some sucker who wants to give you money. Remember: beggars have a choice.

**GEMINI:** As Mercury, your ruler is aligned with Saturn, the planet of limitation, the harder you try to patch up party infighting the worse it'll get. Save energy, remain enemies.

**CANCER:** When it looks like things can't get worse, rejoice! It does. There is always room for deterioration.

**LEO:** Relax. Take it easy this year. Strive for mediocrity. Never do today what you can do day-after-tomorrow.

**VIRGO:** Caution is your watchword for 2058. Don't innovate, don't try anything new, keep low, don't rock the boat. Play dead.

**LIBRA:** Mercury is transiting the money sector of your chart. Seize the moment, this is the Deal of the Century, take the cash and run.

**SCORPIO:** Careful, now. Back-stab him before he back-stabs you. Don't trust your grandmother, even.

**SAGITTARIUS:** Remember, there are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends. Only Permanent Representatives to the UN.

**CAPRICORN:** Planetary activity at the mid-heaven angle of your zodiac chart means you are sure to mess things up. Go right ahead.

**AQUARIUS:** Conserve fuel, clean up air pollution: bring the country to a halt through chukka jams.

**PISCES:** Every time you try to solve a problem another pops up. Sleep on it. By the time you wake up, it will be gone. ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

# House Rajkarnicar built

SAIL SAREBI

Come 20 April, Birendra Rajkarnicar hopes to see some 80,000 people—visiting the Himalayan Expo that he has been organising for the last 11 years through his firm The House of Rajkarnicar. "This year we have 200 companies from 13 countries participating," he says. "When we first started in 1991, just 74 business houses took part. Next year will be even better," says Rajkarnicar, who introduced the idea of a business expo to Nepal. This highly professional event management outfit has had a ripple effect—since the Expo began, fashion shows, concerts and conferences have taken on a distinctly professional hue.

Birendra starts his day from *Hos*—a small courtyard around which a few Rajkarnicar families live in Mangal Bazaar, Patan. Interestingly, the "house" in his business' name does not signify grand multifarious business intentions, but derives from the name of his ancestral home. "We don't know how or why the courtyard was named *Hos*. It doesn't mean anything in Newari. But people in our community understand that it is a house," says Birendra.

While at school, Birendra Rajkarnicar was once blacklisted for leading the first strike at St. Xavier's school. That streak of rebellion was soon to be put in the service of more ambitious pursuits. On finishing school, Birendra's went to Birgunj on his parents' urging, to look after their sweet shop there. "The only way to get out was to go somewhere else to study. And one day my dedication paid off—I got a full scholarship to study in the US," he remembers.

Studies finished, Birendra got a lucrative job with AT&T in the US, but his soul yearned for something else. "I always dreamt of coming back to Nepal doing things to help my country," he says. He returned and started the first Nepali cotton knitwear enterprise, The Himalayan Knitworks in 1985. In doing so, he also doubled the pay of a few hundred Nepali garment workers and got the industry going, exporting cotton yarn to Europe and the US.

Eventually he set up the House, the city's expert organiser of various theme activities. The eventual aim of the firm is to help turn Nepal into an international convention destination. Thirty-something Birendra Rajkarnicar believes that "Nepal, with all its elements, is in a very good position to emerge as one of the best." And with his business, chances are it will. ♦

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