

NEPALI Times

#533

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A satellite-eye view of the Indian subcontinent on 16 December, with haze cloaking the Gangetic plains on its way to the Bay of Bengal.

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Clear view

Kanak Mani Dixit bids UNMIN adieu in the interest of the Nepali peace process

p4

Two Christians share their experience of living in a Hindu-majority country this Christmas

p7



p13

Kashish Das Shrestha documents the everyday of Nepali UN peacekeepers in Haiti, who have had an eventful year

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Nepali Times would like to wish its readers a very Merry Christmas 2010!



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SHED THE LOAD

As darkness falls, instead of pushing on towards home and hearth, more urban Nepalis are likely to be tempted to tarry awhile, if not in their generator-powered offices, then in restaurants and bars in cities that will offer them some respite.

By now, we are all resigned to another long period of loadshedding this winter and beyond. We are equally resigned to the incompetence of an electricity authority that has done so little to increase grid capacity or reduce leakage of what little we have that things are bound to get worse before they get better. The irony is not lost on those who are relieved to hear that power cuts may peak at 'just' 14 hours a day.

But there is something that could be done to shed some part of the load borne by all of us, not just those who can afford to purchase generators, inverters and (still not cheap) solar power. If only government showed more imagination than what they have displayed thus far in resolving Nepal's politics, then daylight saving time (DST) could lighten the days ahead.

It has been estimated that if Nepal Standard Time were pushed forward one hour and 15 minutes, then we could reduce our electricity shortfall by about 16MW, and thus loadshedding by about 40 minutes a day. DST would delay the time at which sunset and sunrise occur by one hour and 15



KIRAN PANDAY

minutes, which would reduce electricity usage during evening peak hours. This would outweigh the increased use of electricity in the mornings.

The supply shortfall this winter is 440MW and this translates into 14 hours of power cuts a day. Nepalis are not rioting in the streets only because they have come to expect nothing from the inept government. DST can reduce the shortfall by 15 per cent.

Systems loss and pilferage of mains electricity is at 45 per cent, highest among Asian countries. Cracking down on power thieves alone could reduce losses by 25 per cent, which would be like adding a 150MW power plant. The other reason for the power crisis is our dependence on run-of-the-river schemes. The time has now come to think about storage plants that capture monsoon runoff in reservoirs to generate peak power.

Of course, DST is no straightforward adjustment for a populace unused to it, or unaware of its potential advantages. The benefits would have to outweigh the disadvantages to early risers such as farmers, and there has to be a strong awareness campaign before implementing it.

The reason to go for a one hour and 15-minute DST shift is also to adjust the petty-seeming 15-minute time difference with India to a more reasonable 1.5 hours. And when we do finally get to the point where our hydropower dreams are realised, DST can always be revoked.

ON THE WEB

www.nepalitimes.com

HELP OUR WORKERS

I am against the government's decision to send women to work in middle-eastern countries ('Helping workers abroad', Roundtable discussion, #532). Women and poor people are treated like slaves there. Everybody knows the human rights situation—their attitude is even worse. Most of the people there believe women who leave home to work are loose and don't deserve respect. There have been many reports of women workers being raped and abused there.

R Rai

- First and foremost there needs to be at least 10 representatives from the overseas workers in parliament to raise the concerns of migrant workers in Nepal. There are more than 3 million overseas workers bringing in billions of rupees annually; their woes must be addressed and the government must take action. They must be treated as heroes who have saved the country from economic debacle.

Shanti Dhami

- Keep on hammering on the subject to get the rules and system updated. The Nepal Government needs to employ a new policy to make their people skillful and trained and search for global demand for appropriate recruitment. Putting manpower agencies under close supervision and applying the ILO convention will not be enough. Secondly, government should provide an information desk in the labour department so that a honest and helpless Nepali can easily get the real information about recruiting companies, so he can judge for himself whether the job is suitable or not.

Engr. Arjun Bhattarai, Nepal Engineer Association, Qatar Centre, SAAC Nepal- Adviser

- This news provides me with immense pleasure that the Nepali community has started a discussion on Safe Migration at a responsible level. My Filipino community developed practices based on strict rules and regulations over 50 years. If the Government of Nepal is determined to control the Cats, Wolves & Jackals dealing in the migration trade it will be SAFE enough. You need help from external experts, as your own strength is not enough. Wishing you success.

Rodel Cawicaan

BAD BOYS

How many in Nepal have fired guns, and even killed people ('Who's bad?', Editorial, #532)? Have all of them been censured by the press, and have all of them been punished under the law? And how many are still free, even when convicted by the Supreme Court? Should the law not apply to all, without exception?

K. K. Sharma

- Nothing wrong with this editorial, in my opinion. If you do not like it, that's your right, but it seems we are up for a fight between the old monarchy and the new oligarchy. It is indeed good to see that the government actually has the *cojones* to do its job and follow due process. Time will tell if anything substantial comes out of this or, as is expected, the government with its tail between its legs will let it pass after the dust settles.

Binoy Yonzon

DUMBOCRACY

Cannot disagree with the points raised in the article but to be fair, it would have been better if the Gachhadars, the Yadavs, and the Guptas were also mentioned along with the lessons that they have taught ('Hollow loktantra', Prashant Jha, #532). The writer may have his reasoning but to some it may look like selective sermonising.

Also, does this mean that the Nitish government in Bihar has no corruption

and treats all law and order situations equally? Universally, the Haves were and are in a better position to be treated more favourably by the law than the Have Nots. This still is the case even in the most democratic or law-abiding countries in the world. Corruption, law and order (maybe selective) are one thing; vision, management, and deliverance something else. Take China for example—it has all of the above. Therefore, they are not mutually exclusive.

It is all about priority, it should be the people and country first, party second, and individual third. In Nepal it is the other way around. With rights come responsibilities; the only responsibility these days seems to be "me first".

Reb

FINANCE FOR THE POOR, NOT THE RICH

Microfinance is always linked with poverty reduction ('Small is beautiful', Paavan Mathema, #532). But what we also need to consider is what level of poverty it addresses. Generally, microfinance caters well only to people who are not destitutely poor, people who are better off than the worst. People at the lowest base of the pyramid find it hard to benefit from microcredit because they do not have sufficient time, energy and patience to wait for the incubation period of an enterprise. Such people want instant results.

Lending to groups and establishing group liability is a feature of the Grameen model. India's apex development bank NABARD came up with the SHG (Self Help Group) model. The problem related to microfinance in Andhra Pradesh, India is more because of the over-commercialisation of the microfinance sector. In India, the microfinance sector was becoming a very attractive sector for investors and many fund/wealth managers were canalising investments towards it. If we really want to link microfinance with poverty reduction, we should never

forget to address it as a social weapon or poverty alleviation tool and not interpret it as a commercial booster serving investors alone.

Prashanta

BLOWING HOT AND COLD

A balanced view on wind power ('Riding the wind', Rubeena Mahato, #532). Great that Ms Mahato does not push wind power as the panacea for the power crisis in Nepal. Solar or wind, nothing can ever compare to hydro and the reporters who go gaga over alternative energy without understanding the basics need to learn their abcs first.

I like the idea of promoting wind in off-grid places without scope for microhydro. And Ms Mahato's signature style of showing people taking the lead is great as always. Way to go Mr. Thapa and all the students who built the turbine.

kaji

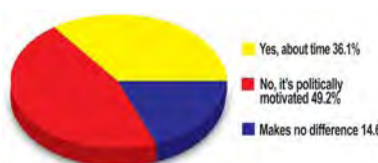
CORRECTION

In 'Helping workers abroad', #532, the name of Ramesh Badal, legal advisor to GFONT, was inadvertently printed otherwise. Hansaraj Wagle is the ex-vice chair and Madan Mahat the first vice chair of the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies. The error is regretted.

nepalnews.com
Weekly Internet Poll # 533

Q. Were the police right to arrest Paras Shah?

Total votes: 2,502



- Yes, about time 36.1%
- No, it's politically motivated 49.2%
- Makes no difference 14.6%

Weekly Internet Poll # 534. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Should students be involved in politics?

The diplomat's burden



PLAIN SPEAKING
Prashant Jha

NEW DELHI. Recent discussions in Kathmandu about the possible departure of Ambassador Rakesh Sood reflect deep ignorance of how policy is formulated in complex government set-ups. It also misses a more overarching reality – India, like Nepali politicians, has moved on from the 2006 framework to a more uncertain and dangerous trajectory.

In diplomacy, individuals matter, but it is rare for them to overcome the systemic red lines.

In 2005, foreign secretary Shyam Saran, intelligence chief PK Hornese Tharakan, and ambassador Shiv Shanker Mukherjee played an instrumental role. They helped convince India, a status quoist power in the region, to support a fairly radical change in the neighbourhood.

But they were aided in this task by a range of broader political factors. The king's actions; GPK's willingness to deal with the Maoists; the strengthening of the Baburam line within the Maoists; the Indian government's dependence on the left parties internally; the focus on the 'peaceful periphery' in Delhi's policy circles; and a growing recognition that royal rule was not sustainable all created the context for the 12-point agreement.

The guiding principle here was to help get the Maoists into the 'mainstream', but ensure they remained a secondary force.

Indian diplomats worked overtime to fulfil this dual, often contradictory, aim. To assure the Maoists, they consented to UNMIN; backed the CA roadmap; encouraged Maoist participation in government; and asked other parties to be flexible. To weaken them, they supported Madhesi forces, pushed Maoists during the arms agreements, assured the Nepal Army its interests would be protected, and bet on elections to lock the former rebels in.

The election results showed their plan – or at least its second component – didn't work, but Delhi stuck to the same script.

When Rakesh Sood arrived in April 2008, his brief specified that the Maoists had to be given their rightful share in the power structure, but also had to be kept under strong check. Sood's initial statements were in fact interpreted by NC leaders as being too soft on the Maoists.

It was Maoist actions in government that alienated multiple constituencies – NC leaders, traditional religious leadership, the business community, and of course, the NA generals, who all feared loss of power and privileges. All of them began lobbying hard with India to 'do something about the Maoists'. The Maoist rhetoric on equidistance and attempts to play the China card had anyway not won it friends in Delhi. And when they acted against General Katawal, India – which had repeatedly warned Dahal away from the army – reacted. Delhi decided it could not 'let the Nepal Army fall', and allow 'Nepal to turn into a Maoist state'.

While the ambassador's inputs played a part in shaping such a line, it was by no means Sood's policy. Assessments by RAW, Indian defence brass, the Indian home ministry, the anti-Maoist orientation of the political leadership in Delhi, and the changing domestic equations in Nepal all played an equally important role in convincing India's cabinet committee on security that the approach had to be reviewed. Sood naturally became the face of the new Indian hardline policy – keep the Maoists out at all costs, force them to 'reform', engage them without granting any concessions, and when necessary, confront them.

Keeping the largest party out of power in another country is a hazardous enterprise. And from the perspective of establishment insiders, Sood turned out to be an effective diplomat who succeeded in implementing an unpopular policy line.

Could Sood have presented a more nuanced view to Delhi, and used Indian leverage constructively to get the process back on track? Perhaps, by offering more carrots along with sticks to the Maoists.

Rakesh Sood could have been more diplomatic, but he is not to blame for Indian policy on the Maoists


Could his style have been less abrasive? Definitely, as even some of his colleagues in MEA agree. And could he have dealt with issues like Kantipur and MRP differently? Yes, by taking a broader view of India's interests and conveying his case more diplomatically.

But to conclude that the ambassador was at the root of

the India-Maoist impasse, and his exit – whenever it happens – will change policy is shockingly naive. Only this week, Indian sources said that a crisis had merely been postponed by extending the CA last year; that they saw no chance of the Maoists compromising on fundamental issues; and it was important for Nepali 'democratic

forces' to stick together and be ready for the coming confrontation next May. "We have the appetite for a fight, Nepali forces must be ready," said a senior official.

Rakesh Sood represents the strategic resolve in India to take the Nepali Maoists head on if needed, and a tough intolerant approach on 'security issues' that is the hallmark of Indian diplomacy in the neighbourhood. A more balanced assessment of his tenure, instead of succumbing to a black-and-white portrayal, will only help us understand the complex India-Nepal relationship better.



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Not missing UNMIN

Asking UNMIN to stay on will only jeopardise the peace process

KANAK MANI DIXIT

The United Nations Mission to Nepal, UNMIN, is to be thanked profusely for its efforts with the peace process and graciously shown the door when its term expires on 15 January. In the meantime, Nepali political actors including the Maoists must concentrate on making successful a unique process that was designed by Nepali stakeholders, starting with the 12-point understanding of 2005.

In its first days, many did feel reassured by UNMIN's presence as a symbol and guarantor of the international community's commitment to peace and democracy in post-conflict Nepal. After the Constituent Assembly elections of April 2008, however, UNMIN's remaining task of monitoring the cantonments was conducted without distinction and at great cost. Even while repeatedly misleading the Security Council with its own version of events, the Mission leadership constantly sought to expand its mandate to be the arbiter of Nepal's peace politics. There is no doubt that the Mission's inability to challenge the Maoists to stand by their peace commitments contributed to that party's obduracy, helping delay the peace process. Those who had lobbied hard for UNMIN's deployment in 2006 were let down.

The question arises whether we should not seek accountability from the UNMIN leadership in the same manner we do from our politicians and bureaucrats. While Karin Langdren, the present chief, has been rewarded with a promotion and a Burundi assignment, the tone and tenor of UNMIN's work was set by the former chief Ian Martin, and Tamrat Samuel, the designated Nepal handler at the UN Department of Political Affairs. Together, Martin and Samuel sought to inject UNMIN into our peace politics, seeking sociological roots to Nepal's conflict when disarming of the Maoist Party should have been the priority. It is they who certified UNMIN's erroneous reading of the Maoists as true agents of progressive change and the other major parties as carriers of the status quo.

Even as the Maoist leaders today engage in rearguard action to extend UNMIN's term, we need to be clear that continuation of the Mission beyond 15 January will – ironically – derail Nepal's peace process. In turn, this will guarantee the collapse of constitution writing, the deadline for which is end-May 2011. The Maoists have preferred to use UNMIN as a security blanket, and they would utilise another extension to filibuster further and influence the last days of the Constituent Assembly.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal lacked the sagacity and courage to convert UCPN (Maoist) into a civilian party when it was united under his

command. Now, challenged by his two deputies, the chairman seeks to appease the cantonment commanders, peace process be damned. He seeks to link UNMIN's departure to constitution making and government formation even though the 2006 agreement on the integration/rehabilitation of ex-combatants allows no conditionality.

Fortunately, the political parties and the international community are not about to be taken in by the Maoist bluff this time around. UML and NC on Wednesday reiterated their position on the non-renewal of UNMIN's term, and Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal has remained steadfast. The word from New York is that the Security Council is not about to reverse its decision and provide another extension. The change of guard at the UK and US embassies in Kathmandu seems to have delivered a more balanced international approach, and China has spoken out against UNMIN extension as well. Germany and India joining the Security Council as non-permanent members on 1 January will favour the successful conclusion of the peace process.

Anyone who wants to see the Constituent Assembly proceed with its work must answer the question that UNMIN never asked – can any civilised society be expected to proceed with constitution writing when one party retains its private combatant force? Why did the Mission not publicly urge the Maoists to implement the repeated pronouncements of Chairman Dahal as prime minister, that the cantonments had in fact come under the Special Committee on integration and rehabilitation?

The urgent requirement of the next three weeks is to transfer the modest task of monitoring the 28 cantonments from UNMIN to the Special Committee, after which the work on integration and rehabilitation can begin in earnest. The transfer of responsibility should not be a problem in principle, because the committee as well as its technical secretariat include the Maoists members. And it is a good sign that the Maoists agreed to the appointment of experienced ex-general Balananda Sharma as coordinator.

Looking ahead beyond the *fait accompli* of UNMIN's exit, the democrat-politicians and diplomats must stand firm as the Maoists seek to manufacture a deadlock. Chairman Dahal perhaps knows that if he pushes too far, the resulting political snowball can lead to a situation of no integration/rehabilitation at all. While the polarisation within his party may not allow the chairman a free hand any more, standing up to UCPN (Maoist) is the best way to promote its democratic evolution. ■

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The ideal candidate should be a Nepali citizen in late 30's or early 40's who has passion for poverty reduction in the mountains but also understands commercial viability and concept of financial sustainability. S/he should have strong commercial and project management skills, is happy to walk and live in the mountains for weeks at a time, intelligent, resourceful, proactive with high energy and an active go-getter with ability to forcefully articulate and ensure results through entrepreneurial approach. S/he should have multi-lateral communication skills to converse with village communities, national regulatory, financial bodies, international funding groups, partner NGO organizations, banks & commercial organizations.

The ideal candidate should have demonstrable experience of successful project management including financial responsibility for that program, recruiting experience, start up experience with preferably dual track experience in commercial organization (e.g. banking) and NGO (especially one with international supporters). Some experience of rural and mountainous region would be an added advantage.

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The ideal candidate should be a Nepali citizen in 30's who has passion for poverty reduction in the mountains but also understands commercial viability and concept of financial sustainability. S/he should be intelligent, structured, data driven, focused, highly financially literate, resourceful, proactive with high energy and is happy to walk and live in the mountains for weeks at a time. S/he should have strong spreadsheet skills, presentation skills; strong conceptual clarity of the sector, an ability to convert complex, often confusing data sets into meaningful decision support information suitably presented would be an essential prerequisite. Knowledge of monitoring & evaluation tools and techniques would be desirable. S/he should have multi-lateral communication skills to converse with village communities and partner group CEO's.

The ideal candidate should have working experience in an international professional service organization, exposure to micro finance sector, work experience in small entrepreneurial companies, consulting experience with hands on roles and educated abroad. Some experience of rural and mountainous region would be an added advantage.

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Delhi diary

Nepali lessons from the world's future power center



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

NEW DELHI. Arriving at Delhi's gleaming new Terminal 3 gives one the impression that this city has indeed upgraded itself to meet international standards. Spread over 500,000 square metres, this is one of the world's largest terminals, built to handle 34 million passengers a year. Although you may still have a few complaints (baggage losses, arrogant and/or untrained staff), it's a tremendous improvement from the congested, polluted, and uncomfortable terminal building of the past. An urban planner told this beed that if India had depended on aid agencies to build an airport of this magnitude, then it would have taken ten years instead of just four. The biggest lesson for Nepal is that large infrastructural developments might be better off in the hands of local private operators than donors.

Rapid development of urban infrastructure obviously facilitates one's ability to do business in a city. The expanded Delhi metro network has helped decongesting city roads and rendered commuting easier and faster, decreasing the economic costs of traffic jams. The over-charging cabbies complain that business is down but surely mass rapid transit is a crucial factor in making cities livable. We may still be battling hours of daily loadshedding here, but it is

important that we explore the possibility of rapid electric transit systems for intercity traffic. Malaysia, a country with a similar population to Nepal, consumes 22,000MW while we are projected to be using just 5,000MW by 2025. It's time we calculated domestic energy demands and plan for self sufficiency in supply.

Small and medium enterprises are growing rapidly in India and this emerging segment presents a business opportunity more feasible for Nepal than trying to attract the attention of the big Indian giants. Indian tourists, too, comprise the highest percentage of visitors to Nepal. But we as a destination have to compete with many other countries that are actively wooing Indian tourists. Nepal needs to launch specific promotional packages to increase the interest of Indian tourists in coming over and spending money.

Anti-Indian sentiment blows hot and cold in Nepal but what cannot be denied is the importance of India to Nepal, in contrast to the significance of Nepal to India. In fact, Nepal is more of a potential security issue than anything else. In the last six months, key world leaders have made pilgrimages to Delhi, indicating India's rising global standing. The onus of engaging with India lies squarely with Nepal.

We need more Nepalis to go to Delhi, market Nepal's economic potential, and provide reasons for India's engagement rather than

make trips to seek political or financial favours. We need to reassess the responsibilities of our embassy in India. Perhaps the time has come to outsource some of these relationship-building activities. www.arthabeed.com

New gadgets

Simtronics Semiconductors, a memory module and motherboard manufacturer, has launched its products in Nepal. Simtronics products include memory modules of 128 MB to 2 GB for over 6,000 different types of desktops, servers, laptops, desktop PCs, motherboards for Intel/ Nvidia, Nvidia graphic cards, and flash drives.

Double win

Laxmi Intercontinental, the sole authorised dealer of Hyundai four-wheelers, has picked the winners of its scheme *Dashain Tihar ko Bela Hyundai ko Upahar Mela*. The winners Mitra Bandhu Poudel, Amarnath Bade Shrestha, and Jeevan Nath Sapkota took home a Santro GLS, an i10 Magna, and an i20 Asta respectively.

Expanding Janata

Janata Bank has opened its fifth branch in Birganj. The bank has plans to open branches in Gaur, Funcling, Birtamod and Inaruwa.

Teen queen

Kriti Tamang Lama has won the Miss Teen 2010 title. Anjali Pradhanang and Alisha Kunwar were named first and second runner-up respectively. The pageant was organised by JCI Kathmandu.

Biz plus

Standard Chartered Bank has introduced 'a Business Plus Account' to cater to small and medium enterprises. The account is exclusively for private limited, sole proprietorship, and partnership businesses and offers up to six per cent interest.

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President's rule?



MY TAKE

Damakant Jayshi

We seem to be moving more towards presidential rule after 28 May next year rather than promulgating the new constitution and holding elections thereafter.

Unless the political parties agree on the major contents of the constitution, the make-up of the future Nepali state, and delinking the Maoist political party from its army, the existing Constituent Assembly-cum-Legislature/Parliament will die on 28 May, 2011. Gone with it will be the prime minister (caretaker or otherwise), the speaker/chairman, and all the committees of the Constituent Assembly.

Only the president's office will remain active. Of course, lawyers close to the Maoists and the Maoist leaders themselves and their army of apologists have argued that the president too will cease to exist.

It will be in no one's interest, least of all the Maoists', to have presidential rule. Surprisingly, the dominant sections of the three major parties – NC, the Maoists, and UML – are open to President Ram Baran Yadav (pictured below with Indian Army Chief Vijaya Kumar Singh, Wednesday) stepping in. Clearly they have their own calculations.

Let us take the Maoist party first. Having tried all the angles it could think of, from civilian supremacy to national sovereignty, enforcing a nationwide shutdown to issuing the open threat of people's revolt, the party has failed to ignite the desired passion among large sections of the populace. Exasperated, it even tried throwing in the revival of the monarchy as a 'cultural' or 'people's' monarchy (whatever the last means). Nothing has clicked.



KIRAN PANDAY

The party, especially Chairman Dahal, is looking for an agenda to galvanise the nation and especially its cadre base, which is growing disenchanted by his 'Rado' culture. Presidential rule, before the CA dies a natural death, would provide just that spark. "We told you so," will be the refrain from Dahal and his acolytes.

NC's hardline faction wants the head of state to take matters in hand because it feels the country is sliding into chaos due to Maoist atrocities, obstinacy, and its refusal to accept a constitution that guarantees constitutional supremacy, pluralism, an independent judiciary, and a free press. They are gaining strength since the Maoists have continued to add fuel to their suspicions, thus weakening the moderates in NC who advocate courting the Maoists and believe they can transform into a truly civilian democratic party.

The Madhav Kumar Nepal-KP Oli faction of UML would gladly accept presidential rule, now or post-28 May. These two leaders are itching to "teach the Maoists a lesson" and by proxy, their own party chairman Jhalanath Khanal, who is close to the Dahal-led faction of the Maoist Party.

Needless to say, these influential people do not believe the constitution will be written and promulgated by 28 May, 2011. But presidential rule will not follow the script they may expect.

All the gains made since the success of People's Movement II in 2006 will be either lost or will come under attack from royalist forces that are already rearing their heads. Dahal would be too happy to even formally align with them. He is already hobnobbing with them under the umbrella of 'nationalism'.

The sections in the big three parties and civil society that believe that the country has really made impressive gains and can build on it need to openly raise their voice in favour of writing the constitution and settling the question of ex-Maoist combatants. Growing calls for presidential rule should be a wake-up call for them, for it won't be Dr Yadav who will be running the show if rule in his name is announced.

damakant@gmail.com



STARTING OVER: Pastor Narkaji Gurung (right) and Krishna Baniya (left) baptise Sher Bahadur Gurung in the Kali Khola, Pokhara, Christmas 2009.

“Being a Christian in Nepal is both a great privilege and a positive challenge”

This Christmas, *Nepali Times* spoke to two members of the growing community of Christians in Nepal: Pastor Narkaji Gurung of Pokhara's Zion Grace Church and second-generation believer Sradda Thapa of the Areopagus Congregation.

The general understanding of Christianity in Nepal is that it was a very small community prior to 1990, when proselytising was still illegal, but that it is now growing apace. Will the 2010 census be revealing?

Narkaji Gurung: Before 1990, according to official government reports, the numbers of Christians were small. However, there may have been more who were closet Christians due to the fear of opposition from family, community, and the government, and other who were unaccounted for. Post 1990, many of these closet Christians have come out. Moreover, now that we are able to freely evangelise, more people have the opportunity to hear and receive Christ as their saviour. So yes, the 2010 census will be revealing in this regard.

Sradda Thapa: One of the basics of democracy is freedom of choice, including that of religion, so it would seem natural that with the end of the criminalisation of Christianity, more Nepalis would be open to exploring their faith or admitting to it. As for the census, any minority group would naturally hope for an accurate reflection of reality!

Why do you think so many Nepalis are willing to convert now, and which communities are they concentrated in?

NG: Conversion is a matter of personal free will. People may convert for various reasons, some of which may be self-motivated but in the course of time those

who are genuine converts will be revealed. I don't think conversion is concentrated in any particular community though generally the poor have been more receptive to the message of Christ's deliverance. This not surprising considering they are the most oppressed. Our small church of around 80 represents nearly all strata of Nepali society.

ST: I'm not sure if more Nepalis are willing to convert now or if the removal of a state religion (which labelled others as un-Nepali and hence 'illegal') has permitted Nepalis to be more open. But we've come a long way since the bugging of Christian leaders' phones and open threats.

What is it like to be a Christian in Hindu-majority Nepal? Is there suspicion towards the community, and what would you say to Hindus who may feel that in a secular state they are 'losing their religion'?

NG: It is a great privilege and also at the same time challenging in a positive way. Personally, I think the Nepali community as a whole is very welcoming and friendly to Christians. One thing that must be made clear is that Christ did not come to start a new religion so the Nepali people should not feel threatened that they will lose their religion. However, truths in the Bible do challenge us to reevaluate our religious concepts and practices, whether be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or even Christianity itself.

ST: Since my childhood, when I was scared to proclaim my faith, to my teenage years, when non-Christian Nepalis perceived me as less of a Nepali at best and more of a traitor at worst, things have gotten better. These days, well-travelled, educated and urban Nepalis are more open to the idea of freedoms, so there are opportunities to learn about each other's faiths. Actually I feel Christianity can help expand Nepali culture; we sing Christian hymns to Nepali tunes, wear traditional clothes and serve Nepali meals at our functions.

Institutionally – from the state that still frowns upon proselytising to media houses that run Dasain specials but not Lhosar, Eid or Christmas specials to schools that do not post 'Merry Christmas' on bulletin boards like they would for 'Vijaya Dashami', minority groups obviously realise that they still reside in a 'Hindu' state. But I don't think I feel threatened or consider it malicious – it's been an opportunity for me to experience how it must be like for Hindu Nepalis in culturally Christian countries elsewhere. It's made me consider how to make spaces more comfortable for the marginalised and minorities of any kind.

What about the accusations about missionaries who 'bribe' or 'take advantage' of poor people, converting them with promises of money or material benefits?

NG: Some of these accusations are valid because sad to say, there are those who do follow such practices. It could also be a lack of wisdom on the missionaries' part; they have a genuine desire to share Christ's love but they may do so without proper discernment. However, in some cases missionaries are not to be blamed but those who come to them with various expectations of personal gain. Many times it could just be that the missionary is addressing a need someone may have and those who are envious make accusations.

Would you like to share your personal experience of finding Christ?

NG: I came to Christ in 1996 shortly after a two-month backpacking journey in India. I bumped into two English missionaries in Shimla. We decided to travel together for two weeks, at the end of which they gave me a Bible as a gift. After returning to Nepal, I began to read the Bible and found that it answered some of the deepest questions I had been struggling with regarding my origins, identity, purpose and destiny as a human being. It also provided the forgiveness, acceptance and love I sought in the person of Jesus Christ. My conversion was a simple affair. One evening I was reading the Bible and I came to a portion of the Scriptures, Romans 5:6, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man we would dare to die. But God commendeth his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." After reading this I felt convinced that Jesus was the one who would save me from my sin so I said a short prayer in my heart, accepting Him into my life.

ST: It's nothing exciting – my parents found the Lord when they were in their early twenties, so I was born into a Christian home. But since Christianity isn't a religion you inherit from your parents or forefathers I made the conscious decision to accept Christ as my saviour when I was 12. I waited till I was 24 to get baptised as it was the most important decision of my life.

What are you (and your congregation) doing this Christmas?

NG: The week leading up to Christmas Day we have been singing carols in the neighbourhood where some of our believers live. On Christmas Day itself we will have a service in the church in the morning with prayers, hymns, and a message celebrating the story and meaning of Jesus's birth. We will have a simple meal afterwards. The service is open to everyone, both Christians and non-Christians. If you happen in to be in Pokhara that day, you are most welcome to join too!

ST: We have had caroling at different church members' houses in the evenings this past week. We will have a special program at church in the 25th and have been raising money and dipping into our church funds (comprised of members' tithes, or 10% of our earnings) to buy clothes, bedding, stationery, and toys for a small orphanage.

Anything else you would like to add?

NG: Though there are differences among churches as to when exactly Jesus was born, most important to us is that His birth is a historical fact and He was born to dwell among us to reconcile us to God. And when we celebrate Christmas we celebrate Christ so actually for us every day is Christmas!

ST: Contrary to popular belief and the commercialisation of this season, it's not about gifts and partying, as much as about remembering God's largest sacrifice to mankind, the sending of his son, Jesus Christ, to be crucified for us and our sins.

A brace of Almodóvar

Yes, the two movies reviewed here aren't new by any stretch of the imagination but if you've been to Mahaboudha lately and considered whether you should invest in a 'box set' of all Pedro Almodóvar's films (upto 2006's *Valverde*), the only downside is that with 16 movies on two DVDs, the video quality is just about good enough for laptop screens. But this won't filter out the riot of wild and wacky human experience the Spanish director conjures up for the adventurous viewer.



Matador (1986) and *Tie me up! Tie me down!* (1989) are vintage Almodóvar, and both feature a young Antonio Banderas. His performances here have nothing to do with the parodies he has too often indulged in with Hollywood productions – nonetheless, they are of a piece with the extreme nature of the films themselves.

Matador tells the story of would-be matador Ángel (Banderas), who falls under the spell of the very weird Diego (Nacho Martínez), a matador who has retired since a near-fatal goring but continues to be obsessed with death. "Treat a woman like a bull," advises Diego, and Ángel tries to

oblige. He gets into trouble, and indeed seems intent on condemning himself, but the arrival of a seductive lawyer, María Cardenal (Assumpta Cerna), heralds darker times.

The premise of the movie is shocking enough, and Almodóvar has no hesitation in testing his viewers' nerves time and again. But the brilliant performances put in by the cast elevate *Matador* far above the realm of a gory psycho-thriller B-movie, whatever the parallels.

Tie me up! Tie me down! (*¡Átame!* in Spanish) seems positively gentle by comparison, which goes to show just how Almodóvar has continually evolved in his capacity to portray a certain cultured brutality, and the lives of those on the fringes of society, with charm and realism. Here we have orphaned Ricky (Banderas again), recently released from a mental institute and hot on the trail of actress Marina (Victoria Abril), a recovering drug addict and former porn star. Ricky kidnaps Marina and holds her captive in her own flat, prepared to wait for her to fall in love with him. The two are as beautiful as they are damaged: "Tie me up...just a little," pleads Marina as Ricky leaves the flat on one of his expeditions to bring drugs for her. Whether you find *Tie me up! Tie me down!* convincing or not, it's certainly compelling.

Both movies are flashy, dark, and full of sex and violence. But get beyond the distractions, and you'll find that like most of Almodóvar, they delve where we don't often explore on our own, perhaps because we are afraid of what we might learn about ourselves. A great way for Almodóvar fans to sample precursors of his more sophisticated later films.



EVENTS

Photo Exhibition by Gemunu Amarsinghe. Till 11 January, 11am to 2pm, Tuesdays closed, Peace Museum, Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya, Patan Dhoka

Let's talk about ART baby! a collaborative solo from the series of Artivities by artist Sujan Chitrakar. Till 27 January, 3.30pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited, 4218048

Winter Art Collection, works by Japanese and Nepali artists. 19 December to 24 January, Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre, Jhamsikhel, 5521120



Peace 2010, exhibition of paintings and poetry. 23 December to 4 January, Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal

Assorted motifs, an exhibition of paintings by Chirag Bangdel and other artists. Till January 15, Chai Chai Café, Jhamsikhel

Staging of Suina Karnika, a new play presented by Aarohan-Gurukul in association with Karnali Natya Samaj of Mugu. Till 9 January, Rimal Theatre, Gurukul, Old Baneshwor, 4466956 Christmas and New Year events

CHRISTMAS EVENTS

Christmas Confectionaries at Hyatt, fine selection of Christmas confectionaries, hampers and gingerbread houses are on sale at the Lounge of Hyatt. Hyatt Regency, Boudha, 4491234

Christmas Turkey Dinner, with surprise visit from Santa and gifts for all, festive menu, a free glass of Irish coffee and all UEFA & Premier League soccer games. 24 December to 1 January, K-too! Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel, 4700043

Christmas by the fireplace, surprise visit from Santa with gifts for all, turkey with all the trimmings and a free glass of hot mulled wine. Festive menu from 24 December to 1 January, Kilroy's Restaurant, Thamel, 4250440/41

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The Merry Menu at Café Mitra, 4-course set menu by Chef Mohit Rana. 24 December to 31 December, Rs 2,750 non-veg and Rs 2,200 veg, inclusive of all extras, Café Mitra & Lounge Bar, Thamel Marg, 4259015, 9851023934

taxes, Exclusive 5-course candle-lit dinner, 24 December, Chimney Restaurant, Rs 2,500 plus taxes, Christmas brunch, December 25, Sunrise Café, Rs 1,200 plus taxes, Christmas hi-tea, a fun-filled event for the children from Bal Mandir with magic show and gift hampers, 26 December, Poolside Garden, 4248999

Christmas Eve Celebration at Gokarna Forest Resort, one night accommodation with a lavish Christmas Eve Dinner, a glass of sparkling wine, and breakfast the next day. 24 December, Gokarna, Room rate Rs 11,000 Nett, Dinner only Rs 3,500 per person, 4451212, sales1@gokarna.net

Celebrate Christmas at 1905 Restaurant, traditional Christmas dinner. 1905, Kantipath, 4225272, 4215068, restaurant_1905@yahoo.com



Share the Christmas Cheer at Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Christmas Eve Dinner, Garden Terrace, Rs 1,999 nett person, Rs 3,999 nett per couple, Christmas Day Lunch and Dinner at Poolside, for Barbeque Lunch, 12pm to 4pm, Rs 1,999 nett per person, Rs 3,999 nett per couple, for Barbeque Dinner, 6pm to 10pm, Rs 2,999 nett per person, Rs 5,999 nett per couple, Christmas delights, cakes and pastries, Patisserie, Rs 3,500 nett for a basket full of goodies, Tahachal, 4273999, www.crowneplaza.com/kathmandu

Christmas celebrations at Yak & Yeti, Christmas carol singing, till 24 December, hotel lobby, Christmas Eve dinner, with lavish food and live music, 24 December, Sunrise Café, Rs 1,600 plus

Celebrate New Year in The Fulbari Resort, sumptuous food, live music, traditional dances and lots of games and prizes to be won. The Fulbari Resort, Pokhara, 4462248, resv@fulbari.com.np, Rs 2,500 nett person

MUSIC

Sunday Jazz Brunch, enjoy a relaxing Sunday in The Terrace at Hyatt Regency Kathmandu with barbeque and live jazz music by Inner Groove. 12pm to 3.30pm, Hyatt Regency, Boudha, 4491234/4489362

Humble Bee playing live at Moksh. Every Tuesday, 7.30pm onwards, Pulchok, 5526212

Live Music by Sign band at The Corner Bar. Every day except Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 7.30pm onwards, The Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, 4411818

DINING

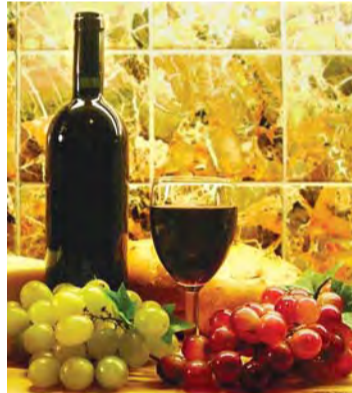


The Factory, a trendy restobar for a refreshing stopover in the chaos that is Thamel. Great food and drinks, with zesty music. Mandala Street, Thamel

Boudha Stupa Restaurant & Café, enjoy wood-fired pizza with a superb view of Boudha stupa and free wifi, candlelight dinner options are also available for the romantics every full moon night. Boudha, 2130681

Ramalaya Tea Room, now open for dinner, experience Chef Mohit's creations from Cider brined Pork Chops to Guava Cheese. Pani Pokhari, near Japanese Embassy, for bookings call 4006589, 4006589

Ghangri Café, a quiet place with comfortable sofas and a lovely courtyard, perfect for those sunny afternoons. Although famous for their open sui mai, they offer a few other great dishes as well. Pulchok



Roadhouse Café, serves pizzas cooked to perfection in wood-fired ovens. Jhamel, 5521755

Jazoo, a quiet place ideal for beer and relaxing conversation. Bring a friend and enjoy their special barbeque set for a mix of everything, Jawalakhel, 5538321

New Orleans, offers a wide variety of western dishes that are scrumptious yet healthy. We got hooked on the rosemary chicken and hamburgers. Jhamel, 5522708.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Toni Hagen Fellowship 2010, the Toni Hagen Foundation announces post graduate fellowships for students of natural and social sciences. Application deadline 24 December, commencement of fellowship 15 January, 2011, Toni Hagen Foundation c/o Himal Association, Patan Dhoka, 5542544, www.resourceshimalaya.org

Launch of AmarJyoti Foundation, December 26, to provide support through scholarships in art and sports, elderly daycare and grief recovery. 9851023958

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Atchoo!



DHNAVANTARI
Buddha Basnyat, MD

When doctors contemplate writing a health column, the first thing that comes to mind is the potentially monotonous topic of the common cold ('ruga khoki') or nonspecific upper respiratory tract infection, as it is known in medical parlance. But let me run a quick quiz to rescue you from boredom. Which of the following has been shown to decrease the duration of the common cold? The choices are: a) azithromycin (an antibiotic), b) vitamin C,

c) zinc, d) Echinacea herb e) all of the above, and f) none of the above.

Upper respiratory tract infections are the leading cause of ambulatory visits to the doctor's office. These infections are characterised by a stuffy nose with some discharge (rhinorrhea), sore throat, cough, and a general feeling of being unwell. This illness is caused by viruses which sometimes prepare the ground for bacteria to launch a 'super added' infection. Some doctors say that when the nasal discharge and the phlegm becomes green or yellow, the bacteria have settled in. The most commonly implicated virus is the rhinovirus, followed by the influenza virus, and

adenoviruses. In general, unless a 'super added' infection has taken root, bacteria are not the initial culprits.

So, the answer to the above question is not an antibiotic because viruses, unlike bacteria, do not respond to antibiotics. Many people swear by vitamin C, but randomised controlled trials (RCTs, the gold standard in western medicine for judging the efficacy of any drug or device) have shown that vitamin C doesn't cure a cold. Zinc and herbs are also ineffective. So the correct answer is, none of the above.

Washing your hands properly and covering your mouth while coughing will inhibit transmission of the illness to others. Influenza A and B can be effectively prevented through annual vaccination. The US Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices (ACIP) now recommends influenza vaccination for everyone above 6 months of age, including pregnant women. More importantly, this year's influenza vaccine incorporates the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine as well. H1N1 caused a scare last year and continues to be problematic this year too.

So can the common cold be cured or must you just sneeze and bear it? The drug treatment is basically nothing, except some paracetamol, a nasal decongestant, and cough medicine. Just watch out for the side-effects of drowsiness while you're at the wheel. 🇳🇵

GREEN SCENE

Handy waste

Only a month ago Nepal Oil Corporation increased fuel prices, including that of LP gas and kerosene, used in most households for cooking and heating. A majority of those who cannot afford the luxury of LP gas or kerosene stoves rely on firewood.

"An alternative to traditional energy sources for heat is briquettes," says Sanu Kaji Shrestha of the Foundation of Sustainable Technologies (FoST), which has been advocating production and usage of briquettes since 2004. A briquette is a block of combustible material that has the same utility as firewood. It looks sturdy but is very light. Small-sized briquettes are used for cooking, grilling as well as in fireplaces. Larger briquettes are often used for industrial purposes. While charcoal briquettes are well known, the uniqueness of the briquettes Shrestha is talking about lies in the fact that they

are made from waste materials.

Fuel briquettes can be produced from agricultural and commercial residues including paper, sawdust, scrap wood, dried leaves and weeds, rice husks, and kitchen waste. All biodegradable waste, in fact.

The process of producing a briquette is quite simple. The waste is ground and soaked for a while. A specially designed press is then used to compress the mash into compact blocks. A ready-to-use briquette forms after the block is allowed to dry in the sun. Drying can take 2-7 days depending on the weather.

A two-inch thick briquette six inches in diameter can burn for about 40 minutes. Shrestha says that a briquette emits 70 per cent less smoke than wood, thus reducing indoor air pollution. His organisation, FoST, is currently designing special stoves for briquettes and is researching methods to improve the technology.

FoST has already given training courses on briquette production and usage in 40 districts. A briquette pressing machine costs Rs 7,000 and can produce over 20 kilos of briquettes a day. Briquettes are priced at Rs 20 a kilo. FoST has been encouraging its trainees to start commercial production so that they can generate income from briquettes. Shrestha has shared this technology in Afghanistan, Cyprus, Cambodia, India and the Philippines.

On the one hand, briquettes made from waste help in garbage management. On the other, they decrease the consumption of wood and other fuels. Shrestha says: "This is an eco-friendly technology that has double benefits." 🇳🇵

Paavan Mathema



KIRAN PANDAY

TIME TO CELEBRATE: The Jyapu community of Kathmandu celebrates 7th National Jyapu Day on Tuesday in Basantapur. The program was organized by the Jyapu Cultural Development Fund.



KIRAN PANDAY

UNITED IN LANGUAGE: The management committee of the International Maithili Conference organised a rally of Maithili language speakers on Wednesday.



KIRAN PANDAY

BACK TO THE ROOTS: Kiratis dress in their traditional attire and dance at a program organised in Nakhpot, Lalitpur, to observe Sakela Udhali, a Kirati festival that marks the harvesting season.

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Hatiban Lalitpur

WEEKEND WEATHER by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

A dominant high pressure spread over the Tibetan plateau has marked the weather patterns of the Himalaya. Due to the pulling effect of the giant low pressure zone in the southern hemisphere, the cold air of the north continues to spill over the plateau and the Himalaya to the south. As a result, temperatures have continued to drop by about one degree per week in the last three weeks. The satellite images of Thursday morning clearly show that high pressure has turned the sky a dark blue. There are no clouds around either, so there is little possibility of rain until the end of the year. Enjoy Christmas and the New Year under clear blue skies in the mountains but expect foggy mornings in the valleys and the Tarai.



FRI SAT SUN



20-2 19-1 18-0

Enjoy the silence

Amid the useless noise surrounding the passing of the old year, here's to pin-drop silence



KALAM
Rabi Thapa

Just the other night, I woke up for no particular reason. No barking dogs, no drunken rants from next door, no errant cars. As I turned over to resume my repose, it occurred to me just how quiet it actually was. I strained my ears to catch the inevitable interruption. The deep silence remained unbroken. Seconds passed, then minutes. I had no idea what time it was. But no dogs, no cars, no drunks. Absolute, pure silence: the world around me was at rest.

For a few more minutes, I relished the luxury of silence. I knew too well that the beehive of Nepali lives would begin buzzing soon, and would continue to do so throughout the day.

We are so accustomed to noise in our neighbourhoods that we indulge in it as a matter of course ourselves, shouting, tooting and blaring our way through the day. Last week in a microbus, I was forced to listen to a young woman whine along to a medley of English and Hindi pop cheeping from her mobile phone, never mind that the vehicle's speakers were also booming out choice selections. Where's the sense in that, I felt like asking her, (feeling like) slowly throttling her into eternal silence.

What's the big deal, you might say, why make a fuss about noise? Just like the concept of privacy, the right to a little tranquility can too easily be dismissed as an individualistic Western concept. But if we are to embrace specific Western values as good and wholesome, then perhaps we should also consider whether other such values are equally worthy. Pick and choose for a hybrid of Western and Nepali values,

coordinating to create a working democracy. The key word here is coordination. For if everyone was to do whatever they felt like doing, in the name of freedom, individual freedoms would only coalesce into a morass of anarchy. Counterweights are needed to ensure that individuals exercise not just their rights, but also their responsibilities.

Not making unnecessary noise is one of these responsibilities that counterweight the right to express oneself loudly. Yes, it does *sound* petty, but not when you begin to see that noise pollution can cause annoyance, aggression, high blood pressure, and stress, among other select perks of living in close quarters with millions of people. God knows this city is hard enough to live in, for all its unspoken joys. Why make it harder?

The right to tranquility is not such a Western concept either, if you can hear yourself think above the roar of the office generator, the "su ayo, su ayo" of your colleague's son, and the visiting idiot whose declamations over the phone can be heard across 50 metres of open-plan office space.

Tranquility, or *passaddhi*, is a key Buddhist concept that translates into tranquility of the body, speech, thoughts, and consciousness. Whatever for, you may well ask. The answer is enlightenment. *Passambhati bhava.*



sure, but this should be a considered process, not random.

Take the concept of individual freedom so beloved of Nepalis of late. In modern times, this is indubitably a Western concept, with individual freedoms

THIS WEEK

Special session off

The special session of parliament summoned by the president on the request of the Maoists and other parties ended without entering into parliamentary business on Thursday. Agreement was reached just before the scheduled second session of the special session to summon a regular session instead, to be called within a week.

The agreement was made possible by the Maoists withdrawing the proposals they have registered in the House and the annulment of the candidacy of NC's Ram Chandra Poudel. The process to elect a PM will now have to start afresh.

Indian Army Chief visits

President Ram Baran Yadav conferred the honorary rank of General of the Nepal Army to visiting Indian Army Chief Vijaya Kumar Singh on Wednesday. Singh also met with Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal and Defence Minister Bidhya Bhandari. PM Nepal assured Singh his government would address Indian concerns on cross-border infiltration by terrorists, and Singh expressed willingness to support the Nepal Army. Singh said he was hopeful that his visit to Nepal would help enhance the military relations between the two countries. He returned to New Delhi on Thursday, winding up his four-day visit.

No extension

A meeting of the 27 political parties in the CA on Monday decided not to extend the term of the high-level taskforce, formed to settle contentious issues pertaining to constitution writing. The parties agreed to use the Constituent Assembly and the Constitutional Committee instead. The taskforce headed by Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal reached decisions on 127 out of 220 disputed issues.

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Pour Something Priceless



PETER SUTORIS

How to achieve a 100 per cent pass rate in the SLC

PETER SUTORIS

As I flew into Nepal and was greeted by the sight of mountains obscured by clouds of dust above a chaotic spread of buildings, vehicles, and human beings, I couldn't help but wonder what difference my short internship with an education-oriented NGO would make. Little did I know these first impressions of sharp contrasts and striking diversity, obscured by dust, would mirror my experience of Nepali education and convince me that thinking globally about reforming Nepali schools requires 'watching locally'.

Most would agree that it is necessary to provide equal access to quality education for underprivileged children. Unfortunately, many of the large-scale top-down education reforms of the last few decades have used approaches akin to deploying jackhammers on nails. The universal, one-size-fits-all model promoted by these reforms ignores the ethnic, cultural, economic and geographic diversity of Nepali students. My internship with The Learning Center of Kathmandu (TLC), which is staffed by four Nepalis and has an annual budget of under US\$20,000, demonstrated how small, targeted programs can effect significant change.

It's 6am in Maheshpur, Jhapa. Uniformed students emerge from the morning mist. Some have cycled from 15km away, and classrooms are filled by 6.30am. The stage is set for two hours of Partners In Education (PIE) tutorials. The program pairs committed private school teachers with underperforming, albeit promising, public school students in grades 8-10 for tutorials in the three most problematic subjects – English, Math, and Science. It currently provides free tutoring to more than 300 children in Jhapa. Since its inception five years ago, not a single PIE-tutored student has failed the SLC, an impressive 100 per cent success rate compared to the national average of 40 to 60 per cent. And the cost to donors? Less than US\$4 per student per month.

Leaving my home in central Europe at 16 for better quality education abroad, I could relate to the apathy I have seen in the eyes of

Nepali public school children. TLC's efforts to close the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged via simple, concrete, targeted interventions has transformed this apathy into the sparks of enthusiasm that I saw in the classrooms of Maheshpur.


Witnessing this newfound passion for learning, I wondered: Why doesn't this program reach children in other parts of Nepal?

Raphael Pradhan, the head of TLC, has similar questions. He cites the example of Tara Bahadur Waiba. Tara was a domestic labourer before joining PIE in 2006. Completing three years of tutoring enabled

him to secure an impressive higher second division result in the SLC. "He even received the 'Most Regular Student Award' which TLC gives out annually for recognition of student dedication. Despite the handicap of coming from a financially poor background, he had the zeal to further his studies and improve his living standards," Raphael remembers.

Today, Tara is studying in Bhairahawa and aspires to become a Health Assistant in dentistry. "I would like to see more poor and underprivileged students receive extra help so that they can at least complete high school and stand on their own two feet, just like Tara did," Raphael says.

PIE has its limitations. Improved public school supervision is needed to ensure it does not become yet another excuse for absentee teachers in government schools who then claim responsibility for the results. Crucially, its scalability depends on the availability of human capital and funding: in the absence of any support from aid agencies, the small individual donations sustaining TLC at the moment do not allow for further expansion.

PIE will not solve the underlying problems of the Nepali education system, but it does promise more concrete results for individual students than many larger programs. So far aid agencies and government have not hit upon the right mix of interventions for education in the developing world. In the meantime, programs like PIE can help close the gaps. With public support, targeted programs can be sustained and scaled up to reach the widest possible range of beneficiaries. 

Support TLC and PIE at www.tlc-nepal.org



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A young man walks past a beauty parlour in Hinche, central Haiti.

Keeping the peace

TEXT and PHOTOS by KASHISH DAS SHRESTHA

It seems we only hear about Nepal's UN peacekeepers when things go wrong. But this may have something to do with the fact that peacekeepers are deployed in the most difficult places across the globe, and the size of Nepal's peacekeeping contingents – Nepal is the second largest contributor to MINUSTAH in Haiti, and the fourth largest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions overall.

Still, it has been an unusually busy time for Nepali soldiers in Haiti this past year. First, there was the January 12 earthquake, which left Nepali peacekeepers unscathed, enhancing their ability to

respond quickly to help the locals. Then there was the outbreak of cholera, which was blamed on a South Asian strain of the virus allegedly brought in by Nepali peacekeepers. And finally, there were the presidential elections of November 28, which MINUSTAH had a key role in ensuring the success of (though as with UNMIN, it is considered partisan).

Kashish Das Shrestha recently visited the Nepali peacekeepers in Haiti, and here chronicles fragments of a soldier's life, far from home.

Lt. Col. Krishna Man Shrestha addresses Nepali troops in Hinche on their 'commendable' conduct during the elections. In mid-November, when Haitians demonstrated against MINUSTAH nationwide, locals demonstrated against the Nepali troops here and four Nepali officers were injured.



A temporary Junior Commission Officer's mess camp in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. On January 12, when the earthquake struck, all the Nepali troops here were gathered in this open field for an anniversary event. The quake struck minutes before the event started and the field immediately became a makeshift treatment centre.



Young officers gather at The Famous Bar within the Nepali camp's premises in Port-au-Prince after an evening of sports.



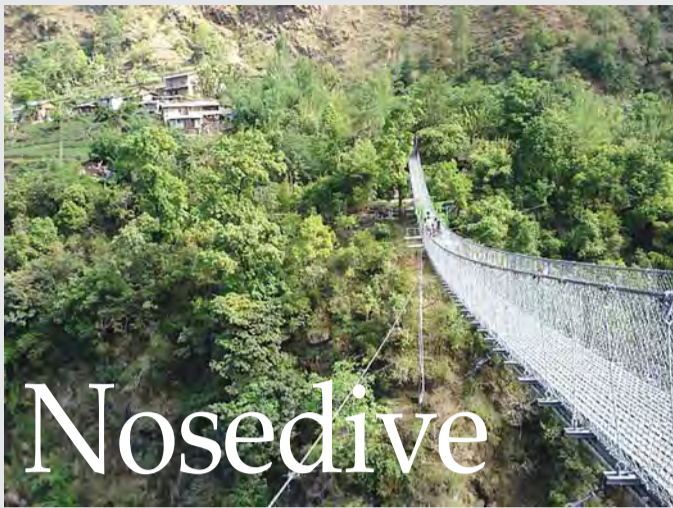
Nepali troops pose for pictures during a rest stop at a place they like to call 'Nepal Danda' along the route between Mirebalais and Hinche, north of Port-au-Prince.



While there are female members of the Nepal Army serving in Haiti, most of them are medics. Seen here however are MPs and a captain at the Mirebalais camp, the largest concentration of Nepali peacekeeping troops in Haiti.



Soldiers can be regularly seen working out at the small gym in the Nepali base in Port-au-Prince.



Nosedive

Nagarik, 22 December

नागरिक

The Last Resort, Nepal's only bungee jumping company, has played a major role in developing adventure tourism here. It was padlocked by locals Tuesday evening. The suspension bridge from which bungee jumping takes place was built through the joint investment of Nepali and foreign nationals in 2000 and spans the Bhoti Kosi River in Sindhupalchok District, but locals are now claiming ownership.

"The locals have padlocked the doors at the jumping point in the middle of the bridge," says Bishnu Neupane, director of The Last Resort. "They have demanded that the ownership of the bridge be handed over to the VDCs and that the resort should rent it to use it."

Listi and Marming VDCs lie on the periphery of the resort, and locals from these VDCs have been making such demands over the last 14 months. Although meetings were held between the officials of the resort and the representatives of the VDCs all day on Tuesday, they could not come to an agreement.

"This bridge is private property, built on land we own. The locals of both VDCs have been allowed to use the bridge," explains Neupane. "We have contributed Rs 3.3 million to the two VDCs for their development."

During the meeting, Neupane offered the VDCs an additional Rs 4 million each. Although Marming agreed to the proposal, Listi did not. Another meeting is scheduled for Wednesday with the mediation of the district administration.

Neupane adds: "We have had a smooth relationship with the locals for many years. This sudden action has baffled our foreign partners. They say that they cannot understand why they are not being allowed to work even though they had helped the locals with honest intentions." Neupane has warned that this incident will send out negative messages in the run-up to Nepal Tourism Year 2011.

The Last Resort was set up 11 years ago for the purpose of bungee jumping, through a joint investment of Rs 15 million from four individuals from New Zealand, Australia, the Netherlands, and Nepal. The resort is spread over an area of 0.63 hectares and has 25 two-person tents.

Over 15,000 people have visited The Last Resort to dive from the bridge into a narrow gorge from a height of 160 metres. Nepali nationals are charged Rs 3,000 while foreigners are charged 65 Euros, for a package including transportation and lunch.

Editor's Note: The locals agreed on Wednesday to allow the resort's continued operation in exchange for additional financial support to the VDCs.

Printing question papers

Editorial in *Nayapatrika*, 20 December

बर्दा पत्रिका

The government installed a security printing press worth millions of rupees that it received in grants from donors three years ago to print confidential documents. It is lying idle. With the SLC examinations around the corner, the government has not been able to decide whether to print the question papers within or outside the country.

Donors provided a grant of Rs 160 million for the security printing press under the secondary education assistance program, but Janak Siksha Samagri Kendra (Janak Educational Materials Centre) is now preparing to print the question papers in India, as has been the convention. On the one hand, the printing press is lying idle, on the other, hundreds of millions of rupees are leaving the country. But printing question papers abroad in the name of maintaining confidentiality cannot be justified any longer.

The Commission for the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority and the Public Accounts Committee of parliament have already instructed the government to print the question papers within the country. The Ministry of Education formed a taskforce under the former education secretary to study the issue but it recommended printing question papers outside the country, citing confidentiality requirements. In the event



that the papers are to be printed in Nepal, the study suggested taking strict measures to ensure confidentiality such as installing CCTVs and deploying plainclothes security personnel.

The committee's recommendations are rational but such measures alone will not ensure confidentiality of question papers. In any case confidentiality can hardly be maintained even if the papers are printed in India when we have to rely on government employees to distribute them to the districts. It is upto the government, the concerned authorities, and the employees of the press to maintain confidentiality of the documents printed, but they should be printed in Nepal.



Chair: Prime Minister
Vessel: Special House Session

कान्तिपुर Batsyayan in Kantipur, 20 December

Whither the disqualified?

Durga Lal KC in *Kantipur*, 19 December

कान्तिपुर

LAMAHI (DANG). Disqualified Maoist combatants are having a difficult time rehabilitating into society. They complain that society still treats them like it did during the insurgency years and that it is difficult to mix with people. More than 400 ex-combatants were designated as unqualified and sent home from the camps by UNMIN.

"Society still perceives us negatively as combatants," says 20-year-old Tufan Singh Kathayat of Kohalpur. "Some look at us with a feeling of revenge. Some belittle us, saying that we didn't qualify.

We picked up guns when we were supposed to go to school. Our friends have progressed, what do we do now? Where do we belong?"

They say that they have not been able to get appropriate jobs. They feel put down because of lack of education and employment. The disqualified combatants claim that the rehabilitation program was not enough to enable them to earn a living. They also complain that they did not receive the aid allocated to them through an agreement between the government and UNMIN.

"The rehabilitation program did not have concrete results. If this situation continues, we will be compelled to pick

up guns again," Kathayat says. He, along with two dozen other disqualified combatants, left home in search of work in Lamahi.

"I don't have an income now. At home, they ask me why I have returned. My friends have jobs, what have I achieved? How can I stay home in such a situation?," says Sunil Basnyat of Bardia. They also feel that the Maoist Party has deserted them. "They promised us many things but left us alone in the end," says Bhim Bahadur Budathoki. "It was not right for them to destroy our lives."

The disqualified combatants say that although they were given vocational



training after being disqualified, it was not enough for them to start a business. More than 100 disqualified combatants have undergone training in veterinary, electrical wiring, and plumbing skills from Rapti Technical School. "We have only had male students so far, but only a few are interested," says Gopal Acharya, chief at the school. "It takes time to improve their attitude, but things are changing slowly."

“We are open”

Interview with UML politburo member Pradip Gyawali in Chhalphal, 19 December

छलफल

Chhalphal: Why did UML give up its neutral position in the PM election and who is likely to lead the new government?

Pradip Gyawali: Our honest and relentless efforts to form a national unity government for the past five months yielded no results. The never-ending election process has created uncertainty. Ideally, there is no alternative to national consensus but as the chance of consensus is waning, we decided to open up room for the possibility of a majority government as well. We are open to all possibilities. But we believe there is no possibility of the Maoists leading the government until they are disarmed. We have not specified who should lead the government. Any democratic force can lead.

It means the Maoists don't have a chance to lead the government.

First of all, the Maoists are not disarmed. Second, they have failed to garner the required majority in the past and withdrew their candidacy. Therefore, I don't see any possibility of the Maoists leading the government.

So the neutral stance of UML for national consensus has now been proved wrong?

The decision was not wrong but



did not get implemented. The undeniable fact is that a national unity government was and is still relevant for writing the constitution and completing the peace process. It did not work out because others did not cooperate. UML's effort alone was not enough.

Is there still the possibility of a national consensus?

We are still making efforts for a national consensus. We are discussing the probable modalities of a consensus government. For instance, this transition period should be divided up into three phases: first the peace process, then constitution writing, and finally a new election for a new government. The big three political parties will lead the

government in turn throughout one phase.

This means the possibility of a majority government has increased.

That's right. If a consensus government is not possible, a majority government should be formed to end the current impasse. But even in a majority government, there are two things we should focus on. First, the government of majority will keep striving for a consensus government for which it should be ready. Second, efforts should be made to forge a consensus in constitution writing and the peace process.

Does your party lead or support NC in forming a majority government then?

Since the Maoists cannot lead the government, there is a possibility of NC leading the new government. We don't have selfish and self-centred motives to claim a government under our leadership. UML is ready to take the responsibility if others want us to. We don't have any preconditions and prerequisites for whoever takes the leadership. We are open.

Who does UML nominate for the post of PM in the new process then?

This is yet to be discussed. We can take the responsibility but we don't claim leadership. If other parties feel UML should take the lead in the new process, then we will field our candidate.

Blind idealists

Rabindra Mishra in *Nagarik*, 22 December

नागरिक

Nepal's sightless idealists are trying to cloak their immorality with sweeping talk of high ideals. In most of them, there is no humanity, only inhumane selfishness. They talk loftily of people's democracy or pluralism, but couldn't care less about families that commit collective suicide because they have nothing to eat, or of small children who have to hang onto wire bridges to go to school. These paper idealists are not interested in real change. Those who believe that change can only come through idealism are slaves of idealism, not real vehicles of change. They only want their ideology to be victorious, they want to win elections, be prime minister. They don't really care what happens to the country in the process. This country will not be remade with 'people's democracy' or 'pluralism'. Our country will not be built by idealism but with unity, integrity and hard work: qualities in which our political leadership scores zero.

Nepali citizens are fed up with the slogans of a 'new Nepal'. When ex-crown prince Paras was detained for a familiar charge of shooting a gun, there were rallies in his support, he was greeted like a leader when released. Where were those who used to shout slogans against Paras? The manner in which ex-king Gyanendra, Paras and Himani are regaining public acceptance is a warning to those who thought Nepal would be heaven once we turned into a republic. In fact none of the political parties look set to institutionalise the new republic through a new constitution. NC and UML want the blame for the inability to write a new constitution to go to the Maoists. The Maoists are reconciled to not having a new constitution and are preparing for a 'people's revolt'. And the civil society that the Maoists abandoned are too busy trying to patch up their frayed ranks.

There are six months to go for the new constitution. If the political parties can agree the term may be extended again. But if there is no agreement why extend it? Instead of focusing on real issues they want to change the flag, others want the word 'pluralism' inserted in the democratic constitution. Why get tangled in these meaningless debates? Will changing the flag fill the stomach of a hungry Nepali? Will it help Nepalis hold their heads high? And if we change the flag, why not change the name of Nepal as well since it has feudal antecedents?

If the constitution is not written in time, the political polarisation will be hard to control. At that time, the gun and muscle will triumph over principles. It will take a long time to bring things back to normal. The present rulers have wrecked this country's beautiful past and its potentially beautiful future. At this rate they will fall into the holes they have dug themselves.

काम सानो ठूलो भन्ने हुँदैन । पसिनाको कुनै रङ्ग र जात पनि हुँदैन । काम गरेर खान लजाउनु पनि हुँदैन । चोरेर, ढाँटेर, छलेर, लुटेर खान पो लजाउनुपर्छ । जो जहाँ रहेर जुन काम गर्छ ऊ त्यसैमा रमाउनुपर्छ गौरव गर्नुपर्छ र समर्पित भएर गर्नुपर्छ । काम नै शक्ति हो, भक्ति हो र मुक्ति हो । कामको इज्जत गरौं, पसिनाको सम्मान गरौं ।

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The Case of the Phantom Firearm

After he resigned Makunay told us he'd be out of Baluwatar by Dasain. He forgot to tell us which Dasain. Looks like he'll be taking-care till October 2011. Does the fact that Comrade Awesome has started parting his hair in the middle have anything to do with anything?

ॐ

'Tis the season to be merry, so I know none of you out there want to hear about the never-ending feud between and within the various political parties that has brought Nepal to a standstill. And they've made sure there are enough distractions so we don't notice the deadlock. As soon as one scandal shows signs of disappearing from the headlines, another one is cooked up. Just as media interest in the Paras-Rubel duel started to wane, we got the CIAA raid on Dabur. Ass' prediction: there will be another scandal next week.

ॐ

Of all the scandals, the most intriguing is the **Case of the Vanishing Pistol**. After making a statement that he pointed a gun at Rubel's head and then fired into the air, Porous now says there was no gun and no firing. And after he found out that all his shenanigans were going to be uncovered Rubel also retracted his original statement and said there had been no shooting after all. Oh yes, when Dad-in-law GPK was medevaced to Gleneagles earlier this year, parliament approved S\$400K but the total hospital bill came to



Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll give it in writing.

only S\$70K. Someone was laughing all the way to the bank for sure. So, Sasoo Suzie cancelled a scheduled press con, and also stopped making demands for a thorough search of Nirmal Nibas for the phantom firearm. Are the two princes in cahoots, or what?

ॐ

No other country perhaps comes anywhere close to us when it comes to shooting ourselves in the foot. Just when it looked like Chitwan was all poised for the Elephant Sport Week, **mahoos in cahoots** went on strike. Just when The Last Resort was booked solid for Christmas and New Year, the VDCs on either side of the Bungy Bridge decided to padlock it till their extortion demands were fulfilled.

The owners and locals have now come to a compromise that, unsurprisingly, requires the former to shell out more moolah for the privilege of using their own bridge on their own land. Great way to welcome 2011. Government is not silent; here is an actual WikiLeaks phone transcript from Wednesday:

Female Board Member of NTB: "The situation there concerns me...my daughter is on a school trip to Last Resort next week, will there be any problems?"

Last Resort: "Unfortunately the school has already cancelled the trip."

FBMNTB: "Oh good. That's all right then." (Hangs up)

ॐ

One of NAC's two 757s has been grounded

because of a dispute over who fingers the kickbacks on an engine repair contract, so its flights have been curtailed, leaving tens of thousands of Nepali migrant workers in the lurch. Air Arabia wanted to use fifth freedom rights to fly KTM-KL, so NAC's union has stopped all domestic operations now for a week in protest.

The PM called up the Arabians and said: "You understand how things are here, can you postpone the KL flight till things cool down a bit?" Air Arabia has sued anyway. NAC's new motto for 2011 Nepal Tourism Year is: "If we can't fly we won't let anyone else either."

Instead of sending a CA delegation to Ethiopia to learn about how not to do ethnic federalism, the donors who sponsored the Addis junket should've sent NAC's Board to study Ethiopian Airlines. Despite wars, famines and political instability Ethiopia has managed to stay on as Africa's best and fastest growing airline with 30 aircraft and another 25 on order.

ॐ

The hands down winner of this week's **Only In Nepal Contest**:

'Weeping Protest (Rua-Basi Julus) Held: Community groups from Dailekh held a rally outside the Constituent Assembly on Tuesday pretending to weep, wail and cry loudly to protest the delay in writing the new constitution.'



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