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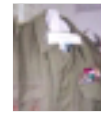
Kathmandu's regular nightlife has taken a break—weekly live band sessions have been postponed, dance floors are empty, pool tables have been abandoned, and if you want to find people to hang out with, head for the nearest TV at the nearest bar

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Letters



“What is the correlation between establishing peace in Nepal and removing monarchy?”

DIPTASHAH

Emperors of ice cream

SANJEEV UPRETY'S FIRST-PERSON account of his time with immigrants from Gadwal while in Rhode Island is brilliant (Re: "Emperor of Ice Cream," Arts and Society, June 27). I say this having lived in New York City for more than 10 years and having interacted with a number of immigrants—Indians, Pakistanis, Iraqis, Mexicans, Afghanis, but mostly with our own Nepalis. It's the

Ice cream" for that fleeting moment with our friends. Life's not all that great in the United States for the struggling immigrant. But he needs to bluff himself into believing it is, just like the Rawats, Uprety's roommates. He needs something to carry on.

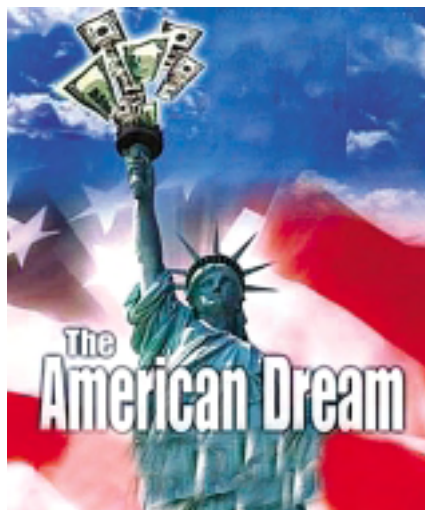
SURESH HOOMAGAIN
NEWYORK CITY

Nepal's roadmap

KIRAN CHALISE RAISES A NUMBER of issues relevant to the state of Nepali politics (Re: "Nepal's Roadmap," Viewpoint, June 27). His analysis accurately identifies key deficiencies in the Nepali political arena. Further, his assertion that the lack of credible political representation has made it incumbent upon "ordinary Nepalis and the world community to ask difficult questions," leaves no room for disagreement.

Although in concurrence with the basic tenets of Chalise's proposition, I would recommend the re-calibration of the sequence of his proposed roadmap with several pre-qualifying questions.

The first and most pressing question is, given the vulnerable security situation in Nepal, how much credibility can one expect a referendum to have in the eyes of future generations of Nepalis (or the international community for that matter)? If the fundamental assumption under which referenda are held entails the ability to voice one's opinion in a free and fair manner, then I would urge that the establishment of such an environment be endorsed as a prerequisite to contemplating the notion of a referendum. Holding a referendum to chastise one institution at the urging of another has the potential to



same old story: we have all escaped (or so we think) the hardship back home and are in search for a better tomorrow.

Here is a snapshot of a conversation after a few beers (Budweiser is a favorite), when the interaction gets really intimate—or overpowering, if you neither have a sense of humor nor are bound by a sense of kinship. "Spice and Curry can't do without me," "those Spanish guys at the Sunset Café are lazy and the boss has found that," "my boss has promised to sponsor me a green card and I can then go home." Many of us are indeed lonely here. But all of us become "Emperors of

propagate precisely what Chalise warns is happening in Nepal—"dealing with the sideshows" while skirting the real issues.

Second, I think it is incumbent upon all Nepali citizens to take a step back from the "referendum bandwagon" and analyze the origins of this debate. As with all political maneuvering, timing is of critical importance. So, another relevant question that should precede those outlined by the columnist is "why is the issue of a republic pertinent at this particular juncture?" The answer, depending on one's political inclination may range from criticism of the monarchy's actions in the past 20 months (preceding the re-appointment of Deuba) to a systematic denigration of the actions of our politicians for the past 13 years.

Determining one's political orientation, however, is not the aim of this exercise. To quote Chalise, "some fresh, alternative, strategic thinking," is what is needed. The point is to engage in critical analysis and decide for oneself the utility of maintaining a constitutional monarchy over establishing a republic. The point is to think outside of the "walls of political construct" and evaluate where the drive for a republic originated from, the timing of this drive and to whom the ultimate benefit of fixation on this debate will go. The real question is, aside from posturing on the part of our politicians, what additional utility does the promulgation of a republic provide for our fellow Nepalis? Then comes the question of what constitutes the real issues for Nepal. The very nature of this question is immensely complex because our problems are as vast and dynamic as the construct of our nation, the societal/economic stratification of our people and the myriad "solutions" offered by intellectuals. However, I must disagree with Chalise in saying that as vast as the real issues plaguing Nepal may be, the question of a referendum on the fate of the monarchy (at a time when the country is virtually in a state of civil war), does not make the first "short list" of pressing concerns for the country. If anything, it has immense potential to evolve into a problem itself. After all, what is the correlation between establishing peace in Nepal and removing the monarchy? Is it a widely held belief that if a referendum is held and constitutional

monarchy voted in as the system of choice, that the Maoists will simply lay down their arms and return to the political mainstream? I think not. What might one ask, would happen if the opposite occurred? Would the political forces in Nepal unanimously honor the decision? Would the Maoists then disarm and adhere to the people's will? The answer may be "perhaps," but the follow-up question is whether a "perhaps" suffices when lives are on the line. Does a "perhaps" warrant the quest for an outcome? So what then, is the true purpose behind a referendum on a republic in Nepal?

On the subject of dealing with the real issues, let's talk about how to improve the security situation in our country, how to ensure that corrupt and manipulative politicians never again lead our governments, how to help our security forces improve their human rights record, how to ensure that our children are accorded every opportunity to a proper childhood, how to de-politicize the education sector, how to guarantee that every Nepali is ensured equal rights and privileges as mandated by our Constitution. Let's get to the more peripheral issues that are likely to serve the interests of a minority political elite only after each and every single Nepali is fed at least two healthy meals a day, has running water and electricity and can read, write and think for themselves. How does this sound as a roadmap designed to deal with the real issues?

Nepal is not an Australia in a time of peace, deciding whether or not to retain Queen Elizabeth as the officiating head of state. The analogy drawn by Chalise between what happened in 1999 in Australia and what he proposes is the most urgent need of the hour for Nepal, is quite simply, flawed. Above all else, the most urgent need of the hour is to remain focused on the constraints under which we have to operate, to keep matters in practical perspective and to move forward knowing fully well that we as a nation, are dealing with a crisis that will take years to resolve. There are dozens of real issues and obstacle that lie ahead in the immediate future for Nepal. Holding a referendum on the relevance of the monarchy is not one of them.

DIPTASHAH
VIA E-MAIL

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C O N T A C T

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Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between people and their beliefs—in religion, literature, colleges and schools—democracy in all public and private life...

Walt Whitman





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EVERY MONDAY



Picture of the Week



YOUNG SINGER AND VETERAN POET:
Rastra Kabi Madhav Prasad Ghimire and
Prava Bhetwal, 9, teamed up in a new
CD, a collection of national songs

nw/Sagar Shrestha

Shooting In The Dark

The international community has invested a lot on capacity building of Nepal's media but there has not been a single public assessment of this support

BY PRATYOUSH ONTA

I recently read two books that discuss various aspects of the Nepali media under the state of Emergency (November 2001 to August 2002). They are "Sankatkalma Nepali Press" edited by Mahendra Bista (2003) and "Nepali Press During State of Emergency" edited by Chiranjibi Kafle (2003). Both of these books were published by the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), the largest elected body of Nepali journalists.

Although the English version is more or less a translation of the Nepali one, it is not an exact translation. From these two books we learn a lot about the legal means deployed to curtail various freedoms of the media at the beginning of the emergency, of the execution, arrest and torture of media people by both state forces and by insurgents and the protest activities carried out by FNJ to secure, among other things, the freedom of its members. However, this essay is not a review of these books. Instead it is an exploration of a statement included in the preface to both books by Taranath Dahal, President of FNJ.

He writes, "Many non-government organizations thrived in the name of working for press freedom and the international donor agencies also backed them. Whereas (sic), the FNJ continued to suffer resource crunch, as it was unable even to provide a minimum possible humanitarian support to the victims of torture and suppression during this period. This has suggested the need for strong fund base for the FNJ in future." Dahal does not specify which NGOs have "thrived in the name of working for press freedom" and which of them were backed by donor agencies. But it is clear that he thinks (a) there are many such organizations; (b) these organizations received lots of money from donors; (c) the quantity and quality of work these organizations did was somehow not proportionate to the money they got; and (d) FNJ did not have enough funds to provide essential support and other services to its members who had become victims of one or other form of atrocities during the period of emergency.

Let us look at these points one at a time. As a media researcher, I have sought information about individuals and organizations that have done work in the field of media freedom. While the number of individuals who have written short articles about this theme in newspapers or magazines is large—I would refer readers to the appropriate listing in Nepali Media Bibliography (2003, Martin Chautari)—the number of organizations that have worked on this theme is quite small. In fact, I can not think of even five such Nepali organizations.

Second, no information is available in the public domain regarding the volume of donor support for Nepali organizations working on press

freedom. Hence Dahal could be correct in assuming that lots of money has been given but I suspect that this is not the case. Donors with offices in Nepal tend to support media-projects with relatively small budgets. Unless such support has been secured from sources outside of Nepal, I would think that the volume of support is not very big.

The third point is related to how the work performed by Nepali organizations ought to be assessed in terms of its quantity, quality and the funding support provided. Given general trends, Dahal's characterization that the quantity and quality of work recorded on the theme of press freedom is not proportionate to the support received is probably correct but we would have to do such an assessment in a case by case basis.

Finally, there is no reason to doubt that the FNJ did not have enough resources to provide essential services to its members who had become victims of atrocities during the state of emergency. This requires a discussion about how FNJ has thought about financing its own operation and this is a subject about which not much information has been put out by the FNJ in the public domain. But to get back to the main point of this essay, I think Dahal's statement points at a more general and pervasive problem regarding assessment of donor support for media in Nepal. It is a fact that the international community has invested a lot of money in capacity enhancement of Nepali media training institutions and media practitioners in the past several decades. However there has not been a single public assessment of this support experience. No one has kept a



SS/ANU

public record of the types and volumes of assistance that has been rendered to Nepali media practitioners and institutions and there is virtually no analysis of what kind and volume of assistance has worked and what has not. Surely, there is a plethora of project reports, held in private by the donor agencies and the project executing Nepali institutions. Tacitly it is understood that the primary logic of these reports is, in the last instance, to justify that donor funds were disbursed in an approved manner

and the work proposed in the mutual contract was accomplished. There is a lot of emphasis on the accountability of this kind of assistance but accountability is understood in the sense highlighted by accountants and auditors.

This would have been something to celebrate were it not taking place in the more or less complete absence of accountability understood as (a) honesty and integrity of the application of both intellect and effort on the work at hand; and (b) a public policy debate in which the costs and benefits of alternate support mechanisms are discussed comparatively. Donor support for Nepali media is necessary but so is a mechanism that evaluates the kind and quality of such support publicly. **N**

(Associated with Martin Chautari, Onta has edited/co-edited seven books on Nepali media)



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Government probe

The government has formed a five-member team to investigate the alleged disappearances from the government custody. Amnesty International documented more than 150 cases of such “disappearances” in 2003, starting with the breakdown of ceasefire in August, and in the following four months. The relatives of the alleged abductees called off their hunger strike in Kathmandu last week after the government announced the formation of the probe team. The protesters were demanding that the whereabouts of their disappeared kin be made public. The probe team is headed by Narayan Gopal Malego, joint secretary at the Home Ministry, and is to submit its findings within 30 days.

Armed Indians

The Thankot police arrested six armed Indians entering Kathmandu. Three of them were identified as members of Reserve Police Line, Uttar Pradesh. The vehicle carrying them had a flag of the Samajbadi Party. The Indians said they were on the way to visit Pashupatinath and the

arms were carried along for security reasons. The police handed them to the Indian Embassy.

Tariff increase

The Drinking Water Supply Corporation is all set to increase the tariff for drinking water. According to Kantipur, the tariff will go up by as much as 15 percent within a month. The newspaper quotes a high-level source as saying that the tariff would go up by a further 35 percent in the near future. The tariff increases come in line with the conditions set by the donors who are funding the Melamchi Project. They have asked for a significant revision of the overall tariff structure by next January. The Asian Development Bank, one of the major financiers of the Melamchi project, wants the water supply in the Valley to be privatized before construction works begin on the 25.6-km tunnel of Melamchi.

Separate ministry

Tribhuvan University (TU) has proposed a separate ministry to cover technical education. The Vice Chancellor, Prof. Govind Prasad Sharma,



ASADH PANDRA: Farmers mark the beginning of the rice-planting season

said that TU has been expanding into new technical areas and the Ministry of Education was unable to keep up with the rapid changes. He proposed to hand over the campuses affiliated to TU to other universities. The university has 278 campuses with over 210,000 students.

Illegal Nepalis

The Australian immigrant authorities have detained at least three illegal Nepali immigrants. This came after a series of raids on more than a dozen locations in Sydney, Kantipuronline reported. Twenty-seven illegal immigrants from various countries were detained in the raids.

Arrangements have been made to deport the detainees.

French concern

The French Embassy expressed concern over the delay in the trial of Charles Sobhraj, a French national. Sobhraj was arrested nine months ago in Thamel. He has been in the Central Jail awaiting a court verdict since. The embassy wrote to the Nepali authorities via the consular section of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The final hearing of the Sobhraj case is slated for July 5. Sobhraj is accused of killing American Connie Jo Bronish and Canadian Laurent Ormond Carriere in 1975 when he came into Nepal as Henricus Bintanja, a Dutch national.

Women's crusade

A women's group in Malekhu VDC, Dhading, have successfully banned drinking and gambling in the village. The president of the group, Kamala Ghale, says that the men are now engaged in more productive activities. The group received support from a local NGO, Self-Help Group. Taking a cue from the initiative, a number of neighboring villages are now following suit.

RNA chief

Army Chief Pyar Jung Thapa has ordered Army barracks to follow the Supreme Court's recent order. Thapa's reply to the Court states that the security forces were committed to honoring human rights, international humanitarian laws and Supreme Court orders. The apex court had also ordered the Army to disclose the whereabouts of Kamal K.C., an alleged Maoist, arrested three months ago. The Army Chief's written re-

sponse also said that the Army did not have K.C. in its custody. Attorney General Sushil Pant told Nation Weekly that the Army-Supreme Court rift had been blown out of proportions by the media. Pant said the media had presented remarks made by the Army chief without putting it in context, deliberately leaving out Thapa's pledges to follow the court's order. "The Army recognizes the supremacy of the Supreme Court," Pant said.



Amnesty appeal

Amnesty International, in an open letter to the Maoist supremo Prachanda, condemned continuing attacks on civilians by the Maoists. The human rights group also expressed its concern at the reported torture of civilians by the Maoists and the impact of their activities on children in particular. Amnesty also asked the Army to come clean about people they have in their custody. It asked the Army to make public the whereabouts of Raj Kumar Mandal, Dharma Narayan Maharjan, Aasha Narayan Maharjan and Nati Shrestha, who were reportedly arrested by the security personnel between May 26 and June 28.

Bomb in BASE

Maoists detonated a powerful bomb at the offices of the Backward Society Education (BASE) in Dhangadi. They also threatened to kill Dilli Chaudhary, who heads BASE. The organization is noted for its successful campaign to end bonded labor. No casualties were reported but the BASE office was severely damaged. BASE has continued to promote social justice for Nepal's marginalized populations through education and income-generating initiatives. Chaudhary and BASE are caught in the crossfire between demands of the Maoists for food, shelter, money and support, and the retaliation they face from the government for harboring Maoists, Forefront said in a statement. Forefront is an international organization of grassroot human rights workers. Chaudhary has categorically refused to endorse and support the Maoist's cause. Forefront has ex-

pressed its solidarity with Chaudhary and his colleagues and has asked the Maoists to respect human rights and to abide by international humanitarian standards.

Tatopani blockade

Maoists ended an indefinite blockade imposed at the Tatopani border between Nepal and China. The Maoists, who had issued an order to the business community not to pay custom duties, imposed the blockade three weeks ago. The blockade was called off after the business community asked for its repeal. Tatopani is the main transit point on Nepal-China border.

Sheriff shot

Maoists assassinated Harka Bahadur Gurung, mayor of Pokhara, who had refused to give in to the Maoist call to step down. The mayor's driver and his bodyguard were airlifted for treatment in Kathmandu. There have been numerous attacks on heads of local bodies appointed by the Thapa government. Gopal Giri, mayor



OLYMPIAN SMILE: Taekwondo star Sangina Baidhya was named 'Player of the Year' by Nepal Sports Journalists' Forum

of Birgunj, was shot dead last year. Punaram Pokharel, the mayor of Butwal, had a close shave; he lost his eye in the Maoist attack. All of the three mayors were members of the RPP.

On deathrow

The Chinese government sentenced two Nepalis to death in Tibet and handed a prison sentence to a third one. All were charged with drug trafficking. The two Nepalis sentenced to death are Ravi Dahal of Morang

and Ishwori Kumar Shrestha of Sindhupalchowk. According to Kantipur, the two were arrested a year ago in Khasa with 29.9 kilograms of contraband but the paper did not reveal what the drugs were. Raywat Kumar Dahal of Bhadrapur, Jhapa was handed a 15-year sentence. The three have decided to appeal the verdict.

Circus ruckus

Twelve children from The Great Roman Circus in Karnailganj, Gonda, have returned to Nepal. They were rescued from the circus with the assistance of the local authorities. Another eight girls were brought back to Gonda from Orissa by the circus owners. The police will take custody of the girls and hand them over to their parents as directed by the Lucknow High Court. A number of Nepali girls had gone missing after a botched rescue attempt in Karnailganj on June 15. The rescue attempt turned violent when the circus owners and their henchmen attacked the activists and Nepali parents who had raided the circus to free the children.



MONSOON BLUES: A stadium attendant drains out the rainwater clogging the football field at Dashrath Stadium

NIIT'S NEW PROGRAM

NIIT launched its new GNIIT program, an "industry-endorsed" multiple-track curriculum for IT career aspirants. The newly launched GNIIT program has been "co-designed" with the IT and IT Enabled Service (ITES) industries.



With this curriculum, NIIT hopes to provide to its students the IT-related skills that are currently demanded by the market and fulfill emerging manpower needs in the IT sector. The program has 4 specialization tracks built upon a common foundation. The 4 specialization tracks are: Software Engineering, Systems Engineering & Networking, Information Systems Management and Business Process Management. After the first semester, the performance and specific strengths of the students will be used to determine their specialization track. The GNIIT career program offers one year training through its Professional Practice (PP) module. This module which takes place in the final year of the three-year program puts students in various organizations to gain a year's work experience, for which they are remunerated by the organizations. Since its introduction, nearly 75,000 students have gone through the Professional Practice module of the GNIIT program.

NEW KIA MODEL

Continental Trading, the exclusive dealer for Kia Motors in Nepal, launched the Picanto, Kia's new car model. The Picanto has a 64 bhp engine with a displacement of a 1086cc. It has a maximum speed of 150 km per hour

and can reach 96 kmph in 15.1 seconds. The Picanto is marketed as being ideal for both city roads and wide open highways. The new model is available in nine vibrant colors with three seat colors to go along with the exterior.

BELL 407 TRIALS

Bell Helicopter Textron concluded its high altitude trials of the single turbine engine helicopter, the Bell 407. During the trials in and around Mustang district, the 407 flew well above 20,000 feet. There are over 600 Bell helicopters operating in nearly 50 countries. These trials represented the first appearance of the Bell 407 in Nepal. It is hoped the 407 will help promote Nepal as an adventure tourism destination and boost the Nepali tourism industry. AVCO International Pvt. Ltd., the exclusive independent representative for Bell Helicopter in Nepal, was the authorized handling agency for the trials.



CENTRAL ZOO PROJECT

Representatives from Toyota Motor Corporation (Japan), Toyota Motor Corporation (Delhi), Toyota Tsusho Corporation and Mr. Suraj Vaidya, President of Vaidya's Organization of Industries and Trading Houses, handed over a project at the Central Zoo to the King Mahendra



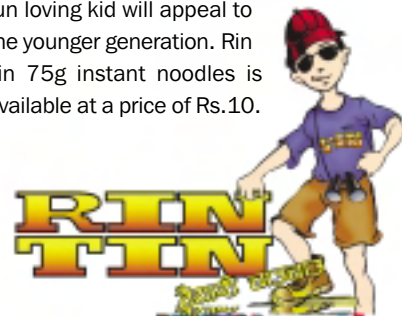
Trust for Nature Conservation. During the course of the project, renovation of the Entrance Plaza and Asiatic Lion's Enclosure, and construction of the Siamang Gibbon Enclosure took place. The handing over of the project took place at a function in the Central Zoo presided over by Minister of Physical Planning & Works Prakash Man Singh. The project started in May 2003 and was completed on 12 November in the same year. A total contribution of Rs. 4,497,193 was made by the organizations. This has been the largest donation to the zoo from the private sector.

KYMCOS ZING 150

Star International Limited launched the Zing 150 motorcycle manufactured by the Taiwanese company, Kymco. With a displacement of 149cc and a maximum output of 12bhp, the Zing 150 gives a mileage of around 40 kilometers per liter. It is available in four different colors; Red, Black, Silver and Blue. The Zing 150 has both air and oil cooling system. Added features include disk brakes and electric start. The motorcycle comes with a two-year warranty.

RIN TIN INSTANT NOODLES

Chaudhary Group launched the new, 75g instant Rin Tin noodles. The launch has come after the success of the 50g Rin Tin snack noodles says the company. It is targeting children as potential consumers for its new product. The brand character, Rin Tin, is a village boy. The company hopes that the Rin Tin boy, characterized as an adventurous and fun loving kid will appeal to the younger generation. Rin Tin 75g instant noodles is available at a price of Rs.10.





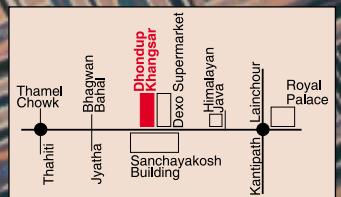
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IN YOUR HONOR

“There was once this old and retired British army corporal and his wife who burst into tears after they came here. It held a lot of meaning for them. We hope this place could attract more young people to get in touch with the living history of the Gurkhas.”

– HASTA BAHADUR NEPALI,
guide and guard at the Gurkha
Memorial Museum

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI
IN POKHARA

As you head towards Damside from Lakeside’s tourist sprawl, on the left inside the compound of Hotel Nature Land stand four tin-roofed rooms. This simple building is the home of the museum honoring Nepal’s famous Gurkha soldiers.

The Gurkha Memorial Museum moved from Kathmandu to Pokhara, hometown of many Gurkhas, in October 2001. Since then the museum has received more visitors, enough at least to pay the Rs. 6,000 monthly rent. However, a bigger, well-equipped museum building is needed to house new contributions of material and to meet visitors’ demand for much better space. A new facility is also necessary in order to preserve properly the memorabilia that range from military uniforms worn by Victoria Cross holders, medals and badges to weapons to books on the Gurkhas and communication equipment used during war.

“This space is already too small,” says former British Army Captain Lal Bahadur Rana, who manages the museum on behalf of the Gurkha Memorial Trust. The trust started the museum in 1995 to preserve Gurkha history after King Birendra gave audience to seven living





Gurkha Victoria Cross winners. The Victoria Cross is Britain's highest award for military gallantry.

The museum exhibits items from the British, Indian and Nepal armies and is managed by the trust's 11-member executive committee and advisors from all three armies. "The Gurkhas are, after all, part of all three armies, including the Singapore Police," adds Capt. Rana. Histories record that the British forces formed a separate company of Gurkha soldiers around 1767 after they were impressed by their bravery during battles with Britain's East India Company.

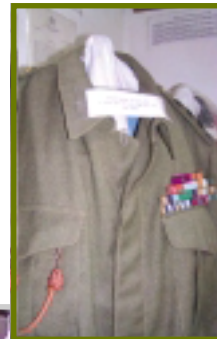
In the 20th century, Gurkha soldiers were part of Britain's military campaigns in the World Wars as well as in Malaya, Borneo, Cyprus, the Falklands, Hong Kong and the Gulf War. Over 3,000 Gurkha soldiers are still serving in the British Gurkha Army. The force has been consolidated into one regiment, the Royal Gurkha Rifles, since the handover of Hong Kong to China.

Most of the museum's exhibits have come from the surplus collection of a similar Gurkha Museum in London and from individual contributions made by former army men. The four rooms in the present space are dedicated to the Gurkha regiments, core Gurkha regiments such as signals and transport

that helped in logistics during wartime, the military medals and Victoria Cross winners. Some of the prized possessions include a life-size replica of the Queen's Truncheon, the Victoria Cross, the VC Champagne issued in honor of the Gurkha VC winners, a heliograph used for sending signals on war fields and a tall radio set used by British Gurkhas in Nepal to communicate between London and Kathmandu.

The museum's relocation to Pokhara came, as Captain Rana puts it, because the marketing of the location in Kathmandu went very wrong, and few visitors came. But even though that the number of visitors has gone up with the museum's new address, the trust's request for a much better premise in Pokhara has not gained much momentum. "We sent a proposal to the Tourism Ministry during the tenure of the Chand government to allow us to co-locate with the Western Region Museum in Naya Bazaar in the heart of Pokhara," says Capt. Rana. "We still do not know what

is happening due to the political instability." The trust is now planning to build its own two-story building at Deep, in front of the British Gurkha Camp in Pokhara, and shift the museum there while they wait for the ministry's decision. **N**



All Photos: Rubina Dewan





Mending FENCES

The Deuba government is all set to get new coalition partners but that doesn't solve its problem: juggling peace talks with the parliamentary elections by next April

BY JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

After keeping a lonely vigil for a month, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba eventually appears set to fulfill a key responsibility the King entrusted in him: form an all-party government. While this will certainly give his beleaguered government some respite, the prime minister still has some way to go before he gets anywhere close to the second responsibility of holding parliamentary elections by next April. And it will be a tough job juggling one unstated responsibility: fitting in the peace talks and brokering a permanent ceasefire with the Maoists in between.

“Who are they trying to hoodwink?” says a Nepali Congress central committee member, referring to the coalition-in-making and recent pronouncements by UML and NC(D) leaders that the four-party (RPP and NSP are the other two parties) government has higher chances of doing what two previous governments, headed by Lokendra Bahadur Chand and Surya Bahadur Thapa, failed to do: strike a lasting peace deal with the Maoists. But even Deuba's ardent supporters admit that a permanent peace is going to be an

uphill task. And that for a number of reasons.

If the four agitating parties, notably the Nepali Congress, continue to cry foul over the UML departure from the five-party alliance, the Deuba government will not even get to see a customary honeymoon phase after the Cabinet expansion. But it remains to be seen whether the agitating parties will be able to hold their fort together, a rare feat in Nepali politics, where alliances are born or broken more out of expediency than ideology.

Leaders of the new alliance however have been trying hard to underscore one point: the four-party agitation has lost its relevance after Deuba's re-appointment as prime minister and return of the executive powers to the ruling Cabinet—exemplified, according to Deuba and his new coalition partner UML, in the form of the defunct Work Performance Regulation.

“Just because an alliance is composed, other alliances do not become irrelevant overnight,” says Chakra Prasad Bastola, former foreign minister and central committee member of the Nepali Congress, defending the legitimacy of the four-party alliance. Bastola dismisses any suggestions of his party joining the government.

'We Can't Be Held Hostage To Indecision'



After Sher Bahadur Deuba's appointment as prime minister, CPN (UML) quickly supported his appointment as "partial correction of regression," indicating that it could join the Deuba government. Bhim Rawal, a UML Central Committee Member, told **John Narayan Parajuli** of **Nation Weekly** his party's decision to join the government (which looked a clear possibility when we went to press) was based on a simple rationale, "UML believes the country cannot be held hostage to indecision."

Prime Minister Deuba has prioritized parliamentary elections; does this sit well with UML?

We have put forward a nine-point agenda and we are discussing it with NC(D). However, we have kept other options open. It depends on how Maoists opt for crisis resolution. CPN(UML) is prepared to display maximum flexibility.

What implications will UML's absence from the five-party alliance have on the political landscape?

Right through the agitation, we held it that parties should offer viable alternatives and behave responsibly. Other parties remained indecisive and they would neither accept our proposal to bail the country out from the stalemate nor come up with their own proposal. Now, we believe that if the Deuba government can bring in other parties, it will facilitate resolution of the current crisis.

What do you mean by "partial correction of regression"? Doesn't it sound like another political word game?

Disgracefully dismissed, elected Prime Minister Deuba has been reappointed and the King has expressly accepted the people's sovereignty. Previous amend-

ments made to the regulation for the functioning of the cabinet has been corrected. This exemplifies both the partial achievement of the democratic movement and the partial correction of the regression.

UML seems to have drawn lessons from Indian coalition politics, but is bickering for ministerial berths the right way to kick-start a new coalition?

In coalitions, issues of power sharing arise naturally but our priority is to stick to Common Minimum Program (CMP). So long as we have that, the question of who gets what becomes secondary. Having said that, we have felt that the proportional representation in the government must be on the basis of seats in the dissolved House.

Why such a delay in joining the government? You think Prime Minister Deuba is not a reliable partner?

It is quite natural that the groundwork would take some time. We wanted to make fundamentals of the coalition government clear, taking the new government as an op-

portunity to resolve the present crisis. Our decision to join the government demonstrates that we are ready to work together with Prime Minister Deuba. Moreover, he has realized his past mistakes and we should definitely give him the benefit of doubt.

Does Prime Minister Deuba have what it takes to lead a divided nation?

Prime Minister Deuba has an opportunity to restore normalcy in the country. If the Maoists opt for dialogue, the government should come forward with maximum flexibility even if that means seeking any sort of fresh mandate from the people and accepting UN mediation.

But Prime Minister Deuba has already said he doesn't want UN mediation?

I am not aware of any such statements by the prime minister. But as far as my understanding goes, all of us remain open to necessary national and international cooperation to resolve the Maoist problem. When we speak of international cooperation, UN naturally comes at the top. **N**

Deuba's aides however say the prime minister wants to keep some ministerial berths free for the possible entry of the Nepali Congress. Famous for walking an extra mile to appease irate members from outside his party, Deuba can be very tenacious as history proves. In the mid-90s, he presided over an ugly era of coalition politics, which ultimately reduced governance to a single mantra: survival at any cost. This time around, Deuba has promised more dignified governance.

Last week, four parties—UML, NSP, RPP and NC (D)—agreed on the common minimum program for governance. The document, among other things, underlined the commitment to protect democracy, approaching the Maoist

problem with utmost flexibility and getting grips on security.

Even without those long-term and ambitious goals, Deuba has had a handful in allocating ministerial berths. The plump portfolios have already been either promised to the UML, or have been already allocated to NC(D) functionaries like Prakash Man Singh and Bimalendra Nidhi. While the leaders publicly insist that power-sharing has never been a problem between them, few Nepalis believe their claim.

Within his own party, Deuba has some juggling to do. There are such young Turks like Minendra Rijal and Prakash Sharan Mahat, clean and intelligent but without a proven popular

base; and there are the likes of Bijaya Gachhedar and Chiranjibi Wagle, tainted by charges of corruption, but with a comparatively larger following.

And there are some serious problems outside his party.

UML General Secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal has already decried Deuba's prioritizing parliamentary elections as the government's main agenda. "Restoring peace must be the first priority," Bhim Rawal of the UML told *Nation Weekly*. "We want the government to display maximum flexibility even if that means accepting UN mediation for establishing peace. Our party is even prepared to go to the constituent assembly if a consensus can be reached with other parties." But Deuba

seems reluctant to publicly commit to either.

Surprisingly, UML has stood steadfast in its defense of Deuba's appointment, a rare display of solidarity, despite Deuba's continued calls for elections. "If elections can be held in Kashmir, they can be held here" has become Deuba's new refrain.

But can peace be established without the government displaying flexibility to go for constituent assembly? And can there be elections without peace?

"No," says Padma Ratna Tuladhar, a leftist intellectual and human rights activist. "The Maoists will settle for nothing less than a constituent assembly, or unless the government comes up with something as democratic." Maoists have not given up their demand for constituent assembly, he says, recalling his recent telephone conversation with the Maoist supremo, Prachanda.



Tuladhar, a facilitator during the last peace talks, says, "There is no point facilitating another round of futile peace talks, but if the govern-

ment is prepared to offer what Maoists ask for, or at least comes up with a viable alternative, peace can be brokered." ■

'NC Hasn't Opted For Constituent Assembly'



Nepali congress (NC) has been against Sher Bahadur Deuba's appointment as the prime minister. It believes that Deuba's reinstatement doesn't undo regression and that the King continues to hold executive powers in the absence of an elected parliament. Chakra Prasad Bastola, former foreign minister and member of the party's central committee, told **Nation Weekly** why the four-party agitation has lost none of its political significance—UML or no UML.

With UML all set to join the government, has the agitation of the four-party alliance lost its relevance?

Well, this is a very tricky question. Just because an alliance is composed, other alliances do not become irrelevant overnight. The present alliance that is composed to form the government has a lot of issues to deal with and an uphill task. We have witnessed disharmony among the partners even before they could announce the government.

Nepali Congress is divided itself. There appears to be a difference of opinion inside your party regarding its position on the issue of constituent assembly...

That's not the case at all. Opinions could differ. Nepali Congress (NC) has not opted for a constituent assembly, as people generally tend to think. Nepali Congress has agreed to discuss the issue of constituent assembly with anyone outside the party. People (many others outside the party) have just said let's go for a constituent as-

sembly. But they have not spelled out clearly what it means.

Do you see republicanism coming up as a viable option in near future?

I have been on record saying that time has not arrived for that sort of system in this country. But we can't completely rule out the possibility. We as political parties, as leaders with experience in multiparty democracy, however doubt if there is a party or an individual who could shoulder the burden of the presidency.

What will be the position of the NC, if the new government initiates dialogue with the Maoists?

It is not a question of either this or that position. The beauty of multiparty democracy is that the role of any particular party doesn't come to an end abruptly. Any party that comes to power for a certain number of years suffers the pangs of incumbency. It is bound to be unpopular in the eyes of the people. However

efficient, however alert the government might be, it cannot perform magic given the scant resources.

Deuba says elections are his top priority. Is the ceasefire with the Maoists a prerequisite to holding the elections?

Not only is ceasefire a prerequisite for an election, we need to have a situation where people can go to the booths without fear, exercising their franchise without fear and vote for any party they like without fear of life and property. And that's not only for certain hours but for a prolonged period. In order to have meaningful elections this sort of situation is a prerequisite.

UML leaders say they are open to UN mediation, just as the Maoists are demanding. What is NC's position?

We have not taken any decision officially. But my own opinion is that we are not averse to third party mediation. Yes, but involvement, we don't want. ■

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OPINION

Historic Opportunity

The fact that some major parties have come around to support Deuba after initial hiccups is a positive sign

BY SUMAN PRADHAN

It's been more than a month since King Gyanendra hand-picked Sher Bahadur Deuba to run the country. And in that time, the nation as a whole has gone through

situation. Who is to rein in the Deuba government if it runs amok?

Just as well, the fact that some major parties have come around to support Deuba after initial hiccups is a positive sign. The even-

We don't know yet where the country will move from here, whether or not the aspirations of the people will be addressed. The present situation could degenerate into infighting between the coalition allies, or it could widen the small window of opportunity for a peace process.

If Deuba, the UML and RPP play their hands right, and if the Palace controls its urges, there is no reason why the government cannot begin to address the larger issues raised by the Maoist conflict and political polarization. The only fear now is that the NC and

UML and RPP's concerns which is reflected in the Common Minimum Program. He is also actively courting the NC to participate in the government.

It is a stretch of the imagination to think that Koirala will suddenly drop all his opposition and join the government. That won't happen, but he and his allies should also not be made to feel bitter and out of the loop. What Deuba and they both need to understand is that the NC and its allies can have their differences with the government but can still work together on the areas they agree on. They need not participate in the government to participate in the peace process.

The same logic should go into dealing with the Palace and the Army. The Palace has legitimate concerns about an eventual peace process. Issues about constitutional revisions, the nature of a new state, etc., concerns the Palace just as it does the common citizen. These concerns should clearly be stated to the government which, in turn, should address it as far as practicable. The onus lies on the government to allay the Palace's fears. But most importantly, the Palace also has some responsibilities. It should not open its own communication channel to the various players in the conflict. It has to let the government do its bidding. In other words, it should let the government be a true government. That's what constitutional monarchy and democracy is all about.

In some ways, the situation presents a historic opportunity for both the political parties and the Palace to mute the criticisms they have faced for much of the past few years. The parties must show that they don't always bicker. They can, if they so choose, transcend traditional power politics for the greater national good. The Palace could follow suit by showing that doubts about its democratic credentials are a thing of the past. ■

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some wrenching changes. Some major political parties, the CPN(UML) and RPP, are coming around to coalesce around Deuba to lend his government a pluralistic flavor. The Nepali Congress and its smaller allies are still opposed, arguing that "regression" is still alive and kicking.

Whom to believe?

Both have a point. The manner in which Deuba was appointed lends credence to accusations by the NC and its allies. The King after all used the same constitutional provision to appoint and empower Deuba as he did with his predecessors. That there is still no parliament and no elected bodies adds to the complexity of the

tual inclusion of the UML and RPP in the government will, despite what the NC says, provide it with a broader base that could translate into some sort of political legitimacy. The Maoists don't seem happy with this coming together of various political forces at the center, but they will have no choice other than to deal with it if the government gains legitimacy.

Most Nepalis though are not hair-splitting over all this at the moment. After eight years of violence and mayhem, and nearly two years of instability and protests, all they want is peace. They want to get on with their lives without fear of the Maoists or government forces.

its allies, who have stayed out of power by choice, could throw up some road-blocks in an already-fragile process.

For this reason, the Deuba government has to be careful in dealing with the opposition. The days of bulldozing opponents, as Girija Prasad Koirala did in the early 1990s and Deuba copied in 1996, are clearly over. The problems we face today manifests from opinions not being heard and commitments not being made in those early days of democracy.

So far, the way Deuba has been doing things indicates he understands all this. He has gone out of his way to accommodate the

UP AND MOBILE

Doko Dai, a mobile library project, has found a simple but unique solution that will give villagers easier access to books

BY YASHAS VAIDYA

There is a stack of books in two rooms in Anamnagar occupied by the Doko Dai project that keeps piling higher every week. As new books pour in, volunteers enter the details of the books into registers. Soon the books will start heading out to their final destinations in Barabise and Mahendranagar where they will eventually end up in the hands of village children and elders. Doko Dai is a mobile library project undertaken by the Nationwide Scholarship Program, SEBS (the alumni body of Budanilkantha School's students) and Development Project Service Centre. The project is funded by the World Bank.

A regular visitor to these rooms is Priyadarshini Joshi, one of the original project writers. "I just came back from a field trip to Barabise to monitor the project implementation," she says. "It will be hard getting the books to the people. The steep hills in the area make it quite difficult to get anything to the villagers. That is why we will be using Doko dais and didis, local porters, to transport our books. Our project was written keeping in mind the challenges of mobility presented by such terrain."

The goal—to provide 30,000 villagers from the villages surrounding Barabise and Mahendranagar with books and other reading materials—looks feasible because by using porters, the Doko Dai project has found a unique solution for transporting books in Nepal. The doko, which is used traditionally to carry everything from cattle fodder to sick people, will be used to carry books. The Doko dai will be the Nepali equivalent



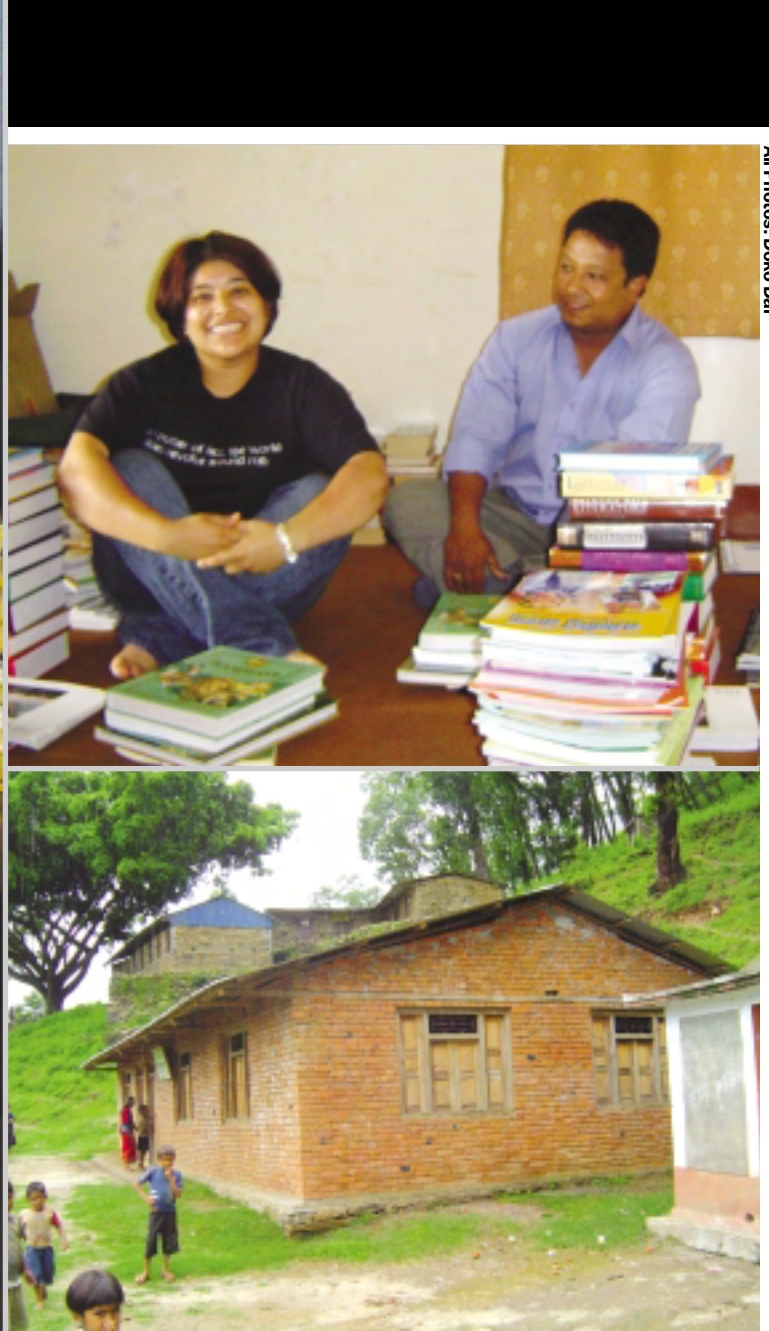
of a Land Rover traveling over difficult terrain.

The Doko dais and didis will start out from the regional headquarters of the project and travel through one of the 10 routes laid out at each project site. All routes will be in operation at the same time. The porters will lay down their dokos at certain stops along the route. For about a week, the stop will be converted into a mobile library where people can come to read and borrow books, newspapers, magazines and the like. The stops selected are easily accessible, usually schools, bazaars, chautaris and even teashops. Books will be changed on a near monthly basis after the porters traverse the route once. The two sites selected for the project will also have a Regional Community Center (RCC), the regional headquarters,

which will be permanent libraries. Other key components of the project are the use of the RCC as a resource center and a scholarship program for bright and needy students (incorporated with the NSP scholarship program).

The books range from simple illustrative English books for school children and agricultural books to benefit the farmers to religious books for the elderly and books on philosophy. "We are constantly taking feedback from the community. We ask them what kind of books they want and try and get those books for our library," says Bijaya Shiwakoti, NSP Secretary.

Nepal's literacy rate currently stands at 45.2 percent. A lot needs to be done in the education sector and Joshi knows that only too well. "There are not enough educational resources like libraries out-



All Photos: Doko Dai

side the capital. People talk about the sorry state of the education sector in our country. But only when you go outside the capital, do you see how bad the situation really is," she says.

The project sounds good enough on paper, but will it really work? To find out, these ideas will be put into practice in pilot routes—one each at Barabise and Mahendranagar next month onwards. "We have tried to benefit the whole community by addressing as many issues as we could," says Rabindra Maharjan, the Program Coordinator of NSP. "We try and remain in touch with the community members and incorporate their suggestions in our project. We are open to modifications and changes." When asked if the project was more like an experiment he responds, "An experiment, maybe, but it's been well thought out."

But keeping such projects sustainable has been a difficult task as many have found out in developing countries the world over. Maybe that's why Doko Dai has taken pains to highlight the "sustainability" theme. (The complete name of the project is Sustainable Doko Dai Mobile Library Project.) The project grants will stop after January 2005. Funds will not be sought from outside after that. The initial grant money is being used to build infrastructure and put a self-sustaining system in place. The idea is to use the RCCs to generate income. The RCCs will be equipped with computers, photocopiers, internet services and the like. There is also a community hall that can be rented out. Nominal fees will be charged for these services to sustain the project.

Sustainability also seems to be a key issue for the World Bank which has

funded the project. World Bank projects have routinely come under criticism for being environmentally destructive, socially disruptive and its loans have been blamed for putting Third World countries under mountainous debt burdens.

Criticisms of the World Bank aside, the Doko Dai project has serious implications on its own. If it succeeds, then it could become a model for other sustainable projects in the country. Its success would also be a shot in the arm for people who do want to do something in the education sector. That's a tough precedent to set but Joshi is optimistic. She says, "There have been numerous challenges in the process, but we've dealt with them. We only hope we can be of help to the villagers." **N**



All Photos: Doko Dai

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LOST RITES

Vidyaashram attendance is declining while demand for Purohits is increasing. Saving this essential element in our culture may require big changes in attitudes

BY SUNIL POKHREL

Satish Nepal, a seventh-grader at Nepal Ved Vidyaashram in Gaushala, doesn't want to be a Purohit. His schoolmate Ganesh Sapkota, a six-grader, joined the vidyaashram at the insistence of his father. Sapkota prefers English to Sanskrit, but he can't study English at the school. Nepal Ved Vidyaashram has 165

students studying Sanskrit. They also learn how to conduct different rituals, starting from pujas in fourth grade to marriage and last rites in tenth grade. Surprisingly, there is no rush for admission, even though the education is free.

Traditional practitioners are either leaving the profession or taking it as a part-time job, and Jajamans around the Kathmandu Valley are increasingly im-

patient about the scarcity of Purohits. Demand is on rise, but the younger generation of Purohit families are not attracted to the career.

"Our society doesn't value a Purohit," Nepal says. The way people stare at him while coming to and from school and in his Daura Suruwal, the school uniform, makes him uncomfortable. He gets angry too when people call him Bahun bajhe.

Purohits believe that the traditional financial arrangements are an important part of the problem. Unlike other service-oriented professions, Purohits don't have fixed rates for services. They traditionally depend on the mercy of their Jajamans and take whatever is offered, even if they are unsatisfied. Govinda Khatiwada from Charikot works at Pashupati. He has felt cheated many times. He fumes, "Is it fair to give Rs. 5 for a shradha, which takes at least one hour?"



Clients on the other hand aren't always satisfied with the way rituals are carried out by the Purohits at Pashupati. "Their only concern is money. More importantly, they are ill-equipped with the required knowledge to follow the actual procedure of any ritual," says Raj Kumar Pandey from Triveni. Pandey was upset when the Purohit who he chose to conduct his father's shradha did not ask him to change his sacred thread.

Fifteen years ago, Krishna Prasad Bhandari came to Kathmandu from Sankhuwasabha. He left behind his family and about 100 Jajamans in a bid to change his profession. Bhandari, who is now 59, began as a Purohit at the age of 10 in his village. He gave it up in favor of a plan to run a retail shop in Kathmandu. When that business failed, he unwillingly came to Pashupati to become a Purohit once again. But he is not doing well.

Unlike most of the Valley, the Pashupati area is awash in Brahmin Pun-

dots. Many have come from other districts due to the conflict. As a result, Pundits from Kathmandu Valley are becoming less common and the competition is very high.

Rishi Ram Sharma, a retired government servant, took up the job only after retirement. His two sons are farmers: they are not interested in becoming Purohits. "Society doesn't view this profession as a dignified one," says one of Sharma's sons. He says farming is much better.

Big changes in Purohits' values and in the nature of the profession are coming fast. Many Brahmins, including the Pundits, are no longer traditional purists. In turn, the automatic reverence for priests is slowly but steadily declining.

Bhandari too has changed with time. Unlike an orthodox Purohit, who is essentially a vegetarian, he doesn't mind eating buff. A conventional pundit restrains from touching a pig, chicken and even so-called untouchables. If he does accidentally, he bathes and changes his sacred thread to purify him. Taking hard drinks is out of question. Bhandari used to follow those rules in his home village but no more.

Kesab Sapkota, a licensed pundit of Pashupati Development Board, says that he and his colleagues love buff momos.

The Purohit's rituals are an essential part of the Hindu tradition. Rituals begin even before a child is born. Garbhadana (conception) is the fervent prayer for a child. This is done in order to fulfill the parental duties to continue the race. Rituals continue in many forms until death and even after. Each time a ritual is conducted, a Purohit's presence is indispensable.

Despite that, Jagannath Acharya, a Purohit for almost 50 families, says, "Our society is still reluctant to eye this profession with respect." Acharya adds, "It is important that all cultures survive. A coordinated effort is needed from concerned parties before the Purohit-Jajaman relationship vanishes."

Acharya's dark vision is a possibility if present trends continue.

Professionalizing and modernizing the practice will force uncomfortable issues of service fees and quality into the open. Are the traditional expectations of Purohits' lifestyles relevant today? Why should the younger generation know and care about the rituals? Difficult questions indeed,

but failing to address and answer them could lead to an irreversible loss of a cultural identity. **N**

Many Brahmins, including the Pundits, are no longer traditional purists



QUIET, PLEASE

A moratorium on development talk shows is just as important as a ceasefire

BY SAMUEL THOMAS

In the place where I come from they tell children that the creator gave us humans two ears and one mouth because he wanted us to listen twice as much as we speak. The “development” sector would appear monstrous by that measure, like a gargantuan being with several large and loud mouths and something like a pore for an ear, because there is so much talk and so little listening. If the people who mattered had listened, things would certainly have been different.

Put simply, the “development” sector is known to quite literally put its money where its mouth is—in talk shows.

On a radio-show this week, the news reader presented a dramatic picture of

how people in Bajura were rushing to the godown at the sound of a helicopter, some maybe even hallucinating or hearing things. They have been starving for weeks now. Cut to the picture of participants at a five-star interaction program on “sustainable development,” “empowerment” or “governance.” Serious disconnect. Extravagance juxtaposed with starvation, illness and malnutrition. Elsewhere in the Mid and Farwest too people are dying of hunger, diarrhea and influenza, all preventable.

The artificial eloquence and profligacy of the development sector are difficult to take in at such times.

Kathmandu is a busy place any time of year. On any given day, there are talk programs, seminars, workshops, interactions or media briefings by NGOs and INGOs. A huge amount of money

is spent on five and three-star venues, on staff time, per diems, on logistics and on fly-by-night development professionals on the circuit. This is for the most part a self-referential discourse where the development world is speaking to itself—there is the same urgency to get out there and say something in public to satisfy the donor and grab some media attention as there is to subject the work of the organization to some perfunctory evaluation by a consultant, preferably flown in. Much of the talk ranks extremely high on the banality index.

The excessive talk reinforces the Kathmandu-centered functioning and consumption patterns of the development sector and legitimizes it in the eyes of both the donor and the recipient. It also legitimizes their relationship and sends out strong signals to “competitors” on the same turf.

The numbers of talk fests per development calendar year has increased of

late because of the inability to work in the field and so often it centers around the convenient shifting of blame on the Maoists for hampering work in the countryside. This is part of the great cover-up, deflecting attention from the raised and unmet expectations, the failure of development interventions to deliver, and the true nature of the development world's interests. So more talk, only now, with the added note that development work has been hampered—the perfect excuse for the rate and efficiency at which the development world delivers.

The costs associated with talk fests are huge. The development sector spends an inordinate amount of money each year talking to itself and its network of donors, consultants, assorted “development” professionals and the media. This talk only feeds the present power structure and its extended networks, in terms of where the money is spent. From informal enquiries it appears that NGOs and INGOs often spend some 10-15 percent of their budget on such events and associated staff time and operational costs or publicity material and events. This is wasteful competition among agencies vying for the same pots of aid money—there is very little sharing of information and resources, strategizing or joint work. All this has been possible because aid flows are heavily concentrated and have been flowing into the same accounts for years. It reveals the complicity of donor agencies in feeding and condoning this wasteful behavior.

A lot of the development discourse suffers a serious disconnect from the reality of the periphery, simply because all the talk is conducted from a position of privilege and inside the relative security and numbing immunity of the capital. Much of it is geared towards what is “current” or the priority of the funding agencies. The development sector's ears to the ground, the content generators for



a lot of talk shows, are an extensive network of consultants and development professionals most of whom know each other from doing the development calendar and circuit. They together form one set of the ground forces that support the self-perpetuating actions of the superstructure, whereby the development sector derives legitimacy for greater arm-chair activity and disproportionate spending. Many are drawn from the elite in Kathmandu, and their concerns have more to do with maintaining the status quo. They contribute to the babble, with the pretense that they have been on the ground.

The development sector's relationship with the media has muted criticism. Much development talk is dutifully reproduced by the media the following day without any investigation whatsoever. It reveals the sheer inability of the media to go beyond reproducing this received wisdom and what is “current” or the “breaking story” and

question such profligacy in such times. So, day after day, journalists make the rounds of seminar halls, dutifully reporting the banalities spouted by development professionals, their number crunching and poor analyses and their imported ideas. The development sector's extravagance and indulgent behavior towards the media has co-opted and dulled critical analysis.

It is criminal to condone such wasteful expenditure during a time of national crisis. What we need right now is a moratorium on development “talk shows.” The next talk shows can happen some three years from now. That way we will have got a lot more done than talk. And those who only talk will have dropped out along the way or will at least have thought up newer things to say. It is up to the donors to decide now whether they want to continue to put their money in such wasteful exercises or in direct support to communities. The keynote speakers can wait. ■



PEOPLE FIRST

A late entrant to the courier and express-delivery market in Nepal, FedEx has now focused on brand promotion and is expanding its customer base

BY SHUSHANK SINGH

Anyone who has seen the Tom Hanks movie “Cast Away” will remember the scenes of hectic operations at the international hub of FedEx

Express. Expedited handling and on-time delivery from one point to another around the globe is its daily bread and butter.

What matters most in the international freight forwarding business is reliability and on-time performance. Do that

well and customers will be satisfied. Everest De Cargo understands this, especially since October 2002, when it became the FedEx Global Service Participant for Nepal and had to comply with FedEx standards. The FedEx global network allows packages and documents to be transported in one to three days to over 215 countries. Its services cover the export and import of packages.

FedEx is a late entrant to the Nepal market. “We do not quote market share figures, but we are confident that our significantly enhanced service will continue to grow our business and market share in Nepal,” says Neelisha Pradhan, Marketing Specialist at FedEx Nepal operations. “Our main objectives right now are brand awareness, expanding customer base and continuing to train and develop our employees.”

A major chunk of FedEx’s investment goes for training and developing its employees because, as business pundits say, customers expect professional and quality service. One of the employee rewards is the FedEx Purple Award, given to employees whose performance appraisal rates higher than their normal job responsibilities. “We believe in an open, communicative and creative work environment, where we put our people first,” says Pradhan. This, as the FedEx philosophy of People-Service-Profit says, because they believe that excellent service



results in profits if people are the company's first priority.

Everest De Cargo, FedEx's Nepal partner, has been in the business of air cargo consolidation and freight forwarding services since 1984. In addition, the company has been FedEx's sales contractor for Nepal for more than a decade.

"We believe that this is a mutually beneficial service proposal for both FedEx and Everest De Cargo," says Pradhan. FedEx shares its technology and operations systems and will provide training and market development support while Everest De Cargo's more than 50 years of local experience in air transportation and import and export services will widen the options available to Nepali customers.

FedEx Express, a subsidiary of FedEx Corporation, says it connects areas that generate 90 percent of the world's gross domestic product in 24-48 hours with door-to-door, customs-cleared service and a money-back guarantee. FedEx Express employs more than 136,000 employees and has approximately 50,000 drop-off locations, 643 aircraft and more than 42,000 motorized vehicles in its integrated global network.



But why Nepal, when many are saying the condition for business isn't right due to the dwindling economy? "With globalization, the need for quick and efficient connectivity with the world's markets will definitely increase," says Pradhan, "and it is important for FedEx to meet that need." When FedEx entered the market over a year ago the competition was already there. "A service like

ours is customer driven, and our services deliver the solutions that our customers need to stay competitive," says Pradhan. "FedEx feels competition helps us to service the clients better and in the end provide the customer with better service."

With its head office in Kathmandu, FedEx has started services in more than 17 towns and cities throughout the country. **N**

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SS/MU

Uttam's Avataars

BY SANJEEV UPRETY

During his artistic journey spanning more than 40 years, Uttam Nepali has experimented with a variety of aesthetic forms, mediums and styles. Thus, while Nepali's early works dating back to the late 1950s include the traditional, figurative depictions of Ganesh and Vishnu, his later paintings—probably influenced by the artists of western modernism like Matisse, Cézanne, and Braque among others—took a clear modernist turn in the 1960s. This interest in modernist art took Uttamji towards abstract expressionism; those “abstract” explorations of human mind through variable combinations of free flowing color patches that characterize his mature work.

Recently, as we conversed at the National Art Council, Uttamji criticized the technique of some of the younger, though well known, painters of Nepal who, in the name of “abstraction,” splash their canvass with a variety of colors and, in the process, allegedly discover their theme through the act of painting itself. “The artist should be able to explain the reason behind his or her painting,” says Uttamji. “Every painting begins with an idea; the artist gives a visual expression to that idea which first germinates in his mind.” Mukesh Malla, one of the foremost art critics of Nepal, on the other hand, contends that such an insistence

upon some “prior idea” makes Uttamji a semi-abstract or a semi-realist rather than a fully abstract painter. “His paintings show an interest in form, and explore a particular “idea” that he expresses through his semi-realist forms. For this reason perhaps it is not appropriate to call him an artist of abstraction.”

Uttamji, however, insists that he has always tried to resist labels such as “realism,” “impressionism,” or “abstractionism.” “Every age brings with it its own school of painting,” he says, “My artistic journey has spanned five decades. I have seen many changes, and have adapted my work to those changes. My own aim has been to keep on trying to innovate, to remain open to stylistic experimentation and influences while at the same time creating paintings that are charged by my own personal vision.”

As I gazed at Uttamji's paintings titled “Feelings,” “Happiness,” and “Love”—all in acrylic—and oil paintings such as his erotic images of the 1960s, it seemed to me that Uttamji's main strength lay in his restless spirit of experimentation. Instead of allowing himself to be trapped within the aesthetic and stylistic norms of specific schools of art he had dared to experiment with various styles that

ranged from figurative realism to abstraction, and with themes that varied from spiritualism and eroticism to the psychological studies of the human mind.

One of the foremost painters of the nation, Uttam Nepali has taken various avataars and assumed multiple identities throughout his career. Born in 1937, Uttamji not only studied art at the college of Arts and Crafts in Lucknow, but also ran off to Bombay to pursue his dream of becoming a film actor, and briefly thought of pursuing a military career. While his Bollywood dream remained unfulfilled, he partially fulfilled his “filmi” ambitions: he was the first Nepali villain on the big screen in “Aama,” a Nepali feature film. In addition to this, he also opened the short-lived Prithivi Art Gallery in 1966 with Max Matthew, an African American schoolteacher. In addition to all this, Uttamji is also an accomplished poet with three volumes of poetry to his credit.

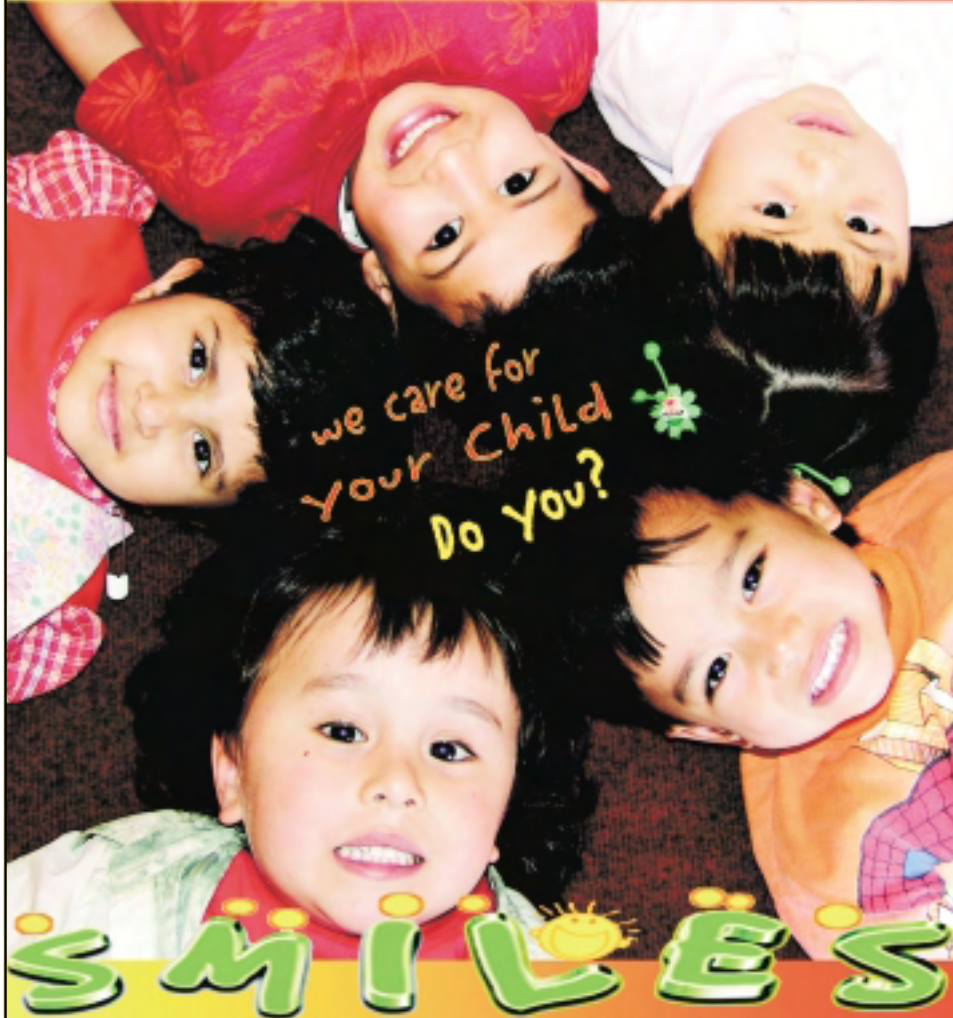
Both in life and in art, Uttamji has adopted a vision that accepts new challenges, and which experiments with both new artistic techniques and the multiple layers of his own personal identity. After all, just like his paintings, the human

mind too contains multiplicities. There are numerous identities struggling with each other within our minds. Most of us suppress some of those identities within us while emphasizing others. In the paintings of

Uttam Nepali's main strength lies in his restless spirit of experimentation

Uttam Nepali, however, those multiplicities acquire a visible form through an intricate play of blues and reds, and yellows and grays. Taken together, his paintings speak to us about a journey; an inner journey within the soul of a person who has kept on pushing new frontiers by perpetually reinventing himself, both as an artist and as a human being. **N**

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Shades of Laughter

A rockin' rebel teacher's story and a genre crossover attempt by an auteur both tickle your funny bone

BY SUSHMA JOSHI

Got a 10-year-old? Imagine what would happen if an impersonator came into the classroom and started to teach him/her rock music instead of math and science? "School of Rock" is a comedy that taps the infinite possibilities of this scenario.

Jack Black blasts his way to rotund comedic greatness as Dewey Finn, a loud, second grade-rock musician who gets kicked out of his band for misbehavior. Harassed by his roommate's girlfriend for being down and out, he impulsively impersonates his roommate Schneebly (Mike White) and gets a job as a substitute teacher. Never mind that it's at a snazzy private school where the kids carry cell-phones and get annoyed when they hear their new teacher doesn't want to teach them anything.

Black finds a mission in life when he notices his charges are musical protégés. He doesn't know math or science, but he can teach them what he knows best—rock music. He rushes out of the classroom and brings in his guitars, setting up an instant band in the classroom. Everybody's assigned a role, and before long they're doing homework on Pink Floyd and the Ramones. Classtime is devoted to the history of rock music. The students follow Black as he leads them through an intricate family tree of rock musicians.

Unsurprisingly, they're in trouble with their parents before a few days are out.

The class project culminates in a Battle of the Bands event. The movie is unrealistic—nobody in their right minds could believe such a scenario could actually take place. Suspension of disbelief, however, is easy with Black at the helm—as he sings and plays and dances his way through the movie with manic energy, shepherding the group of amateur child actors along with him.

True, in Nepal this would be a horror movie, not a comedy. Which upwardly mobile parent who has put his kid in an uppity private school would not see this scenario as the disaster of the year? But the surprising thing about "School of Rock" is the way it takes something as youth oriented as rock music and makes it a family-friendly movie.

The screenwriter (Mike White) seems to be on a mission to create a more user-friendly 2000 version of rock. Drug users are seen as losers, and music is the god that rules. If you want a facemelting, gutwrenching bellyful of laughs, the "School of Rock" is the way to do it.

HAPPY TIMES

Zhang Yimou, one of China's auteur filmmakers, is well known for classics like "Red Sorghum" and "To Live and Raise the Red Lantern."

"Happy Times" might seem like a break from his visually stunning, historical epics, but there is an underlying edginess about the movie that makes it fit well into his canon. The story could easily become appallingly sentimental—a laid off factory worker, a blind stepdaughter, and a plot with a clichéd ending is not the best combination for a movie. The film, however, is salvaged



by the depth of the characters, who are alternately selfish, suicidal, generous, gentle and compassionate to each other.

Zhao, a laid-off factory worker, is searching for a wife who will take care of him. Eager to marry a chubby divorcée, he allows himself to be committed to an expensive wedding. To raise money, he transforms an abandoned bus into a place for lovers who need some private space in the crowded city. Unable to tell his fiancée about his financial status, he lies to her and tells her he manages the Happy Times Hotel. His fiancée corners Zhao into giving Ying, her blind, malnourished stepdaughter, a job at the hotel as a masseuse. Zhao spends a lot of time devising a believable massage parlor for the blind girl with the help of a group of enthusiastic collaborators. Besides the plot, there are other classic moments — the fiancée overfeeds her son, who is grossly overweight and disgustingly bratty. The stepdaughter, in contrast, is barely fed. A scene where the mother pretends to give her ice-cream when Zhao is present, and then grabs it away from her when he leaves, will not seem that foreign to Nepali viewers. "Happy Times" is a well-produced comic tragedy that will resonate with Nepali audiences. **N**



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It's Futbol

Kathmandu's regular nightlife has taken a break—weekly live band sessions have been postponed, dance floors are empty, pool tables have been abandoned, and if you want to find people to hang out with head for the nearest TV at the nearest bar

BY JENNY MAYA

In an attempt to drag my friends out dancing during the weekend, we headed to Subterranea on a mission to get down on the dance floor. Usually somewhat lacking in energy, the place hopping as early as 10 p.m. The music was just what we wanted—a wide variety from techno fusion to hip-hop. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves whether hanging out at the bar or getting their groove on.

Subterranea draws a great mix of locals, expats and tourists all coming together on the dance floor, which is surrounded by comfortable seating for the tired dancer, the observer, or the non-dancer. In the back room, there are three groups of couches for a big assemblage of people who want to hang out, relax and enjoy listening to the music at a lower volume.

As soon as I walked into the club, I found myself on the dance floor. I couldn't get enough of the music. But when I slowed down and looked around I found all of my male friends had vanished.

On a hunt, I found them around the corner sitting on the edge of a sofa filled with 20 other people or standing on the tips of their toes straining to get a glimpse of the European Cup match on TV. We were at a dance club with all this happening music and here were my friends eager to watch the idiot box! And this wasn't the first time that Euro fever had ruined my evening. I remember a friend of mine mentioning that he was going to head home for the Sweden-Italy game... There was no way we could get him to change his plans for the evening. But, another group of friends were very innovative and realized that you could watch the game at pretty much any location in Thamel, so they happily allowed us to drag them from place to place (just as long as the game was on!) But once we arrived at a particular place, talking to them was off limits (unless it was about how slick the last goal was).

I guess Kathmandu's regular nightlife has taken a break—weekly live band sessions have been postponed, dance floors are empty, pool tables have been abandoned, and if you want to find people to hang out with head for the nearest TV at

the nearest bar. You're bound to find a ton of people glued to the screen, hooting and stamping, eyes glued to the screen in rapt attention. And when they raise the roof with their cacophony when a goal is scored you would think that the next millineal new year was nigh.

It's not just the buddies who party with me on Friday nights who are down with Euro Fever. Even my more domesticated friends—those people I could count on to be home when I needed to talk to them—don't want me butting in during prime Euro time. So, like it or not I have had to learn by rote the Euro Cup schedules: I have learned that to call any of my friends after 12:30 p.m. is to commit the mother of all faux passes.

So, here we are in Kathmandu, thousands of miles away from the actual event, with no chance of escaping the world's obsession with futbol. The weird thing is that some of my Nepali friends seem more fanatical about a game where a European country battles another than those in the expat crowd. I have even seen some of them revamp their wardrobes overnight to such an extent that I now know that blue is not a synonym for azure but *azzurri*, fluorescent orange does not mean "Men at Work" but Holland and that it's cooler to sport the red and white colors of St. George's insignia than the colors of the good old Union Jack. These fashion tips and the football jargon I've picked up, like counterattack, 4-2-4, 1-1-4-4, and golden goal may help me melt in among the rabid football crowds in Kathmandu, but I would rather have my Friday nights and my friends back. **N**



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CITY This Week

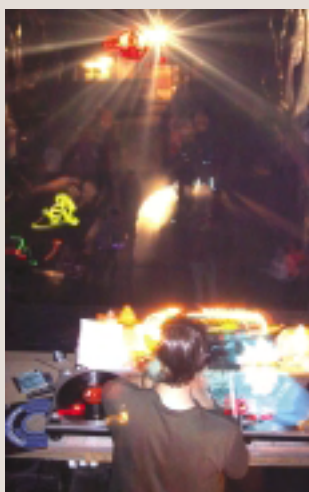
EVENTS

Juneli Spotlight

Enjoy a fun-filled creative evening at the Juneli Bar. Juneli Spotlight is an open stage event. Take to the stage, and bring out the poet, singer, musician, storyteller or comedian in you. Lift your spirits with an up close and personal event. To be on the performers list, e-mail the details to ashesh.sharma@tajhotels.com. Date: July 9. For information: 4256909, ext. 181.

Tantra Lounge

Zone in to a wide range of electronica : Chill Eastern Dub N' Break, Asian Massive Bossa, Drum N' Bass, Broken Beat, Neo-soul. Specials - Hookah and more. At the Tantra Restaurant & Bar, Thamel. Date: July 7. For information: tantra@info.com.np



Summer Drift

Sway to the beat and give in to the heat of the summer. At the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency. Date: July 6. Time: 7 p.m. Tickets: Rs. 600 for gents, Rs. 400 for ladies, includes a welcome drink.

Salsa Workshop

Learn Salsa, Bachata and Merengue. Workshop with Diego for beginners and experienced. At the Salsando Dance Studio, Durbarmarg. Date: July 11 - 16. Registration deadline: July 10. Price: Rs. 1,500. Form Outlets: Ground Zero, Jawalakhel. Moksh Bar, Pulchowk. Tantra Bar, Thamel. For information: 9851068871 or info@partynepal.com

ART EXHIBITIONS

Erotic Drawings

An exhibition by Birendra Pratap Singh. Buddha Gallery Zen Café, Thamel. Till July 10. For information: 4441689

Secret Moments

An exhibition of paintings by Bhairaj Maharjan. Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited. Till July 15. Time: 11 a.m. - 6 p.m. For information: 4218048

ONGOING

Afternoon Jam Sessions

Bringing the best of R&B and House. At Club Platinum, Yak & Yeti Hotel. Smart casuals recommended. Every Saturday. Time: 2 - 7 p.m. Tickets: Rs. 300 for ladies and Rs. 400 for gents, Rs. 500 for couples.

All That Jazz

Presenting the JCS Trio and the best of jazz in Nepal. At the Fusion Bar, Dwarika's Hotel. Every Friday. Time: 7 p.m. Tickets: Rs. 555, includes BBQ dinner, a can of beer/soft drink. For information: 4479488.

Grand Slam Offer

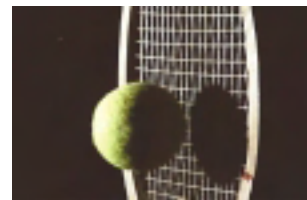
The dual Tennis Court packages a dual delight of tennis plus breakfast. At Godavari Village Resort. Tickets: Rs.444. Prior reservations recommended. For information: 5560675.

At Hotel Vajra

A dance performance of Hindu and Buddhist Gods. At the Great Pagoda Hall, Hotel Vajra. Every Tuesday. Time: 7 p.m. Tickets: Rs. 400. For information: 4271545.

Open Air Party

House, Hard, Progressive and Psychedelic Trance with the Funky Buddha Psy. Club. Every Friday Night. Time: 7:30 p.m. - 6 a.m. At the Funky Buddha Bar & Cafe Free Entrance. For information: 4411991



Film Club

Dark Days is an award-winning documentary from British director Marc Singer. It focuses on a group of homeless people living in an abandoned New York City railroad tunnel. They have built homes in the underground out of scrap metal, plastic, and plywood. They have electricity, furniture, and working kitchens, not to mention community, and the support of each other. Shot in 16mm black-and-white, the high-contrast, grainy celluloid look is not only beautiful, it connects with the life of people on the margins of American society. The sparse, haunting soundtrack by DJ Shadow perfectly captures the sense of otherworldliness that pervades this film.

Watch "Dark Days" at Baggikhana, Patan Dhoka. Date: July 11. Time: 5:30 p.m. Tickets: Rs. 50.





Middle Class Race

The culture of materialism arrived full-force with the upscale supermarkets bringing with them the mall culture of seeing and being seen, the promenade of cars, the lines of causally dressed rich people buying tinned eatables

BY SUSHMA JOSHI

My nephew had his pasni ceremony a few days ago. The five-month old got, among other presents, eight racing cars. The brightly colored, glittering toys were inscribed with words such as: “super,” “powerful,” “top driver,” “police,” “prowl car” and my personal favorite: “conquest.” Racing cars are not particularly indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley, so when they started to pile up I started to wonder why this automobile had taken such a special hold on the Nepali imagination.

You couldn’t trace it back to the influence of television. There are plenty of popular TV shows on boxing and cricket, but there were almost no little cricket bat toys, and no little boxing gloves. So why the racing car?

Since children play not only for fun, but also to acquire skills useful in later life, I wondered if the racing car symbolized my nephew’s future of mobility in the Kathmandu Valley. This is a valley congested with station wagons, cars and motorbikes. Increasingly, these are private vehicles that belong to the middle class. They jostle for space in the tiny roads, trying to maintain their right of way with speed. The lowly pedestrian cannot navigate Kathmandu with a feeling of ownership anymore. Only those with private vehicles, and those who can drive the fastest, driving others out of the way, can dream of surviving the Valley’s hectic roads.

Since toys that build skills were missing—no Lego for building skills, no wooden puzzles for critical thinking skills—I assumed the concern of the gift-givers had not been on building the baby’s future navigational skills. Perhaps a clue lay in the toys’ origins. The majority of the toys (and almost all the clothing) were bought from the neighborhood supermarket, that institution where the aspiring upper-middle and middle-class shop for consumer goods and identity.

When the supermarkets first opened, the meaning of going shopping took on a subtle twist. “We’re going shopping” used to mean we’re going to hang out, check out the shops at Ason etc., and have a gala time. Now it means “We’re going to buy status symbols (at an upscale, overpriced institution where we will spend ostentatiously and buy imported goods that make us look good in front of our neighbors).”

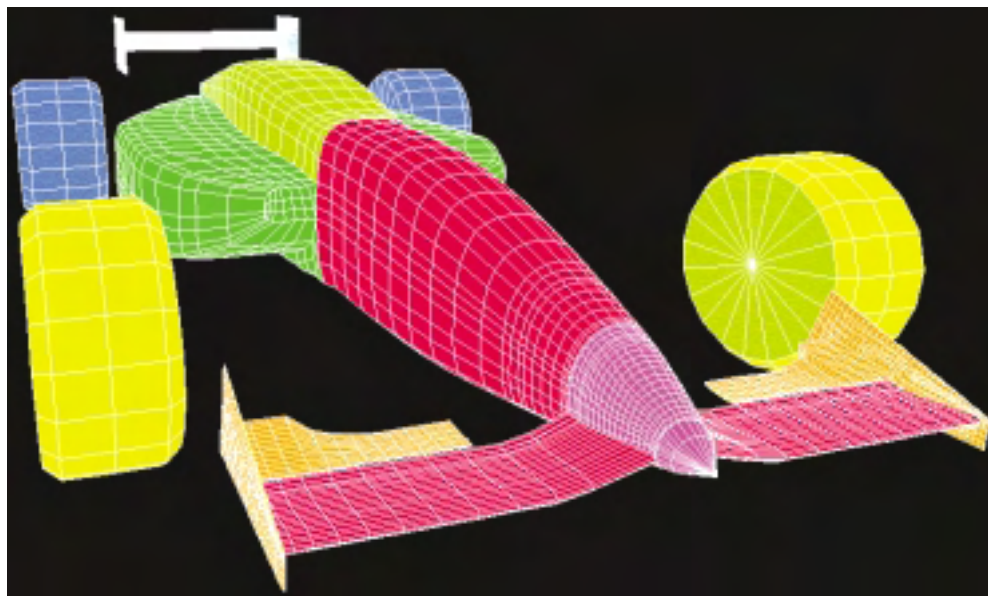
The culture of materialism arrived full-force with the upscale supermarkets bringing with them the mall culture of seeing and being seen,

the promenade of cars, the lines of causally dressed rich people buying tinned eatables.

With the supermarkets also arrived a slew of brand name goods. These goods have the logos of transnational corporations, and the “Made in China” stamp that signifies the new global economy of cheap, liberalized labor. This signification of labor has allowed countries like Nepal to take part in the same consumeristic culture that controls much of the western countries.

You can buy status at these supermarkets. You can buy fluffy teddy bears (with synthetic fiber that is dangerous around an infant determined to put anything and everything in its mouth); you can buy an airplane with a “US Army” logo on it, and you can buy armored trucks with flashing lights and loaded cannons.

What you cannot buy there is a tiny bear, made in Nepal by some unnamed handicrafts industry, made of natural fibers and which does not have any fancy buttons or noses that could detach and choke an infant. It is the safest bear to leave around a five-month old. Ironically, this lone bear of indigenous origins is gifted to my nephew by an American friend.



As a spoilsport aunt, I think one little boy can be happy with a couple of toy cars. My sister-in-law, who has lived in the Valley longer than I have, insists a roomful of toys is the minimum requirement in these modern times.

For the moment, my nephew is still ignorant that a battalion of racing cars and weaponry with U.S. Army logos awaits him in his closet. For the moment, he is happiest with the crackle of wrapping paper, oblivious to the piles of consumer goods that surround and welcome him into the material world. ■

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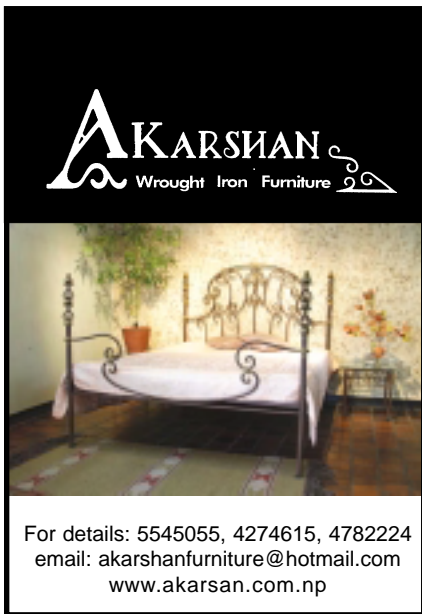
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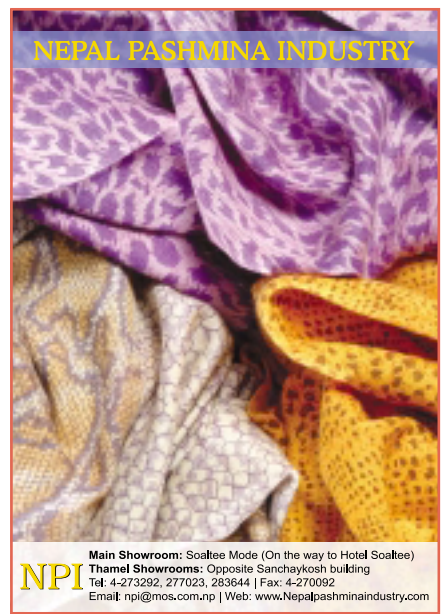
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The Caged Bird Sings

Close friends of Narayan Wagle, Editor of Kantipur, see him more as a travel-writer who happens to be a journalist. By his own admission, his first love is travel and he feels suffocated inside Kathmandu Valley, chasing stories every single day. Some years ago, when he took the executive position as the Chief

Reporter for the paper, a senior journalist who had closely followed his career graph and was well aware of his appetite for travel warned him, “This position will tether you to Kathmandu. And could be the death of the artist in you.” Six years on, he finds himself at the helm of affairs in Kantipur but he has lost none of his passion for either travel or travel-writing, though he now has little time for either. Wagle spoke to **Tiku Gauchan** of **Nation Weekly** of his new life as Editor of Nepal’s most widely circulated newspaper.

What is it like being the Editor?

It feels like I’m working eight days a week. There’s just so much going on. I was in London once and I saw this Beatles album cover with the title “Eight Days a Week,” and I thought, “that’s my song.”

How long have you felt this?

Ever since I took up journalism. I’m more of a wanderer—I love trekking and traveling. I feel like I’m a free bird. I still do go wandering around the country—when the publishers signed me up for the job I had demanded that I be allowed to do so from time to time—but these days whenever I’m away I feel like a free bird with a long leash that’s tethered to the office. I’m constantly thinking about the newspaper.

Do you feel weighed down by the logistics?

That too. We have around 130 reporters. Fifty in Kathmandu and the rest scattered all over Nepal. But the problem is not just about managing the reporters. For example, getting stories about the con-

flict is tough. Both the Army and the Maoists don’t provide much information. And even if we do get details it’s very hard to verify them.

Would you rather be a roving reporter again?

Yes, but that’ll happen later. I am primarily a writer. In fact, I’m working on a novel whose content is largely drawn from my travel experiences. I’d also like try the Pico Iyer kind of narratives. It’s really rewarding being out in the field and I believe that I have learned more from my travels than I could have learned from books, etc. For

The English media is fairer. At least in their political coverage. On the other hand, they don’t write the hard-hitting stuff that the Nepali public wants

example, I was at Namche once where I was interviewing the chairman of the VDC there. As I kept firing questions at him, I noticed that his wife wouldn’t stop crying. Later, the chairman told me that his wife thought I was abusing my power when I grilled him. I realized then how crazy the power representations are in Nepal. The chairman’s wife thought I was putting her husband in the hotseat just because I was an urban bully. I couldn’t have learned about such nuances in Nepal’s realities by sitting in the office.



nm/ss

Aren’t you happy being Editor?

Don’t get me wrong, yes, I wish I was out more often. But I also look at this job as a challenge. These are such exciting times in the media—the situation in the country is very fluid and there’s so much happening politically. I am learning a lot everyday. And I’ve also learned many things about myself which I would not have explored otherwise.

Do you help shape your paper’s policies?

Of course. Kantipur’s largely successful because of the freedom given to the editorial team. It’s a democratic institution.

How do you accommodate the conflicting political views that the situations throw up?

It’s been 14 years since the dawn of democracy here. I’ve been involved with the media right since the early days of the free media in Nepal. I’ve grown up with the changes. I believe one has to be professional about one’s profession and just take it from there.

What’s the difference between the Nepali media and the English language media here?

The English media is fairer. At least in their political coverage. On the other hand, they don’t write the hard-hitting stuff that the Nepali public wants, nor do they seem to have an extensive coverage. But that’s probably because the English media is relatively new and they don’t have a large network of journalists. The English readership is still very small but I believe that in 10 years they’ll be as huge as the Nepali media. **N**

Desaffronizing History

BY BELA MALIK

In *Times of Siege*,” follows the controversy that stalks the protagonist, Shivmurthy, a professor of history at the Kasturba Gandhi University. Shivmurthy’s historical preoccupation is with the ancient city of Kalyana, where, in the 12th century, there lived a poet-visionary, Basava, whose chief claim to attention was his attempt to organise an egalitarian society, which met with the same dismal fate that often attends such efforts. Those who stood to lose by the creation of an equal society instigated a counter-revolution that led to social upheaval and culminated eventually in Basava’s disappearance. Until the opening of the novel, nothing dramatic or noteworthy has happened to Shivmurthy in either his personal or professional life.

Two events disrupt the life of the ageing pot-bellied liberal Shivmurthy. One is the entry of Meena, a 24-year old studying sociology at Kamala Nehru University, who comes to stay at his house. The relationship between Meena and Shiv soon moves beyond that of “ward and guardian.”

The second “incident” that disturbs the even keel of his life is more political. The “Itihas Suraksha Manch,” a hardline Hindu body that lays claim to singular, monolithic truths of its own manufacture, takes exception to a passage in one of the BA history modules on Basava prepared by Shivmurthy. The Manch quite naturally has a vision of a Hindu past unsullied by caste differences. They revere Basava, exalt him to mythical status, and render him sterile so that his radical ideas and politics can be safely consigned to oblivion. The Manch cannot brook Shivmurthy’s history module that has a much more nuanced understanding of Basava. The organisation wants the “offending” booklet withdrawn, amended, and passed by a “committee” of historians of dubious distinction nominated by it.

These two “events” in the mild professor’s life are interwoven dextrously,

and the account delves into the ordeals faced by Shivmurthy. His own uncertainty in taking a steadfast stance is pushed aside by Meena, who helps to organize campaigns against the fundoos (fundamentalist) and munchies (members of the Manch). Events beyond his control take Shivmurthy to arenas beyond his customary ambit. We find Shivmurthy in the make-up room of a TV studio, in a panel discussion with a fundoo bigwig, and at dharnas, rallies and meetings. He now has to take a stand. Somehow momentous events of the recent past that passed Shivmurthy by (among others, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the attack on a Kannada playwright who dramatised Basava’s life some years ago, the attempt to rewrite history textbooks, the assault on M.F. Hussein for daring to paint Hindu goddesses in the nude and the hullabaloo raised over the filming of widows in Banaras) unpredictably knock at his door. In this tornado over the contest of representation of a segment of India’s vast and varied past, the reactions of individuals are brought out with sympathetic realism, and we encounter the usual lineup of strong lefties, waffling liberals, “muppies” (Marxist yuppies), the rightists (in power at the centre) and host of other well-developed characters.



“In *Times of Siege*” is more than a novel. It is a chronicle, register and a journal, with entries that are frighteningly actual. The story picks up precisely the person who epitomised the “it-won’t-ever-happen-to-me” persona,

and makes it happen to him. Shivmurthy is a non-Muslim, non-Christian, non-Communist and he is subjected to harassment over an issue that is seemingly so innocuous as to ever contain the possibility of attracting fundamentalist attention. In the Indian context, it is religious fundamentalism; in other contexts it could be any other closure of democratic space. **N**

STUPID WHITE MEN

Michael Moore’s “Stupid White Men” is an all out frontal attack on the American Right that not only rules the roost in America but also calls the shots around the world. This is Moore’s tirade against that big, ugly special-interest group that he says is laying waste to the world as we know it: “stupid white men.” Right from the get go Moore lunges for the jugular. He lashes out against the “Thief-in-Chief,” George Bush, and then having set the battle tone goes on to unravel class, racism and top-heavy corporate issues that have largely defined the American Right’s agendas. Neo-cons, and neo-liberals, too, for that matter, have dissed Moore as a disgruntled mad man who does not deserve his fifteen minutes of fame. They say his writing is nothing but rants. But for people who would rather not sift through tomes of dominant theories about right-wing fundamentalism and new-age imperialism, his fresh, witty work is a welcome breather. **N**



DUDE WHERE'S MY COUNTRY?

In the follow-up to “Stupid White Men,” Michael Moore is back to ask what he thinks is a most urgent question—“Dude, Where’s My Country?” Moore intends the book to be a guide on how to take back America from the conservative forces in power. Using his trademark brand of confrontational and incensed humor, Moore expresses his bewildered, enraged, yet this time, stalwartly upbeat point of view. Refreshingly, “Dude, Where’s My Country?” avoids being completely one-sided. Moore finds space to praise the Republicans for what they have got right as well as criticize his fellow left-wing colleagues. However brief the mention, there are a few more shades of gray in what is increasingly becoming a black or white world for most people. **N**



Compiled by Yashas Vaidya



A Little Respite

The past one week has been one of huge relief for Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. And to some extent, the nation as a whole. With all their differences, CPN(UML), RPP, NSP and Deuba's own NC(D) agreed on the Common Minimum Program. Though the CMP really doesn't say much in terms of specificities, it holds a huge symbolic meaning: it's a show of solidarity by parliamentary parties (never mind, if all of them aren't on board) at a time of deeply polarized politics.

Still, when we went to press, Deuba hadn't been able to induct the three parties in his government. The UML still appeared unhappy about the power-sharing in the new government and about Deuba's commitment to such fundamentals as complete restoration of executive powers to the people. UML leaders worry that their party has a lot more to lose if the conflict escalates. That is understandable: it has a lot more workers at the grassroots than NC(D), RPP, and NSP. UML's participation will give the Deuba government a decisive edge and it is only natural that the party should look for unambiguous commitment on some fronts from the prime minister in return. With three more parties in the government, the new-look government will enjoy greater legitimacy. And this perceived legitimacy will give the government an edge both on and off the ground in its battle against the insurgents.

It took Deuba more than a month just to reach here. But the fact that he succeeded in putting four parties together at all deserves some praise. It was always obvious that Deuba—or any prime minister for that matter—would struggle to cobble together a coalition during these

troubled times. Already, he has gone a notch above the two previous governments, which started out as appointed governments and never made much progress in being seen as representative governments.

A major challenge now before Deuba is to show that his is a people's government without losing sight of the fact that the King remains a key player in Nepali politics. For his part, the King has a tightrope walk to negotiate himself: he has to allow enough space to the new prime minister without alienating the armed forces. The prime minister needs that space if he is to avoid the fate of Chand and Thapa. If Deuba succeeds in doing what the two failed to do, the Nepali people will still say that the problem lay with the Panchayat



veterans. And a lot of credit will still go to the King.

Last week's common minimum program is only a beginning. When Nation Weekly welcomed Deuba's appointment a month ago, we had made a point and that statement still holds. The days ahead are going to be a test of cohabitation for both the head of the government and the head of the state—they will have to prove to a wary public that they complement each other.

Akhilesh Upadhyay, Editor

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