

JULY 25, 2004 VOL. I, NO. 14

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Letters



“Nepal has a vibrant press, all right, but the vibrancy often deviates”

PETER JAMES

In Your Honor

Honor without reward means little (Re: “In Your Honor,” Gurkhas, July 11). It is good to see a young journalist like Satish Jung Shahi introducing the Gurkha Museum in Pokhara to the readers. But it is more important to highlight the exploitation of the Gurkha soldiers, indeed of martial races from Nepal as a whole, in the British Army.



It is unfortunate that the Gurkhas are struggling to preserve the “status” of their museum and, in extension, their history. If we only could tap the goodwill and trace all the money that is supposed to have gone into the welfare the Gurkhas, we would not only secure ourselves a well-managed Gurkha Museum, but also provide healthcare, education and other services for the welfare of our ex-servicemen and their families. But the big question is: who will bell the cat? While millions of rupees are spent each year in reunion parties, I have to say with great sadness that we could not save the Victoria Crosses of our gallant soldiers for the Gurkha Museum.

YAM GURUNG
RETD. BRITISH ARMY SOLDIER
LALITPUR

All's not lost

Cricket probably tops the list of unpredictable sports (“All’s Not Lost,” Cricket, July 18). You never know when the tides will turn and the Davids will bring the Goliaths tumbling down. The best of teams have had shock defeats at the hand of supposed minnows. We have only to look back at the performance of Kenya in the 2003 World Cup to understand the rather capricious nature of the game. Nepal’s defeat in the last ACC trophy—Qatar playing the spoilsport this time—came as no big surprise to me, unlike what you made it out to be. These things happen in cricket, even with the best of teams. There is no point in unduly criticizing our cricketers; they have been doing exceedingly well in the last couple of years, bar a few glitches now and then. Nepal will qualify, I believe, for the ICC trophy in Ireland next year. Let us continue to support our budding cricketing stars. A year ago, I firmly believed Nepal would secure a World Cup slot for the “West Indies 2007,” and my faith in our team has



not been shaken. Let us not forget, cricket is still in its infancy in Nepal, and it will be some time before we consistently perform well at the international level. We played all our matches on artificial pitches not long ago. Now, we have proper cricketing pitches with first-rate turfs; and, we will boast a cricket academy soon. Besides some on-field disappointments, we have achieved a great deal in a relatively short time. It may, after all, only be a matter of time before we start delivering the goods on the field—and consistently as well. We have always had good bowlers and our fielding has been very impressive. The tough art of batting will take some time to blossom, though. But things are looking up. The players themselves have raised their bar—illustrated by the disappointment of the Nepali captain, Raju Khadka, after the defeat to Qatar—which only bodes well.

I agree with Vaidya on his larger message, though: that all is not lost. The sheer number of cricket enthusiasts makes me believe: outside the 10 Test-playing countries, Nepal has the brightest future. The ICC may have so much in mind in awarding the Asian Cricket Council academy to Nepal. Of all international sports Nepal participates in, cricket is probably the best hope for putting us on the international map. Though football is undoubtedly more popular, let's face it, it will be ages before we make any mark in the Asian scene—let's not even talk about the world stage.

We should keep supporting our cricketers, every way we can. The government should pay heed to the sentiments of commoners and identify more resources for the development of the gentlemen's game in these not so gentlemanly times.

PARAS ADHIKARI
SIMALTAR

Belly or the beast

I agree with Kirsty Fisher that Thamel is just a part of Nepal, and not Nepal itself ("The Belly Of The Beast," Arts & Society, July 4). Tourists flock to Thamel and yet you see them doing the same thing they do back home: spend hours at cyber cafés, talk about western meals while having dal-bhat. It appears that many of them have traveled to Nepal just because

it is much cheaper to be here than back home. They should try to understand Nepal for what it is and not see it through the lens of the guide books.

KRISHNA THAPA
KATHMANDU

It's futbol

The FIRST PERSON column by Jenny Maya "It's Futbol" (July 11) is more appropriate for a magazine of teenyboppers, not Nation Weekly. On the other hand, as a fan of Sushma Joshi, I think her article carried under the column VIEWPOINT lacks a definite point of view ("Middle Class Race," Viewpoint, July 11). Her piece is basically descriptive—her observation of the mall culture and so on. It is more like a first-person account than an argument piece. Her writing could therefore have come under FIRST PERSON instead of VIEWPOINT.

BISWAS POKHREL
KOTESHWOR

Seize the day

The "Last Word" this week had one of your better editorials ("Seize The Day," Last Word, July 18). A foreigner living in Nepal for the past few years, I am not much of an expert on Nepali politics. But I am well aware of the situation that led to the breakdown of the two peace processes. You make a strong case for a roadmap and that it was the absence of one that led to the breakdown of two rounds of peace processes. I am especially impressed with your criticism of the press coverage during the peace process (a belated mea culpa?) and your attempt to see what ails Nepal's media. As you put it, Nepal's media indeed has been part of the problem. You only have to turn the pages of the newspapers to see that their coverage suffers from an extreme degree of myopia, and even anarchy. Nepal has a vibrant press, all right, but the vibrancy often deviates so far that the reader fails to get any perspective. As you put it, "As journalists, are we just writing stories that we want to believe?" I ask this question to all media persons, including you.

PETER JAMES
VIA E-MAIL

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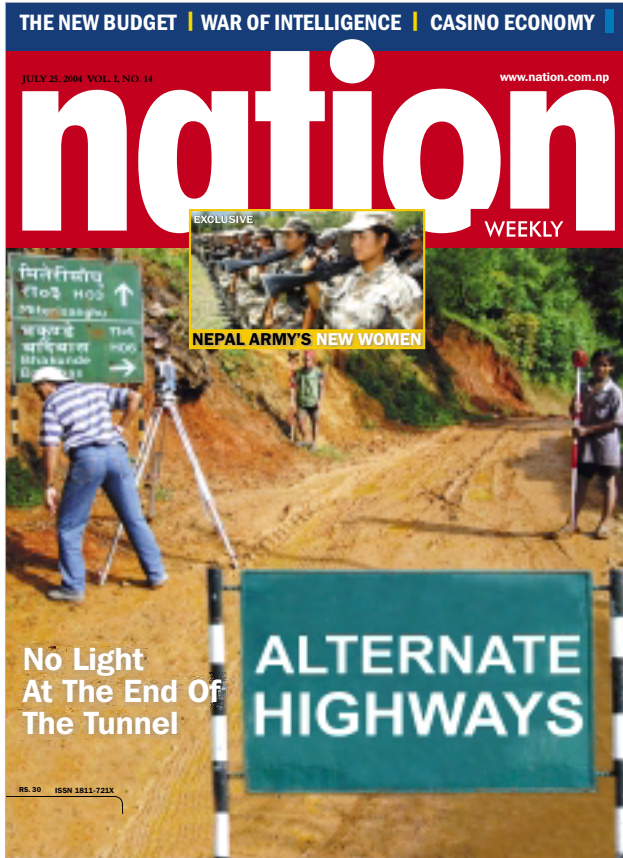
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2111102

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
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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





LITTLE BHANU BHAKTA: Pallavi Bhandari, a sixth-grader of Bhanu Bhakta Memorial School poses as Aadi Kabi Bhanu Bhakta to mark the late poet's 191st birth anniversary

nation weekly/Sagar Shrestha



AIDS In Focus

At the World Conference on AIDS, three issues stood out—all directly linked with U.S. policies

BY SUMAN PRADHAN

For much of the past week, the world's spotlight was once again on HIV/AIDS, thanks to the 15th World AIDS Conference in Bangkok. Several issues pertaining to the deadly virus and disease were hotly debated. Three stand out.

The first is access to anti-retroviral drugs therapy. The second is ABC (which stands for Abstinence, Be faithful, and use Condoms), which the United States is pushing as a means to fight the spread of HIV. And the third is the U.S. government's penchant to bypass international mechanisms. Before we discuss these issues, let us begin with a simple fact: No, there's still no cure for HIV. It looks years away.

Now to the three hot topics. Access to affordable drugs has been a major battle cry for AIDS activists since scientists developed a potent cocktail of anti-retrovirals (ARV) in 1996 to combat the spread of the virus in the body. In Bangkok, "Access for all" was indeed the theme of the conference. The drugs don't cure the disease but help to keep the immune system stronger for long periods and therefore extend productive lives. For these reasons, AIDS today has been a manageable disease in rich countries.

But in poorer countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, HIV infection is largely still a death sentence. That is because the anti-retrovirals are expensive. A year's supply costs well over US\$ 4,000 for a patient, which even in the developed world is considered expensive. This is why governments in rich countries have stepped in to ensure that the ARVs are available to those in need.

In Asia and Africa however the costs of the drugs and the sheer number of infected people has led to much finger-pointing. Poor countries once used to argue that the pharmaceutical manufacturers in the west (who research, develop and market the drugs under brand names) have kept the prices deliberately high and out of reach of the poor. The western companies responded that the high prices reflected the high costs of research and development without which the drugs would never have been developed in the first place.

This debate pitted morality against intellectual property rights, and ultimately led to the rise of the generic drug manufacturers. Generic drug manufacturers produce the same ARVs but they don't put a brand name on the drugs. These are less expensive because the generics don't have to recoup costs of research and development, and rarely do they spend much in marketing.

For countries in the middle of an HIV epidemic, the generics provide a cost-effective way to combat the spread of the disease. India and Brazil, which have a relatively developed pharmaceutical manufacturing base, allowed their drug companies to produce ARVs in bulk. These countries were also instrumental in pushing for a significant concession from the WTO by way of which patent rights on life-saving drugs can be

suspended in case of national health emergencies to allow for bulk generic drug production.

Generic ARVs have been a boon to poor governments. The generics have another advantage: since they don't adhere to patent rights, they can combine two or three different drugs to make a single pill. This makes it easier for infected people to comply with the medication.

In Bangkok, the ARV debate was largely centered around the U.S. government's policy. Having initially fought for patent rights, the United States agreed to the WTO concession. But the \$15 billion President Bush promised last year to fight HIV/AIDS around the world is largely spent on purchasing brand name drugs from western manufacturers. Under current policies, no recipient of U.S. aid can purchase generic ARVs. They have to stick to buying branded drugs.

The issue is important because, though cost of the branded drugs have themselves been slashed (and in some cases distributed free by the manufacturers), they are still expensive. Though the United States has now simplified how foreign generic manufacturers can get their ARVs approved (they have to apply for a review by the U.S. Federal Drug Administration), it still hasn't satisfied the activists because, as one put it recently, "this means the FDA will act as a supra-national body for clearing all generics."

The ARV debate is directly connected to the second hot issue in the Bangkok conference. The ABC campaign—modeled along the successful program in Uganda—is controversial because the U.S. government puts enormous emphasis on A (abstinence from sex) than on C (condom use).

This is a politically-weighted decision, especially in an election year, because the Bush administration has a large religious base to please. Activists want more emphasis on C than on A because they feel A is impractical while C has been proven to halt HIV's spread. The fear among activists is that, putting emphasis on abstinence over condoms merely risks the lives of women.

The third hot topic, again, is connected to the Bush administration, particularly its penchant to bypass global mechanisms.

The prime example is Bush's plans to spend US\$15 billion on HIV/AIDS. The plan, launched in early 2003, pledges to provide anti-retroviral treatment to two million people with HIV, prevent seven million new HIV infections and offer care to 10 million people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, including orphans and vulnerable children in 15 focus countries.

But activists decry that rather than work through the existing global mechanisms, the U.S. plan works unilaterally. They charge that the United States is putting conditions on poor governments who are in need of funds to fight HIV. This is the reason why French President Jacques Chirac castigated the Bush administration in Bangkok by accusing the United States of "blackmailing developing countries into bartering their right to produce generic HIV drugs for free-trade agreements."

This is the AIDS debate in a nutshell. **N**

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All the messages will be handed over to Sangina at an official function, before her departure to Athens.

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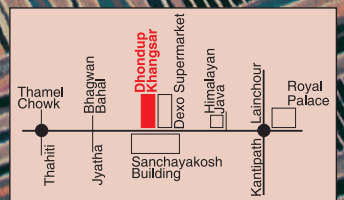
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NSU coup

Nepali Congress (NC) dismissed the central committee of its student organization, the Nepal Students' Union, headed by Gagan Thapa and Guru Raj Ghimire. Both were at the forefront of the "anti-regression" movement and are said to be at loggerheads with the party general secre-



tary Sushil Koirala, who announced the decision. The party formed a 30-member ad hoc committee to prepare for the next NSU convention and elections. Keshav Singh, a Koirala loyalist, was nominated the president of the committee.

Endangered sites

Kathmandu-based World Heritage Sites are at risk of

losing their venerated status. So much was said in a meeting of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee held in China. The warning comes amid concerns that the sites have been constantly eroded due to uncontrolled urbanization. Seven groups of monuments in Kathmandu Valley, including the three Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, with some 130 monuments in total, fall in UNESCO's list. In the meantime, the committee has put these sites on the endangered list and withheld the decision to remove them from the list until its next meeting.

Court refusal

The Jalpaiguri District Court in West Bengal refused to release Maoist leader Mohan Baidhya on bail despite a lower court order to do so. Baidhya has been in custody since he was arrested in Siliguri on March 29. Kantipur quoted Anup Mitra, Baidhya's lawyer, as saying that a petition would be filed at the Kolkota High Court regarding the district court's refusal to release Baidhya. Baidhya is said to be the second-in-command in



CRITY FOR CREATIVITY: Durga Nath Sharma, General Manager of NTV (left) presenting Best Agency Award to Ranji Acharya, CEO, Prisma Advertising

the Maoist hierarchy. Outgoing Indian ambassador Shayam Sharan told the Nepali media, "The Indian legal system is complicated. If produced before a magistrate or law, the law takes its own course. After that, extradition cannot take place unless legal process goes through."

No respite

Dhan Bahadur Bam, mayor of Dhangadi, was shot dead by a suspected Maoist. He was shot while coming out of his office and died on the way to the hospital. His driver also sustained bullet injuries. There have been a series of attacks on heads of local bodies who have been ordered by the Maoists to step down. Harka Bahadur Gurung and

Gopal Giri, mayors of Pokhara and Birgunj, have died in such attacks while the Punaram Pokharel, mayor of Butwal, had a narrow escape.

Skull sale

Human skulls exported from Nepal were seized in Canberra, reported The Herald Sun in Australia. The officers of Fair Trading were quoted as saying that they had found an importer bringing decorated human skulls, said to be up to 100 years-old, from Nepal and selling them in Australia. They were sold as decorative items and serving bowls. The seller had been advised that the sale of human skulls was potentially an offence under Australian law. The skulls are no longer on sale in the market.

Refugee issue

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Prakash Sharan Mahat will hold talks with his Bhutanese counterpart on the sidelines of the SAARC foreign ministerial meeting in Islamabad this week. Mahat, who leads the Nepali delegation to the meeting, will hold talks with Bhutanese Foreign Minister Khandu Wangchuk. About 100,000 Bhutanese refugees have been living in seven refugee camps in eastern Nepal for more than 13 years.

SAUDI ABUSE

Foreign workers in Saudi Arabia are getting a raw deal from the Saudi judiciary, the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) said. Foreign workers—who comprise one-third of the kingdom's population—face torture, forced confessions and unfair trials when they are accused of crimes, it said. There are as many as 100,000 Nepalis in Saudi Arabia, according to unofficial estimates. One such Nepali, Jit Govinda

Maharjan was killed in the city of Jeddah on June 29 in what was believed to be a hit-and-run case. Maharjan had reportedly left his job after



being harshly treated by his employers. The HRW report titled "Bad Dreams" documents the failure of the Saudi government to enforce its own labor laws in the face of significant abuses of foreign workers.

Railway connection

The first cargo train from India arrived in the Birgunj dry port. The train from Kolkata came in with food items sent by the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization. Nepal and India reached a railway agreement last year to make the dry port operational. This latest development has been hailed as a milestone for Nepal's trade. The railway connection would cut the transportation costs, The Himalayan Times quoted the Secretary of Industry, Commerce and Supply Purushottam Ojha as saying.

Chinese reply

The Chinese Embassy said that the verdict sentencing two Nepalis to death have not yet come into force. Ishwori Kumar Shrestha of Sindhupalchowk and Rabi Dahal of Morang were handed death sentences on charges of drug trafficking and have appealed to a higher court. The embassy was responding to a plea made by the wife of Shrestha and human rights organizations, including the Amnesty International. Concerned Nepalis should believe that the Chinese court will take due course making a just verdict, the embassy said, adding their concerns will be duly communicated to the Chinese authorities.

Royal snag

Crown Prince Paras escaped from a major road mishap in Pokhara. Newspapers reported that the prince's car skidded off the road after hitting a ditch around 7 a.m. at Sahid Chowk on July 11. Rumors are rife that the Crown Prince was behind the aerial firing in the premises of the Hotel Everest in the early hours of the day before. He



had reportedly spent time at the Galaxy Disco at the hotel till the wee hours before flying to Pokhara the next morning. The Palace has remained silent over the incident.

Student fees

The task force entrusted to revise the school fees has put the monthly ceiling for the urban areas at Rs. 450 for primary level, Rs. 550 for lower secondary level and Rs. 650 for secondary level. In "municipality areas," the school fees for the same levels stand at Rs. 500, Rs. 600 and Rs. 700. Similarly, the fee arrangements for the rural areas are Rs. 300, Rs 400 and Rs. 500. However the report allows schools some room for flexibility, putting the ceiling 50 percent higher in case where the concerned schools have additional facilities. The taskforce also recommends scholarships for 10 percent of the total student body.

Rain havoc

Heavy rains in Eastern Nepal continued to wreak havoc with the death toll exceeding 100. While the Eastern and the Central Regions remained flooded, Doti in the Far-western Region faced an acute drought. With rice saplings going dry, farmers dependent on rains were wor-

ried that they would lose the staple crop for the season. Only a small number of farmers with irrigation facilities have escaped the dry spell.

SAARC sore

Around 142 private contractors, mostly involved in the face-lift constructions in the Valley during the SAARC Summit in 2002, are organizing a relay sit-in in front of the Department of Roads (DOR) office in Babarmahal. President of Kathmandu Valley Construction Committee Purna Bahadur Tamang told us that the government still hasn't paid Rs. 165.6 million it owes them dating back to the Summit. DOR Director General Madan Gopal Maleku said the payments had been delayed because no budget had been allocated for construction work during the SAARC Summit. He said the payments will now be made through the DOR's own accounts.

Army response

The Royal Nepal Army has court marshaled a soldier who had shot dead a civilian, Rajiv Shrestha, in a road rage incident in Kathmandu last November. Shrestha's car had hit an Army bus. Army officials told us the action was taken in view of the possible use of "excessive force" by the soldier. "It wasn't murder,"

RNA's head of human rights cell Brig. Gen. B A Kumar Sharma told Nation Weekly. "But the soldier has been jailed for two to three months." He said the case did not need to go to a civil court as demanded by the Nation Human Rights Commission as the soldier was in a security operation outside the barracks.



Botched attempt

Ulas Vaidya, an official of the Nepal Electricity Authority, was killed during an attempt by security personnel to round up a suspected Maoist activist, Krishna Adhikari. Adhikari was caught red-handed while Vaidya was handing him counterfeit notes. Earlier, Vaidya had informed the security personnel of the extortion attempt and they had promised him a security cover. Vaidya was hit by a stray bullet when the security personnel opened fire at Adhikari who died amid a hail of bullets. The Maoists later said Adhikari was not their cadre.



BUDGET FOR SALE: Street hawkers selling copies of the Financial Ordinance

NABIL BANK CELEBRATES 20 YEARS OF SERVICE

Nabil Bank, the first joint venture bank in Nepal completed its 20 years of service on July 12. Initially christened as Nepal Arab Bank Limited, it started with its first office at Kantipath in 1984 under the technical service agreement with Dubai Bank Limited.

Today, Nabil Bank has 18 branches across the country. Recent investments in its computer systems and hardware communications now have made it possible for the bank to provide customers access to their accounts and services from any branch. The bank is also in the process of rolling out a comprehensive network of Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs) at prime locations in Kathmandu, Pokhara, Biratnagar, Dharan and Butwal.

The Bank offers Visa Electron debit card, local currency Visa and MasterCard, foreign currency MasterCard, US Dollar MasterCard and foreign currency travel quota MasterCard. On the credit loan side the Bank offers products ranging from customers loans like Auto, Home and Personal loans to corporate facilities to national, regional and multi-national corporations and business houses.

BRAND AMBASSADOR NIMA RUMBA

SUBISU has appointed pop-star, Nima Rumba as its brand ambassador. SUBISU has also launched "Cablenet" becoming the first company in Nepal to provide internet through cable. Users can also watch over 68 television channels over the same connection. The company uses fiber optics technology and provides other facilities like "virtual private network," "video on demand" and "conference vlan." The monthly service fee for daytime users is Rs. 2515 and for nighttime users is Rs. 1315. The speed limit over SUBISU's connection is 64 kbps.



CHINA OUTBOUND SEMINAR

A two-day seminar was organized by Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) and PATA Nepal Chapter on "China Outbound" in Kathmandu. The main objective of the seminar was to disseminate the most updated information on the Chinese outbound market.

Addressing the participants were several distinguished personalities like John Koldowski, Managing Director-Strategic Intelligence Centre, PATA Headquarters, Mr. Tony TSE of



the School of Hotel and Tourism Management of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Mr. Sim Kok Chwee, Director, PATA Headquarters. The habits and idiosyncrasies of the Chinese traveler, their likes, dislikes and jinks which make a difference to their lives were discussed in a presentation "Knowing the Chinese Traveler." Participants also discussed Nepali tourism products. Mr. John Koldowski and Mr. Tony Tse made presentations on crisis management while the NTB outlined its promotional activities in China. Fifty-four participants from the private sector, Nepal Tourism Board and PATA Nepal Chapter participated in the seminar.

TVS-E PRINTERS

Speed International Pvt. Ltd., the authorized distributor of TVS Electronics in Nepal, launched a new range of TVS-E printers. TVS Electronics has offered a two-year warranty on all models of the dot matrix printers. Gartner and IDC Survey 2003 and DCQI Survey 2003 have rated the TVS-E printers as number one in terms of sales and services in India. The company is promoting these printers as being value for money in terms of reliability, technology and prices with affordable prices and economy rate of printing. The TVS-E printers are claimed to be suitable for offices, factories and business houses.

ADB LOWERS LENDING RATES

ADB has lowered its lending rate for US dollar pool-based loans. For July 1 to December 31 this year, the rate will drop to 6.09% from 6.27% per annum in the previous half-year. While the average cost of borrowings during the first half of 2004 of 5.69% per annum was as compared to 5.67% in the previous half-year; 0.20%

per annum of the lending spread was waived. On 29 April the conversion of the multi-currency pool-based loans to Japanese yen pool-based loans was completed. For July 1 to December 31 the lending rate for Japanese yen pool-based loans will be 1.93% per annum as compared to 2.13% in the previous half-year due entirely to the waiver of the lending spread. The average cost of borrowings during the first half of 2004 has remained at 1.53% per annum.

NEPAL SALES MISSION IN SRI LANKA

Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) in association with the Royal Nepalese Embassy in Sri Lanka organized the first ever Media and Tour Operators Meet in Colombo on July 13. The meet organized at the Taj Samundra aimed to develop the tourism ties between Nepal and Sri Lanka and to increase the awareness about Nepal as a tourist destination. Some 75 representatives comprising of top Sri Lankan Tour Operators, media persons and other important dignitaries attended the program. The Nepalese ambassador to Sri Lanka Bala Bahadur Kunwar was the chief guest of the program. Colombo is connected to Kathmandu via India, South East Asia and the Middle East by various airlines at an affordable price. Last year the Nepali embassy in Colombo had issued about 4000 tourist visas. Nepal and Sri Lanka have also identified common products for products and marketing linkages in the region.

NIBL APPOINTS NEW CHAIRMAN

The Board of Directors of Nepal Investment Bank Ltd unanimously elected Prithivi Bahadur Pandé as the Chairman of the Bank on July 13. Pandé who is also the Chief Executive Director of the Bank, was appointed in place of former Army chief, Dharmapal Bar Singh Thapa who resigned from the post in June. Mr. Pandé, will now hold both positions. Pandé, a Chartered Accountant has been in the banking sector since 1978 and started at Nepal Rastra



Bank where he worked for 12 years in various capacities. In 1991, he set up Himalayan Bank Ltd. as a founder member and served as the Chief Executive for 10 years.



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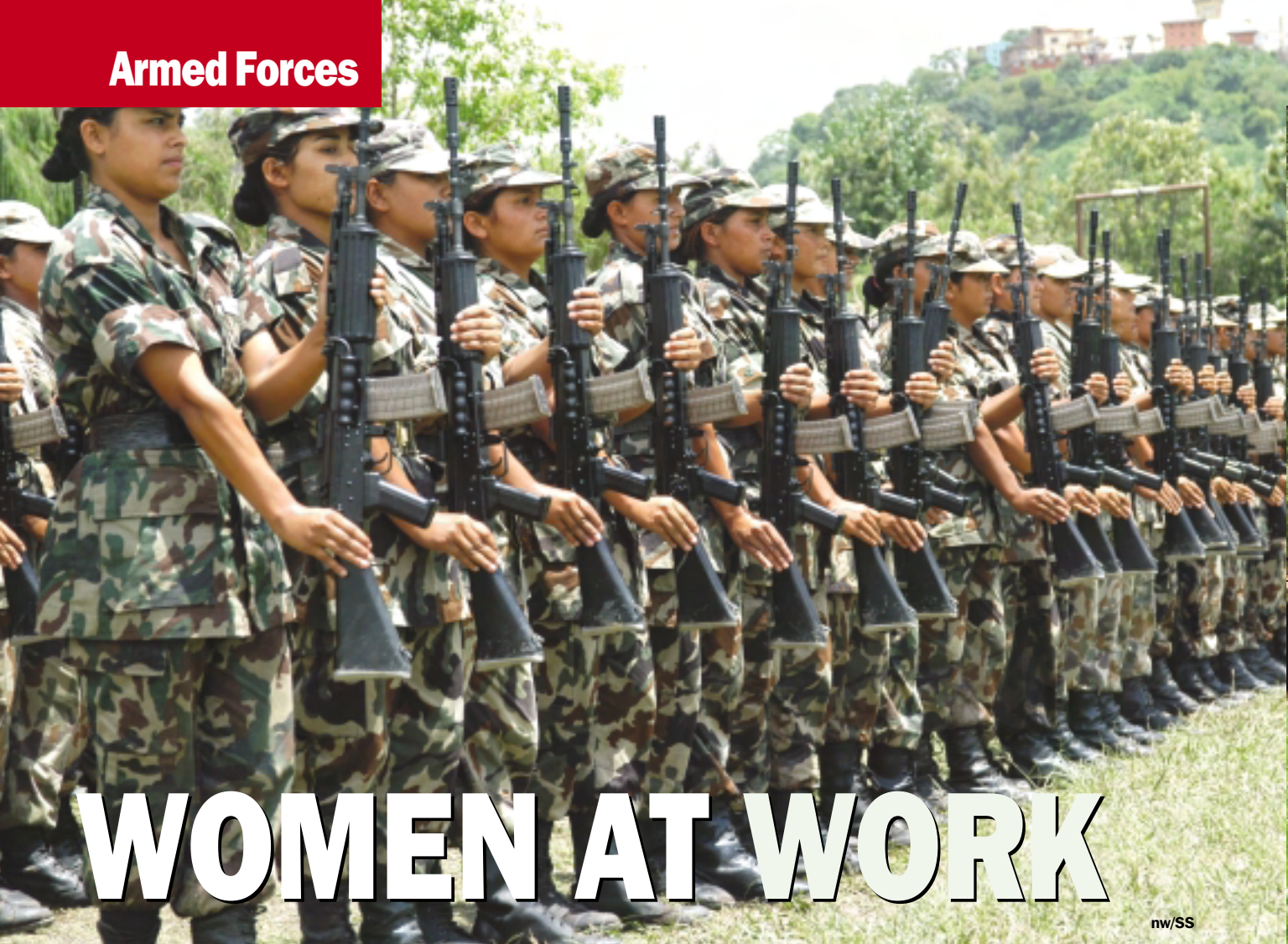
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nw/SS

WOMEN AT WORK

The Royal Nepal Army is preparing to cast off its traditional image by recruiting women into the regular forces. They will do jobs that have so far been handled only by men in green battle fatigues

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI

AT THE BASE OF PEACEFUL Swayambhu lies the well-guarded military base of Chhauni. Inside, the Jag Dal is living up to its name. Jag, “foundation” in English, is the new Royal Nepal Army base for training women for the regular forces, a first for the nation’s largest organization.

The scene in the parade grounds is unique: women in battle fatigues carry Indian INSAS rifles and perform tasks such as crossing the teda-meda (zigzag) bar, climbing a “nine-foot ditch” and doing the monkey crawl. When the Nation Weekly team reached the Jag Dal for an exclusive photo-op last week, the 200 women trainees were practicing the drill for their passing-out ceremony, slated

for July 30. Their five-month training, Army officers say, featured the same full-fledged curriculum—including physical training, weapons handling and military operations—that men have to undergo.

“The women aren’t behind their male counterparts,” says Royal Nepal Army spokesman Brig. Gen. Rajendra Thapa, who was earlier with the Army’s legal cell. The Army first started recruiting women in non-technical field in 1998—a member of the batch, Evita Rana, also of the legal cell, now holds the distinction of being the first RNA woman to serve overseas. She was posted in East Timor last year. But the 200 women currently training in Chhauni are the first batch of all-women regular recruits.

Women’s recruitment in the Army dates back to 1962 when they served as

nurses and parachute folders (in “technical” fields), but this is the first time women are graduating in the non-technical field or, as spokesman Thapa stresses, “the regular Army.” These women will now do jobs that have been handled so far only by men in green battle fatigues. Among them are three “single women,” whose husbands died fighting the Maoist rebels. All other trainees are unmarried and between the ages of 18 and 22.

Chief of Army Staff Pyar Jung Thapa told a military gathering marking King Gyanendra’s birthday early this month that the Army planned to strengthen its women forces up to five percent of the Army personnel, whose number currently stands at around 78,000. Already, new applicants are being screened for the next batch of 250 women, who will start training immediately after the first batch graduates.

Not everyone supports the idea of inducting women in the armed forces, currently engaged against the Maoists. “The decision (to recruit women) emerged from the basic reality of need-



ing more bodies in the fight against the Maoist insurgency,” writes Seira Tamang. Recruiting women for certain positions will enable militaries to free more men to fight, she argues.

According to spokesman Thapa, the current trainees will work as technicians, computer operators, military police, band musicians and drivers. “Every few months you’ll hear that new fields have been opened for women, though we cannot say if women will make it to the battle frontlines immediately,” he adds. The British Army still does not allow women to serve in a combat role in

the armed forces, though the policy is currently under review.

“We have now overcome the psychology that mixing up genders could create problems in barracks,” says spokesman Thapa. “The only problem right now is to slowly build the infrastructure for new women recruits in all military installations. That needs to be tackled phase-wise.”

Senior Army officers say women soldiers will substantially enhance policing as they can body-search women without offending them. Their presence will also assist in ironing out security mat-

ters as Nepalis have been found to be more open to women.

The idea of recruiting women in the Royal Nepal Army didn’t come easily though. Ironically, many say, it was the massive recruitment of women by the Maoists since 1996 that opened doors for women in the Army. The wife of influential Maoist leader, Baburam Bhattarai, herself a NCP (Maoist) central committee member, is on record claiming that women comprise about 40 percent of the party’s militia.

Officials however dismiss any comparison with the Maoists. “The decision to recruit women would come over time,” says spokesman Thapa. “Like any other institution, the Army too has a history that is not possible to change overnight. It was the same case when women first entered the banking sector, and many people perceived it as a negative.” Going at least by the number of applications the Army received—as many as 1,300 for the current 200 seats—the Army officials are positive that’s not the case. Let’s hope it remains that way. **N**

ALTERNATE HIGHWAYS

Both Tribhuvan Rajpath as well as Prithivi Rajpath are now too clogged and risky for traffic, especially during monsoon. Considerable research has been done on alternate highways, but very little has been done on the ground in making them a reality

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI
IN BHAKUNDE BESI

A

S IN EVERY MONSOON, KATHMANDU WAS STRANDED FOR days early this month. Both the major highways linking the capital to the rest of the country were blocked after incessant rains caused landslides in at least three different places. And as usual, vegetable prices shot up as news of the landslides made headlines.

The stories are the same each year: heavy rainfall, landslides, blocked highways and stranded passengers. "It looks as if people in Kathmandu have taken landslides and blockades as part of their daily lives," says Bikram Karmacharya.

He came to Kathmandu from Pokhara on a marketing assignment for his biscuit company, Karmacharya Biscuit, but got held up by a landslide in Fishling for hours. "It's surprising that the government hasn't come up with fresh alternatives rather than just fix broken highways each year."

Continued on page 25.





राष्ट्रिय सडक सुरक्षा बोर्ड
सडक सुरक्षा अभियान
सडक सुरक्षा अभियान
सडक सुरक्षा अभियान
सडक सुरक्षा अभियान

Tarai Will Be Less Than Two Hours Away

Satish Jung Shahi of **Nation Weekly** talked to Madan Gopal **Maleku**, Director General of the Department of Roads.

Haven't we spent too much money on road maintenance?

Proper maintenance is a necessity. Our study shows that if we spend Rs. 1 on maintenance, you will likely save Rs. 2 in something else. If the roads are well kept, you will save time and you are most likely to use lesser spare parts and your vehicles are likely to depreciate even lesser. Road maintenance is like housekeeping.

What are the other alternatives available?

We have already initiated the work of building a fast-track that will connect Kathmandu to the East-West Highway in Nijgaad along Patlaya near Birgunj. The Japanese will be conducting a feasibility study soon after monsoon is over. We have plans to build tunnels at landslide-prone areas. The cost is going to be very high but it will be the most reliable highway and will connect

Kathmandu to Tarai in one and a half hours.

How will that be of help?

It is normal for people abroad to travel up to one and a half hours to work. The Kathmandu-Nijgaad Highway will allow people to live in Tarai, even Hetauda, and come to work daily in the capital. Also, the present international airport in Kathmandu has no space for expansion. The private sector has already been invited to submit their proposals regarding the airport.

What about the existing Pharphing-Kulekhani-Hetauda road?

Half of that highway is just an inspection road built by the Kulekhani Dam. The rest was built by the local VDCs to connect the villages. It cannot take heavy loads and is extremely steep. All that can pass through are vehicles up to mini trucks and that would not be economically viable. The cost to revamp the Kanti Highway is a huge investment amounting up to an estimated Rs. 3 billion.

Is the Banepa-Bardibas Highway going to be of any help?

It is going to help Kathmandu connect to the east and will reduce travel time. But the Kathmandu-Nijgaad Highway is still going to be more efficient as we are talking about vehicles that can ply at an average 60 kilometers per hour along that highway.

When do we get to see the completion of that plan?

It is a fast-track so we would also like to see it completed fast. It might take up to five or six years.

Has the Maoist insurgency in any way affected your work?

It has made construction of new roads difficult in the rural hills, as we cannot use explosives to clear up huge boulders. In some places, we have taken help from the security forces but that is very much minimal.

How do you view the new budget as the head of the Department of Roads?

The government has always made transport a top priority and has allocated funds for the right project. Our job is to create new roads and blacktop existing rough roads. You have to see the road network as key in poverty alleviation. Roads help us with national

integration as well as creating new opportunities for the villagers on innovative businesses such as herbal and horticulture, for example. Roads will also help eradicate social tensions from which the Maoist insurgency arose. I am so far happy with what the government has done, though this could have been done at a faster pace. ■



THE ROAD BUDGET

PRIORITIES: 2004-05: Outreach districts without road connection; complete bridges under construction; implementation projects in the Mid-Western and Far-Western Development Regions; and extending road network throughout the country.

Feasibility study of fast-track connecting Kathmandu to the East-West Highway within four months and begin construction.

Encourage private sector in the construction of tunnel, fast-track, urban road, electric train and rope-way under the Build-Operate-Own-Transfer (BOOT) system.

TOTAL ALLOCATION: Rs. 5.5493 billion – Construction of roads, bridges and maintenance.

STATUS COMPARED TO LAST YEAR'S BUDGET: Increase, by 36.5 percent.

ALLOCATIONS: Rs. 893.8 million – Road Networking and Development Project of Dolalghat-Chautara, as well as upgrading and construction of Belbari-Chauharwa, Damak-Gaurigunj, Biratnagar-Rangeli-Urlabari, Pauwa Bhyanjyang-Phidim, Basantapur-Chainpur-Khanbari and Hile-Basantapur

sections; Rs. 774 million – Complete blacktopping of Gorusinghe-Sandhikharka Road as well as maintenance and upgrading of Tribhuvan Highway, Silgadi-Safebagar, Harthok-Tamghas, Lamahi-Kohalpur, Shaule-Silgadi, Mohana-Attaria and Narayanghat-Butwal sections; Rs. 767 million – Construction of 30 bridges; Rs. 460 million – Sukhet-Jumla Highway; Rs. 362.8 million – Maintenance of total 4000-kilometers of roads under the Road Board; Rs. 245.5 million – Additional 12-kilometers of Bishweshwore Prasad Highway.

OTHER ALLOCATIONS: Trishuli-Shyabrubesi-Rasuwegadi Road and Thankot-Chitlang sections of Ganeshman Singh Highway.

DEAD END

There's no shortage of ideas for alternatives. Officials however are indifferent

BY JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

Are you tired of Kathmandu's heavy dose of pollution, traffic-snarling protests and exploding population? How about commuting to the warmth and open spaces of Hetauda or thereabouts after work? Sounds like science fiction, doesn't it?

Perhaps not. All great projects—the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower and even Singha Durbar—started with bold imaginations. As for Kathmandu, it is clear that alternate highways are becoming a necessity, not a choice. This need is felt acutely each year in the monsoon when traffic on the roads to the capital comes to a standstill for days and the country's nerve center remains cut off from the rest of the country. Early this month, it happened one more time.

"It took me almost three days to reach Kathmandu," says Sandeep Bhandari, a resident of Damak, Jhapa. On July 11, Bhandari had to walk across a makeshift bridge on the Rapti River, near Hetauda, with his heavy luggage and then change over to another bus. It was also a time of heavy rain. Bhandari's experience epitomizes the discomfort thousands of passengers have to bear annually. Are there alternatives?

Experts say there are many. Two stand out: the Hetauda-tunnel link road and the Kathmandu-Birgunj railway project. Although the feasibility studies on these projects were done years ago, lack of proper initiative and policy have left them unexplored. There is also a psychological reason behind this inertia: we fail to look beyond our immediate needs. That goes for our officialdom too.

With the Tribhuvan and Prithvi highways, the only major links between Kathmandu and Tarai, crumbling under heavy traffic and heavy weather, the need for an alternative is strongly felt. "The government needs to decide on an alternative link real quick that would cater to the country's growing needs for not just 10 or 20 years but for 100 years," says Badri Nath Khatiwada, a long-time proponent of the ambitious Kathmandu-Birgunj railway.

However the response from the concerned authorities is so halfhearted that no one be-

lieves that an alternative link will be coming anytime soon. "As an alternative to existing highways, we are exploring the possibility of building either the tunnel link road or a railway line," Tirtha Raj Sharma, Secretary at the Ministry of Physical Planning and Works, told a press gathering last week. There was little discussion on specificities.

Such remarks have been churned out with routine regularity for the last 50 years with nothing to show except grand plans. And now as the clamor for an alternative highway grows, officials have started down another road: seeking Japanese support to bail out Nepal's troubled transport routes. But officials are still undecided as to which option to pursue. "We will let the Japanese decide on the alternative," says an official.

The feasibility study of the Hetauda-tunnel link road was completed almost 10 years ago, by a private firm supported by FINIDA, the Finnish International Development Agency. A private construction company, R.S. International, even submitted a proposal showing its interest in constructing the tunnel link road.

Officials at the Ministry of Physical Planning and Works are however apprehensive about the proposal. A year ago they raised the issue of cost. The estimate for constructing the 65-km tunnel road was about \$167 million then. Although the benefits of a tunnel road, which could cut the distance by more than one-third, are clear, there are concerns about the safety of the tunnel, and its ecological impact. The tunnel passes through an area that is prone to geographical hazards like flash floods and landslides.

Engineers at SILT Consultants, who conducted the feasibility study, put it differently. "If we just stick to the issue of safety, nothing can be done. Maybe the critics are questioning our expertise in tunnels, but let's put it this way: if everyone had become cynical about the safety aspect, perhaps no tunnel would have been

built around the world," says an engineer with the firm, insisting anonymity. He thinks that this is a very lucrative and viable project for private companies. "The rate of return is very high, and private companies would find it interesting," he adds. However, the government officials do not seem to find the project as interesting and the construction is unlikely to go ahead anytime soon.

Senior engineers are increasingly rallying behind another major option: the Bagmati corridor project, which includes a link road and a railway. Both these projects would follow the course of the Bagmati River. Engineers say that the railway is the best alternative considering geological and economic factors.

Infrastructure Nepal, a private consulting firm, conducted a pre-feasibility study of the railway link some 10 years ago. The idea is to build a two-track broad gauge railway line along the Bagmati River to Birgunj, a distance of 135 km. Electric trains would pass through the Bagmati gorge to Thingal, then to Chhatium in Makwanpur, on to Nijgadh and Patlaiya, and finally to Birgunj. The proponents of this project argue that it is eco-friendly, cheap, fast and, to top it all, would cater to the needs of the Kathmandu Valley and the country as a whole for over 100 years. Experts put the cost of building the railway system at around \$175 million, as expensive as the Middle Marsyangdi Project that never got off the ground. NEBECON did a similar study on the road link along the Bagmati corridor.

Although the projects seem attractive, proponents complain about the government's apathy to an alternative plan. A study of Nepal's transport needs reveals that the capital has required an additional highway every 20 years. The requirement will continue to grow: an alternative highway or mass transportation railway system is unavoidable. The longer insurgency and complacency put off the decision, the more expensive will the alternative become. **N**



BAGMATI CORRIDOR: Bulldozers at work on the banks of the Bagmati in front of the Tribhuvan University Gate in Kirtipur

PHOTO: NWS/SS

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Continued from page 20.

Both the 72-km. Kathmandu-Hetauda Tribhuvan Rajpath as well as the Prithvi Rajpath (that links Kathmandu to Pokhara built by the Chinese in 1972) are now too clogged and risky for traffic movement, especially during monsoon. Considerable research has been done on alternate highways, but very little has been done on the ground in making alternative highways a reality.

The Birendra Rajpath, which links the 60-km. stretch between Pharping to Hetauda via Kulekhani, is one such alternative. When the Nation team visited the highway up to Talku in Dudhechaur VDC on a motorcycle last Tuesday, the four meter-wide highway was barely passable, especially the slippery slopes.

"You will meet the pitch road after Indra Sarowar, Kulekhani (23 kilometers) and then follow the rest of the road comfortably till Hetauda," a local resident, Binod Kumar Bhandari, told us. Though occasional motorbikes were still taking to the road, the bikers told us that they were only traveling to adjoining villages and larger vehicles avoided the route throughout the monsoon. According to Bhandari, microbuses charged Rs. 250 for a three-hour ride from Kalanki (in Kathmandu) to Kulekhani last winter along the same route. "There were even a few large buses that plied this route when the Maoists called a banda in Dhading (along the Prithvi Rajpath)," he

said. "But the security forces halted movement of heavy vehicles, saying it could damage the Kulekhani Dam."

Prem Shahi, an engineer with Welink Associates, who was conducting a private feasibility study to blacktop the Birendra Rajpath, said the highway could be used as an alternate route to connect the Valley with Tarai. "It is extremely important, as we do not have any alternative so far," he said. Like others, he has no idea when the potential alternative will translate into a reality.

It's pretty much the same story with the Kanti Rajpath that connects Kathmandu with Hetauda via Thankot. There have been researches on and off but little progress on the ground. And the same applies for a Japanese-conducted survey on the Ring Road-Sitapaila-Dharke (Dhading) highway.

Of all these, the most feasible alternative is the 158-km. Dhulikhel-Bardibas B. P. Highway that is currently being built with Japanese assistance. We drove up to Dapcha Bridge, Bhakunde Besi, some 18 kilometers from Dhulikhel, last Thursday. That stretch of the highway has been blacktopped and

Here's a common refrain: development projects are being stalled due to the Maoist threats

the drive offers great views. The ride was very comfortable except for a number of hairpin bends, which could make it tougher for vehicles to run smoothly both ways. The pitch road continues till Kaldhunga, about seven kilometers further, and the buses ply up as far as Nepalthok 50-km. off Dhulikhel. The highway, when complete, will drastically bring down traveling time between Kathmandu and Biratnagar.

"It is going to open up this place to the outside world," said Haan Bahadur Shah, a resident of Guchataar and nearby Bhakunde Besi, whom we met with a quarter-size bottle of Gill Mary whiskey in a local teashop. "Already people near the highway have started hotel and tea-stall business to make most of the highway traffic." Outside the tea stall were huge weighing machines where the Kathmandu-bound green vegetables were being loaded. "Business is really good since this highway opened," a farmer told us as he was loading his sack of tomatoes, cucumbers, beans and cabbage on a blue Tata pick-up.

Shah, who had just returned from Malaysia where he had worked (he wouldn't be specific) for several years, said that the government had already asked those living within 25 meters of the highway to dismantle their makeshift tea stalls and houses. "I am planning to build a hotel here soon," he said, with an inevitable qualifier, "if the Maoist insurgency doesn't get any worse."

It was a common refrain all through the alternative highways: security concerns are widespread and the talk of development projects being stalled due to the Maoist threats was common. Many recalled how a deadly Maoist attack on a police post in Bhakunde Besi in February 2002 killed 16 policemen and stalled road construction for a long time. Now work has resumed, albeit at a slow pace and the police post houses huge bulldozers and other construction vehicles.

"Our police post is going to be another transit hub like Thankot after the highway is opened," said police Sub-Inspector Sitaram Hachhethu at Koteswor, the entry point to the Banepa-Bardibas Highway. But that will have to wait and chances are that the talk of alternative highways will die down once the monsoon rain dries. Just as the previous years. **N**



NORMALCY RETURNS: On this section of the B.P. Highway in Bhakunde Besi Maoists ran over a police post in February 2002

SS/NU

WAR OF INTELLIGENCE

The Army and APF have helicopters and big guns, but they seem to be fighting the intelligence war almost unarmed

BY JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

IN A BIZARRE INCIDENT LAST Tuesday, security forces mistakenly killed a civilian at Purano Baneshwor Chowk. Ulas Vaidya, a senior official at the Nepal Electricity Authority, had tipped off police that he was meeting a suspected Maoist extortionist. The police were to subdue the lone criminal and take him under their control. But the plan went completely awry. While Vaidya was handing over a pile of notes, most of them counterfeit, the security forces opened fire at the Maoist suspect, who was on a motorcycle. In the hail of gunfire, a stray bullet hit Vaidya. He later died in the hospital.

“It was a grave mistake,” says a police officer. “Vaidya died a needless death. We were tipped off on time and were tailing the Maoist suspect for a while. The sting operation was supposed to be limited to taking control of the extortionist, but we lost an innocent civilian.”

A lot more was lost in the botched operation than an innocent life, it seems. The extortionist, Krishna Adhikari, was apparently a member of a wider network of Maoist sleeper cells in the Valley. (After keeping mum for days, the Maoists on Thursday said that Adhikari was not one of their cadres.) In any case, the security forces lost an invaluable intelligence link to an extortion ring. It was a colossal intelligence failure.

A day later, two unidentified gunmen shot dead a schoolteacher in Samakhushi. The very next day, an explosion in front of the Nepal Telecom office in

Jawalakhel killed 70-year-old Maiya Chhetri.

These incidents and a series of other killings in recent weeks have fueled a new round of questions: have the Maoists infiltrated the Kathmandu Valley; has the long-feared urban warfare started; and, perhaps most importantly, what is the state of official intelligence, key to battling the insurgency?

The answers are, at best, sketchy. There are reports that despite added vigilance there is a steady flow of small arms into the Valley. The Maoists also have developed an intelligence network and function in independent cells. Analysts attribute the Maoists’ ability to sustain the “people’s war” to their organized intelligence. In a guerrilla war, information gathered on the ground by people—human intelligence or “humint” in spy-speak—contributes more to victory than military hardware. Many say the Army and the police are weak in this area. “It needs good [human] intelligence,” wrote Retired General Ashok K Mehta of Indian Army in an article, in reference to the Royal Nepal Army.

A legacy of the past

For many years the Army remained isolated from the people, only occasionally venturing out from the barracks. Although the RNA has recently put a lot of effort into revamping its intelligence network by planting informants and deploying regular army personnel undercover, many say the security personnel are easily recognized and killed by the Maoists. The key failing may be that the Army still hasn’t been able to build much rapport with ordinary Nepalis. “I was able to foil at least three major operations while I was posted in a Maoist hotbed,” says a police officer. “On all occasions, I was tipped





off about the impending attacks by civilians.”

The Maoists owe their intelligence superiority, at least in their strongholds, to unsuspecting children, say those who have experienced fighting the Maoists outside Kathmandu. The Maoists use minors as soldiers, porters, cooks, messengers and informants. Children are more obedient, do not question orders, are easier to manipulate and seldom become suspects in the eyes of outsiders. The Maoists are happily taking tactical advantage of them.

“School children ingenuously extract information from visitors and strangers: they could be informants of either the Army or the Maoists,” says a journalist who recently returned from Salyan. “One has to be careful.” There are also reports of Maoist infiltration into the ranks of the Army, vigorously denied by the RNA spokesman. There is ample evidence that a substantial number of “snipers” with small arms have made their way into the Valley to orchestrate what military strategists call urban warfare.

Urban warfare?

There have been six daytime assassinations in the capital since Prime Minister Deuba took office on June 2. The three recent deaths followed barely a day after a senior security official in the Valley told Nation Weekly that Maoists have overhauled their special task force (STF) in the Valley and may launch a wave of assassination bids.

A security source estimates vaguely that up to 300 STF members might have infiltrated the capital. The Maoists may have a plan of hit-and-run attacks in the capital. They may target VIPs and those belonging to the security wings. Even politicians are at risk, especially those tainted by charges of corruption, the source claims, which will give them a messianic dimension. Last year, the Maoists had prepared a hit-list of 217 VIPs. Some of them were assassinated, most prominently the chief of Armed Police Force (APF), Krishna Mohan Shrestha, and his wife Nudup Shrestha.

There are other soft targets that the Maoists may try to attack. Tax offices; Indian-affiliated multi-national companies; embassies, especially American, Indian and British; the airport; telecom-





nw/SS

munication towers; and water reservoirs could be high-priority targets for sabotage, officials say. But the officials concede their intelligence is sketchy and could even be speculative.

Conflicting conclusions

Security forces and civilian experts disagree on what this all means. An official familiar with the situation describes the new pattern as just a “seasonal variation” in the Maoists’ tactics. During the monsoon it becomes nearly impossible to protect logistics and weaponry in the jungle, he says. “This is what is forcing them to shelve their plans for high-profile attacks.”

Brig. Gen. Rajendra Thapa, the Royal Nepal Army spokesman, believes the Maoists are merely engaged in a psychological warfare because they are not in a position to deliver a major “shock-and-surprise attack of Salleri and Bhojpur proportions.” He contends that the Maoists have been seriously debilitated by the Army in the post-emergency period but adds with a note of caution, perhaps for his own men. “The Maoists are weak now, but it would be sheer stupidity to think that they have been eliminated.” He thinks that the Bhojpur and Beni attacks were desperate attempts to show that they are still strong, when in fact they are not.

Professor Indrajit Rai, a military analyst, holds a different opinion. He believes that Maoists are under intense psychological pressure not to launch any major offensive because of the possibility of peace talks and the arrests of top-level leaders such as Mohan Baidhya, alias Kiran, and Matrika Prasad Yadav by Indian authorities.

“No doubt their strategic balance has been disturbed,” says Rai, “partly because

the government has started rehabilitation programs and initiated a psychological operation of its own and partly because the Indian government has arrested many top (Maoist) leaders.”

Rai adds, “The Maoists also have a genuine desire to talk. They want to come to the table with some sort of third-party mediation, preferably the United Nations. For this reason they think that large-scale bloodshed may harm the environment for talks.”

Other observers however believe that the Maoists are now trying to tilt the asymmetrical war in their favor by escalating hit-and-run tactics like landmines and assassinations. The idea is that these tactics will inflict heavy damages on the opposition while the Maoist will suffer little. In the last six years more than 500 people have lost their lives in landmine explosions. The dead include security forces and civilians. “In a guerilla war the insurgents have an upper hand,” says a retired army officer.

The military establishment realizes this. “There are 11 infantry brigades and seven specialist brigades. Most of them are engaged in Kathmandu or committed to safeguarding city centers and other installations in district headquarters. Only a small force is available for search-

and-destroy missions. The Army is stretched thin to contain the insurgency,” says a senior RNA official.

Some Indian military analysts have often alleged that the Maoists receive funding and training from foreign intelligence outfits. Rai says he has no knowledge of such links but believes “underworld links” can’t be ruled out. “Since the Maoists have already made a name for themselves in the underworld by sustaining the insurgency for eight years and more, there is always a possibility that other underworld organizations as Al-Qaeda may be looking to have a tie-up with them,” he says.

An RNA official says the Army has no information of the Maoist tie-ups with either state intelligence outfits or Al-Qaeda, adding, “They are tied up with the Revolutionary International Movement and regional organizations like the Peoples’ War Group and the Naxalites in India are helping them.”

In the insidious war of intelligence, the security apparatus seems to be armed with little more than vague information and conflicting analyses. And unless it overhauls its system and relies more on human intelligence than gizmos and gadgets, the security forces will continue to miss opportunities, and the threat of urban warfare will increase. **N**



nw/SS

Political Logjam

If all agree on the agenda of constituent assembly without any pre-condition, the prospects of ending the logjam are clear

BY LOK RAJ BARAL

Quirks of history and systemic evolution are two different aspects of development. History and politics have a tendency to converge when the country's environment is shaped by turn of events, idiosyncrasies, personal motivations bereft of minimum ideological content. Unprincipled political actors—kings and politicians—perennially influence the Nepal politics, and trajectory of history is in tandem with the latter. Even if party politicians swear by principles, they fall prey to the ambition of monarchs. The post-1990 politics of Nepal has witnessed the continuity of history that was characterized by high degree of opportunism, compromise of values and personal aggrandizement.

Party leaders whose political incamation started with the extreme radical movement have now reincarnated themselves as eulogizers and courtiers. As a result, rampant aberrations in public life and breakdowns of established institutions, indicating no future direction, are being observed.

Such developments and political uncertainty have not only provided breeding grounds for the Maoists, whose mission is to transform the existing conditions into a qualitatively different order, but have also worked for more radicalization of others, who have lost their faith in empty promises and slogans. This loss of faith can be attributed to the fact that promises are easily forgotten soon after the politicians are in power. And it is reflected in the current political impasse as well.

Why the political logjam remains unattended needs to be probed at greater depth. The recognition of power centers—the monarchy, the

Maoists and the parliamentary parties—and the failure of political parties to prepare a common roadmap have helped to put a lingering shadow on the progress of Nepal. On the one hand, they harp on the balance of power theory between the three forces, but their public posturing and various lists of demands contradict their action. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990 was based on the theory of compromise between the King, the Nepali Congress and some parties that were involved in the movement for the restoration of multiparty system in 1990. And the political forces seemed to have once more given the benefit of



doubt to the King that he would henceforth behave as a constitutional monarch. However, the later developments proved that the King was not reconciled to changing his role to a constitutional monarch, but on the contrary it was an immediate tactical move of the King for accepting the politics of compromise. The late King Birendra had shown his displeasure with the constitutional arrangement that he defied during the course of implementation of the constitution. And King Gyanendra accomplished the task of asserting monarchical power on October 4, 2002, reminiscent of 1954 that had exalted the position of monarch vesting all powers with the King.

In England, controversies have arisen about the constitutional discharge of royal functions but they remain procedural, merely legal wranglings. The constitutional head is not expected to be a usurper of power as his/her powers and functions are well defined by conventions.

The British model of parliamentary system can only be replicated to a certain extent in Nepal. In Britain, the struggle for rights and democracy came from above, while the struggle for democracy and freedom in South Asia was germane to the lower level. The Nepali democratic struggle has some variations because of the country's non-colonial background making

the native Rana regime the target of the movement. The participation of the monarchy in the anti-Rana movement could camouflage the later democratic developments that gradually sidelined the key role of parties from mainstream power politics. On the contrary, the King came to the center-stage turning other political actors into the pawns on the royal chessboard.

Such a situation continues today with political party leaders playing a game of musical chairs of power. The slogans and protests against the rising Royal power, or what they call pratigaman (regression), are thus feeble yielding no effective result. The anti-regression movement launched by these par-

ties is not yet clear about its own roadmap or the future model with these parties failing to identify a few key elements crucial for future essence of democratic progress.

Nonetheless, the four-party alliance now agitating against regression needs to be clear about—(1) how they make the movement effective and with what new agenda of democratization? (2) how is it going to open dialogue with the Maoists whose demand of constituent assembly is now accepted by most political parties? (3) what modus operandi do they accept for ending the present crisis? The nagging problem is of the armed guerillas—the source of Maoist strength, which, ironically, remains to be problematic for unarmed political parties. Armed to the teeth, the Maoists have to assure the pro-change political parties that they can indeed work together for bringing about a qualitative transformation from the existing regressive and “status quo”-ist regime into a vibrant democratic system protected by the empowered people. If all agree on the agenda of constituent assembly without any pre-condition, notwithstanding the pressure on them for sticking to the politics of status quo, the prospects of ending the logjam are clear.

Given the mindset of the politicians and the efforts that will be made by the regressive forces to sabotage the prospect of constituent assembly, it will not be easy to accomplish the agenda. The existing power balance between the King, the Maoists, and the political parties would work against it unless the popular forces—the Maoists and political parties polarize themselves for changing the status quo. For this to happen, the Maoists should convince that they would not betray the cause of pluralist democracy along with an agreeable solution to the issue of armed guerilla forces. The laying of down arms and peaceful struggle by all the democratic and progressive forces alone would create conditions for peaceful democratic change and stability. **N**



PATCHWORK GREEN

Conservationists have pushed the idea of Community Conservation Areas for some time now. Why is this all the more relevant today?

BY SAMUEL THOMAS

ONE OF THE MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS from the World Parks Congress held in Durban last year related to community conserved areas. It can be summarised under two points. One, that certain areas have long been managed by communities, and that these areas are under threat today from centralized political decision-making processes. Two, that these systems can be revived so that conservation addresses the interests of the people who depend on these resources the most, and that conservation management takes into account local knowledge and skills rather than imported ideas and conservation models.

The idea of Community Conservation Areas emerges from the manner in which biodiversity “hotspots” and other representative landscapes have been protected often at the expense of communities that have enjoyed customary access and use rights for centuries. In that very fundamental sense, they are therefore more than just another conservation category. The role of communities in conservation and sustainable natural resource management, often based on customary tenure systems, norms and institutions, has been recognised by various other international conventions dealing with environment and human rights. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) for instance stresses on biodiversity-relevant knowledge, skills, innovations, and practices of communities, and the draft Declaration of the





Rights of Indigenous Peoples acknowledges the right of such peoples to control and manage their territories. The World Parks Congress recommendation 5.26 put it rather straight: “A considerable part of the earth’s biodiversity survives on territories under the ownership, control, or management of indigenous peoples and local (including mobile) communities. However, the fact that such peoples and communities are actively or passively conserving many of these sites through traditional or modern means, has hitherto been neglected in formal conservation circles.”

Now, link this with the current network of

protected areas in the country, both in terms of ecosystem network and representation and community involvement as an integral part of the decision-making process.

The Nepal Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan (NBSAP) is explicit about the under representation of ecosystems in the existing PA network: “The most effective way of maintaining biological diversity is to protect a representative array of ecosystems. Therefore, a network will be designed to represent all ecosystems in Nepal with particular emphasis on: (i) tropical evergreen forests, (ii) far-eastern subtropical forests, (iii) lower temperate broad-leaved forests, and (iv) subtropical broad-leaved forests located in the west of the country. These forest types would be best represented in the districts of Kaski, Lamjung, Tanahu, Lalitpur, Udayapur, Taplejung, Sankhuwasabha, Bhojpur, Terathum, Dhankuta, Ilam, Morang, and Jhapa, which have a rich biodiversity, especially of mammals and birds.” By the government’s own admission more areas need “protection.”

Take for instance the Tinjure Milke Jaljale area, the junction of three eastern hill/mountain districts—Taplejung, Terhathum and Sankuwasabha. This area provides a natural niche for dozens of rhododendron species—mixed to pure stands of over 28 species and a host of other plants and animals. A community conservation area was proposed for this area in the mid-90s, (covering 16 VDCs, 3 districts) linking with the Kanchanjunga Conservation Area to the northeast, and the Makalu Barun National Park and Conservation Area to the northwest. According to the French botanist Rene de Milleville, author of “The Rhododendrons of Nepal,” Milke *danda* has what are “arguably the largest rhododendron forests in the world.” Given that this area is part of one the largest transboundary and landscape corridor efforts—with Qomolangma in Tibet and Sikkim and Bhutan—the corridor integrity of the area is important to preserve, even as an outlying corridor area. Nearly a decade later that idea of a community conservation remains just an idea.

Given that there are ecosystems underrepresented in the Protected Area (PA) network, and given the emerging global and local realities in terms of environmental governance, what are the options before Nepal?

Protected areas in Nepal have mostly been managed under strict protection regimes, and in the last decade there have been some efforts at co-management. However, they still are a far cry from community conservation areas in the true sense: in terms of subsidiary, in terms of devolution and local autonomy, in terms of local environmental governance, in terms of conserving local ecological knowledge, skills and practices, and in terms of costs and benefits sharing. Nepal is considered a world leader in involving communities in the management of forests and this model of community forestry evolved over a two-decade long period of refining policies, rules and regulations, and engaging with ground realities. The idea of the Community Conservation area then argues for taking this success forward, as a progressive next step in local environmental governance. The Local Self Governance Act (LSGA) clearly pushes for

decentralised environmental governance. The National Biodiversity Strategy too calls for “strengthening the involvement of local and indigenous people in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.” In other words, the idea of community conservation areas sits well with stated country priorities.

At the local level community conservation has to do with decision-making and the sharing of costs and benefits, essentially changes in the structures of power governing the management of natural resources that affect equitable cost and benefit sharing. Admittedly, costs and benefit sharing in the existing PA system is skewed. And part of the reason for advocating this shift is the failure of the system in place to deliver equity in real terms to people who usually lose from delineation and management of conservation areas. What the WPC did recommend among other things was that governments “promote a multisectoral process for recognizing, enlisting, evaluating, and delisting CCAs; recognise and promote CCAs as a legitimate form of biodiversity conservation, and where communities so choose, include them within national systems of protected areas, through appropriate changes in legal and policy regimes.” It also calls upon governments to ensure “that official policies, guidelines, and principles, recognise diverse local (formal or informal) arrangements developed by communities on their own or in collaboration with other actors, for the management of community conserved areas.”

The alternative model that therefore emerges is one that engages with and corrects the mistakes of the past, that addresses issues of how traditional knowledge and skills associated with conservation are integrated into PA planning and implementation, that access and benefit sharing issues are addressed, that customary rights issues are addressed and that the future of conservation is a diverse network of protected ecosystems that have “interest-based rights” at their core. The diversity of ecosystems and peoples demands a diversity of governance types if it is to be relevant at all. A patchwork green. **N.**

WALKING THE TIGHT ROPE

It was never going to be an easy budget. The Finance Minister made compromises on all fronts—and with all political players—and ended up presenting a run-of-the-mill document that lacks much imagination

BY B. L. NARAYAN

FOR BHARAT MOHAN ADHIKARI, his second budget speech, delivered last week required tightrope-walking skills of the highest order. Not only is the country going through a grave phase in its history, but there were also political pulls and pressures from all directions: the coalition partners, the Army, the Palace, and from his own party, the CPN(UML), which was keen to use the budget to score political points over its rivals. In the end, the Finance Minister produced a budget that may not upset anyone but that is also unlikely to significantly change the state of affairs in the country.

In a way, there is little he could have done anyway, faced as he is with a situation where the capacity of the government to affect the lives of people has been fast receding.

On the one hand, government activities that better the lives of people have been steadily decreasing. Development expenditure has more than halved from over 13% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in FY1991 to about 6% in FY2004. Spending in education and health has stagnated. This is no doubt due in large part to the security situation and political instability but the government inertia and inability to adapt to the changing scenario have also been contributing factors. To effectively deliver development assistance, many bilateral donors have entered into agreements with the Maoists—a grim reflection of the fact that the government writ does not run outside too many district headquarters.

On the other hand, the government has been spending more and more on its own upkeep. Regular expenditure has doubled from 6.5% of the GDP in FY1991 to 13% in FY2004. Security expenditure has taken a disproportionate share, in-

creasing from about Rs. 4.1 billion (1.6% of the GDP) in FY1996 to Rs. 15 billion (3.1% of the GDP) in FY2004 while increases in salary and burgeoning debt servicing requirements have also added to the burden. This crowding-out effect of security expenditure on government development spending is exerting a significant negative impact on the development of physical and human resources. This will reduce the stock of human and physical capital and depress the long-term economic growth of the country.

With regards to debt, sins of the past seem to be catching up with the government. While the country's debt stock has piled up over the years, their inefficient use has meant that they haven't done enough to sufficiently increase the size of the economy. Debt servicing expenditure as percentage of total government expenditures has, thus, increased from 11% in FY1991 to 20% in FY2004. It could soon assume alarming proportions in absence of strong economic growth.

In this backdrop, Adhikari has proposed a budget outlay of Rs. 112 billion. Of this, Rs. 32 billion has been allocated for capital expenditure while Rs. 68 bil-

lion for recurrent expenditure. Despite earlier commitment to the contrary, Adhikari has failed to control recurrent expenditure, which is estimated to rise by 19%. Going against party line, Adhikari has desisted from making cuts to the Rs. 330 million allocations for the Royal family; allocations for the Royalties are nearly three times the level in FY2002.

As such, there is just a 10% increase in security expenditure over the amount allocated last year but this does not preclude the possibility of an increase later in the year. A relatively large Rs. 9.4 billion allocation for miscellaneous items means additional funds could be diverted to security spending. Last year the Army spent 17% more than what was allocated to it in the budget.

The government is also reported to have been keen on a salary hike for civil servants but its attempts were stymied by the International Monetary Fund, which was insistent that the government should not incur additional liabilities without increasing its revenue. Even without the raise, the government will be spending nearly a quarter of the total budget on salary and other benefits for its employees.

The budget proposes a revenue target of Rs. 70 billion—13% higher than the revenue receipts last year. Revenue collections have grown by an average of 9% over the last five years, reflecting government efforts to reform customs administration. Nepal's government revenue at 12.8% of the GDP remains the second lowest in South Asia—much too low to meet the development needs of the country. For revenue collections to reach satisfactory levels, the government needs to allocate more resources to modernization of tax administration through widespread computerization, including electronic filing, better data processing and mining. It is also equally important to establish a rigorous penal and enforcement mechanism to address tax evasion.

The foreign grant receipts of the government are projected to grow by almost 50% from Rs. 11 billion to Rs. 17 billion

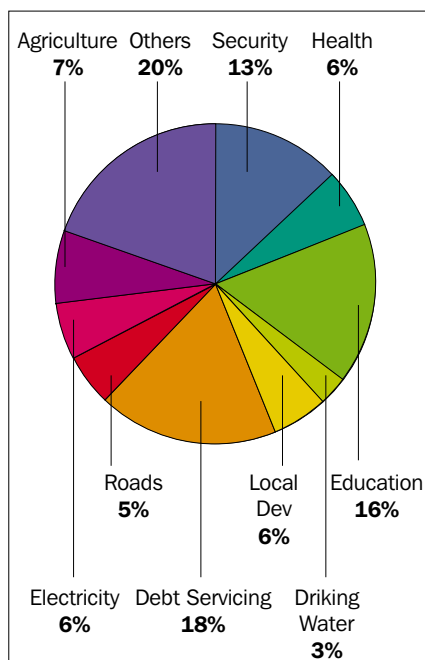


SS/MJ

but the fiscal deficit is still estimated at 5.3% of the GDP, up from 3.9%. Two-thirds of the deficit will be financed by foreign loans while the remaining amount will be financed by domestic loans.

One of the major thrusts of the budget and one that carries the stamp of Adhikari and his party is in the area of education and health. Adhikari has proposed an increase of 25% in the education budget and 50% in the health budget over last year. Well and good. The difficult part, however, is going to be to ensure productive absorption of the planned outlay, especially in view of the conflict situation in most parts of the country. More money for education and health may not necessarily mean more education and health unless delivery mechanisms are improved. In this regard, the budget's proposal to speed up the handover the management of more and more schools and health posts to communities and local bodies could help improve the efficiency of these investments.

In a bid to live up to its billing as the "peace budget," the new budget also proposes the establishment of a peace secretariat, allocates funds for relief and re-



habilitation of the victims of the conflict, reconstruction of social and economic infrastructure destroyed in the conflict, and "participatory" development and construction programs. However, the Rs. 1 billion allocation for these activities is just a drop in the ocean given the magnitude of the work at hand. The allocation reveals both the low expecta-

tions of the government in this regard as well as the fiscal constraints it faces.

The budget also pledges to move ahead with a slew of, mainly donor propelled, economic and social reforms and projects, which have been gathering dust for the last several years due to the conflict and political instability, and the lack of initiative on the part of the government. The most prominent among these are promotion of investments on Build-Operate-Own-Transfer basis, construction of a fast-track to link Kathmandu to Mahendra highway, land reforms, scholarships to women and minority groups, establishment of special economic zones, promulgation of economic laws, and privatization of public enterprises. Given past history of non-performance in these areas, there is little reason to hope that much progress will be made on these fronts.

Overall, the budget is lacking in novelty. It disappoints in adopting a run-of-the-mill approach and its inability to propose "out of the box" solutions to challenges facing the country. Perhaps, Adhikari just wants to keep all political players happy by not rocking the boat. If that's the case, he has succeeded mightily well **N**.

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FIRST PERSON

A Woodcutter Who Dances

BY SANJEEV UPREY

Natwar cuts deep into the body of a fallen log with the sharp blade of his axe. His body is drenched in sweat and he is breathing hard. Oblivious of the villagers who are calling his name, Natwar—also known as Nattu around the villages of Sanischare and Arjundhara in Jhapa—is consumed by a singular passion: to break the entire pile of brown logs before him into small pieces of firewood.

One of the villagers tells me that Nattu has two major interests: to go around the village performing his traditional Tharu dance and to cut wood, a task for which he is often summoned by the more affluent among the village folk. The head of the household whose firewood Natwar was cutting explained to me, however, that Natwar only cuts wood when he feels like it. “I sent repeated messages to him over the last week, asking him to come over and cut my wood. But Nattu never came. I only saw him this morning after I was awakened by the sound of the axe smashing against the wood. I came out of my bed-

room to see where the sound was coming from ... and lo! ... There was Natwar Tharu cutting wood in my backyard without speaking a single word.”

All attempts to convince Natwar to take a break proved futile. He neither talked nor showed any interest as I snapped my camera a few times to capture the image of this man with a mission. Another villager explained that Natwar goes into some kind of a trance while cutting wood and also when he dances. “With his earrings bobbing up and down Nattu makes a spectacular sight for the eyes when he dances,” he said. “Children and grown-ups from the neighborhood gather to see him dance.”

The old villager further explained that Nattu is extremely obstinate and irrevocably fixed in some of his habits. For example, he never rides a bus or a taxi, and prefers to run all the way from Birtamod in Jhapa to this Tharu village near Lahan, Morang during his annual trip to the village of his ancestors. It takes him about five days or so to complete his marathon run. After spending a fortnight with his friends and relatives, Nattu takes to the roads again, and runs with a slow rhyth-

mic motion back to the village of Sanischare, in the foothills of Jhapa, where he has spent the last 10 years of his life dancing, cutting wood, and of course running around.

A middle-aged woman told me about another one of Nattu’s eccentricities. “Nattu prefers to be paid in coins rather than in paper money,” she said. “He carries all of his coins in a cloth-bag and loves to listen to their jingling sound.” One of his favorite pastimes is to take out all of the coins, count them, and put them back into his bag. He does it several times during the day and also before he sleeps. Despite the fact that he is sometimes cheated by those

who pay him in coins, Natwar still prefers the solidity and substantiality of metal rather than the seemingly fragile paper money.

Lunchtime arrived. Natwar finally laid aside his axe and opened a paper bag of red chilies. Those he mixed liberally with his meal of rice, vegetables and dal served by the lady of the house. He spent the next 10 minutes eating his food with the same single-minded dedication and gusto that he had displayed during the cutting of wood. Then he sat back satiated and spoke for the first time—to scold his hostess. “Make sure you cook a kilo of roasted meat for tomorrow,” he said. “How can a diet of vegetables and dal support a hardworking man like Natwar?” he said referring to himself by his first name, another one of his oddities. “Why don’t you get married Nattu?” she retorted back. “Your wife will cook you delicious meals of chicken and chilies. And if you play some musical instrument, perhaps, she will even do all your dancing for you.” A shy smile creased Natwar’s face. “Yes, Natwar will marry when the right time comes, and when he will find the right girl,” said Nattu, once again referring to himself in the third person. “But no! No dancing for her,” he continued. “If she wishes she could learn to play an instrument. But it is only Natwar who will dance and cut the wood.” **N**

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The Reigning Story Teller

Even Moore may have been unprepared for what is happening with his new film that aims to dethrone Bush

BY SUSHMA JOSHI IN VERMONT

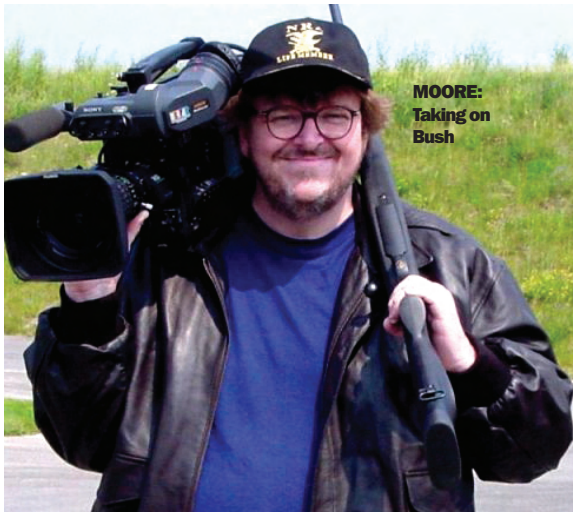
Americans like their heroes to be lean and mean—not fat and shaggy, shambling and unshaven like Michael Moore, who won the best film award for “Fahrenheit 9/11” at the Cannes Film Festival. “Fahrenheit 9/11” asks questions that many of us have been asking post-9/11. How come the Bin Laden family was flown out of the United States before they could be questioned? Both the Bush family and the Bin Laden family have cozy business connections with the Carlyle Group, an investment company with deep investments in defense and aerospace industries—how was this linkage never investigated? How come Halliburton, a defense company which has gotten multiple, non-competitive contracts for the war in Iraq, had Dick Cheney, current vice-president of the United States, as its former CEO?

Moore is a polemic documentary-maker and author, well-known for taking on big business head-on, and he does this unapologetically and with his trademark bite of satirical humor. His previous best-selling documentary, “Bowling for Columbine,” aimed at the incendiary topic of gun-control in America. He examined the incident in Columbine, where two young boys went berserk and shot their classmates before killing themselves. “Bowling” raised questions about rampant and uncontrolled gun ownership and was a hit with audiences over America and worldwide.

But even Moore may have been unprepared for what is happening with his new film. “Fahrenheit 9/11” beat the opening weekend of “Return of the Jedi,” broke “Rocky III’s” record for the biggest box office opening weekend ever for any film that opened in less than a thousand theaters, and went to #2 on the all-time list for largest per-theater average ever for a film that opened in wide-release. Whoever said

Americans were not interested in politics?

And whoever said flag-waving and patriotism was reserved for dumb Americans who watch Fox News and believe it? Moore’s biggest coup is making this delicate shift from rabble-rouser to patriot. He goes from a man who could potentially be branded, in the fear-crazed atmosphere of Terrorized America, as a domestic terrorist to a true citizen of America. And that’s when the shambling, I-come-from-a-factory-town-in-Flint-Michigan-and-I-know-the-heartland claim comes in handy. Cowboy Bush may know how to say “Bring it on!” but he should not have opened his big mouth when he yelled at him cheerily: “Hey



MOORE:
Taking on
Bush

Mike, get a real job!” This scene is ruthlessly used by Moore, who takes up the challenge by showing how Bush was on vacation 45 percent of the time just before the WTC bombings.

Bush stays in the classroom watching children reading a story about a goat while planes destroy the World Trade Center. Bush looks less like a president than a deer caught in the headlights. Moore’s intention may have been to call attention to Bush’s ineptitude but he also does a delicate job of slipping in the question—how can this man not have known what was going on? The majority of the hijackers in the plane were Saudis, not Iraqis or Afghans. And Moore spends a

great deal of time dissecting the Bush family’s business connections with Saudi Arabia.

Moore is acutely aware of the need to be populist in his mission to get Bush dethroned. To accomplish this mission, he goes back to the voting heartland of America. He picks a strong character—a patriotic woman from Flint who loses her son in Iraq. Filmed with quiet sympathy for a military family, this segment is a coup d’etat, allowing both the anti-war Left who see soldiers as intrinsic enemies, and the families of soldiers, to participate in the outrage that is the Iraq war. The military families, shielded from the realities of 1,000 dead American soldiers and thousands of wounded by the mainstream American press, get to know that the per diem of each soldier as well as veteran benefits have been brutally slashed by the Bush administration.

The documentary is made and played to be film’s poor cousin. They rarely get theatrical releases. Moore has changed

all this with his spectacular results of the bottom line—box office records. Time magazine even ran a point-by-point breakdown of the Moore Method—comedy, tragedy, infiltration, confrontation and speculation—analyzing what makes him the undeniable master of his own genre. Christopher Hitchens, another documentary-maker who shot to fame unmasking political myths with “The Trails of Henry Kissinger,” rants jealously in Slate.com about “Fahrenheit.” Poor Hitchens! Reduced to mediocrity, he will never reach the same heights as Moore, simply because he lacks a

showman’s approach. Moore, more than anything else, is an entertainer who speaks truth to power. Who but Moore could write a book called “Stupid White Men” and get away with it—or even better, see it soar to the top of the bestseller charts?

At the end of the day, a good story can steal an election, launch a war, change the face of global politics, and buy time for a cabal of murderers. The entertainment factor, more than the truth, matters in America. By cuing himself to the populist power of the media and entertainment, Moore might have made himself more powerful than the President of the United States. Now let’s see who wins that goddamn election. Bring it on! **N**



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THE 10 MOST INFLUENTIAL WOMEN OF NEPAL



Policing Traffic

If the traffic police really want to be effective in preventing accidents, there is a lot they can do beyond checking licenses or issuing tickets for illegal parking

BY DEEPAK THAPA

When seat belts were made compulsory for drivers and front-seat passengers last year, there was quite a chorus of complaints that buckling up was quite unnecessary in the slow Kathmandu traffic. But rules are rules and our zealous traffic cops did their best to ensure compliance with on-the-spot fines. For some reason, however, buses, trucks, three-wheelers and some others were excused. Even on the highway, which does actually allow for potentially fatal speeding, bus and truck drivers were able to get away without seat belts. But, unlike the earlier very sensible decision to make helmets a must for pillion riders on motorcycles (although it is still beyond reasoning why people in mourning attire should be exempted from wearing helmets), the seat belt rule has been considerably relaxed even in Kathmandu, which only goes to show that a lot of heat was generated for something that had not been planned carefully.

If the traffic police really want to be effective in preventing accidents, there is a lot they can do beyond checking licenses or issuing tickets for illegal parking. To begin with, they should crack down on “tandem biking” Nepali-style. Everyone must have seen these pairs of cyclists, with the one on the saddle pedaling and the other on the crossbar steering. It is clear to anyone that this kind of stunt should be practiced only in an open field or a circus ring, not in the middle of heavy traffic. But apparently that does not constitute breaking the rule.

The police should also start penalizing vehicles that do not dip their headlights at night. The glare of an approaching car with headlights on high beam is very dangerous for other drivers, motorcyclists, cyclists and even pedestrians, but not enough, it seems, to alarm our traffic cops. On the subject of lights, it should also be the law that all bicycles be equipped with reflectors in the front and back, and possibly on the wheels too (and kept mud-free as well). For a start, the police could fix reflectors on their own bicycles and keep them clean to serve their original purpose.

Fines should also be imposed on slow-moving vehicles that decide to hog the right-hand lane since it slows down traffic and also encourages people to overtake them from the risky left side. That should also extend to cyclists who merrily ride on the middle of the road either through ignorance of traffic rules or foolhardiness in believing that they can pedal faster than motor-powered cars.

A speed limit should be enforced on public vehicles, on and off the highway. Because of the dial system whereby the first in line gets to go first, buses—regular, micro and mini—all drive at full speed to get to their destination first. The drivers may be under pressure to increase their

earnings, but that should not be allowed at the risk of endangering fare-paying passengers as well as other users of the road. Many countries have made speed governors mandatory on public transport, and there is no reason why this should not be introduced here as well, especially since many drivers of public transport seem totally unaware of traffic etiquette. Perhaps the best place to begin would be buses carrying school children. Similar to public buses, school buses are notorious for speeding (not to mention sudden stops to let off children). Besides endangering the life of the children, quick bursts of power and the swerving that such driving requires make the ride very uncomfortable for young children. But of even more concern is that children—themselves future drivers—could be picking up the wrong kind of driving tips from adults.

These are just some pointers. We hear of senior police officers being trained abroad on traffic management. But introducing fads like compulsory seat belts or preventing talking on mobile phones while at the wheel are hardly enough to ensure good traffic behavior. Training the young through the annual ritual of the “traffic week” is not any more useful. Getting children to instruct pedestrians to use zebra crossings and wait



for the “walk” sign at traffic lights may look cute, but does it really accomplish anything in our country with perhaps 50 zebra crossings and even fewer traffic signals? It needs much more imagination to make our roads safe for everyone, and that is something we certainly have not seen much of. **N**

CITY This Week

EVENTS



Monsoon Mela

Artistic, creative and designer items. At Bhooja Ghar Party Palace. Date: July 19. Time: 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. For information: 4421720, 4445628.

Celebrating 25 Years

At Shangri-la Hotel, Lazimpat. M & M: Maharaja's Masti Tandoor & Kababs Special. Date: July 24 and 25. For information: 4412999.

Films @ Lazimpat Gallery Café

Free Admission. All profits from food and drinks during the shows will go to PA Orphanage Nepal. Time: 7 p.m. For information: 4428549.

July 22: Torque

Music video director Joseph Kahn's directorial debut film "Torque" is more like an extended music video itself. "Torque" is a typical action movie—hot bikes, hotter women and lots of loud music to go with it. As for the script, well there isn't one. "Torque" doesn't try to be theatrical or dramatic. It

doesn't take itself seriously and no one else should.

July 20: The 51st State

The movie is about an American chemist who travels to Britain to sell a new wonder-drug. Samuel L Jackson stars as the cool, black kilt wearing American dude who travels to city of Liverpool,

Martin Chautari

Discussions at Martin Chautari, Prasuti Griha Marga 509, Thapathali, Kathmandu. Participation open to all. **THIS WEEK AT MARTIN CHAUTARI:** MANGALBARE DISCUSSION (JULY 20). Time: 5 p.m. Topic: Women in Foreign Employment. Pundit: Jagannath Adhikari

MEDIA DISCUSSION (JULY 22). Time: 3 p.m. Topic: How to increase the number of janajati journalists? Pundits: Chun Bahadur Gurung (Raajdhani), Rudra Singh Tamang (Rautahat Times). **YOUTH DISCUSSION (JULY 23):** Time: 3 p.m. Youth related discussions.

E-commerce training

A five-day training on e-commerce, specifically for handicraft products, organized by E-Sewa. The training will cover topics such as web designing, online transactions, and website marketing and promotion. Date: July 25 – 29. For information: 4414670, esawa@catgen.com



famous for "The Beatles" and its football club (an important part of the movie). Director Ronny Yu puts first-timer Stel Pavlou's script to work creating a fast-paced, witty crime comedy.

ART EXHIBITIONS

Monsoon Collection

An array of paintings by various artists. Park Gallery, Lazimpat and Park Gallery, Pulchowk. Till July 24. Time: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. (Sun – Fri) For information: 4419353, 5522307.

Colors of Monsoon

An exhibition of paintings by senior artists. Gallery Nine, Lazimpat. For information: 4428694.

ONGOING

Dwarika's Thali

Enjoy Nepali cuisine, hospitality and heritage. At Dwarika's Courtyard, Dwarika's Hotel, Batisputali. For information: 4479488.

Thakali cuisine

Enjoy a Thakali lunch with two kinds of curry and great phapar Dhindo from Mustang and many other items. At Thakali Thasang Kitchen. Time: 10 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. For information: 4224144.

Earthwatch

Have a farmhouse breakfast with birds, lunch with butterflies and dinner with fireflies, at Park Village. At Park Village Restaurant, Budhanilkantha. For information: 4375280.

Executive Lunch

Executive Lunch available for Rs. 170. At Bhanchha Ghar Restaurant, Kamaladi. For information: 4225172.

All That Jazz

Presenting the JCS Trio and the best of jazz in Nepal. At the Fusion Bar, Dwarika's Hotel. Every Friday. Time: 7p.m. Tickets: Rs. 555. For information: 4479488.

Live Music

Catch Hits FM award winning singer Dimple and his band Full Circle live. At The Bakery Cafe, Jawalakhel. Every Friday. Time: 7 p.m. For information: 4434554.

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.

BBQ Dinner

Enjoy Summit's Barbeque dinner along with vegetarian specials. At the Summit Hotel. For information: 5521810.

BRANDINSIGHT 2004

BrandInsight is the first event in the Nabil Bank Excellence Series being held in celebration of the Bank's 20th Anniversary. BrandInsight is a workshop on the concept of "branding." Branding is just slowly beginning to find its feet in Nepal. The workshop focuses on brand creation, competition and differentiation. It is aimed at organizational leaders and managers.

The principle resource person for the event is Ajay Gupta, Managing Partner of Brand Prophet, India; former Executive Vice President of Saatchi and Saatchi and an alumnus of IIM, Ahemadabad and IIT Kanpur. He has had over 25 years experience in building successful brands.

Date: July 25. At Megha Hall, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. Time: 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. Registration fees: Rs. 5500 per person; 3 or more delegates from the same organization Rs. 5,000 each. Registration can be done with J & T Associates (Phone no. 2003020, e-mail: info@jnt.com.np)





Casino Economy

*There's a brand new gimmick everyday
Just to take somebody's money away*

—BOB DYLAN, 'Talking Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues'

BY UJOL SHERCHAN

It's hard to tell whether some companies in the instant noodles industry are merely using lottery-like schemes to market their noodles or actually promoting them as products in their own right on the back of their noodles. Never mind the distinction. The government that shut down pyramid schemes such as Gold Quest and Pentagone is oblivious of this trend. And, it has not even registered on the consumer groups' radar yet.

The trend hits the suspecting and unsuspecting rural and urban poor as well as the lower middle class the hardest. Remember Jo Jo's Dashain-era *Khasi Kukhura* and *Naya Luga* commercial aimed squarely at rural Nepal? The message was: let them eat Jo Jo, so that they might in turn win these offers. Such commercials that take undue advantage of people's relative poverty by playing on their propensity for unrealistic expectations have become so commonplace that we fail to notice this trend for what it is: a nation-wide lottery phenomenon. The consumer, like the proverbial frog in the slowly warming water, is essentially helpless in the face of this trend that's steadily picking up steam. Don't get me wrong: Jo Jo tastes good but does the consumer have a choice of paying for Jo Jo only, without having to also underwrite the *Bokna Sakne Jati Nagad Rupaiya* scheme?

Watch the 2 PM *Jackpot* commercial on TV, and you'll notice right away that it has nothing to do with 2 PM noodles and everything to do with the *Jackpot* and a chance to meet Rajesh Hamal. Do not be fooled; there's a big disconnect here: many of these companies are producing noodles, all right, but what they are promoting is the lottery scheme! There is very little attempt at product differentiation; mostly it is prize differentiation: what you might get if you buy that particular brand. While Shaka Laka Boom comes with the *Magic Ride Offer*, Rin Tin offers *Cash Awards*.

Free market purists may argue: what consumers do with their money is their right. True, but only if such schemes are a "fair" bet. When it comes to a lottery, or a gamble, there is a mathematically exact definition of what constitutes "fair" and these schemes are anything but. The costs of running the lottery scheme are passed onto the consumer (who ends up subsidizing the few winners, and possibly enriching the promoter) in the form of higher prices, so the scheme is basically a glorified game of chance that smacks of a scam. Not surpris-

ingly, celebrities like Rajesh Hamal are roped in to confer a veneer of legitimacy on these dubious schemes.

Additionally, the lottery scheme may be more extensively rigged than one realizes. I know a retailer who opens packets of noodles to check for the winning coupon(s), and reseals them. You will never ever win the 2 PM *Jackpot* if you happen to shop there. Apparently, the noodles industry is not monitoring its own schemes. Moreover, who is to say that some of those TV commercials showing lucky winners are not phony? I do not always see an adherence to the costly-to-fake principle in awarding the lucky winners, so I am naturally skeptical. Clearly, in this game of chance, there are potentially many ways in which the dice is loaded against the player or consumer from the get-go.

What do you make of the bundling of Mayos noodles and the *Millionaire Offer*—two completely different products—for instance? Recently the EU charged Microsoft with bundling Media Player with its Windows operating system, thereby violating EU's competition law. A case in point: my sister insists that I too eat Mayos, because Rara, which I prefer, doesn't come bundled with her favorite lottery scheme. I would tend to think that a significant percentage of consumers, including my sister, have switched brands "away" from non-lottery promoting noodles such as Rara, and that their decision had nothing to do with the price or quality. The prize was the clinching factor. If it were not so, why the emphasis on the prize in the commercial? And if this is not unfair competition, what is?

Nowhere on my travel abroad have I seen the noodles industry resorting to anything like the lottery scheme to influence a demand for noodles. Wai Wai has a sizeable market in India but their lottery scheme doesn't extend there. India's enlightened consumer groups wouldn't allow something so blatant. However, in Nepal, the noodles industry has taken the lottery scheme to a whole new level. *Khasi Kukhura* and *Naya Luga*, the *Magic Ride Offer*, *Bokna Sakne Jati Nagad Rupaiya*, the *Millionaire Offer*, 2 PM *Jackpot*, the *Scholarship Offer*, the *Employment Offer*, *Hira Ko Har*, *Cash Award*, etc., etc.

Not to be outdone, Samsung (*Kaukuti Offer*), Konika (*Gift Scheme*), Muna tea (*Cash Award*), Tokla tea (*Gold Locket*), and Diyo, Puja

and OK washing soap—and on and on and on—are following suit.

When will the consumer groups wake up from their midsummer night's dream and play their watchdog role? More importantly, when will the government that prohibits Nepalis from visiting the casinos protect the consumer from the emerging casino economy? **N**

(The author's views are his own and should not be attributed to the organizations he is affiliated with)





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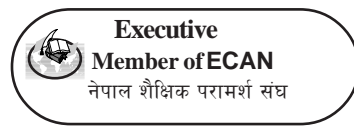
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Still A Novelty

Novelist Sashi Kala Manandhar has the distinction of being the first woman novelist in the Newari language. But Manandhar's entry into Newari literature came more by chance than by planning. A student of science, she felt that her native language suffered from neglect. There were not simply enough writers writ-



nm/ss

ing in Newari, which has a long and rich history of its own. A recent award, the Gankee Basundhara Puraskar, she says is a timely recognition for her contribution to Newari literature. To date, she has published three novels and a short story collection. After working for several years, she released her latest novel earlier this year.

Now that your novel "Jalla Theegu Lanpu" has finally come out, do you feel better?

Yes. My new novel is based on my travel experiences in Europe, mostly England. It's a first-person account of a student's experience. I re-wrote it four times, and I did it keeping in mind the criticisms of my earlier novels. I've been working on it for the past four years—three years of writing, and a year of re-writing.

But there is criticism this time around as well. Some say it lacks a central plot or storyline?

I have heard that from a few people. I decided to write this novel differently, making it more of a narrative. I have focused more on the characters, and the exchanges between them. Some people may feel it doesn't rigidly follow the normal plots of a novel. But I wanted to write something new.

What is the state of Newari literature?

There simply aren't enough people writing in Newari, especially women and more specifically novelists. And at the same time there aren't enough critics who would be able to contribute in their own right. The problem is there are few new writers coming up while the old ones have largely stopped writing.

What seems to be the problem, why are there not enough writers?

The problem is that "Newari," in whatever forms it exists is largely a colloquial language. Even within the Newar community, there are people who speak Newari, but very few who read. That has meant that there are even less people who write in Newari.

How do you view the future of Newari literature?

I wouldn't say that there are dark days ahead. But there are going to very few who read Newari. That signals troubled times for Newari literature.

There simply aren't enough people writing in Newari, especially women novelist

Have the Newars as a community done enough to conserve the language?

The community is now slowly waking up to the fact that our language is in trouble. There are organizations that are now trying to promote the speaking of the language. They are going out in the community and trying to get people to teach their children Newari along with Nepali and English.

Is Newari literature overshadowed by Nepali?

Not really. Each language has its own place, and I'm talking about all kinds of indigenous languages—Newari,

Maithali and so on. But since there are only limited number of people speaking these languages, the audience of such literature is obviously limited.

Does the community have a critical mass to sustain its own literature as say Nepali?

I have been told that I need to write in Nepali to reach out to a wider audience. But I do not want to stop contributing to Newari. I plan to translate some of my works into Nepali so that they reach a much wider audience. Right now, I am translating my latest novel into Nepali.

Did you start out your literary career with Newari?

I used to write in Nepali in the beginning. When I was an I. Sc. student in Trichandra College, a Newari college magazine asked me to contribute. So I translated one of my writings, a poem into Newari. That was back in 2033 B.S. It was the first time my writing had been published. Then the next year I wrote a story in Newari for the magazine, and then for various magazines. I believe most of these magazines don't exist anymore, but it was through them that I started.

Why are there so few women wiring in Newari?

There are but few who give it continuity. Writing needs to be given continuity. It's like singing, where you need to constantly practice, just as singers require *riyaz*. Many of those who were involved got married, started a family, got busy with other jobs. Many others say that there are not enough material benefits. And I guess they are right. **N**

Master Of Intrigue

BY MEENA KAINI

Move over Ian Rankin, Jeffery Archer and make way for Dan Brown—the new master of intrigue and suspense. This fourth offering from Brown has literally taken the publishing world by storm.

“The Da Vinci Code” is a historical thriller, which claims that Jesus was a mortal and Christianity was a sexist conspiracy to exclude women from positions of power. Priory of Sion—a European secret society founded in 1099 and whose members included Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo and Leonardo Da Vinci—guards this secret to this date. Opus Dei, a conservative network of Catholic priests, is portrayed as a sinister and sadistic sect. It is a deeply devout catholic

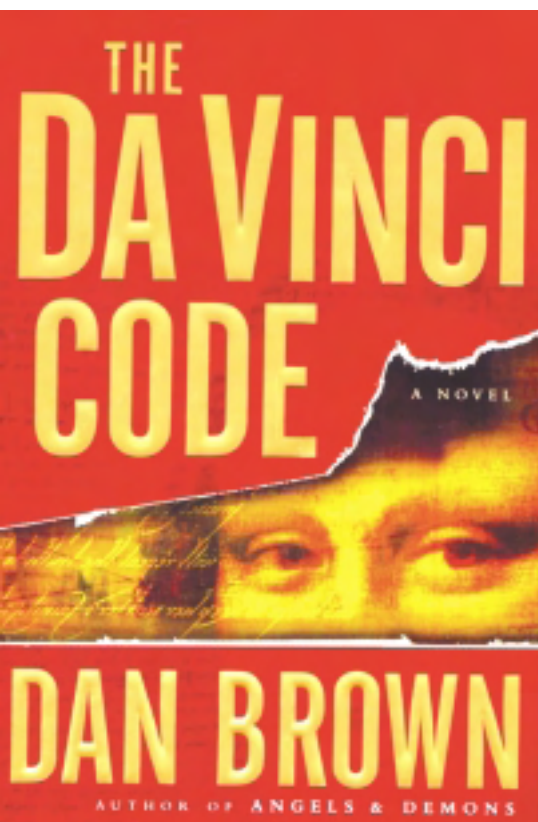
fessor and symbologist Robert Langdon (who has been a part of Brown’s earlier novel “Angels and Demons”) and a French detective and cryptologist Sophie Neveu then go on a roller coaster ride through France, England and Scotland sorting bizarre riddles to save the secret of the holy grail—its central plot—that a centuries-old conspiracy hid the evidence that Jesus was a mortal.

Brown has done a masterly job of combining history with conspiracy and suspense. Starting with a murder at the famed Louvre museum in Paris, the story reaches a climax at Rosslyn chapel in Edinburgh, believed to house the grail, all in just 24 hours. The 489 pages of intricate details however do not make the reader feel jaded. There might be too much of history pumped in by Brown but that doesn’t affect the storyline.

Some critics have been at a loss to explain the book’s success. The prose is routine and the plot often confusing but it works because according to the author all description of architecture, artwork, documents and secret rituals is accurate and therefore fascinating as well as believable. “The Da Vinci Code” reads more like a film script than a novel as Brown’s eye for detail is phenomenal and one can easily visualize the action, as it unfolds.

According to the publishers, Doubleday, “The Da Vinci Code” has now sold 10 million copies worldwide, 7.5 million in hardback, making it the biggest-selling hardback novel ever. It has topped the New

York Times bestseller list for more than a year and has been translated into 40 languages. For diehard fans, a special illustrated version of the Code is said to be coming out on Christmas. It is soon to become a Hollywood blockbuster directed by Ron Howard, of “A Beautiful Mind” fame. **N**



sect and has recently completed construction of a \$47 million National Headquarters in New York.

The thriller begins with the assassination of four members of Priory of Sion who guard the secret about Jesus and Mary, clues to which are hidden in works of Leonardo Da Vinci. An American pro-

Book Mar k



DBM

Renowned orthopedic surgeon Dr. Ashok Banskota is the co-proprietor of B&B Hospital and founding chairman of the Hospital and Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled Children, Banepa. An avid reader, Banskota says his reading habits have changed over the years and he is more selective about the books he reads now. His favorite reads these days are spiritual books and medical journals.

How did you become an avid reader?

In St. Xavier’s, Godavari we had this culture of “book report writing.” We used to review a lot of books. So I got into the habit of reading books at an early age.

What kind of books did you read then?

I used to read old classics by authors like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy.

Who is your favorite author?

A. J. Cronin, a Scottish writer. I came across his work for the first time as an eighth-grader. It was his autobiography called “Adventure in Two Worlds,” it inspired me to become a doctor. There is another poignant and moving book of his I recall, “Hatter’s Castle.” I have read every one of his books.

What do you have on your bookshelf now?

I have filled my bookshelf with books of my guru, Paramahansa Yogananda. He is a pioneer of yoga in the west.

What are you reading right now?

I am mid-way through the book “The Royal Science of God Realization,” an interpretation of the Bhagvad Gita by Paramahansa Yogananda. I would like to complete it some-time soon.

How do you find time to read?

If there is something that you really love doing, you can always find time for it. **N**



Compromise Budget

We have mixed feelings about the new budget. As a wartime Finance Minister, who is heavily weighed down by a burden to rally disparate political actors, Bharat Mohan Adhikari was always going to struggle with the budget. We had feared as much when he took office early this month. His coalition partners, who don't share his party's vision, were bound to safeguard their interests in the 111-billion-rupee pie, the largest ever.

Notably, coming right at the heels of the Cabinet expansion, we were also well aware that the new budget was going to be influenced by forces that held sway before the CPN(UML) came aboard. The best Adhikari could, then, do was to fit in his party's interests and still come up with a compromise document that wouldn't ruffle too many feathers outside his own party.

And so he did. Unsurprisingly, most of the budget is a routine affair. He had little control over the fast ballooning security and Palace expenditures. The regular expenditure, which goes into meeting the salaries of the government officials, continues to siphon off a sizeable portion of the budget. The revenue targets continue to be more ambitious than realistic. For second straight year, a huge amount has been set aside for elections.

But he seemed to have tried bravely to buttress the much neglected health and education sectors. We take heart in that. A 25 percent increase in education spending and 50 percent in health are silver linings of an otherwise routine budget, notwithstanding its focus on rural development. Development expenditure, which betters the living conditions of the people, has been on a steady decline since the "people's war" started in 1996. When the country is riddled in a violent conflict, security bills find easy passage and few dare to question them. We do, and that at the risk of looking foolish. As long as the country contin-

ues to invest poorly on development, the poverty cycle will continue and that in turn will continue to fuel the insurgency.

But it is still the spiraling security expenditure that continues to haunt us. There has been as much as 10 percent increase in security expenditure over last year and there is every possibility that an additional Rs. 9 billion allocation for miscellaneous items could be diverted to this sector, as much as last year when the Army spent 17 per cent more than what was allocated to it. When the "people's war" started in 1996, the security expenditure stood at a mere Rs. 4.1 billion; it has now reached Rs. 15 billion. We fear that high security spending will continue to crowd out other sectors.

Another area of concern is high allocations for the Royal Palace. Rs. 330 million set aside in the current budget for the Palace is three times the 2002 level. This comes despite the UML's recent pledge to rein in the Palace expenditure. We understand the juggling act must have been difficult for the largest coalition partner while working alongside parties

which seem to be happy maintaining the status quo. But why promise if you can't deliver? A number of leaders (outside UML) have been rather vocal in asserting that the communist party

has the habit of changing its tunes to suit the audience. We fear that the label doesn't bode well for the party that insists it is determined to change its ways by doggedly pursuing its documented goals. We hope this budget will mark a new beginning. The party has set some ambitious targets—in education and health sectors, for example. The Nepali people would now like to see their government make genuine efforts towards that end.

Akhilesh Upadhyay, Editor



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