



Golf in Gokarna 19

Summitting in Kathmandu

BINOD BHATTARAI AND
HEMLATA RAI

Perhaps there was really no doubt that this SAARC Summit would ultimately go ahead. Perhaps all the sabre-rattling of the past weeks between India and Pakistan was in fact carefully calibrated brinkmanship to make this summit happen.

Whatever the case, the two South Asian nations nearly went to war over the 13 December suicide attack on Parliament in New Delhi. They have

This SAARC Summit is going to be an India-Pakistan affair. But we don't mind as long as they patch up in Kathmandu.

now stepped back from the brink. Will Kathmandu be where they patch up? More importantly: will Kathmandu be where they will find some mechanism to prevent a risky escalation like this in future?

Not likely, say experts and officials from the region who have gathered in Kathmandu this week prior to the Summit. "We shouldn't be too ambitious," one senior South Asian diplomat told us, "The fact that the Summit is taking place is already a miracle." Indian and Pakistani officials are coy about the question on everyone's lips: will Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and General Pervez Musharraf shake hands in front of the television cameras after the Nagarkot retreat? "Let's wait and see," is all they say.

As the tit-for-tat cancellations of trains, over-flights and satellite transmissions show, things can get pretty petty between New Delhi and Islamabad. Even in Kathmandu, organisers said, there was at least one request for a change in seating arrangements by one of the countries which didn't want to sit next to another. Ironically, participants said the atmosphere during the preparatory meetings was one of surprising friendship and camaraderie. "Outside they are about to go to war, inside they are best of friends," one Nepali participants told us. "We have Pakistan seconding Indian proposals and the other way round. Despite everything everyone wants SAARC."

By all accounts, the draft declaration of the Summit and other conventions have seen surprisingly smooth sailing through the committees. "There are no hitches, no needlessly long debates about commas and brackets that we saw in previous summits," another delegate told us. The reason could be that everyone wants this on-again-off-again Summit to go without a hitch.

The meetings discussed giving the 1987 SAARC anti-terrorism convention

more teeth by making it compatible with national laws, and agreed with provisions of post-11 September United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373. But what if one nation's terrorist is another's freedom fighter? The answer from one delegate: "We did not go into definitions."

Officials in the preparatory meetings also agreed on deadlines: having the SAFTA framework treaty ready by end-2002, re-starting SAARC meetings at different levels to keep dialogue open. More could happen by the time we reach the Summit because everyone, including leaders, seem to be under a lot of pressure to show that SAARC works.

"The timing may have worked perfectly for all because despite tension, the Summit provided an opening," says Sridhar Khatri, executive director of the Institute of Foreign Affairs in Kathmandu. "It looks like Churchill's jaw-jaw being better than war-war is at work inside the closed doors."

There is little doubt that the entire spotlight during this summit is going to be on Vajpayee and Musharraf. In fact, their every gesture and eye contact (if not shoulder contact) is going to be minutely recorded for signs of thaw. The danger is that the media glare in Kathmandu may tempt both to play to the domestic galleries. But for SAARC's sake, everyone is hoping for a truce.

Sixteen years of SAARC have made not just the leaders of India and Pakistan, but the smaller countries as well guilty enough to at least show they can meet during these annual summits—even if it is just to deliver speeches. This time, the added complication was India's ban on overflights by Pakistan International Airlines which forced Gen Musharraf to take a round-about route via China. India denied it is being petty, one senior Indian

diplomat told us: "We have taken terrorism for so long, we just had to draw the line." But Pakistani officials say they have gone out of their way to assuage India on terrorism. "There is real mistrust. They don't want to believe we are acting in good faith," said one.

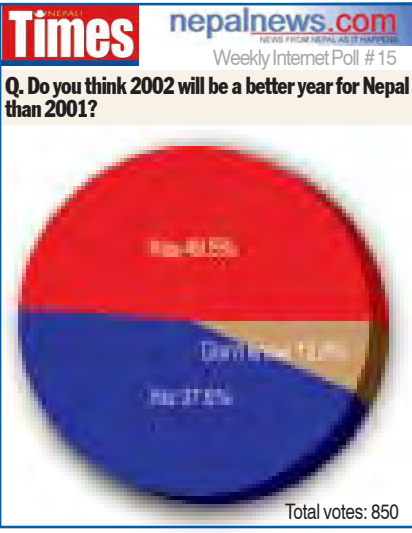
Former SAARC Secretary General, Nepali diplomat Yadav Kant Silwal saying most of this is posturing. He is a true-blue believer in SAARC: "This is the

only answer to South Asia's troubles. There is no other road." But going on this road has been painfully slow, and SAARC appears to need new vision and commitment if it is survive its self-inflicted injuries. Kathmandu should mark the beginning of this process. ♦

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TSK TSK

The daily ceremony at the India-Pakistan border crossing where turbaned border guards go through an extravagantly choreographed flag-lowering ritual has now come to symbolise the vacuity and swagger of the relations between these two countries.

What they think is a patriotic pageant at Atari actually resembles a cock-fight. While people on both sides cheer, the rest of the world is laughing. Separated at birth, the governments of these twin nations are so consumed by their envious loathing for each other they are holding their own people and the rest of South Asia hostage. Come on, guys, grow up.

The latest brinkmanship came in the run-up to the 11th SAARC Summit. Just look at the inane chest-thumping. Calling these two governments infantile would be an insult to children. With the Afghan war drawing to a close, the conflict is now threatening to creep eastwards. New Delhi, which felt peeved and left out as Washington wooed Islamabad for support in the anti-Taliban campaign is now trying to get back the world's attention. We're here, they seem to say when they mass troops along the Pakistan border, or cancel the overfly rights of Pakistani airliners. In trying to imitate America's war on terror, the Indians are making the same mistake: not addressing the roots of extremism. And in India's case it has (for the past 50 years) always been the struggle for autonomy in Kashmir. Resolve Kashmir and everything else will probably fall into place. Let Kashmir fester and this corrosive extremism will consume us all. It is difficult to see why it isn't easier to find a solution to this.

As long as India and Pakistan were just destabilising each other, the rest of South Asia didn't really care. But now they are playing with nukes. And the rest of us are quickly trying to figure out prevailing winds so we won't be downwind when the firecrackers go off.

Leave Kashmir aside for a moment. Isn't a moderate Pakistan in everyone's interest? It's in General Musharraf's interest, and it's in Prime Minister Vajpayee's interest. Escalating the current tension only benefits extremists in both India and Pakistan. By its short-sighted sabre-rattling New Delhi is not giving Gen Musharraf political space, and playing right into the hands of those who want to Talibanise Pakistan. Gen Musharraf needs to reign in the Taliban's mentors within his own intelligence community, but threatening to go to war is not going to make that job easier for him.

The leaders of India and Pakistan need to once and for all redefine their perspective on security. It is no longer about outdated military concepts like strategic depth or doomsday deterrence, it is no longer about adolescent posturing with nuclear erections. It is about human security and development. The enemy is within, not in the other's territory. Poverty, inequality, decades of mal-governance and corruption have rotted the innards of both countries. More than half the populations in both countries live in poverty, the parameters for infant mortality, literacy and safe drinking water are shameful even by sub-Saharan standards.

Having nuclear weapons does not mean zilch. Remember the Soviet Union? It had enough warheads to destroy the world ten times over (once would have been quite enough, but that's just how mad they were during the Cold War). The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics imploded under the weight of its own inability to address economic and governance crises. International stature comes from the strength of your economic and social indicators, not the size of your arsenal. The enmity between India and Pakistan, besides threatening us all with radioactive contamination, is dragging down the economy of the rest of the region.

From our vantage point in the Himalaya, we see the bilateral bickering between New Delhi and Islamabad for what it is: a dangerous game that is diverting precious resources away from a more urgent task that they (and we) need to address—South Asia's development challenge.

But Indian and Pakistani hawks need each other's hatred to perpetuate their holds on power. Saner leaders must now call the shots and take bilateral relations to the fundamental need to give all Indians and Pakistanis a chance for more decent lives. On that they both need to be fundamentalists.

SAARC IS US

There is really no sense blaming the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu for the mess that this regional body is in. SAARC is us. It is the lowest common denominator of our red-tape, lack of transparency, our debilitating fatalism. It is a symbol of our collective failures to manage our own countries.

Maldivian and Sri Lankan delegates flew to Kathmandu this week via Bangkok and Singapore. To fly from one SAARC member country to another SAARC member country they went all the way to the edge of the Pacific. Maybe the dips are amassing frequent flyer miles, but you can't blame them when our governments have made it as difficult as possible to fly within our own region. The Delhi-Colombo flight is at 3AM. The most convenient connection between Delhi and Dhaka used to be on British Airways. And now PIA can't fly delegates to the summit because India has suspended overflights. If air connections were bad, you should try land and rail links. Actually, you can't. There aren't any.

So, in Kathmandu this week let's not make grandiose plans for SAPTA or a free-trade area. Let's just make South Asia a free-travel area. After that, other things may fall into place.

STATE OF THE STATE

by CK LAL



Celebrating South Asian-ness

National boundaries do not erase a common cultural identity.

One of the very first acts of the post-Taliban regime of Kabul was to send an SOS to New Delhi for musical instruments to record Afghanistan's new national anthem. If ever there was any doubt about Kandahar being a part of South Asia, it was dispelled by the request of Hamid Karzai's cultural ministry for a set of harmonium, tabla, sarod, sitar, tanpura, surmandal, sarangi, pakhawaj, flute and dholak.

There is a fundamental unity between the cultures of this region, the inheritor of a civilisation that once extended from Kashmir to Colombo, and from Bamiyan to Burma—and exported its beliefs across the seas to Bali, and beyond the Himalaya to Beijing. Despite millennia of natural upheaval and the rise and fall of several empires, the civilisational commonality of our cultures remains intact. Had Jawaharlal Nehru not appropriated the name India for his republic, perhaps we would all have been proud to call ourselves "Indic". Now we have to make do with the expression South Asian so as not to offend the patriotic sensibilities of people insecure about their identity in the young nation-states of this region.

Sadly, ever since Bill Clinton declared South Asia "one of the world's most dangerous regions", it

has become even more dangerous. National politics has played havoc with the civilisational unity between the peoples of this region. To forge a common identity based on politics is thus fundamentally flawed. The likelihood of a United States of South Asia any time soon does not appear to be a realistic possibility.

Future unity based on the economic commonality of nation-states in this part of the world is also a mirage. Despite all talk of SAPTA and SAFTA, the emergence of a South Asian Union patterned after the European Union looks remote. Forget about a union, even an association like ASEAN is difficult to achieve when there is so much acrimony between the top leaders of SAARC member states. When even Indians need a passport to fly smoothly into Kathmandu—mercifully, a visa is not a requirement as yet—you can rest assured that not even religion is a unifying factor in a region dominated by parochial politics.

Ironically, to chart a common future, all we need to do is look at our collective pasts where empires competed with each other, even while accepting the harmony between their cultures. Aurangzeb is an aberration. It was not the sword of Islam that conquered Hindustan, but the service of Sufis that did the trick. Christianity did not arrive in

South Asia riding the wave of the Crusades, it was brought by missionaries who spread their word through exemplary service to society in education and health. Despite the massacre that marred the partition of British India, no culture of South Asia has to bear the guilt of mass murder on the scale of the Holocaust.

Controversial Harvard professor Samuel P Huntington is a much-maligned man, perhaps deservedly so. All he sees is the conflict between cultures along civilisational fault lines. Actually there is an element of unity between the cultures within a civilisation, which could be an important factor for global peace. Most contemporary conflicts are within civilisations, not between them. Hamid Karzai may have fought his war with the help of CIA money and American B-52 bombers, but he and Mullah Omar differ only in their beliefs, not culture. Come to think of it, even the Crusades were intra-civilisational: Christians and Muslims worshipped the same book as far as the Old Testament was concerned. All they fought for was the finality of their respective prophets, a conflict that was later to emerge with equal ferocity between Catholics and Protestants, and Shias and Sunnis.

Nothing exemplifies the unity between the cultures of our region as

strongly as our food. Picture an Oriya Swami Agnivesh, a Nepali Dipak Gyawali, and a Kamnada Pradeep Sebastian longing for home-food in a small town on the France-Belgium border. And then imagine all of them ending up in a 'Kashmiri' restaurant owned by a Sialkoti Muslim from Bangladesh with a cook from Peshawar in Pakistan. Then a lovelorn Bollywood star is in perfect lip-sync with the soulful voice of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan on a video in the restaurant, and you realise the absurdity of LK Advani's rhetoric of "Hot Pursuit" followed by General Musharraf's thundering "Lay Off". How can you ask a Sindhi in hot pursuit of Baigan Rogan Josh to lay off Kabuli Nan, Saffron Rice, Machher Jhol and Mango Pickle?

After the music and the food, there are the reform movements of every religion that emphasise the unity of purpose inherent in every faith. Sindhi Sufis, Bengali Bauls, Bhakti Panth Swamis in the Indo-Gangetic plains, neo-Buddhists blessed by broadminded Maharashtrian or Andhra Bhanutes, reforming Christian Fathers preaching in the backwaters of Kerala or the tribal areas of Meghalaya and Madhya Pradesh—they don't teach patriotism, they spread the word of humanism. They display a concern for the

underprivileged that doesn't recognise the artificial lines drawn on maps by agents of an imperial power in retreat.

Cultural identity goes to the very soul of a person, an identity that national boundaries cannot erase. It is this identity that the leaders of the region must re-emphasise while reconceptualising South Asia. Without that, SAARC will continue to remain periodic jamborees.

Maybe by the time we have the 12th SAARC Summit, there will be a simultaneous Parliament of Cultures taking place between Pashtuns, Awadhis, Bengalis, Tamils, Nepalis, Assamese and Kashmiris, rather than just the so-called eminent persons of the region. ♦



The Subcontinent of Sub-Saharan Asia

MAHBUB UL HAQ
The rest of the world is heading towards peace and prosperity, but India and Pakistan would not know it. Despite the crushing poverty of their respective populations, the two countries spend \$20 billion a year on defence, twice as much as Saudi Arabia, a country 25 times wealthier. Both countries have six times more soldiers than doctors. Pakistan recently bought two French submarines at a cost of \$1.2 billion, and India deploys missiles while millions live on pavements.

How tragically comic that after bleeding their economies to fund defence expenditures, the two governments beg and submit to all sorts of conditionalities from international lending institutions. The economic costs of the continuing confrontation between Islamabad and New Delhi are prohibitive, but policy-makers in the respective capitals seem unable to recognise what is obvious to everyone else, that human security is the most important element of national security.

Some say that there is a need for balance of terror in South Asia. Where should that balance be set, if people are sleeping on pavements, and children suffocate in windowless classrooms? Nations might accumulate all the weaponry they want, but they have no strength when their people starve.

The World Bank, in a "wealth of nations" report which studied 190 countries, points out that 16 percent of the wealth worldwide comes from physical capital (buildings, roads, machineries), and 20 percent from natural capital (minerals, forests and other resources). Sixty-four percent of the wealth of nations is human capital. Yet, as we collect hardware and exploit our natural resources in South Asia, we do not bother about people. We all want to be South Korea, but that country invests \$130 per person every year in basic education. Malaysia spends \$128. India invests nine dollars, Pakistan three, and Bangladesh two.

With India and Pakistan leading the way, South Asia trails behind while the rest of the developing world surges ahead. Even Sub-Saharan Africa's basket case is doing better than South Asia in some sectors. Their average adult literacy rate is 55 percent, compared to South Asia's cumulative 47 percent. 800 million South Asians do without elementary sanitation, 380 million are illiterate, and 300 million drink from ponds rather than taps.

Global military expenditure, which was at \$1,000 billion in 1987, is down to \$750 billion dollars today [in 1996], a \$4 billion reduction each year. The two poorest regions in the world increased their expenditure. Not the Middle East or Latin America, but Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These facts have to be highlighted to embarrass policymakers into action.

South Asia is just not prepared to enter the 21st century. It does not invest enough in its people.

The goddess of growth

India hopes to be a regional superpower, but cannot become one with the scale of sheer poverty that exists. Indian policy-makers must mull over the Chinese growth rate of 12 percent, and see how China is investing in its people. The lesson of Cold War rivalry is not that capitalism triumphed over communism, but that political power not backed by economic strength is unsustainable. The

In this article written before he died in 1998, Mahbub-ul Haq argued South Asia would not get ahead until it started investing in its people. Never truer than today.

Soviet Union collapsed because it could not feed its people. All its tanks, submarines and secret service meant nothing. India has the largest number of poor people in the world. If it can deliver social justice while it maintains or expands its defence expenditure, India is welcome to become a regional superpower. But it cannot, and so should choose between bread and guns.

Fifteen years ago, in 1980, the ratio of military to social spending was highest in Iraq (eight times), Somalia (five times) and Nicaragua (3.5 times) Yet none could effectively defend its national security. Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948, and now spends one-third of its national income on education, nutrition and health. Today, it is

the only prosperous democracy in a troubled Central America.

However, economic growth alone is not enough, there has to be distributive justice. Three decades ago, Pakistan had one of the highest growth rates in the developing world, 7 percent a year. So, why were people protesting in the streets? Economic growth had not touched their lives—income distribution was skewed against the poor. In high growth West Pakistan, it was in the hands of landlords and industrialists—22 families dominated the economy. The lesson was clear: you have to stop worshipping the goddess of growth, put people at the centre, enrich their lives, provide them with options.

Amidst all the gloom, South Asia itself provides examples of the dynamism that can be released when human lives are made the focus. In Bangalore, once they started training people in computers, the industry took off and India is now the second largest exporter of software in the world. It presently sells a billion dollars' worth, and may top five billion by 2000. Before 1971, what was then East Pakistan did not have significant industry. Bangladeshi businessmen went into ready-made garments, put their skills into it, and today the country has out-competed India and Pakistan, and is

exporting two billion dollars worth of garments to North America and Europe.

Towards civilian rule

India and Pakistan must take the lead and turn South Asia away from the abyss. The SAARC organisation, which has remained an exercise in protocol, must be energised. Each member must agree under a multilateral agreement to cut five percent of military spending annually, and earmark the money released for education and health.

Why spend a million dollars a day to contest the frozen heights of Siachen? Why not withdraw the troops a few miles down the ridgeline, continue to argue across a table, and save some money? India and Pakistan must also come to an understanding on the nuclear issue, rather than keep embarrassing each other in front of others at UN forums, so that an enormous packet of funds can become available for social needs.

The existing political structures of India and Pakistan are not conditioned to accept such proposals, which require nationality and statesmanship. The people should take the lead, through energetic advocacy and use of the increasingly powerful and borderless media. It is time for civil society to conduct a "bypass operation" around reluctant politicians, who are never willing to stake their lives and reputations for social justice.

Of course, there are tremendous vested interests in the power structures of the two countries, among policy-makers and military generals. That is a given. People are hesitant to challenge defence expenditure because it is camouflaged under the shroud of national security. There is little understanding of the social opportunity costs of buying more and more sophisticated armaments. But why should we assume that these things are immutable?

Only the people of South Asia can change the complexion of the region. The swamp of human despair can become a frontier of human hope once we begin to invest in education, training, and the spirit of the people. ♦



LETTERS

MILITARY

While I appreciated the candid responses by Gen Prajwalla SJB Rana in the interview (iThis is not a Royal Army, but the Royal Nepalese Army, #73), I wish Vijay Kumar had asked other pertinent questions like the lack of transparency within the military.

The army must change with the times, reform its old ways, and not just stick to its iold boyi traditions. We

should also look at whether we can afford such an expensive institution, and whether it can do more for development.

S Nepali Kathmandu

CIVIL

I was impressed by the article by Seira Tamang on basic civil rights and the responsibility of civil society (iEmergency soul searchingi, #73). Hope that article found its way into Nepali language papers too. It would also apply there.



Sarah Acland Kathmandu

ECONOMY

Binod Bhattarai says in iEconomic emergencyi (#74) that the government will have to spend over Rs 3 billion for security.

I really don't understand where this money is going to come from except by diverting it away from development. Money for weapons and guns and helicopters will not permanently solve the security problem—the long-term answer to that lies in spending more on development. The late King Birendra had the right idea, by pushing for Nepal as a Zone of Peace. War never resolves anything, negotiations are the only way.

Bibek Adhikary by email

POLITICS

The internal feuds and hatred of the leaders of the Nepali Congress have manifested many times over past 12 years, and have played a pivotal role in feeding corruption, discrediting democracy and inviting the present emergency. We are fed up with Kisunji and Girijababu, they are finished intellectually, and they have failed the Nepali nation. Girijababu is now calling for a imassive democratic alliancei when there is no alliance even within his own party. The two of them should retire from politics, and help save Nepali democracy.

Kumar Regmi Kathmandu

BULLETS

No, it's not because of the state of emergency that my

wife and I have quarantined our son at home. Nor is it because there are dangerous Maoists (or is it terrorists?) out there. Actually it is because last week, two of our neighbours in Chun Devi found stray bullets in their yards, one still warm. The next time you are strolling in town and you see a guy in a green suit behind sandbags packing a huge weapon, you may wonder: is he providing security or is he a safety hazard?

Paolo Bonetti Chandol

REASON

The misgivings of the Nepali Times team about their editorial role (iAnimated suspensioni, #73) are misplaced. In this age of unreason, when cynicism, passion, demagoguery, dissimulation and

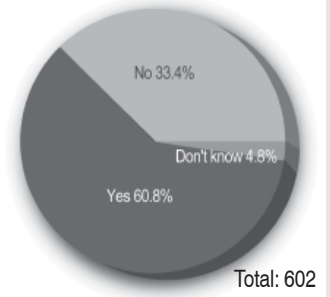
falsity rule the roost, your weekly editorials stand out as a beacon of hope, a clarion call to moderation and the voice of reason. Keep up the good work.

Saradchandrika Sharma PK Campus

CORRECTION:

The pie chart for the poll in #74 was incorrect. This is how it should have been:

Q Do you think the SAARC Summit will be held as scheduled?



Not all gloom and doom



KUNDA DIXIT

Community forests drape mountainside in Dhading district.

RAMYATA LIMBU
Nepal has lurched from one crisis to another since the restoration of democracy in 1990. The latest is the declaration of a state of national emergency. But however bleak things may look, Nepal has forged ahead in many areas with innovative development initiatives, and pioneering rural development schemes that have sustained themselves over the years.

- Despite headlines about deforestation, the Himalayan midhills have seen a dramatic return of forest cover in the past 15 years.
- Democracy may be in crisis in the capital, but local self-governance and the revolutionary Decentralisation Act have boosted grassroots development giving rural Nepalis the power to make the decisions that affect their daily lives.
- Until the emergency was declared, the Nepali media was perhaps the most free in South Asia. Nepal was the first country in the region to allow community FM stations and private broadcasters.

- The deregulation of Nepal's hydropower to foreign investors was also a South Asian first, it has allowed a slew of medium-scale projects to come on stream and ended chronic electricity shortage.
- Domestic aviation took a great leap forward with privatisation, improving services, reducing prices and providing valuable service to the tourism industry.
- More than a quarter of Nepal's land area is made up of national parks and protected areas.

Everytime there are floods in India and Bangladesh during the annual monsoon season, fingers are pointed at the denudation in the hills of the Nepal Himalaya. Researchers wrote books 20 years ago on how deforestation and soil erosion would turn Nepal into a desert before the end of the century. Not only did that not happen, Nepal is green again.

In 1993, the government passed the community forestry law which handed ownership and management of commons in rural areas to village

committees. Villagers formed user groups to plant, protect and manage forests. Within years, denuded slopes had turned into lush forests in districts like Sindhupalchok, Kabhre, Dhading and Tanahu. Nepal's community forestry experts are now helping other countries in the world to replicate the success here.

Even though Nepal's aggregate forest cover has gone down—reflecting deforestation in the tarai plains—the resurgence of the canopy in the mid-hills is real. Says Bhumi Raman Nepal, one of the earliest activists for grassroots ownership of forests: “When we began lobbying to give forests back to communities two decades ago, we thought it would take 50 years for our dream to come true.” Bhumi Raman is now the chairman of the Forest and Environment Conservation Group in Dhading district. “Just look at the trees now.”

Think locally

Nepal's constitution says in its preamble that people should be allowed to participate in political decision-making. No one believed devolution of power could happen in a society with such strong feudal controls. But it did. Despite political wrangling, parliament passed a revolutionary law that would make decentralisation real. The Local Self-Governance Act (1998) broke traditional and cultural barriers, and transferred not just decision-making authority but also the right to frame local laws to elected village and district committees.

Implementation of the law has not been as fast as expected, but local governance units around the country have begun to exercise their new powers. And in places where this has happened, decentralisation has finally begun to deliver democracy. Starting next fiscal year, local bodies will be allowed full authority to plan and implement projects for agriculture, postal services, primary education and basic health care.



WWF NEPAL

Rhino at Chitwan being pursued for translocation.

Despite all the bad news, Nepal has shown considerable progress in the past 12 years. We review some of the little-known success stories.

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In a country where the central government has lost credibility, this could be the answer to Nepal's ills, including the Maoist insurgency. “Where decentralisation has worked, there have been little problems even from the Maoists,” Krishna Prasad Sapkota of the Kavre District Development Committee told us recently. “What happens when people's expectations are raised and there is no delivery?” he asks, and answers: “It will just turn young people into extremists.”

The vision thing

Unnoticed, by the rest of the world, Nepalis have also mastered the craft of providing low-cost, reliable and world-class ophthalmologic care. Twenty years ago, if Nepalis developed cataracts they either went blind or had to go to India for treatment. Today, thousands of patients from India line up at Nepali eye hospitals and specialised centres in the tarai for treatment.

It is one of those little-known success stories of development, today

Nepal is a regional leader in eye care. In 1981, there was only one eye hospital in Nepal, today there are 17 hospitals and 32 other eye care centres. Sanduk Ruit, is the director of the Nepal Eye Program who pioneered low-cost modern cataract surgery, and has trained doctors in Eritrea, Cambodia, China, Vietnam and Burma. He says: “In a country like ours, the trick is to provide reliable service cheaply.”

Wild successes

In November 2000, Nepal showcased its successes in wildlife conservation by holding a major conference of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). And there was a lot to be proud of: the rescue of Nepal's one-horned rhinoceros from the brink of extinction, the dramatic comeback of the Royal Bengal Tiger in Chitwan, research on the elusive snow leopard, the conversion of nearly a quarter of Nepal's territory into national parks, and successes of eco-tourism models like the Annapurna Area Conservation Project (ACAP).

HERE AND THERE

by DANIEL LAK



Step back from the brink

Family squabbles are the worst. More than disharmonious, they're also never-ending, and as time goes by, hostilities resume for ever more trivial or incomprehensible reasons. Any one whose clan is prone to disagreements knows what I mean. And when you look around a region like this one, where everyone is related in some way, shape or form, add danger and cynical disregard for reality to an already explosive mix.

At the moment, I'm talking about those two feuding cousins, India and Pakistan. Their latest flare-up is holding much to ransom. Regional peace of course, the Himalayan environment if they confine any future fighting to convention weapons, the wider South Asian skies and soil if they go nuclear, poverty alleviation across their vast pool of poor people, investment in their flagging economies for the middle and upper classes, tourism in every country, including Nepal, badly in need of planeloads of spendthrift sophisticates. The list is bleakly endless.

And why are they fighting—or refusing to make peace—this time? Well, as ever, talk to one party and you hear how the other is totally to blame, a demon, a pariah, untrustworthy and a dealer in death. It matters not which one—each thinks ill of the other. In India, a free media spins constant speculative tales of support for Islamic extremism across a dangerous border, some true, others fearfully fantastic. The fantasies, in part, are because Islamabad denies Indian journalists visas. In Pakistan, people hear a nightly tirade disguised as news on state-run media, a litany of rape, pillage and human rights abuses in Kashmir, all blamed on Indian security forces or the government. Steps to curb those problems aren't mentioned. You had only to watch the scenes on television last week from the Wagah border crossing, crowds baying for each others' blood, Punjab 53 years after bloody partition still divided by carefully maintained hatreds.

Not that the assault on the Indian parliament on the 13th of December wasn't an outrage. As an attack on democracy and openness, it was evil. But

Mr Vajpayee does not want war. Nor does General Musharraf. But do they know just what is at stake here?



whoever is to blame, it is clearly part of the plan for groups like Al Qaeda—and yes, many of them are involved in fighting in Indian Kashmir, even based in Pakistan.

But don't they understand in Delhi that a war pitting a largely Hindu country against a Muslim state is exactly what the bad guys want? Equally, doesn't

General Musharraf understand that the days of supporting cross border militant groups in Kashmir are over? That any organisation advocating violence against India can no longer be based on Pakistani soil. It has to stop, and not just because Washington or London is worried about nuclear war. No one—including nasty nihilists like bin Laden and his ilk—should be allowed to think that violence works. Full stop.

But for that to be so, we all have to behave less emotionally, with more of an eye to the future and the fate of our children. Just because the Americans have chosen to use brute military force against the Al Qaeda doesn't mean that is the answer to everything. Indeed, many of us urged Washington to avoid easy options like bombing Afghanistan to dislodge the Taleban, precisely because of the can of multi-hued worms that now gapes open.

India—with full justification—sees itself deeply violated by an act of terror, the attack on Parliament. It endured similar acts in the past, and even a territorial invasion by Pakistani forces around Kargil in 1999, and did not threaten the region with war. Now, with Afghanistan still under US bombardment and crucial state elections in Uttar Pradesh in February, even a wise old moderate like Atal Behari Vajpayee can barely resist hardline and populist pressure to beat the war drums as loudly as possible.

I believe that those elections are what's pushing the current situation past critical mass. I also think Mr Vajpayee does not want war. Nor does General Musharraf. It's wrong, but the rest of us have no voice in a conflict that will engulf us all, poison our children and set this region back a hundred years or more. The two leaders are the key to this crisis. I hope they know just what is at stake, and what their places in history will reveal, whatever they do.

I plead with them on behalf of the overwhelmingly young population of South Asia, the people who crave peace and prosperity, not radiation sickness and annihilation. Step back from the brink, find common ground, win the Nobel Peace Prize. Or go down in history as men of war. ♦



Parking full at Pokhara airport with planes from private airlines.

Conservationist Chandra Gurung is a pioneer in some of these efforts, and has seen dramatic changes. "Today, Nepal is a leader in community based conservation in Asia. In 1988, seven percent of the income from tourism in ACAP went directly to communities there, today nearly half of it does," says Gurung, who is now the Nepal representative of WWF. Since 1961, the number of rhinos in the Royal Chitwan and Royal Bardia National Parks has grown six-fold to more than 600. Tigers which numbered less than a hundred have now gone up to 350, and 125 of them are breeding adults. In the Annapurnas, the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation is implementing a unique eco-tourism project that ploughs tourism income directly into the village economy to boost incomes and foster education and conservation. Learning from the Annapurna project, conservationists have replicated the eco-tourism model in Malaysia, Costa Rica and other areas. WWF and the government are now gearing up to implement the ambitious India-Nepal crossborder Tarai Arc Landscape (TAL). Jungle habitats of Nepal and India will be joined into a contiguous forest for tigers, rhinos and wild elephants. TAL will spread over 49,500 sq. kilometres starting from the Bagmati in the

Nepal tarai to the banks of Yamuna River in India.

Flying high

Till the early 1990s getting an air ticket on a Royal Nepal Airlines flight to a domestic destination was like winning a lottery. Seats were scarce and only government officials could fly without hassles. Today, the domestic airline network has expanded, private competition has brought down fares somewhat, but more importantly, flying has never been easier. All this is a result of the deregulation of domestic aviation in 1992. "Compared to other SAARC countries, the government here was more positive about private investment in airlines because it encouraged growth," says Narayan Singh Pun, an MP who runs his own helicopter company and an airline. "Now we need to update the policy to ensure that we can sustain the industry." This year's tourism slump has hit aviation the hardest. But the ones that are doing the best are those who had invested in domestic aviation and did not just rely on tourism.

Brain gain

Till the 1980s, Nepal had no medical schools other than the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu. There used to be just one engineering college

running under-graduate level courses. Today, there are more than 12 medical and engineering colleges catering to the increasing need for technical expertise. Some of these schools are among Asia's best. In 1998, Thailand's Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) ranked technical schools on the basis of the performance of their alumni in campuses. Nepal's oldest engineering school, the Institute of Engineering (IOE) Pulchowk has consistently ranked in the top ten. Last year it was ranked third in Asia in terms of calibre of graduates. This change had partially reversed a dominant trend of Nepalis heading to India, Pakistan or Bangladesh for higher technical studies. Today, Nepali medical schools have foreign students from the Maldives, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Power to the people

One of the most dramatic successes of the government's new investment policy was a paradigm shift in 1992 that prioritised medium-scale investments in cheap and quick power projects. "With political pluralism in 1990 hydro-generation also became pluralistic," recalls water expert Ajaya Dixit, "It provided an alternative to government-led development thinking." Despite development, only 15

percent of the population has access to electricity but with present trends, this is bound to increase in the years ahead. Problems of high tariffs and mismanagement exist, but compared to other countries in the region Nepal now has reliable and adequate power for the foreseeable future. Aside from larger projects, Nepal is also a model for the development of indigenously designed micro-hydro plants in the 5-20 kilowatt range which can easily be installed at sites with traditional water mills. Nepali micro-hydro technology has been exported to Lesotho, Sri Lanka and to parts of India. ♦

Bagmati finds friends

Kathmandu residents haven't given up on Bagmati yet. Rather than screw up their noses and ignore the rising piles of garbage on the banks of the Bagmati, a group of locals have come together in a campaign to revive the spirit of a largely cynical population. Sixty Friends of Bagmati got together last week to clean up the area around Kalopul, Teku. They believe it is possible to not only reverse the degradation of the Bagmati River, but to restore it to its former glory. The Friends, who aim to raise awareness among the locals about the plight of the river and encourage local people to take positive steps in reviving the river systems in the valley, collected two truckloads of rubbish, plastic and biodegradable waste, with equipment provided by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City. The Friends also plan to clean up the Teku-Thapathali area which covers approximately a 2-km stretch of riverbank and temples.



Mountain Year

After the SAARC Summit got us going, Nepal has a year full of mountains ahead. The opening of the Daman Mountainous Botanical Garden - a vantage point for viewing the Himalaya - paves the way for a variety of programs designed for 2002, including an international mountain film festival and an international mountain women's meet. Designated by the United Nations as the International Year of the Mountain, the year 2002 is to be spent promoting sustainable mountain development. 2002 will also see a series of programs to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the ascent of Mt Everest by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary.

Fake certificates

Jhapa Chief District Officer Chandra Bahadur Karki became the highest-ranking bureaucrat to be accused of presenting fake academic certificates for promotion. For the first time, the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) has filed a case against a joint secretary level (first-class) official. CIAA filed a case against Karki at Patan Appellate Court after obtaining necessary evidence to establish their case. Two other senior officials, under secretaries at the Ministry of Land Reform and Management Phatte Bahadur Batuwa and Sanat Kumar Regmi at its Lalitpur office have been charged of presenting fake academic qualifications for promotions. CIAA estimates that approximately 50,000 government employees have presented fake qualifications for promotion and recruitment. Presently, CIAA is investigating the academic qualifications of more than 100 joint secretaries and under secretaries. These are officials who had obtained their certificates from 12 different universities in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Declaration of wealth

Three cabinet members have declared their wealth. Ministers Ram Sharan Mahat, Bijaya Kumar Gachchhedhar and Jaya Prakash Prasad Gupta own houses and other housing plots in Kathmandu Valley. Each has at least two cars. Besides, all the three own more than four housing plots in their respective home districts. Interestingly, they do not seem too keen on claiming ancestral properties. Though the Nepali laws enables sons to make claim for equal distribution of parental properties among parents and brothers when they reach 18 years of age; all three Ministers have undivided (with their brothers) ancestral lands. They also hold an average of 700 grams of gold jewelry and silverware. They have also invested on shares, bonds, companies and have at least two bank accounts. Mahat is the only one has saved his money in US dollars. All three parliamentarians have made it to the cabinet at least three times.

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A home of one's own



MIN BAIRACHARYA

RAMYATA LIMBU

Santa couldn't have been more generous. That's what Anuradha Koirala, founder of Maiti Nepal, must be thinking. Never in her dreams did Nepal's nationally and internationally-known social worker—she's been on Oprah—think she'd be able to house her extended family of over 200 women and children under one roof, and a large one at that. But it's happening.

Maiti Nepal is preparing to move into its new home, a neat brick complex at Pingalshtan in Gaushala generously built by Dr Winfried Kill, a German philanthropist. Situated on over 4,900 sq m, the new Maiti Nepal Protection and Rehabilitation Centre will be officially opened on 20 January by Queen Komal.

"Having your own home is a dream come true," says an animated Koirala, proudly walking us through the new premises. Workmen and labourers scrub, paint and polish, adding hectic last-minute finishing

Maiti Nepal is getting ready to move into brand-new premises, with a little help from German friends.

touches. The petite social worker graciously acknowledges Dr Kill, an economist from the German city Bergisch Gladbach, who was so impressed by Maiti Nepal's work that he decided to donate \$1.7 million to build the new complex in memory of his 21-year-old daughter Sonja who died in a cycling accident on 20 January, 1993.

"I guess hard work and dedication do pay off," says Koirala as she bustles through corridors smelling of fresh paint in her trademark crisp cotton saree. A decade ago, Koirala, a former teacher, rented three tiny rooms in Baneswor, where she took in destitute women trying to make ends meet around Pashupatinath. They were women abandoned by their husbands, abused by their in-laws, some still

nursing babies, runaway children who found that life in Kathmandu was not so easy, and women working the streets.

The word spread, and the numbers of destitute children and women grew. Today Maiti Nepal is sheltering 138 children and 68 women in a couple of rented houses in Gaushala. It has also expanded as an institution, and runs eight halfway homes around the country for women intercepted being trafficked, one hospice for people with HIV/AIDS in east Nepal and another one planned, and a primary school in Kathmandu aptly named Teresa Boarding.

"The school was opened the day Mother Teresa passed away," says Koirala, speaking of her idol. A pioneer in HIV/AIDS rehabilitation and care in Nepal, Maiti Nepal recently won the \$50,000



MIN BAIRACHARYA

Reebok Human Rights Award. The new complex houses a legal section, a shelter each for children and women, and a 20-bed clinic operated by a doctor and four nurses trained in HIV/AIDS care. "Since there aren't

really any places that take in people with HIV, we expect a lot, especially mother-to-child cases, which are on the rise," says Koirala.

The complex has been designed to ensure that space is used most efficiently, with practical considerations being taken care of. "There are separate blocks for women and children, so the kids don't contract infectious diseases like tuberculosis, which many of the girls suffer from. There's a huge laundry room on the top floor to dry clothes in the monsoon, and also a 50,000 litre water recycling plant. And then there is Koirala's own touch—a small tulsi tree and a little temple. "Religion plays an important role in life," says the social worker.

Koirala appears to be enjoying setting up house. "We cannot compromise on quality, that's what Dr Kill has insisted," she says, sorting through piles of quilts and bed linen that she's selected herself. "I think the young ones will like greens,

from what they're used to in the villages."

When she's not interrogating traffickers or prodding parliamentarians to bring about effective policies to check trafficking, and attending international meets and congresses, she's usually among her extended family—patting a little head here, directing a stern reprimand there, giving a pep talk to her staff, and ticking off donors.

Says Gereon Wagner, a 37-year-old Maiti Nepal supporter, instrumental in contacting Dr Kill with the idea of helping the organisation, "I never expected such a thing to happen. We didn't even have a plan for a separate children's home."

Wagner first came to know of Maiti Nepal's work through a documentary on sex slavery in Asia. Initially Wagner, an independent business consultant from the same city as Dr Kill, approached the millionaire for funds to set up a café that Maiti Nepal girls would manage. "The

idea was to combine the café with an information centre on trafficking," says Wagner. But that idea has been put aside for the moment. "I'm too busy trying to help finish the complex in time for the opening," says he. ♦

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SOMEWHERE IN NEPAL

by PUSKAR BHUSAL



Naipaul, Udit and Tenzing

What if Sir Vidiadhar refuses honorary Nepali citizenship?

voice in the actor's blockbuster debut. After seeing how Nepalis could burst into a fiery orgy of patriotism against slanderous remarks everyone said the Indian actor had made but no one had heard him make last year, Udit should have been more circumspect while answering questions concerning his citizenship.

Regardless of what Udit says today, he probably can't forget the hours he spent squatting on the little lawn in front of Radio Nepal's yellowish studio with that other crooner from Birgunj. Their duet *Sainli ra maili poila gaye chan* spawned countless parodies before they decided to do their own video remix. Even today, when Udit speaks about Madhu Chettri, he sounds like he's referring to a mentor rather than a mate.

Udit might have wanted that national award so desperately this time that he didn't realise he was going overboard in identifying himself in that interview. He was not entirely inaccurate, though. The Koshi river is Saptari's Sorrow. If perennial floods forced young Udit and his siblings to flee to the safety of his maternal grandparents' abode on the southern side of the open border for part of the year, blame Mother Nature or the fathers of the dam project.

Udit might not have wanted to hurt us on purpose. Even if he did, maybe he wanted to get back at those who he thought messed up his recording schedules at Radio Nepal because his accent and complexion were a bit different. Or maybe he

couldn't forget those musicians who deliberately spoiled their arpeggios or struck the wrong note just to make him record extra takes. Nepalis unconnected with those studio machinations would have been gratified if Udit could have risen above those slights. But, again, it's easy to preach the virtues of magnanimity when you're not the one nursing the grievances.

Udit is perhaps more Nepali than the actress in Bombay who happens to have a politically prominent Nepali surname. That's not my slur, by the way. I'm just paraphrasing another Indian newspaper interviewer who responded to the leading lady's suggestion last year that she was the first Nepali in Bollywood who didn't have problems acknowledging her origins.

This brings us to where origins really do matter. How many prime ministers and foreign ministers can you name who were born outside Nepal? Three, four—or more? Count as many as you want, but you have to acknowledge that they didn't choose their birthplaces. When their ancestors were banished to Banaras or even further south after each shift in the power equations of the Nepali court, our forebears didn't rally to plead for compassion. If we can live with foreign-born leaders, can't we realise the futility of arguing over the character of the boy from Bharda who started out vocalising patriotic songs for Radio Nepal and decided to redefine himself as he moved along his career graph?

As for Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad, the Trinidad-born author long wrote of India as either an area of darkness or a wounded civilisation. Many

Indians nevertheless longed to see the day he got the Nobel Prize. Such abiding kinship must have inspired Naipaul to revise his views about India. Even then, the best he could do was come up with a portrayal of a country in the midst of a million mutinies. When he finally got the Nobel last year, Indians felt their perseverance had paid off. But Naipaul had other ideas while preparing his acceptance speech. Two years ago, somebody sent him papers suggesting that his ancestors might actually have come from Nepal. For a country still overwhelmed by the critical acclaim Samrat Upadhyaya got in the West, Naipaul's revelation had to merit nothing short of front-page-anchor display. One ebullient reader urged the government to extend Naipaul honorary Nepali citizenship. Other commentators were already thinking a step ahead, wondering whether we would have any determination left to move on if he declined.

Udit could have done what a prominent personality of an earlier era did in a similar situation. When Tenzing Norgay became part of the

first duo to conquer Mount Everest, there was much political controversy between Nepal and India. We wanted Tenzing to assert he was ours and the Indians wanted him to affirm he was theirs. Tenzing, who at the age of 18 left Nepal for Darjeeling where he hoped to be able to join one of the British expeditions to Everest, was fed up with the feuding. "I was born in the womb of Nepal and raised in the lap of India," he once told a reporter. No doubt, the game of celebrity-snatching continues, with one author claiming as recently as a year ago that Tenzing actually might have been born and raised in Tibet. But since the man himself had already spoken, we didn't have to be too distressed by endless speculation.

Udit's dilemma is different. And not only because he's the one making conflicting assertions depending on which side of the border he happens to be on. But the singer's identity crisis is not unlike that of Naipaul's protagonist in his 1979 best-seller, *A Bend in the River*. ♦

SUBHAS RAI

Given the national mood of exuberance it has produced, VS Naipaul's apparent acknowledgement of his Nepali roots seems to have come as a balm for Nepalis bruised by Udit Narayan Jha's reported rejection of his. The sad part about the playback singer is

that every time he tries to shape an identity that would please fans on both sides of the border, he ends up in deeper trouble. If he can be accused of anything new this time—apart from spousal abuse—it has to be poor judgement. Udit should have learned from Hrithik Roshan, who he lent his

project.

FOLLOW-UP

Still Nepal Oil Corruption

There was a sabotage scare at the airport two weeks ago. The army crew refuelling a helicopter that was to ferry Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba discovered unidentified floating objects in the aviation fuel. A swift examination revealed that the sludge had resulted from a ruptured valve in the storage tank. The problem was corrected immediately because the army crew showed the sample to their VVIP passenger.

But such speed and efficiency is a lot more uncommon in matters concerning adulterated fuel at the Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC), which has the dubious distinction of being one of Nepal's most corrupt public sector undertakings with fuel adulteration kickbacks up and down the line.

When government last week announced that it was setting up a task force to recommend improvements at the NOC, there seemed to be hope that Nepalis might soon be able to buy unadulterated fuel. But those who thought the committee would also look into fuel adulteration and the corruption associated with it were mistaken. Sher Bahadur Pandey, head of the task force, told us his study was a way to respond to the changes taking place in the business of importing and selling fuel, and would make recommendations on making the NOC "more effective". He told us: "It will not be an investigation." Then why bother?

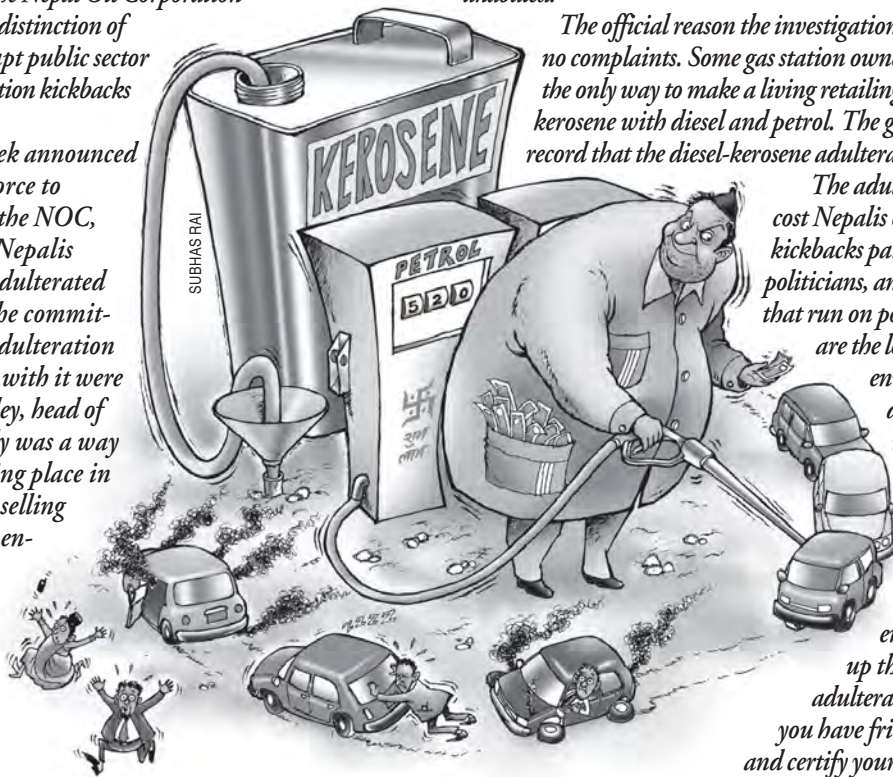
Just over a year ago, after a series of reports on fuel adulteration in the

press (including "Nepal Oil Corruption", NT #19), the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies ordered a probe. And that was the end of that. The probe committee decided its fact-finding mission would consist of writing to some newspapers, asking for evidence of their reports. The committee also issued public notices calling on people to report adulteration. Meanwhile, during the middle of a state of national emergency, one of the most blatant and open forms of corruption in the kingdom goes on unabated.

The official reason the investigation fizzled out was there were no complaints. Some gas station owners had openly admitted that the only way to make a living retailing oil was by mixing subsidised kerosene with diesel and petrol. The gas station owner told us on record that the diesel-kerosene adulteration was 50-50.

The adulteration of fuels is said to cost Nepalis over Rs 1.2 billion in kickbacks paid to NOC staffers and politicians, and maintenance of vehicles that run on poor quality oils. Besides, there are the longer-term health and environmental impacts that are difficult to quantify. The mafia that is responsible for adulteration and corruption in the NOC are at large.

Some anti-corruption activists say the government should use its emergency powers and clean up the act. It is impossible to adulterate and get away with it unless you have friends at the NOC who test and certify your supplies. ♦



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SAARC occupancy



The SAARC summit has given Kathmandu hotels a much-needed occupancy boost, coming in a year that has seen tourism slump to perhaps the lowest levels ever. The larger hotels on the conference circuit are booked to capacity and the Soaltee Crowne Plaza, which will be hosting the heads of state and government in special suites, has the largest cut of the pie. The Everest Hotel, which has the SAARC media centre, is also booked to capacity and has even converted some of its regular restaurants into rooms for press briefings. Up on the hill east of Kathmandu, the Club Himalaya Nagarkot Resort, is booked for the nights of 4 and 5 January. The mountain resort will be where the heads of state and government will head for a retreat, the only time in the summit that leaders will have the chance to interact informally and out of the eye of television cameras.

“Regular” tourism

Three years after Nepal began focussed tourism marketing, 2001 was as bad as it could be in terms of arrivals. Last week, the Nepal Tourism Board announced the preliminary numbers for 2001 and said arrivals by air were down by about 20 percent, compared to 2000 numbers and the arrivals that year were already low compared with 1999. Indian arrivals dropped by a whopping 33 percent and those from third countries by almost 17 percent. Pradeep Raj Pandey, Chief Executive Officer of NTB says all this has happened despite increased efforts to market Nepal in both India and overseas. The effort had begun to pay off early in the year when arrivals had begun picking up. The numbers began tumbling after the 1 June royal massacre, and were pushed further down after the 11 September terrorist attacks in the United States. The emergency has also taken its toll on tourism: the year-end total arrivals were 43 percent of a full ten percentage points lower than the declining figures in the first ten months of the year.

Government last week announced some measures to bail out the industry, especially hotels, whose overdue electricity bills are to be rescheduled, and there is also talk of helping banks reschedule bank loans. The government will even waive visa fees for overnight visitors, though industry sources say that won't make much of a difference. The industry, in an attempt to reduce overall package costs to Nepal had asked the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation waive visa fees for three-day visitors. However, when immigration statistics were extrapolated to assess how much that could cost in lost revenue, it turned out that the fees for about 100,000 tourists would be lost, hence the one-day-free gimmick. Still NTB officials are hoping they will get transit passengers here and then be able to lure them for a longer return visit. The NTB also says it will also step up its marketing efforts in the 12 countries that provide 75 percent of Nepal's tourists. The primary markets are India, USA, Japan, United Kingdom and Germany. France, Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Australia are the major secondary markets.

Euro currencies

The central bank discontinued maintaining separate exchange rates for several European currencies starting 1 January. That means banks will stop exchanging German Marks, Dutch Guilders, French Francs, Austrian Schillings, Belgian Francs and Italian Lira. Commercial banks with stocks of these currencies will have to sell them to the central bank by 15 January. The exchange of these European currencies will in future be based on their locking rate with the Euro, the Nepal Rastra Bank said.

Paddy prices

The price of the new rice crop has fallen to the lowest levels in recent times, much of the drop taking place in this past year and the year before. A study by the Agriculture Department and the Agriculture Marketing Directorate says the drop was steepest in 2000, and the trend continued during 2001. The prices have dropped by an average of Rs 200 between 1996 and 2001. The main reason for the drop in prices is lower prices across the open border with India.

Big shark, little fish



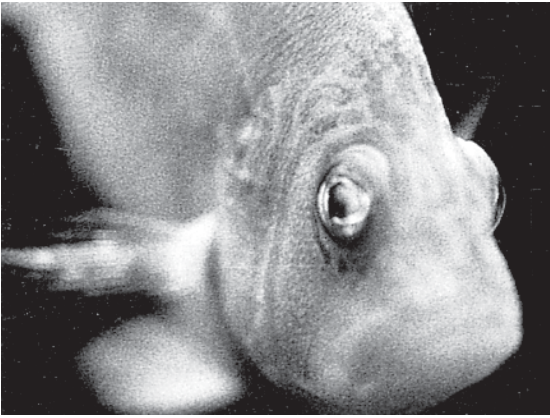
The pundits of this region harp on about the economic sense of getting together, ignoring the political sense that requires.

People are getting aggressive. The Sri Lanka Investment Promotion Board has been advertising in Indian newspapers and magazines extolling the competitive advantages available to Indian industries that might want to set up shop in the island. How true is this, one wonders. Sure, there are competitive advantages for countries within South Asia, including Nepal, to woo Indian industries with, but how does that play with the rhetoric of South Asian cooperation—within all the restrictions we impose on each other?

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises of a big shark and small fish, in terms of population, economic growth and GDP. In the context of the political issues that the region has to deal with, it is worth asking whether this association of supposedly equal partners makes economic sense or not. It is time for some introspection, and analysis of what the economic benefits of the association have been in the past fifteen years, and not simply endorsing or moving to endorse the supposedly brilliant idea of SAFTA. In a business environment where Indian domestic industries are crying foul over Nepali exports to India, and refusing to renew treaties, the Beed does wonder where that wretched spirit of co-operation is when you need, like when Nepali exports are still on the lower side of the decimal as far as the total volume of Indian imports is concerned. Are we simply going after SAFTA, blinkers on, because it has been adopted once and

so 'ought to' continue? Do the numbers make sense? Does the economics of it pan out?

Economies cannot be interdependent and benefit from the desire (if not the fact) of close linkages until there is political will and co-operation. It is not possible, for instance, to have regional headquarters for multinational



companies. The person who sits in Delhi may not be able to control Pakistan operations, and a person in Islamabad, similarly, will likely have no say in Indian operations. While a company that has regional headquarters in Bangkok can have full control of companies in South East Asia, this cannot be replicated in Kathmandu. How can we even begin to harp, as is our wont, on the NAFTA or ASEAN models of economic growth, when barbed wire fences, embankments and border posts are of perennial and prime importance?

Sure, the potential of this region is immense, and though we don't need to be told it again, the Beed will remind readers that a quarter of the world's population live here. Just consider even tourism, where loosening political boundaries and freeing up transportation—and

allowing airlines freer use of each other's airspace—would mean immense gains for all nations. Allow easier and cheaper transportation, and then only will we know what free trade can do. The benefits of cheaper sources of energy cannot be harnessed for the benefit of the region if free flow of power between countries is impossible. If we wire the region—as a region, not as a collection of fiercely independent and self-sufficient countries—it can mean a cheaper source of power for all of us, whether from the waters of Nepal and Bhutan or the natural gas of Bangladesh. Similarly, the potential of free access to the educational institutions and health care systems of each

other's countries would reduce the social costs of all our economies. Network the communication system, and global companies would find us almost irresistible.

Perhaps in trying to make the SAARC a success only within its limited political boundaries, we are limiting our thoughts on the economic potential of the region. The WTO and China's accession to it, together with a decade-and-a-half of economic reforms have changed the landscape of the regional economy. It is obvious: for survival, leave alone prosperity, there are few options for our economies than to band together under various arrangements. Whether SAARC and SAFTA are the best is debatable. ♦

Readers can post their views at arthabeed@yahoo.com

INTERVIEW

“South Asia must prepare for globalisation and manage capital flows effectively.”



Pradumna B Rana is a Nepali economist who is Director of the Asian Development Bank's Regional Economic Monitoring Unit (REMU) which was established in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis in 1999 to help Asian countries harness the benefits of global financial integration and international capital flows. Rana spoke to Nepali Times in Manila about the new Asian crisis, prospects for SAARC cooperation and prospects for Nepal.

Nepali Times: There is a new economic crisis verging on recession in Asia, how is this different from the 1997-98 crisis? Pradumna Rana: Sharp economic slowdown in East Asia: Yes. But a recurrence of the crisis: No. These are the key messages of our December 2001 Asia Economic Monitor report. In 1997-1998, when we experienced a severe crisis in East Asia, it was mainly the countries with open capital accounts such as Indonesia, Korea, and Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand that were affected the most. This time around

all countries are affected depending on their openness to trade. All Asian countries are experiencing a common external shock namely a synchronised slowdown in the major export markets in US, Japan, and Europe.

Is it true that the less developed parts of Asia, like Nepal, are cushioned by the fact they are not as closely linked to the globalised economy, as say, Thailand, Malaysia or Singapore? That is correct. Countries that have been less open to trade and capital flows and, therefore, relatively less linked to the global economy have been relatively less affected than those that are open. This, of course, does not mean that countries should control trade and capital flows. The East Asian experience shows that openness to trade and capital flows brings in immense amounts of benefits in terms of growth and poverty reduction. But globalization has to be managed effectively. Reforms have to be designed and sequenced properly.

From your vantage point, what kind of policies have worked in turning around the economies of Asian countries? The rapid growth in the US economy during 1999 and 2000 had helped the region to recover quickly from the crisis. But policies also mattered. The Asian crisis of 1997-1998 was a capital account crisis. This means that investors panicked and fled when they saw weaknesses in the banking and corporate sectors leading to currency devaluations and banking crisis in the region. The initial responses which comprised contradictory monetary and fiscal policies were not appropriate in such a situation. Subsequently, however, the stance of these policies were altered and they contributed to the recovery of the region. Efforts to resolve banking sector and corporate sector problems have also played an important role, although a lot more remains to be done.

As a Nepali, what kind of lessons do you see in this for Nepal? Globalization is for real. It cannot be wished away. Hence the major lesson for Nepal, or for that matter other South Asian countries that are fairly closed, is that countries should prepare for globalisation and manage capital flows effectively. This requires actions at the individual country and sub-regional level because financial contagion tends to be very virulent. Countries need to strengthen banks and recapitalize

them so that they can intermediate effectively between entities. Countries also need to develop well-functioning capital markets to reduce the risks of potential instability in an integrated world. Most importantly, capital account liberalisation should be sequenced properly. It is not advisable for countries to open up their capital account too hastily and in full force. Prudence in capital account, however, does not mean being complacent and freezing the reform process because the benefits of globalization are large. It means adopting a pace of liberalization consistent with the state of development of the financial sector and the soundness of macroeconomic management.

At the sub-regional level, South Asian countries need to further enhance cooperation in monetary and financial areas. The establishment of the SAARC Finance group, under which Finance Secretaries and central bank governors meet to discuss issues of common interest, is a good beginning. They should also participate in the on-going efforts to promote monetary cooperation is East Asia.

How far are we from setting up an IMF type monetary fund for Asian economies?

The Asian Monetary Fund was proposed soon after the Asian crisis began in 1997 but the idea was shot down very quickly. In its stead, the ASEAN and ASEAN+3 Surveillance Process was established. Under this Process, the Finance Ministers of the East Asian region get together twice a year for peer review of economic policies and exchanging information on recent developments of mutual interest. In March 2001, in the sidelines of the ADB's annual meeting, the Ministers also announced the Chiang Mai Initiative under which a network of bilateral swap arrangements are being arranged among the countries. Efforts are being made to further enhance monetary and financial cooperation in East Asia including developing some collaborative exchange rate arrangements and establishing an early warning system. The ADB is supporting these efforts. Such experiences could be useful for South Asia as well in order to prevent and, if not, to manage a crisis.

As for the Asian Monetary Fund, although it was shot down earlier as I already said, it has not been completely forgotten and keeps being revived every now and then under different names. ♦

Not according to plan

The National Planning Commission seems to be suited to more authoritarian times. Is there still a role for it?

BINOD BHATTARAI
Every once in a while Nepal's National Planning Commission goes through an existential crisis. The NPC is always in a heads I lose tails you win situation with politicians. When things go wrong, planners are blamed and in the rare occasion when things go well, politicians take the credit.

The NPC is currently putting final touches on its Tenth Five-Year Plan, which some are already saying will be Nepal's "Poverty Reduction Strategy". It is reviewing and evaluating the Ninth Plan and incorporating changes into the new document expected to be readied later this year.

Nepal has been making Soviet-style five-year plans since 1956, but doesn't have much to show for it. Will the Tenth Plan be any different? "We are trying to focus on poverty reduction, to be attained by maintaining a stable macro-economy," says Dr Shankar Sharma. "There are five priority areas: agriculture, health, education, water resources and rural infrastructure."

Sharma thinks the new five-year plan may be the one that finally does it. It will primarily be focussed on poverty-reduction, and be the first one to be backed with a realistic budget. But that was before the emergency was declared and the army was deployed against the Maoists. The added expenditures for the war and how it will unfold may reflect on the eventual outcome.

The Tenth plan's budgetary



Shankar Sharma

backup will be the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) which is now being drawn up, and its finalisation may help secure funding.

Every new five-year plan is greeted with a chorus of criticism about the effectiveness of the NPC. This time will be no different, and there is already talk of a major reshuffle of its membership. The fundamental questions about whether we need an NPC keeps coming up, especially since 1990 when short-term political expediency has become more important than a long-term strategy, but the debate usually fizzles out.

Today's NPC is a misfit. It is outside the political loop because even though the Prime Minister chairs it, it does not have effective cabinet representation. The NPC



Mohan Man Sainju

was created by a cabinet decision and does not have statutory anchor.

Its policies therefore do not reflect the political priorities of parties or a nationally accepted framework that is vetted by parliament. And for Nepal's donors, the NPC remains a convenient window through which to bypass politicians and the bureaucracy and push projects of choice.

It wasn't always like this. During the Panchayat, the NPC was at the centre of things. Those were the days when it had a role in controlling other ministries—possibly reflecting the authority of the absolute monarch. Dr Mohan Man Sainju who was vice-chairman during the 1980s remembers: "We did not have to worry who the prime minister was and how political gimmicks would influence



Ram Sharan Mahat

us." Sainju, like technocrats before him, were appointed by the king and were able to focus continuously on planning and co-ordination. "Our chain of command was very clear," adds the economist who now heads the Institute of Integrated Development Studies (IIDS).

Many former members dismiss today's NPC as a "dead institution". Even technocrats working in it say it has become an employment agency for political appointees and rejects from other ministries. They wallow there until retirement or till some political benefactor comes and bails them out. "This has to change, otherwise we may as well close it down," said one insider.

Even after democracy the NPC could have worked to push the strategies of the party in power. But, of course, things didn't work out



Dipak Gyawali

that way. NPC appointments ended up reflecting the power tussles within the ruling party eroding the even credibility of the top planning jobs. After ten years of democracy, NPC jobs are not as coveted as they used to be.

Engineer-economist Dipak Gyawali was sounded out for NPC membership but turned it down. He does not mince his words about why: "The NPC has a basic structural flaw. It has little, or no role today." Gyawali's main criticism is that the NPC doesn't have the institutional mechanism to analyse and learn from past failures. "I have not found any analysis done by NPC on major projects such as the Arun III or even Mahakali," says Gyawali. "What is the point if decisions on such important projects with

serious implications on the country are made without even getting the NPC's input?"

NPC insiders admit that the professional team of technocrats, all well trained and experienced, end up being government speechwriters or proposal writers for donors. They are convinced there is no way the NPC can be reformed without a clarification on the chain of command.

Today even NPC members don't hesitate to admit that the institution could have done better. Many are also convinced it is not possible within the existing governance mechanism. Still, most people we spoke to for this article agreed on the need for an agency to do the "big-picture long-term thinking".

Says Sharma: "There is no question that we need a vision or a plan, or whatever you want to call it. Someone has to do it. Our concern should be why the plans haven't worked." One of the reasons could be the NPC's overall incompatibility with the changed polity after 1990, which reflects on plan implementation.

Agriculture, for example, was the priority of the 9th plan but according to Sharma, investment in the sector in real terms was actually down by almost 36 percent during the plan period. And every plan is derailed because of funding gaps caused by diversion of funds to new politically tinged projects.

Despite all this, Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat, who was once vice-chairman in the early 1990s, remains a strong advocate of retaining the NPC. "That is one place where we can get professional analysis done. There is still a role for planning. And it is still relatively unaffected by politics." ♦



Summiteering by air

If the SAARC Summit gets unbearable, delegates can get away to other great summits.

View from the cockpit of a Beech 1900C. Mt Everest and Makalu on the horizon, with Namche Bazar in the valley below.

JANAKI GURUNG

Summit this, summit that. By now, most Kathmandu Valley residents and very likely a good number of visitors here are somewhat tired of the S word. And yet, it has another, more sublime meaning. To get away from it all, and also to start the International Year of the Mountains in a fitting manner, we propose the Mountain Flight, an aerial pilgrimage over some of the most awe-inspiring landscape in the world.

There are people who will try to tell you that most flights in Nepal are mountain flights "one way or the other." Do not believe them.

It is spectacular to fly from, say Pokhara to Jomsom and feel like you're about to hurtle over headlong into Nilgiri and Machapuchre, but an entire 30-40 minute flight dedicated solely to ogling at mountains is a different kind of decadence entirely. Sort of like the difference between Nescafe and Colombian. And the only IATA-approved flights in the world

that take off and land from the same airport.

A mountain flight is a kind of meditation. There is no one sitting next to you, resting their chin on your shoulder or showing you photographs of their grandchildren. On the more superior flights, such as the Beechcraft 1900 C and D that Mountain Air and Buddha Air use, the next seat is across the aisle and the windows are large. And as there is no destination—you come back to the same airport you take off from—your mind is focused solely on the moment, and the incredible sight of the highest peaks in the world, born of violent tectonic upheavals, looking like so many whipped egg whites in an Iles Flotantes desert.

Even as tourism has risen and fallen in the last four years, the number of tourists taking mountain flights has quadrupled—nearly 70,000 people took the Everest flypast in 2001. It is expensive, at \$109 a pop (the rate is lower for Nepali and Indian nationals), but worth every cent. And the good

thing is, with the new higher-flying, pressurised aircraft, no matter how rainy or fog-bound Kathmandu may be, and even during the worst monsoon rains, the flights do take off. In winter, flights are delayed by fog in Kathmandu, but once you climb steeply out of the Valley, and you soar over the haze you get a splendid fly-past of the world's highest mountains.

The most frequently asked question aside from which airline offers the best views, is which side of the plane to sit on. It is now official: the right-hand window seats are better because the mountains are closer on the flight back, but the return flight is also shorter, since the plane is descending. If you are on the right, you will have to curb your impatience on the outbound leg, as the passengers across the aisle go oohing and aahing. On some flights, though, it might be possible to use this time to venture into the cockpit and be more astounded than you thought was possible, as you seem even closer to the peaks



Window on the roof of the world during the one-hour flight.

than from the cabin.

Another common question is: how close do we get to Everest? The answer is: it depends. If there is turbulence and clouds, you could be pushed further away. Later in winter the jet stream makes the flights bumpier, and planes don't venture closer than 20 km from the

Lhotse-Nuptse Wall. Generally, the earlier morning flights are less bumpy, but fog in winter can often delay even the first flight by as much as four hours.

Beginning with the somewhat grandfatherly and stentorian Ganesh Himal north-east of the Valley, past cuties like Langtang,

the long ridge of Xixapangma with its mussel-like striations, and Dorje Lakpa, which appears a perfect pyramid from every angle of the mountain flight, you head towards Phurbi Gyachu and the twin peaks of Gauri Shankar. Behind it looms the fortress-like mass of Melungtse in Tibet, which could be an ice

As the SAARC summitteers arrive, you need to know

- ❖ Himal is the only South Asian magazine.
- ❖ The January 2002 issue is just out.
- ❖ It is a "South Asia special".
- ❖ It challenges SAARC regionalism.
- ❖ It proposes an alternative regionalism.
- ❖ It contains a special gift:
A downside-up atlas-quality map of South Asia.



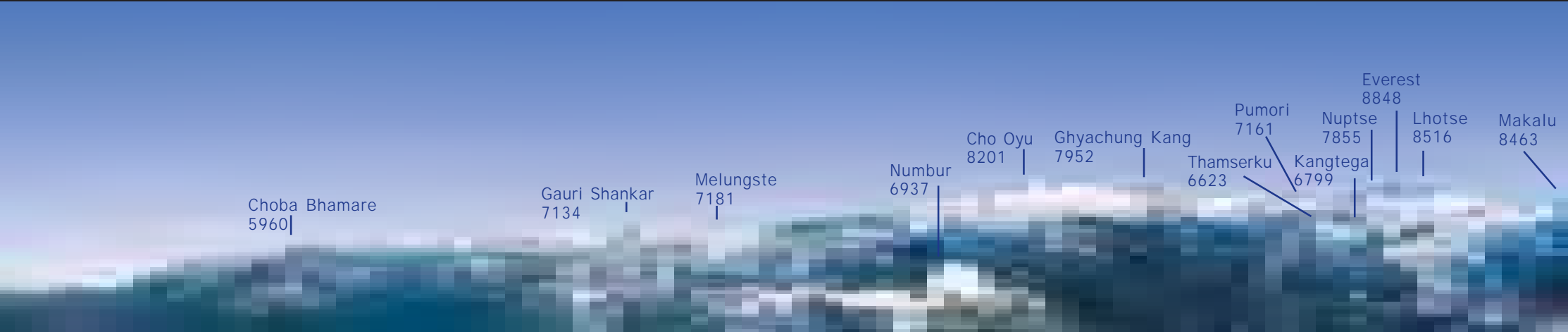
Extra copies of the Himal, as well as the map separately, are available at all major book shops including: Pilgrims (Thamel, Kuponhole), Saraswati Book House (Pulchowk), Ratna Book Distributors (Bagbazaar, Bhotahity), Mandala Book House (Kantipath), Ekta Books (Thapathali, Manbhawan), Gemini (Jawalakhet), and Barnes & Nobel (Thamel). To subscribe, whether you live in Quetta or Colombo or Chittagong, call Rinzina at tel: 543333

Which mountain flight to take?

It was only after the deregulation of the domestic airline industry in Nepal that private airlines started gearing up for the profitable sight-seeing flights. Three airlines, in particular, have made Mt Everest flights their niche markets:



Buddha Air and Mountain Air. Fares may vary depending on the travel agent, but the official cost quoted by all airlines is \$109 for foreigners, IRs3,000 for Indians and Rs 4,800 for Nepalis. Other airlines like Necon Air and Cosmic Air also operate mountain flights, but these make up a smaller proportion of their total revenue. Cosmic has aisle seats and does not guarantee you a window seat, but Necon says it sells only 23 seats at the back of its ATR-42 and offers a \$164 couple discount for a second person in the aisle seat. The Beechcraft flown by Buddha Air and Mountain Air are the best bet, and Buddha's 1900 D allows you to stand up to your full height inside the craft (provided, that is, you are under six ft).



sculpture of a Lo Manthang palace, or the Potala. In the middle of this panorama, and for the rest of the flight, you can often see past the mountains and into the Tibetan Plateau, brown and arid, but for the occasional deep blue of its lakes.

For those who have spent time in the Valley, this segment of the flight is like meeting local heroes and finding that they are just as nice in real life. It is at this point that, as you get even closer, the 25,000 ft cruising altitude of even the Beech seems inadequate. You will encounter four eight-thousanders—there are only ten in the world—including The Big One, and their summits will be even higher than the plane.

Chugimago (6,297 m), Pigfenago (6,620 m), Numbur (6,957 m) and Karyolung (6,511 m) are nice enough, snow-topped and with a whimsical sense of shape, but Cho Oyu ((8,201), is different. Dark and brooding, it seems to say, like Hamlet, that the rest is silence. And indeed it is, for then hoves into view Everest, and the sudden silence is only broken by the clicks of cameras. An enormous mass of dark, solid granite flanked by its

handmaidens, squat, table-like Nuptse (7,855 m) and perky Lhotse (8,516 m), it isn't the most attractive mountain in the world. Ama Dablam (6,812 m), way below to the east, is far more charming, with its reassuring symmetry and snowy face. But Everest brings home to you, far more than any other sight, just how extreme the terrain is. This close up it looks so inhospitable you wonder why anyone would want to go up that desolate, rocky face. And yet, if you think one step further, you start to understand a little why mountains can drive people to distraction. There is something almost holy in the magnificence and expanse of Himalaya. When you think about the violence of the tectonic forces that caused the Indian landmass to collide with the Eurasian plate, sending rocks soaring into the stratosphere, the true scale of the planet comes home to you.

The final treat is Makalu, at 8,463 m the fifth-highest mountain in the world, its pink rock face exuding a calm detachment. If you're really lucky and manage to look out of the right-hand side of the cockpit at just the right



Melungste's elegant flanks and the Tibetan Plateau beyond.

moment, you may catch a glimpse of Kangchenjunga (8,586 m), the third-highest mountain in the world, and the second-highest in Nepal. The turn-around is a good time to catch a glimpse of the chaos

of the Khumbu Icefall, and the second-longest glacier in Nepal, the Khumbu Glacier. There is Namche Bazar, the strating point for the Everest Trek and headquarters of the Sagarmatha National Park. ♦

FOR BOOKINGS		
Airline	Phones	Aircraft
Buddha Air	542494, 437025	Beech 1900D
Cosmic Air	241053, 244955	SAAB 340
Mountain Air	489065	Beech 1900C
Necon Air	480565	ATR-42
Shangri-La Air	439692, 416028	Beech



Buddha Air's Mountain Flights wait out the morning fog at Kathmandu Airport.



Mountain Air returns for another plane-load of summiters on a brilliant winter morning.



Debates over genetically modified (GM) foods engulf every corner of the globe. While many concerns about GM foods are legitimate, these debates mostly reflect the interests of developed countries. But countries facing constant threats to their food supply consider access to new biotechnological techniques as essential to their development. Their hopes of using these technologies safely and responsibly are threatened by environmental and consumer activism in industrialised countries.

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a necklace and a large earring. Her face is covered in digital-themed makeup, including blue and orange eye makeup and a blue lip. A large, stylized 'WWW2002' logo is overlaid on her face. The background is black with a grid of small, glowing orange squares. The text 'Wave web winner 2002' is written in a stylized font across the top of the image. The text 'make your mark on the web' is written in a stylized font across the bottom of the image. The text 'The website designing contest' is written in a stylized font across the bottom of the image. The text 'Sponsored by Mercantile' is written in a stylized font across the bottom of the image.

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COMMENT

by ALBERTO ALESINA AND ENRICO SPOLAORE

The problem of oil

It isn't scarcity, but volatility. And even that may soon not be an issue.

The price of oil was supposed to skyrocket after 11 September due to political instability in the Middle East. Instead, it has dropped by 30 percent to under \$20 a barrel, the lowest level in two years.

This drop is due to three causes. First, recession has hit high oil consumption sectors such as air transport hard, and so the demand for oil has gone down. Second, American policy has avoided an open confrontation with the countries of the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan, thank god, is not an oil producer. Third, Russia, coming out of its post-Soviet crisis, seems decided to continue expanding its own oil production, despite its recent sop to OPEC.

But this short-run fall in oil prices should not obscure the long-term political problem—the fact that the major part of the present oil production is concentrated in autocracies which use oil resources to maintain repressive patronage regimes, finance extravagant consumption by the elites, and acquire a terrifying amount of arms. Enormous oil revenues and their unequal distribution are a continuous source of internal instability and external aggressiveness, as demonstrated by Iraq's recent history.

So should the scarcity of oil, and its concentration in the Middle East, be a permanent source of global uncertainty? No. In reality, there is now a global abundance of oil and a great part of it is in one of the most stable countries on the planet: Canada. In the last 20 years, the cost of Canadian oil extracted from non-conventional fossil deposits has

dropped by more than half, to \$11 a barrel. In 1997 a US government study estimated that it is possible to produce more than 500 billion barrels of oil from non-conventional sources ("shell oil" and "tar sands") at less than \$30 per barrel. Such reserves of oil are about 250 times more than conventional reserves and could theoretically satisfy world energy needs (at today's levels) for the next 5,000 years.

Non-conventional reserves are for the most part unexploited, because they are uncompetitive, price-wise, with conventional oil and other sources of energy, such as natural gas. Perhaps it will never become necessary to use the non-conventional reserves of fossil fuel, if the development of alternative technologies (for example, liquid hydrogen) should render oil obsolete. But these reserves exist, and conventional reserves themselves can cover world needs for the next few

decades. Certainly, oil reserves are not infinite. But there is no reason to think that they are becoming more "scarce".

Technological innovation and new discoveries are reducing the importance of oil in the production process. The price of oil, corrected for inflation, has not increased in the last decade, and despite all the "oil shocks", its price has, on average, oscillated around today's prevailing price. Oscillations in oil prices do not reflect "structural" scarcity in the long term, but are due to movements of demand and supply in the short and middle run. In the short run, the demand for oil is "inelastic"—it responds little to changes in price, and even small reductions in supply result in great price increases. In the middle run, high prices lead to expansion of supply and reduced demand, and the price comes down again. At that point producer countries—which depend on

oil revenues to maintain consumption, political power and patronage—try to raise prices by cutting production, and the cycle resumes. This process increases political instability in producing countries and involves them in a vicious circle. When the price of oil is high, their governments spend the money on arms and palaces fit for pharaohs. When the price of oil falls, they risk discontent, coups d'états, wars, and revolutions.

The problem of the oil market is not scarcity, but volatility. As noted by former Saudi oil minister Sheikh Yamani, sooner or later the age of oil will end, but not because of a lack of oil, much as the Stone Age did not end because of a lack of stones. ♦

(Project Syndicate)

(Alberto Alesina is Professor of Economics at Harvard University; Enrico Spolaore is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Brown.)

OPINION

by MARCIN KROL

Omar and Osama's Kampf

History has many such stories: a political party emerges that most people think is a bad or sick joke. When they are not laughing at it, they ignore it. Suddenly, the economy becomes bad or an external threat looms and the party marches toward power. When it seizes government—think Hitler, Lenin, Mussolini, even Mullah Omar—all laughter stops.

In Poland, a "joke" party with malignant intentions is emerging. Called Self Defence, it voices—it says—the discontents of poor farmers and those displaced and radically dissatisfied with politics here. Its leader is a shrill primitive named Andrzej Lepper. A thuggish guttersnipe more akin to Aleksander Lukashenka, the dictator of Belarus, than to the great dictators, Lepper represents a hideous irrational politics. For this reason, I cannot laugh at him. Hitler, Lenin, and Mussolini sought power to use the state to impose their will, their programs. Today's anti-democrats view the state as an obstacle. They want to gut its power so jackals like themselves can feed on the corpse.

Self Defence has participated in several parliamentary elections but never received more than 2 percent of the vote before this year. Three weeks before last September's elections, opinion polls gave it 7-8 percent of the vote. Everyone thought this an exaggeration. It ended up securing nearly 11 percent, and was parliament's third largest party. People were shocked, but most Poles believe in democratic norms and civilising the uncivilised. So Lepper became one of parliament's four deputy speakers. Political and media commentators were drawn to his provocativeness, but within a month were bored. He then called the foreign minister a traitor

Democracy's greatest enemy is the profitable anarchy of a crippled state.

and threatened violence if his program was not enacted. Ideas about civilising Self Defence ended, and parliament evicted Lepper from his position deputy speaker. In his last speech, he accused many politicians of taking bribes, naming the amounts, times, and places. He seems unable to substantiate these accusations, but has kept his profile high—by asking to meet the US Ambassador, claiming knowledge of a Polish role in 11 September.

I wish I could say that by discrediting himself, Lepper self-destructed. This should happen in a democracy. But Lepper is no empty windbag like Joe McCarthy, nor is he a nationalist like France's Le Pen. He is neither Rightist nor Leftist, he loathes the political system and wants to replace it with a nothingness in which feral politicians run amok. Lepper's supporters are the remnants of lower Communist nomenclatura—apparatchiks too stupid to steal as Communism collapsed—and those who made money in the grey period of 1989-1991 when state controls were non-existent. Lepper's people are nostalgic for the profitable anarchy of a crippled state. Their enemies are not the traditional targets of lumpen anti-democrats, such as Jews, masons or gypsies. They repudiate parliament itself, its necessary compromises, and even the rule of law.

Parliamentary democracy was devised by Europeans sickened by domestic (mainly religious) wars. Its greatest enemy remains domestic war. Without exaggerating Lepper's threat, I believe he represents a model of irrational politics—from Indonesia to Afghanistan, Georgia to Ukraine, his movement is part of a new nihilism that seeks to make countries ungovernable. As a political philosopher, I find democracy's internal enemies an intellectual problem. Even if Lepper's lies are proven false and he is jailed, his followers (and their rage) will remain. Like Hitler, he will likely emerge from prison even more beloved. You cannot win domestic wars (even non-violent ones) through legal processes or political means alone. Consider America and Osama bin Laden's terrorists. We must, to repeat the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt (no friend of democracy himself), treat enemies as enemies. When democracy is at stake you must defend it, as Malcolm X said, "by any means necessary". This may be difficult for liberals to understand, and for democratic-minded peoples to accept. But hard choices are inevitable if democracy is to prevail. ♦

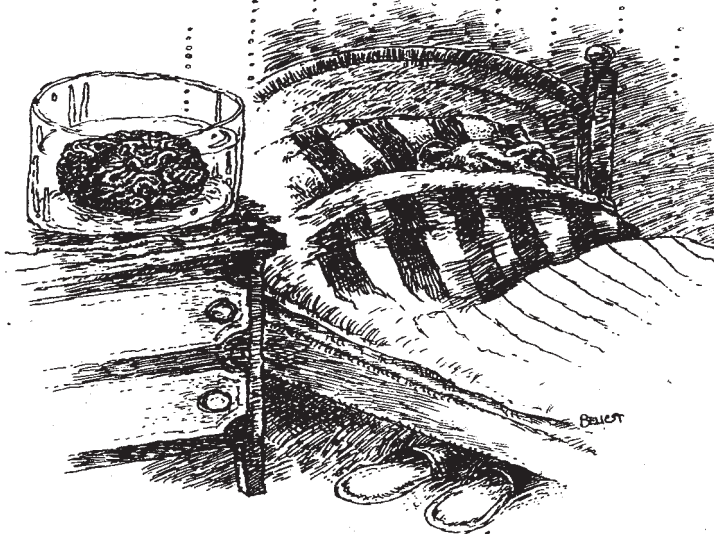
(Project Syndicate)

(Marcin Krol is dean of the history faculty at Warsaw University and editor/publisher of the intellectual journal Res Publica Nowa.)


One nation, White Australia

SYDNEY - iDespite what a few hyperbolic types might allege, the White Australia policy is dead and gone.î Dr Gerard Henderson, executive director of the Sydney Institute, wrote in *The Australian* recently. iHowever, if influential Australians have their way, it might soon be replaced by a Muslim Immigration Restriction Act or, perhaps, a Judeo-Christian Australia policy.î Australian diplomats and politicians are quick to dismiss such suggestions, even pointing out that Pauline Hanson's racist One Nation Party was soundly beaten in the November polls. But in order to win back voters from the far right anti-immigration party, Prime Minister John Howard's anti-immigration rhetoric very much reflected the platform of One Nation. Until the mid-1970s, Australian immigration policy specified that only people with European ancestry could migrate to Australia, to check the iyellow perilîthe possibility of large numbers of Asians, especially Chinese, flocking to Australia. Now, some respected economists, sociologists and influential media commentators are openly debating economic argumentsóagainst a backdrop of fear about iinternational terrorismîto justify the re-introduction of a discriminatory immigration policy. Wolfgang Kasper, emeritus professor of economics at the University of New South Wales, wrote recently that, iof the various institutional systems developed by man, probably none is more resistant to accepting new ground rules than the Middle Eastern tradition. This is not a consequence of biology and race, but of environment and race.î Kasper argued that Middle Eastern migrants can have friction with ordinary Australians, and so Australia's immigration policy ought to be restructured to include selection criteria that imeasure the readiness or otherwise of newcomers to fit in with our open society.î

Another key figure in the debate is John Stone, former secretary to the treasury and ex-senator of the National Party. In 1988, when then opposition leader Howard suggested restricting Asian immigration, Stone, a member of the shadow cabinet, was one of his strongest supporters. In a recent article in *The Australian* entitled, iWe only want those who are prepared to be like usî, he called for a new immigration policy that discriminates not on the basis of race, but culture. Stone said: iAustralians must fundamentally rethink the stupidities which for 20 years now have dominated our immigration policies and, along with them, our official policies of multiculturalism.î He defines multiculturalism as inon-assimilationî to the mainstream culture. iOur future immigration policyÖ,î added Stone, should have everything to do with whether those concerned are capable of assimilating into Australia's basically Judeo-Christian culture, and disposed to do so.î He added: iAll cultures are not equal, and it is ridiculous (and since 11 September much more dangerous) to keep insisting that they are.î Sydney Institute's Henderson disagrees, pointing out that Muslims have been in Australia since 1860. While the Islamic population has been growing rapidly in the last 20 years, most of them are not Arab, and most Arabic immigrants are not Muslims, he explains. (IPS)



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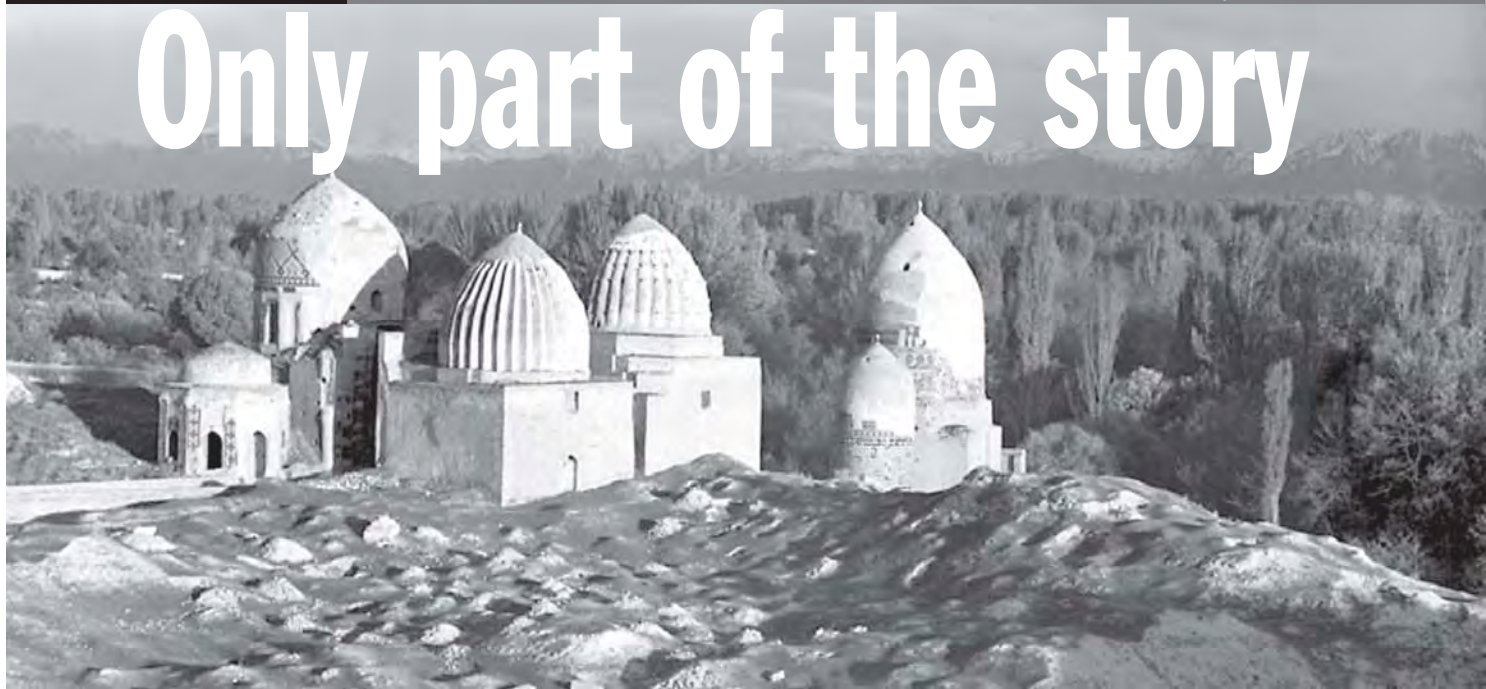


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Only part of the story

The events since 9/11 have incited speculation about the relationship between culture and economic development. The Islamic world is charged with having missed the advances of the European Enlightenment when the state and religion were separated, modern scientific ideas adopted, and cultural attitudes towards women modernised. Thus, the story goes, it still has cultural practices hostile to economic growth and cannot cope with the demands of modernisation, in technology or in cultural practices. As always with crude generalisations, elements of truth are here mixed with great confusion. Certain cultural practices do support economic modernisation—greater equality between men and women and their social roles, rewarding educational attainment with high social status, secularising many aspects of modern life, including the preeminence of modern science, and supporting cultural practices that favour social mobility in the choice of occupation. The false belief is that some cultures are static, others are uniquely modern. All over the world cultures have had to adjust to the changes in economic organisation, technology, and scientific knowledge of the past 200 years. In Western Europe and the US, for

Culture, as in “Islamic culture”, is a simplistic excuse.

example, the cultural acceptance of social and economic equality between men and women has involved a long process of political struggle and evolving social norms. The pace of change has varied markedly within regions and across cultural sub-groups. The Islamic world, which stretches over 15,000 km, dozens of countries, and over 1 billion followers of the faith, displays similar cultural variation. Islamic countries in the Mediterranean (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Turkey) are culturally and politically distinct from Islamic countries in the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman), which differ from those in Central Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan), Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Mali and Chad). Consider one example: the number of children per woman, or “total fertility rate”. Economic growth suffers when this is high, and the education given to each child in poor households also tends to be reduced. In some parts of the Islamic world, most notably the Arabian peninsula, the fertility rate remains very high. A

Yemeni woman on average gives birth to more than seven children in her lifetime. In Saudi Arabia, the average is over six. In other Islamic societies, the fertility rate has declined in recent decades, signalling a major shift in cultural norms. In Tunisia, it has dropped from 6.2 in the 1970s to 2.3 today, slightly above the 2.0 average in the US; in Turkey and Indonesia, the fertility rate fell from 5.2 in the 1970s to 2.7 now. Women have entered the labour force in these societies in much greater number, delivering economic gains and improvements in their social status. Tunisia, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia have been among the world’s fastest growing economies in recent decades. Islamic culture has shown its vibrancy and capacity to adjust to changing conditions. In the Arabian peninsula, cultural change has been slower, as has economic development. Causation probably runs in both directions here: cultural factors may have impeded economic growth, while poor economic performance (say, bad economic policies and over-dependence on oil) may have slowed the adaptation of cultural practices to the needs of a modern economy. In

remote places like Afghanistan or Chad, weak connections with the world economy also delayed the processes of social change. These examples should warn us away from three current tendencies. The first is to give easy labels to complex and diverse societies. The idea of a single conservative “Islamic world” is as mistaken as a single modern “Western society”. Diversity is high, cultural practices vary widely. The second tendency is to forget that cultures everywhere change in response to technological developments, economic growth, and—of course—globalisation. The third is to believe that culture is the key to economic development. Development is determined by many factors, including geography, politics, international relations—and culture. Cultural differences across societies are often more the outcome than the cause of differences in economic development. ♦ (Project Syndicate) (Jeffrey D Sachs is Professor of Economics, and Director of the Center for International Development, Harvard University.)

Missing recession, and the boat

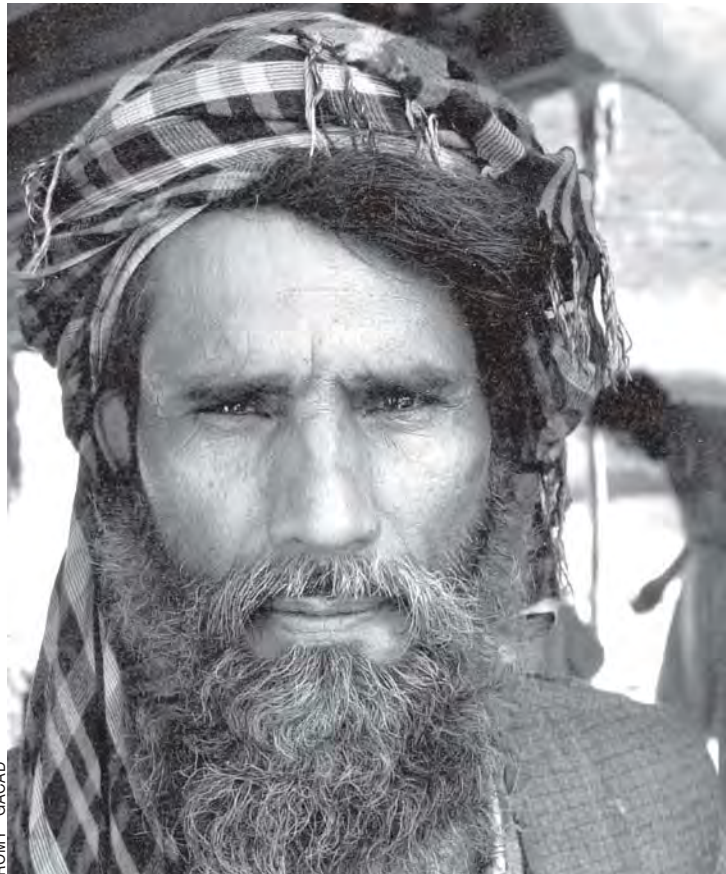
NEW DELHI - As most Asian economies reel under recession, India has been left unscathed thanks to its still largely-isolated economy, says Indian Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha. Investment banking major Morgan Stanley predicts India will remain Asia’s second fastest growing economy after China, recording a 4.8 percent GDP growth rate in 2001, and going up to 5.2 percent in 2002. Sinha attributes India’s economic stability to the same strict financial limits that left it unscathed during the 1997 Asian crisis, and prevented over-investment in unpredictable sectors like real estate. A decade after embarking on what were to have been ambitious and aggressive reforms, India accounts for only 0.7 percent of world trade, and continues to be a largely self-reliant but sluggish economy. But economists say there are differences between the 1997 Asian crisis and the present global slowdown. In 1997, India was spared as it had little foreign capital waiting to exit and domestically-owned capital was denied exit through strict capital controls, says Sunanda Sen, who teaches economics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. This is not the case now. Also, over the last two years, India has opened up trade enough to affect the economy, but done little to improve exports, which declined by 2.3 percent in April-August 2001 from 21 percent growth in the same period the previous year. Arvind Panagariya, of the Center for International Economics in Maryland, says that even now, China maintains seven to eight percent growth, though it is twice as dependent on exports as India. The difference, he says, is that unlike India, China has moved forward with reforms regardless of a worsening external environment. (IPS)

More bombs per sq m

UNITED NATIONS - The UN and its mostly local mine-clearing personnel in Afghanistan must now clear away some 25,000 unexploded bombs strewn across the terrain, mainly by US warplanes. UN officials said they have received information from the US-led military coalition that some 244,420 isub-munitions were used during the air campaign against Afghanistan that began in early October. Initial ground assessments indicate that at least about 10 percent of these about 24,442 have failed to explode and are lying on the ground as very dangerous and deadly unexploded ordnance, said Dan Kelly, manager of the UN Mine Action Programme in Afghanistan (MAPA). Cluster bombs, which are not precision-guided, consist of canisters that break apart to release a large number of small ibomblets. Many do not explode but lie on the ground, much like anti-personnel landmines. US forces used them extensively in Afghanistan, in Kosovo in 1999 and during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. More than 5,000 Afghans have been trained to search for unexploded bombs, and still more are slated for training early next year. Last week, two children were killed and two others injured near a Herat refugee camp when a bomblet exploded. During the 1980s Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, an estimated 10 million landmines were scattered throughout the war-ravaged country. MAPA, the world’s oldest and largest de-mining programme, said it has cleared 1.6 million explosives from former battlefields, agricultural land, roads, and residential areas. Between March 1978 and December 2000, at least 2,812 Afghans have died due to unexploded mines. MAPA says landmines and unexploded ordnance cover about 724 million sq m of land in Afghanistan. Of this, some 344 million sq m are classified as high priority for clearance. (IPS)

Hearts, minds, books

BEIJING - President and party chief Jiang Zemin said the battle for the hearts and minds of Chinese people is about to intensify, given the rapid economic globalisation and the western pursuit of international cultural hegemony. Jiang was speaking at a Beijing gathering of more than 2,000 artists and writers last week. The high-profile speech is part of Jiang’s efforts to leave his mark on Chinese communist theory as the party prepares for its crucial 16th congress next year. Jiang has recently been promoting his theory of the Three Representatives, a re-interpretation of Marxist thinking to suit China’s new realities. An article in the English-language China Daily last week bemoaned the ifloundering state of contemporary Chinese literature, calling Chinese writers too ichild-ish and iselfish to take on the social responsibility of real writers. Decadence and commercialism are being blamed for the popularity of writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian, who have depicted China’s social underbelly in graphic, grim detail. Propaganda officials are even angrier about last year’s Nobel Laureate for literature, Gao Xingjian, a dissident writer who left China in 1987 and renounced his Communist Party membership after Tiananmen Square, 1989. Jiang told the writers: iliterary and art workers should adhere to the truth, oppose falsehood, glorify beauty and goodness, advocate science and combat foolishness. His call evoked associations with a famous 1942 speech by the late Chairman Mao Zedong where he said art must appeal to the imasses rather than the intellectual elite. After that, Mao turned the world of art and writing into an engine for propaganda. In a way, Jiang’s speech is a step backwards, reflected one foreign analyst. The Party is telling you what you have to write again. (IPS)



JOHN RETTIE

Seven years ago I was briefly a member of the British royal family. True, this elevated social status lasted only about 20 minutes. But in Afghanistan, where anything can happen, fame evaporates quickly, though while it lasts, it may save your life. And so it was with the driver of my battered yellow taxi, the brilliantly inventive Amir Shah. His quick-witted tales saw us safely past many groups of men brandishing threatening Kalashnikovs on the wide, dusty plain north of Kunduz. “Be sure you’re across that plain before noon,” we were warned in that pleasant little northern town, now ruined by war. “After that the bandits are in control.” So we set off at 5.30 in the morning. It was hard to tell whether the armed groups who infested Afghanistan in those days were mujahideen guerrillas or bandits. Most of them were both, and

Afghan tale

When you are their welcome guest, Afghans are the most generous hosts on earth. When you arrive unwelcome and uninvited, they kill you.

their total indiscipline made any journey very frightening. But though without a gun, Amir Shah had the measure of them. “See that white man in the back,” he whispered to them confidentially. “You’d better be polite to him. He’s a close relative of the Queen of England, and he’s here to assess how much aid we need. We could get many thousands of dollars if you treat him well.” So the gunmen just helped themselves to some of our chocolate bars and let us go — showing little surprise that a British prince could be riding in a very old and rusty yellow taxi. Such was the wizardry of Amir Shah’s story-telling. My task, as a humble foreign correspondent without royal connections, was to travel from the capital, Kabul, to the Amu Darya river (the Oxus of Greek legends) which forms Afghanistan’s border with the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan. We reached the small town of Emam Shahab, a few kilometres south of the river, in time for breakfast with a friendly mujahideen commander — freshly picked grapes and almonds, with warm milk and Afghan bread. Never was a breakfast more welcome. The commander’s men took me to the river through villages ruined by fighting between rival mujahideen groups and Russian bombing. That evening we sat on carpets round a large pot of mutton stew, and slept on the carpets under the world’s most brilliant stars. When you are their welcome guest, Afghans are the most generous hosts on earth. When you arrive unwelcome and uninvited, they kill you, as the British found out in the 19th century and the Russians in the 20th. And now the Arab fighters of Osama bin Laden are suffering the same fate of unwelcome foreigners. But despite the formation of an interim government, the country as a whole seems to be returning to the state of anarchy of seven years ago. Spanish and Swedish journalists found this to their cost a few weeks ago when without the protection of an Amir Shah, they were killed and robbed by armed bandits. It is now forgotten that the Taleban, who became so oppressive and dictatorial, were originally welcomed for imposing security and order. Who will replace them now? ♦ John Rettie is a veteran BBC reporter and was The Guardian South Asia correspondent in the mid-1990s.



Door: knock knock
Man: Oh no, they're already at the door, do it fast do it fast. —Spacetime Dainik, 30 December



Board: Welcome! 11th SAARC Summit
Man: Whom can we believe? We have to bring the guests even through a tunnel. —Naya Sadak, 30 December



Dont pull too much on that side, its uncovered on this side. —Kantipur, 29 December

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

The freedom of the press cannot be controlled by an emergency. The press has to be daring. When left free, the press here goes overboard. When threatened with action, it starts signing hymns.

—K.P. Oli, UML Standing Committee member, in *Budhabar Saptahik*, 2 January, 2002.

Newspaper sales

Jana Aastha, 26 December

आस्था

Of the negative impacts of the emergency that was declared a month ago has been newspaper sales. Newspaper have not been able to carry out factual reporting like they used to, and as a result they are losing credibility and the trust of their readers. Newspaper distributors say that sales of daily and weekly papers have dropped by half. Says Shyam Pandey, a newspaper distributor at Bhugol Park, "Before the emergency I used to sell 400 copies of *Kantipur* every day and 400 copies of *Saptahik Bimarsa* every week. Now I sell 350 copies of *Kantipur* and 330 copies of *Bimarsa*." It isn't only the wholesalers who are affected—some news outlets or retailers find they cannot pay their rent because the drop in sales means a corresponding drop in their income. Sales have dropped outside the Kathmandu Valley, too. Since the emergency has affected the distribution of papers, people don't know what is really happening. The general economic slowdown has also caused advertising revenues to dip. The big publication houses should stop acting as if they are unaffected by the slump in sales, and the sector as a whole should try to solve the problems affecting the industry. Many readers have lost faith in political stories, with the result that journalists are concentrating on economic and social stories.

Bank employees unite

Budhabar, 26 December

बुधवार

Employees of the Nepal Rastra Bank and the Nepal Bank have formed a joint committee to protest against the decision to hand over management of two troubled banks, the Rashtriya Banijya Bank and Nepal Bank Ltd. on management contracts to foreign managers. They've told the deputy governor of the central bank that it was not right to hand over management of the bank to foreigners without making efforts to improve the management from the inside. In a letter to the governor, the Joint Agitation Committee (*Sanyukta Sangharsha Samiti*) has noted that political interference in management needs to be controlled, a good management system has to be set up, irregularities checked, and those guilty of fraud, have to be punished instead. The employees say the decision of the government to privatise the bank and to hand over management to a foreign group would increase foreign control over the national economy. If the management was handed over to a foreign group, the head of the team would be paid a very high salary and so would other members of the management team as result of which aid from the World Bank would go outside the country. Another union concern is possible cut down in staffs of the banks once the new management steps in.

Women in the army

Ghatana ra Bichar, 26 December

घटना र बिचार

The Royal Nepal Army has set up security check points at various points around the city. This is a positive step, keeping in mind the current situation, but some shortcomings just cannot be ignored. Owing to a lack of women security personnel, women passengers in public transport feel exceptionally uncomfortable when they have to undergo checks. Also, due to lack of women in the security forces, at some check points women get away by with just their bags being checked. At others they are searched by male security

forces. Both approaches are wrong. At many points, people have to wait in long lines while security forces just check their bags and don't conduct body searches, so a person could get past with a concealed weapon.

According to the Nepali Constitution 1990, all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law. But women are still not allowed to join the Royal Nepal Army. The Army Act 2016 does not allow women to enlist. At one time, the Nepal Police Act didn't provide for women to enter the police force. But in 1981, a direct order from the Royal Palace allowed women to join the force. They compete to enter the force, and women police, from cadets to Deputy Superintendents of Police, are doing well there. They are less involved in controversies and cases of corruption. The recent Armed Police Act also allows women to join the force.

Women around the world have proven their skills in the armed forces. The US army is 15 percent female. The women there fly warplanes and serve in warships. Keeping in mind the current situation, Nepal's Army Act needs to be amended to allow women to join the forces. As long as the process of enrolling women in the army isn't completed, female police officers should be deployed to conduct security checks on women. It is extremely important for the council of ministers to make a decision to allow the enlistment of women in the armed forces.

Even the PM pays

Jana Aastha, 2 January, 2002

आस्था

People will be surprised to know that after the talks between the government and the Maoists failed, the same prime minister who called the Maoists "terrorists" and "traitors" donated money to them.

But this is politics and everything is possible in politics. Yesterday's enemies will be friends today and enemies today friends tomorrow. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba

apparently gave Rs 9,000 last Tihar to the All-Nepal National Free Students Union (Revolutionary), an organisation with links to the Maoists. The ANNFSU-R students, who had sent word beforehand to the prime minister's residence in Baluwatar saying they would be coming to play *densi bhailoi*, arrived with two busloads of students and musical instruments. Devendra Parajuli, president of the union, vice president Krishna KC, general secretary Purna Paudyal, Lemmath Neupane and a few others were called inside the residence, offered tea by the prime minister, and sent off with the tidy sum of Rs 9,000. And in lieu of the traditional thank you and goodbye offering, the group blessed the prime minister that he might have the courage to call for a constituent assembly.

The group also reached the Satsdobato government residence of the main opposition CPN-UML leader Madhav Kumar Nepal. Nepal also played the gracious host and gave them Rs 1,000. The Union also visited the homes of CPN-ML leaders Bam Dev Gautam and CP Mainali. Although the group got Rs 500 from General Secretary Gautam, he was reportedly nervous, as only a few days prior to this, several student leaders of the CPN-ML student union had broken links with the party and joined the Maoist-affiliated ANNFSU-R. Mainali, for his part, was said to be much more comfortable with the group and even danced along with them holding hands with his wife. He gave them Rs 1,000.

This is the game of the times. Prime Minister Deuba has now forbidden anyone from helping these ANNFSU (R) who he played *densi* with, and has even had those who had helped the Maoists in the past arrested. With the declaration of the state of emergency and talk of the control of corruption, all those who have contributed large amounts to the Maoists, and corrupt Congress leaders are said to be living in fear.

Call for Applications

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The Immersion Course on Contemporary Social Issues is an undertaking of Himal Association, Rato Bangla and Interdisciplinary Analysts.

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India
Sri Lanka
Pakistan
Australia
England
West Indies
New Zealand
South Africa
Bangladesh
Zimbabwe
Kenya
Namibia
Scotland
Canada
Nepal
Papua New Guinea

The last under-19 World Cup in January 2000 was won by India, who defeated the host nation Sri Lanka by six wickets in the final. In the previous January 1998 World Cup in South Africa, England defeated New Zealand by seven wickets.

The Under 19 World Cup is a One-Day Cricket tournament. The ICC Playing Conditions for One-Day Internationals will apply. The opening ceremony will be held in Christchurch on 14 January and each side will play two warm-up practice against teams in other pools before the competition starts in earnest with the opening match between New Zealand and Sri Lanka on Saturday, 19 January. World Cup Tournament Director, Tim Murdoch, said planning was well in place for the event, which is expected to bring around 300 players and officials, as well as hundreds of spectators and media representatives to New Zealand.



Team Nepal in practice

The sixteen competing teams have been split into four pools as follows:

- India (holders), South Africa, Bangladesh, Canada, playing in Auckland
- Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Namibia, playing in Christchurch
- Pakistan, England, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, playing in Christchurch
- Australia, West Indies, Scotland, Kenya, playing in Dunedin

Each team then plays the other three teams in the pool. The top two teams from each pool move forward into the Super League. The Super League is contested by two pools of four teams each. At the end of Super

League play, the top two teams in each pool go through to the finals. The bottom two teams from pool play move into the Plate Championship. The two Plate pools then play to determine the top two teams in each pool. These four teams go through to the Plate Finals series. The minimum number of games a team will play is six. To win the World Cup final a team will play eight matches.

The pool matches will be played in Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin. The Plate Championship pool play will be in Auckland, and the Super League pool play and the Finals series for both the World Cup and the Plate Championship will be played in Christchurch. ♦

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DOUBT AND THE DRIVE TO WRITE: Viplob Pratik



KUMAR ALE

I’ve written something, poet Viplob Pratik said in one of our first meetings, and I want you to read them and tell me if they are poems. This, from a man who composes exquisite songs, who has written poetry since he was a child. I tried to laugh off his statement. But from his intent, candid tone, it was clear that he was serious. There was a time in his life when he was writing something almost every day, he explained. But in the past few years, for reasons beyond his own understanding, he’s been unable to write poems. Now I’m starting again, but I don’t know if what I’m writing qualifies as poetry.

All writers and poets have, at one time or another, been plagued by uncertainty about their enterprise. Doubt can be debilitating; it is at the root of that dreaded phenomenon, the writer’s block. But it can also be very productive, when met without fear. For, contrary to popular belief, a writer does not simply dash off whatever comes to mind. A poet does not just emote. Creating inspired flashes, or in drudgery, is merely half of what writers and poets do. The critical mind is equally engaged in the process of writing, and it is this mind that comments, sometimes honestly, and sometimes just brutally, iWhat a cliché, iHasn’t all this been said before? iIs this *anything* really worth writing about?

Why should I write? What is achieved by it? And what is lost if I don’t write? These are the questions that every writer or poet must grapple with as she develops her own voice and creates her own oeuvre. Even if one is to write, there are surely more useful things to write than stories or poems. Perhaps this is why Pratik keeps a day job as an editor. To counter exactly this kind of scepticism about the worth of

literature, William Carlos Williams has written:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there

It is a sign of hope that someone like Pratik who has written from a young age should stop, investigate himself and his poetry, and then begin again, in humility. Even after overcoming such rudimentary, existential doubt, however, a poet faces a life full of smaller, but equally vital questions about his craft and his depth of vision. No matter how deep the drive to write, it must always battle doubt. To write, one must accept, even welcome questions. One must learn to keep writing with doubt.

How to write of sadness without bathos? How to speak eternal truths without generalisations? What kinds of line-by-line movements might make a poem fresh and unexpected? These are the craft and vision questions that face Pratik now, questions that he has answered with a quiet, restrained voice in the poem below:

REPOSE

Never, in my life, have I slept a collected slumber
I’ll fall into a collected sleep now
Should anyone be bold enough to wake me
I’ll sleep in such a way I am a mountain
Jab me as much as you want, I won’t feel a tickle
I am a rock
I’ll shift if I’m moved I won’t budge otherwise
I am a boulder
Even if assaulted I won’t make a response

I was the rains once you wouldn’t get drenched
I was the ocean once you wouldn’t swim in me
You wouldn’t look at me when I once was a rainbow

Never, in my life, have I slept a collected slumber
I’ll fall into a collected sleep now, today

The next poem is angrier in tone, more defiant. Yet the same careful word choice is in evidence, the same shift from line to line, from one difficult emotion to another.

THE UNDEFEATED PERSON

I stand alone in the field
Locking house windows, all of you are shrieking
I like the act of viewing people’s spectacles
and I feel that people
are but a horde watching a spectacle
I’m proud I stand alone in the field
I cry I experience the suffering
of wounds/assaults/and thoughts
but I’m proud I stand alone in the field
I’m eager to meet
young men who brave storms
young women who brave attacks
I’m eager to hold out a costly tray
decked with tears strung as finely as pearls
I stand alone in the field
The moon is alone/the sun is alone/the earth is alone
I stand alone in the field

Interestingly, Pratik’s book reviews and comments on literature show off a bristling, keenly critical mind. It is, without doubt, harder for those with high literary standards to write than it is for the street-side hack: for once you know what constitutes great poetry, you don’t want to commit doggerel. It takes great courage to confront one’s fears, to answer one’s inner critic, to try meeting one’s own high standards. It also takes drive, the drive to live, fully, in art, the kind of drive expressed in Pratik’s poetry.

RECOLLECTION

by TRISHNA GURUNG



OS

Death lends razor sharpness to this moment. Life is reduced to the aching undeniable reality of a waning day and half-charred bodies on dying fires.

I have fought to be here, to stand dry-eyed beside my father on the silty banks of the Bagmati that runs by the cremation grounds of Pashupatinath.

We are here to say our final goodbyes to the body that housed one loved so much.

This woman is dead, she who was my mother and, in the final weeks of her debilitating illness, my child. Her body shrunk by death and disease lies in its shroud. Flowers from her garden surround her face, her hair loose, eyes closed.

It is business as usual for several priests scurrying around, energised by the smell of lucre that surrounds these ceremonies. Grief-stricken families are manipulated into believing that it is their dharma, duty, to send off the dead in an elaborate funeral involving sandalwood logs, masses of flowers, incense, enormous quantities of ghee and wood.

Before the ceremony begins there is a heated debate over whether father needs to shave his hair off or not. It is a mandatory sign of respect to do so at the funerals of brothers, uncles and fathers but is not entirely necessary, apparently, for a dead wife.

It seems ironic that a scant century ago it was thought entirely appropriate for a wife to immolate herself alive on her husband’s funeral pyre as an honourable sign of grief.

The priests start intoning Sanskrit hymns that serve neither to comfort nor offer solace to us. People from our community have re-embraced Buddhism and they ask us why we are here, at a Hindu

temple. It seems beside the point to explain we never converted back to Buddhism. We are here because we are here. Had there been a choice we would have cremated her in our garden and floated her ashes in the lily pond she had made. She belongs there, in the place she lived and loved.

It is time to begin.

Her astrological birth charts that plotted her life are torn and flung far out into the waters. The priests ask us to place a gold nugget in her mouth. We do as we are told without asking.

My cousin accidentally bumps my mother’s head while placing her on the pyre. Irrationally, I worry that it hurt her. Thoughts skitter around, none daring to stand in the spotlight of clarity.

Someone whispers to me that she is blessed among women for she died in the arms of her husband and he is here to see her off on her final journey. It is difficult, so difficult, to watch father touch the flames of the *dagbati* to her mouth. I need to

move away as the fire feeds greedily. A corpse lies abandoned nearby. Its small, twisted form is covered with a saffron sheet tattooed with gods’ names, sprinkled with vermilion and a few grains of rice. I am told it was probably a pauper or a destitute from the old people’s shelter. We offer to pay for its funeral rites, to scrape up some dignity for the dead never accorded to the living.

A fine mist drizzles the air. Care is taken to see the pyres are not put out.

A bus disgorges a load of tourists on the other shore. Their guide gives them the salient points of Nepali religious customs in a three-minute lecture and then points them our way. They cross the bridge that separates the temple complex from the viewing gallery. Cameras are out and poised to capture the drama of burning fires against the bleeding colours of dusk. Flashes go off as they mill around clicking rapidly. These photos will make their way to Occidental suburbia where they will become souvenirs of their holiday in the “exotic East”.

This is a funeral, not a photo opportunity. Harsh words are exchanged and they move towards an unattended pyre.

The priests inform us that we may leave. They will take care of what remains.

We decline politely. We wish to be here till the very end. We owe it her, a last few hours to conclude a lifetime of love, companionship and courage. I whisper my love and thanks to her.

Tears are for later, away from this circus. I hold my grief within and contemplate a physical symbol of my loss—scarring myself, shaving my hair off, wearing black or perhaps even killing myself. I never want to forget this pain, this intensity of mind-numbing sorrow. It is my way of remaining faithful to her.

It is unfortunate the human mind cannot choose what shall be remembered and what shall be relegated to the subterranean regions of our cluttered unconscious.

Three hours and twenty minutes later it is finished. Forty-seven years of living reduced to a handful of grey ash. Water is poured over the stones. Steam rises in a hiss. The blackened water splashes into the already murky river water.

A funeral priest gropes in the ashes for something. He finds the small nugget of gold that has been purified by the fire as it burned through flesh and wood. He tucks it into his ash-streaked clothes, fringe benefits for services rendered.

The impulse to shove him into the river is almost overwhelming.

We are told half-burned logs of funeral pyres are fished out downstream and sold to vendors who roast meat and corn on them. It is macabre and repulsive. I am glad nothing is left.

It is cold and dark when we get home. Unknown branches of the family have spawned a host of relatives. Funerals become family reunions.

We are ritually impure and cannot enter the house. At the gates we are made to step over a small fire. Ganga water is sprinkled over us with tulsi branches.

Father has to bathe with cold water and change his clothes outdoors.

The luxury of my own bathroom and hot water is allowed to me.

I see myself alive and healthy under the cleansing stream of almost scalding water. I rinse my mother’s ashes out of my hair and my body, ashes that cling to me in dark flakes and surround me in the smell of wood smoke as if in a final embrace. ♦

The last journey

Not forgetting this intensity of mind-numbing sorrow would be a way of remaining faithful to my mother.

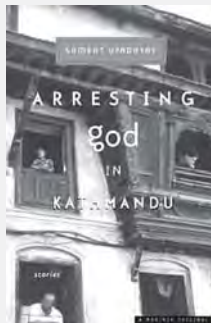
ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITION

- ❖ **Bamiyan Buddha: Icon of Hope, Peace and Renewal** Prints, installation, paintings, and video. Until 10 January 2002, Sidhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal. A part of the proceeds from the sale of paintings go towards the renovation of the Bamiyan Buddha in Afghanistan.
- ❖ **Textiles of Gujarat** Until 12 January, Indigo Gallery, Naxal. 413580

EVENTS

- ❖ **Talk and talkback** with Samrat Upadhyay, author of award-winning *Arresting God in Kathmandu*. tea will be served. Lounge, GAA Building, Thamel, behind Hotel Malla. Godavari Alumni Association and Martin Chautari. 4PM, 4 January.
- ❖ **Nepali classical dance and folk music** at Hotel Vajra. Dances of Hindu and Vuddhist gods Tuesdays and Fridays, 7Pm onwards, the Great Pagoda Hall. Ticket and tea Rs 400. Nepali folk tunes Wednesdays and Saturdays, 6.30PM onwards, hotel restaurant. Hotel Vajra. 271545
- ❖ **Contemporary Jazz dance classes** by Meghna Thapa. At Alliance Francaise Sundays and Tuesdays 4.30PM-6.30PM, 241163. At Banuís, Kamal Pokhari, Wednesdays 6.30PM-8PM, Saturdays 1.30PM. 434024, 434830



MUSIC

- ❖ **Unplugged music** Fridays and Saturdays through January. Everyday discounts with celebrity host Ashoke Rana. The Olive Garden, Radisson Hotel. 411818
- ❖ **Live acoustic music** Dinesh Rai every Friday at the Himalatte Café. 6.30PM-9PM. 262526
- ❖ **Live music** Tuesday and Friday nights at the 40,000 Ω ft Bar, Rum Doodle Restaurant. 414336
- ❖ **Parties over? Feeling Let down?** Friday night party with live band, traditional sekuwa, bonfires. Rs 555 per head. Dwarikaís Hotel. 479488

EATING OUT

- ❖ **Rox Restaurant and Bar and The Café** Traditional European cuisine from wood-fired ovens in show kitchen at the Rox Restaurant. Live music, cocktails and snacks at the happening Rox Bar. Buffet and a la carte continental, Nepali and Indian food all day at The Café. Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 491234
- ❖ **Newari and Nepali lunch and dinner** Krishnarpan speciality restaurant with six-to 20-course dinners starting from \$19. Lunch also available. Dwarikaís Hotel. 479488
- ❖ **Le Cafe des trekkers** Crepes of Brittany, raclette, cheese and meat fondue. 15 percent discount until 15 January 2002. Jyatha, opposite Blue Diamond Hotel. 225777
- ❖ **Childrenís Saturday** Games, prizes and food every Saturday, 12 noon onwards. Bakery Café Baneshwor and Teku.
- ❖ **Spa and Swiss Food** Spa Rejuvenation Cuisine Special brunch with use of health club and swimming pool. Sundays, 11.30AM-5PM. Rs 750. Daily dinner fondue, Rs 1,200 for two and raclettes, Rs 900 per head. Hotel Yak & Yeti, 248999.
- ❖ **January at the Fun Café** Combo meals with burgers, salads, fries, coke, pastry for Rs 350, and aromatic teas from around. The Fun Café, Radisson Hotel. 423888
- ❖ **Authentic Thai food** Everyday at Yin Yang Restaurant. 425510
- ❖ **SAARC** Stressfree surroundings, Astounding architecture, Royal suites and deluxe rooms, Cuisine fit for a king. Kathmanduís best-kept secret, Dwarikaís Hotel. 479488
- ❖ **Far Pavilion** Indian cuisine with Sapan Pariyar and Suresh Manandhar. Everyday except Tuesday. 8PM-11PM, The Everest Hotel
- ❖ **Tukche Thakali Kitchen** Buckwheat, barley, bean, and dried meat specialties. Also brunch with porridge and pancakes, all raw material from Tukche village. Darbar Marg 225890.
- ❖ **Barbecue lunch** with complementary wine or beer for adults, soft drink for children. Saturdays and Sundays at the Godavari Village Resort. 560675



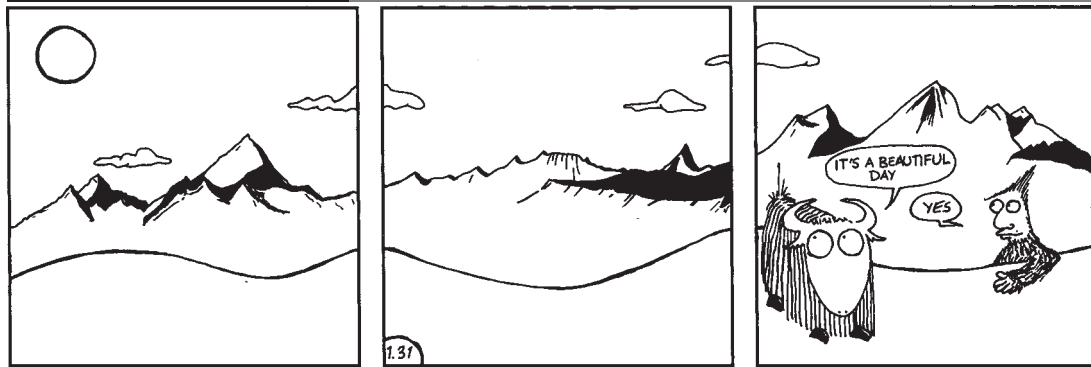
GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Fresh air and tranquility in Kathmandu Valley** Stay at Triple A Organic Farm Guesthouse in Gamcha, south of Thimi. Rs. 1,500 per person per night, all-inclusive. Email aaa@wlink.com.np. 631766
- ❖ **TGIF** Overnight packageócheck-in, scrumptious sekuwa bbq, cocktail, Saturday brunch, massage, only \$125 per couple. Dwarikaís Hotel 479488

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YAK YETI YAK

by MIKU



BOOKWORM

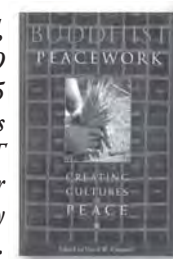


Scripture, Logic, Language: Essays on Dharmakirti and his Tibetan Successors
Tom JF Tillemans
Wisdom Publications, Somerville, USA, 1999
Rs 2,570

Dharmakirti, a 7th century Indian Buddhist philosopher, explored the nature, limits and justification of rationality within the context of Buddhist religious and metaphysical concerns. Tillemans, a leading scholar of Buddhism, sheds light on the interrelated topics of scripture, logic and language, and the theory of reference and problem of entailment as explored by Dharmakirti and his Indian and Tibetan successors.

Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace David W Chappell,
ed Wisdom Publications, Somerville, USA, 1999
Rs 1,165

This volume makes available for the first time in one place first-person statements of the ideas and works of such eminent Buddhist leaders as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Maha Ghosananda, AT Ariyaratne, Daisaku Ikeda, Shih Cheng-yen, Sulak Sivaraksa and Robert Aitken. A useful collection for students of peace studies interested in questions of religion, moral behaviour, individual responsibility and spirituality.

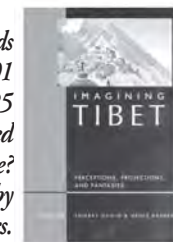


Ultimate Healing: The Power of Compassion Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Wisdom Publications, Somerville, USA, 2001
Rs 1,365

Beginning with stories of people who have recovered from disease through meditation, renowned meditation master Lama Zopa Rinpoche addresses the central role played by karma and the mental habit of "labelling" in causing illness and explains how meditation and other techniques for developing compassion and insight can eliminate the root cause of all disease.

Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, eds
Wisdom Publications, Somerville, USA, 2001
Rs 2,325

Backward shamanistic theocracy, exotic Shangri-La promising immortality, enlightened society ravaged by outside aggression. Where did such Western ideas of Tibet come from and why did they change? This volume traces the images in the writings of explorers and missionaries, the definitions used by Theosophists and scholars, and the contemporary views of political activists and Buddhist practitioners.



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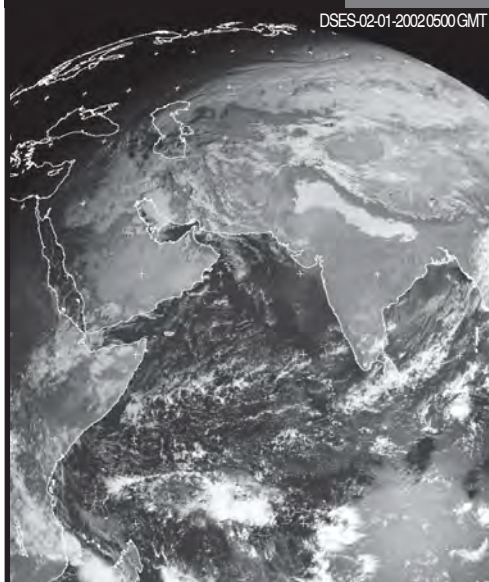


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NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL



DSES-02-01-20020500 GMT

Still waiting for westerlies, and it looks like this time there is a substantial one hovering just over the horizon. The wide front seen over Saudi Arabia is moving in an easterly direction and is expected to hit north India by Friday. Which means high probability for a cloudy SAARC Summit weekend with chances of snow flurries at higher altitudes and drizzles in Kathmandu and the midhills. Western and Central tarai will continue to be under the spell of thick ground fogópart of the swathe that stretches right across the Indus-Ganga plains 9sse satellite pic taken on Wednesday at noon). Morning temperature will hover around zero and even go down to minus one.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
20-01	20-00	19-01	19-02	18-02

Hole in one

The high-end golf tourism market could be an easy sell for the Gokarna Golf Course.

course, a round of golf could take the entire morning. The start and end points of the game can be viewed from the Club House, situated on a neat plateau that overlooks the course. The restaurant serves Thai, continental, and Nepali cuisine, and has a well-equipped pro shop and magazine kiosk.

Often, Chand's balls disappear into the thick undergrowth that circles the course but it doesn't mar her pleasure in the game. Sprawled over 140 acres of land within the royal hunting grounds, the course boasts the only Bent Grass Greens in South Asia (imported from the US and grown in a nursery on the grounds), making it one of the highlights of the professional tour circuits in the region. Among the competitions in the Gokarna Golf Course have been the Famous Grouse Trophy and the Surya Masters, and now the course is preparing to host the annual New Year's Cup on 12 January.

It isn't only Kathmandu golfers in raptures, but even wealthy Japanese and European golf tourists. The David Kidd-designed course has placed Nepal on the golfing map of the world. "We get Japanese businessmen, Europeans, and many expats," explains retired Vice Admiral SK Chand who manages the course. The green is perfectly kept and the excess water that is drained out forms canals surrounding the course and fills up the artificial lakes that add to the serene atmosphere and challenge the golfer's stroke.

"It's cool here even in the summer, and sometimes you can spot deer and monkeys," says Deepak Acharya, 26, one of Nepal's few golf professionals. The course offers a driving range and pitching and putting greens, and for the newbie, golf lessons are available through professionals like Acharya. "The standard of golf in Nepal has

really come up but we still have a long way to go, because there aren't enough tournaments," says the pro. "Golf isn't just about hitting the ball. There are mental challenges involved, and focused energy is required," says Acharya, who, when he's not on Gokarna's greens teaching beginners the A-Z of teeing off, travels the professional circuit.

A tourism venture of Prem Sachdev, a Singapore businessman, former captain of the Singapore Gold Club House and single-digit handicap player, the Gokarna Golf Course is preparing for the launch in a couple of weeks of 16 luxurious vacation club rooms, serviced through the adjacent Hunter's Lodge and Golf Club House. Nearby, on a large plateau at the end of a winding, climbing road through the forest, the 62-room Malla-style Le Meridian Hotel Complex is being constructed. The first phase of the forest resort and spa, that is slated for completion next winter, hopes to attract golfers and their spouses with a health club, pool, business centre, and speciality

restaurant, and break into the high-end golf tourism market.

Membership to the Gokarna Golf Club is pretty steep, at Rs 420,000 for a couple and their children under 21 for 25 years, though there is a special rate for senior citizens above 60—Rs 250,000 for 25 years. Annual membership is \$1500. But, says Chand, this is not too high a price. "The course boasts facilities and an atmosphere the likes of which you won't get anywhere else in Kathmandu," he says. Chand is eager

to promote golf tourism and seems undeterred by the current slump in arrivals. After all, last December 35 millionaires gathered to play golf in Gokarna for a day. Chand and his team are betting that sort of thing can be done on a more regular basis.

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www.gokarna.com



MIN BAIRACHARYA

RAMYATA LIMBU

Gokarna - It's 1 PM. Do you know where your golfers are? If you're in the Valley, chances are they are just trooping off the greens in the dense, lush forests of the 470-acre Gokarna Game Sanctuary, discussing double and triple bogeys. It is hard to imagine that a mere 10 km, or 15 minutes, from the airport, lies one of Nepal's sporting treasures. Designed by the renowned Gleneagles Golf Development, the Gokarna Golf

Course is spectacularly well-appointed and every part of the course and the club house is designed to be in perfect harmony with these pristine and calm surroundings.

"It's a really relaxing course," says avid golfer Pushpa Chand. "There are hardly any distractions, you just concentrate on hitting your next ball." Chand who plays golf more for exercise than for competition enjoys walking the only 18-hole, par-72 course in the country. On the 8.5 km

SAARC HAPPENINGS



MEDIA INVASION: The SAARC summit is being accompanied by unprecedented media attention. Journalists from across South Asia gather at the Soaltee Crown Plaza for the foreign ministers' photo-op.



SAARC ATTACK: Billboards draped in SAARC slogans at Bagmati Bridge and racing against time to finish the Patan welcome gate, under construction for the past six months.



THEY'RE HERE: SAARC foreign ministers meet for a chat before their formal Council of Ministers meeting on 2 January.

ALL PICS: MIN BAIRACHARYA

HEARTY WELCOME

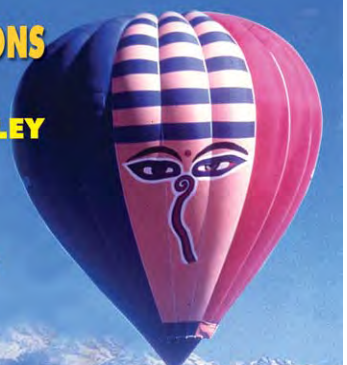
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Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

Make love not war

So it's final: they are not going to shake hands in Kathmandu this weekend. They're going to kiss. After getting through the formalities of reviewing decisions, endorsing agendas and forwarding the modalities of the draft declaration, the two are going to smooch in broad daylight at Nagarkot in full view of spy satellites.

Where and when this intimate moment is going to take place is a closely guarded secret, mainly because kissing is still taboo on the Indian screen, and we don't want the subcontinent to be scandalised by this public display of affection on live television, especially since minorities may be watching. It could be potentially destabilising.

Leaders lead by example, and executing a wet Brezhnev-Fidel type bear hug-cum-kiss will need statesmanship, determination and, yes, even stamina. But for our sake and for the sake of future generations of South Asians yet unborn such a gesture may be exactly what we need to lift the taboo on osculation in Bollywood once and for all. For too long, and in movie after movie, we have waited in vain for the singing and chasing of saris in the undergrowth to finally come to its logical conclusion as the hero and heroine duck behind a coniferous trunk, but then the camera inexplicably pans away for a long shot of the scenic Lauterbrunnen Valley with Jungfrau in the background.

How many times has Pretty Zinta got drenched while cavorting in a sudden squall with a lover boy named Something Khan (the one who can't seem to move without looking like he is swinging an invisible hula-hoop

around his mid-section) and then comes the moment of truth when in all normal human societies a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation sequence would have been called for, but once again at that very instant, we are taken on a tour of the world's most wondrous waterfalls? How can we expect a tension-free subcontinent when we allow Bollywood to indulge in such celluloid brinkmanship?

If done often enough, life imitates art, and that is what we are seeing now: an eruption of pent-up distress of a people who have been let down once too

often by squeamish directors who refuse to cut to the chase. The time has come to stop just paying lip-service to the vital subject of on-screen kissing, and to make love not war. And I don't mean

that light peck on the eyebrow, or a head-on collision that is averted at the very last moment by the protagonist veering away from his beloved to redirect his amorous intent at a nearby pine cone. I mean spreading by word of mouth a major epidemic of tongue-lashing across the subcontinent at everyone's earliest convenience, and preferably during the SAARC Summit.

Kathmandu this weekend will be a love-fest like no other, it will take us back to the glory days of Khajuraho when the SAARC Region was the world's Sex Superpower and a Tantric Hot Spot. No other region in world history knew as much about the birds and the bees as our region, not even the birds and the bees. Restoring this heritage and tradition may be the only way to ensure lasting peace. All together now, muwuuuuuuuuh!



NEPALI SOCIETY

Only skin deep



The process of being chosen to be Nepal's most high-profile model is a bit like getting a government scholarship. You are among a shortlist of 200 of the best and brightest, you have to learn how to handle interviews. Yash, Nepal Leveris new Fair & Lovely model went through all that and was the chosen one. What she hadn't bargained for were tough questions from inquisitive journalists.

We tried to corner her and ask what she thought about the whole concept of beauty and fairness. Quick as a flash comes the reply: iBeauty is only skin deep. Women need not just be fair and lovely, they must be beautiful from the

heart. With an answer like that, Yash could easily bag beauty contests here and abroad.

Yash will now replace Monica Chand as Leveris main model for its beauty products. She is, ummm, fairly confident she can juggle her studies and modelling. Yash is short for Yashawi Shah, and she is sure modelling will not detract her from her ambition to become a doctor. iI have no firm plans to continue modelling, but if there is another good project maybe, i she says coyly.

Yashawi used to be Rupa Laxmi Shah, a name picked by her grandfather, until her parents did a name change some years ago. We must admit, Yashawi has a certain

ring to it. iIt's been very exciting so far, and I think more people will notice me once the campaign begins, i she says. iI had not imagined all this when I had my picture taken for the application, i adds Yash.

Thomson Nepal finished the first commercial shoot at Changu Narayan last week and was directed by Latha Menon who has also done commercials for Fair & Lovely in India. Towards the end of the chat, we asked Yash if she had ever used Fair & Lovely, the product she is going to be modelling for. iNever before, only sometimes but I might now, i says the 17-year-old science student from Kuleshwor. ♦

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