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Coming soon

Inflation and possible devaluation vis-a-vis the Indian rupee

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

CATCH 'EM YOUNG:
Two-and-half year old Aran Shrestha plays with a toy gun in Dharan this week.



DAMBAR K SHRESTHA

The timing couldn't have been worse. After announcing fuel price hikes last week, the government followed up with pocket money for civil servants and a VAT hike to 13 percent.

Even people who supported the government on the fuel price were aghast. Economists warned it would increase inflation and trigger an exchange rate increase with the Indian rupee.

"The country's productivity will drop and competitiveness will be hurt," predicts former Finance Minister Prakash Chandra Lohani. Another ex-finance minister, Ram Sharan Mahat, agrees: "The loss of competitiveness will hurt investment."

Nepal is already a high-cost economy but the fuel price hike and 13 percent VAT increase last week were a double whammy that will have repercussions from the macro-economy right down to individual families.

Decreasing domestic productivity would mean increased imports from India with which we conduct 60 percent of our trade and have NRs 50 billion annual deficit. All this will put more strain on the Nepali-Indian rupee parity and force revision of the current 160-100 rate.

Economists agree that the Nepali rupee is already overvalued against IC. Now that

the Indian rupee is gaining strength because of the weaker US dollar, there appears to be no option but to devalue the Nepali rupee. "Chances are the US dollar will continue its slide, which means a stronger Indian currency, which in turn means more pressure on the Nepali rupee," says another ex-finance minister, Badri Shrestha.

Economist Bishwambar Pyakurel says the Nepali rupee's overvaluation is not sustainable anymore. "Sooner or later, it will have to be revised considering the IC's strength." And when that

happens, it will be another blow to hard-pressed Nepali families who will have to endure another price spike of Indian imports.


Experts agree that the government should have avoided increasing the VAT rate at such a critical time and there were plenty of other options for non-tax revenue. "Increasing VAT and fuel together was bad timing," Shrestha says.

However, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, has a very simple logic for the increases: the government needs money. "Since the Maoists did not come for talks, we have to go for elections and that means we need to increase revenue for more security expenses," he said this week. ●

Editorial p2
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Weekly Internet Poll # 171

Q. Do you agree that the government had no alternative but to raise fuel prices?



Total votes: 680
Weekly Internet Poll # 172. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. What is the most-feasible political option at present?

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KIRAN PANDAY

SWAYAMBHU: King Gyanendra receives offerings from devotees at the Samyak Mahapuja at Swayambhu on 14 January.



KIRAN PANDAY

SNOWMEN: Traffic jam at Godavari as Kathmanduites defy a fuel shortage to go up to Phulchoki to see the season's first snowfall on Tuesday.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

THE WHITE GOD: The figure of Seto Machindranath being given a ritual bath and a change of clothes on Monday with *panchamrit*.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

NO FUEL SHORTAGE: The four parties and their student affiliates burn effigies to protest the fuel price hike and 'regression' on Sunday.



INDO-PAK SUMMIT: Noted Indian and Pakistani journalists before embarking on a mountain sightseeing flight on Saturday after concluding a workshop on media and conflict.

Atul's dream

Hundreds wait outside the Jivan-Jankai Ashram near Pashupati to bid farewell to Atul Gautam, the tabla maestro. As family members carry his body to the pyre, the air is heavy with grief.

Doctors pronounced Atul Prasad Gautam dead at dawn on 16 January, four days after he suffered a brain haemorrhage. Survived by two children and wife, Bandana, Atul's compassion not just as a musician but also a social worker, touched the lives of many Nepalis. Among those gathered at Pashupati on Sunday was his inner musical circle from the band, Sukarma: tabla drummer Navaraj Gurung, sitarist Dhruv Chandra Regmi and sarangi player Shyam Nepali. They lived like brothers, and Atul was cruelly taken away from them just as the band was beginning to make a mark in Nepal and abroad.

Abhinav and Sunanda, who arranged Atul's performance with Sukarma for the inauguration of

Dharara on Saturday (picture, Atul at right), were this time arranging his last rites. Madhusudan, one of Atul's students, said, "We used to tell him how lucky we were to have a guru like him and he always replied that luck depends on how much you devote yourself to practice." That was Atul, always inspiring aspiring young classical musicians.

A childhood friend, tabla player Sarita Mishra whose house overlooks Atul's now traces the emptiness in the street that her friend walked everyday. Atul's mission was to manifest the knowledge of tabla in all its possible aspects and he was completing a PhD from Banaras under the tutelage of Pandit Pravin Uddav who at one time told one of Atul's students, "This man is learned and famous in his

country and yet he comes to learn more from me." Atul completed his Masters in Music from Prayag Sangit Samiti in Allahbad in 1996 where he got a gold medal and many honourable mentions.

Satirist Chatyang Master was in a sombre mood at Pashupati, contemplating the ultimate satire that nature plays on us by giving life and then snatching it away. Atul was in his early 30s and Chatyang had watched him grow into a fine musician, treating music not just as a profession but as a passion and devotion.

A few months ago, Atul told me about his dream to establish himself as not only a tabla player but as a versatile musical academician. He would have accomplished his goal had he lived, but now others will have to fulfil Atul's dream. ●

Saill Subedi



KIRAN PANDAY

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Gai jatra

Janabhabana, 17 January

जन भावना

The cover photo of *Himal Khabarpatrika's* latest issue had this message: the press too has been infected with the low mentality of politicians. The fortnightly may have pointed out the need for unity through the photo on its cover but this was an irresponsible act that transcended the bounds of freedom. News along with photos must be based on fact and an event that has taken place. *Himal's* cover photo that involved the dignity of the monarchy is a naked experiment of imaginary photographic and artistic license. Leading personalities in the intellectual circles feel that such a photograph is an abuse of press freedom.

The press must be aware about this conscious bending of the truth by *Himal* which has overtaken politicians in trying to turn democracy into a monocacy. At one time, the editor of *Saptahik Bimarsha*, Harihar Birahi, was punished for publishing a cartoon that depicted the chief justice as a monkey.

The country's press code of conduct bars imaginary and artistic portrayal of news that affect the dignity of constitutional organs. The action taken against Birahi for contempt of court has become a precedent. Should those at *Himal* similarly be punished for bringing out a photo containing the constitutional monarch? Intellectual circles are not only seeking an answer to this question but are also intrigued by the silence of the Department of Information, the Press Council and the Information Ministry.

Imaginary and doctored photographs are banned in Europe. Even in India, publication of such works has been prohibited because of the possibility of character assassination. In Nepal, special publications are allowed on the occasion of Gai Jatra when journalists have extra license to lampoon. But even on that day, nationalism, monarchy and the court are not dragged into controversy. What *Himal* has celebrated can be called 'Maha Gaijatra'.

Nispakshya, 18 January

निष्पक्ष

The group photograph published in *Himal Khabarpatrika* not only tricked readers but also offended the journalistic code of conduct. This was some kind of an illusionary journalism and now everyone, from an ordinary reader to intellectuals and politicians, are saying that such an established publication is trying to show it can go to any extreme by doing something so irresponsible. Both the published photographs, on the cover and page 28, were doctored. Heads of the king, Girija, Deuba, Madhab and Pasupati had been pasted on somebody else's bodies. It is really sad as well as funny to see how this publication has degraded the king and the institution of monarchy by making the king join hands with those disreputable leaders who do not accept the integrity of the king and the royal institution. The purpose of the news may be good, but such fake photographs make a bad impact. Intellectuals say that *Himal* needs to apologise for dishonouring the monarchy. The palace should also make its objections public against such irresponsible journalism and issue a warning, say intellectuals.



Resettlement

Kantipur, 16 January

कान्तिपुर

The government is considering allowing Bhutani refugees to settle in any third country, a facility already granted to Tibetan refugees. Discussion has begun at the Foreign Ministry regarding the process because of Bhutan's recalcitrance in repatriating its citizens. "Since Bhutan's policy seems to be dillydallying, we have no option," says Madhuraman Acharya, Foreign secretary. It has been more than a year since the Bhutani members of the Nepal-Bhutan joint verification team left Khudunabari camp, one of the seven Bhutani refugee camps in eastern Nepal. During the 15th round of joint ministerial level talks between Nepal and Bhutan, it was decided that Thimpu would take back all refugees except those of the non-Bhutani category. The other three categories are Bonafide Bhutanis, Bhutanis who have emigrated, and Bhutanis with criminal records. These three categories comprise 74 percent of the more than 100,000 Bhutani refugees in Nepal.

Despite the agreement, Bhutan has again cited the security situation in the camp as the main hurdle for the repatriation process. But Foreign Ministry officials believe that is a lame excuse. Having seen that Bhutan is unwilling to resolve the humanitarian crisis, the government is considering allowing the refugees to settle in any third country they wish.

Military rule

Nepal, 23 January

नेपाल

When the army was brought out of the barracks for the first time during the state of emergency, the main aim was to disarm the Maoists. But certain officers in the army who are given the responsibility of maintaining security have crossed the limits



MIN BAJRACHARYA

of their authority. This was evident in Putalisadak during the anti petrol hike protest by the students. Legally, the local administration is supposed to take the help of the police to control such demonstrations and riots. But on that particular day, Brigadier General Dilip Kumar Karki who had come to the street without his uniform was seen ordering his bodyguard to open fire at the demonstrators. It was the restraint shown by the bodyguard that averted a tragedy. Such display of arrogance only proves that those with power and arms will go to any extreme to use their authority. The local administration has been granted the authority to curb violence on the streets. The most it can do is shoot at rioters below the knee if the situation gets out of control. But nobody has the authority to fire at demonstrators. When a responsible officer goes beyond his jurisdiction and gives orders to shoot, it is natural for ordinary citizens to be terrorised. Billions of rupees have been spent on the army and weapons to control the Maoist violence. But instead of security, ordinary citizens are experiencing terror. The army should know it is necessary to seek the support of the people to control the rebels and it will get that support only if it disciplines officers like Karki.

Lack leadership

Editorial in *Rajdhani*, 17 January

राजधानी

Multiparty democracy depends largely on the leadership of political parties. Leadership can't be strong unless party leaders have the commitment for sacrifice and service. It is not possible for all political parties to find great leaders like BP Koirala and Madan Bhandari. Great leaders are born, not made or trained. It is perhaps not fair to blame Madhab Nepal and Girija Prasad Koirala for lacking qualities of their forebears. They too must have led their parties with their best ability, wisdom and capacity because nobody wants to be weak and face criticism from all quarters. But they can never be freed from some of the qualities they have been born with. That is why party workers should either say they can't

accept their leaders because they lack special qualities or stop criticising them.

It will be more sensible for party workers to censure themselves instead of blaming others for the lack of foresight and inability to make prompt decisions. After all, the cadre are to blame for choosing such people to lead them. Party workers can openly criticise their leaders for not showing exemplary sacrifice or not being punctual at office or functions. It is not fair to criticise them for not displaying the qualities of a real leader. The public, on the other hand, is free to condemn the leaders on any grounds but it is apparent that even public criticism does not affect these leaders. Koirala was constantly advised to be more liberal and keep Sher Bahadur Deuba in the party for the sake of unity. But he refused. Madhab Nepal is still stuck with a stereotype attitude. He was often told that showing off his intellect does not help in politics. Truth and practicality would work better but both have not changed with the times. Lately, Nepal has been criticised for weak leadership. He was the subject of public scorn when he stated being unaware of the price hike decision made by a member of his own party, Minister Ishwar Pokhrel. Even his own comrades are disappointed with the way Nepal lied as soon as the anti-fuel price demos began. If Madhab Nepal has any dignity left he should confess to lying about his lack of knowledge on the price hike issue and ask his comrades to withdraw from the government.

Bunker terror

Rajdhani, 19 January

राजधानी

MAHOTTARI—The rebels have started digging trenches on the Jaleswor-Bardibas road and nearby areas. This has stirred panic among the people here of getting caught in the crossfire. The rebels say the trenches and bunkers are to defend impending attack from both the security forces and the Indian army. The Maoist's district leader Sanjeeb said that they plan to dig at least 300 trenches near the Nepal-India border areas and around Jaleswor, the district headquarters. "The local people are helping us," Sanjeeb added. According to the rebels, the bunkers are 2m deep and 100m long, shaped in English letters A, C, W and E. Meanwhile, the security force has destroyed 19 bunkers in Kishan Nagar, Hattilet, Bijalpura, Sitapur, Bhangaha and Pashupatinagar. The army believes that building bunkers is not a big deal. "War tactics are more important," says Brigadier General Nirmal Thapa, who heads the Gorakh Battalion in Pakauli. He added that the bunkers would not affect the security force at all and would only put the villagers at risk.



Man on the run: Human rights activist

राजधानी *Rajdhani*, 16 January

QUOTES OF THE WEEK



The conflict in our country will never be resolved as long as the army remains under the king.

Padma Ratna Tuladhar in *Annapurna Post*, 18 January



“Local groups can deliver service”

The point man in the government who deals with donors is Madhab Prasad Ghimire, who heads the Foreign Aid Division at the Finance Ministry. In this interview with the *Nepali Times*, he explains what issues come up the most while dealing with the donor community.

The US dollar is depreciating, this must be good news for our loan repayment?

Yes it is. But it will be an advantage only if we can pay now and that depends on the revenue situation. It would certainly be a good time to pay back our loans. Because we have amortisation schedules for loan repayment we can't pay early but we can always talk to the creditors and change the timing schedule or currency.

Shouldn't our reserves be determined by currency values in the international market?

That could make some difference and I am sure that the Nepal Rastra Bank and the Financial Controller's Office are looking into the matter.

Aid has gone up but due to the insurgency, development spending has gone down. How does it work?

This has been our concern as well. But donors have been very supportive. We know we have not been able to spend what we should and we have been in touch with donors and line ministries to develop a new mechanism so spending can be increased.

The government had stated that such mechanism would include local users groups and communities to implement programs. The insurgents don't mind services that reach the grassroots. When we use the community groups for projects on health, drinking water and public infrastructure, they are not getting affected.

How much have foreign aided projects been hampered because of the diversion of the budget to security expenses?

It is very difficult to say. But one thing that we can say for sure is that the foreign assistance we have been receiving are all tied to projects and they can only be spent on programs they are meant for. We have not diverted money for security purposes.

What about assistance given for budgetary support, can't that be diverted for security expenses?

I don't agree. Even if the assistance is for budgetary support, it is meant for development programs and that is where we can spend it. There could be some kind of tradeoff because if there are any domestic savings, which we could use for development programs, they may go for other recurrent expenditure.

If that is the case, how do you find money for the ever increasing security expenses?

That is from our domestic savings. We can't use donor money for security at all.

So, if we had so much domestic savings why were we turning to donors for foreign assistance for development?

The problem is we are not in a comfortable position even now in terms of increasing security expenses. It is difficult for us. I am not saying we have a lot of domestic savings and we can spend it all on security. We have a very tight budget but we are managing right now.

An increasing number of donors are either suspending their projects or pulling out.

I wouldn't say they are pulling out. Some have suspended project activities for the time being. They are trying to investigate incidents that led to the suspension.

Donors are keen on a review of last year's Nepal Development Forum to look at implementation.

It's not really a review meeting. We hold meetings with donors every alternate month and the next one is due at the end of the month. As far as the NDF review is concerned, we hold the meeting every two years. That will happen in due course.

But donors are worried that the Auditor General's report hasn't been made public for three years and want that meeting right away.

Regarding the AG's report, we are also very concerned. Every year we make the Immediate Action Plan to execute certain plans and programs immediately and the National Planning Commission and the Ministry of Finance jointly monitor it. One of the key actions under the IAP this year, is to make the AG's report public.

In your interaction with donors, how do you find their current mindset?

Their general concern is how to implement development programs in the present security situation. They are concerned about peace talks.

The beat within

Atul Gautam was one of those rare souls, happily productive

Last Sunday, Atul Gautam, a tabla virtuoso, died unexpectedly of a massive brain haemorrhage. He was only 33. Those of us who had the good fortune, in both public settings and small gatherings, of watching and hearing Atul play the tabla remember many things about him.

STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari



But three in particular stand out. Atul's passion for learning was contagious, both in terms of higher studies and continuous practice. Once he started playing, he displayed what the University of Chicago psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has identified in his widely applied study of productive workers as an autotelic personality. And third, by working closely with some of the leading musicians, Atul served to advance the cause of neglected and under-funded eastern classical music in Nepal.

Most of us do work that could be mind-numbingly boring once we figure out how the work is supposed to be done. Unless we consciously trouble ourselves to create new ones, there remain few challenges to get us continuously excited about our daily work, regardless of what the work is. Human resource theorists often suggest that managers to keep parcelling out challenging assignments to employees before the inevitable anomie of routine work sets in to sap energy and creativity.

That is why, it takes a certain kind of individual, who, without any prodding, keeps finding challenges in their routine work and continuously aims to improve what they do. Atul was one of those rare people. Lit up by fierce motivation from within, he

could go on practicing for eight hours a day—delighting in infinitesimal improvements in the ways he played the tabla. Besides, not content to be a mere practitioner, he enrolled himself in a doctoral program in Banaras. His aim was to contribute to the theoretical foundations of music.

Being a classical musician is a labour of love anywhere in the world but more so in Nepal. There is hardly any money or much publicity. The practice facilities are decrepit and the audience is small. But Atul managed to bloom where he was planted. He devoted himself completely to his music since

in contact with him.

Atul understood that making music, like any piece of good work, was a collaborative activity. Whether in impromptu jam sessions with Sarita Mishra and Dhruv Chandra Regmi on Saturday mornings at Pashupati's Kirateswor Sangeet Ashram or elsewhere, he had no difficulty attracting others to play with him, thereby rising above the tales of jealousy and backbiting which, alas, hobble the Nepali arts community.

Interestingly enough, with his striking looks and inspired performances, Atul was the closest thing to 'a rock star' that Nepal's classical music



KIRAN PANDAY

Sitarist Dhruv Chandra Regmi speaks at a memorial service for Atul Gautam at the Yala Maya Kendra on Thursday.

the age of seven. And he played with no expectations of making money or earning public acclaim. He played because playing well for the sake of getting into the flow of making music without worrying about time, money and what others said was a reward worth savouring—again and again. Indeed, he showed one could produce much with very little. And in doing so, his autotelic or self-contained personality shone through, touching all who came

fraternity had. But his greatness was that instead of basking in his own spotlight, he put his signature strengths to serve the cause of music: to quietly train the next generation of tabla players, volunteer for fundraising shows and increase the visibility of classical music and musicians. There is much we can learn from Atul's short life about how to be a productive worker and a happy human being. May his soul rest in peace. ●

New Book

Trade Facilitation: Nepal's Priorities

Published by the Institute of Foreign Affairs Edited by Nishchal N Pandey

With four thought-provoking articles by Prof Biswambhar Pyakhurel, Krishna Hari Baskota, Dr Durgesh Man Singh and RB Rauniyar on trade issues, economic diplomacy, customs reforms, etc.

Trade Facilitation :
Nepal's Priorities



Edited By
Nishchal N. Pandey



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ALL TOGETHER NOW

Constitutional forces of Nepal, unite. You have nothing to lose but your very existence.

The bane of Nepali politics has always been narrow-minded and short-sighted egocentrism. This proclivity to put personal and partisan interest before that of the community and nation has led to our downfall. And even at this moment of historic crisis when our future as an independent nation is threatened, we show the same fractiousness that has brought us to this state. Not that we are unaware of this fatal flaw—every other political speech we have heard in the past few years from the king to cadre has bemoaned it. They exhort unity and then go right ahead to bring each other down.

The first step in extricating ourselves from this spiral of violence and conflict is to get the constitutional forces into speaking terms. The alternative is that the middle ground will disappear and the country will be irreversibly polarised between extreme left and right. It is to preserve the centre that we need the constitutional monarch and the political parties that believe in the constitution to come together. What are they fighting about anyway?

We have to work backwards for that to happen. First there has to be unity within the political clan that has inherited BP's mantle. Then we need a sense of common purpose within the Nepali Congress ahead of its Birganj Convention and perhaps even a move towards reuniting the party. The four parties on the streets and four parties in the government will then finally appreciate that if they don't work together they are doomed. After that they may persuade the king they are mature and accountable people's representatives, and His Majesty can please return to being a constitutional monarch. It will be at the end of that process that dialogue with the Maoists will make any sense.

This phased unity within political parties, between parties, among the parties and the palace is needed for whichever path we choose to resolve the conflict: ceasefire and talks, elections, reinstatement of parliament or constituent assembly. Even those who believe in a military solution need this political consensus first.

If the constitutional forces don't get it even after ten years and 12,000 lives lost, one wonders when they will ever coalesce into a force for peace. After ten more years of this, 50,000 dead and a country in ruins?



NOT UNDERGROUND

Pranav Budathoki in 'Nepalis go underground in Britain' (#230) has levelled serious charges against me by trying to entangle my status with illegal migrant workers. This is absolutely baseless. First of all, I am a genuine research student doing PhD at the University of Reading which I embarked upon the completion of my masters degree after being awarded the Chevening Scholarship. At present, I am working on the livelihood diversification issues in the post rural electrification stage and I am due to submit my dissertation at the end of 2005. I have no intention of sticking on in Britain upon the completion of my PhD. I am completely dedicated and committed to my country where I have spent a lot of time doing research in rural areas. To the best of my knowledge, no Nepali student from this university has ever stayed back in the UK. By regulation, all international students are allowed to work not more than 20 hours during term

time. Indeed, I had a summer job during weekends at a local department store, but I don't know anything about any bakery that Budathoki talks about. In November, I was elected chair of student representative committee of the higher degree research students in my department. The critical fact is that I am not underground but openly overground.

Before charging someone and generalising the scenario, Budathoki should have cross-checked his facts otherwise it is a case of character assassination. There must be ethical issues that prevent journalists from invading people's privacy and defaming them. The report has caused me tremendous physical, emotional and psychological anguish. My colleagues and I regard the *Nepali Times* highly. We have unwavering faith in its content, but I would request you to prevent misleading and distorted news items like these from being printed in future.

Badri P Bastakoti,
University of Reading, UK

The angst of arches

The politics of monuments and why we build them

There is a difference in the politics of those who erect victory towers and those who cope with commemorative gates and arches.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche racked his brains (literally: he suffered a mental breakdown) trying to understand the origins and function of values in human

GUEST COLUMN
Dipak Gyawali



life. He distinguished between master and slave moralities and saw in the former a 'will to power' and in the latter its nihilistic absence. He feared that the emerging nationalism of late 19th Century Europe was a false god demanding slavish obedience rather than creating a liberated 'superman' with the proper will to power.

We have enough examples in Nepal of this sort of edifice complex running amok if we look at the *dwaras* and *stambhas* around us. Bhimsen Thapa put up the Dharara, perhaps the first phallic symbol in Nepal's secular domain, unlike the myriad national religious protrusions of antiquity. It was followed by Bir Shamsheer and his Ghanta Ghar. (Why *ghar* and not *stambha*?) Both the Thapas and the Ranas exhibited a stubborn will to rule that they appropriately flaunted even if the current of history was already flowing the other way.

After the Ranas, it seems to have become the age of gates. King Mahendra built the Sahid Gate (not a Sahid *Minar*!), but was it to domesticate the

anarchic unruliness of virgin democracy? After all he built the tower inside the royal palace that even today has all of Nepal perplexed as to its meaning, almost like the Panchayat he instituted.

The Panchas, despite their bluster, were politically a hermaphroditic lot doing both arches and towers. They were famous for putting up welcome arches by the scores every time King Birendra went on a regional tour. So many of them had to be put up (and so much money siphoned off) that in Dharan once a football field had to be requisitioned just to put up gates that found no space on the main road. On their 25th anniversary, shortly before their demise, the Panchas dotted the land with celebratory erections aptly nicknamed *Rajat Jayanti Pancha Lingas*.

Unfortunately, when moral authority has slipped away, no amount of phallic brandishing will work. Or as Lenin is supposed to have said, "A revolutionary situation arises when the ones on the top can't rule and the ones at the bottom want not to be ruled." A crowning symbol of this anomie remains the *Pancha Linga* on the Ring Road between Maharajanj and Chabel (*pictured*) that is a white conch on a black, square pillar. With a missing base for the inverted conch to rest on (such as a blooming lotus), it looks like a botched circumcision carried out by an over-zealous surgeon. But by then, with its political exclusion via the Gaun Pharka politburo, Panchayat had already lost its political base as well.

The trouble with obelisks is that form overtakes substance, and the angst with arches is that one does not know which direction is entry and which the exit, amplifying the confusion and hiding subliminal libidos that are symptomatic of psychic stress. The structure on the Ring Road below the airport is another example. As a 'gate' it neither closes off nor opens onto anything, and as an arch one is not sure if it is saying the Himalayan capital is happy to welcome you or glad to see you off. The country, on the other hand, would no doubt have been better off if that constructive energy was spent on rescuing Royal Nepal Airlines.

When it comes to confusion over history, however, a tower in Kolkata takes the cake. Shahid Minar on the Esplanade used to be called the Ochterlony Monument, after the British general who tried to invade Nepal in 1814. The monument was off-limits but with some cajoling the caretaker (paid by Britannia the biscuit maker, it turns out) allowed me in to look at a sign which said:

Shahid Minar (Ochterlony Monument)

This 165 ft (50.3m) high monument was erected during the period from 1828 to 1830, as a victory tower in memory of General David Ochterlony, conqueror of Nepal.

In 1969, it was dedicated in memory of the freedom fighters of India and renamed as Shahid Minar.

Maintained by Executive Engineer, City Division, PWD, Writers' Building, Kolkata 400 001

LETTERS

WIN-WIN

The win-win idea that you provide to cut Nepal's fossil fuel imports ('Oil and politics don't mix', #230) is an excellent way out of the present crisis. But you underestimate the amount of electricity that Nepal wastes every year due to 'spill', it is actually closer to one billion units and the price of this would be closer to Rs 3 billion a year. This is the energy that isn't

used and can't be sold domestically because of the peculiar problem we have of over supply of electricity during the monsoon months when the demand is lowest. But there is a huge energy hungry market right across the border in northern India. Your idea of bartering this excess energy for refined petroleum products from India is brilliant. Someone should start working on it and not just launch street protests

and bemoan the fuel price hike.

S B Shrestha, email

• The street protests following the oil price hike is symbolic of the utter disregard Nepali politicians both in (UML) and out (NC) of government have for national interest.

If he was minister now instead of his brother, Ram Sharan Mahat would have no option but to raise the price of petroleum. But he's going to fight it tooth and nail because his party is out on the streets. Similarly for the UML, it wants to have its cake and eat it too. Either way, the Nepali people suffer.

Gyan Subba, email

• I agree with Kunda Dixit's economic and market logic in 'Adding fuel to the fire' (#230) but he does not address the issue of how to reduce the burden of the fuel price increase for the poor people: 77 percent of Nepalis who don't use kerosene, according to Bhusan Tuladhar. It is called cross-subsidy and you do it by using the surcharge in aviation fuel and petrol to subsidise kerosene. The problem is that even after the fuel



KIRAN PANDAY

Ochterlony got no further than Hetauda in 1814 but the Raj had to tell its subjects and all who came there that they had conquered Nepal. The Marxist who came to power when it was re-named Shahid Minar, despite being imbued with socialist realism, found the myth worthy of promoting. If only the rulers of Writers' Building had corrected it to 'Ochterlony, conqueror of Darjeeling' they might have had fewer problems with the Supremo of the Hill Council. Mercifully, nobody thought of asking Nepali visitors to lay wreaths there in memory of the freedom fighters like we do at Tundikhel's Sahid Gate. ●



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Postcard from Lakeside

Pokhara has survived the insurgency but who will save it from itself?

POKHARA—Tourism in the time of insurgency requires a lot of ingenuity and innovation. Entrepreneurs have to devise new methods to survive the slump and exploit whatever opportunities are available.

In the business of regional aviation, Cosmic Airlines is trying to break new grounds with its no-frills flight to Dhaka and New Delhi. The bus service

Nepali rupees.

There is no reputed eatery on the lakeside that serves staple diets of Indians and Nepalis at reasonable rates. No doubt, phapar ko dhindo at the Thakali Kitchen is an eating exotic but such a luxury can't be an everyday affair. Very few Nepali visitors can afford to pay the premium price of a plate of rice in restaurants that have dance-troupes outnumbering diners. Lakeside is badly in need of hotels and restaurants that are functional and cater to a changing tourism demographic.

One of the reasons most Nepalis don't complain about rates and services of Pardi, Baidam and Lakeside hotels could be that many of them are here seminaring. SUVs with diplomatic number-plates vastly outnumber taxis in front of all the fancy bars at the Barahi Temple boatway junction.

Another drawback of tourism entrepreneurship of Nepal in general and Pokhara in particular is its traditional nature. Innkeepers behave like landlords who are doing Nepali and Indian visitors a favour by allowing them to rent rooms. Between the hustling of touts at the airport and scowls of hotel owners, the service orientation of the hospitality industry is conspicuous by its absence.

Even some upscale hotels have become shabby due to prolonged disrepair. Reedy lawns, creaky furniture, broken faucets, yellowing bathtubs, and faulty locks show the apathy of their owners and managers. Clearly, there is a huge mismatch between the



expectations of entrepreneurs and the customers. One gets the feeling Pokhara has given up even without even trying.

Shop fronts along the banks of Phewa lake look neat. The streets aren't potholed like in Kathmandu and the sidewalks are a joy to walk on. Ironically, the eyesore on the lakeside is not tasteless hotel architecture but Ratna Mandir which occupies a large chunk of the lake front. With its prison-like high walls topped with concertina wires and ominous looking pillboxes, it isn't a friendly place that builds confidence among visitors. Even the shutter shops look more agreeable.

Having reached the limit of growth possible under a free-for-all competitive entrepreneurship, tourism in Pokhara now needs some planned intervention to reorient it towards domestic and regional tourism. It needs creative thinking: why not tap tourists with direct flights from Banaras and Delhi? Why not ferry Indian visitors up

from Nepalganj and Biratnagar? Why not build that long awaited new airport? Offer comfortable and affordable lodgings which make their profit from added services rather than room rents that try to wring visitors dry. More eateries on the lines of Kailash Hotel of Chipledhunga and more cafes patterned after Panthi Dairy will attract hordes of middle-class Nepalis catching some shopping at Saleways in between trips to Bindyabasini and Sarangkot.

John Maynard Keynes once said, "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economists". Pokhara may not recover bad debts that financed follies like Fulbari but innovative and planned development will allow it to get over the present low cycle.

They just need to follow the abundant examples of innovation like Cosmic, Greenline and one of the most faithful believers in Pokhara's future, Avia Club, which has stayed through good times and bad. ●

STATE OF THE STATE CK Lal



of Greenline Tours goes one step further even at a time when highways have become dangerous: its intercity carriers are full service packages that offer complimentary bottled water and even a free lunch. The service is so sophisticated it even keeps the latest issue of the *Nepali Times* in the seat pockets!

When one gets to Pokhara, one realises hoteliers there haven't been as inventive. Most continue to chase increasingly rare western tourists even though it is now clear domestic and Indian visitors keep the lakeside humming even during winter.

And they will even pay more. Across Nepal the word 'tourist' has become synonymous with 'white farang' and nowhere more so than in Pokhara. Menu cards on display along the lakeside seem to be designed to frighten away orthodox Hindus and Muslims from across the border with non-kosher meals of beefsteak and pork. Few hoteliers seem to have realised the importance of offering room rates in

price increase there is a shortage of kerosene and diesel in the market. So what was the point? What is the point in reducing the excise on plastic bags? What is the point in increasing the allowance for civil servants who form only two percent of the population? Why doesn't the government prioritise renewable energy? Why are environmental activists sleeping?

Indra Maharjan, Kathmandu

● Why don't the political vandals get it? There has been a 30 percent increase in world oil prices. The government actually tried to hold on to fuel price increase as long as possible. You can't just keep saying: "We are a poor country we want cheap fuel." You have to do something about it: reduce dependence on imported fuel and concentrate on what we have in abundance which is hydropower.

The price of oil is never going to come down, so let's start substituting oil wherever possible. Electric vehicles and cars can be perfect for Kathmandu and other major cities. But the government

has yet to let anyone import a private electric vehicle because of controversy about the tax rebate on e-vehicles.

So, instead of rioting in the streets against the fuel price hike, the student unions should be pressuring the government to open up the import of electric vehicles.

Avani Dixit, email

● It is not surprising that Nepal Oil Corporation raised fuel prices. What is surprising is it took them so long to do it. Is it because their pricing has been flawed from the outset? Why doesn't NOC explain to us laymen how they have come up with their pricing system, not just the increment? Secondly, it always intrigues me how our government is fast on the draw to raise taxes, prices etc. Electricity prices have been raised by about 30 percent in the past 2-3 years. This was supposed to be something Nepal is rich in. Now, the VAT has been increased. VAT is a relatively new tax, doesn't it make more sense for the government to increase the number of businesses registering

and paying the VAT, rather than burdening current payers of VAT with more tax?

S Rana, Lalitpur

DEFAULT

Having worked four years ago at Pokhara's Hotel Fulbari owned by Piyush Bahadur Amatya, I was intrigued to read his interview ('Why only pick on me?' #227). Given the kind of whimsical megalomania I saw during the construction of the hotel, I am not surprised that he is a blatant defaulter who never had any intention of paying back the public's money he borrowed with the connivance of bank officials and the government. Money was being spent like 'Lutko dhan, phupu ko saradhha'. It's such a shame that the Nepali state establishment didn't do anything to punish him and other such shameless guys. What Craig McAllister is doing is the last remaining option and he should be thanked.

Bhuwan Singh Khatri, Kathmandu

DRONGOS

I enjoyed Kanak Mani Dixit's Southasia Beat 'Porous societies,

sealed frontiers' (#230). Unfortunately, there can't be any open border between India and Bangladesh or India and Pakistan in our lifetime as both Bangladesh and Pakistan have been 'sworn' enemies of India. I am glad the Nepal-India border is open and peaceful. The reason is there are no deep-rooted animosities between the people of India and Nepal, no serious ideological differences, no past history of hatred and genocides.

C P Mohan, email

● Greatly enjoyed Kanak Mani Dixit's Southasia Beat. He laments the construction of walls in South Asia. Before walls are built on land, they are built in the minds of people. Always remember that. There is also another famous saying, good fences make for good neighbours and when you have bad neighbours, you need fences. The problem is not the wall, the problem is illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India.

Deepika Damerla, email

STOP IT

Kunda Dixit has been writing his column, Under My Hat, unfailingly each week for more than four years. Out of the 200-odd Under My Hat writings, I have not read more than 20. Who thinks they are funny? Like Dave Barry, Dixit should take a break.

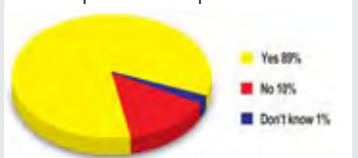
Jagannath Lamichhane, email

● Kunda Dixit's satire makes me laugh so loud that my family members think I have gone mad. Two months ago, I made the mistake of reading Under My Hat while eating. The columns should carry a government health warning.

Bijay Gurung, Tokyo

CORRECTION

Colours in the pie chart depicting results of the poll question, 'Do you think the Outer Ring Road is a good idea?' were reversed in #230. The correct pie chart is reproduced below:





Gloom and doom on

The conflict turns popular highway stops into ghost towns



KIRAN PANDAY

CABLE AND WIRELESS: The Manakamana cablecar terminal on the Prithvi Highway was largely empty of visitors this week, and (overleaf) a pickup drives past the charred hulk of a minibus near Mugling.

Looking at Nepal from New Delhi

Kathmandu and Delhi need to work together on establishing democracy and development

NEW DELHI—In the sunwashed daytime on the crowded streets of India's capital, the problems of a small mountain kingdom seem a world away. It's a short flight to Kathmandu but the aircraft might as well be circumnavigating the globe.

India, in short, is hardly aware that Nepal exists anymore.

The New Delhi newspapers brim with the aggressive confidence of the new urbanites that are increasingly shaping

the destiny of this country. Style overwhelms substance, if it can find any space among the ads for mobile phones and apartment complexes. The news stories are the usual fare: Pakistani perfidy in Kashmir, political infighting and oddities from the mohfussil. But the subtext, as one billboard for *The Times of India* has it, states firmly that 'India is going Places'.

It's easy enough to be cynical about all this and to remind Indians about endemic poverty, caste problems and above all, environmental overload from rapid urbanisation.

But these seem quibbles alongside the tremendous conviction of the local middle class that theirs is the society of

the future. And I can't help but believe that these people have the ability to make it so, despite their problems.

So where does this leave Nepal, a land where entropy seems written on stone in the tablets of history. I compare those selfsame aspirational middle classes and come up gloomy, despite the occasional gloss of new media and new buildings in Kathmandu. The king, the king, the king, what will he do next? The question on everyone's lips is hardly modern and forward looking. And as night descends, fear of the Maoists or the security forces or both settles over a countryside where development is actually unravelling, where the achievements of democracy and aid are eclipsed by violence.

India's newspaper stories about Nepal, most of them written by stringers in Kathmandu, are mere accounting. So many dead, so much rumour, so little hope. Nowhere does one find analysis or forethought, some attempt to comprehend a neighbour's woes. It's a frightful contrast to the attitude at so many Nepali dinner tables, that India is just waiting to take over and create itself another state. On the contrary, those Indians who know anything about Nepal are mostly sad that the hope of the 1990s seems to have been dashed north and east of the border.

India, it seems to me, has never really coveted Nepali territory or its occupants. This is a canard fostered by extremist forces in the kingdom, right and left, to

account for their own excesses and incompetence. The Indians would like nothing better than a Nepal that is prosperous, happy and at peace. Of course there would be disputes galore, mostly driven by the rapacious border mafias in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, whose greed and corruption is legendary and who wield more than a little political clout. There might also be misguided Hindu nationalism in New Delhi that sees a Hindu Rastriya in the Himalaya, and wants one for itself.

But more and more, Nepal needs India to be its friend. And yes, even the occasional mentor. No more than that mind but Kathmandu and Delhi need to work together on establishing democracy and development that the kingdom so badly needs. That doesn't mean any loss of sovereignty at all. Of what use is freedom to those who know only poverty, fear and decline? This then is an urgent call for the diplomats, politicians, leaders, kings, commoners, business types, journalists and development specialists on both sides of this troubled border to start collaborating.

India can be far, far more generous and spacious with Nepal. The kingdom can stop mistrusting its giant neighbour and work alongside all South Asian nations for regional prosperity and peace. It's the only way forward. ●

HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak



the highways

NARESH NEWAR
in MUGLING

It is four in the afternoon at Nagdhunga. Traffic on the pass on the western edge of Kathmandu Valley is already tapering off.

"I think this is the last one," says a fruit vendor as he runs to sell oranges to passengers through the windows of a Chitwan bound bus.

After a brief security check, the bus heads off down the Valley in a cloud of dust. By five in the evening, the highway is quiet except for a few straggler lorries.

Just a few years ago, this would be peak hour at Nagdhunga as hundreds of night buses and cargo trucks to all parts of the country passed through the Prithvi Highway. The insurgency has reduced traffic and hundreds of thousands of families that depended on the restaurants and lodges along the highways have lost their livelihoods.

Before the Kathmandu-Pokhara highway was built in 1970 and the connecting road to Narayanghat was opened seven years later, Mugling was a sleepy fishing village at the confluence of Marsyangdi and Trisuli. The highway junction transformed Mugling and it was known as a town that never slept. Today, everything is shut by midnight and Mugling looks like a ghost town again. Many shops are shut, the restaurants look forlorn and dogs sleep on the asphalt.

"There used to be so many buses, there was nowhere to park," remembers Min Gurung of Narayani Hotel, "It's not just



depressing, it is also getting dangerous with the violence and crime."

Up the road, Manakamana benefited from the cable-car that connected the highway to the hilltop pilgrimage spot. Today, the number of people coming to Manakamana has plummeted. "This place is dying," says Nanda Kumari Gautam, owner of Jorte Guest House. Until three years ago, Gautam's lodge used to be so packed that people slept outside on the verandahs and terraces. She could name any price and pilgrims would pay happily. Today, Gautam and other lodge owners will rent a room for less than Rs 200 a night—if they find customers. A large number of lodge owners had migrated here from Pokhara and even Jhapa but most have packed up and left.

"Earlier, the lodges were about profit now they are about survival," explains Kalika Joshi of Hotel Joshi, who came here from Pokhara three years ago. Heavily in debt and with no prospect of peace or tourists, Kalika is thinking of heading back to Pokhara. Some hoteliers have been reduced to selling fruits and vegetables on the highway.

Bhim Silwal came here from

Godavari and used to run a restaurant. When the business died, he started selling puja paraphernalia and flowers to Manakamana pilgrims in the highway below. "Very few buses stop here nowadays and only for a few minutes," says Silwal.

Media coverage of firefights along the highway, ambushes of army convoys and landmined barriers have made people fearful of travelling. The charred hulks of government vehicles bombed by the rebels in August litter the highway, there are craters along the road where booby trap mines went off.

The security checks along the highway were also a nuisance, with passengers having to get off buses and be searched and interrogated up to five times between Pokhara and Kathmandu. But in recent weeks, security has been relaxed and travel along the Prithvi Highway between Thankot and Dumre is swift and smooth. Even the army has become more tolerant and soldiers at checkpoints are surprisingly polite. "It is no longer the fear of ambushes, now it is the blockades and bandas that have reduced business," says Ramlal Sharma in Malekhu, two hours from Kathmandu.

Malekhu is famous for its fish and was a popular lunch stop. The famous Sharma Bhojnalaya used to be thronged with hundreds of travellers, and people had to queue for lunch. Today it is almost empty. "Sometimes I dream that my restaurant is full again," says Ramlal Sharma. Things have been especially bad since the blockade in August. "I don't think Malekhu will ever recover," Sharma adds, despondent.

At the Riverside Spring Resort in Kurintar, business is down. After the Greenline bus passengers make their stopover in the morning, the resort is mostly deserted for the rest of the day. "Traveling from Kathmandu has become uncertain, so the people from Kathmandu have stopped coming," says Suresh Shahi, restaurant manager of Riverside Spring Resort which has 22 rooms, all of them empty when we were there. ●

Extradition treaty with India

The fate of a dozen Nepali Maoist rebels held in India rests on the revised Extradition Treaty agreed on between Nepali and Indian home secretaries in New Delhi on Thursday. The details of the updated treaty, initially signed in 1953, have not been made public. The revised treaty will come into force once the ministers of the two countries sign it. Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Sharan, while returning from his assignment as Indian ambassador in Kathmandu, had said, "What India will do with the Nepali Maoist rebels found in India depends on the finalisation of the revised Extradition Treaty."

Two senior Maoist leaders have been in Indian jail while two others were handed over to Nepal in the past. Many junior level cadre have been either arrested or handed over by the Indian government.

Nepal and India had running differences on extraditing third country nationals that delayed the signing of this treaty. Foreign and Home Ministry officials in Kathmandu were tight-lipped about whether Nepal had finally given in to Indian demands that it hand over third country nationals caught in Nepal to India. Nepal already has an agreement with the US on not handing over each other's nationals to any third country. To supplement the revised Extradition treaty, Nepal and India have also signed the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty at the Home secretary level.

High ranking visits

Louise Arbor, the UN high commissioner for human rights is visiting Nepal on 23 January to assess the human rights situation in the country. She is the first senior UN rights official to visit Nepal since the people's war started in 1997. Arbor is best known as the chief prosecutor for tribunals into the genocide in Rwanda and human rights abuses in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. She also indicted the former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic for war crimes. In January 2004, she replaced Sergio Vieira de Mello, after he was killed, as the head of the UN operations in Iraq.

Another UN official, Samuel Tamrat special envoy to secretary general Kofi Annan, is in Kathmandu this week to study the political situation in the country. The UN has constantly offered its good offices as a go-between to initiate peace talks. The rebels are keen to take up the UN's offer but the government has rejected it outright saying that the conflict is an internal matter.

Arbor will make a firsthand assessment of the situation in Nepal during her four-day stay and meet senior officials of the government, judiciary and the military to discuss the state of human rights in the country, says a press release by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).



Qatar goes double decker

Qatar Airways is among the launch customers of the world's largest passenger jet, the Airbus A380-800 when it was unveiled in Toulouse this week. The airline has ordered four A380-800s with first delivery in 2009 to coincide with the opening of the new Doha airport which has been designed specifically to accommodate the twin-deck A380.



Soaltee hospitality

The Soaltee Crowne Plaza welcomed a group of Russian Tour Operators in Nepal on a familiarisation trip. The operators observed various places of interest in the country, its culture and lifestyle. The hotel says things look promising as far as tourism is concerned, with 2004 showing an increase in tourist arrival as compared to 2003.



Branching fourth

Kumari Bank Limited, in a very short period of time has established itself as a prominent player in Nepal's banking sector. The chairman of the bank, Noor Pratap JB Rana inaugurated its fourth branch in Pokhara. The Pokhara branch commenced its operation by extending its first credit facilities to the boat operators of Phewa Lake.



Hoping for the best

Raju Babu Shrestha (*below, right*), owner and director of Manakamana Cable Car is a born optimist and despite the downturn in business caused by the insurgency he is still upbeat. "As long as there is a Manakamana temple, there will still be people who want to go there," he reasons. The cable car company, Nepal's first modern passenger ropeway system, is still ferrying 1,000 passengers every weekend from the highway to the temple.

Shrestha is even investing in an 18 room hotel with a swimming pool to cater to Nepali tourists. "Our main advantage is that unlike other big tourist businesses, we focus on internal tourism, which is why we didn't suffer as much as the others," says Ujwal Sherchan, assistant station manager of the cable car.

"Manakamana is still a major attraction for its religious and cultural importance and even western tourists have started coming here," says the restaurant's manager Sashi Shrestha, adding, "We have to be patient and not lose hope."



Foreigner seeks flat/small house, Patan.

Preferred: reasonably-sized living area, bedroom, study, good views, outside space, quiet location.
9851083219

BEAUTIFUL HOUSE FOR RENT, chakupat, patan,

Five bedrooms, study, living, dining, three bathrooms, immaculate garden, large roof terrace, garage. Near UN, INGOs.

Exceptionally peaceful central location. 5520988, 9841234999

Royal republics

Fine tequila versus bad coffee

Sorry but I couldn't think of any other way to attract your attention. So much analysis has been done and so many opinions thrown around on everything that I am afraid people will skip this article if I had named it 'Assessment of the Existing National Quagmire and Future Prospects of Nepal in Light of the Existing Constitutional Loopholes, Regression, and Reactionary Forces Amassed At the Border'. I don't want to be the last person to weigh in on this great debate.

The Maoists think a republic is the only way out. I can't compete with people that have a JNU gold medalist on their team.

NEPALI PAN
Pravin Rana



Hell, I can't even compete with first year Nepali college students for whom debate is a full on contact sport. The only medal I won was in

elementary school in a sack race after the other three contestants tripped.

But I am told by well-placed sources on the Kathmandu streets (Mohammad Mohsin and subversive moles at Martin Chautari) that the coffee at JNU has been known to give people delusions of grandeur, unmitigated nihilistic tendencies and abominably bad shaving habits. Other sources (florists in Kathmandu) tell me the coffee at the FNCCI mess hall makes people want to impulsively put garlands on anything that moves. If Hitler showed up in Kathmandu today, they would put a garland on him. Key observation from this: those Nepali models from cybernepal.com are really, really hot.

So mentally challenged, disrespectful, non-conspiracy-theory-believing, tequila-loving, medal-challenged people like myself are giving this a lot of thought as we take a sip of fine cactus arrack: What kind of a Republic are we talking about here?

Is it something along the lines of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (yes, *that* Korea)? Or is it more along the lines of the French Republic? Or perhaps like the Republics of Mexico or Congo? I won't even bring up the United States: the coffee there has about 47 percent of the people believing that the country is now officially a dictatorship. So I guess they don't qualify as a republic or a democracy anymore.

Let's start with the DPRK, which is neither a republic (at least as the Greeks envisioned it) nor a democracy (not even as the Koirala dynasty envisions it). If names could deliver us economic prosperity, justice, transparency, opportunity and equality then we wouldn't need to be so uptight and replace words like Kingdom and Royal with Democratic and Republic and move on. I'll even change my last name, if that helps. And if the whole Vishnu Avatar thing makes you cringe, how about the cults of personalities and the mythology that have emerged from countries that have 'republic' and 'democracy' attached to their names.

And France? They are only on their fifth republic since getting rid of those cake-eating-and-serving feudals. Their first republic lasted two years. Our politicians can beat that record while balancing their mistresses on both hands. The two years of the first republic is known as (uh-oh) The Reign of Terror. Am I the only one that gets queasy when I hear 'republic'? And between the first and fifth republics, we see emperors, dictators and strongmen, each wanting to establish their own dynasty.

We can barely put up with our own monarchy, how are we going to deal with a, ahem, Nepalian executive president? I'm not necessarily against republics and am definitely not for feudals. Having lived in the US for so long, I have no idea what a feudal looks like even though my wife tells me its easy: just look in the mirror.

I want to go to clubs in Kathmandu just as much as the next guy without getting beaten to a pulp. Walk (stumble in my case) home after a night in Thamel without getting run over. And please, all that decorum makes me dizzy because feigning diffidence is harder than it looks. And, yes, I must warn you that I could write at least two sentences on the pros and cons of relying on genetics to sustain governance. But I'm already on my fourth tequila. ●



REBATI SAPKOTA
in SINDHUPALCHOK

It has been two years but the villagers in Thulo Sirubari still speak in quivering voices while recalling the events of that April morning.

Six Maoists had spent the night at the homes of villagers. On a tipoff, an army patrol from Chautara headquarter, led by Capt Keshab Shahi and another unit from Panchkhal converged and surrounded Thulo Sirubari. By the time the soldiers went house-to-house, the six district-level Maoist leaders who had sheltered in the village had fled. The army rounded up seven villagers, beat them up as they were led away into the Rolpakha community forest.

Villagers heard the sound of gunfire twice between nine and 11. They gathered around and mustered the courage to go and investigate. The first to be found was Shivahari Dulal's body, lying face down 100m below Mane Danda. He had been blindfolded and handcuffed with strips of cloth torn out from his own shirt. "I don't remember clearly but after seeing his body I fell down unconscious," recalls Tikaram Dahal.

Five hundred metres further on, the bodies of Jhalak Bahadur Dulal, Bhaktalal Dulal, Tikadutta Dulal, Ganesh Gautam and Tsiring Tamang were lay close to each other. There was a note next to them: 'Don't remove the bodies'. The corpses rotted there in the summer heat for four days and by the time they were buried they had been dismembered by



(Clockwise, from left) Tika Dutta Dulal 73, Jhalak Bahadur Dulal 65, Ganesh Gautam 24 and Shivahari Gautam 25.

animals and vultures. The seven o'clock news over Radio Nepal that week quoted a Defence Ministry statement: "Six armed Maoists were killed in an encounter in Thulo Sirubari and 50 socket bombs were recovered

from them."

The villagers of Thulo Sirubari are still reluctant to talk about that day. Finally, they told us how Ganesh, Shivahari and Jhalak had been forced by the Maoists during the ceasefire

Seeing is

AARTI BASNYAT

Some good comes out of even the most tragic events. Publicity of the havoc created by the Sumatra earthquake and the tsunami it unleashed in the Bay of Bengal last month has done more for earthquake awareness in Kathmandu than anything else in recent times.

That is why Mona Pradhan, 33, took her husband to Mangal Bajar this week to visit the Seventh Annual Earthquake Safety Exhibition. Mona was quizzing mason, Janak Maharjan, about the exact construction methods he used to make a life size demonstration earthquake-resistant model of brick walls and reinforced concrete beams.

"We are building a house and we wanted to make sure it

can withstand earthquakes," she told us.

Nepal Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) which has been organising the annual exhibitions since 1998 to coincide with the great earthquake of 1934 which flattened Kathmandu Valley and killed more than 10,000 people. But this year, organisers say, there was unprecedented interest in new building techniques and disaster preparedness. Organisers lost count of the number of people who thronged the displays and stalls at Patan Darbar Square for three days this week.

The theme this year for Earthquake Safety Day on 15 January was compliance to building codes. NSET's Mahesh Nakarmi explained: "It is possible to reduce fatalities from an earthquake if we make

our buildings safer. You can't prevent earthquakes but you can be prepared for them." Nakarmi added that even if new houses in the Valley followed existing building codes they would be much safer.

But there are examples of new earthquake-resistant buildings which Nepali architects have pioneered and even taken the knowhow to Bam in Iran and to Afghanistan (see: 'A Bhaktapur bricklayer', #222) which would make housing safer. One of the exhibits, the 'Shake table', at Mangal Bajar this week was a platform with two models of apartment blocks: one retrofitted to withstand tremors and the other not. When the platform is shaken to simulate a strong quake, the unprotected house came

Maoists killed in encounter'

Newspaper headlines don't distinguish between hardcore rebels and villagers forced into the militia

period to officiate in the local 'people's government' because of their commitment to social welfare in the village. None of them or the others were hardcore Maoists.

The Thulo Sirubari incident has been repeated many times all over Nepal during the last nine years of war. The Maoist strategy has been to set up 'militia' wherever they go: to work as night sentries, messengers, raise 'donations', take care of wounded guerrillas and their families and to act as civilian representatives. During raids on military and police bases, it is the militia that is placed at the front as human shields. "Usually we use the militia to go ahead and probe the defences during an attack," says Harka Gurung, member of the district people's government in Sankhuwasabha.

The defending security forces expend their ammunition shooting at the militia and volunteers and that is the when the guerrillas move in to overrun the base. The militia and civilian village recruits are used also to evacuate the wounded, as happened in the Beni attack last march. Videos taken by the Maoists of the attack show hundreds of 'militia' in civilian clothes taking part in the attack.

It is also the militia that soldiers usually encounter during patrols and it is these reluctant Maoists that mostly end up getting killed.

A Maoist central committee

meeting in July admitted that 10,000 of its leaders, cadre and supporters have been lost since the start of the 'people's war'. "It is mostly the juniors that have been killed," admitted a Maoist leader, "and this is natural." Military expert Indrajit Rai says most of the Maoists who have been killed are militia that have been kept as reserve in the villages.

Indeed, another conflict analyst Bishnu Raj Upreti says that in this kind of war, it is always the civilians who are in the frontlines followed by the militia, guerrillas and the leadership. That is why, except for special offensives, this is the order in which the casualties appear.

Although Mao Zedong said 'wage war with the minimum casualties', his followers in Nepal don't seem to be doing so and this puts the lives of the militia, many of them forcibly enlisted, at a higher risk. This year, Prachanda in a statement claimed his group has 100,000 militia but Rai thinks the number is closer to 30,000. They get basic training in explosives, grenades and intelligence gathering, according to erstwhile militia trainer, Mandab Raj Karki. But not all get practical training, and in most cases the instructions are theoretical. Many militia members have been killed by their own grenades because they were never trained properly, Karki says.

There aren't enough



uniforms, weapons and grenades to go around, so most militia are unarmed and do their sentry duty in civvies. They can be men and women, from 15 to 60 years old. The Maoists say the militia is their way of militarising the countryside and it is the first step up the ladder of the 'people's liberation army'. But in many cases, the militia is kept back in the villages to fulfill the party's orders such as the 'One tole one militia', and more recently the 'One house one

guerrilla, one house one bunker, one village one tunnel' campaign.

Many hundreds of thousands of villagers have fled their villages for fear of recruitment, and those who remain are forced to be militia members. Even though the Maoists don't seem to be too concerned about the large numbers of militia who have been killed, it is from the ranks of the militia that the movement draws its strength. It is the militia with which the

Maoists fill the vacuum left by the absence of a government in the hinterland.

Back in Thulo Sirubari today, it is hard to find a villager who speaks in favour of the Maoists. That doesn't mean they support the army either. "Neither the Maoists nor the soldiers have come back since the day of the massacre," says Jhalak Bahadur's daughter-in-law, Usha, "just as well because if they did we wouldn't even give them water to drink." ●

believing

There is unprecedented interest in earthquake preparedness among Nepalis after the Asian tsunami

down like a house of cards while the resistant design was unaffected. The watching crowd gasped in amazement.

Thirty other organisations participated in the exhibition, including the Royal Nepali Army, Everest Bank, ActionAid, United Mission Nepal and others. Many of the stalls belonged to community disaster-preparedness groups which displayed first aid kits, excavation equipment and other supplies needed for rescue in the aftermath of an earthquake. Many elderly Patan residents flocked to a photo exhibition of grainy black and white photographs of the 1934 earthquake and were seen

pointing them out to their grandchildren.

Patan was an apt venue for this year's anniversary since it is the only town that has implemented an earthquake-resistant building code. It even has an earthquake safety section in the Lalitpur sub-metropolitan city office.

Although there was some grumbling from Patan's tourism entrepreneurs about converting the entire Darbar Square into an exhibition ground, NSET's Nakarmi justified it: "Just remember 1934, all these temples here had collapsed. If we don't prepare for the next earthquake there will be no heritage left to protect." ●



KIRAN PANDAY



(Above) An aerial view of the Seventh Annual Earthquake Safety exhibition. (Left) NSET's Mahesh Nakarmi during the demonstration of the Shake Table Technology.

Development dilemma

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Whenever Nepal's donors are asked whether they are thinking of quitting because of the difficulty of carrying out projects in the field, they are firm in their answer that they will not abandon Nepal in its hour of need.

But it looks like the situation is getting too hot to handle and many are having doubts about how long they can go on. The rebels have asked donor agencies to sign-up with them before doing any work, and they have threatened staff and extorted money from them.

In fact, it has now become impossible to work in many parts of Nepal without acquiescence of the Maoist presence. The degree of cooperation with local Maoists will vary from project to project, and in many cases it is indirect. But project staff admit privately that they can't move without a working relationship with the rebel leadership at the grassroots.

In Kathmandu, most donor officials we interviewed admitted things were getting difficult but said service delivery to needy Nepalis was too important to abandon. One agency admitted to us that it

Caught between an ineffectual government and Maoist threats, donors wonder if they should pull out or go on

had told its staff to do what needed to be done but to keep the project going.

"There was no way out, we had to go for de facto registration of the project with the rebels," said the head of the group in Kathmandu on condition that he not be named.

Until a few months ago, most donors had been resisting the rebels' pressure to get their project registered. But working in the field is getting more and more difficult for most aid personnel. The government's local administration is now almost non-existent and permission to operate must now come from a different quarter.

Johannes Knapp is program coordinator for the German Technical Cooperation, GTZ and admits that his staff is threatened by rebels. "Our staff may have to yield under such pressure, especially if they take place at gunpoint," he says, "but we have made it mandatory for them to report if anything like that happens. We don't punish staff for yielding under such pressure but we punish them for not reporting the matter to us."

Charge d' Affaires at the



KUNDA DIXIT

Danish Embassy, Gert Meinecke, too feels that field work is getting more difficult. "Because of the security situation, the space for development work is growing narrower," he told us.

Not having working relations with the rebels would mean pulling out. An increasing number of foreign agencies have suspended field operations recently. GTZ pulled out of its green road project in Gorkha. The Danish aid agency, DANIDA, has suspended its

rural electrification project in Kanchanpur. The Swiss SDC is also suspending some field-level projects.

Even so, donors say they are willing to help the government augment its development projects. Most bilateral donors have actually increased aid commitment and the aid graph is projected to rise for the next few years. During the Nepal Development Forum last year, donors pledged to provide \$560 million a year as assistance under the poverty reduction strategy.

It is not just the problem of signing up with the Maoists. The rebels' policies are also inconsistent. What is acceptable in one place is completely rejected in other areas. The Rural Access Project of the British aid group, DfID, is the only project allowed by the rebels in Bhojpur district but they have prohibited the same project in the neighbouring Khotang district. "It all depends on the whim of the local commander," says NGO Federation President Arjun Karki.

The Maoists' clandestine FM radio in western Nepal recently listed NGOs that it said would be allowed to work in the region. The donor community was hesitant because it was told that the list was not sanctioned by the leadership. This flip-flopping has confused donors. As one aid official told us: "In one area they say one thing and in the other they have something else to say."

In the end it is the people who suffer. As donor-supported service delivery becomes difficult and aid doesn't get to the neediest, education, health, sanitation, water supply and other basic needs projects are being hampered across Nepal.

One way out has been to involve community-based organisations to implement projects. The World Bank funded Surkhet-Jumla highway is going ahead because a Karnali-based project is involving villagers in digging the road. Min Bahadur Shahi, chairman of the Karnali

Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre which is involved in the Jumla road, explains: "There can be an understanding with the Maoists even without giving them money or getting ourselves registered with them." Shahi's real problem is that the security forces then suspect his project of colluding with the Maoists just because it is allowed to work on the road. The government finally seems amenable to the idea of working with grassroots groups (*see interview, below*) even though it knows some of the money may get into Maoists hands.

But foreign agencies working in the field say the idea is not working as well as it should. "The government makes a strong case for community based development but at present, in many parts of the country, it is not possible if they are not accepted by the insurgents", says Jorg Frieden, SDC's country director.

Government officials say they are not as strict about aid disbursement through community based organisations even in Maoist control areas as long as the work gets done. But donors say they can't work directly with the rebels since their legal arrangement is to work with the state. "An agreement with the rebels is simply out of question," says Meinecke at the Danish embassy, "We have our code that does not allow us to recognise the Maoists as representatives of the people."

Knapp agrees. "The operating guidelines of donor agencies in Nepal does not allow them to reach any formal agreement with the Maoists." Ten donor agencies have come with a guideline that requires them to work independent of any political group.

When queried, the local staff of foreign funded projects say it sounds all very good when seen from Kathmandu but in the field they have to either find accommodation with the local Maoists or leave. ●

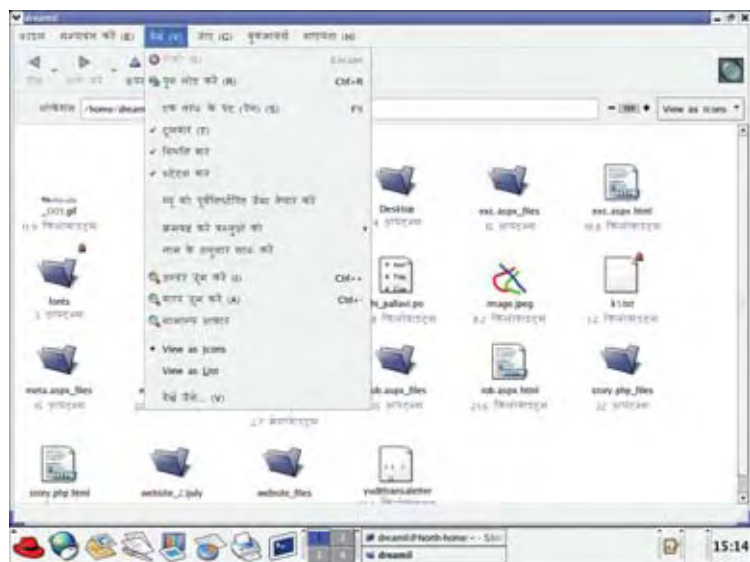


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VIBEK RAJ MAURYA

There are two main reasons for the digital divide: people can't afford computers or they don't have the English to use it.

Nepal used to have the same problem. Now, with the development of open source software and Nepali unicode, there is at last a chance for users in Nepal to benefit from the IT revolution.

Microsoft's Windows2000 and XP are released in English, French, German, Spanish and other variants. The company's latest version of Office Suite is available in more than 20 languages. Although widely used, such software is out of reach for people in whose language it isn't released. Software giants don't benefit from localising their products so they don't do it. They keep away the underlying source code from alteration.

The way to get around this is through open source software which

is widely available in different languages. Programmers can recompile source codes to reproduce the software in their own language. The popularity of open source software has appeal especially in developing countries. In China, India, South Korea, Brazil and other countries, governments are promoting the use of such software which, unlike the proprietary kind, allows users to inspect, modify and freely redistribute its underlying programming.

Adopting open source software is cheaper, they can be freely modified and are easier to translate or localise into indigenous languages. As an end product, for instance, the interface (menu, dialogue box, message strings and help file) will appear in Nepali and spread accessibility of computers who don't have English.

One of the arguments that the open source community uses

NepaLinux

Open source software will bridge Nepal's digital divide

against Microsoft is to question the security of Microsoft operating systems whereas many prefer Windows' user friendliness over Linux's geekiness. Yet licensing and high price tag will push users to open source software which are usually free and can be localised.

KDE, one of the most popular graphic user interfaces or desktop interface for open source Linux, is available in more than 50 languages and 50 more are in the pipeline. Localised Nepali GNOME graphic user interface is also being developed and will be bundled with NepaLinux, expected to be released by the end of this year.

Localising software is a tedious job, requiring harmony between programmers and linguists. The project to localise the Nepali operating system, office suites, basic tools and utilities are already underway. Even though there are 92 different dialects in Nepal, localisation of software in Nepali for now would prove to be a milestone and open up avenues for computing in other Nepali languages. Nepali will therefore have both Windows and Linux in the near future, opening up a choice of operating systems for users.

By releasing Unicode based Nepali keyboard input system for

Windows, Linux and Macintosh, the Nepali Language Computing Project at Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya has at least made it possible to store and retrieve data fed in Devanagari characters. One can even query length of texts, name the files and customise limited menus and desktop labels in Devanagari.

That's not all, standardisation and development of unicode Nepali fonts has opened it up for localisation. Users will have the advantage of choosing a variety of softwares on different platforms according to one's need, scalability and purchasing capacity.

Presently, programmers are preparing to release their own versions of Nepali OS, office suite, email and Internet client package which will fulfil personal and office needs in Nepali. Yet, open-source software is more affordable and does not have propriety and licensing hassles.

The debate between open

source software and proprietary software will go on. Microsoft products have an edge because of their user-friendliness whereas Linux requires an in-depth knowledge of customisation and there are few experts around who can fix bugs. Even Linux beginners don't dare run their machines exclusively on a single operating system fix bugs. The open source community needs to establish and groom a support network to spread the use of open source software.

Still, given the fact that users are developers and bugs are frequently self-corrected in open source softwares, they have started elbowing out proprietary software in many parts of the world where localisation is a priority, as it is here in Nepal.

Vibek Raj Maurya is a freelance software developer with an interest in human technology interface.



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Poor investment

Chaitanya Mishra in Nepal, 23 January

नेपाल

The main reason behind the widening gap between the rich and the poor in LDCs is the capitalist system whose main objective is to reap profit. The day there is no profit, the system will collapse. Since profit is earned from investment of profits made earlier, there is no level ground for trade. On a macro level, this situation has benefitted developed countries that trade with underdeveloped ones.



The rich-poor gap is characteristic of the capitalist system. To stop this system from encroaching poverty-ridden areas, special arrangements have to be made. Education, skill and health facilities enable people to be more productive. If there is famine, the government needs to address the situation. Mass production must result in products being affordable to the poor also. Governments need to keep this in mind and such safety nets are in place in India. The government should look after basic needs such as education, health and skill training of the poor. In Nepal, primary education in public schools is free. Implementing such programs means that the state can minimise the effects of poverty.

Another problem is urban-centred investment. Private investment, foreign aid and government money are mostly spent in the capital. Even when it comes to public infrastructure, these are the places that benefit the most. There was a time when Nepalis serving in foreign armies returned to the villages. The rural economy benefited to an extent. Now even the lahures have begun to settle in urban areas like Pokhara, Butwal and Dharan. Gender and caste-based issues are other reasons for the widening gap between the rich and the poor. After the 1990 movement, the rift between dalits and other castes grew as the issue of land ownership and health facilities began. In the last 50 years, the people who had been left behind are still lagging behind.

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Getting into the fast lane



NARESH NEWAR

The capital's social circuit is abuzz with talk about high-speed broadband Internet. Having a dial-up email account makes you a social outcast, people are showing off about the speed of their cable Internet as if they were talking about a new sporty motorcycle.

Broadband technology is not new in Nepal. Corporations and aid agencies were already using the system through wireless and cable modems provided by ISPs such as Mercantile, Worldlink, Subisu, Vianet and ITNTI. But the service providers are now diversifying into home-based surfers by making broadband Internet affordable so that clients can get not just the Internet but also cable television through the same pipe.

The best thing about broadband is that it does not require a telephone line for

network connectivity. This reduces the cost of surfing by more than half since phone calls are so expensive.

Then, Internet speed is up to 20 times faster than a dial-up modem and is online 24 hours.

"Broadband is still seen as a luxury but with affordable prices, this concept is changing," says Rupesh Sakya of Worldlink, which is providing broadband connections through its radio modems to several upper middle class neighbourhoods in Kathmandu and Patan. The company plans to market cable modem connections and replace dial-up

"The prices will gradually go down as more people start subscribing," says Sudhir Parajuli of Subisu, which claims to have the largest number of home based broadband users. Started with a handful of young Nepali IT engineers from Bangalore, Subisu has been making waves in the market. Within a year, the company has

High-speed broadband has become the new status symbol in Kathmandu

managed to penetrate into middle class homes in the Valley. All it costs is Rs 999 a month and the customers get broadband connection along with 80 television channels.

Co-axial broadband is cheaper for several reasons. Unlike wireless radio broadband, the operator does not have to get a license for each subscriber. There is still a huge hassle for getting a subscriber license for wireless modems. The license has to be processed both at the Ministry of Communication and Information as well as the Nepal Telecommunications Authority. "For wireless broadband, there is always the regulatory issue. Unless our laws change, marketing wireless at the household level won't be feasible," explains Binay Bohra from Vianet, which specialises in wireless broadband networking.

Even for cable broadband, there are several hurdles. The cables have to be linked through the street electricity poles for the network and the ISP has to pay an annual rent for every pole used. This is becoming quite expensive for Subisu, which specialises on cable broadband Internet. "It's not only expensive but also time consuming, we can't keep up with the growing demand," explains Parajuli.

Despite all the hype about broadband, only a few home-based surfers have been able to access the system. There are reportedly less than 500 individuals who have subscribed to broadband Internet and most of the ISPs are concentrating within the city core. Consumers living outside the Ring Road have given up hoping for high-speed Internet reaching them anytime soon. "If we are to convert dial-up users into broadband consumers, we have to first ensure quality service," says Rajat Kayastha from Mercantile.

The competition in the market is stiff and the five ISPs are working on the new major offers to be announced during the Computer Association of Nepal (CAN)

event next week.

Offers are already available with annual subscription charges ranging from Rs 6,000 to Rs 10,000 per year. The price also depends on the range of bandwidth choices from 64-256 kbps. The installation charges have higher costs while the monthly subscription costs are far lesser compared to the monthly telephone bills paid through the dial-up system. For night surfers, the monthly charge could come down to just Rs 500 a month.

Further competition is expected to come from Spacetime which plans to launch its own broadband Internet through fibre optic. "We plan to reach at least 10,000 consumers" says Akbar Shah of Spacetime.

"The charm of broadband is once you get the hang of it, you can't do without it, unfortunately costs are still very high for individual subscribers," explains Mahendra Vesawkar from ITNTI, which caters solely to corporate houses.

Internet is very expensive in Nepal, it depends on satellite connection via Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan because ISPs have to pay at least \$2,500-3,000 per megabit in addition to taxes, VAT, royalties and so on.

"Information Technology is perhaps the most heavily taxed industry in Nepal," says Vianet's Bohra. "The pie is still very small." The only way to cut down costs is to change uplink sources and this is possible by accessing through the landline connection through India. "Otherwise, ISPs can't afford to lower the prices and if they do the quality of service will drop, which we don't want to do," says Prachanda Man Sakya from Mercantile.

At the moment, some families get a monthly phone bill of Rs 4,000 even though their Internet costs only Rs 1,000 a month. It is obvious that dial-up Internet will be obsolete once people start calculating how much cheaper it is to have Internet through cable. ●

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The sugar season

More bad diets and the world will soon be in ICU

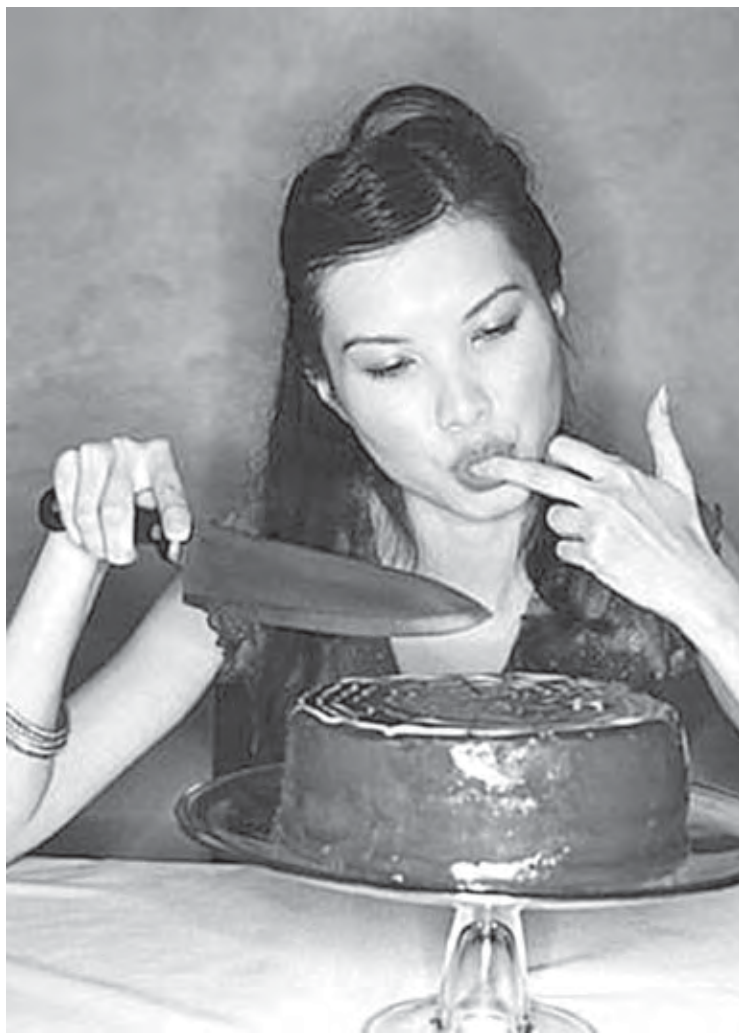
KAARE R NORUM

The marriage season usually consists of overeating and the rampant consumption of sugar is nothing to celebrate. In fact, this seasonal upsurge in sugar consumption is just a part of the huge transition in world health that is now underway.

Many countries, especially the developing ones, are facing the consequences of huge changes in lifestyle: modifications in diet, lower levels of physical activity and increased tobacco use. These changes are determined, to a large extent, by the globalisation and expansion of food markets and by ever-greater levels of urbanisation. Both these factors incite sedentary behaviour at home and at work, as well as profound alterations in dietary habits.

So it should be no surprise that noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), obesity, diabetes and cancer now kill roughly 33 million people around the world each year and cause almost 60 percent of total deaths. Indeed, they account for almost half the global burden of diseases.

By 2020, that contribution is expected to rise to 73 percent of all deaths and 60 percent of the global burden of diseases. Moreover, more than 60 percent of these deaths occur in the developing world and here NCDs increasingly appear in younger



age groups, which can have huge implications for how productive a country's workers are.

Recent data from China reflect the extent of the problem. In China's rural areas, with more than 800 million people, NCDs account for more than 80 percent of deaths. Many countries are now afflicted by a double burden of diseases.

Countries that still struggle with malnutrition and illnesses like malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, now must contend with an explosion of CVDs, diabetes and obesity, as well as soaring rates of high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol.

Indeed, five of the 10 leading causes of death worldwide are related to diet

and physical activity: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, low intake of fruit and vegetables, high body mass index and insufficient exercise. Clearly, effective strategies to tackle the NCD burden require a critical examination of what people are eating and their levels of physical activity.

The World Health Organisation, together with a group of international experts, has developed a global strategy on diet, physical activity, and health over a period of 18 months through an extensive series of consultations in more than 80 countries and with the input of United Nations bodies, civic groups and food producers. One of the strategy's key conclusions is that reducing the burden of NCDs requires a multi-sectoral approach. Like a toolbox, the strategy provides WHO members with a comprehensive range of policy options from which to choose.

Governments can act. Transport ministries should provide safe roads so children can cycle to school. Finance ministers could tax unhealthy food and subsidise healthy food. Education ministers should demand healthy school meals. Many countries are already developing their own national strategies. Most of what WHO is recommending has been endorsed by public health officials for many years. But we face a global problem with many international stakeholders and

this requires an urgent and worldwide response.

Of course, there is considerable debate about what precisely makes for a healthy diet. This debate is both welcome and to be expected, improving diet and finding ways to increase physical activity is a complex issue. Moreover, there will always be groups with their own interests, using arguments saying we do not have sufficient evidence to act. But there has been no challenge to the strategy's recommendations from the global scientific or public health community.

The strongest critique has come from sugar associations, who claim that the upper limit of 10 percent on caloric intake from sugar is not based upon scientific evidence. However, more than 20 national and international reports from around the world by scientific bodies governing dietary recommendations set similar or lower targets for sugar intake.

The growing NCD and CVD burden is a time bomb for world health. The implementation of the WHO's strategy could lead to one of the largest-ever positive shifts in human health putting populations throughout the world on the pathway to lifelong and sustained improvements in well-being. ●

(Project Syndicate)

Kaare R Norum is Professor of Medicine and Nutrition, University of Oslo.

The best of enemies

India and Pakistan have eased travel restrictions but getting a visa is still no joke

"I tried to submit the visa application for India for three days. One day I reached there at 5AM. No luck. They opened the window for less than two hours and took the application of, at the most, 12 women. The next day, it was the same story. Women coming in from different villages and towns reach there at 2AM and they are always ahead of me. So it is a sour story of the wish

LETTER FROM PAKISTAN

Beena Sarwar



and intention to go to India, with a remote hope that it may make Ather a bit cheerful," wrote a 60-year-old Islamabad teacher to a relative, about her attempts to get an Indian visa, in order to be with her nephew who had undergone multiple spinal surgeries.

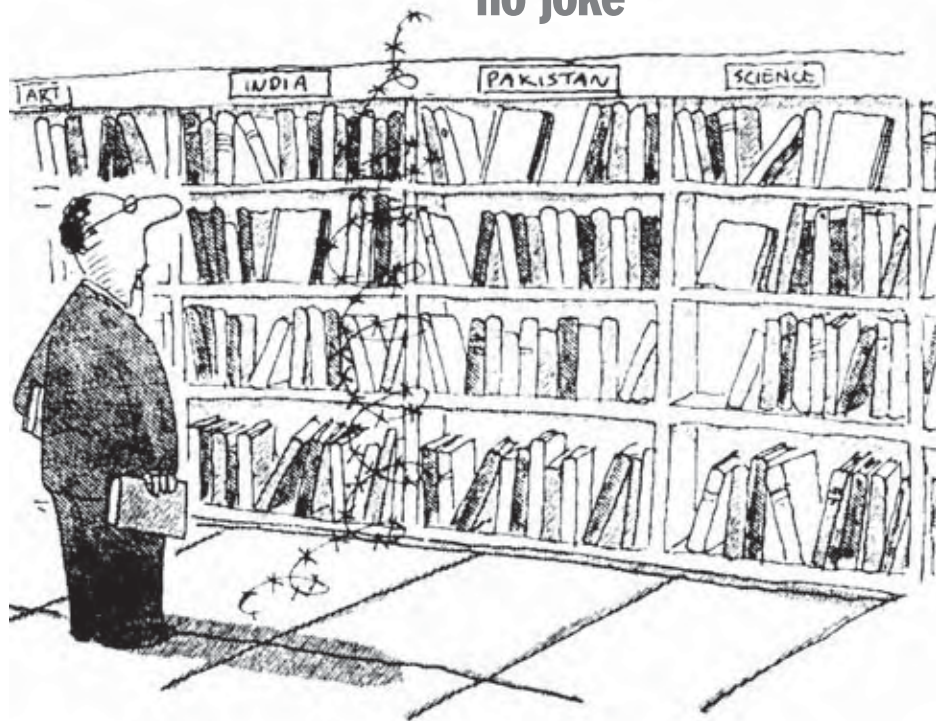
The story of Indians attempting to seek visas from the Pakistan High Commission in Delhi is no different, except that there is not even a 'drop box' facility of the kind the Indian High Commission initiated in Pakistan a couple of months ago.

In Pakistan, the demand for Indian visas is as much as 1,500 per day, according to Kamal Parvez, press attaché at the Indian High Commission. However, the High Commission can only issue 300-400 visas a day, since neither country has brought diplomatic staff to full strength. Besides staff shortage, the two high commissions are burdened by being the

sole visa-issuing authorities since their respective consulates in Karachi and Mumbai were dosed over a decade ago. The groundbreaking SAARC summit in Islamabad in January 2004 led to talk of reviving these consulates. But India has yet to receive a response from Pakistan to their request made in February to open a camp office in Karachi.

Pakistan High Commission's spokesman Rai Biaz Hussain is cautious in his response to requests for information. After duly consulting the 'diplomatic wing', he makes no mention of the number of visas being issued currently or what the demand is and bypasses the question on whether Islamabad plans to use a courier service to facilitate Indian visa seekers. "The opening of visa offices in Mumbai and Karachi will be done simultaneously. We are trying to locate some place in Mumbai as India has not given us the Jinnah House. Since the strength of this mission has not been restored, we cannot cope with the visa requirements here," he says.

Despite these constraints, the past few years have seen an increase in exchanges involving students, journalists, businessmen, doctors, dentists, activists, filmmakers and academics. The organisers of annual events like the Pakistan-India People's Forum conventions, the South Asia Free Media Association, and the Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop's Dance and Drama Festival in Lahore manage to obtain visas for most of



their participants—but not everyone is as high-profile, well-connected or determined. Even celebrities are kept on tenterhooks till the last minute before visas are granted—sometimes too late to enable them to attend the conferences.

"My secretary had to sit in Delhi for four days," says actor Om Puri, who is among the growing numbers calling for an abolition of

the visa system between the two countries. "All a British citizen needs to visit the US is proof of citizenship. This should be the case with us too," he suggests. As it was before we became entrenched in our positions as the best of enemies. ●

Beena Sarwar is contributing editor, *The News*, Pakistan.

Legitimacy and elections

Without legitimacy, there can be no stability in any political system

So Ukraine now has a legitimate government. Or does it? Observers confirm that infringements of the electoral rules were but minor. Yet questions remain. The defeated candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, contests the result. The country is deeply divided.

Legitimacy is a delicate, yet utterly important feature of stable democratic politics. It is also complicated. Was George W Bush the legitimately elected president of the United States in his first

ANALYSIS
Ralf Dahrendorf



term, having gained office

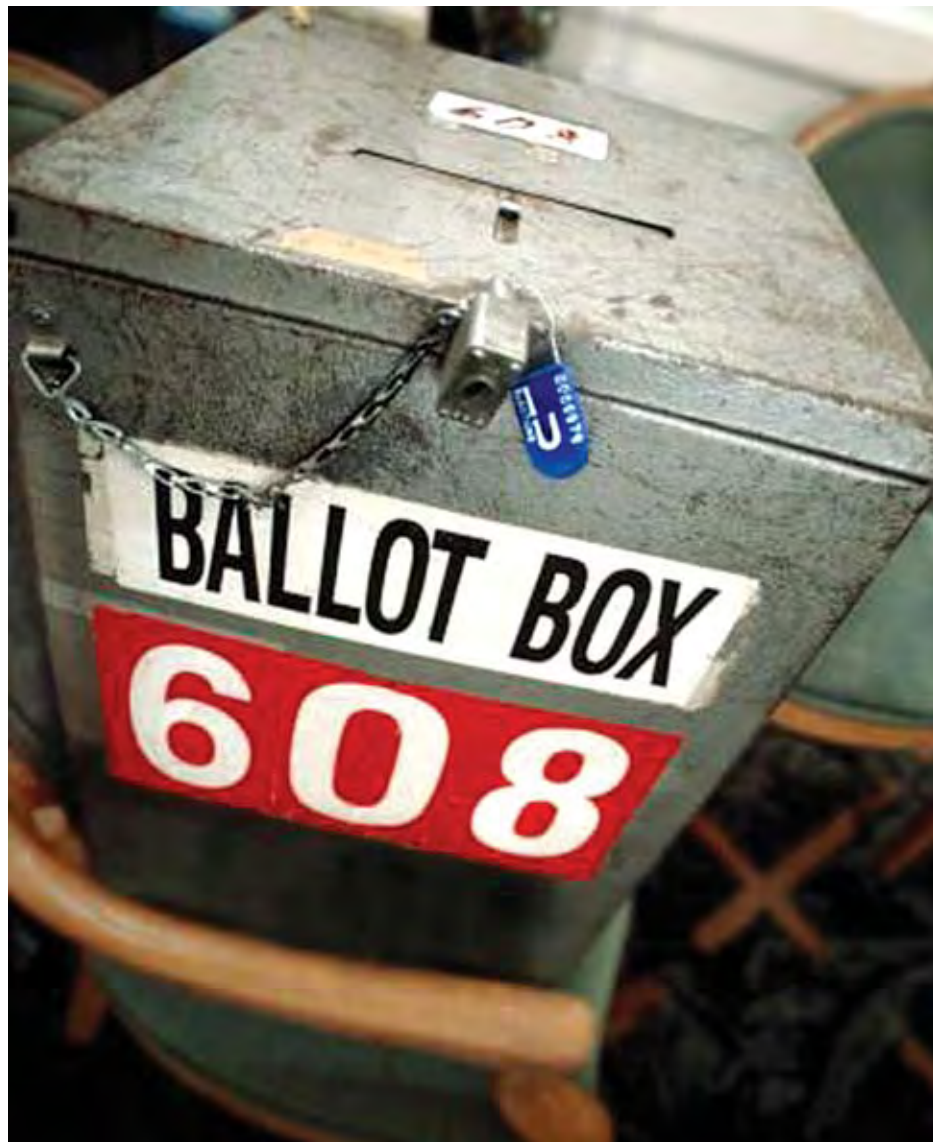
only after America's Supreme Court ordered an end to the Florida recount and with Bush having secured only a minority of the votes nationwide? Are the presidents of some former Soviet republics who seem to command 90 percent of the popular vote legitimately elected? Will the planned elections in Iraq be regarded as legitimate internally as well as externally?

It is vital to remember that elections alone do not guarantee legitimacy, even if they are seen to be free and fair.

Americans find it hard to understand this, as do others in the lucky democracies of the Anglo-Saxon world. For them, legitimacy simply means voting and counting votes happens according to undisputed rules. What is legal, they think, is also legitimate.

For many others in the world, however, at least two other questions remain. First, turnout is crucial: who has voted and who has not. The second question is whether there remains any systematic, potentially violent opposition to the outcome.

The point about George W Bush's first term was that despite grumbling and continued vocal opposition, the result of the election of 2000 was generally accepted. Or consider Tony Blair's 'landslide victory' in 2001, when Labour won 40 percent of the vote with a turnout of 60 percent. In effect, 25 percent of the



total electorate gave him nearly two-thirds of the seats in the House of Commons. Did anyone doubt the legitimacy of the result? Not in Britain, nor among Britain's partners.

But there are not many countries where that would be true. Most others would—at the very least—demand a coalition government to reflect the existing diversity of views. Legitimacy by election is particularly problematic in

countries with what might be called 'endemic minorities'.

In Canada, for example, it would be risky to overlook the special interests of Quebec. In Ukraine, the divergent interests of the country's west and east have to be recognised if legitimacy is to be established. In Iraq, a technical majority in a wholly legal election is almost meaningless if the position of Sunni Muslims and Kurds is not

explicitly recognised. The occupation powers are therefore right to be worried about an election in which massive abstention among Sunnis results in a large Shiite majority.

So legitimacy is more than legality. It rests on what the people concerned believe to be real. At the very least, there has to be an absence of violent opposition, including the threat of secession.

In western countries, notably in the US, people tend to assume too much when it comes to bringing democracy—meaning elections in the first instance—to others. In particular, we assume an essentially homogenous electorate, so that even a low turnout does not involve any disadvantage for particular ethnic or cultural groups. We also assume an automatic acceptance of rules that in fact took a long time to become embedded even in the US.

Without legitimacy, there can be no stability in any political system, and without elections—that is, an explicit expression of popular consent to the holders of power—there can be no legitimacy. But while free elections are a necessary condition of legitimacy, they are far from being sufficient to assure it. Constitutional arrangements must guarantee all entrenched groups a place in the country's political institutions. It is equally imperative to establish the rule of law, exercised by an independent and respected judiciary.

We should remember this as we pursue the elusive objective of democracy in Iraq, so we are not surprised if the upcoming election fails to generate a legitimate government. ● (*Project Syndicate*)

Ralf Dahrendorf, author of numerous acclaimed books and a former European Commissioner from Germany, is a member of the British House of Lords, a former Rector of the London School of Economics, and a former Warden of St Antony's College, Oxford.

NEW active gel
closeup **Now in Nepal**

Toothpaste with mouthwash for fresh breath and confidence ● Vitamins, Fluoride and Micro-whiteners for strong white teeth

Getting rough

Just a little knowhow can save you from the rough side



When driving, even the world's best golfers don't hit every fairway. PGA tours statistics show that top driving accuracy rarely exceeds 80 percent. Amateurs are often just happy to hit fairways on par 4's and 5's, as they know that most of the time they'll end up in the rough. It is that very rough which makes the game so much more difficult.

So even though all those tips on straight and long driving that I give you seem great, what all golfers need in their armoury is how to manage the rough and save quite a few wasted strokes on every round. We have often seen big pros hitting the green and even getting it close from the rough. Believe me, that is no fluke. They know what they are doing and here, I will share this trick with you.

Yes, a powerful swing (high swing speed) makes a big difference in getting the ball out easier from the thick stuff. An example would be Tiger Woods, who is known to be a monster when it comes to hitting full shots a long way from situations where most pros just think of getting

back on the fairway. This is simply due to his phenomenal strength. Not everybody can have Tiger Wood's skill and strength. However, with a little bit of knowledge you

can improve your shot making out of the thick and tall grass.

First let's analyse why is it difficult to play out of these lies. With the normal swing speed, the club head just can't cut through the thickness of the grass. It grabs the club and twists it or just slows it down so much that it either remains in or barely comes out. Here are some quick remedies. Follow them and you will be assured of saving strokes:

Right from the address position, you need to make adjustments. Hold the club upright and choke down on the grip by atleast an inch. Instead of taking a normal big arc, hinge your wrists early right at the start of the backswing. This promotes a steep angle of attack on the downswing and helps with better contact on the ball. Always stay balanced on your feet and try to swing faster if you have more than 50 yards to carry.

Don't forget—if you have a very bad lie just think of taking a lofted club and getting the ball back on the fairway. Use the same 'steeper' swing on these shots also.

The odds of 'going all out for it' and pulling off a superb recovery are heavily against you. Chances are that you will end up in much worse trouble than you started with, along with a couple of lost strokes. Play smart from bad rough and wait for another chance to go at it. ●

Deepak Acharya is a golf instructor and Golf Director at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa, Kathmandu. prodeepak@hotmail.com



ALL PICS: DEEPTI GURUNG

The ultra experience

Coming soon: long-distance flights on powered gliders

DEEPTI GURUNG
in BHARATPUR

The sky is the limit, it seems, for the potential of ultra-lights to add a new dimension to recreation and adventure tourism in Nepal. This was proved by the pioneering flight of two powered gliders of Avia Club Nepal, Pokhara to Bharatpur roundtrip, on the occasion of the Chitwan Mahotsab on 9 January. The Club has been operating sightseeing flights from Pokhara airport for nearly 10 years now, but the proving flight last week showed it is feasible to also ferry tourists to other destinations and give them the time of their lives en route.

"This is absolutely one of the most exciting flights I have done in Nepal," said pilot Stefan Shrestha of Avia who flew one of the gliders. "It was very smooth, the scenery was spectacular but it was really cold up there." Stefan has been flying tourists on ultra-lights along the Annapurnas and over Phewa lake for several years now and if he was that excited, it must really mean something.

The one-hour flight took the old DC-3 route along the Seti River when Royal Nepal Airlines used to have a shuttle service from Pokhara to Bharatpur before the Mugling highway was built. Being slower, the ultra-lights took an hour to make the journey, flying at 11,000 ft above most of the other scheduled Twin Otter flights between Kathmandu to the west.

Once in Bharatpur, the ultra-lights made a low fly—past



Top to bottom: Pokhara, airport and Dhaulagiri on takeoff, 'Hotel Charlie' and 'Delta Uniform' parked at Bharatpur airport after the long flight and winging past Himalchuli on the way back.

trailing banners and dropping flower petals on dignitaries attending the launch of Chitwan Mahotsab, which included the prime minister. Avia Club then conducted free flights for locals during the two-day festival in and around Bharatpur and the Chitwan National Park. "There was so much excitement and interest to go up on the aircraft that many had to be turned back but we promise to return to Bharatpur," Avia Club's Natasha Shrestha told us.

Nepal is an ideal country for ultra-lights and there is great potential for sports and

adventure tourism. The aircraft is cheap and easy to fly and besides sightseeing, can also be used for a host of other applications, including national park patrolling, research and wildlife tracking. "We want to explore the possibilities of ultra-lights in Bharatpur, not just for tourism but also for environmental conservation," says Natasha Shrestha.

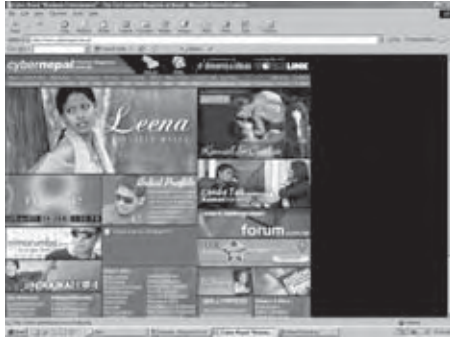
Avia has successfully tested flying ultra-lights with pontoons from Phewa Lake and is awaiting civil aviation clearance to begin regular takeoffs and landings from the water. ●



SURYA NEPAL
GOLF

World wide waffle

A graded review of websites for Nepalis, by Nepalis and of Nepalis



www.chiyapasal.com

We're not that good at reading Roman Nepali but this site gets top marks for originality. Took a long, halting, every-word-spoken-aloud time but we hear most young Nepali people are quite adept at that sort of thing. It's full of witty Nepali slang and nepanglish that had us laughing our heads off. The colour scheme and layout are gentle on the eyes. Check out the radio. Jhakasss!

We give it ★★★★★ for good entertainment value.



www.muncha.com

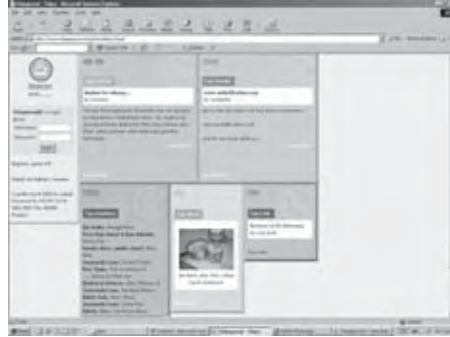
A Nepali online shopping site which looks impressively well-stocked, with links to almost everything one might need laid out neatly on the left-hand side. The service isn't just limited to Katmandu and it is easy to pay wherever you may be and there are all kinds of options. Too bad there isn't an option for bargaining! The layout is pretty bare but it is functional and easy to navigate.

★★★★

www.cybernepal.com.np

A jumbled outlook on the entertainment scene of Nepal. Crammed and colourful, great fodder for the young Nepali population. The holy grail for scantily clad Nepali models (mostly female) while still maintaining a thin veneer of respectability. Everything you wanted to know about your favourite pop star, all in a one-window site if that's what you're going for. Coughyeahrightcough.

We give it a generous ★ because we're not really into that sort of thing.



www.food-nepal.com

In this mouth-watering site, recipes of Nepali food are organised into categories like appetisers, vegetarian, non-vegetarian etc. The navigation system suggests links to other relevant recipes, so it's quite fun to just browse through the site. Still, the site doesn't stimulate the eyes as much as it stimulates saliva, since it employs a number of clashing colour schemes and most of the pictures are too small and fuzzy to look edible. We give it ★★★★★ for a great idea.



www.thamel.com

This site has become much more than the online business directory it started out as and is now a gift delivery service for Nepali people here and abroad. The concept of being able to send gifts to family members in Nepal while one is somewhere else is unique and rather touching, especially as the certification is a digital picture of the receiving party with the gift. Wish there were Nepali translations, though.

★★★★



www.spinybabbler.org

This is a site on the arts of Nepal, contemporary and traditional. Organised and actually created with a purpose in mind, unlike many of the confused Nepali sites that we encountered. Good for those with artistic tendencies. We especially liked the art show section where Spiny Babblers has snapshots of artwork by contemporary artists. We give it ★★★★★ for doing what it's supposed to and so elegantly.



www.rna.mil.np

The Royal Nepali Army website opens with music and martial scenes and a typo in the icon. Everything you wanted to know about our army and its martial tradition up-to-date with its latest press releases. Interestingly, there is a separate section on human rights and a long list of soldiers who have died in action in the past four years as well as recent television programs on Real Player. Umm... ★★



www.nepalmatrimonial.com

This is an online matchmaker for Nepalis looking to marry by very specific standards. The profile you enter is pretty thorough, asking you to submit religion, height and even complexion (options are: 'fair', 'very fair' and 'dark'). You can be your own matchmaker or somebody else's, thus neatly allowing for arranged marriages as well.

★★

www.partynepal.com

A trove of information for party animals. If you fancy looking at pictures of people you've never met partying at places you're never been to, this is the perfect site for you. It also works for those who went to those parties and want everybody to see they were there or to say "Eww, I look awful!" Gives new meaning to the motto: See and be seen. We give it ★★★★★ because we like looking at pictures of people.



www.sajha.com

This site seems to be suffering a major identity crisis, taking up topics ranging from Nepali music to humour, in buttons (wrong colour, wrong size) crammed on the left of the main page and trying to be everything for everyone. Recent posts from the forum are on the front page but the site would be better off scrapping most links and just having one called 'FORUM', which is why most people seem to come here anyway. On a brighter note, the forum is quite lively and updated frequently.

We give it ★ because there is vast room for improvement.



www.cpnm.org

If you were wondering how to get to the blocked Maoist homepage, wonder no more. Simply go to the Proxify site (www.proxify.com) and you can browse all the banned websites in the world. The underground comrades have a blood red homepage with Stalin, Mao and Lenin prominent on page one and Mao's favourite quote 'Political power comes out of the barrel (sic) of a gun'. Links to Krishna Sen Online, Janadesh and affiliated organisations like RIM and CCOMPOSA and recent statements. What the heck: ★★★★★



www.nepalhmg.gov.np

A much needed site for the student who needs to research the convoluted structure of the Nepali government. The site is well organised and very detailed, some of the links even lead off into separate sites. But particular information has to be opened in .txt files, though, while most sites would just use .pdf files, which are less of a hassle. We give it ★★



www.nepalnews.com

Nepalnews.com garners the most hits of all Nepal based sites. A comprehensive news portal with all the latest happenings 'as it happens'. Caters to the Nepali diaspora. Contains excerpts from all Nepali dailies and periodicals from Kantipur (in Nepali) to our very own Nepali Times. It lacks an e-newsletter service, which we thought would have made it a better site overall and it could also do much better in the design department.

We give it ★★★★★



www.ngs.org.np

As one travels through a bewildering number of sites, it's natural to pick up a few odd bits here and there. Like the site map of the Nepal Geological Society which has taken the term in a very literal way that they probably got from looking at very literal things like rocks all the time.

We give it ★ for providing an unexpected laugh and the only thing we can say about this site is "it rocks".



www.welcomenepal.com

This site represents the valiant attempt being made by the Nepal Tourism Board to entice tourists to visit Nepal despite all odds. There are maps and guidebooks in several languages but the hotel information link did not work when we were testing, so we guess the site prepares visitors for Nepal and alerts them to expect the unexpected. We give it ★★



www.nepal.com

If a site manages to capture the best webportal name for information on Nepal, you'd expect it to live up to it. Sadly, that is not the case. It lumps every link it can find, even ones selling a pharmaceutical product named 'Neoral'. (Someone made a typo somewhere.) Nothing here you wouldn't get if you simply googled Nepal. However, it's the perfect site for someone who just types nepal.com and would be happy to click away at random. We give it ★★



"Lata ko desh ma gaando tanderi." (In a land of fools, even a man with a bad goatee can be a hero.)

The Adventures of HEROJIG
HELLO. NAMASSTHAY!
by jissy gaton
Tashi Delek

Our Heroji daydreams of buying a new **HOUSE**, in the country, outside the Ring Road, but not too far, and is awakened by the harse reality of Nepal...

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-- Socrates
...a very old Greek dude, 469-399 BC

Hey dude, where do I sleep?

Next change: Herojig snaps out of it and flies to Bangkok

Herojig's Adventures can also be seen at www.extreme-nepal.com #53 2061 by jigme gaton - read. love. write.

ABOUT TOWN

FESTIVAL AND EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Zen Paintings** by Kang Chan-Mo at the Buddha Gallery, Thamel. Until 26 January. 4441689
- ❖ **Collective Reverberation** Paintings by Manish Lal Shrestha at Gallery Nine, Lajimpat. Until 26 January. 4428694
- ❖ **Reflection of Nature II** Pressed dry floral Oshibana art by Pabitra Shrestha at Park Gallery, Lajimpat. Until 28 January. 4419353
- ❖ **Life through the Lens** Photographs by Kishor Kayastha at Indigo Gallery, till 31 January. 4413580, indigo@wlink.com.np
- ❖ **Kickin' Up Dust** Photographs of Australian contemporary indigenous cultural festivals at Siddhartha Art Gallery. Until 31 January. 4218048



EVENTS

- ❖ **Whale Rider**, A film by Niki Caro, New Zealand on 23 January at Nepal Tourism Board, Bhrikuti Mandap at 5.30 PM.
- ❖ **News Quiz** Team entry Rs 300, three members per team, on 28 January, 6.30 PM at Lajimpat Gallery. 4428549
- ❖ **Sanibaar Mela** Every Saturday at the Dharahara Bakery Café, 12AM-5PM.
- ❖ **3rd Annual Wave Web Winner 2004** Website designing contest. Entry deadline 15 February. www.wavemag.com.np
- ❖ **The God Dance of Kathmandu Valley** Tuesdays at Hotel Vajra. 4271545

MUSIC

- ❖ **Shukrabar** at Patan Museum on 21 January, 6PM. Tickets Rs 350.
- ❖ **Sea Biscuit** Film show on 25 January at Lajimpat Gallery Café, 7PM. 4428549
- ❖ **Motown Nite** with Soul-T on 28 January at Four Season restaurant, Thamel, 7PM-10PM, tickets Rs 100. 4701715
- ❖ **Margarita Night** at Fusion-The bar at Dwarika's Hotel on 28 January with Abhaya & the Steam Injuns, Rs 799. 4479488
- ❖ **Jazz it up** New York style with Sunny Jain Collective on 28 January at the Jazz Bar, Hotel Shangri-La, 7 PM onwards for Rs 999. 4412999
- ❖ **Classical vocals and instrumental music**, 7PM onwards, every Friday at Hotel Vajra. 4271545
- ❖ **Jatra** Saturday nights with Looza, 6.30 PM onwards. 4256622
- ❖ **Jukebox experience** with Pooja Gurung and The Cloud Walkers every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at Rox Bar. 4491234
- ❖ **Happening live jazz in town** at Upstairs Jazz Bar, Lajimpat. Every Wednesday and Saturday, 7.45 PM onwards.

FOOD

- ❖ **Italian Food Festival** at Hotel Yak & Yeti. Until 22 January. 4240520
- ❖ **Grand Dosa Festival** at Hyatt Regency, till 30 January. 4491234
- ❖ **Barbecue Dinner** Every Friday at the Summit Hotel. 5521810
- ❖ **Seasons Special Luncheon** at the Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-La for Rs 450. 4412999
- ❖ **New delicacies** Introducing pastas and snacks at Roadhouse Café, Jawalakhel. 5521755
- ❖ **La Soon** Restaurant and Vinothèque, Pulchok. 5537166
- ❖ **Sizzling Weekend Treat** with live music, dance, barbeque and karaoke at Garden Terrace, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- ❖ **Delicious barbecue dinner** Fridays at Summit Hotel. 5521810
- ❖ **Café Bahal** Newari and continental cuisine under the giant Cinnamon tree at Kathmandu Guest House, Thamel. 4700632
- ❖ **Splash Spring BBQ** Wednesday and Friday evenings, 6PM onwards. Radisson Hotel, Kathmandu.
- ❖ **Executive Lunch** at Toran Restaurant, Dwarika's. 4479488
- ❖ **The Beer Garden** at Vaijayantha, Godavari Village Resort. 5560675
- ❖ **Dwarika's Thali** Lunch at the Heritage courtyard. 4479488
- ❖ **The Tharu Kitchen** at Jungle Base Camp. Junglebasecamp@yahoo.com

GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Shivapuri Heights Cottage** Tranquil atmosphere at the edge of Shivapuri National Park. steve@escape2nepal.com
- ❖ **Chiso Chiso Hawama** One night two days package for Rs 1,700. 4411706
- ❖ **Jungle Base Camp Lodge**, Bardia, special package and prices. junglebasecamp@yahoo.com
- ❖ **Malaysia Dream Holidays** Packages starting from Rs 45,500 per person. 2012345, malaysiaholidays_marco@polo.com.np
- ❖ **Getaway package** Night's stay at Godavari Village Resort, includes dinner and breakfast. 5560675
- ❖ **AAA Organic Farm and Guesthouse** Rs 950 with three meals. 6631734
- ❖ **Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge** Pure relaxation to escape the Kathmandu chill. 4361500
- ❖ **Temple Tiger** One night package \$250. 4263480
- ❖ **Machan Wildlife Jungle Resort** special packages available. 4225001
- ❖ **Weekend Special** at Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha. 4375280
- ❖ **Jomsom Mountain Resort** Two nights-three days at Rs 5,999 for Nepalis, \$199 for expats including airfare and food. 4496110, salesjom@mail.com.np

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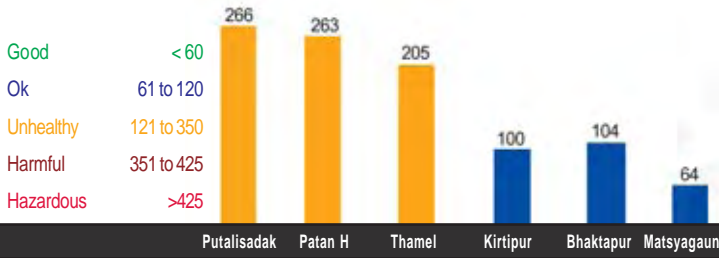
Call 4442220 for show timings
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Now Showing

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

Thanks to the dry winter chill and the Nepal banda at the start of this week, the pollution level dropped down somewhat in comparison to last week. The concentrations of particles below 10 microns in all air quality monitoring points came down further thanks to the rain. Taking a walk after the rain might be a good idea but still avoid Putali Sadak, Thamel and Patan Hospital if you can.

9 - 15 January 2005 in micrograms per cubic meter.
Source: www.mope.gov.np



NEPALI WEATHER

by MAUSAM BEED



The dominant westerly front broke the month-long drought of winter this week, a bit unexpectedly. The jetstream pushing the front appears to have been stronger than we expected. The western hills received as much as 40mm of welcome rain on Tuesday and Wednesday. In Kathmandu 24mm of rain was recorded, well above the 14 mm average for January. The snow came down to 2,300 m but was melting quickly as the sun came up on Thursday. This satellite picture taken on Thursday morning shows another wide westerly front approaching over Afghanistan which will keep pumping moisture into the region. Expect partly cloudy to overcast days with some precipitation likely over the weekend at higher altitudes. The Valley's minimum temperature will hover at zero.

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अन्धविश्वास र कुरीतिहरूले समाजलाई पतनको बाटोतिर लैजान्छन्। बोक्सी, भूतविद्या आदि विषयमा प्रचलित अन्धविश्वासहरू तर्फ लाग्नुभन्दा यथार्थ कुराको विश्लेषण गरेर आइपरेका बाधा व्यवधान हटाउने तर्फ सचेत नागरि कहर्ले लाग्नु पर्छ। अन्धविश्वास र कुरीतिहरूको प्रचलनबाट हुने दुष्परिणामहरूबारे जनसाधारणलाई जानकारी दिन सचेत र शिक्षित व्यक्तिहरूले अग्रसर हुनु पर्छ।

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walkathon

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on Feb 27, 2005

Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), 4261991, nefej@mos.com.np

The more the merrier

Yet another wedding season is upon us and the nation is busy clearing up the backlog of couples patiently waiting their turn to tie the knot. Why anyone would want to get hitched at a time when the country is engaged in deadly serious debates about reinstating parliament is beyond me.

Anyway, the institution of marriage has many advantages but till press time I couldn't remember any of them. Oh yes, there is one benefit of having a spouse that becomes apparent after being married to one for 25 years, which is that men and women of reproductive age and above are allowed to legally conjugate. Usually, this is followed in due course by the arrival of a brand new Nepali into the world. The more the merrier.

A wedding is therefore good for our demographic way of life. It is also an excellent way to raise the per capita GDP because it allows us to reproduce consumers by a process known as genital engineering. Marriage is a tourism and trade multiplier that can help kickstart the national economy at a time when retail and employment levels are down. We must remember:

UNDER MY HAT
Kunda Dixit



Nepal may be landlocked but it is also wedlocked. Therein lies our salvation.

Besides the happy couple, the people who are most ecstatic about the nuptial season are supermarket owners. Their shelves are stacked high with gift items that are exclusively imported for the wedding season. And since marriages in our part of the world come in swarms, one is best off buying wedding presents for all and sundry at one go and just hoarding them in case there is a future shortage. Having just returned from just such a marathon shopping spree, in the public interest I'd like to reveal the utilitarian and functional array of wedding gifts I bought. For some reason, they are all replicas of exotic and mythical beasts, usually a winged dog with hooves and a prehensile tail.

Exhibit A:

Adorable Dolphins

A graceful and playful bottlenose dolphin caught in blue crystal leaping high over the crest of a wave on a glass pedestal simulating an undersea tableau. Perfect for living rooms.

Rs 3,000 + 13% VAT

Exhibit B:

Swooning Swans

Romantic sculpture of swans with their necks intertwined riding the spun-glass surface of a placid lake. Mandatory for bedsteads on wedding nights to get the newly-wed couple into the mood. As marriage matures, it can also serve as a projectile.

Rs 4,200 for two swans, Rs 3,000 for one.

Exhibit C:

Cute Gargoyles

Griffins and gargoyles are favourites as wedding presents for Kathmandu's glitterati. No marriage is complete without a set of these. Great resale value, can be recycled to people who give you dolphins.

Rs 5,000 for alabaster griffins but gargoyles, being cuter, are more expensive.

Exhibit D:

Gnice Gnomes

On a slightly larger format, we have wedding gifts for the garden including scantily clad marble maidens holding pitchers and gnomes. The latter is irresistible since after the honeymoon is over it can serve as a paper-weight. Rs 6,000 for a six pack of gnomes in various poses including fishing, playing the flute, pretending to be a paper weight, peeing, staring into space and conjugating.





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