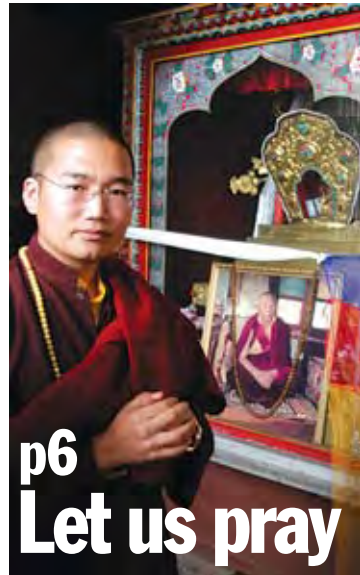


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Nine years on ...the insurgency has pushed Nepal back at least 20 years

KUNDA DIXIT

Nepal's conflict enters its ninth year this weekend. In that time, besides the cost in human lives the war has set the country back between 20 to 30 years, depending on who you talk to.

In the absence of reliable data, it is difficult to measure the slippage. But most experts agree that development parameters like infant mortality, literacy and life expectancy that had shown marked improvement in the 1990s are sliding again.

"Development has come to a halt," says academic Pitambar Sharma, "The figures show improvement but that flies in the face of logic."

Nepal's Health Management Information System (HMIS) used to be one of the most reliable and comprehensive in the developing world, with every village recording vital statistics like birth, causes of death, migration. VDC chairmen used to be able to rattle off the main childhood killer diseases in their village, they had literacy and fertility statistics at their fingertips.

Not any more. Even local officials now admit figures are doctored. Village councils have not existed for five years and officials usually send data showing steady progress.

"The impact of conflict should be reflected in the figures but they aren't," says an assistant health worker based in a midwestern district. She estimates that maternal mortality must have gone back to pre-1990 levels because of the lack of mobility: many mothers die because they can't be taken to hospitals at childbirth due to blocked roads.

The 2002 figures for infant mortality in the latest UNDP Human Development Report is 68.5 per 1,000 live births, but many have doubts about the accuracy of

this figure and estimate that in the three years since infant mortality must have gone down even further.

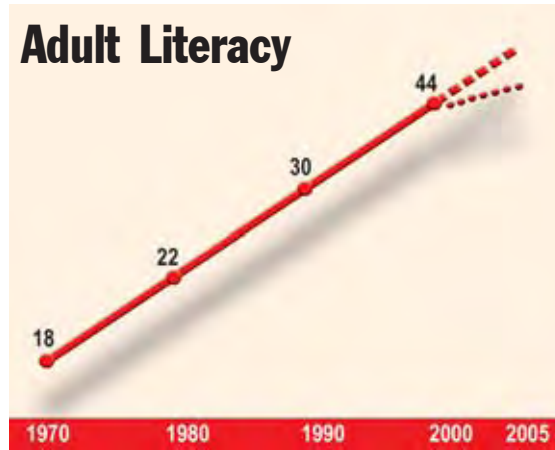
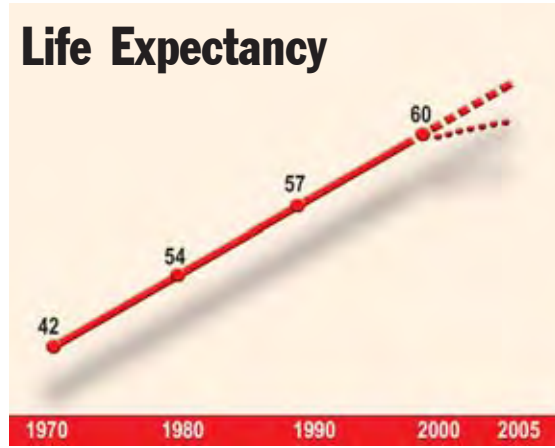
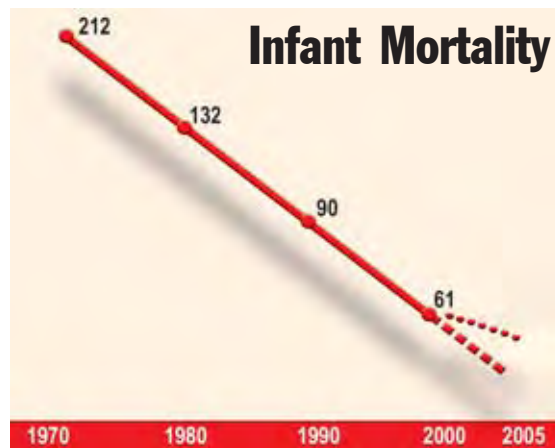
The health posts don't have assistant health workers or simple antibiotics to treat pneumonia in children. But in Kathmandu, a UN official while admitting that the conflict has impacted adversely says there may be mitigating factors. Displacement has eased pressure on land and food, and remittances have improved income levels.

"Health posts were not doing much for public health anyway," she said, "female health workers were the ones providing real service." Indeed, there are now an estimated 40,000 female health volunteers who provide basic health care all over the country. Because they are all locals, their work continues despite the conflict.

Still, school enrollment is down. Boys have fled fearing Maoist abduction and many girls have stopped going to school because they have to help at home. Most teachers have run away except where rebels have forced them to stay. All this is impacting literacy levels, says an INGO field officer in western Nepal.

Infrastructure has been hard hit, the roads department can't even spend 10 percent of its budget earmarked for national level projects. The only ones still being built are the those with local participation. There have been serious reversals in telephone coverage, civil aviation and administrative infrastructure.

Even though it is hard to measure the impact of the conflict on the health and education of Nepalis, experts extrapolate the charts and say if there hadn't been an insurgency adult literacy would have increased, infant and maternal mortality would be reduced and fertility rate would have come down. ●



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Righting wrongs

Failure to engage in democratic debate will revive authoritarian fantasies of the past

Twenty-five years ago, only Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela were reasonably stable Latin American democracies. Today, what might be considered electoral democracies are found throughout the region. Indeed, at no time since independence has there

ANALYSIS
Dante Caputo



been such a proliferation of democracy in Latin America.

But what has been gained is never guaranteed. A military coup is not the only way to destroy a free society. As the political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell observed, democracy's flame can also be extinguished gradually when dreams of justice and social progress fail to materialise.

During the 25 years of the spectacular rise of Latin American democracy, per capita income has increased by a mere \$ 300. Even in Chile, which enjoyed high economic growth and cut poverty in half, and Brazil which lowered the percentage of citizens living below the poverty line by a third during the 1990s, concentration of wealth has increased.

This isn't for lack of structural reforms. Political changes helped spread democracy in Latin America, structural economic reforms were strengthened. But profound economic and political transformation masked a deep disparity between reforms and reality. Although this gap endangers the future of Latin American democracy, many leaders consider it apostasy to admit that living standards are little better today than they were during the era of dictators. Their first inclination is to defend electoral democracies on the grounds they no longer engage in killing or in torture.

But consider this: Amnesty International and the US State Department have three basic indicators of human rights—the right to life, the right to physical safety and the right to freedom from political persecution. They use a scale of one to five, with one representing an optimal level of human rights and five indicating conditions of general terror. During 1977, the worst year for human rights violations, the average Latin American rate of terror stood at 3.0. In 2001, after two decades of democracy, it was 2.6. By contrast, the terror index for Western Europe was 1.1.

Still, to insist that Latin American democracy has been a major disappointment would not merely be pessimistic; it would fail to recognise that the most important values of a free society include the capacity to change, to rectify and to improve. The problem does not lie with our shortcomings but with the way



we choose to resolve them. The role of the state, the market and the region's place in the global economy all need urgent attention and discussion. Yet our leaders consider these subjects taboo.

Our first challenge is to recognise that electoral government has failed to lead to a true democracy of the people. Our second challenge is to find the keys to open that door.

Latin America seems to lack the will to establish a true people's democracy and it has tied itself to a narrow market economy whose bad outcomes are apparent to everyone. But government has a central role to play in the debate over the creation of democracy. Merely returning to big government will not resolve anything because it is inefficient and generates the opposite but equivalent imbalance. Indeed, it may be that the framework for a state that can

preside over a true democracy has yet to be created. The Washington Consensus does not forecast increase in GPA or eliminate poverty. It does, however, increase inequality. Do we abandon market economy? No, political liberty cannot be separated from economic liberty.

Failure to engage in critical debates about democracy will provide fertile ground for reviving the authoritarian fantasies of the past. If political leaders lose their fear of debating important issues, Latin America can move forward. Having won some of their freedom, the people should not be forced to pay the high price implied by their leaders' failure to open forbidden issues to debate. ● *Project Syndicate*

Dante Caputo, a former Foreign Minister of Argentina, was director of the UN Development Program's Project on Democratic Development in Latin America.

Thaksin's second onslaught

BANGKOK—The outcome of Thailand's parliamentary election will help answer a question that has gained prominence in the final hours ahead of the poll: Do Thais worship leaders with absolute power?

It arises out of a desperate plea being made by a motley mix of academics, civil society groups, political activists and journalists to the country's 44.5 million registered voters. They do not want the voters to give incumbent Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra a sweeping mandate in the new parliament, consequently placing Thaksin and the party he leads—Thai Rak Thai—in a realm beyond accountability. The need of the hour, they say, is for the voters to support opposition parties vying in the hotly contested poll, ensuring a political environment that respects the ideas of 'checks and balances'. "Many leading opinion makers are appealing in a way they have not done before for the virtues of checks and balances," said Sunai Phasuk, Thai researcher for the global rights lobby Human Rights Watch "They see it as a way of containing the absolute power Thaksin may get after the poll."

Typical of this mood is the unusual step taken by *The Nation*, an independent English language daily, to run a front-page commentary on Wednesday about the fate of Thai democracy if the TRT gains an absolute majority. "The best way out is to ensure that there are sufficient opposition members of parliament who can do the monitoring for all of us and have just enough votes to scrutinise the prime minister in parliament," the paper argued in its commentary. "This is an unusual plea but Thailand's situation is far from normal," it added. There are two reasons for this clamour for a strong opposition in the new parliament. On the one hand, Thaksin succeeded in dominating the country's political landscape for the past four years after he led his party to an unprecedented victory at the January 2001 elections. By the time he finished his term—becoming the first elected prime minister to do so since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932—Thaksin had the support of 364 members in the 500-seat parliament. (IPS)

World Bank's fault lines

WASHINGTON—Activists are urging the World Bank to adopt recommendations made in an internal report that strongly criticises the bank's global operations and calls for major changes. The World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department, the independent auditor within the Bank, said in a report released late last month that the institution needs to improve its project selection process and oversight of the global portfolio. It also urged the giant lender to exercise better governance and management of individual programs. The report, *The World Bank's Approach to Global Programs*, says that the bank's strategy is "poorly defined", that the voices of developing countries remain "inadequately represented" and that there is a pressing need for independent global program oversight.

Activists who have long criticised the Bank for being dominated by the world's richest nations welcomed the report as validation of their concerns that the massive lender has financed development disasters in numerous countries. Watchdog groups say that the internal report is an invitation for the bank to lead by example and improve its performance in several key areas, especially the decision-making process at the highest levels. (IPS)

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New ministers

Samaya, 4-11 Feburary

समय

As per Article 127 of the 1990 constitution, King Gyanendra has formed a new cabinet under his chairmanship. The king appointed 10 ministers from different ethnic backgrounds: Newar, Brahmin, Chettri and Thakali who hail from the hills, tarai and Kathmandu Valley. Seven of the ministers are new faces in the public arena:



Rameshnath Pandey, Foreign Affairs

Was repeatedly appointed minister during the Panchayat era and twice as member of the National Assembly. Served as minister for information, population and environment and tourism.

Elected minister during the NC-UML government in 1998, he was also a member of the 2002 Chand cabinet.



Radha Krishna Mainali, Education and Sports

Founding member of Nepali Communist Party (ML). Unable to get membership in the permanent committee of the UML after the Janakpur Convention in 2003, he has distanced himself from the party. Served as chairman of the United Left Front and was elected minister during the nine month NC-UML coalition government.



Krishna Lal Thakali, General Administration
Minister for General Administration in the first Deuba cabinet, little known politician but created own identity by taking a strong stance against UML's frequent and random transfer of government officers. Appointed member of the National Assembly and member secretary of the Gumba Development Committee of Mustang.



Buddhiraj Bajracharya, Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation

Former mayor of Lalitpur, also served as pradhan pancha during the Panchayat era. Bajracharya says he will continue on culture. Elected mayor of Patan under a UML ticket and is a member of the Raj Parisad.



Khadga Bahadur GC, Local Development

From the Maoist-affected Pyuthan district, served as zonal commissioner and was known as a hardliner. Began in politics with the leftist students' union.



Tanka Dhakal, Information and Communication

Twice appointed to the Rastriya Panchayat, used to be general secretary of Nepal Nationalist Independent Student's Council, never before been appointed to an executive post.



Dan Bahadur Shahi, Home and Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs
Former secretary of the Civil Service Commission and Ministry of Agriculture, Zonal Commissioner of Kosi during Panchayat.



Madhukar Shamsher Rana, Finance

Development economist, was special economic adviser at the Ministry of Finance, served as adviser to Finance Minister Prakash Chandra Lohani during the Thapa government. Founded CEDA at Tribhuvan University, president of Nepal Management Organisation, training adviser at UNDP, Geneva.



Durga Shrestha, Women, Children and Social Welfare

RPP central member, also served as member of the Rastriya Panchayat in the old days.



Ram Narayan Singh, Minister for Labour and Transport Management: Former CDO.

study the details, apply and pay online. Names of the groups whose applications have been accepted will also be posted on the website. "This new arrangement will involve no paper work and will be hassle free for tourists who visit Nepal for mountaineering," said Trityal. The Tourism Ministry has also decided to give the initial permission letter to expedition teams two days after applications are received. The final permission letter will be given a day after the mountaineers have arrived. Earlier, the process used to take at least a week.

Spice mobile

Nepal Samacharpatra, 8 February

नेपाल समाचारपत्र

Spice Telecom, a licensed private mobile phone network, has decided to start a dual band based mobile system with the 'Mero Mobile' trademark. Spice Telecom plans to launch with GSM 900 and 1,800 bands from April, according to company officials. "Using these bands will improve the quality of mobile phone service," says Spice Nepal's Indra Subedi. Though the company is all set to start, due to the change in the country's situation, it will probably begin with a soft launch. Meanwhile, it is scouting for the best possible location for its base station. Spice Telecom will offer both prepaid and post-paid mobile phone services but they will have the same kind of numbers, says Subedi. Nepal Telecom's prepaid and post-paid services have different range of numbers. Spice Telecom has recently tendered for one million mobile phones from Nokia, Siemens, Ericsson and three others. Negotiations are being conducted with these companies, says Subedi. Russia's Megaphone Company holds 60 percent share of Spice Telecom.



THE FULBRIGHT & THE EAST-WEST CENTER 2005 SCHOLARSHIP COMPETITION

The Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States and Nepal announces the 2005 competition for the Fulbright and the East-West Center (EWC) Scholarships. Those selected would begin their US studies beginning August-September 2006. The Fulbright program provides all expenses (including travel) for a master's degree program of up to two years at selected U.S. universities, in any field except medicine, engineering or computer science. The EWC scholarships of the University of Hawaii (UH) are available for master's or doctoral-level study in any field offered at UH and cover all university tuition and fees, a partial monthly stipend, housing, health insurance, book allowance. However, candidates selected for the EWC scholarship will be responsible for partial monthly expenses of \$400, transportation to and from Honolulu, and any other costs not provided by the Center. Applicants for either program may be employees in any government or semi-government agency, private business, NGO or INGO.

Application Forms & Deadlines

Application forms and detailed information regarding the competition are available from: the USEF/Nepal office at the American Center in Gyaneshwor (between 2 p.m. - 5 p.m., Monday - Friday); the Ministry of Education; the National Planning Commission; Tribhuvan University Rector's Office; Kathmandu University Rector's Office; Samudaik Sambandha Kendras in Bhairahawa (Siddharth Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Kalikasthan), Birgunj (Ward No. 14, near National Trading Company), Pokhara (Pokhara Public Library, Mahendrapul), and Biratnagar (Chamber of Industries, Morang, Sahid Marg); and with Campus Chiefs at out of the Valley degree campuses. **Interested persons are encouraged to access and download the application and information from the Commission's website www.fulbrightnepal.org.np since the application form needs to be completed using a computer or a typewriter.** The application distribution deadline is 4 p.m. Friday, March 11, 2005. Duplicate, hardcopy, completed applications must reach the Fulbright Commission (USEF/Nepal) no later than 4:00 p.m. Friday, March 18, 2005. Incomplete applications or applications received after this deadline will not be considered.

General Requirements for Entering the Competition

All applicants must:

1. Possess Nepali citizenship.
2. Demonstrate in post-intermediate degrees a minimum aggregate mark of: 56% for students in non-technical fields (humanities and social sciences), and 60% for students in science and technical fields. (The minimum requirements for students under the semester system are: 65% in non-technical fields; 70% in technical fields; or a Cumulative GPA of 3.5/4.0 in either field.) If the grading systems for the bachelor's and master's level are different (percentage and GPA, etc.), the applicant needs to meet the minimum score requirements separately, not in the aggregate.
3. Have a high level of competence in speaking, reading and writing English. (Applicants who pass the first screening will be required to sit for an English test during the application process. The English language test requirement during the selection process may be waived for those who pass the initial screening and have either: a) a valid TOEFL score of 213 or higher; or b) have passed the English language test administered by USEF/Nepal in April or August 2004.)
4. Be under 40 years of age for those applying for the master's degree under the Fulbright or EWC program, or be under 45 years of age for those applying for the Ph.D. degree under the EWC program, as of the application filing deadline date (March 18, 2005).
5. (a) Applicants for the master's degree under Fulbright or EWC program: possess either a four years bachelor's degree; or, if the bachelor's degree was of fewer than four years duration, then a master's degree is also required, such that the total number of years of formal education equals at least 16. Students with a three-year bachelor's degree who have completed only the first year of a two-year master's degree program, master's degree students who have cleared all exams but still need to fulfill other university-mandated degree requirements, or students who have two or more bachelor's degree but no master's degree are ineligible to apply. (b) Applicants for the Ph.D. degree under EWC program: possess a master's degree that is equivalent to the US master's degree; that is, a master's degree that required at least 18 years of continuous study.
6. Applicants must have at least three years (for men) or one year (for women) of post-bachelor's degree, full-time, professional work experience in an area directly relevant to the applicant's chosen field of study as of the application filing deadline date (March 18, 2005). This experience must be documented by letters (or attested copies) from employer(s) that verify applicant's position(s) and years of employment. Even if you worked at several organizations, you are eligible to apply as long as your work experience at those organizations adds up to the minimum work-duration requirement;
7. Be in excellent health, as evidenced by a letter from a medical doctor; and
8. Be eligible for a non-immigrant J-1 U.S. visa, and not already in possession or in the process of obtaining a U.S. immigrant visa ("green card").

Note: Individuals holding master's degrees equivalent to a U.S. master's degree are ineligible to apply for the Fulbright scholarship competition, but are eligible to apply for the East-West Center competition Ph.D. program; and individuals who have previously resided in the United States for six months or more during the preceding five years prior to the application submission deadline are ineligible to apply for either competition. In addition, this competition is not open to: individuals with, or in the process of obtaining, U.S. citizenship or U.S. permanent resident status; employees of USEF Nepal and local employees of U.S. Mission in Nepal who work for the US Department of State, and their spouses and dependent children (who are ineligible for grants during the period of their employment and for one year following the termination of employment).

(Applicants must submit documentary evidence for items No. 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7.)



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BETWEEN THE LINES

It must be said that outside the capital's intellectual, activist and media circles there was general approval for King Gyanendra's February First move. The talking heads in the puff pieces on NTV are not all propaganda.

To be sure, people aren't exactly jumping up and down with joy. But there is cautious hope that this could be a way out of long years of instability, anarchy and violence. The Nepali people are desperate enough to go along with anyone who can fix this mess.

The photo studio owner in Dilli Bajar, teashop wallas in Mugling, bus drivers, dairy farmers in Dhading, Panauti's vegetable growers were all fed up with bandas and blockades that put their livelihoods in jeopardy. Across Nepal, along landmined highways thousands of bus passengers stranded for weeks are willing to give their monarch the chance provided the interregnum doesn't last too long. King Gyanendra vested executive powers in himself, declared an emergency.

We in the media have been warned of broad and unspecified punishment for broad and unspecified transgressions. The directives contain ominous-sounding references to 'confiscation of assets' and 'house arrest' against those making 'public comments affecting the morale of the security forces...and disturbing the sovereignty, integrity, peace and security'.

We can't say we are happy with this, but that doesn't mean we can ignore a general lack of public outrage on the streets about the king's move. Pro-democracy activists, politicians and we in media have to ask ourselves why. And we're not saying that just because there is this guy looking over our shoulder.

The communication blackout was a nuisance. But in Nepal there are only 1.6 land phones for every 100 people, one mobile phone for every 10,000 and only 26 internet subscribers for every 10,000 Nepalis. For a vast proportion of this country's 25 million people, therefore, it didn't matter that phones didn't have dial tones because most don't have phones anyway.

Even so, good sense prevailed and communications were restored. What is less reasonable is the continuing restriction on FM radio because this information vacuum is being filled by those with clandestine transmitters. A blanket ban on information for people who have become used to free and unfettered access is counterproductive—especially because there is no such restriction on news on private tv channels.

News bulletins *a la* 1985 won't work anymore. People can read between the lines, and we know they know whatever it is that is being tried out there is limited time to make it work.

Reason over reaction

What should be the prescribed course of action for the international community?

With the royal proclamation of February First, Nepal has once again been thrust into the international limelight. The question at hand is not whether to support or oppose King

GUEST COLUMN
 Dipta Shah



Gyanendra's actions. What is lacking is a range of perspectives emanating from those to whom political developments in Nepal matter the most: Nepali citizens.

And what should be the prescribed course of action for the international community? Let's dispense with some of the more common misperceptions that mainstream media has capitalised on.

First, media reports have been rife with official statements from foreign governments which have bluntly demanded the immediate restoration of previously

established 'democracy' in Nepal. Those who subscribe to the underlying ideals of democracy (and comprehend not only democratic freedoms but also associated responsibilities) can't seriously insist on the re-establishment of a set of principles that ceased to exist years before February First.

What Nepal had was a judiciary with the power to indict but not prosecute, political parties with the ability to incite but not be held accountable, security forces with a broad mandate to protect but no clear objectives which to execute. Surely, when responsible world leaders call for the restoration of Nepal's system of 'multiparty democracy', one would hope that they are not implying a move towards the status quo, *ex-ante*?

Second, the right to assemble, freedom of speech, and the right against preventive detention (while extremely important) are

not the only principles enshrined under the broader democratic umbrella. The right to peaceful co-existence (without fear of intimidation), the right to education (without political disruption), the right to a proper childhood (without being subject to indoctrination) these are also fundamental rights that every Nepali citizen is entitled to, independent of the prevailing system of governance.

Third, it would be misleading for the international community to formulate its course of action based on the assumption that a minority two percent (representative of Nepal's relatively educated and politically savvy elite) accounts for the collective views of a nation of 24 million. This is especially true when no consensus exists within that two percent itself.

Also erroneous is the underlying assumption that the 'representative elite' is guided purely by populist concerns. No more need be said on this except to note their self-serving nature and absolute unwillingness to even begin to grapple with the problems of the country. And although it is unfair to group all Nepali politicians in this inept category, it would also be a great disservice to imply that there are more than a handful of respectable leaders.

While the prospect of near-authoritarian rule (for the interim) is alarming, one must take into account the alternative:

LETTERS



BOB MARLEY

It is with great interest that I read Anoop Pandey's article on Bob Marley ('Raja of rasta and reggae', #232). I am a professor of mathematics here in California as well as a reggae DJ and a historian on the side for the last 12 years. I am afraid that Bob Marley has never been to Nepal or India. I am good friends with Roger Steffens (Marley's archivist and historian). Him and I have had countless hours of discussion on Bob Marley's life. We have concluded that he has never been to Nepal. Bob's music touched us in the 1970s and I was very pleased to see that his music is just as strong today in Nepal. I was there only a month ago and left many rarities of Bob Marley CDs with some of my friends and also some bars around Lajimpat and Thamel. Also, there has been quite a discussion on sadhus vs rastas but there is yet to be any link between them other than the few similarities in lifestyle.

Sanjay Dev, California

Thank you for that excellent curtain-raiser on the Bob Marley 60th anniversary. Bob Marley was not just a musical prophet, he was also a messiah for the Third World and decades ahead of his time. What he did for African pride and for the self-esteem of the 'two-thirds world' through his music is incalculable. Perhaps the reason

for his popularity in Nepal is that the Nepali people feel downtrodden and want to sing his redemption song?

Kumar Pradhan, Kathmandu

TREES

Thank you very much for the editorial. There are readers around and across the world who can measure the depth of an article. Thank you for being loyal to your profession as well as your country at the same time.

Anup Kaple,
 Westminster City Council, UK

I am very touched by your editorial this week. I too truly believe that the trees shouldn't have been axed even though they may have caused problems at times along our streets. In a way, the planting of these trees in the 1990s had given a great ambience to the Nepali community and it is sad that they have been axed. I hope that greenery forever exists

in our beautiful country and that they will continue to hold the soil and other components of the ground together.

Nripesh Dhungel, New York

I think your editorial was extremely good. At first, I was taken aback by the simplicity and irrelevance of the material, but I was forced to read between the lines. If I am thinking what you are thinking then this is an excellent piece of journalism. Well done and keep up the good work.

Buddha Shrestha, email

Once more the Nepali media has shown that it will rise up to the occasion and show that it will not be meek and compliant. When will the authorities realise that curbing information makes it worse for them because it spreads negative rumours, provokes panic and paranoia? And when they finally end up telling the truth no one will believe them. And what could be a more vivid example of shooting oneself in the foot than the fact that we in the outside world had no information from Nepal except from underground groups since the ban on Nepal-based websites also affected the government's own homepages!

Tashi Namgel, Seattle, USA

Your editorial on tree felling represented a welcome if perhaps

Maoist totalitarianism. Clearly, endorsing Maoism is not a viable option by national or international standards. This is even more the case when considering the Indian position that has not swayed from its declaration of the Maoists as terrorists and the US government's addition of the Maoists to its terrorist watch list.

India simply can't afford to alienate Nepal at this critical juncture. If New Delhi was to abandon Kathmandu, all bets would be off including certain arms procurement covenants between the two countries, which may then leave Nepal with no option but to deal with the Chinese, a nightmare for both India and the US.

More seriously, disengaging Nepal now would open the door to the Maoists' long-sought Compact Revolutionary Zone through which Indian and Nepali Maoists function across national and state boundaries in much the manner of the communists in Southeast Asia in their fight against the Americans during the 1970s.

All of Nepal's well-wishers want genuine multi-party democracy in Nepal. There is no ambiguity or ulterior motive. But the time to forward this agenda will undoubtedly come and will be accomplished with support, but not direct involvement from the international community.

That time however, is not now. And lobbying to force the king to reverse his decision, threatening to cut off foreign aid to Nepal, and alienating the new government are not means with which to ensure a democratic future for Nepal. If we can't unite to guarantee the sovereign integrity of our nation, there is no honor, no pride in calling ourselves Nepalis. ●

Ten days old



Ashwini Nepal gave birth to this baby girl at 11:00 AM on 1 February at Patan Hospital.

DEEPPENDRA BAJRACHARYA

involuntary change from the *Nepali Times'* tradition of outspoken political commentary. At a time when the only things that seem to be on people's minds are politics and conflict, it was refreshing to read about a real issue. My only quibble with your otherwise excellent piece was the somewhat contentious point about imported exotics, such as the poplar or the eucalyptus being less sturdy than indigenous varieties such as the Gorkhali tree. I don't entirely share that point of view. Indigenous varieties are often well adapted to the local environment, perhaps better so than imported exotics. But in the face of, for example, global climate change, indigenous varieties, precisely because they

have evolved in highly specific environments, may prove less adaptable and less hardy than many exotic species. Cutting down such imported varieties, then, may be doubly shameful, particularly if the indigenous species prove themselves unable to adapt to a changing environment, and (in conformity with the Darwinian principle of natural selection) become extinct. Then we would have no trees left whatsoever in Kathmandu and that would be intolerable. A world without trees would be like living without order in our lives. Nonetheless, this minor difference between us should not be allowed to get in the way of a genuine meeting of minds. My hearty congratulations on reminding us

that in the midst of our eventful daily lives, we should not be allowed to lose sight of the wood for the trees.

Purna Puri, email

PERIODS

Contrary to the implications of the advertisement for Kotex in *Nepali Times* (#226) the normal menstrual cycle is not a debilitating illness or incapacitating disability but rather a periodic indication of the female power of fertility. It is quite obvious to any female reader that the Kotex advertising campaign has been conceived and composed by persons who have never ever had a menstrual cycle, namely men. Otherwise they certainly would know this to be true, despite the fact that such men must witness women in their

lives who do not disable themselves five days a month, as the advertisement explicitly suggests, which thereby illustrates their inability to transcend their own ignorance on the point. It is safe to say that your advertising department is out of touch with the customer profile of your female readers. Nepal already suffers from a severe chronic wretched case of menstruation and female-related paranoia without you adding to it.

Furthermore, you might ask your advertiser to promote high-tech fibres and design construction thereby honouring the intelligence and dignity of the potential customer instead of insulting it as it is presently doing. Another approach would be to politely suggest that Kotex

come back to *Nepali Times* after redesigning their advertising campaign at an agency that includes significant numbers of conscientious women among its staff.

Surely there is at least once such firm in Nepal? It is really surprising to see that *Nepali Times*, with so much credibility earned among its readers over the years, has succumbed to demeaning itself in its quest for advertising revenue, having ignored or failed to see the tragic nature of the advertising campaign it has accepted.

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23 weeks to go

Time for the media to take stock of itself

One hundred and eighty days. That's how long the current gag on media is meant to last and enough time for the Nepali media to do some much needed soul-searching.

These are challenging times for those in the news business as they try to communicate in a time of censorship. It tests the media's creativity and ingenuity to find news beyond the headlines.

Nepal's media has been obsessed with reporting politics, the antics of politicians and their quarrels. The next six months provide an opportunity to do things differently and untangle itself from politics. With objectivity and fairness, the media can stand tall and fearless. Before the royal takeover, one had to read an assortment of newspapers to get a sense of what actually happened. Just reading one newspaper, watching one TV channel or listening to one radio station, never gave the whole story.

Journalists must also bring themselves down from their pedestals, the ivory tower from which they talk down on those they interview or question. That arrogance and cynicism comes across as journalists connect with interviewees. The greatness of reporters comes in quashing their egos, staying in the background and letting their subjects speak.

These days most newspapers have slimmed down and seem hungry for matter—a perfect time to start chasing real stories. This is the opportunity for investigative journalism and there are hundreds of stories waiting to be told: 'safe' issues like environment, health, education and day-to-day living. Why is there an increasing trend of deadly road accidents? How are Nepali families who have fled the conflict managing? What are their children doing? What about displaced children? Why have so many sidewalk trees been chopped down all over the valley? Are all the orphans really orphans? How has the anti-*chhaupadi* campaign changed the lives of the men and women in the far-west? Do the sand and stone mining syndicates on our rivers understand the ecological impact of mining?

Publishers have always argued that such 'soft' stories don't interest the public as much as juicy political ones. This could be true but only because the public wasn't given a choice. This could be the time to start doing news that is relevant to people's lives, raise their awareness and even spread optimism and motivation. In the past years, with the escalation of conflict there have been unending talk shops. On a typical day there would be simultaneous workshops covered in excruciating detail by tv, radio and print. *Gosti-patrakarita* dominated coverage with visuals of inaugurations, chief guests speaking from the podiums, cameras panning across the self-conscious audience and journalists then scooting off across town to cover another series of talking heads. Today, media has fewer functions, workshops and seminars to cover and should use the time to do real news.

The media must be introspective and improve accuracy in reporting. As they diversify the nature of stories, journalists have to re-educate themselves in getting it right. Many have forgotten journalism school rules to cross-check facts, make sure quotes are correct and contextualised, privacy is respected and there is no defamation. They must also re-learn to do followups and move beyond event reporting. The horrific bus accident in Pyuthan last month that killed more than 40 people was reported as just another accident, not as part of a serious trend in escalating highway fatalities. There are all these issues about road safety, the poor conditions of roads, easy availability of licenses, overcrowding and intoxicated drivers. To be fair, some media have followed-up on the accident and analysed the aftermath, including the decision by the widowed not to don white mourning garb.

Ten days have passed, there are 161 days to go. There is time for the media to take stock of itself so that it surfaces stronger and more powerful. ●

Still in the pipeline

Melamchi set to roll again with new Chinese contractor

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

The much-delayed Melamchi project designed to boost Kathmandu Valley's drinking water supply is set to roll again with the appointment of a new Chinese contractor.

The project had faced uncertainty and delay ever since the Korean contractor, Haniel Koneko demanded cost overruns due to Maoist threats and walked out without finishing even five percent of the work on the access road. Koneko was demanding Rs 100 million extra as compensation while its bid amount was Rs 450 million.

Negotiations between Koneko and the Melamchi Water Supply Project (MWSP) were deadlocked for over a year and construction ground to a halt. The government finally terminated the contract with Koneko last year, seized its performance guarantee of Rs 50 million and called for new bids. The China Civil Engineering Corporation (CCEC) was chosen over five Chinese, Indian and Japanese bidders.

The controversy even dragged MWSP officials to the corruption watchdog, CIAA and the National Vigilance Centre which began an investigation. "We think we have been able to convince the commission and the centre that everything is above board," one MWSP official told us.

The project and its main creditor, the ADB, seem happy with the selection of the Chinese company and say its Rs 1 billion bid is "quite reasonable". Koneko, they say, had quoted an artificially low amount to be selected with the intention of "padding it up with overruns" later. Bidders have used loopholes in the FIDIC contracts in the Kali Gandaki and Middle Marsyangdi projects to quote low and demand high variation costs once selected. MWSP and ADB officials say there is less chance



of this happening with CCEC and hope the project can now resume construction of the access road.

But whether CCEC will live up to expectations remains to be seen. For one thing, Sindhupalchok is a heavily Maoist-affected area and it is accepted wisdom that construction can only resume with the blessings of the rebels.

When completed in 2010, the \$500 million project will bring 170 million litres of snowmelt from the Melamchi Khola to Sundarijal through a 2 km tunnel. The project can be expanded to 500 million litres daily by adding more rivers at the intake. Progress has been delayed because the access road to the headworks are not finished yet. Only once the road is ready can foreign engineers come for the tunnelling phase.

The project also needs to implement a distribution plan for Kathmandu Valley through private contractors for which several new legislations and amendments to existing acts are needed. Melamchi's donors want

the laws in place before tunnel work begins.

MWSP officials said they are preparing to invite tender for the appointment of the contractors of tunnel construction. "We will call for the tender by August," said Dhruva Bahadur Shrestha, executive director of MWSP.

Since the first 20 km of the tunnel construction is being funded by Norwegian and Swedish governments in grant and mixed credit, contractors of only those two countries will be allowed to bid. With the Asian Development Bank funding the last seven km of the tunnel construction, international bidding will be allowed for that part.

The government is not able to meet even half the current demand for 200 million litres a day in Kathmandu Valley. However, critics say the Melamchi project is too expensive and cheaper alternatives like building storage reservoirs inside the Valley have not been adequately explored. ●



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Kofi warns child soldier recruiters

In the annual report he submitted to the security council, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has not missed out Nepal while referring to child soldiers across the world. The other countries mentioned in his report are Burundi, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Sudan, Colombia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Uganda. "In Nepal, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist recruited underage soldiers and killed children, including more than 50 in the first half of last year," the report said. In the report, Annan has recommended sanctions against groups who use child soldiers. "These sanctions could include travel bans on leaders, arms embargoes and a restriction on the flow of financial resources to the parties concerned," he said. The UN Security Council is to debate Annan's report on 23 February. The UN special representative for children in armed conflict, Olara Otunnu, said Annan's report marked a turning point for 'transforming words into deeds'. Some 54 groups, including state and rebel forces, use children as soldiers.

ARV costs

Even though the price of the anti-retroviral drugs to treat AIDS patients have come down to Rs 33 per person a day, only 25 out of 5,000 infected people in Nepal are getting it. Those who have access to the drugs pay \$420 per year. "The common minimum price that was discussed was \$200 per person a year," said Rajib Kafle, an activist who himself has HIV. Kafle said that the price of anti-retrovirals came down because of generic drugs that ended the monopoly of multinationals. Though brand manufacturers claim that their investment on research and development has added to the high cost of their drugs, generic manufacturers disagree. Kafle says ARV drugs can be made cheaper in Nepal. Says Kafle: "China is the largest producer of the active ingredients, India is the biggest exporter of the generic anti-retrovirals and Nepal lies between the two."

Tour operators all smiles

Despite series of booking cancellations due to the disrupted telephones and Internet last week, tourism entrepreneurs are all smiles now about business prospects. "The cancellations should be no problem at all," says Bhola Thapa of President Travel. "What matters for us now is that the situation is improving and soon we will see boom in travel trade."

Tour operators have seen massive cancellations in the wake of the disruption in telecommunication. But they believe that the situation, at least in Kathmandu, is fast improving and they are spreading the word. "We do not know what is happening outside Kathmandu but in the capital we have seen that things have changed tremendously and we are informing our international travel agents about it," said Ravi Poudel of the Nepal Association of Tour and Travel Agents.

NEW PRODUCTS

JASTAPATA: Rajesh Metal Crafts has introduced RMC Jastapata, a new brand of corrugated metal sheets in the Nepali market. The company, which has been manufacturing and distributing construction materials for more than a decade, is following up on the significant success of RMC pipes.

Bottom of the pyramid

How to eradicate poverty through profit

With phones lines down, the omnipresent Internet disconnected and news channels off the air, this Beed enjoyed getting back to basics—reading. And the pick of the season is CK Prahlad's *Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed



This book surely has a lot of insight for us Nepalis who are at the junction of events that will direct our nation's future. As your columnist has often repeated, Nepal's problems are economic and not political. Therefore, irrespective of the state of politics, the economics should surely move on. And what better platform for the new finance minister than to take on this challenge.

Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid provides an interesting analysis of the people who are at the bottom of (what else?) the pyramid. Those marginalised by all, especially the private sector. The billions that comprise more than 60 percent of the global population are yet to be served and therefore present a tremendous opportunity for business.

The poor are in fact brand conscious and willing to pay. For instance, they pay astronomical rates of interest to moneylenders. Banks can surely gain by servicing these markets. The poor consume a lot, that's why product development and packaging have to be innovative. The success of one-rupee shampoo sachets in India led multinational companies into this segment, as the volume at the bottom of

pyramid is always large. Similarly, distribution channels need to be innovative. The traditional distribution channels used to service urban markets may be expensive, so newer ways of getting to the consumer willing to buy the product becomes challenging. The consumer is willing to buy but at a price that is far lower than the prevalent.

This book illustrates through examples innovative efforts that are the mission of 'eradicating poverty through profits'. These range from banks like ICICI in India, e-Choupal initiative of ITC in India to Casas Bahia a retail chain in Brazil and Cemex, a construction service provider in Mexico. All case analyses lead to a single message: there is growth potential if one focuses on the bottom of the pyramid which most companies, especially multinationals ignore.

Nepal can surely replicate

these successes. There is much more for the private sector to do than seek protection or lobby against punitive actions for wilful defaulters. This book is also a must-read for people working in development who think that the private sector is always manipulative and anti-poor.

Rather than run more 'social security programs' and use conflict management in all aspects of life, donors would find many answers to their questions here. Students and corporate executives should be motivated to find more ways to 'compete for the future'. Surely, as the book says, our search for economic sustainability is never ending. Insights like these that 'enable dignity and choice through markets' are always welcome. ●

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हिमाल ढाकिन्छ ...



... तर हिमाल उद्विन्छ पनि

The singing Rinpoche

ABHA ELI PHOBOO

It is a new crop of popular artists that the Nepali music scene has turned to, not hip-hop, rap or sappy romantic songs but soothing melodies with simple lyrics. When Ani Choying Dolma's debut album *Moments of Bliss* topped the charts for months, it came as no surprise for her record company Opal International. Now, they have come out with another album of the same genre: *Dharma Dhwani* by Dhilyag Subchu Rinpoche.

"I don't expect to become a phenomenon, I just want to share my prayers through music," says the Rinpoche who adores Pandit Jasraj and Karna Das as musicians. "Technology is a big platform, we can use it to share and inspire peace of mind."

Dhilyag Subchu Rinpoche, 21, became a monk at the age of six, growing up in Swayambhu which he says was also his home in his first life. Chanting for nearly 30 minutes each morning is the only musical training he has had but his voice has an energy that is quiet and soothing. *Dharma Dhwani*, his first album, comprises of prayers and chants in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Nepali. Initially, it was meant to be distributed only among fellow Buddhists and disciples but Opal International approached him and proposed to market it for a wider audience.

"Usually, this sort of music is targeted at the international market but we wanted to share it with Nepali listeners also. These are turbulent times and such soothing music restores our zest for life, giving us a positive

attitude," says Anand Tuladhar, of Opal. "We expected the older generation of listeners to like it. When, to our surprise, the young Nepali audience took to Ani's album also, we realised that right now prayers are what we need."

The lyrics in all the eight tracks of the album *Dharma Dhwani* are simple. Some are one-line prayers, pure and beautiful. For the title song *Dharma Ko Dhwani*, Nhyoo Bajracharya and Durga Lal Shrestha, famous for their work in *Phool Ko Aankha Ma* have teamed up again. And again, it is geared to be a hit with its unobtrusive soothing melody. As cliché as it might have sounded, the lyrics with Bajracharya's music gives the words new meaning that it is hard to imagine any other voice singing it.

With the mesmerising sound of the sarangi and the flute, the music itself is a prayer. The musical experiment represents the essence of Buddhism with peace not only as its essential ingredient but also as the desired result. The album was released in Maitreya Gumba, Swayambhu where the singing Rinpoche learnt to chant. Proceeds from the sale of the album will go to the restoration of the Gumba.

Swayambhu, one of the eight cultural World Heritage Sites in Nepal, needs restoration work and better facilities. The butter lamps also need to be improved as a year ago, an accidental fire destroyed the ancient Pratapur temple. Two people were killed in a landslide on the northern side, and the eastern side remains in danger of collapse. ●

Dharma Dhwani is available in music stores for Rs 250.

Right now, prayers are what we need



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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Hole after hole

Management of emotions on the golf course can make it easier

Very often, we hear golfers say, "After a triple bogey in the beginning, I lost my cool" or "I got angry and over tried, and ended up dropping a few more strokes". Golfers, especially amateurs, get easily frustrated after a bad shot or a bad hole inviting more bad shots and ruining their game. Why does anger and frustration adversely affect a golfer's game? Lets find out.

When a player swings the club, his entire body moves in unison to make the swing. The ideal swing aims to follow the same swing path each time at an identical speed to make identical contact with

TEE BREAK
Deepak Acharya



the ball. These elements result in the ball receiving an identical amount of energy, direction and launch angle leading to identical shots.

However, when a player gets angry or tries harder to produce better shots, his thought starts to vary. This results in the pre-shot routine changes in muscle tension level leading to minor variations in the club head speed, direction of swing path and ball contact. Changes in the state of mind ultimately change the overall ball strike, hitting it in the wrong direction.

If you watch top players in action, they seem unperturbed after bad shots or bad holes. With experience, I reckon, they are convinced that good shots will also follow bad ones. They realise they have many more holes to play and bad shots holes are as much a reality of golf as good shots. This way, professionals are always able to balance their scores in each round.



So what do you need to do to maintain an identical state of mind and tension level? The answer is simple: switch off interfering thoughts or better still, support the process by training yourself to think identically. Positive visualisation can help it further. The bottom line for consistency is follow an identical routine during shot making, which gives each swing the best possible chance of success. Coupled with patience, it will result in the highest probability of a player optimising his skills.

In this era of golf, we hear about top players doing yoga and meditation to compete at the highest levels. These practises help maintain the tension levels of the mind and body while executing shots on the golf course. As they say, golf is for those who have patience and can keep their cool. Trust me, with routine, faith and patience, existing abilities can produce better results. In the end, it is about putting your belief to practice over a period of time. ●

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

SURYA NEPAL
GOLF

LUCIA DE VRIES

When Pabitra Tamang's parents found out she was suffering from a life-threatening disease called a-plastic anaemia, they took a desperate decision: they left their jobs as daily labourers to take care of five-year-old Pabitra and her two sisters.

With no money to pay the rent, the landlord threatened to throw them out of their tiny Bhaktapur room. All three children left school and moved into the hospital, much to the chagrin of the medical staff. Only Pabitra kept smiling: she loved the extra attention and her chance to visit the hospital's playroom.

While Pabitra received regular blood transfusions and medication, the hospital bills increased. The small plot of land back in Makwanpur district was put up for sale but the Maoists stopped them from selling it. A loan was taken and the parents started visiting churches to ask for contributions. The doctors said even with the best care Pabitra would not survive long unless she was taken to India for bone marrow transplant or immunosuppressive treatment. Average costs for which was Rs 700. The parents were bewildered. At the rate things were going they could no longer feed their children, let alone travel to India.

Due to the armed conflict, the number of destitute children suffering from serious diseases is increasing everyday. Especially in the hills, village health facilities have been seriously affected as general health conditions deteriorate. In 20 VDCs in Mugu for instance, there is no health care to be found. Mobility has been hampered as a result of which, an increasing number of sick children arrive in the capital with chronic medical conditions. Treatment tends to be difficult and costly. With no proper government support system in place, a growing number of parents are left with only one option: take their sick child home to die. In some ways, destitute Nepali families facing

Little heroes

No child should ever be sent home without treatment for lack of money or information



Pabitra Tamang on the phone at the hospital.

severe health problems are worse off than tsunami survivors in other parts of Asia.

Some hospitals run some sort of a welfare scheme. Social Action Volunteers, started by Father Eugene Watrin 20 years ago, conducts programs in villages in Kathmandu Valley as well as in Kanti Children's Hospital. Food, clothes and lodging are provided if needed, as well as blood and some financial support. Thanks to the large number of student volunteers in the program, each year over 200 sick children are supported in one way or the other.

Jayanti Foundation, established by Princess Helen Shah in the memory of her daughter Jayanti, donates the income of Pokhara's Fishtail Lodge to support heart patients. Each year some 120 patients undergo sponsored heart surgery, 60 percent of them are children. The organisation is supported by Nepal Youth Opportunity Foundation and a number of hospitals, which provide 30 percent of treatment costs. Unfortunately, due to reduced incomes and Maoist threats to close down Fishtail Lodge, support is gradually dwindling.

Ganjala Outreach was established last year in the

memory of eight-year-old Raju Basnet, who died from untreated a-plastic anaemia in September 2004. A group of concerned individuals got together to create a pool of blood donors and establish a support system for children such as Raju. Ganjala's founder Netup Lama dreams of establishing a nation-wide fund for ill and destitute children.

"The suffering of these children in the hospitals of Kathmandu is shocking. No child should ever be sent home without treatment, simply because of lack of money or information," says Netup Lama, who feels such a fund should be initiated and managed by a committed network of welfare and business organisations. Pabitra was lucky. Ganjala Outreach requested the All India Institute of Medicine to provide heavily subsidised treatment and helped raise funds. Pabitra has been in Delhi for the past month and responds very well to the treatment. From her hospital bed she says she feels well and looks forward to being reunited with her sisters this week. ●

On Saturday, 12 February, Ganjala Outreach organises Night for Little Heroes at 1905, Kantipath to raise awareness of funds for sick destitute children. Contact: 9841-350008, info@gchnepal.org

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Hurrah, Nepal's future is in the

Being able to turn cattle manure into cooking gas was the best thing that



NARESH NEWAR

Thirty years ago, when textile engineer John Finlay was involved in constructing a biogas plant for a private household in Bhairawa, the last thing he expected was that the technology would transform Nepal.

Finlay was a young and ambitious engineer at the Butwal Technical Institute set up by the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) in 1974. He was looking forward to create small-is-beautiful technologies that would help Nepali farmers.

One day he met the Belgian Jesuit, Fr Bertrand Saubolle at St Xavier's School in Godavari who boiled water from a demonstration gobar gas plant on his balcony. You mixed cow dung and water, put it inside the drum and out came methane gas: it was as simple as that. Finlay

nearly shouted "Eureka!" and together with Saubolle began designing lifesize models for Nepali homes.

He went to Ajitmal across the border in Uttar Pradesh in 1974 and met Ram Baux Singh of Gobar Gas Research Station, the Indian biogas pioneer. Together with Nepali engineers, the first plant from an oil drum was constructed and exhibited at an agricultural fair during the coronation of King Birendra in 1975.

The government was so much impressed that it launched a gobar gas program and backed it up with interest-free loans for farmers to install plants. The United Nations stepped in with subsidies and the project took off. UMN helped set up the private sector Gobar Gas Company (GGC) in 1978 which started building affordable biogas plants with indigenously

designed underground digesters that did not need maintenance like the Indian drum model. With the UMN, Agricultural Development Bank and Fuel Corporation as three major shareholders, GGC built 10,000 plants in 10 years.

The Nepali biogas design was so cheap and efficient that it spread like a tarai grass fire. The design proved to be far superior and popular than those built in India and China, where biogas technology has existed for 100 years. They also had incredible lifespans, some of the plants that Finlay helped build 25 years ago are still going strong. "Unlike in India, over 95 percent of gobar gas stations in Nepal have continued to work," explains Finlay.

By 1992, the Dutch aid group SNV introduced a comprehensive Biogas Support Program (BSP)



and Nepal's biogas program was poised for another big leap forward. Financed with microcredit hundreds of thousands of new plants were built across Nepal. Subsidised loans made the plants affordable, the farmers saved on firewood and forests were conserved. Kitchens became smokeless and children didn't fall ill. In addition, the effluent slurry could be made into rich fertiliser.

"Nepal is now the highest per capita user of biogas in the world," boasts Sundar Bajgain of BSP-Nepal which has now spun off from an SNV project into an autonomous group. There are more than 140,000 biogas plants all over Nepal. The basic underground dome design and the credit subsidy model has been replicated in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia where about 1.3 million of people have access to biogas.

Biogas users in Nepal have been reaping benefits for decades. All it takes is an investment of Rs 11,000 but the rate of return is 35 percent and the investment is recouped in three years. It is a cheap alternative to LPG, kerosene, firewood and electricity. "The returns keep coming throughout their life," explains Bajgain. According to Alternative Promotion Energy Centre, one biogas plant can save two tons of fuelwood, 0.8 tonnes of agricultural waste, 0.45 tonnes of dung cake and 50 litres of

kerosene per household. And women make up 90 percent of the beneficiaries of gobar gas because it saves them drudgery and provides smokeless kitchens. The organic fertiliser of the spent slurry saves farmers money because they don't have to use chemicals.

Biogas is now also going to benefit the country because we can claim compensation from the International Clean Development mechanism (CDM) project for saving carbon emissions into the atmosphere. With the Kyoto Protocol going into effect on 16 February, it is possible for Nepal to actually trade the carbon dioxide not emitted by using biogas and earn up to \$ 5 million per year. Unfortunately, Nepal has yet to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which was an opportunity missed during the Sher Bahadur Deuba time when there was lack of decision and parliamentary mandate. Many are now pinning their hope on the new government which can make this possible through a Royal Ordinance.

"If we reach the target of building 200,000 plants by 2009, Nepal can claim \$30 million every year from the CDM," says Finlay for whom the success of Nepal's biogas program is also his crowning achievement in Nepal. ●

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ever happened to rural Nepal

“A model for the rest of the world”



Irishman John Finlay has been in Nepal for the last 30 years promoting biogas technology. A self-taught engineer who never went to university, Finlay started as an intern in a factory. Now nearing retirement, 66-year-old Finlay spoke to us about Nepal's manure wealth.

What is your overall impression about biogas development in Nepal?

All we did was try to show the way, I never thought it would be such a big hit. Nepal's biogas program is now an international model. It is amazing to see how a little project we started in Butwal has now turned Nepal into a global rural development phenomenon. I'm so proud of Nepal and the BSP and SNV have done a great job.

What was the reason for this success?

To start with, Nepal has quality designs. Around 1978, we were trying to find out how to build a market and commercialise biogas on a large scale. We prioritised the technical and engineering aspects trying out 10 different designs to find the cheapest and best option that suited Nepal, requiring minimum maintenance. We worked on appliances, stoves, gas stops which were all manufactured here.

Who has benefited the most?

Rural Nepal, and I feel especially happy for the women and children who are now less burdened with gathering firewood. They save a lot of money from medical checkups because they used to work in smoke-filled kitchens before. They used to suffer from eyesores and lung problems. But not anymore.

Has it also helped the people financially?

They have saved money by using biogas. And a lot of jobs have been generated for villagers. Many are working as masons and technicians to install as well as maintain the plants.

And the future? What is there left to do?

There are still tens of thousands of gobar gas plants to be built. The gobar gas worked so well that the country now has scope in applying the renewable energy technology in electricity generation and solar energy.

johannesburg

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हत्या र हिंसा सामाजिक अपराध हुन्। यस्ता कुराले समाजको विकास उन्नती र प्रगतिमा बाधा पार्दछन्। नेपालको जुनसुकै नागरिकको हत्या भए पनि नेपालमाताको एउटा होनहार सपूत छोरा गुम्छ। तसर्थ हत्या र हिंसाको विचार छाडी प्रत्येक जात, जाति, वर्ग, समुदाय र विचारहरूको आधारमा विखण्डन ल्याउने प्रवृत्तिलाई अलग्याएर पारस्परिक सहयोग र सद्भावना बढाउने तर्फ लाग्नु समस्त नेपालीको कर्तव्य हो।

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ECH/OAD/DABUR/VATIKA/75/04

Just couldn't take it anymore



Himal Khabarpatrika, 29 January-11 February

हिमाल

Extortion by the Maoists have terrorised not just businessmen and civil servants but also the poor who cannot even afford a square meal. This fear is stark in Nawalparasi, Rupandehi and Kapilbastu. Dirgha Narayan Kewat is an ordinary wage labourer in Butwal but the Maoists have demanded Rs 60,000 and 10 quintals of rice from him. To save himself, he took a loan of Rs 10,000 and some rice to pay the rebels.

Murari Pahalman from Nawalparasi was abducted in Rupandehi. He was released 22 days later on condition that he pay Rs 160,000. "I sold my land and paid the amount to save my life," said Pahalman, who joined a group of Nawalparasi villagers waging an armed retaliation against the Maoists. He sent his wife and children to India for security. Mohammed Salam of Rupandehi fled to India with his 10-member family after the Maoists demanded Rs 200,000. Unable to endure the constant pressure for donations from the Maoists, several families have resettled in Butwal according to Salam. Besides money, they were also required to donate food grains.

The businessmen in Rupandehi receive the worst brunt. Many of them have been asked to pay between Rs 200,000 to 900,000. "Every time we pay, they say it's the last but the demands continue," said an hotelier. "Now they are asking for even more, around Rs 800,000 from every businessman."

Many villagers from Paklihawa of Nawalparasi have begun a team to fight against the Maoists. It has spread to over six-dozen villages. Dipendra Yadab, who is working with the Armed Police

Force, has also joined them. The rebels tried to kill him while he was visiting his parents at Paklihawa. Till date, more than a dozen villagers have lost their lives in encounters with the Maoists. They have so far managed to capture and handover five Maoists to the local police. A few weeks ago, while the Maoists were playing carom, the villagers attacked seven of them in Ratnaganj. They also killed the Nawalparasi section commander after the Maoists asked for Rs 30,000 from a farmer and handed Gita Poudel, area member, over to the administration on the same day. The villagers beat five Maoists to death in Parsauni and Bedauli the next day and set fire to several rebel shelters.

According to the village retaliation committee, Suresh Yadab and Rakesh were among the five Maoists killed, who had come on motorcycles to ask for donations. On 9 January, they killed a Maoist sympathiser in Bedauli. The Maoists avenged by killing Ramkripal Gupta, former chairman of the committee. "We have asked the Maoists and their supporters to surrender and join our team. Those who turned it down have fled," said Muna Khan, the committee chief. Around 22 Maoists have surrendered so far and are working with the villagers. "They feed us confidential information," said Khan. Today, nobody can enter the villages without Khan's permission, not even journalists and human rights workers. The committee has blacklisted over two dozen rights workers and journalists who visited the village during an observational tour. The people who have to walk through these villages are frisked and interrogated by the retaliation team members.

Special envoy

Nepal Samacharpatra, 7 February

नेपाल समाचारपत्र

In the wake of the latest developments in Nepal, the Indian government is preparing to appoint a special envoy in order to establish direct contact with King Gyanendra. A source at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu said the incumbent Indian Ambassador Shiva Shankar Mukherjee would continue but India is keen on appointing someone else as special envoy considering the new developments in the country. The source added that the security committee of the Indian cabinet had recently held a meeting under the chairmanship of the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to discuss the appointment of the special envoy. No name has been fixed yet. To coordinate with the international community on Nepal, Britain appointed Sir Jeffery James as special envoy to Nepal. *The Hindustan Times* has also mentioned the special envoy proposal and says three possible candidates, MK Rasgotra, KV Rajan and Deb Mukherjee, were discussed during the meeting of the Indian cabinet's security committee. All three were former Indian ambassadors to Nepal. The Nepali Foreign Ministry however is unaware of any such move. A ministry official said India had not informed the ministry officially yet. "Perhaps they have not informed us about it because the name has not been decided," said the official.

stations around the world decided to paratroop reporters with satellite communication equipment but many were stuck at Delhi airport. "We arrived at 11AM but had to wait until night because none of the flights were able to fly to Kathmandu," explained a journalist who arrived here at midnight. After arrival, they couldn't reach their local contacts because the phones were out. Their attention was geared towards arrests of leaders, press censorship and the communication blackout. Most have now left and moved on to other stories because they couldn't find any scoops. They were unable to meet any of the detained leaders. Some, Sujata Koirala, Minendra Rijal and Arjun Narsingh went to Hotel Yak and Yeti to offer interviews.

Radio news

Editorial in Kantipur, 9 February

कान्तिपुर

Radio came to Nepal in 1951, barely 30 years after it became widespread in Europe with the BBC. Today, there are many private FM stations in Nepal and there has been a phenomenal growth of radio making Nepal a model for the developing world. FM radio is constantly tuned on everywhere, even in the taxis, auto rickshaws and public buses. It has already become a major source of information for the citizens whether it is about the weather, flight schedule, traffic, accidents and national issues. Unfortunately, since last week when the government stopped radio stations from airing news and programs, there has been an obstacle in the development of radio. Hundreds of media people are out of jobs. Unlike the print media, the FM stations are heavily controlled as they can no longer air any news and they feel left out. The government probably feels that radio stations will not adhere to the notification given by the government as per the state of emergency declaration. But the radio stations know they have to be responsible and will work within the limitations stated by the government. On the contrary, FM stations can make a significant contribution in the present situation by providing responsible and credible information.

Hydro power

Rajdhani, 9 February

राजधानी

A micro hydropower project under construction in Solukhumbhu district's Lukla Bajar will save forests in Sagarmatha National Park. The 100 kW micro hydro plant was built on the Chaurikharka stream in partnership with the Rural Energy Development Program (RNDP). The Buffer Zone Council and the park chipped in Rs 1 million and RNDP contributed Rs 1.3 million. Local people volunteered labour for construction. Surya Bahadur Pandey of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation said, "This is an example of how national park authority and the local people can work together." Local people are happy the hydroelectric project will help them conserve rhododendron trees. "Now deforestation will stop," said the Buffer Zone Council's vice chairman Dawafunti Sherpa. "Without electricity people don't need to cut trees for fuel." The project will benefit 150 families in and around Lukla and boost tourism.

e-expeditions

Rajdhani, 8 February

राजधानी

For adventurers in foreign lands, acquiring permission for mountaineering in Nepal is now only a click away. The Tourism Ministry declared that it would soon introduce a system through which mountaineers can apply for expedition permission on the Internet. The Ministry will scan the online application and let the applicant know, also through the Internet, if permission has been granted.

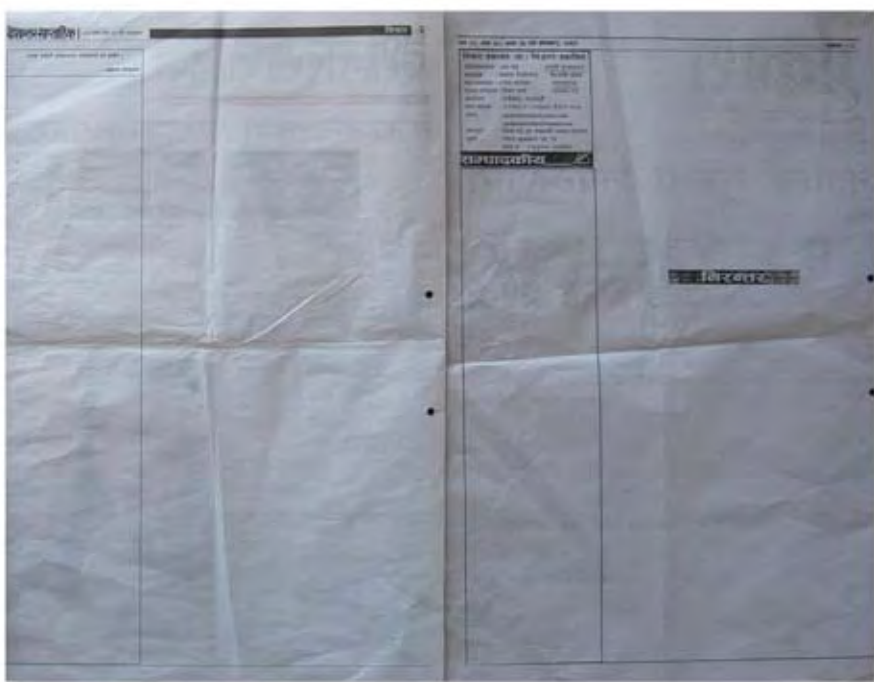
No scoop

Nepal Samacharpatra, 8 February

नेपाल समाचारपत्र

Foreign journalists who came to Nepal were caught with their pants down when the communication system went dead just after the royal address. Newspapers and television

According to the spokesperson of the Tourism Ministry, Sharda Prasad Trityal, all information regarding application processing will be posted on the website and the application procedure will be paperless. Mountaineers can



Op-ed pages of Deshantar and Prakash weeklies.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK



"No individual in the current council of ministry is a decision-maker. The decision maker now is the king who also has the prime minister's portfolio."

-Radha Krishna Mainali, Education and Sports Minister
9 February in interview in *Jana Astha*

Jump-starting freedom

Just like you can't be half-pregnant, you can't be half-free

Democracy is supposedly on the march in the Middle East. But Arab dictators are afraid of true democracy with its civil liberties and competitive elections, so they conjure up potions that protect the status quo by selecting bits of western political models and adding some religious interpretation to ensure a patina of Islamic legitimacy.

Saudi Arabia fits this

ANALYSIS
Mai Yamani



description to a tee. Its rulers—some of the most autocratic in the world—say that democracy is incompatible with Islam. So they prefer the term 'participatory government'. But a majority of Muslim scholars, including such eminent men as the Sheikh of Al Azhar in Cairo and the influential Qatar-based Sheikh Qaradawi, believe that Islam is compatible with democracy, at least as they define it: respect for the rule of law, equality between citizens, a

fair distribution of wealth, justice and freedom of expression and assembly. What remains debatable and contentious is the right of citizens to choose their leaders.

Yet pressure to democratise is mounting, in part due to the smaller Gulf States, which compete with each other in democratic reforms. Qatar and Oman have elected consultative councils and enfranchised women. Parliamentary elections are to take place in Kuwait and Bahrain, and at the end of last year, Sheikh Mohammad al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, suggested Arab leaders must reform or sink. Iraq's elections turned up the pressure even more.

So, threatened as the regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia has joined the reform race by announcing partial municipal elections to consultative bodies in which the royal family already appoints half the members. The first election were held in the capital of Riyadh on 10 February, followed by the oil rich eastern region and the southern Asir

region on 2 March, and Mecca and Medina in the western Hijaz region and al Jouf, in the northern Region, on 21 April.

The government describes this as a 'new political era'. But women remain excluded from the vote despite attempts by several to participate in areas that the Wahhabi religious authorities deem acceptable to the 'nature of women'. Moreover, in accordance with Saudi tradition, the ruling family appoints a prince as chairman of the general committee overseeing the elections—a sign not of wider political participation but of business as usual.

Despite efforts led by Crown Prince Abdullah to urge participation, voter registration is low, which suits the government as high turnout could lead to the development of an electoral culture. Low turnout, by contrast, could convince western audiences that despite the Saudi state's best efforts to jump-start democracy, its people are satisfied with the status quo.



Saudi intellectuals attribute the lack of voter interest to the absence of free expression and assembly, which frustrates genuine political participation. Moreover, leading reformers have been jailed since last March for signing a petition asking for a constitutional monarchy, which has reinforced the general lack of trust in the government's agenda.

If Saudi Arabia's rulers were serious about 'participatory government', they would encourage liberals, moderates and pragmatists. Instead, they repress, censor, silence and even imprison the moderates and appease the religious radicals.

The authorities have killed some of the more violent jihadis in their 'war against terrorism' but they fear that a wider crackdown, however necessary, would alienate important tribes and clans.

Despite cynicism, apathy, frustration, despair and violence, some Saudis still hope for the emergence of a prince on a white horse who will place the kingdom on the path of reform. But there is no such prince, there are only the old ones, clinging to power without legitimacy and toying grotesquely with their people's aspirations. ● *Project Syndicate*

Mai Yamani is an author and Research Fellow at the Royal Institute for International Affairs.

In a Black mood

A movie that provides some solace in troubled times



The late Kathmandu winter has turned dreary, creativity is stifled and so it is time to visit the Jai Nepal theatre and take in Bollywood's latest offering. Though it is a gloomy tale of pain and loss and despite some loose ends which will certainly deprive it of an anticipated Oscar, the movie *Black* has the ingredients to uplift the spirit. Bollywood is finally waking up to

SOUTHASIA BEAT
Kanak Mani Dixit



senses that benefit reach out across Indian frontiers.

Hindi films have always been a Southasian phenomenon, since when

Lahore was the centre of celluloid and the Pathan hunks had yet to migrate south to Bombay. But back then, the language was Hindustani of the folk boli rather than the stultifying labaj preferred by latter-day Bombay scriptwriters. That was also the time when the titles and even casting used to be in three scripts: English/Roman, Hindi/Nagari and Urdu/Arabic. Somewhere in the 1980s, the Urdu quietly slipped out with political realignments in the northern subcontinental plains. As maverick filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt told this writer a year ago, "What a good idea! Yes, let us bring back Urdu!"

In *Black*, director Sanjay Leela Bhansali provides superstar Amitabh Bachchan with the opportunity to observe

penance for all the television commercials he inflicts upon satellite television audiences from Chittagong to Quetta. It is a well-crafted film based on the story of Helen Keller, with a fine performance by Bachchan as a tipping teacher past his prime who, towards the end, succumbs convincingly to Alzheimer's. He takes on the mission of rescuing the being of a hearing and sight impaired Anglo-Indian Shimla girl, played by Ayeesha Kapoor who grows up into Rani Mukherjee.

The film is targeted at the urban and non-resident Southasian (NRSA) upper-crust and packs a sophistication to match. A production such as this is made possible through diversification achieved by the Indian film market and the emergence of the stand-alone Anglophone upper middle class audience. Gone (perhaps) are the days of one-size-fits-all films with generic packaging including three-hour length, six to eight songs, stereotyped characters and melodrama that simultaneously incorporate extreme tragedy and comedy. Continuing segmentation has made a film like *Black* viable, with nary a song, at under two hours, and a poignant plot that demands subtlety in performance and presentation.

When Bollywood brings out fine Hindi films, all Southasia joins in the pleasure. We cannot live the fiction that only (North) Indians watch these productions. But the incongruity remains: even though the larger audience knows no boundaries these films are made for an audience within India and the expat NRI. That is why unsettling chauvinistic productions like *Gadar* (2001) hit the big screen with regularity and we can only hope for the day when the international box office takings

from the Southasian diaspora will reign in the producers. Damage done by the Pakistan-bashing jingoism of a single *Gadar* cannot be undone by 10 saccharine-sweet bhai-bhai films such as *Veer Zaara* (2004).

For the moment, the gentrification and enhanced quality of Hindi films has benefited the urban 'A' segment and Southasian diaspora: the lower stalls are pronouncedly empty. We await therefore a further evolution to provide the larger population of the Indus-Ganga basin with better fare. Otherwise, we will forever be stuck in a time warp with bizarre films like the Lahore-made *Joh Dargaya Woh Margaya* (1996).

As production technologies become cheaper and there is a diffusion of skills, some simultaneous trends must be encouraged. Firstly, there has to be devolution of Hindi filmmaking power from Bombay to other centres. It is incredible and unnatural that no more than a handful of megastars monopolise a market of nearly half a billion. Other centres of film production must evolve in Hindi and as the regional economies expand, they must take in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and so on.

The turn of the wheel will also hopefully and at long last bring back regional cinema to the north of the Subcontinent, emulating what has happened in the south. If celluloid is to bring quality entertainment to the thirsty masses, beyond Hindi and its dialects, cinema has to be (re)discovered by Bengali and Punjabi Oriya, Asamiya, Sindhi and Nepali.

While we await this utopian future, it is a good idea to go see *Black*, as a motion picture that provides some solace in troubled times and as a harbinger better things ahead. ●

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"Lata ko desh ma gaando tanderi." (In a land of fools, even a man with a bad goatee can be a hero.) - as translated by UNACO, the United Nation's Assn. of Cartoonists

HeroJig's Adventures can also be seen at www.extreme-nepal.com

Next change: Herojig enjoys Dhal Bhat after 3 weeks without.

#55 2061 by jigy gaton - read. love. write.

ABOUT TOWN

FESTIVAL AND EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Saraswati Puja** on 13 February.
- ❖ **The Solitude of Colour** Paintings by Binod Pradhan at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited. Until 18 February. 4411122, 4218048
- ❖ **Peaceful Breathing** Exhibition of ceramic works by Jang Moosik at Buddha Gallery, Thamel. Until 15 February. 4441689.
- ❖ **Exhibition of Japanese Kites and Tops** at Nepal Art Council, 8-17 February, 9.30 to 4.30 PM.
- ❖ **Sama Theatre Festival** at Gurukul, Maitidebi, 4.30 PM onwards. Till 13 March. 4466956



EVENTS

- ❖ **Night For Little Heroes** on 12 February at 1905, Kantipath. Proceeds go to Ganjala Outreach for ill, destitute children. 4225272, 4215068
- ❖ **Prajatantra Dibas** Long live democracy on 18 February.
- ❖ **Taudaha Jamboree** on 12 February. Entry Rs 75(students), Rs 100(Nepalis) and Rs 200(foreigners). 4470 770, fob@dwarikas.com
- ❖ **Kathmandu Chorale Rehearsals**, 7.10 PM at The British School, Jhamsikhel. 5534737
- ❖ **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

- ❖ **Last Waltz** at Moksh, Pulchok on 11 February, 6PM onwards. Jam session with Full Circle, 1974AD, McTwisters and Lolo. 5528703
- ❖ **Good Time Blues Band** at Rum Doodle every Friday, 5PM to 7PM. 4701208, 4701107, rum_doodle@gohimalaya.com
- ❖ **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

- ❖ **Executive Lunch** Every Saturday and Sunday, 11AM to 2PM, all through February at Moksh, Pulchok, Jhamsikhel. 5528703
- ❖ **Barbecue Dinner** Every Friday at the Summit Hotel. 5521810
- ❖ **Taste of Thailand** at Rox Restaurant, Hyatt. 4491234
- ❖ **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
- ❖ **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
- ❖ **Farm House Café** Unlimited nature with delicious meals at Park Village Hotel. 4375280
- ❖ **Café Bahal** Newari and continental cuisine under the giant Cinnamon tree at Kathmandu Guest House, Thamel. 4700632
- ❖ **Barbecue-Ban Bhoj** at Godavari Village Resort. 5560675
- ❖ **Splash Spring BBQ** Wednesday and Friday evenings, 6PM onwards. Radisson Hotel, Kathmandu.
- ❖ **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

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- ❖ **Chiso Chiso Hawama** One night two days package for Rs 1,700 at Club Himalaya. 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, malaysiaiholidays_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
- ❖ **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

JAI NEPAL CINEMA

Michelle McNally (Rani Mukherjee) is special in more ways than one. She cannot see, hear or speak. She inhabits a world of infinite black, of a seamless, endless void where nothing reaches her and she reaches nothing. On the sheer will of her ferocious rage against destiny, Michelle struggles to stay afloat in the impenetrable whirlpool her life has become. Into this devastating isolation enters a battle weary teacher, Debraj Sahai (Amitabh Bachchan). With a single-minded obsession, Debraj takes up the challenge to lead this wild, uncontrollable child into the light of knowledge. Thus begins a journey of two headstrong individuals.

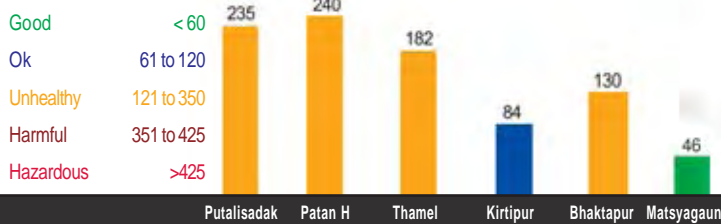
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KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

As the weather warms up, Kathmandu Valley's inversion layer is not as persistent and this has led to a slight improvement in concentration of fine dust in the air. But pollution level is still on the high side. The concentration of particles below 10 microns (which are dangerous because they are small enough to enter human lungs and stay there) along busy streets like Putalisadak and Patan Hospital last week were two times the national standard of 120 micrograms per cubic metre. Only if you live in rural areas of the Valley such as Matsyagaon and Kirtipur, will you be able to breathe freely.

16 - 22 January 2005 in micrograms per cubic meter.
Source: www.mope.gov.np



NEPALI WEATHER

by MAUSAM BEED



Due to the winds of change from the west, Nepal got precipitation well above normal in December and January. This is expected to continue this month also as the westerly jet stream is still intact over the Himalaya. This satellite image from Thursday morning shows a fresh westerly front advancing over the Pamirs expected to reach us over the weekend. The good news is that the frosty weather could dissipate faster due to warmer afternoon sun. In February, the Valley normally receives 18 mm rainfall when mercury level fluctuates between two to 20 degrees in average. The weekend will see cloudy intervals with the possibility of light rains over the higher mountains. Thereafter the days will be warmer while the nights will be less frosty, but still chilly.

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Walkathon Postponed

We wish to inform that the walkathon scheduled to be organised on **Feb 17, 2005** has been postponed for an indefinite period. We wish to thank all those friends, supporters and well-wishers for their goodwill gestures.

Radio Sagarmatha/Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ) Family



NEPALNEWS.COM

BUTTER LAMPS: Women lighting lamps to celebrate the royal proclamation of February First on Tuesday at Darbar Marg.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

SATELLITE WORKS: AFP's Deborah Pasmantier reports on location via satellite phone during a rally at Putali Sadak on Thursday.



SURESH NEUPANE

SANDS OF TIME: Sand mining has resumed in the past week after being banned for 10 years because it undermined the foundations of the Bagmati Bridge.



KIRAN PANDAY

IN TOUCH AGAIN: Internet surfers at Newa Cyber Cafe, Thamel soon after access to the Internet was restored on Tuesday.



KIRAN PANDAY

LET THERE BE LIGHT: A woman lighting lamps at Boudha on Losar, which fell on Wednesday.

Guitarrista de Nepal

Mukti (left, first row) and his several bands of brothers have consistently kept the blues alive in Nepal for more than 20 years. He has transformed from a boy dreaming of being in a rock band to forming some of Kathmandu's most happening groups, from becoming a father and businessman in Spain to returning to the music scene here time and again.

Mukti grew up listening to everything: from ethnic Newari music to his older brother's strumming and singing. "My brother would leave the guitar in the room after he was done and then I'd pick it up and have a go at it," recalls Mukti. In 1979, as a teenager, he formed a band called Radium in which he was the bassist. He got himself a custom-made guitar from India and soon life was swinging. "For a while it was what we'd dreamt of," he says of fame, parties and money, but creative differences cropped up and the band split.

In 1982, Elegance was launched with Mukti as lead guitarist. The members shared their vision of writing

Nepali originals to playing western covers. It was difficult making ends meet. "Now I hear of singers making money, buying bikes and cars after releasing an album," says Mukti, "Things were different back then."

Mukti moved to Spain with his Spanish wife, Maria. The blues man turned into a businessman, shuttling back and forth for three years before he packed up his ventures and returned to music,

doing everything from busking on streets to jamming with bands.

In 1996, the first Mukti and Revival performed their last show together in Basantapur. Their opening act Newaz impressed Mukti and they later morphed into the new Revival with Roshan, Upendra, Rabindra and now Maria. In 2000, Mukti and Revival released its hit debut album *Kalanki Ko Jam*. The second album *Bujhai Deu* was released in 2003.

This time, Mukti has come to Nepal not for music but for the Sanyak Mahadan, a Buddhist festival that takes place every 12 years at Swayambhu. Mukti's father has chaired the organising committee for 48 years now and this is the second time Mukti has worked as the festival's chief coordinator.

"I came for a different reason altogether, I wasn't planning on recording anything," he says. But Roshan had arranged for a concert in Shillong on 6 February so Mukti's stay in Nepal has been extended.

"I figured the band might as well record a few songs since I'm going to be here for awhile," he adds.

Mukti also fronts a blues trio called Mn'M in Spain and says with a grin on his face: "We're not that famous in Spain but most people around our town know me as that guitarrista from Nepal." ●

Kashish Das Shrestha

ANUP PRAKASH



All the news that is fit to print

Statutory Notice: An official Fact-finding Committee has pre-tested this column on lab animals and certified that it contains permitted synthetic dyes and preservatives and has declared it fit for human consumption provided the childproof seal is not broken at the time of purchase.

However, one can't be too careful during these perilous times so readers are advised to exercise individual caution on a case-by-case basis. Management is not responsible for the consequences, especially if perpetrators are apprehended perusing this in broad daylight, charged with indecent exposure and sentenced to 36 lashes with a wet rattan cane on each hind cheek.

UNDER MY HAT Kunda Dixit



Now that we have those legal niceties out of the way, we can get down to what you have all been impatiently waiting for with barely-concealed boredom, which is a roundup of this week's main events:

Togo Felicitated

HMG has congratulated the Democratic People's Republic of Togo on the smooth transition to a new government.

A free email SMS was sent to the new leader of Togo, Dr Sir Tyrone George Baboonga Wala-wala, MBE, wishing him personal happiness and prosperity and the Togolese people continued progress in their relentless march towards being a pariah state.

"We know what it is like to be one of the poorest countries in the world and it heartens us to see that you are doing a great job maintaining that position and being reviled by the international community," the message read, adding, "one has to do what one has to do."

In another congratulatory message the Chairman of the Nepal-Togo Friendship Society expressed the hope that bilateral relations between the two countries would expand in the years to come in the spirit of panchashila and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. He added: "I am glad to note that there are no major bilateral irritants between Togo and Nepal, and we hope that will change in the not-too-distant future."

Nation Already in Ballantine's Day Mood

Every country in the world marks the International Day of Love on 14 February in its own quaint way and Nepal is no exception.

This year's Ballantine's Day will be celebrated for three days nationwide in a grand manner under the slogan 'Make Love Not War'. Most people will stay at home to implement it (but only in groups of five people or less) nursing scotches on the rocks and drinking themselves silly, according to a press release issued by the Chairman of the Publicity sub-Committee of the All-Nepal Ballantine's Day Commemoration Main Committee.

"You'll all be pleased to know, hic, that at the present time advans shelebrations have already shtarted," said the sub-Chairman of the Nursing Committee at a pre-launch press conference, denying rumours that he was sloshed. "My speech may be slurred, but I am not plastered," he added, instructing journalists to exercise restraint and only report "the tooth and nothing but the tooth".

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