

Courage & Conviction

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Maoist cadres have put up a party flag and banner asking for votes for the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists just outside a gas depot in the Balaju Industrial District (BID). The photo was taken on April 6.



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History in the making At last

The biggest threat to the law and order and fair conduct of the poll comes from the Young Communist League

■ nf correspondent

Amidst hopes and doubts, an estimated 17.6 million voters are set to go to the poll this week on April 10 as world watches with vigilant eyes. At least 1000 international observers led by former US President Jimmy Carter will be observing the poll as fears rise that they may not be free from violence, intimidation and rigging. The fact that at least three dozen candidates, mostly from the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), have been wounded in the attacks by the Maoists gives credence to the misgivings.

As Nepalis appear set to elect the 601-member constituent assembly to draft and approve the future constitution, there are intense speculations about the future leadership of the government and all parties' ability to go together on vital issues confronting the nation.

The biggest threat to the law and order and fair conduct of the poll comes from the Young Communist League, which has been indulging in violence and intimidation of the candidates and cadres of other parties. Besides, the Maoist leaderships' oft-repeated threat that they would not accept the poll outcome if that goes against them has also raised doubts whether election will be an exercise in futility at a latter stage.

Worried about the prospects of violence, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Bhojraj Pokhrel summoned Chief of the Armed Police Force (APF) and the Nepal Police on April 6 to ensure that law and orders are strictly maintained. A ban on movement of private and public vehicles for

two days preceding the poll, EC sources said, was aimed at minimising risks of all clashes.

A well armed posse of 25,000 APF, around 50,000 civil police and nearly 76,000 temporary police recruited by the Home Ministry recently will be on round the clock patrol between now and the poll day.

According to election commission sources, it will take three weeks for the results to be declared. Filling up seats under the 335 proportional representation system will still be a tough job for the party leaders mainly Nepali Congress. And the toughest job will be to decide on the future Prime Minister as the CA, many believe, is going to be a hung-one with no party's clear majority. ■

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Cornering Nepal Army

“APF will be the country’s elite security force in the days to come.”



Pic by: Bhashwor Ojha

In what appears like the present government’s attitude of systematically isolating the Nepal Army (NA), it has adopted a policy of equipping the Armed Police Force (APF) with sophisticated weapons.

The government’s policy that was under consideration since long was implemented recently when India supplied 17,000 Self Loading Rifles (SLR) with a huge amount of ammunitions. The government, on the other hand, has taken no initiative to resume the supply of arms and ammunitions to the Nepal Army; which the government of India suspended back in February 2005, soon after the king took over power.

The arrival of weapons in several

trucks from India recently had infuriated the Maoists who suspected that the import of arms on the eve of elections was clearly aimed at sabotaging or rigging the poll. But Prime Minister Koirala succeeded in convincing Maoist Chief Prachanda that it was meant purely to quell possible disturbances by Madheshi outfits during the polls, and was not at all meant against the Maoists.

Koirala’s repeated statement that the army may be used during the poll was only meant to deliver a tactical message that it could have a role even under the current set-up. But APF will be the country’s elite security force in the days to come, official sources said.

Prof SD Muni who is often identified with India’s security establishment said in a recent television interview to an Indian channel that if NA is used during the poll, it would send a message that the government is meant to rig the poll in favour of the monarchy. And NA, both for the current establishment in Nepal and India, is still loyal to the palace. The fact that India refused to resume supply of arms even after Chief of the Army Staff, Gen R Katawal made a plea during his visit to Delhi four months ago is a clear proof of that view. Moreover, the government here told India that APF and Nepal police’s need for arms were greater.

That is the reason the APF has been able to get maximum resources and equipment exclusively from India. A couple of days before the arms were imported from India; APF Chief Basudev Oli had briefed the PM about the likely arrival of the arms. The information was not shared with the army at any stage, sources said.

Om Bikram Rana, Chief of the Nepal Police said publicly on April 4 that Nepal Police is capable of maintaining law and order during the polls and said, “We do not need the army,” - a statement which senior officials claim, was made at the behest of political leadership of the Home Ministry to provoke the army.



Keeping China happy

The policy makers are clear on one thing - that China’s sensitivity over Tibet is something that Nepal cannot ignore.

A week after the Chinese government expressed concern over the ‘use’ of Nepali territory for anti-Chinese activities, the government of Nepal seems to have swung into action. “The free Tibet groups have been issued warning that the government of Nepal is under no position to help them,” a Shital Niwas official told newsfront.

As a result, the anti-Chinese activities that continued in the capital for more than two weeks have now stopped ostensibly till the elections to the constituent assembly are over.

“They are over hopefully,” the source said.

In fact, Nepal was caught in the trap

of criticism with the European Union and Human rights groups on one side, and the Chinese authorities on the other, for opposite reasons. However, by using the middle path, the Free Tibet groups were told to stop their activities if they wanted to remain in Nepal.

Nepali authorities took the step after Chinese Ambassador Zheng Xianglin not only came back here cutting short his leave from Beijing, but he also hosted a press conference warning that foreign forces were actively engaged in instigating the anti-Chinese activities in Nepal. He did not name the country, but made it clear that the United States and India were clearly aiding such groups.

The ambassador said Nepal government must ensure that such activities directed against China did not take place.

In fact, China, which has a long standing relationship based on mutual trust with the royal palace is said to be confused over the unfolding political scenario in Nepal. There is no clarity as to what happens to China’s Nepal policy if monarchy is abolished from the country. This is something that is now being debated in security and foreign policy forums in Nepal quietly. “If Maoists emerge as a major political force after elections China may feel comfortable dealing with them,” the Shital Niwas source who did not want to be quoted, said.

Despite all these uncertainties, the policy makers are clear on one thing - that China’s sensitivity over Tibet is something that Nepal cannot ignore. Foreign Minister, Sahana Pradhan has time and again assured Ambassador Xianglin about Nepal’s clear-cut line. “She has also assured China that no other country will be given space in Nepal in detriment to Chinese interest,” the source said.

The incident of use of force by the police on Tibetans in exile as well as the monks got so much priority in the international media; that it was reviewed informally at the Prime Minister’s level. A source in the PM’s office quoted Home Minister KP Sitaula as saying, “It is so difficult to keep China happy.” But Koirala, the source said, instantly asked Sitaula that Nepal should not be seen as a human rights violator across the globe.

News Brief

International recognition worry

A week after Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Bhojraj Pokhrel went around the country certifying that law and order situation has improved and conducive enough for the poll, he expressed his quiet worry about the situation during his interaction with the senior civil and police officials on April 5.

Chief Secretary Bhojraj Ghimire and Inspector General of Police Om Bikram Rana (Civil) and Basudev Oli (Armed Police Force) assured the CEC that the law and order situation was perfectly alright and nobody was in a position to create problems for the poll.

Yet they agreed to remain vigilant especially in the light of the large scale presence of the international observers. “You must be alert that violence and rigging could lead to the election not being recognised by the national and international community,” Pokhrel is believed to have warned the police chiefs.



Model country

At least the environmentalists have every reason to feel happy about it. All vehicles including public transport will be off the roads for 24 hours beginning midnight April 9. Not only will that save fuel that is already in shortage, but will also bring about a good respite from vehicle emission.

And on top of that the noise pollution coming through loud-speakers during the past four weeks of election campaign will change into relatively quiet campaigns beginning midnight of April 7. The use of public meetings and loud-speakers has been banned for electoral purposes. The parties and candidates can only visit electorate in the door to door campaign.

Needless to say, the country will be observing a dry-week with no liberty to anyone to buy and sell liquor. But consuming what one already has in store may not be a problem perhaps!

Save Dolma

Maiti Nepal has set-up a secretariat for the ‘Save Dolma’ campaign. A bank account has been opened with Nepal Investment Bank to raise funds for the campaign. According to the secretariat, the account no is (AC NO): 5490040.

Anybody willing to be a part of the campaign is free to deposit the contribution in the account. Anuradha Koirala, Anjitenji Sherpa and Lakpa Sherpa are the account trustees. The amount will be used to hire a defense lawyer in Kuwait and assist the victim’s family.

Richer by 28 million pounds

Nepal got whopping 28 million pounds sterling from the British government for the electoral as well as other peace initiatives. The announcement to this effect was made jointly by British Ambassador Andrew Hall and head of DFID Nepal, Bella Bird on 4th April.

Announcing support of 14 million pounds, Ambassador Hall said, “The UK is pleased to support peace and development in Nepal and both are vital for a new Nepal to be created.” DFID Chief Bird said, “The UK is providing further 14 million pounds in support of the elections and for other key areas of the peace process as well as efforts to improve human rights and ensure those who committed human rights abuses in the past are brought to justice.”

The two said that the money will go to the government’s Nepal Peace Trust Fund, the UN Peace Fund and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Expedition continues

■ Yubaraj Ghimire

Nepal has declined Chinese request to suspend all the expeditions to Mt. Everest and a couple of other mountains between May and May 10 to keep Tibet free from alien troubles when the Olympic torch passes through the area. But Nepal has guaranteed that the expedition from its sides will be peaceful and apolitical with no negative impact on the bilateral relationship.

According to the official sources, the decision of the Nepali government follows a written undertaking that none of the expedition groups climbing the Mount Everest and other peaks from Nepal side would indulge in anti Chinese activities. In fact, the government of Nepal which had promised to favourably respond to the Chinese request earlier, reviewed its stance in the cabinet meeting on April 2 and gave the undertaking to the Chinese government of a trouble-free expedition from Nepal. The Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) would be acting as the official monitor during the expeditions. It has agreed to stand guarantor that the expedition would be trouble free.

NMA Chief Ang Tsering Sherpa told ENS that it would be a pity to



cancel or suspend the permits already granted for expedition during the peak season. He said he has received the letter from the Foreign Ministry here asking it to monitor the expeditions and ensure that it

remains trouble free. "We have agreed to take that responsibility and let both Chinese and Nepali governments rest assured that the groups would demonstrate the highest level of professional spirit and character as

always."

Suspension of the expedition altogether or restricting it to base camp of Mt. Everest would have resulted in the loss of at least nine million US dollar during that period.

According to the official sources, in addition to three million dollars as expedition fees, these groups normally spend twice that amount when they stay in the country.

Besides, 10,000 locals, mostly Sherpas who would be engaged as porters and guides would have lost their jobs. In addition to Mt. Everest, China's earlier request suggested that the expedition to Mt. Lhotse along the Tibetan border also be suspended.

"We recognise Chinese sensitivity on the matter, but they also understand that Nepal is a friendly country which does not go against Chinese interest especially on the Tibet issue," a source in the Prime Minister's office said.

An official who did not want to be identified claimed that China was even willing to compensate for the loss of all these revenues to Nepal in lieu of suspension of the expedition, but relented after the official undertaking that the expedition groups would not in any way endorse or support the Free Tibet movement. China has already asked

Nepal to stop pro Free Tibet demonstrations in the capital and not let foreign powers, which it refused to identify, to fuel those protests.

CAEOF Election Watch

The situation for the election of Constituent Assembly (CA) is gradually improving. The clashes between political parties are decreasing in number. Top three parties have come into the ten point agreement to give positive message the election. Within the framework of the ten point agreement they have formed the committee to monitor the electoral violence. This is an appreciable step towards creating conducive atmosphere for the election.

The government of Nepal formed a "Peace and Conflict Management Committee" under the co-chairmanship of Daman Nath Dhungana and Padma Ratna Tuladhar. It is believed that this committee will function effectively for maintaining smooth relationship between major ruling parties and minimising electoral violence. The Election Commission (EC) appears firm in taking action against candidates and the parties, if found violating the electoral code of conduct. The commission has already summoned four candidates of different parties for clarifications on the charge.

Maoist Chairman Prachanda, speaking at the mass meeting at Tundikhel, ordered his cadres and YCL members to behave like Gandhi at least for the election week. It can be considered a positive step to minimise election violence. India has already offered to seal the border for three days during the polls. The effective sealing of the borders will help to check the criminal groups to disrupt the poll and engage in criminal activities during the election in Tarai region.

Another positive development seen these days is the alliance of women, who are

campaigning for women candidates irrespective of the parties. They are urging people to vote in favor of the women candidates whichever parties they represent. The civil society conducted the national wide rally on 5th of April to pressure the political parties to stop electoral violence and ensure free and fair election.

But challenges are equally big. Top three political parties (Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, and CPN-Maoists) have announced to mobilise youths in every booth. This seems very risky because it may cause the clashes in the day of the poll. Election Commission is facing difficulties in managing and coordinating the election observers. Observers, in great numbers, have a responsibility to be fair, professional and unbiased towards the whole process.

If no untoward incidents take place now, there are no major obstacles likely to be coming in the way of Constituent Assembly election of April 10. Yet, the government and the seven political parties should remain vigilant to thwart any possible last minute attempts of sabotage. One has to realise that this CA election is not conducted at normal situation rather held after the decade long armed conflict. For this reason, the overall recent developments are satisfactory.

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Point to Ponder

A politician looks forward only to the next election. A statesman looks forward to the next generation.

- Thomas Jefferson

Observing polls

Nepal stands at the threshold of opportunities that comes but rarely in the history of a nation. Today as the nation is all set to witness a historic event where the entire 17.6 million voters stand together as equals in spirit, with a dream that this country deserves to get out of a history mired in bloodshed during the more than a decade long conflict.

That is why it is imperative that all eligible citizens have a duty to exercise their franchise out of free will. After all, it is an election where every citizen has a stake. A huge presence of the international observer in the current context is therefore, a welcome move. But all of us must be clear that international observers do not have a legal status.

Yet, their moral status cannot be and should not be undermined. They are expected to act as a deterrent against any design and act to subvert or manipulate the will of the people while casting their votes.

It is all the more reprehensible that the Election Commission (EC) who invited the international observers feels the need to warn them that 'isolated' cases of poll violence or irregularities should not form the basis of their reports of the poll.

The commission is right in its plea that post election challenges are much more formidable, but a fair poll does not come in the way of future law-makers to fulfill their responsibilities. The EC has been given the historic responsibility of conducting the poll in a fair manner in free and fearless atmosphere.



Letters

Superb cartoon

Abin's cartoon was superb. It helps even a nitwit to understand what the constituent assembly poll is going to be like. Our politicians who are totally devoid of political commitment, principle and character, are only flexing their muscles. They are only trying to legitimise the bullets, sickle and hammers as means to get what they want.

Tejshree

Kuleshwar, Kathmandu

Keep children out of politics

It's so sickening to see boys or girls being used for politics. More than 400 children have lost their lives in the insurgency launched by the Maoists in this country. So far, no parties have come forward in support of children's right to education.

Your cover pix last issue that showed two girls painted UML's election symbol on their faces, exposed that party. But I do not think any party is different in that sense.

It at all children need to come out openly in rallies with banners and flags, it should be to collectively appeal to shun these political parties unless they treat schools and children truly as zones of



peace. UML, as any other party, can always assert that those two children came to the election rally out of their free will and offered their faces to be painted, but violation of rights knowingly or unknowingly is just that, a violation. Children must be kept out of politics.

Mandira Sharma
Chabahil, Kathmandu

UNMIN's silence

UNMIN has now been coming out with regular reports highlighting the human rights and code of conduct violation by the political parties including

the Maoists. It has very categorically stated that the Maoist guerrillas deserted the cantonments in Chitwan and Surkhet to work for the Maoist party. But UNMIN has ignored to respond to the newsfront story that stated that UNMIN representatives were not present when the government money was distributed among the People's Liberation Army recently.

Is it a breach of understanding between the Maoists and the government or a routine lapse that UNMIN can afford to ignore?

Daya Sharma
Teku, Kathmandu

Wake up election commission

So far the election commission has not done

much to enforce the code of conduct, although newspapers are full of reports about violence, clash and such violations. Is it not a culture of impunity that the election commission is promoting?

If the candidates and their parties, especially the bigger ones are so immune, imagine the amount of impunity that the elected members of the constituent assembly would be exercising? This goes against the very basis of democracy. There can be no different class of citizens who will have more privileges or impunity than the others.

M. Singh
Dilli Bazar, Kathmandu

Spiritual Corner

Teaching effect of stories

Nasreddin, meaning victory of the faith in Persian, is a legendary satirical Sufi figure who lived during the Middle Ages (around 13th century), somewhere in Greater Khorasan, Iran. Many nations of the near, middle east and central Asia claim the Nasreddin as their own.

Much of Nasreddin's actions can be described as illogical yet logical, rational yet irrational, bizarre yet normal, foolish yet sharp, and simple yet profound. What adds even further to his uniqueness is the way he gets across his messages in unconventional yet very effective methods in a profound simplicity.

The Nasreddin stories have touched cultures around the world. Superficially, most of the Nasreddin stories may be told as jokes

or humorous anecdotes. But it is inherent in a Nasreddin story that it may be understood at many levels. There is the joke, followed by a moral - and usually the little extra which brings the consciousness of the potential mystic a little further on the way to realisation.

The anecdotes attributed to him reveal a satirical personality with a biting tongue that he was not afraid to use even



Sufism. This is such a common practice that, given the nature of many of

against the most tyrannical rulers of his time. He is the symbol of middle-eastern satirical comedy and the rebellious feelings of people against the dynasties that once ruled this part of the world.

Some tales of Nasreddin are also adapted and used as teaching stories by followers of

Nasreddin's jokes, multiple interpretations are to be expected. Idries Shah, a well-known Sufi and writer, published a number of collections of Nasreddin stories and suggested that the stories' various layers of meaning have a teaching-effect.

While Nasreddin is mostly known as a character from anecdotes, whole novels and stories have later been written. The oldest manuscript of Nasreddin was found in 1571.

Two sides of a river

Nasreddin sat on a river bank when someone shouted to him from the opposite side:

- "Hey! how do I get to the other side?" "You are on the other side!" Nasreddin shouted back.

To be a member of a middle class one has to toil very hard with honesty and integrity and the progress is never anything other than incremental.

Middle-classless society



Maoist candidates from Kathmandu

■ Binod P. Bista



While the communist parties in general and the Nepali Maoists in particular are vigorously campaigning for a

classless society in Nepal and the whole world, the failed ideology of yesteryears, Nepal is becoming a nation of middle classless society. There is no nation on earth today that has developed and sustained its progress and prosperity without the continuous contribution made by the middle class. It is not only a matter of economic growth and development but the middle class has also been the backbone of political as well as social development and stability in all advanced and developing countries.

The middle class people emerge from a society, similar to the new middle class of India and other newly emerging economies, by believing steadfastly in their country and toiling hard at the same time to realise the dreams of majority. The current situation in Nepal, where there is no environment for the development of a true middle class, seems to be the main problem. Though some people have made lots of wealth in a very short span, they have not, however, climbed the middle class ladder.

Windfall gains owing to irrational rise in real estate prices or corruption affected system providing numerous opportunities to evade taxes to government or trade deflection can never produce a middle class society in a country. To be a member of a middle class one has to toil very hard with honesty and integrity and the progress is never anything other than incremental. Anything such emerging groups of people embark produces genuine result; be it in business, art & culture, cuisine, music or even philanthropy if some of the middle class people were to move up to higher class.

The development of a middle class is not person oriented but encompasses the family as a whole, which later embraces communities and larger chunks of society in its stride. The least it does is to secure the future of the children of the country and also build a solid foundation for future generations. Whether it is the great USA or a progressively developing country, all governments ensure that the middle class receives enough support and encouragement to continually progress. That is the reason why the American president talks about small and medium businesses more often than big industries since they provide the necessary support to America to excel.

In Nepal, everything seems to be

anti middle class. Business wise, instead of fostering competition the government seems to be assisting some large businesses to become even larger by encouraging mergers and acquisition in many areas including the financial sector. The government and its agencies' requirements for establishing a small and medium sized business is so cumbersome and costly that there are ample cases of failures during the preparation phase itself.

Weak supervision by regulatory bodies, which are very few in the first instance, of the larger business makes it virtually impossible for small and medium industries to survive, much less progress. Turn to bureaucracy, the honest and hard working staff are always sidelined giving unfair advantage to those who not only tow the party line but also campaign for the party during all of the office hours.

The list is long as to why there can be no emergence of a true middle class in Nepal under the present condition. Turn to professionals and one finds that there is hardly any environment for specialisation and consolidation of their specific professions unless they, too, work for parties directly or indirectly. The other groups of people engaged in non-government organisations are hardly supported by their own and they

need to consistently seek support from international organisations.

The outcome of such endeavors is less than desirable at most times. Even the future pillars of society, the students, are not outside the influence of political parties. When some may be able to operate outside of it, there are others distractions and influences that mar their advance to be an honest and hardworking person with strong ethical sense and moral values.

Simply by acquiring some wealth without hard work does not make a person (family) a middle class. It is the middle class that checks the high handedness and aberrations of a government since this class is well educated, enlightened, mannered, disciplined and always conscious of its rights as well as obligations to the society and the country.

Absence of such a class in any country erodes the sense of nationhood and national pride. Despite several opportunities available to build a solid middle class in Nepal, her leaders have sadly wasted all chances in their bid to project their own image and their parties by unfair means. Are we trying to create a new Nepal into a middle-classless country caught up in self praise, hooliganism, lawlessness and unhealthy business practices? ■

The development of a middle class is not person oriented but encompasses the family as a whole, which later embraces communities and larger chunks of society in its stride.

For four million starving Nepalis, the CA is not a priority – their hungry stomachs are.

Eleventh hour observations of the election

■ Roop Joshi

The news bulletin on the radio reports that ten Nepali Congress (NC) workers including a campaigning candidate have been attacked and severely injured with Khukuris and stones in Rasuwa by a group of 200 Young Communist League (YCL) cadres. Just the day before, the leaders of the Nepali Congress, United Marxist-Leninists (UML) and Communist Party of Nepal – Maoists had faced the Election Commission, on live TV, and pledged an end to any activities that breached the code of conduct set down by the commission. This widening gap between the declarations of the politicians regarding their commitment to the elections and the ground reality is causing much turmoil in the minds of the electorate.

On another front, marauding armed factions in the Tarai are yet to sit for negotiations with the government. Their key objective is to stop the elections. They have declared a Tarai bandh (closure), to commence just a few days before the elections. Meanwhile, Maoist fighters in the various cantonments have started leaving in groups in uniform and armed to 'support' the campaigns of the Maoist politicians.

UNMIN stands impotent, declaring that this is against the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and that it neither has the capacity nor the mandate to stop this exodus. To top it off, the Election Commission has just declared that 227 candidates for the elections have yet to present their citizenship papers and 66 candidates are below the age of 25 – the requirements for candidacy.

On a recent evening, Madhav Kumar Nepal, President of UML as well as Pushpa Kamal Dahal a.k.a. Prachanda, Chairman of the Maoists were on television on separate channels. Mr. Nepal spoke of the significance of the Constituent Assembly elections, now eight days away, how it will take place at all cost and how the end of the monarchy was a done deal. Mr. Dahal was speaking about his college days, trying to present a human face to his 'awesome' reputation. Girija Prasad Koirala, PM and head of the NC, repeatedly asserts, in his usual maudlin manner, that the elections will take place.

International election monitors – from the EU, Carter Center and many governments and INGOs -

have poured in. Former US President Jimmy Carter himself will be here for the elections. It is expected that every polling booth will be covered by at least one of these monitors. This is a good sign and signifies the commitment of the international community to peace and democracy in Nepal. However, international commitment without national implementation capacity is not enough. We trust that these monitors will have the moral courage to call the elections, should they occur, as they are - untainted by condescending

Nepal a 'secular federal republic' without mandate and without taking into account the opinion of the people. This was done in two phases: initially, the declaration of a secular state, followed by the declaration of a 'federal democratic republic.'

A recent opinion poll undertaken with the involvement of The Asia Foundation indicated that 50% of respondents wanted a place for monarchy in Nepal and 59% wanted Nepal to remain a Hindu State, while 38% did not want to



An election monitor turns a blind eye as party activists stick election posters in violation of the code of conduct in Pokhara.

notions of 'budding democracy.'

Our politicians have now started hinting at utilising the Nepal Army (NA) to provide security for the elections, in addition to the Police and the Armed Police. The NA has been used effectively for this purpose in previous elections. Currently it is solely the provision of the CPA, dictating that the NA be confined to its barracks while the Maoist fighters are confined to their cantonments, which poses a political dilemma for the NA to provide security for the elections. As mentioned above, the cantonments are fast emptying and it is commendable that the NA has exercised discipline and remained in its barracks. But if the only way to secure law and order for the elections is to use the NA, some tough political decisions need to be made by the government.

Let us presume that the elections will be held and the Constituent Assembly formed. The CA will immediately realise that the current interim unelected government has taken decisions that are the purview of the CA. It has declared

retain the monarchy and 31% wanted a secular state. The survey sample reflected carefully the composition of the general population. These issues must be put to the people for their decision, i.e. by a referendum. Denial of a referendum will almost certainly lead to violence. Further, the issue of federalism needs to be deliberated upon and decided by the CA. This is an intricate issue with numerous implications and cannot be 'declared' by a bunch of unelected politicians.

To conclude, after these many years of civil strife, what we want most is peace and development. To illustrate, a recent headline read that the World Food Programme has estimated that almost four million Nepalis in western Nepal are facing food deficit because of poor harvest and skyrocketing prices. To these 4 million, 15% of the population, the CA is not a priority – their hungry stomachs are. And to an objective observer, the CA – should it be constituted soon – will do little to appease this hunger. And self-centered and divisive politics will not help. ■

Farcical or a genuinely 'new' Nepal?

■ Siddhartha Thapa



Nepal's peace process is fraught with uncertainty. For those who envision that a CA poll is the panacea to all of Nepal's ills, they are in for a rude awakening. The aftermath of the CA polls have been much speculated, some pundits opine violence will culminate the CA polls, where as some are under the impression the results will be widely contested; in actuality both opinions are accurate. Violence will mar the post poll celebrations and the results are expected to be refuted widely.

This is because CA poll is being held in the most unceremonious fashion, to put in so many words, elections that are held

throw new political challenges that will ultimately lead to the breakdown of the peace process. This can be augmented by examining a few critical variables that are crucial to build a new Nepal through CA polls. Individualism remains the most vital caveat of a democratic society. The very idea of political and civil rights are directly linked with the idea of individualism. Therefore, political parties represent individuals in a multiparty system. But when individuals are purposely bullied into submission and humiliation by a majority group, the whole electoral exercise will prove to be futile.

If these elections are held under such a fragile situation, the repercussions will prove too dear for the country. The political parties that come out of these elections as losers will not hesitate to refute these results and resort to violence. The vulnerability of the situation on ground will allow political parties to challenge the outcome of these elections. The tide is fast turning against the Nepali Congress led by GP Koirala; Prachanda has already claimed that five dozen of his cadres have been killed in the election campaigns across the country in recent months. Even if Prachanda's allegations are not true, the Maoists have already set the tone of the discourse.

In a functioning democracy, the media plays an extremely important role. In most cases, the people in general are unable to make legitimate decisions of their own. This is where the media comes into play in a democratic society and the media is therefore, supposed to play an individual role with the aim of bridging the gap between people and politics in the hope of aiding people to make conscious political decisions.

under fragile circumstances will provide a legitimate ground for parties to challenge the outcome of the elections.

The people in general are anxious to cast their votes but certain political parties, namely the Maoists, who for a decade claimed to liberate the people, are now oppressing the people so that the people will cast their votes in favor of the Maoists. The upsurge in violence and the acceptance of this rugged political approach pursued by anti poll elements has been mandated by the silence of the international community.

The farce of new Nepal has outweighed the possibility of realising a genuine new Nepal. Where an elected body is supposed to draft a new constitution, the people are being restrained from casting their verdict due to the fear of their lives. Now, will an election held under force and coercion provide a long lasting solution to Nepal's problems?

The country is embracing an election when the law and order situation has nearly broken down and when political parties themselves openly doubt the fairness of the polls, it becomes evident that the polls are being forced upon the people. Such a forceful exercise will

If the objectivity of a journalist is blurred due to a vested political interest, the media can be doing more harm to the political process than good. The media has a serious responsibility to keep people abreast on the unfolding situation of the country. If politics is allowed to dictate the objectivity of journalism, the idea of a new Nepal may well remain a distant reality as the forces of negative liberty are bound to overshadow the possible good of the electoral exercise. Therefore, the media must rise to the challenges meted by anti polls elements, not on the basis of rhetoric but on grounds of reality.

These elections are to draft a new constitution and this exercise is bound to have far reaching consequences. Therefore, given the situation on ground, it is only foreseeable that the elections will bring about a fractured political solution that will endanger both the peace process and the democratic institutions. The credibility of the constitution will be questioned as long as there is room for the parties to doubt that these elections will not be fair. If the true aspirations of the people are not reflected in these upcoming elections, yet another political crisis in the form of a violent agitation is inevitable. ■

"I am with the people, not the leaders"

P.L.Singh, arguably the most well known Kathmanduite, very popular among the common people, with a large network of friends abroad; is amazingly silent, rather passive as most would say, as the nation goes to the poll. PL, Kathmandu's first elected Mayor after the 1990 political change, was the only Member of Parliament who refused to take the oath when King Gyanendra, under agreement with seven parties and India, revived the House of Representatives. But rarely has PL spoken about his politics in the past two years. Excerpts of an interview with **Yubaraj Ghimire** for newsfront:

Why have you become passive in politics of late?

That will not be a correct assessment about my current silence. I have always had enormous faith in multi-party politics and the people of Nepal. I strongly believe in inner party democracy. It is also equally true that democracy is all about process. Seven years ago, I wrote to G P Koirala, the president of the Nepali Congress on the eve of Pokhara convention to seriously establish inner party democracy in the party.

I had also demanded that the bungling in issuing active membership should be probed and corrected as the first way to ensure that the culture of vibrant inner-party debate and participation of the members in policy matters begins. But the leadership continued with its practice of treating the party organisation as its pocket borough. That was the time when I dissociated myself from all the organs of the party including its central committee.

Does that mean you no longer belong to the Nepali Congress?

That is the party that I belong to, on the basis of its stated commitment and principles. But as the party leadership abandoned those principles, I am no longer with them. I am happy that at this late hour, at least Kishunji, has raised this issue publicly. If politics

and principle ever become inseparable you will see who will belong to this party and who will lead it.

Why did you not take the oath of membership of the revived parliament?

The main basis of democracy is the rule of law and constitutionality of the process. Morality has a place there. Parliament revival was not in conformity with the constitution. To be part of a parliament-not elected by the people, but gifted by the king was something my conscience did not allow. I was elected by the people, that is why I chose not to become a king's nominated member.

I still fail to understand why the seven parties who opposed dissolution of parliament were ready to accept its revival long after its normal tenure was over. How could not they go to the people right away and face the poll? Dissolution of parliament might have been a controversial act, but that was not unconstitutional as that is a subject under Prime Minister's prerogative.

But no one including the king had the right to revive a dissolve parliament. That right was given to him by the leaders of the seven political parties including the Maoists. These leaders have a big role in making the king an absolute monarch. On October 4, 2002 I had said that dismissal of an elected Prime Minister was rape of the constitution. But our top leaders including G P Koirala endorsed that dissolution through their silence for a week; as all of them were waiting to be invited by the king to take over as 'Prime Minister'.

Was it not possible for you to be in the party and continue raising your voice?

I am doing exactly that. I am not with the leaders, but am very much with the people who still believe in programmes, policies and ideology of the Nepali Congress. When I speak, I am speaking for the people and on behalf of the people. But Nepali Congress has become a

Let me make a forecast today: Once Maoists acquire power, there will be no space for other opinion.

party where ordinary people have no say in its affairs. It has lost its humane face. I will give just one of the many examples. Look at Shailaja Acharya today.

The government or the so called Nepali Congress leaders are not even sending her for treatment abroad. They do not even care whether someone who has made so much contribution to the cause of politics and democracy is suffering so. Does it mean that in today's culture of Congress politics, those with different or dissenting voice should not even survive physically?

What do you have to say about the election to the constituent assembly this week?

This is hypocrisy. We the people are led to believe that these people who destroyed the self-made constitution and which they once described as the 'best in the world' are now saying that they will give a pro-people constitution to the country. This is a game solely dictated by "Gun-tantra" (weapono-cracy) —and we

understand it.

Congress and CPN-UML have now become the followers of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists. They have accepted George Orwell's famous satire - "All are equal, but some are more equals than others." What he had said as a political satire so long ago has come true in Nepal's politics. The Nepalis who had become honourable citizens — courtesy, constitution of Nepal 1991, are being forced to become slaves of the seven parties.

I am sure most Nepalis have understood this. I am one of them. Our politics is not over. They are looking for an alternative platform. And the search is on. I do not believe that the Constituent assembly will give a political exit to the mess that the country is in today. Those who want to establish their own absolute rule as an alternative to another form of absolute power are unacceptable. Let me make a forecast today: Once Maoists acquire power, there will be no space for other opinion.

About the international community extending its full support to the seven parties?

It is unfortunate and most regretful that the international community has supported absolute powers in this country many a times. They did

so in 1960. They did so when Sher Bahadur Deuba was sacked as the elected Prime Minister in 2002. They are doing so even now. Even now, they are supporting the monopoly rule of the seven parties and a political interlude that is based in vacuum. It's a challenge before the Nepalis whether to be guided by the international community on their agenda with an overdose of their self-interest, or seek their support in favour of a constitutional political system based on rule of law.

Nepal is already on the move towards republicanism and federalism as the Constituent Assembly will have an obligation to implement that. Your say on this?

In a true democracy, people have an unchallengeable right to express their faith and conscience in a fearless manner. But strangely, this dictate to the future CA was issued by those who became members of the interim parliament by the grace of the king. The people are not party to those decisions. As it involves major and fundamental policy matters, its imposition without proper debate and people's involvement would have far reaching consequences.

Such decisions should be made by the people alone, and not by the parties by making people their slaves. And mind you, all these parties have made a mockery of the constitution and democracy. You think that those who take away democracy will give you 'Ganatantra' (people's democracy)? Let us not live with that illusion! ■



Bhanor Ojha

विश्व अनि हामी ...

नौला, रोचक, शानवर्द्धक र

फरक प्रसंगहरू

बिल्कुलै नौलो अनि रोचक प्रस्तुति

सूचना र मनोरञ्जनका लागि

फरक विश्व

... मात्र सगरमाथा टेलिभिजनमा



सगरमाथा

समाजवादीको विकासको नेपालको गौरव

हरैक मंगलवार राति १०:३० बजे
दुधवार विहान ८:३० बजे
बिहीवार बिउँसो २:३० बजे
र शनिवार साँझ ६:३० बजे



What would have been the production of food in Mugu if the same or even a half of the money spent on subsidising rice was spent on increasing production and productivity in the area?



MUGU rice blues

■ Teeka Bhattarai

It took a couple of visits to understand that Mugu actually is the name of a VDC that lent its name to the district. People cannot say for certain when the airlifting of rice in the name of Mugites started. It is said that it was followed by a royal hunting camp in the district in the beginning of 80s. Most Mugu people, who are supposed to get rice, do not get the rice. Rather, some people claim, most of it goes to the government staff and now also to non-government institutions' staff. Critics believe that the sole

purpose of the rice distribution in the district was to support government's assertion from Kathmandu - relief to the people being a side-product!

It doesn't sound unconvincing however. Most staff in the government and even non-government offices comes from the parts of the country where rice is the main staple food. Most of them do not like to work in the district as it is remote and living conditions are harsh although government provides additional remoteness allowances. In the last financial year, an activist calculated more than 75% of rice went to the staff - locals and outsiders included.

Some people living mostly around rice distribution centre have internalised the idea that rice is a symbol of status. When people speak of food shortage in Mugu - the most obvious question to ask would be: to

what extent is the shortage rice or food grain? Its impact is yet to be studied but both in psychological and practical terms, it is said that it has had devastating impact on the production of food grain in the area. It is clear that there is hardly any significant improvement in the production. Now the question is how long the rice will continually be supplied and what would have been the production of food in Mugu if the same or even a half of the money spent on subsidising rice was spent on increasing production and productivity in the area?

Mugu has four regions called Bheg: Soru, Khatyad, Gam and Karan. While the last and the first are food short regions Khatyad is the rice bowl of Mugu. It has not been studied or thought if the rice from that area can be supplied to other regions of the

district. From this, people deduce that other interests of airlifting are at play. When we get into the issue of corruption - Mugu ranks on top. Few months ago during an exercise to identify key issues of development, some 20 development workers

get to the district headquarters and get the plan approved and get out - least bothered how a particular NGO will implement the program.

As to why even the basic agricultural and land improvement



belonging to lower profiled NGOs unanimously ranked corruption as the number one - leaving off-stated problems of road, electricity, conservatism, difficult terrain and so on behind!

The number of NGOs registered in Mugu reaches over 150 by now. Most of the 'active' NGOs belong to the local elites. They flourished when Maoists drove them away from their homes for being feudal and exploiters. They are under the control of major parties and a network of closed relatives. A major character of such NGOs is that chief executives are job-holders in another establishment notably the school teachers and the health workers including some non-government staff. It is extremely ironic that the donors (I included) are discussing an adult literacy program with NGOs despite the fact that one can see a troop of children wandering around school premises because of absence of teachers! Often donors

practices were not undertaken even around district head quarters, a local teacher said, "None of the staff stay in the district for more than few months, you don't know what season he or she is coming, its already time for them to go." In contrast to other government staff, most teachers from outside who comprise over 60% of all teachers in Mugu are said to love to remain in the district because they get good remoteness top-up on their basic salary without having to teach.

With rare exceptions, coordinating with donors is even more difficult. NGOs say the donors do not appreciate public gatherings as people ask questions about their way of working including budgeting. ■

(Teeka is a national consultant for a Swiss INGO - Fastenopfer. Comments: teekab@info.com.np)

तपाईंको मनमा उठेका प्रश्नहरूको उत्तर खोज्ने प्रयास



जनसरोकारका विषयमा सगरमाथा टेलिभिजनको खबरदारी

सगरमाथा विशेष



तपाईं पनि
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आइतबारदेखि शुक्रबारसम्म दिउँसो ३ बजेको समाचारपछि प्रत्यक्ष प्रशारण, पुनः प्रशारण राति ८ बजे र भोलिपल्ट बिहान ८ बजे

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On the protest bandwagon

The Beijing Olympics has become a windfall for China's critics, despite and not because of what happened.

No sooner had protests imploded in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in mid-March than Western figures like Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, exploded against Beijing and egged on the world to protest against the Chinese government.

Western mainstream media had also been building sentiment against China, with the BBC even taking senior Olympics officials from abroad to task. Yet the broadcast and print media, from CNN to the *Los Angeles Times*, refer only vaguely to China's "(bloody) crackdown", deemed politically incorrect, against the violent demonstrations presumed to be innocent.

But what actually happened in Tibet and its environs over the past four weeks, as far as these media outlets could tell?

On March 10, hundreds of Tibetans including monks marked the 49th anniversary of a failed uprising against Chinese authority with protests in Lhasa, resulting in arrests. Four days later more protests followed, including a hunger strike by monks demanding the release of their detained brethren.

Then unconfirmed reports of two monks attempting suicide were broadcast by Radio Free Asia, a US-funded and CIA-originated station broadcasting propaganda to communist countries since the Cold War.

Meanwhile, Tibetan protesters on the streets attacked passers-by deemed to be ethnic (Han) Chinese and destroyed shops and cars. Initially there was little or no response from the police or military. In due course, some fatalities resulted from the violence on both sides.

The authorities acted belatedly, closing three



monasteries, manning street checkpoints and imposing a curfew. Then foreign journalists were barred from the hotspots.

Witnesses said protesters resorted to unprovoked violence against unarmed individuals and private property through beatings and arson. In any other country, the government would have responded more swiftly and resolutely than a Beijing anxious about compromising the festive atmosphere of this August's Olympics.

And therein lies the little-mentioned factor behind the protests. The issue of Tibet has been around for half a century, so why such a fuss now if not to exploit China's vulnerability in the run-up to the Olympics?

If Chinese officials had initiated the violence, and on a scale inviting worldwide condemnation, then Western complaints would have been in order. That happened with the killings at

Tiananmen Square, resulting in Beijing losing its bid for the 2000 Olympics in a 1993 decision.

But Lhasa in March 2008 was not Tiananmen in 1989, or Lhasa in 1959. And this time there was no equivalent of Li Peng, the Chinese premier who reputedly ordered troops to fire on unarmed student protesters in 1989.

This time, the group in Tibet with the most legitimate grievance against the Chinese authorities would be ethnic Chinese, because officials had failed to ensure adequate protection against the violent protests.

Yet the Western or international media have not covered events from their angle, even when the ethnic prejudice they suffer in Tibet can only worsen. Instead, the media focused only on the plight and perspective of ethnic Tibetans, including the perpetrators of the violence.

Result: Tibetan separatists effectively get a

free ride in the global media, with their objectives and methods remaining unquestioned. The same goes for the Dalai Lama's metaphorical claim of China's "cultural genocide", even while ordinary Chinese suffer racist violence from Tibetans.

Another newsworthy issue that was neglected is how the Dalai Lama, despite his image as an icon of peace, did practically nothing to help quell the violent protests.

Yet another is how a younger generation of pro-independence Tibetans has (especially since 2005) diverged from the Dalai Lama's quest for autonomy.

The Western media generally leans towards a barbed demeanour over a still-communist China, however nominal or irrelevant that ideology has become. Such a herd mentality, though unworthy of independent journalism, persists.

So the communist bogey continues to haunt Western consciences that presume many familiar media restrictions are still in force in today's China. Such presumptions sit oddly with recent developments, like foreign media access to dissidents and to protesting Tibetan monks in recent days, and Xinhua News Agency's coverage of the protests in mid-March.

Chinese authorities are also presumed to be tough on protesters, but what has been the recent experience of other countries with Tibetan communities?

Indian authorities arrested Tibetan protesters near the Chinese embassy, and even when they were planning a march to the border. India offers refuge to the Dalai Lama and his fellow exiles, but requires them to refrain from political activity.

(Malaysia Star)



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MARSHLAND FLOWERS

Chatur Brahma Viharas

It is only such an insight that can liberate and no other methods of meditation can liberate.

■ Acharya Mahayogi Sridhar Rana Rinpoche

The Purvanivas-anusmriti gained by meditation has practical benefits in many ways. With this knowledge one can realise the truth of rebirth, the operation of the law of karma, the history of the macro cycles and micro cycles of evolution and involution of world systems. It is of the greatest help for cultivating Maitri (loving kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (empathy) and Upekchhya (equanimity). These are called the Chatur Brahma Viharas and are a very important meditational group within Buddhism – especially in Mahayana/Bodhisatwayana.

This group of meditation has been copied wholesale in the Patanjala Sutra. According to the famous scholar Dr. SN Gupta the Patanjala Sutra is nothing but a rehashing of the Buddhist Astangika Marga. Today almost all Hindu meditation methods link themselves with the Patanjala Sutra.

Purvanivas-anusmriti also helps a lot in gaining insight into phenomenal existence (Dharma) which is the main

objective of Vipassyana because someone who can see all these can clearly see the changes of time, see nations arising and ceasing, civilisations arising and ceasing, world systems (Lokadhatus) and bigger world cycles (Trisaahasra mahasaahasra lokadhatus) arising and ceasing; just as a Vedanaanusmriti vipassyin can see his micro level Vedana arising and ceasing. And indeed that is what Vipassyana is all about.

Vipassyana is to see or gain insight into the fact that all Sanskrita Dharma (conditioned phenomena) are constantly changing and are therefore impermanent (Anitya/ Anicca in Pali); and because they are Anitya, they are Dukha (sorrowful or

sorrow producing or better still unsatisfactory) and because they are impermanent and unsatisfactory (Anitya – Dukha) they are neither me nor mine (Anaatma – Anaatmiya).

Kaya (the body), Vedana (the feeling sensation), Chitta (the mental continuum) and the Chaitta – dharma which are the four used in the Smrityupasthaan Sutra as Alambana (objects of meditation to gain insight (Vipassyana) into the way phenomena (dharma) exist). It is only such an insight that can liberate and no other methods of meditation can liberate. We shall go into greater details about Vipassyana and the difference between Shamatha type meditation and Vipassyana type meditation, later when the time comes.

Purvanivas-anusmriti also helps in the realisation of the Four Noble Truth (Chatwari Arya Satyani), which is the very foundation of Buddhism and its practice and in itself is the whole teaching of the Buddha in a nutshell. ■

(To be continued)
(Sridhar Rinpoche is a Vajrayana Master)

Vipassyana is to see or gain insight into the fact that all Sanskrita Dharma (conditioned phenomena) are constantly changing and are therefore



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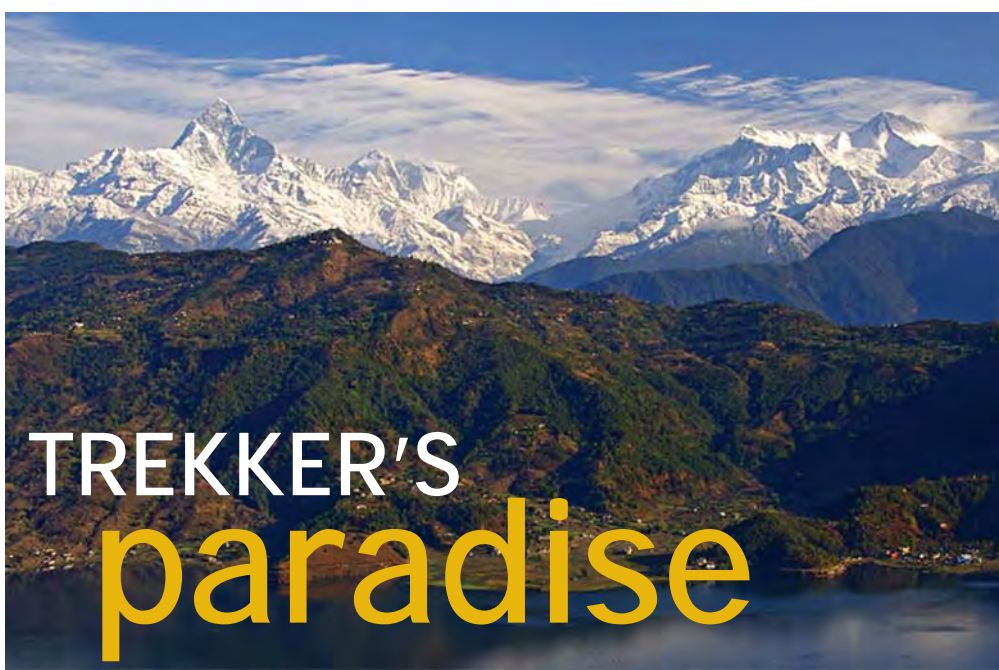
Pokhara is an extraordinary place to view the glorious mountains and is

truly a centre of adventure and the gateway to several world famous trekking and rafting destinations. From where it stands at an altitude of 827 metres above the sea level, mountains like Dhaulagiri (8,167 m), Annapurna (8,091 metre) and Manaslu (8,163 metre). Machapuchre (6,997 metre) are visible. Machapuchre is double finned like a fish, thus the name, fishtail.

Pokhara lies one week's walk (200 km) west of Kathmandu. An idyllic location, it is dotted with half a dozen lakes, interesting caves, green hills, gushing rivers, and above all, the captivating mountain ranges. It is a lush valley, a blend of rich farmland and green hills. It is the biggest tourist destination after Kathmandu valley and is populated with 200,000 people. It is the headquarters of the Western Development region of Nepal, as well as of Gandaki Zone. It has moderate temperature and receives the highest rainfall in Nepal.

Tourism began in the early '70s. Development and change in Pokhara has been relatively rapid and modern. Historically, Pokhara was an important village, being one of the old trading routes between India and Tibet. A chequered history of Chaubise Rajya (little kingdoms) under Kaski and later with Shah Dynasty, it invited Newars from the valley to promote trade and commerce in the 18th century. It is an important meeting point of two ethnic groups, Buddhist Gurung, Magars, and Thakalis from the surrounding hills and other Hindu castes from other parts of Nepal.

Fewa lake is perhaps the best single attraction of Pokhara. 4.4 square km large, it is the second largest lake in Nepal, and the most enchanting of the seven lakes in Pokhara. Boats can be hired to cross the water or to visit Barahi island temple in its middle. Barahi temple is a two



TREKKER'S paradise

storied pagoda temple of the goddess Ajima.

The north-eastern shore of Fewa Lake is known as the Lakeside. It is a favourite tourist location with sprawling hotels, restaurants, shops, banks and various offices. The shore has developed into one of the major tourist hubs of Nepal. Boats can be hired for a ride on the lake. Sarangkot, at an altitude of 1592m, is a stunning vantage point to experience breathtaking



magnificent panorama of mountains with spectacular sunrises and sunsets. A former Kaski fort on a hilltop is also famous for those who are brave enough to paraglide. The trip gives a bird's eye view of the mountains, Seti river, Fewa lake, and the valley itself. World Peace Pagoda, is on the top of a hill on the southern shore of Fewa lake. It is at an altitude of 1,113 metre and yet another magnificent vantage point for viewing the mountains. On the north-eastern part of Pokhara, there is a modest monastery.

Seti Gandaki, the boisterous river, divides Pokhara almost into two halves. At certain places, the river is only a couple of metres wide. It rumbles underground and has made a deep gorge by its powerful flow. Devi's fall, where Fewa Lake thunders into gigantic hole and then disappears, is an interesting place to be. The Tibetan refugee camps have modest monasteries and therein one can see unspoiled Tibetan lifestyle.

Museums, including the Mountain Museum and Pokhara Museum, showcase history and ethnic mosaic of Western Nepal. The natural history museum has a collection of butterflies, insects, birds and models of wildlife. The Mountain Museum is an organised presentation of man, mountains and mountaineering. The project is supported by international alpine clubs with its uniquely modern thematic showcase.

Monuments and temples with Newar architecture indicate its

history with the arrival of the business community from Bhaktapur, at the invitation of a Kaski king in mid 17th century. One of the most visited temples in Pokhara is the Bindhabasani temple, with its Bhagwati shrine. The Bhimsen temple with erotic carvings, testifies its age-old relation with Kathmandu valley.

Pokhara has good communication facilities, a modest airport, several multi-national banks, hotels of diverse range, innumerable restaurants offering various delicacies, music bars, etc. There are frequent transport links with Prithvi highway to Kathmandu and Siddhartha highway to Bhairahawa. Connections to various districts make Pokhara an important regional centre. It is linked by air to Kathmandu, Bhairahawa, Bharatpur, Jomsom, Manang and by helicopter to Western Nepal.

Pokhara is a trekker's and adventure's paradise. There are long and acclaimed treks from those like Round Annapurna and Thorang pass, to short and memorable treks passing through Ghandruk, Jomsom, Poon hill and Sikles. However, uncontrolled modernisation, poor local transport facilities, and the glaring development gap between the westernised Lakeside and the rest of the valley, are what I'd call the downsides of this place. ■

(nre@mail.com.np)

FIREFRONT

Through my window

Yuyutsu RD Sharma



I might be the last one to walk these trails littered with dry leaves
song of the rain falling like slow
sonorous river
the cicadas breaking the silence of
green glades

(Helambu)

Through my window in New York City, I see the stars above the illuminated Manhattan.

The stars are dim and dismayed like the news that The New York Times brought this morning from my nation reeling under conflicting complexities of experiments with truths of dictatorship and democracy. The news of forthcoming elections in Nepal is big news in the Western world.

My American friend Jim finds it interesting that the elections will decide the fate of several key issues; not only King's role but also the powers of major political players in the democratic political set-up. It will decide how powerful the Maoists are in the country and if people of once a Hindu kingdom believe in the power of the barrel of the guns.

Most interesting feature of the NY Times piece on Nepal for my American friend here seems the Maoist leader Babu Ram Bhattarai's visit to a Hindu shrine with his parents in Gorkha District. Considered somewhat Left in the American circles, Jim's radical leaders' list excludes Chairman Mao and his interest in the upcoming scenario centers on the nation's interplay of tradition and change in the making of its polity.

There are some friends here who still doubt the success of this democratic exercise. The election won't be substantial without the inclusion of every political player. But the issue of the recent Tibetan upsurge seems to hog the headlines of the Western media. At one reading in Cleveland, I found audiences asking questions about Tibet very engagingly.

But I want to keep the focus on the Himalayan mountains to keep my dialogues lively. There's nothing more beautiful than the Himalayas, I suggest, as a way of distraction. The mountains in the Midwest are mere humps. Everyone laughs, "Sure they must be where you come from, Man, the rooftop of the world." I narrate the story of my visit to the Alps to amuse them. I look a train and saw some hills and then some more hills. After a while, I asked - Where are Alps? Are they gone? What were mountains for them were mere hills for me. ■

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Show MERCY on donkeys



Pic by Pragnan Ghimire

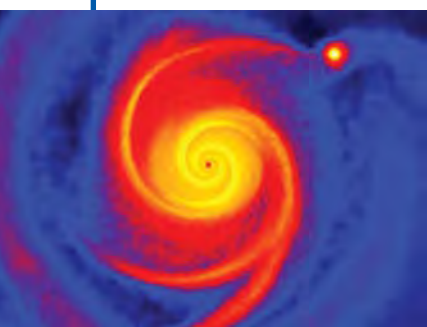
Donkeys have always been the worst victims of human atrocities since ages. But the condition of those in Kathmandu is getting worse. Brick kilns are using donkeys to transport bricks, bearing loads beyond their capacity. When they die or get weaker, they are thrown into public places. The state of the mute animals shows yet another degree that human cruelty can reach.



A pair of donkeys was thrown at Kushunti near ring-road. One was dead while another was still alive. KAT, an organisation that looks after stray dogs, mercifully took away the surviving donkey for treatment after children from Kushunti took initiatives to save it. ■



Astronomers see 'youngest planet'



An embryonic planet detected outside our Solar System could be less than 2,000 years old, astronomers say.

The ball of dust and gas, which is in the process of turning into a Jupiter-like giant, was detected around the star HL Tau, by a UK team. Research leader Dr Jane Greaves said the planet's growth may have been kickstarted when another young star passed the system 1,600 years ago.

Details were presented at the UK National Astronomy Meeting in Belfast. (BBC)

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