

My 'local' community (Kathmandu) Or "When the king turned off my mobile!"



Author: Dr Val Inchley.

As Prithvi Narayan Shah¹ stood on the ridge overlooking Kathmandu, he coveted the beautiful, green, fertile valley spread before him: by 1769 it was his, but if he were to be reincarnated today I doubt he would want it. Apart from very limited contact with British India during the Rana regime², Nepal remained a hidden Himalayan Shangri La, but since the country opened up to the world in 1950/1 it has changed beyond all recognition. Nowadays people 'sow' bricks and not rice in the fields.

As today's tourist flies into the valley s/he catches only a brief glimpse of the snow-peaks before plunging through a suffocating layer of smog – the inheritance of the internal combustion engine. From the first car carried over the hills, it is a mere 50 years to the present traffic and lung congestion, but everyone (who's anyone) has a motorcycle or Pajero³ while no one repairs the roads or removes the garbage.

Understandably tourism – the main source of income since the 70s – is declining. Supermarkets for the national elites have mushroomed but souvenir shops and hotels are struggling. Once the Mecca of the Hippie trail, Kathmandu is now rejected in favour of destinations free from armed police and pollution, but retains its legacy of drugs. Visitors bold enough to browse the bookshops of Thamel⁴ saunter among the saris, attired in mini-skirts or jeans, serenaded by "Om Mane Padme Hum"⁵ & hard rock before savouring an international menu.

At Tribhuvan airport, Westerners arriving for their Eastern mystical experience mingle with Nepali Christian leaders departing for Anglo-American theological training, young hopefuls on their way to making millions in 'Arab'⁶ and delegates to the latest SAARC⁷ conference in the capital. Meanwhile IDPs⁸, escaping from their villages and HIV-positive girls, ejected from the brothels of Bombay, run (often in vain) to the city for succour and swell the numbers of unemployed squatters. Such people make the town untidy – which is presumably why the fruit and vegetable sellers at the corner of my road are repeatedly 'moved on' by the authorities. But the next day they're always back, sitting selling in the mud: what else can they do?

Ever since 1970, HMG/N's⁹ 5-year plans have been hijacked by the WHO and UN, because 'development has to be done exactly the same way throughout the world' – or the funding will stop, while DFID¹⁰ consultants and their national counterparts plot the demise of poverty from their ivory palaces – without meeting the people in the periphery. In 1990, King Birendra devolved his power to a democratically elected cabinet, but ministers pocketed the profit and precipitated the Maoist People's War as angry young men realised that political promises

¹ Famous king who unified Nepal.

² Despot family who ruled Nepal for 104 years prior to 1950/1.

³ 4x4 vehicle popular with government ministers.

⁴ Tourist area of Kathmandu.

⁵ Buddhist Chant "Behold the jewel in the lotus!"

⁶ Usually means the Middle East, but nowadays Malaysia is also popular.

⁷ South Asia Association for regional Cooperation, whose HQ is in Kathmandu.

⁸ Internally Displaced Peoples, forced to leave their villages by a combination of human rights abuses perpetrated by both the Maoists and security forces.

⁹ His Majesty's Government of Nepal.

¹⁰ Department For International Development (UK) Used here as an example.

were made to be broken. Exhibition¹¹ Road and colleges started to resemble Tiananmen Square until on 1 June 2001 – through a complex interaction of ‘glocalistic’ factors – still not fully untangled – the royal family was assassinated. Under Gyanendra things got even worse: with 14 PMs in as many years. Clearly no one was in control – except perhaps those who set the city on fire on ‘9/1’¹² in protest against the assassinations of 12 Nepalis in Iraq and the unscrupulousness of the companies sending labour to the Middle East. Then on 1 February 2005 the king seized back the power and turned off my mobile¹³. Most communications networks were subsequently restored and we still have freedom of the press – or so ‘they’ say, despite the recent arrest of 50 journalists!

I know all this because I live in Kathmandu, in the house of an ex-British Gurkha; use a Chinese radio to hear the news of Iraq and a Japanese laptop to contact friends in Africa; I ride a Japanese-Indian scooter, wearing an Italian helmet, English underclothes, a Swiss watch and an Indian kurta-suruwal; I phone my Korean friend on a Finnish mobile to arrange a meal at the Singaporean-Malaysian restaurant, although more usually I consume organic Nepali food and bottled water (NOT American Coke) while dreaming of Colombian coffee and my holiday in Malta. Before that there’s a mission teleconference linkup with UK, NZ & Oz before I board Qatar airlines heading for the course on Global Issues in Contemporary Mission in the UK.

About the Author

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¹¹ Literally ‘demonstration’ road.

¹² 1 September 2004.

¹³ He actually switched off the complete telephone and email networks presumably in order to install strict censorship, and 6 months later prepaid mobile phones have still not been restored.