Whither the Hindu Kingdom
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Nepal's unique status as the last surviving Hindu nation continues to be threatened by impinging external forces

Nepal is vivified legend, walled in by two powerful Hindu traditions--Natha and Pasupata Saivite--just as it is enclosed by the imposing Himalayan and Mahabharat mountain ranges. Until 1950, Nepal was isolationist, like Tibet, insulated from the world and the ambivalent amenities of 20th century progress. It could have happily remained so, steeped in the magic of its celestial landscape and spiritual mindscape--though it was in a political catharsis. In 1951 Nepal opened its doors (including garage doors, for the first automobiles packed in on litters) five years before a road was sculpted down to India. With its doors wide open for half a century now, Nepal appears to have become host to friends and enemies alike, both political and religious. The following special series of reports includes photographer Thomas Kelly's first-hand account of tense days in the capital earlier this year; correspondent Hari Bansh Jha's telling of affronts by Western conversionist religions and the apparent indifference of the government; a cry of grave concern from Amnesty International and the story of Teej, an annual festival for women which has not been spared the brunt of political scheming.

By Thomas Kelly

April 4:I opened my e-mail. Newsweek Hong Kong queries, "Will you cover the April 6th, 7th CPN chakra bandh?" A bhand is a strike against all moving vehicles and shut down of the Hindu kingdom.

For anyone living in Nepal for any extended period of time, bandhs normally mean a holiday for government employees, most shopkeepers and all sensible taxi drivers. For tourists and other Nepalese, it means clear skies appearing from out of the normally polluted days caused by belching three-wheeled diesel powered transports, known as "tuk-tuks," and other should-be-banned vehicles. People walk to work and breathe a sigh of relief not to be sideswiped against the wall by some wild juvenile taxi driver.

Preceding the bandh, the national newspapers: The Kathmandu Post, The Rising Nepal, The Gorkha Patra and even the US State Department's Travel Advisory Sheets read: "This bandh will be different." The Maoists declared a torch light procession for April 6th in the capital city of Kathmandu. They called for equal consideration from the government towards the peasants living below the poverty line and justice against corruption. For me, more significant was the order given to the police, "Any agitators will be shot." In the 1990 overthrow of Nepal's monarch, many people lost their lives by misfire due to mistaken agitation.

April 5: I investigated with the Kathmandu Valley Police offices and police headquarters, to see what they thought. Their reply was to be expected, "The Maoists are not a recognized political party, and if they gather together, they'll be arrested."

April 6: The torches were never lit. The city was shut down. Nepalese rented videos, listened to the radio and got a good night's sleep. It was only the police who lost their sleep, along with several photographers and journalists waiting for the action that never occurred. It's rumored, though, that the wolf will cry its bluff three times, and on the fourth no one will react except for the folks representing the oppressed. Beware!

April 7: 5:30 am. Tata police trucks with grilled windshields and police vans with open sliding doors revealed police packed to capacity armed with rifles peering out, tense and ever watchful. I thought to myself, "What a tragedy." Just several years ago, Hindu and Buddhists deities were paraded through the streets by frenzied devotees, and now these deities are locked up behind grilled screens or found in museums far from their devotees.

I bicycled slowly towards the Royal Nepal Airline building. Several well-informed tourists wheeled their suitcases stuffed with gifts and personal affects to the designated bus stops announced as spots for transport to Tribhuvan International Airport. They were in luck; there were several freshly painted buses, marked with signs, "Tourist Transport." The armed guards on the buses would be their last memory of this Shangri-La fading into an uncertain future.

While peddling to the airport, I rode beside the less informed tourists, those who awoke extra early to catch a rickshaw puller, profiting more than usual from the strenuous two-mile peddle to the airport. A smile gleamed over their faces as I said, "Namaste." Their reply was, "ke garme sahib, kanna

kannu parcha." "What to do, we have to eat too!"

I arrived at the international airport to a rickshaw packed parking lot. The sight was not unfamiliar. This wasn't the first bandh in Nepal. Beside the lined up rickshaw pullers were several taxi drivers capitalizing on the bandh in hopes of charging exorbitant prices to take tourists across town to their destination. While waiting for the arrivals, the taxi drivers helped one another paint out their numbered license plates with black paint, thinking that if someone was recording numbers with planned retribution for disobeying the Maoist bandh, they wouldn't be fingered as capitalists.

An Austrian Air chartered flight arrived. First out of the arrival doors walked the refreshing Austrian stewardesses. Dressed in short red skirts hitched up to their thighs, they wheeled their convenient luggage to an awaiting van escorted by armed police guards wearing flat, bullet-proof vests and carrying guns as signs of protection. After I clicked away, one of the stewardesses stepped up to me asking, "Who are you shooting for?" I replied, "For the public." She smiled, lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke towards the watchful police sitting in the escort Hilux Toyota pick-up truck. I asked one of the police what he thought of all this, why there was a bandh and whether it was justified. He said, "Listen, if one of those government aid vehicles was sold, a suspension bridge could be built."

In the middle of the parking lot I spotted a group of strong, garlanded men. I immediately knew they were climbers. They were busy watching their outfitter pile 500 kilos of climbing

gear onto rickshaws. I smiled when I recognized Jake, the guide. His reputation proceeds him. Last year he accompanied the expedition to Mt. Everest in search of Mallory and Irving. As he sat down on one of the rickshaws, he waved good-bye saying, "ke garne, yo Nepal ho." "What to do, this is Nepal."

My next stop was the government Bir Hospital. Last time I stepped inside this institution, I was photographing another bandh. Two bus drivers doing their duty were fire bombed and suffering from third degree burns. I reluctantly snapped their last breath. Today, it was fortunately quiet. I bicycled home under beautiful views of the Himalayas thinking, "What will be next?"

June 20: I woke up to The Kathmandu Post headlines, "Maoists justify killings." "For the first time, the underground Maoists have given their version of the June 8th police-Maoist encounter in Panchkatiya, Jarjakot, where 25 people were killed." The Maoists claimed they had been successful in "protecting our accomplishments and living up to the people's expectations." The statement did not elaborate what the "accomplishments" were. Of the 25 people killed in the attack of the police post were seven civilians, including five children, one of them a three-year-old. "We deeply mourn the deaths and send our condolences to their families." The statement is signed by Military Commander Pasang and Action Commissar Chandrabir. Twelve police personnel, including an inspector, and six Maoists were killed.

As a person who loves Nepal and its people, I sincerely hope the government of Nepal and the Maoists realize that

frustrations from injustices, however grave they may be, do not deserve to be taken out on innocent people. Those that do so should think hard about our precious gift of life and the importance of meditating on the pricelessness of human life.

By Dr. Hari Bansh Jha, Kathmandu

Recently, Nepal's noted industrialist, Binod Chaudhary, wrote an emotional open letter to the Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala. As soon as the letter was published, it created a sensation throughout the country. In his letter, Chaudhary categorically appealed to the Prime Minister to initiate improvements in the condition of the country's most sacred cremation ground, Arya Ghat, lying on the bank of the Bagmati River, below the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu. Failing to do so within six months, he admonished, would compel him to take up the job on his own, in the loving memory of his departed mother.

Chaudhary resolved to renovate the Ghat because he was unable to fulfill the ritual of offering bath to the body of his mother, Ganga Devi, before cremation. Also, he could not bathe himself after the cremation. Following the Hindu tradition, he was expected to do both. He could not because this "holiest of the holy rivers" has turned to sewage.

The river was spoiled more than a decade ago. Its source is almost fully diverted for drinking water for Kathmandu. What remains is only drain water coming from over 200,000 houses in the city. Hence, Lord Pashupatinath no longer gets bathed

with the water of this river, though it was once believed to be a hundred times more sacred than even the Bhagirathi Ganga. "The government that is not interested in purifying the Bagmati and making at least Arya Ghat suitable for cremation can do no good for the Hindus," says Krishna Pathak, a schoolteacher. Thus a bitter truth about the state of Hinduism in Nepal is exposed--Hindus feel orphaned and vulnerable in their own land.

Due to this indifference, some claim, the Shiva Linga was desecrated sometime ago at Lalgarh in Mahottari district by the people of an alien faith. In response, the Hindu Samaj Kalyan Sangh engineered a massive signature campaign to press the government to take concrete steps to punish the offenders. Subsequently, the holy book of Guru Granth Saheo at the Gurudwara in Kathmandu was torn into pieces. The culprits remain at large.

Missionaries receive funds from abroad to create a rift among the Nepalese Hindus and Buddhists who have lived so closely together for ages. Many of the janjatis (tribal castes) like Kirati, Limbu, Magar and Gurung, who had been following the endemic religions, have been exhorted not to celebrate the main Hindu festival of the Kingdom, Dasain. If all this were not enough, the Sanskrit books prescribed in school syllabuses are being burnt.

A number of Christian missions, including United Mission to Nepal, ADRA Nepal, International Nepal Fellowship and Lutheran World Service, have overtly or covertly converted many Nepalese Hindus and Buddhists. Isujung Karki, chairman

of Nepali Rastriya Mandali Sangati and General Secretary of Nepal Isai Manch, has acknowledged that as many as 40 organizations are engaged more in proselytizing Christianity than in social work. Many believe that the real number is higher.

By a legal amendment of the Civil Code, no person is allowed to propagate one's faith at the cost of another. If found guilty of merely attempting to convert, one is subject to three years imprisonment. If one is successful, he is subject to imprisonment for six years. Foreign converters risk deportation. Before the law was amended, there was compulsion for a person to return to one's own faith after such conversion. Such is the law, but Nepalese legal experts contend that the amended version of the Civil Code is helpless in controlling conversion. The law is silent about punishing a person who converts of his own volition. A person can no longer be compelled to return to his original faith.

On the streets of Kathmandu, missionary youth push Christian literature translated into Nepali. Their prime targets are the poor, refugees and slum dwellers. As Nepal had been protected from external influences for so long, indigenous Hindus and Buddhists have little experience in facing the new challenge of the missionaries. Censuses reveal that from 1981 to 1991 the Hindu population dropped from 89 to 86 percent. In 2001, it is feared to fall even further.