

Hail the Republic

Republic Day is both a day of celebration and introspection for India



DINESH WAGLE

On the 26th day of every January a grand ceremony is held on Rajpath (formerly King's Way), a wide road that begins from the Indian presidential palace located at Raisina Hills, New Delhi and descends on to run along flat land with spacious gardens on both sides that are filled by thousands of spectators. India puts its military might and cultural diversity on full display through a colorful parade while the President awards medals of bravery to deserving citizens. The day, a national holiday in India, has its own name: The Republic Day.

26th January to India is the equivalent of 28th April (15th Jetha) for us, the day we, the citizens of the latest republic in the world, will be celebrating the first anniversary of the declaration of republic in Nepal. On that day in April last year hundreds of thousands of jubilant people throughout the country came to the streets to celebrate the decision of the Constituent Assembly (CA) that, while implementing the earlier decision to make Nepal a republic, abolished the 240-year-old institution of monarchy.

Delhi is a fortress these days, thanks to Monday's Republic Day celebration plans. The security measures that had been put on place in key parts of the city were extraordinary. The temporary makeshift weekly bazaars at various locations had been closed for at least two weeks. The elaborate parade



rehearsals and other activities created traffic havoc in some major parts of the city. Police could be seen in every nook and cranny of the capital that has been a major target of terrorists. "All these efforts to prevent any unwanted incidents on Republic Day," said my landlord Uncle Mehra pointing to a newly installed barricade on the street near where we live. "Just a precaution," he added, pointed to policemen, and continued, "They don't want to take any chance." Especially in these times when the media is awash with reports that are in one way or another related to the late November Mumbai attacks. In fact, security personnel who died on that day emotionally dominate the list of awardees who were honored by the President.

India declared itself a republic almost two years after it gained independence from the British Raj. The new constitution formulated by their CA -- which was in fact elected during the Raj -- was also enforced on the same day. That particular day -- 26th of January 1950 -- was deliberately chosen as a mark of respect to Gandhi who had started celebrating symbolic independence on that date some 17 years before real independence.

After three years of intense discussions and deliberations, the Indian CA brought out what is now considered to be one of the world's longest constitutions consisting of 395 articles and eight schedules. In all, the assembly held eleven sessions, which consumed 165 days. In between the sessions the work of revising and refining the drafts was carried out by various committees and subcommittees. Such committees were recently formed in the Nepali CA.

The proceedings of the Indian CA were printed in eleven bulky volumes, notes celebrated historian Ramachandra Guha in his 2007 book *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest*

Democracy. "These volumes -- some of which exceed 1,000 pages -- are testimony to the loquaciousness of Indians, but also to their insight, intelligence, passion, and sense of humor," observes Guha. "In them we find many competing ideas of the nation, of what language it should speak, what political and economic system it should follow, and what moral values it should uphold or disavow".

While reading those accounts of the CA and how they came up with the federal structure one feels that Nepal is doing (or going to do) what India did some sixty years ago. There were heated debates on the rights of the states and the centre. The constitution showed a certain bias toward the rights of the union of India over those of its constituent states, states Guha.

The constitution provided for three lists of subjects: union, state and concurrent. The subjects in the first list (union) were the preserve of the central government, while those in the second list (state) were vested with states. As for the third list (concurrent), here the center and the states shared responsibility. However, many more items were placed exclusively under the union than under states; and more were placed under "concurrent" than the states wanted. The union of India also had control of minerals and key industries. And Article 365 gave the centre power to take over a state administration on the recommendation of the governor (which is popularly known as President's Rule).

Provincial politicians fought hard for the rights of the states, observes Guha. They asked for greater share of tax revenues. And they mounted an ideological attack on the principle of centralisation itself. A member from Orissa said that the constitution had "so centralised power, that I am afraid, due to its very weight, the centre is likely to break." A member from Mysore thought that what was proposed was a "unitary" rather than "federal" constitution. Under its provisions "democracy is centered in Delhi and it is not allowed to work in the sense and spirit of the rest of the country." A member from Madras thought that the fiscal provisions would make provinces "beggars at the door of the centre." In the United States both the federal government and the states could levy "all kinds of tax," he argued, but here, crucial sources of revenue, such as the income tax, had been denied to the provinces.

The next day, according to Guha's book, another member answered these charges. The member wondered whether it was not "India's age-old historical tendency of disintegrating that was speaking through these stalwarts." A strong centre was an absolute imperative in these "times of stress and strain," he said. Only a strong centre would "be in a position to think and plan for the well being of the country as a whole." Members of the Drafting Committee vigorously defended the unitary bias of the constitution. "What we want today is a stable government," said one. "What we want today is a patriotic government; strong government and an impartial and unbending executive that does not bow before popular whims."

Indian leaders take pride on the fact that theirs is the world's largest and, more importantly, one of the stable democracies. However, the Indian constitution and federal system are far from perfect. Even after sixty years, debates on the rights of the states and centre still take place. Indian federalism, in that sense, is an ongoing experiment. It is dealing with separatist movements and resisting efforts -- including one by Nepali speaking Gorkhas -- for the creation of other states within the Indian union. Recently the states led by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party criticized the central government's effort to create an American FBI like investigation agency after the Mumbai attacks saying that such an idea undermines the states' authority and makes the centre more powerful.

Thus one feels that the Republic Day is for India also a day for introspection regarding how far it has come and how long it has to go in terms of addressing the voices of its people through the constitution.

(The writer is the New Delhi bureau chief of The Kathmandu Post.)

kpost@wagle.com.np

Six months after the war, Georgia looks very different

People are questioning the official version of the South Ossetian conflict, and asking if their president can be trusted

JONATHAN STEELE

For a few days last summer Georgia was under the world spotlight, portrayed by Mikheil Saakashvili, its president, as a victim of Russian aggression on a par with the invasion of Hungary in 1956 or Hitler's blitzkriegs. As Russian tanks rolled across northern Georgia and smoke from burning villages plumed into the sky, western politicians and the media rushed into talk of a new cold war.

Six months later, Georgia is a different place. Leading figures in the opposition openly blame Saakashvili for the five-day war. So, too, do several recent defectors from his team, including two who were his standard-bearers last summer at the United Nations and in Moscow.

On Barack Obama's international agenda Georgia is not the top item, but Saakashvili as well as his opponents are looking to Washington for any sign of a new approach. Georgia and Russia are clearly linked, but which is the dog and which the tail? How the new US presi-

administrators and, finally, the same faults that undid Shevardnadze - election-rigging.

"Saakashvili was our Obama. After 10 years of Shevardnadze people wanted change. But now we are no different from Azerbaijan or Turkmenistan," says Erosi Kitsmarishvili, a businessman who was in charge of the Rustavi 2 television station that helped to bring crowds into the streets five years ago. Along with Zurab Zhvania, who became prime minister, and Nino Burdzhaneladze, who became speaker of parliament, he was seen as the third key member of the group that put Saakashvili in power. Zhvania died in a mysterious accident in 2005, which many Georgians assume was murder. Burdzhaneladze resigned a few months before the August war, and now wants Saakashvili to.

George Khutsishvili, who heads the International Centre on Conflict and Negotiations, says Saakashvili and the half-dozen loyalists who form the core of his regime have cynical motives in allowing opposition newspapers, small television stations, and political par-

ty. "These people had authoritarian instincts from the beginning but they had to maintain some sort of liberal democratic slogans. These people want velvet authoritarianism," he adds. As Obama was taking his oath of office last week, Khutsishvili was at the US embassy delivering a letter from several civil society groups. It urged the new president not to limit his Georgian contacts to the government.

Whether Obama accepts this case or the opposition's will become clear later. The crucial point is that last summer's image of a little democracy trying to resist the advances of a brutal giant was flawed. More and more Georgians are asking why they found themselves at war and if their president can be trusted. Obama's people, as well as European governments, need to listen hard.

The Guardian



dent answers that question will shed light not just on the value he puts on good relations with Moscow, but also on his understanding of how far democracy has advanced, or retreated, in the former Soviet republics.

Under Bush Georgia was a favourite, touted as a fledgling democracy with a US-educated leader representing western standards. Saakashvili had come to power in 2003 after demonstrations over rigged elections forced Eduard Shevardnadze, a former member of the Soviet nomenklatura and one-time Soviet foreign minister, to resign. Dubbed the Rose revolution, it became the template for Ukraine's Orange revolution in 2004.

The west's labelling of Saakashvili as a democrat staggers Georgia's opposition politicians. They deplore the way that Saakashvili's enthusiasm for joining Nato, plus an almost total lack of serious foreign media attention, allowed him to escape rigorous scrutiny. They point to constant slippage since the Rose revolution, from constitutional changes that emasculated parliament to the gradual takeover of the main television channels, pressure on businessmen to join the ruling party or toe its line, the sacking of independent

She did not want her name to be used. Ministers reject the criticisms and describe the top defectors as grumblers who always wanted more power or to use their government jobs for self-enrichment. They insist Moscow started the war. Temuri Yakobashvili, the minister for reintegration, says the army's advance on Tskhinvali was not an attempt to liberate the region but a military necessity to block a Russian invasion that was already under way. "If you want to defend Georgian villages north of Tskhinvali, the only way was through Tskhinvali. The Russians could have been in Tbilisi if we hadn't gone to Tskhinvali. We won time and were able to stop the Russians from advancing across Georgia," he says.

Whether Obama accepts this case or the opposition's will become clear later. The crucial point is that last summer's image of a little democracy trying to resist the advances of a brutal giant was flawed. More and more Georgians are asking why they found themselves at war and if their president can be trusted. Obama's people, as well as European governments, need to listen hard.

David Usupashvili, who chairs the Republican party, puts the same point more softly. Describing the August war as the "logical end" of months of

Joining hands

I am impressed by the idea of Muslims and Hindus joining hands for the construction of Mission Cancer Hospital in Khajuri in Banke district ("Faiths come together for noble cause", Jan. 25, Page 1). Locals of Khajuri deserve many thanks. This is a wonderful beginning and ought to spread to other parts of the nation. This sends a positive message to the entire world and especially India which is deeply entangled in religious conflict. Through such innovative social activities, we can transform Nepal into an example of religious harmony and unity.

Suresh Adhikari
Imperial Academy, Kathmandu

History a mystery

It is true that many wars have been waged in the name of revolution as Biyamani Paudel said in his letter to the editor ("Don't forget history", Jan. 24, Page 5). But I would like to remind him that Gandhi did not pick up arms to fight against the British. He was able to free his nation with his strong determination and by launching a non-violent

resistance. Remember Madi incident where so many innocent people were killed in Maoist violence. Madi victims have not yet received any compensation. And everyone knows about the extortion, abduction and torture carried out by the YCL. Their leader always tries to cover up for them and claims they are serving the nation. Whenever I hear Prachanda's speech, I can smell tyranny. Not only Maoists, but the NC and CPN(UML) are equally responsible for these things. So history is mystery; try to analyze present chemistry.

Manoj KC
Nepalgunj

Ban on labour

The recent news of ban on foreign labour in Malaysia is a dangerous storm which would not only sweep job opportunities for skilled labourers but also devastate Nepal's econo-

my ("Malaysia bans foreign labour", Jan. 23, Page 2). If the same step is adopted by other labour-importing countries, Nepal's economy will be a disaster. The Nepali government should either take legal steps toward obtaining employment for its citizens in other countries, or ensure jobs within the country in sectors like agriculture, herbal medicine production and processing, tourism, hotels, etc.

Badrish Sapkota
Bharatpur, Chitwan

Reporting stereotypes

I agree with James Sharrock's opinions on parachute journalism ("Reporting stereotypes", Jan. 25, Page 4). Nepal is a tiny country and has its own problems in which people from bigger nations have little interest. For the rest of the world, what happens in India, China, Pakistan or Afghanistan is way

more significant than what goes on in our little country. So getting media attention in the big media markets of the west is irrelevant for us because they consider our issues petty compared to the grave issues they are dealing with.

Praghosh Chhetri
Bhairahawa

Loadshedding

There is always a crisis of electricity in our country, especially in the remote areas. People are forced to live in darkness. There are electricity poles and wires but no electricity. This is the time of examination in schools and colleges. SLC exams, the 'iron gate' to students' career, is also coming near. When will the students learn and build their career if there is always load-shedding? The government must buy electricity from other countries

or re-make old turbines to produce more electricity and end the loadshedding problem.

Sanjeev Panther
Chidipani, Palpa

Disband YCL



What is this new drama of changing the name of YCL into YDCL? ("YCL to be renamed", Jan. 25, Page 1) Why has the government not taken any step to disband the YCL when they had promised to do so? Does 'disband' mean disbanding only the name? YCL must be disbanded or else the whole peace process may come to an end. But I don't think the Maoists will do so as they have to win the next election.

Parikram Nepal
Kathmandu

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Kantipur Publications Pvt. Ltd. Kantipur Complex, Subidhanagar P. B. No. 8559, Kathmandu; Nepal Phone: 4480100, Fax: 977-1-4466320, e-mail: kpost@kantipur.com.np