

# A life ordinary

Bishnu Prasad Nepal, like thousands of Nepalis in Delhi, has been a *chowkidar* for years



DINESH WAGLE

Bishnu Prasad Nepal does not work in one of those Indian call centres in Gurgaon that serve American customers, but every evening as the clock hits eight he gets ready for his duty for the next 12 hours. It's been years since he drew the conclusion that he was born to guard a residential complex in south Delhi with two weapons: a cane and a whistle. As he patrols tapping his cane and blowing his whistle at midnight Bishnu occasionally thinks about the dream that he sees during the daytime. "I wish to make a small home," said Bishnu who was on duty in a recent chilly night. "That's it."

Born in Palpa 45 years ago, Bishnu migrated to Nawalparasi at the age of 10 when his father decided to go to the plains for better life. The proud identity of being Bishnu Prasad Nepal, the great grandson of Bamdev Nepal, grandson of Mansudhan Nepal and son of Ghanashyam Nepal, however, is limited to his small village of Kumarbasti in Nawalparasi where his wife and two kids live. No one knows him by that name in block B of Jangpura Extension. Everyone calls him "Bahadur" spoken in a way that sounds like "badur" or even "badar", which means monkey in Nepali. So the original word meaning "brave", uttered by Indians who are brazenly insensitive to other people's self-respect and identity, becomes synonymous with insult and humiliation.

But Bishnu didn't come here by choice to take up the job that doesn't pay him even a fourth of what his service deserves. For millions of Nepalis suffocated by unemployment in their homeland, India is a quicksand where they are engaged for years by harsh and lowly jobs for which they get meagre cash. In addition to the jobs of portage, construction work and cooking/dishwashing in roadside *dhabas/restaurants*, *chowkidari* (the job of Bishnu) is preferred among those who have enough strength in their muscles. There are around 20 thousand Nepali *chowkidars* in Delhi alone, according to one estimate. Most of them are from the far western district of Bajura. On a recent Sunday in a south Delhi park I met several youths from Bajura who said they were all from the same ward of Barabish village. "I have seven members of my family here," said 28-year-old Bhim Bahadur Sarki who, like Bishnu, is a nighttime *chowkidar* in Greater Kailash.

The main job of a *chowkidar* is to guard the residential complex that is called block or colony. The homeowners form a committee and raise money to

hire a *chowkidar*. Besides the 12-hour duty, a nighttime *chowkidar* generally washes cars inside the colony for which he gets paid (about Rs. 150, and Rs. 100 for bikes). A youth from Bajura guards the Bishnu Prasad Nepal's block during daytime. Both are accountable to the block's secretary H.R. Mehra.

"Security of the block is number one," Mehra explained the reasons for hiring guards. "No one should steal things from here. No one should be allowed to come to the parks and engage in nefarious activities like drinking and bringing girls. The residents should get a sound sleep."

Blowing a whistle and tapping a cane, the *chowkidar* goes on several rounds of patrolling in a night to provide the "sound sleep". Those who hear the sound for the first time might conclude the eruption of an emergency situation outside. Apart from keeping possible thieves at bay, the 'sound' serves as the "attendance of *chowkidar*" according to

a guest of B-7. Instead of running away with money, he notified the owners and was rewarded Rs. three thousand. "It takes me ages to earn that much money," he said. "But I didn't sell my honesty. I have won their trust."

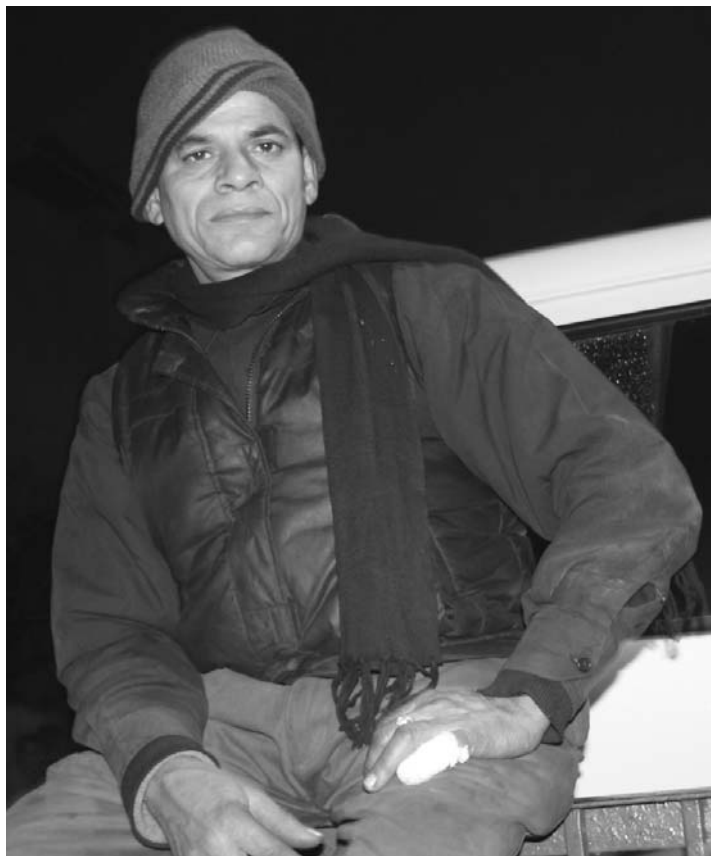
Winning others' trust and realizing your own dream are two different things. *Chowkidari* earns him Rs. 2800 per month. Since he also works as a household help in a Block B home where he lives Bishnu manages to save around Rs. 3000 a month. "It will take around five years to have enough money to build a house," he calculates. Apart from food that he buys from a nearby *dhaba*, four cigarettes costing a rupee each a day and a Hindi daily newspaper, the only money (Rs. 30 per month) Bishnu spends for entertainment is for a call back tune on his cell phone. Dial his numbers and you will be treated to a Nepali *dohori*: *samjhana le bhairachu tolaune/ paapini lai ke bhani bolaune/damauli ma pool/pirati launa le sarai bhayo bhool*. Everything he saves is for his dream and his family back home. His five-year-old son goes to an English medium school while the 14-year-old daughter studies in a government school.

Bishnu becomes sentimental and full of remorse when he is reminded of his childhood. His father was a priest. Bishnu broke his leg when he was 10 and his father decided migrate to Nawalparasi thinking his son wouldn't break his leg in the plains. His father sent him to a school but Bishnu never paid attention to his books. "I was a brat," he said. "Didn't study, always played. Now I am facing all these hardships in life because of that."

Bishnu had an argument with his father when he was 12. He decided to leave home. He worked in a roadside hotel in a nearby town of Narayangadh. After a few years he went to Punjab, India. There he stayed for five years and returned home only when his younger brother, second among three, came to see him (The youngest died at young age). Both brothers came back to Delhi, worked for two years and returned home. But they did not stay there for long. Bishnu came back to Delhi again and took up the *chowkidari* job in block B of Jangpura Extension. Seventeen long years have passed but there is no certainty of future. Every year he takes a month long unpaid vacation during the Dashain festival to go see his family. "If this were a government job, it's about time I got pension," he said. "But it's not. Tap the cane as long as you have strength in your body. When you are depleted, quietly go back to where you came from."

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

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Mehra. The sound, Mehra added, also assures residents that "nothing can happen to us or our properties because *chowkidar* is on duty." For Bishnu, I felt, that's like belling the cat. "When I didn't tap the cane they used scold me alleging that I was asleep," Bishnu recalled old days. "I used to break the floor of the courtyard of the complainer's house at night. He wouldn't say a word from the next day."

Forty-five oldies have died in the block since Bishnu started *chowkidari* 17 years ago. Some of them were good while others were not so good, says Bishnu. One old man who used to give him tea and clothes took Bishnu's shoes and cane one night when he was asleep. Next day the old man thrashed him showing shoes: "You bastard, sleeping during duty? Here's the proof."

Now, he said, the residents don't complain much.

"Why?"  
"I won their hearts by good service," he said.

Once, while patrolling, Bishnu found Rs. seven lakhs in a car that belonged to

# Slavery's legacy in West Africa

Two scholars find a lasting distrust among people of the region, once the center of the slave trade

GREGORY RODRIGUEZ

If a 10-year-old boy in Benin, in West Africa, wants to describe someone he doesn't trust, he's likely to use one of these two roughly translated phrases: "He will sell you and enjoy it" or "He can make you disappear."

Such phrases are not uncommon in the languages of West Africa, which for four centuries was the epicenter of the continent's slave trade, and their presence in contemporary speech poignantly suggests that slavery's legacy lingers on in profound ways.

That's the premise of a fascinating new study by economists Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon on the slave trade and the origins of social mistrust in Africa.

For decades, sociologists and economists have been homing in on the importance of trust in creating a properly functioning democracy and a stable economy. Simply put, societies in which trust is high have better governments, more open markets and less corruption. It makes sense really. All kinds of cooperation -- be it political or financial -- require mutual trust and predictability.

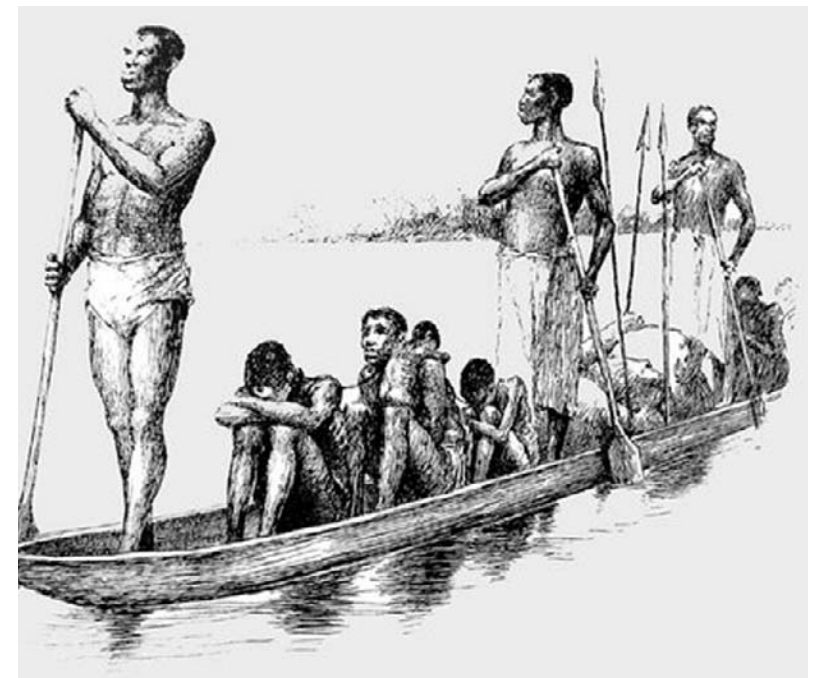
found and insidious mistrust this engendered was passed on from generation to generation as a means of protection. Parents would incorporate a distrust of others into the set of values they sought to instill in their offspring. Over time, the response to the trauma of slavery became part of the local culture.

Most social-mistrust studies focus on how members of one group might view members of another. We tend to assume that familiarity breeds trust, and dissimilarity, the opposite. This study, however, focuses our attention on the equally important phenomenon of intra-group mistrust.

"I think this shows that the idea that people who know each other and share the same language and experiences automatically trust each other is not true," said Wantchekon, who is from Benin but now teaches economics and political science at New York University. "When we talk of Africa, in particular, we talk of all these groups that can't get along. But there are times when the level of mistrust for your own people can be just as bad if not worse than that for other people."

Unlike other ethnic groups, say Jews or

Societies in which trust is high have better governments, more open markets and less corruption



In commerce, the absence of trust can not only scare investors out of the market, it can raise the everyday costs of doing business. Businesspeople in high-trust societies spend much less time and money trying to protect their interests and are more likely to take risks that lead to innovation. Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter once noted that the distinguishing feature of capitalism is the financing of innovation with borrowed money. If that's true, then credit is the root not only of economic development but of all social progress. Also, in the words of British economist Walter Bagehot, it's "the disposition of one man to trust another."

Using both contemporary household surveys and historical data on slave shipments, Nunn's and Wantchekon's study found that people whose ancestors were heavily threatened by the slave trade a century or more ago still exhibit less trust in neighbors, family members and local authorities today. Combating this low level of trust, the authors argue, is key to the region's economic development.

What's intriguing about their findings is that the mistrust is directed not just at the outsiders who bought and exported slaves. That's because, by the end of the slave trade, it was not uncommon for individuals to be sold into slavery by friends or family members. The authors suggest that the pro-

Armenians, who have built communal solidarity in the wake of oppression at the hands of others, many African ethnic groups remain fragmented to this day because of the insidious nature of slavery.

I asked Wantchekon whether his approach to West African culture wasn't a bit like psychoanalysis, and he didn't deny it. He and his colleague are trying to figure out how collective historical trauma has created patterns of cultural behavior -- neuroses, if you will -- that hinder the economic and social well-being of contemporary West Africans.

Unlike so many similar conversations of slavery in the United States, these scholars' interest isn't in blame, retribution or reparations but in "correcting" cultural behaviors that are harming societies.

So what's the first stage in healing? The media and early childhood education, Wantchekon suggests, could help eradicate mistrustful preconceptions.

"We need to talk," he said, like a good shrink. "Talk shows could play a big role. We need to understand that our reasons to distrust no longer have a basis in reality. We need to show people that all this distrust is nonsense."

The Los Angeles Times

## WFP clarification



This is in response to article "Aid meant for refugees misused" (Feb. 12, Page 7) published in your paper. The article claims that World Food Programme (WFP) is providing substandard food to the refugees, a claim that we categorically disagree with. For all locally-purchased food, suppliers are contractually obligated to provide food that meets quality standards set forth by the government of Nepal. These standards are clearly spelled out in their contracts. Food from the suppliers is routinely checked to ensure that both the correct amount is delivered and the quality standards are met. If at any point WFP finds that the food provided by local suppliers does not meet the specified requirements, it is immediately returned and the supplier has to replace it.

Furthermore, over the last two months the majority of the food provided to the refugees has been in-kind contributions. The local suppliers mentioned in the article

are not involved in transporting, handling or distributing in-kind food consignments received via India. In-kind food shipments are transported in sealed containers from Calcutta to Nepal and are delivered directly to WFP warehouses within the refugee camps and not to suppliers' godowns as suggested by the article. We have no evidence that in-kind food shipments have been diverted to suppliers' go-downs.

Finally, suppliers are not responsible for distributing WFP food assistance to the Bhutanese refugees in the camps, as stated in the article. Food distributions are managed through our local implementing partner and in-conjunction with the refugee camp management committees with oversight from WFP. We take seriously the accusation that WFP food assistance for the Bhutanese refugees is being sold in the market by suppliers and will continue to investigate the claim.

Richard Ragan  
WFP Country Director

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Congrats, Dr Bhattarai



Where there is a will, there is a way. Dr Bhattarai has successfully collected tax under the voluntary declaration of income scheme (VDIS) ("VDIS scheme gets extension", Feb. 12, Page 1). Despite all the criticisms he got from certain sections of society, including so-called experts who claimed this was a 'daydream' scheme, Dr Bhattarai has achieved his target. I would like to congratulate him and hope he will be able to achieve his other ambitious goals for the benefit of the country and people.

Prem Kumar Rai  
Homer International, New Baneshwor

### Distant schools

The news story "Arduous journey to

school" (Feb. 10, Page 1) is an eye-opener for those who want to see Nepal as a literate country and a slap in the face of the Ministry of Education for failing to address the problem. How can those tiny feet walk such a long distance to school? Students in remote hilly regions may have accepted this reality, but it does not fail to shock and disturb us. All their valuable time is spent on traversing the arduous path. The education ministry must urgently formulate an effective policy taking into account people's economic condition, geographical location and the population of students.

Ranju Shrestha  
Bandipur, Tanahun

### Irrational decision

Nepal is facing a serious power crisis. People from Mechi to Koshi suffering the 16-hour power outage. In such a condition it is not a rational decision of Melamchi

villagers to shut down Indrawatti III and padlock the powerhouse of Indrawatti IV that is under construction ("Melamchi Villagers Shut Indrawatti IV," Feb. 10, Pg. 3). Their demand of making their area "load shedding free" would be appropriate if the country had ample power supply. Of course, local people are most entitled to utilize the local resources of their area. However, the current situation of hydropower does not allow this. Every Nepali should think about energy sharing and saving.

Fullfilling the demand of Melamchi villagers means to increasing load shedding in other parts. Do the villagers aim to light up their village by making the rest of the country dark? It seems some elite people are trying to politicize this issue to their advantage. Melamchi villagers probably understand that their cooperation can prevent the increase in load shedding hours. Therefore, they should immediately run the 7.5 Mw Indrawatti III hydropower project. Their efforts to complete the construction of Indrawatti IV will be a great contribution to the country.

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Central Dept. of Environmental Science, TU