

# Iron man

Conversation with a press wallah



DINESH WAGLE

This is about this guy whom I have been seeing busy at his work all day, almost every day, since I came here to Jangpura Extension, one of south Delhi's many residential complexes. He is there, right at the front of the building, on the side of the road that is attached to number B-19 whose third floor I live on. It's been six months, and we have never talked. When leaving my apartment and returning, I see him busy at his work. Freezing cold? He is working. Scorching heat? He is busy. Every time I see him I can't but appreciate his dedication to work. I am inspired. Look at this guy who is working so hard, standing and in harsh weather. How can you complain or possibly find difficulties in the comfort of a chair and air conditioner? How can you not complete the work that has been pending for a week?

Three months ago, I bought a book called India Express: The Future of a New Superpower by celebrated journalist Daniel Lak. The book starts with a description of a guy in Chennai similar to this man I am talking about. I was stunned to find "my guy" in the book. Not an exaggeration, but it was a surreal experience. As I read the first few pages of the book, I felt as if I was reading about this very guy with whom I had talked with only my eyes so far. I silently used to take note of what he was doing and, I assumed, he did the same about my activities (of going in and out of the apartment). There was no reason for me to go to him as I never wear ironed clothes. But on Thursday, partly because of my own vested interest to "interview" him for this article, I finally went to the press wallah, the man who irons clothes of people in the neighbourhood. One press wallah finally talks to another.

Here is Lak's press wallah: "By the side of a leafy suburban street, in the South Indian city of Chennai, an old man plies his trade. He bends over a wooden plank suspended between two piles of ragged bricks, wielding an old-fashioned iron. His name is Ram... Dark skinned, wizened and wearing a cotton loin cloth, Ram is what Indians call a press wallah: press, as in "iron", wallah, an all-purpose Indian word that means someone who does something.

"As Ram works, a pot of charcoal smolders besides him, even in the steamy summer heat. The coals go into a compartment in his ancient iron. Ram pro-

vides the steam to smooth the wrinkles from the clothes. He fills his mouth with water and sprays the water between his pursed lips at the most stubborn creases and ornery fabrics. Then he whips the hot iron onto the wet cloth, producing billows of steam and the hissing of a hundred snakes. Beside him, a makeshift clothes rack displays his finished work: crisp cotton shirts that sparkle in the sunlight, trousers with creases like knives, dark skirts with not a pleat out of place, sari blouses so finely ironed and starched that they seem to stand up on their own."

The press wallah at work is a common sight in India, Lak observes. Almost every residential block has one. All function in, more or less, the same way. They set up their "offices" on the roadside, attached to the wall or a tree. I haven't seen Mitrupal Chauhan, 52, spraying water through his pursed lips like Ram (he does that with his hands), but I can imagine how that looks. In fact, in many villages in Nepal where electricity is only a dream, the

unmarried ones is studying in the 11th grade while the other left school after finishing 10th grade. The only son is in the fifth standard. "I want to make him an engineer," said Mitrupal, stunning me partially. "That is what he told me he wants to be."

Like Nepal, India is a society of contrasts. The only difference is that the contrast is much starker in Indian society. One can see some of the richest men in the region and the poorest in the world jostling for the same traffic space on many roads in Delhi. While the former are confined in sophisticated cars, the latter are knocking on the closed windows of those cars to beg or sell pirated versions of books and magazines. Signs of prosperity and richness can be seen in as many places in Delhi as those that are dominated by beggars and the homeless.

"Of course, I also dream of riding a car," says Mitrupal. "But I wasn't born for that."

Mitrupal represents the India that has yet to see the shining days. His parents used to do the same job that he has been doing for the past 17 years at the same spot. Before putting his hands on the iron, he tried his luck as a porter/loader at an airport in Delhi. That didn't last long. He was born for this. His parents were from a remote village in Uttar Pradesh; but Mitrupal was born and grew up in Delhi, in this neighbourhood. He didn't study beyond third standard in a local primary school, but has learnt enough English words to communicate with any of his affluent customers. He lives with his family in Faridabad, a town in neighbouring Haryana state, from where he commutes to work by train.

Over the years, Mitrupal says, India has progressed. His basis for saying that is the quality of clothes his clients have started wearing in recent years. Previously, people used to wear cheap clothes, he says, now they wear expensive ones.

It was my first visit to his workplace, though I have parked my car near to him innumerable times before and communicated with him in unspoken words, perhaps responded to his facial expression by a smile. But today, I was right there at his workplace interviewing him. "Your predecessors (Surendra Phuyal and Gopal Khanal) used to bring their clothes for pressing," he said. "But they never interviewed me. And you have never brought your clothes."

"I never wear pressed clothes," I said. "How can you press T-shirts and jeans?" "You should," he said. "Clothes become shiny when they are pressed."

Then, reminding me of Lak's Ram who repaid his customers not only the loan but the interest too, Mitrupal offered me a bidi and a cup of chai. Just like Ram's customers, I couldn't refuse.

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same charcoal-powered irons are used to press clothes. We used to have one in our home in Ramechhap.

I had realized in the first few weeks that at one point in time I would have to talk to this man. After reading the Lak book, the urge to speak to Mitrupal increased. I wanted to find out if he was also the sole breadwinner of his family like Ram, if he also dreamed of seeing his kids work in the BPO sector or anything as fancy as that, and if he was also as honest as Ram who proudly pays back the loan he took from his customers for his children's education. There were some basic differences as it happens with every person; but in more ways than one, I found Ram and Mitrupal the same. Mitrupal's wife helps him with the collection and delivery of the clothes that he presses. Among their five daughters, three are married. One of the

# Empire of Carbon

PAUL KRUGMAN

I have seen the future, and it won't work. These should be hopeful times for environmentalists. Junk science no longer rules in Washington. President Obama has spoken forcefully about the need to take action on climate change; the people I talk to are increasingly optimistic that Congress will soon establish a cap-and-trade system that limits emissions of greenhouse gases, with the limits growing steadily tighter over time. And once America acts, we can expect much of the world to follow our lead.

But that still leaves the problem of China, where I have been for most of the last week.

Like every visitor to China, I was awed by the scale of the country's development. Even the annoying aspects -- much of my time was spent viewing the Great Wall of Traffic -- are byproducts of the nation's economic success.

But China cannot continue along its current path because the planet can't handle the

swamp any emission reductions elsewhere.

So what is to be done about the China problem? Nothing, say the Chinese. Each time I raised the issue during my visit, I was met with outraged declarations that it was unfair to expect China to limit its use of fossil fuels. After all, they declared, the West faced no similar constraints during its development; while China may be the world's largest source of carbon-dioxide emissions, its per-capita emissions are still far below American levels; and anyway, the great bulk of the global warming that has already happened is due not to China but to the past carbon emissions of today's wealthy nations.

And they're right. It is unfair to expect China to live within constraints that we didn't have to face when our own economy was on its way up. But that unfairness doesn't change the fact that letting China match the West's past profligacy would doom the Earth as we know it.

Historical injustice aside, the Chinese also insisted that they should not be held responsi-



The Chinese insist that they should not be held responsible for greenhouse gases they emit when producing goods for foreign consumers

ble for the greenhouse gases they emit when producing goods for foreign consumers. But they refused to accept the logical implication of this view -- that the burden should fall on those foreign consumers instead, that shoppers who buy Chinese products should pay a "carbon tariff" that reflects the emissions associated with those goods' production. That, said the Chinese, would violate the principles of free trade.

Sorry, but the climate-change consequences of Chinese production have to be taken into account somewhere. And anyway, the problem with China is not so much what it produces as how it produces it. Remember, China now emits more carbon dioxide than the United States, even though its G.D.P. is only about half as large (and the United States, in turn, is an emissions hog compared with Europe or Japan).

The good news is that the very inefficiency of China's energy use offers huge scope for improvement. Given the right policies, China could continue to grow rapidly without increasing its carbon emissions. But first it has to realize that policy changes are necessary.

There are hints, in statements emanating from China, that the country's policy makers are starting to realize that their current position is unsustainable. But I suspect that they don't realize how quickly the whole game is about to change.

As the United States and other advanced countries finally move to confront climate change, they will also be morally empowered to confront those nations that refuse to act. Sooner than most people think, countries that refuse to limit their greenhouse gas emissions will face sanctions, probably in the form of taxes on their exports. They will complain bitterly that this is protectionism, but so what? Globalization doesn't do much good if the globe itself becomes unlivable.

It's time to save the planet. And like it or not, China will have to do its part

The New York Times

# Letters to the editor

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## For the president

Abhi Subedi writes that the president made a blunder by issuing stay order in favour of the Chief of Army Staff (CoAS) Rookmangad Katawal ("Politics in circle", May 13, Page 6). As a commoner I do not agree with the prime minister's decision to sack the Army chief in the name of civil supremacy. I support the president and am amazed by the disagreement shown by human rights activists and others who are adding fuel to the fire instead of helping solve the problem. The videotape has revealed the Maoists' secret political strategy to seize state power. Prachanda should give clarification regarding this to the Constituent Assembly rather than disrupting the House.

Baikuntha S  
By email

## Young leaders

I seriously believe that the Maoists are the ones who must lead the new government, as mandated by the people's verdict ("Govt formation effort on ice", May 14, page 4). Nonetheless, if they don't join the government

for one reason or the other, the Nepali Congress ought to shoulder the responsibility, but only on condition that Gagan Thapa is given the top job. What I don't understand is why these status quoist senior leaders, who did nothing but spoil the country in the past two decades, do not consider handing over the responsibility to younger leaders. I sometimes wonder if Gagan Thapa is still there in politics. How did such a vivacious leader disappear into oblivion after joining mainstream politics? Or have his senior counterparts asked him to wait for another 15 or 20 years so that he can learn the art of Nepali politics by then: to oppose each and every decision made by the rival party, picket the rostrum for petty demands, make empty promises, embezzle state coffers, buy voters during election, and after winning, not return to the constituency until the next election.

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## Erroneous deductions

Rhoderick Chalmers has correctly gauged the severity of the current political crisis in Nepal

but drawn some very erroneous deductions ("In choppy waters", May 14, Page 7). As he asserts, the tussle over the Army is symptomatic of a wider collapse in trust and in picking such a deliberate fight, the Maoists appeared to be thumbing their nose at the idea of rebuilding cross-party consensus. These and other accurate observations, however, fail to lead to a deeper analysis of what is actually at stake in Nepal. He is right, General Katawal is not the issue. It is not about the man, or even the institution of the Army that he represents. What Chalmers misses is the significance of the all-important question of the Maoists' intent. Were the attempts at Katawal's removal and the series of prods into the army's ribs made by a "reformed mainstream democratic party" to democratize the army and assert civilian control over the military? Or was it something more sinister, like well thought out measures to weaken the last remaining hurdle to an unchallenged grip on political power in Nepal?

If one is to believe that the Maoists are at the end of their process of political transformation and are truly ready to stay within a system of competitive multi party democracy, then no compromise made in a bid to accom-

modate the Maoists seems too big. But, if one is to examine the ample evidence of Maoist statements corroborated by their behaviour on the ground, one may conclude that the Maoists are engaged in a temporary exercise to attain their goal of establishing a Maoist Republic in Nepal. As the astute Nepal observer, Swandas Gupta wrote in the Times of India some months back, the problem in Nepal is not that the Maoists are disguising their intent, indeed they have consistently made it publicly very clear, it is that the other stakeholders in Nepal seek to wish away the facts and argue that the Maoists can't really mean what they say.

Robin Paudyal  
USA

## Can't we decide?

It is obvious that the People's Movement 2006 succeeded because of us students. We braved baton charge, teargas and rubber bullets on the streets and brought the revolution. Some of us even gave up our lives. The Army chief Rookmangad Katawal was one of the top guys to suppress the movement. And now we

are still debating over whether sacking him was right or wrong. Why? Don't we have the consciousness to decide what is right or wrong? Do we always have to let the political leaders and outsiders decide what is right?

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## National unity

Until recently, President Ram Baran Yadav was the president of all Nepalis. He seemed free from narrow self-interest and hunger for power. But now the president has degenerated into just another politician. He is serving the Army and politicians who have done nothing except make the citizens more and more hopeless. Today he is the president of some Nepali congress leaders and Rookmangad Katawal and his supporters. We are all sorry to have lost yet another symbol of national unity. The president claimed he was taking action to save the country from 'possible' disaster but can he stop the chaos that his action has generated?

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