

Easy rider

The IIT graduate who set off on a bicycle tour to Nepal



Dinesh Wagle
delhi@wagle.com.np

prosperous town where, one website noted, people "have a great tendency towards adopting new trends and life styles". Its another name is Garibrath, chariot of the poor. The Maoists are still far away, but not very far. (A few years ago, Anand's maternal uncle was briefly "detained" by the rebels who released him immediately after they found out he wasn't feeling well.) Anand's father works at a steel plant there, and that partially influenced him in choosing metallurgical engineering.

"That was a wrong choice," Anand said. "Later, I realized I was interested in a different subject."

That subject is a combination of "art" and "design". Today, he is a user interface designer who tries to make products easy to use. Anand is not the only one to study one subject at IIT and pursue a career in another. He shares an apartment in south Delhi's Kalkaji with three other IITians. Two of his flatmates studied computer science and electrical engineering and switched to banking while the third has remained faithful to his subject: architecture.

What's the point of going to IIT by cracking such a rigorous competition when you are pursuing a career

institute meant to India. "Here... stands the fine monument of India, representing India's urges, India's future in the making... symbolical of the changes that are coming to India."

In that year, the Indian parliament declared IIT "the institution of national importance". Despite being state-owned, IITs receive no political interference and no bhansun works to get through the entrance exam. This has received praise from even the Americans who feel that their leadership in technical education might be coming to an end soon. "In the 50 years since [the first IIT]," writes Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat*, "hundreds of thousands of Indians have competed to gain entry and then graduate from these IITs and their private-sector equivalents... Given India's one billion-plus population, this competition produces a phenomenal knowledge meritocracy. It's like a factory, churning out and exporting some of the most gifted engineering, computer science and software talents on the globe." Friedman quotes a *Wall Street Journal* article that says it's more difficult to get into IIT than Harvard or MIT.

Like in many other Indian educational institutions, quite a few Nepalis join IITs every year. Having anything like an IIT in Nepal is perhaps a dream for now, given the current state of affairs that sees the education system being plagued by political interference and endless strikes. The best we can do right now is talk more about an Indian IITian who is cycling in Nepal.

Oh, poor Anand, a victim of the ongoing economic recession, who after losing his job, freelances from his flat while he is not cycling. But he is not complaining. "In a way I am taking advantage of the recession," he said. "If there was no recession, I would still be with my company that wouldn't have given me a 10-day leave every now and then for bicycling."

Having said that, Anand has a meeting to attend on June 29 in Delhi in which he will be talking business with a client from London. If he can't make it to Kathmandu in time, Anand said he planned to return from Pokhara. The desire to go to Nepal came to him during a trip to Rishikesh a few weeks ago where he spent time with some "hippies". Then he Googled and discovered that "Nepal is after all not so far. Only around 350 km [to] the nearest border crossing that is, Mahendranagar." He planned to return in a bus. His latest Tweet, posted on Thursday, said he got a Nepali mobile phone number in Mahendranagar. One Tweet says, "First impression of Mahendranagar, lots of hair saloons and fashion stores. Also lots of ladies on bikes and motorbikes." How was the entry into Nepal? "It was more like a railway crossing, and my first thought was, 'Am I in? Really?'"

in a field that is different from the subject that you studied at IIT? The media has raised this question once again in India after results of the JEE were announced last month. "Art can't exist without engineering and vice versa," says Narayan Parasuram, an IITian who is a musician, in this week's *Outlook* magazine. "Is the Madhurai Meenakshi Temple an artistic marvel or an engineering feat?"

Both, in fact. Another fact is that these IITs have a major role in India's technological advances in the past few decades. These marvelous institutions, better known by the names of the cities they are located in and independent of each other, are universities in their own right. The first one, IIT Kharagpur, was set up in 1951 by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who, at the first graduation ceremony in 1956, spoke about what the



The current Iranian uprising is vastly different from the one in 1979

PATRICK COCKBURN

At first sight, what is happening in Tehran today looks very like the extraordinary events of the Islamic Revolution 30 years ago. But how deep do the similarities go? On 2 December 1978, two million Iranians filled the streets of central Tehran to demand an end to the rule of the Shah and the return of Ayatollah Khomeini. It was the most popular revolution in history. At night, people gathered on rooftops to chant "Allahu Akbar — God is Great". In the daytime, mass rallies commemorated as martyrs the protesters who had been killed by the security forces.

The methods of protest are very similar. This is hardly surprising because the demonstrators seeking to get rid of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad understandably hope the type of unarmed mass protest that worked against the Shah will succeed again. Mass rally and public martyrdom are part of the Iranian revolutionary tradition, just as the barricade is part of the tradition in France. A difference between 1978-9 and today is that the Iranian government has no intention of letting history repeat itself.

Nor is it likely to do so. The Iranian revolution was carried out by a broad coalition from right to left which had religious conservatives at one end and Marxist revolutionaries at the other. The Shah and his regime had a unique ability to alienate simultaneously different parts of the Iranian population which had nothing in common. His cruel but poorly informed Savak security men convinced themselves that communists and revolutionary leftists were the danger to the throne and not the Shia clergy. They were not alone in their delusion. President Jimmy Carter recalls an August 1978 CIA memo, drafted five months before the Shah took flight, firmly concluding that Iran "is not in a revolutionary or even a pre-revolutionary situation".

Crucially, the Iranian revolution had a messianic leader in Ayatollah Khomeini who was a visible alternative to the Shah, a leader whose claims to legitimacy were compromised even before he came to the throne: his father Reza Shah, an army general who seized power in the 1920s, was deposed by British and Soviet troops in 1941. His son was forced to flee in 1953 when Mohammed Mossadeq was elected prime minister, only to be restored by a CIA-run coup for which President Barack Obama has apologised.

More astute rulers might have tried to burnish their nationalist credentials but instead the Shah indulged in historical fantasies such as abolishing the Islamic calendar and celebrating the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire at Persepolis in 1971. Foreign dignitaries and celebrities sipped drinks behind security cordons while Iranians were excluded.

What makes the Iranian revolution different from previous revolutions in the 19th and 20th centuries is that it was a religious revolution in terms of its leadership and inspiration. Thirty years later, when "Islamic revolution" is seen as such a menace in the West, it is difficult to recall what a surprising development it was in the late 1970s. Revolutions were supposed to follow roughly in the footsteps of the French, Russian or Chinese revolutions. Their tone was secular and anti-religious. Priests were the defenders of the established order.

There had been Islamic anti-colonial movements against the European empires and later against the nationalist regimes which succeeded them. But the record of these Islamic parties was one of failure. It was the Iranian revolution that made political Islam such a potent and, to its enemies, such a menacing force.

The revolution was not only Islamic, but was rooted in the theology and beliefs of one particular Islamic sect. At a moment when intelligence services were looking at Moscow, Peking and Havana as the inspiration for revolution, none of them foresaw the danger to the status quo that was brewing in the clerical seminaries of Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran. The birth of revolutionary Shi'ism surprised the world. In theory, Shia theology is more likely to spawn revolution than the Sunni because so many of its beliefs and ceremonies revolve around the lost battle of Kerbala in AD680. It was here that Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, and 72 of his companions and relatives, were massacred by the soldiers of the second Umayyad caliph Yazid I.

It is a story of refusal to bow to injustice, of resistance to oppression and martyrdom. But this alone did not make Shi'ism a revolutionary ideology. Iran became Shia by the fiat of the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century. It was only in the 1950s and 1960s, in response to triumphant secularism, leftist revolutionary ideology and persecution by the Shah, that the Shia clergy of Iran and Iraq began to develop their own Islamic "liberation theology" which enabled them to take power in 1979.

The Iranian revolution was more deeply rooted than

it appeared to be. It sprang from a coherent ideology. It succeeded partly because it caught its enemies, as well as most of its supporters, by surprise. But it was not a spontaneous event. Khomeini and the clergy who supported him were committed revolutionaries. They had thought out how to take power and how to keep it. They might decry nationalism, but it was their commitment to defending the Iranian nation from foreign encroachments which was so crucial to their success.

In 1964, Khomeini was expelled from Iran, to take refuge in Najaf, because of his opposition to extra-territorial rights for US government employees. The present Iranian leadership does not have the great weakness of the Shah, which was to be seen as the puppet of foreign powers.

By the time the Shah left Iran on 16 January 1979 he had almost no support. This again is very different from the present situation. President Ahmadinejad was re-elected with 62.6 per cent of the vote last week. His opponents claim the poll was rigged, although this is almost exactly the same as his vote in 2005, when he won 61.7 per cent. The point is that Mr Ahmadinejad is a popular politician and the Shah was not. He is very unlikely to be forced from power. Nor is he likely to surrender as the Shah did when he found he was unable to cope with the uprising.

The weakness of the Shah was not evident when the first demonstrations against him began in October 1977, after the death of Khomeini's son. The first demonstrators, religious students, were killed in early 1978 after an article in a government newspaper attacked Khomeini. Their deaths were commemorated 40 days later, according to Shia religious custom, and protests spread across Iran.

These demonstrations in some ways resembled civil rights marches in the US but they had greater impact because they were wedded to religious ritual and the commemoration of martyrdom. Politically, this was a potent blend. It appealed to the most conservative cleric and the most radical student alike. Even so, the marches and demonstrations might have run out of steam over the summer of 1978 if they had not been sustained by a network of clerical supporters of Khomeini in the mosques. Iranians from the slums and villages who had not benefited from the oil boom began to join in.

No crime was so bad that Iranians did not think that the Shah and his security men capable of it. When the Rex Cinema in Abadan caught fire and 400 people burned to death, it was widely believed Savak had started it.

The Shah, who appeared demoralized from an early stage in the crisis, used enough repression to make his regime detested but not enough to create lasting fear. His concessions conveyed confusion and weakness. Martial law was declared. On 8 September, so-called Black Friday, soldiers opened fire on demonstrators and were accused of killing thousands (though the real figure may have been much lower). These were the days when the Shah lost his last chance of staying in power.

He made one further unforced error which had disastrous consequences for himself. Khomeini had been in exile in Najaf, from which he could communicate with Iran but with some difficulty. Cassettes of his sermons had to be smuggled across the border. There was no international press corps in Iraq. But with self-destructive zeal, the Shah's emissaries persuaded the Iraqi government, in which Saddam Hussein was already the strongest figure, to expel Khomeini, who, after being refused entry to Kuwait, took up residence in a suburb of Paris in October.

In Paris, he had better access to the international press than the Shah and was able to communicate easily with Iran.

By the end of 1978, Iranians, even those opposed to the revolution, could see that the Shah was finished. His core military support began to waver. The clergy made every effort to infiltrate and propagandize his armed forces. In any case, he did not want to fight. By mid-January, he and his wife had left Iran forever.

On 1 February 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran to be greeted by several million Iranians and swiftly completed the takeover of power. He marginalised his secular allies from the year before and began to radicalise the revolution, culminating in November 1979 when clerical students took over the US embassy.

Recalling how the Shah had come back from exile with US support in 1953, any potential Shah supporters were imprisoned or shot.

The leaders of the new regime were intent on staying in power. They have not changed much today. The spectacle, the symbols, and the language in Iran in 2009 are similar to those present in 1978-9, but the political forces at work could not be more different. The protesters then were much stronger than they looked; those of today have the odds heavily stacked against them.

The Independent

Letters to the editor

Stateless people

It was upsetting to read about the sorry plight of the Barua-3 villagers ("Dang village in state of statelessness," June 18, Page 1). Unfortunately, the political leaders who are supposed to take care of common citizens are busy in dirty power politics — well illustrated by the ongoing wrangling over ministerial portfolios. It is a great misfortune of Barua villagers that while they struggle to maintain their identities as Nepalis in light of the growing Indian influence over their lives, their representatives at the centre couldn't care less.

Manorama Sunuwar
Conflict, Peace and Development Studies, TU

University politics

Prem Phyak has boldly exposed the naked

realities about the unnecessary politics and deteriorating academic researches in Tribhuvan University (TU) ("Double Trouble," June 18, Page 6). TU has become more a platform for political exercise than a true ground for academic excellence. From vice-chancellor to peon, everyone is appointed on the basis of political connections. The tag of a party easily outweighs quality, capacity and skills of a candidate. Political parties are happy to see such activities and want to continue using the university as a land of politics. Since a university is a sensitive area, political parties are well aware that it can create sustained and far-reaching waves in case they want to protest against the government or demonstrate their own power.

On the other hand, research activities are paid the least attention. Besides thesis works, the university lacks novel and workable plans to engage students in research-oriented

activities. It's high time for everyone concerned to do something to clean the tarnished image of TU.

Ranjan Khatri
Golden Gate International College, Kathmandu

Topi and flag

All the ministers in the recent swearing in ceremony were seen in *topi* — traditional Nepali caps ("11 ministers sworn in, Tarai parties stay away," June 18, Page 1). It is difficult to know how the *topi* came to symbolise Nepali nationalism. Undisputed nationalists like Amar Singh Thapa never wore it. In fact, the *topi* doesn't seem older than the Rana rule. If it is so, it is hard to understand how a cap that originated in the feudal era can be regarded as a symbol of nationalism. The Sun-dynasty and

Moon-dynasty Hindu royal flag is also still fluttering in public buildings of the republic and the cars of its ministers. The *topi* and the Sun-Moon-Dynasty flag have to be dumped into the past in order to craft new symbols of nationalism befitting the new republic.

V.P. Sayami
Kathmandu

Unqualified ministers

I doubt if Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal is aware of the historic task he was chosen for: meaningful end to the peace process and drafting of new constitution ("UML lawmakers vent ire against leadership," June 18, Page 1). He is busy pleasing every party and negotiating in fear to satisfy them all so that they won't kick him out too

Samyam Wagle
Bungkot, Gorkha