

# Disaster looms for eastern Himalayas

The Himalayan region is torn between competing interests. It is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. It is the cradle of the river systems of Asia. The Ganga, Indus, Brahmaputra and Amu Darya all originate in the Himalayan glaciers. The Himalayan region also contributes to economic development of the Himalayan countries through hydropower. The construction of hydropower projects is continuing despite scientific evidence warning of dire consequences. Will we heed the warning of the recent Chamoli disaster?

While the need for development initiatives cannot be denied, the pathway of development should not compromise the environment. Environmental impact assessments can enable a fully informed and unbiased decision regarding a project. Unfortunately, their effectiveness as an environmental decision-making tool has been greatly reduced in recent years.

Environmental impact assessments should be participative, transparent, unbiased, rigorous, provide complete information regarding all impacts and have a robust follow-up mechanism. They should also present alternatives regarding the design and construction of the project and its location. This will then lead to rule-based decision making, enabling the decision-maker to ensure No Net Loss of biodiversity. However, environmental clearances tend to be granted based on EIAs that lack, downplay and very often even hide key information.

There are now over 300 hydropower projects in different stages of planning and construction in India's Himalayan river basins. If all dams are constructed, the Indian Himalayas would have one of the highest average dam densities in the world, with dams constructed in 28 of the 32 major river valleys. There would be one dam for every 32 km of river channel. When you add to this the fact that each of India's neighbours is also planning to build hydropower projects in the Himalayan region, the scale of potential environmental impacts becomes dramatic.

The Indian government is pushing hydropower development in the Eastern Himalayas. The extent and manner in which this development is being planned will be ecologically catastrophic. This region is a treasure trove of endemic biodiversity, which is



under serious threat due to anthropogenic interventions. Fifty-four per cent of the nation's threatened mammals, 68 per cent of endangered birds and 63 per cent of endangered reptiles are found in this region. Several iconic and endemic mammals, such as clouded leopards, reside in the lush forests of the North East. Their population is now fragmented and dwindling. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the habitat of the clouded leopard has been decreasing at a rate of 10 per cent per year since 1997. The Namdapha flying squirrel is listed in 'IUCN's 'critically endangered' category and is on the verge of extinction. There have been no sightings of this species in its habitat since 2002.

The ever-increasing anthropogenic pressure and the pandemic-

induced conservation crisis are pushing the unique species of the North East to the brink of extinction. Increasing construction of hydropower projects will make matters worse.

EIA studies in India are conducted in a project-specific manner. Cumulative impacts of hydropower development, as well as the impacts of upstream and downstream projects, are not considered at the scoping stage and are not included in the formulation of the Terms of Reference of the EIA. The lack of clear policies on conducting cumulative impact assessments encourages project proponents and EIA consultants to avoid an ecosystem approach. In the absence of such an approach, a complete survey of the likely impacts on flora and fauna is ignored.

In the North East, indigenous communities have been working to protect the region's biodiversity. The Lepcha community has been at the forefront of trying to save the Himalayan Kanchenjunga landscape. Kanchenjunga is considered by them to be the 'Mother Mountain'. They have been protesting the construction of hydropower projects on their sacred rivers in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve bordering the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve. Dzongu is sacred to the Lepchas, as is the Teesta which flows through it.

Other indigenous communities have also been contesting hydropower development in their home regions. Where are their voices in the government's development plans and policies? It is well known that public

consultations are poorly conducted in EIA studies and the views expressed by members of local communities are not taken into account. Weak public participation is not merely a procedural flaw; it violates environmental democracy.

Destruction of Himalayan biodiversity will strongly impact the lives of people in India, as well as across Asia. The critical importance of this region for climate, water and food security must be considered paramount while designing development policies and programs.

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100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

The recent announcement of several deaths among the workers at the Radium Institute in London adds to the significance of a recommendation which is made in the report of that Institute for last year, that no nurse or attendant who habitually applies radium apparatus should work continuously for more than three months, and that this period should be followed by a change of occupation or a rest for another three months. It also advises that all the workers should have at least two clear holidays a week to be spent in the open air. The same precautions seem to be necessary in the case of workers with the X-rays. Many of the early workers with X-rays suffered from an irritation and inflammation of the skin which in some cases developed into cancer, and precautions were adopted for the protection of the skin by wearing leather aprons or complete suits. It has become evident, however, that both radium and the X-rays may have a harmful effect on the blood, causing a severe form of anaemia. A Memorial Fund has been raised in memory of Sir James Mackenzie Davidson, who himself suffered from the effects of the X-rays, and it is proposed that the fund should be used for the foundation of an establishment for research and teaching in radiology, for the benefit of the engineer and the metallurgist as well as the doctor.

NEWS ITEMS

RAILWAY STRIKE IN BURMA

Rangoon, May 5  
Railway strike reports from Meiktila show considerable dislocation of the train service between Myingyan and Thazi. All local trains have been cancelled, and mails overdue are being brought to Meiktila by motor cars from Thazi. Passengers have been held up at all stations, and the ice supply from Mandalay has ceased, none being available locally. This is causing great inconvenience to all, owing to the excessive heat. There will be a meeting this morning in the office of the Development Commissioner, when Mr. P.D. Patel, representing the strikers, will present the men's case. The strikers allege they are acting under orders, and dare not return to work without sanction from the headquarters of the strikers at Insein.

POLICE FORESTALL GANG OF DACOITS

An encounter between the police and a gang of dacoits took place yesterday at Jafala village, within the limits of the Khargpur police station. At midnight about thirty men, armed with swords and lathis, attacked the house of Beni Madhav Ghosh with a view to committing a dacoity there, but Deputy Superintendent Maulvi Yakub Ali Khan, Inspector S.N. Dhole and Sub-Inspector Abdul Banki, with a posse of armed constables and chowkidars, had surrounded the house before the dacoits appeared on the spot. The police challenged the dacoits and a hot scuffle ensued. The gang beat a hasty retreat, carrying away with them several of their comrades who were injured.

HOW A BOYCOTT WAS AVOIDED

Rangoon, May 5  
At Dubern's Ice Factory, Sule Pagoda Road, a crowd waiting for ice supplies became impatient. It is stated that a clerk pulled the beard of an aged Moslem, who rushed into the street denouncing the insult. A large crowd assembled and threats are alleged of boycotting the factory and attacking the employees. During the commotion some budmashes gained access to the back premises and threw some blocks of ice on the road. Eventually the crowd dispersed on the arrival of the police. It is asserted that the matter was referred to Moulvi Abdulla Misri, who ordered that the aggrieved Moslem should slap the face of the factory clerk, and that on receipt of an apology and compensation the threat of boycott should be withdrawn.

ALLEGED FALSE MEDICAL CERTIFICATE

In connection with a case in which Ali Mahomed was charged with assaulting a constable of the Railway police at Sealdah, a qualified doctor, B.D. Chatterji, medical practitioner of Nimtollah Street, appeared before Mr. I.J. Cohen, Honorary Magistrate at Sealdah, to show cause why he should not be prosecuted for granting a false medical certificate to the accused man recommending rest. The doctor said he did not examine Ali Mahomed but gave a certificate of ill-health after hearing a statement made by the accused man's father as to his condition. The Magistrate warned and discharged the doctor. Ali Mahomed's father was asked to show cause why he should not be prosecuted for producing a medical certificate on his son's behalf, knowing it to be false.

# Nepal's democracy in crisis

AJAYA BHADRA KHANAL

It has been a toxic combination of incompetence, arrogance and greed.

As if announcing elections at the peak of a pandemic were not enough, political leaders gathered thousands of people from the outskirts and crowded them in big cities in meaningless displays of power. The big rallies and social interactions intensified until the pandemic reached a tipping point, killing thousands of people.

On the other side, the governments have failed to continue the vaccination drive, manage Covid-19, or bolster the health sector. Nepal's political circus, which began at the centre, has now spread to the provinces. Political instability, borne out of complete disregard for democratic principles and values, has reached epidemic proportions in Nepal. In summation, Nepal's politics has failed its people. In fact, the greatest threats to Nepal's economy, democracy, and well-being of its people are the political parties.

We can assess the performance of the political parties and the status of our democracy in several ways. For example, we can look at the ability of the parties to deliver the fruits of democracy to the peoples or look at the way they represent the people's voices. We can also look at the status of fundamental rights and freedoms, or adherence to democratic values and the rule of law.

Here, I will briefly discuss the ability of parties to represent and deliver on people's aspirations and how the public has so far perceived



their performance.

While the Nepali state has become strong, the people have become weaker and unable to receive the benefits.

The state of disarray and chaos exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic may appear counterintuitive to this claim. However, the Nepali state's ability to raise taxes (and extract from the people) has grown in recent years. For example, in the last 6 years, the tax to GDP ratio has increased from around 16 per cent to 21 per cent. It is similar to that of high-income countries, but unlike them, most of the taxes are indirect (more than 65 per cent).

Similarly, Nepal's security and rule of law institutions have become stronger. Nepal's foreign policy has also become more independent, to the extent that the Nepali state can now take stands against countries like India, the US, and China.

The only issue, however, is the use and abuse of such a strong state. Arrogant and incompetent leadership has meant that the strength of the state has been used and misused to serve vested interests rather than deliver the fruits of democracy to its people. In the absence of democracy, who controls the powers of the state and for what ends, has become a critical question. Undoubtedly,

many of Nepal's institutions designed to deliver services to the people have become hollowed out and weak.

One evidence of this is public perception. According to a recent nationwide opinion poll conducted by Sharecast Initiative Nepal, a growing number of people believe that the country is heading in the wrong direction. Such pessimism is more prevalent in the urban areas (50 per cent) than in rural areas (40 per cent). What is more worrying is that the number of people feeling this way has increased by 16 per cent in the last year.

The 'fruits' of democracy that people prioritise are employment, poverty reduction, control of inflation, control of corruption, political stability, health and education. People also want roads, especially in the Sudur-pashchim Province.

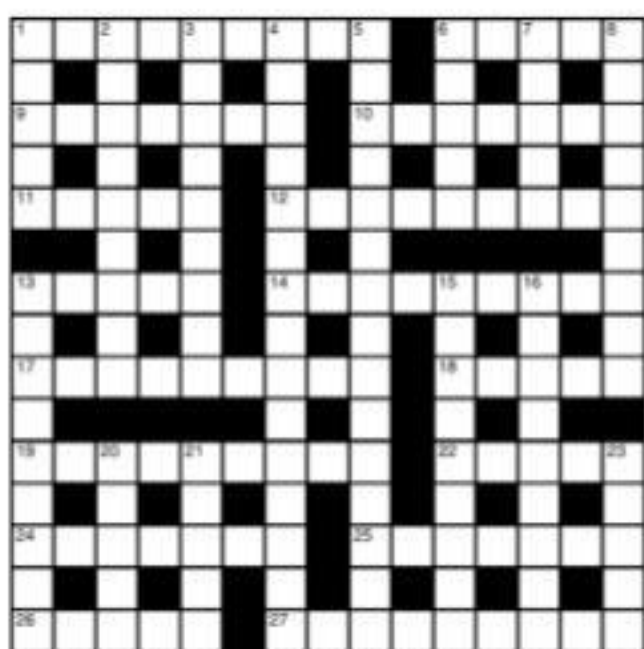
The operation of a democratic system is unthinkable without political parties. Political parties are the medium through which people are represented. However, if perceptions of the people are to go by, Nepal's democracy is in crisis. According to the poll, about 76 per cent of the people believe that political parties do not represent their interests.

More than three-fourths of the people believe that the parties have failed to represent them. What could be worse?

The primary cause of the current unfavourable situation is political parties and their leaders. About 60 per cent of the people do not trust the political parties and their leaders. However, a positive sign is that the people trust their ward representatives more than their provincial or national representatives. People are

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

O S A F S O W H  
U R T I C A R I A V E R V E  
T E C I M E E S  
M A P L E D I A C R I T I C  
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P E T R I C H O R C E L L O  
H L N A U E A V  
E X E R T R E S O N A N C E  
N T O T H T D R

ACROSS

- Nobleman poison wine (9)
- Credit card finally found in marketplace on return (5)
- Canadian politician impolite in letter to Mitsotakis? (7)
- Clergyman pockets a pile (7)
- Place in Surrey for one needing meat (5)
- First off, replace outside toilets and relax (4,5)
- At home adult takes exercise, being unfit (5)
- Lumpy old bed aunt moved out of bedroom initially (9)
- Religious teacher from Chartres regularly ignored

DOWN

- Joint account's closing in difficult situation (5)
- Run out with disgusted expression over players getting plastered (9)
- Having painful joints, he tucked into drink with a spasm (9)
- English composer Sullivan worked with him, a wag (7,8)
- Extremely subtle documentaries broadcast 4's work (8,2,5)
- Lark Ascending enthralls a South African village (5)

- As before, not all recommend it totally (5)
- Resignation is more certain to involve split (9)
- Dish in Venice, starter of toasted carrot (9)
- One may replace Yale lecturer with hick, most foolishly (9)
- Piece of wood that will make 8? (3-2-4)
- Father and daughter kept in trim (5)
- Love role displaying creative style (2,3)
- Once more offend Amber? (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

