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Kanak Mani Dixit

## *The Spring of Dissent: people's movement in Nepal\**

## I

Nepal and Nepalis represent a country and a people that have been cheated by history for far too long. In the latest instance, there has been a decade of violent insurgency followed by a king who thought he knew the answers, when he did not. For me personally, the previous four to five years has been a period of learning, for it is during this period that I have been writing in the Nepali language on what I may call 'vernacular politics', the source and fount of energy of the Nepali nation-state.

There has been a groundswell of politics in Nepal, spurred by 12 years of democracy between 1990 and 2002. It is the self-confidence developed by the people during that democratic period that has given them the energy to withstand years of insurgency; but even more importantly, in the latest instance, it has allowed them to shrug off a despotically inclined monarch. These dozen years gave people a confidence they have never had in historical times.

There is an old ballad sung over the decades which this year became an anthem of the *Jana Andolan*, our People's Movement of April 2006. It says, *Gaun Gaun Bata Utha, Basti Basti Bata Utha...* "Rise from the villages, rise from the shanties, rise to change the face of the nation." And that is what happened this time around. People arose right across the land, from the shanties, from the villages. The entire country was agitated, citizens from all over united as one for a return to peace and democracy.

\*Adapted from a Talk by the author at the IIC on May 10, 2006, titled "Nepali Peace, Nepali Democracy."

The analysts had for a while been wondering, when will the people rise? Well, the people had been waiting for the possibilities of peace and democracy to come together. The people wanted democracy for sure, but they wanted peace first. If the king were to say that he would grant it to them, they would first test the king out, even though he may have been wrong on both principle and practicality. And if the king emerged a despot, the people would turn on him. It turned out that the king had no inclination to provide peace. He took over on the excuse of battling the Maoist insurgency, but the whole idea was to use it to go back to autocracy. So the people rose, and how they arose!

On one Saturday in Kathmandu, the day after the king's first speech, there were said to be a million people demonstrating on the streets of Kathmandu—whereas four months earlier, the parties would have found it difficult to bring in four or five thousand to their rallies. In fact, for some time it was the civil society which had to keep the flame of dissent burning, because the parties just couldn't bring in the people. Why? Because the people were telling the parties, "You can't give us peace, which is what we need first. All you can promise us is democracy. Let us see you give us peace." That was why the 12-Point understanding, hammered out between the political parties and the Maoists last November, was required.

What was extraordinary was the peaceful nature of the People's Movement, even though there were millions upon millions demonstrating over the three weeks of April. This country-wide phenomenon took everyone by surprise—except perhaps the so-called common men and women, who were simply biding their time. Of course we have seen the violence in the photographs and on television, the burning tires, the rubber bullets, the lead bullets and the lathi-charges; but we have also seen pictures of demonstrators protecting policemen from sure lynching. When millions were on the march there was no looting of private shops or residences. In fact, there was no general looting at all, even though some government property was damaged.

In the previous *Jana Andolan* of 1990, there were 48 deaths. In the *Jana Andolan* of 2006 there have been 22 tragic deaths, even though the size of the movement in terms of citizen participation was perhaps 80 to 100 times larger, and over a much longer period.

For some time now, we have thought that Nepal has lost its right to be called a nation marked by peace and harmony—a

Shangrila, the birth place of the Lord Buddha. In a manner of speaking, we have regained that title, due to the kind of peace that prevailed during this People's Movement. For this, the credit also goes to the Maoists, because the rebels were certainly also to be found in the ranks of the agitators and the demonstrators. Keep in mind that in this overly-armed country, we do not know of one instance where the bullet went the other way, from the demonstrators to the security forces. Something was happening there—a remarkable phenomenon.

## II

### *Collective Leadership*

What the People's Movement of 2062-63 (*Vikram Sambat*) gave the Nepali people is a sense of national unity that has long been wanting. For a long time we have relied on artificial shibboleths and symbols to prop up our nationalism, added together with a good dose of xenophobia. This is because as a country we have been historically divided by region, language and faith, and kept together by props such as hill-Hinduism, kingship and the Nepali language. You will forgive me the sense of optimism and exhilaration that I bring here from Kathmandu, but I do believe that for the first time there is a sense of collective identity among the Nepalis, based on something achieved together.

What will this new-found collective identity do for us? I think the country will have more self-confidence, be it in managing our economy, our politics, socio-economic development or foreign affairs. Already, the People's Movement gave the politicians the confidence to deal with the Western ambassadors who, at the peak of the agitation, went trooping into a critical meeting of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) to try and dictate the course ahead. But the groundswell could not be stopped or diverted with diplomatic intervention, and the politicians refused the diplomatic request.

For too long, starting with the latter part of King Birendra's reign, Nepal has gradually been led by others, mainly because we relied so much on foreign aid. Now, that was the past, and this is the present. Henceforth, we will have to take our own decisions on our development course, taking momentum from the Jana Andolan

of 2006. The nation-state may have been defined two centuries ago, but the nation-state is just being built; it started with the People's Movement, leading into the Constituent Assembly and state restructuring, and a democracy that will be more inclusive than in the past. The Nepali word for inclusive democracy that has suddenly come into currency is *loktantra*. *Prajatantra* was the term for democracy, because it was mistranslated in an earlier Constitution.

In the meantime, there is an interim period through which we have to go. There is work to be done immediately, as well as in the long term. The Nepali people have shown that they do not lack in agency, and that things are not the way they were back in 1990 when we did not have a 'civil society'. We did not have journalists then who were experienced in investigative political journalism; nor did we have FM radio in large parts, or human-rights NGOs. The Nepal Bar Association springs to mind as a pillar against the royal autocracy. We had few of these institutions activated in 1990—now we do.

At this juncture the wheat has been very firmly separated from the chaff, for various reasons. Because Nepal is always open to the flood of donor-money, we have lost our way again and again. Because of the donor-led conflict-resolution industry ongoing in Nepal, you were fearful about what would happen if our People's Movement had to be funded; or what would happen if even the political parties were to decide that, because there is so much donor money available, let's use some for the People's Movement. That did not happen; we might even have come close, but it didn't happen. Actually, the People's Movement that took Nepal by storm (and the world by surprise) was not 'funded'.

### III

#### *Eight Months*

The peace process in Nepal actually began in August 2005 when, in the hills of West Nepal, the Maoists held a plenum and they decided, for national and international considerations, to enter mainstream multi-party politics. In essence, they had decided that the 'people's war' was unwinnable; but that they had to try to cash in on the success achieved so far. In a way it

could be said that the Maoists were a victim of their own success. They now saw the possibility of landing in the corridors of power in Kathmandu, but that could not happen with gun in hand. Because you could not take over the state by force of arms; nor would any international entity or government allow that to happen—most importantly, the all-important southern neighbour.

When the Maoists decided to make this descent, the political party leadership—Girija Prasad Koirala, Madhav Kumar Nepal and others—came and met the Maoist leaders, the political parties and leaders, in various safe-houses in New Delhi. They came here to talk to the rebels one-on-one, to see if the Maoists were serious. If anyone has lost the most to the Maoists, it is the political parties; and yet by meeting the Maoist leadership here in the by-lanes of New Delhi, the political parties proved themselves to be serious leaders of the people of Nepal, intent upon scouting the road to peace. The political parties and the Maoists decided to go in for a 12-Point understanding last November, which was the spark that was required for a People's Movement.

Normally, when there is some initiative that takes place in Indian territory, there are suspicions in Nepal about Indian intentions. However, despite the Maoist-Seven Party Alliance negotiations having been held in Delhi, there was no xenophobic reaction. The people knew what was right and what was wrong; if the meetings had to be in India because the meetings could not take place within Nepali territory, then it had to be in India. Incidentally, even though there have been various pulls and pushes within India when it comes to responding to Nepal under the Gyanendra autocracy, the role of Indian foreign policy, as well as that of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Congress Party and the individual politicians, has been appreciated.

It is the *Basanta Hritu*, springtime, that is the season of dissent in Nepal. The 12-Point understanding made it possible for the people to arise during April; otherwise we may have had to go against tradition and organised an *andolan* in the middle of the monsoon. It helped that the season was right, that there was an understanding in place, that the political parties had been relentlessly organising, and that the Maoists decided to support the movement non-violently. And so in places they aggressively pushed the villagers into the rallies, and elsewhere they stood aside so that the people could join the peaceful rallies. Most importantly, what brought the people out was

the contempt that the king, Gyanendra, showed he held for the people of Nepal. And the people had kept their frustration bottled up for far too long—it simply exploded in April.

The king thought he lived in the times of his father, Mahendra, in the 1960s rather than the twenty-first century. He did not realise that the ground reality, the demography, the exposure, the transforming mass culture was different—that by every measure, Nepal was a different country. The People's Movement was also assisted by the radio revolution that Nepal has experienced. The FM radio stations played a primary role in bringing the millions out, from the far east to the far west of Nepal.

As I said before, the People's Movement has its wellspring in the dozen years of freedom and pluralism that we had already experienced. That was a successful 12 years of democracy, chaperoned by politicians who represent the people from the bottom up. The fact that the Nepali political discourse happens entirely in the 'vernacular' is a major advantage. The successes that the politicians delivered between 1990-2002 include the take-off of local government, in the districts and villages. Community forestry is another arena that saw success, which also helped energise and politicise village women across the country.

The so-called failure of 12 years of democracy was a concoction of the Kathmandu Valley elite, who detested the fact that, after having ruled the country for two centuries, from 1990 the power suddenly went away from them towards the elected leaders from the districts. This visceral reaction against the politicians also impacted the foreign embassies; because the politicians of Nepal don't speak English with ease, and so the ambassadors tend to party with the English-speaking, as yet mostly regressive, elite.

Still, Nepal of 2006 is a very different country from the Nepal of 1990. We have yet to understand the incredible transformations that have taken place. In this transformed nation, we have to define the true basis of non-chauvinist nationalism. The People's Movement had the participation of people who participated as citizens, even though they were divided by ethnicity, faith, regional origin, language, gender. Indeed, Nepal is among the most diverse countries on the planet. It is this diversity that should now be the basis of the sense of belonging and citizenship's pride among Nepalis.

When the king took over on February 1, 2005, his intention was to control society and convert Nepal into a police state. The



good fortune of the Nepali people was that Gyanendra did not have the intellectual or organisational capacity to put a police state in place, though the intention was very much there.

#### IV

##### *Abagya Revolution*

**H**ow did the people respond? The Nepali word for disobedience or rejection is *abagya*, and that is how they responded. This is what we did when the king brought in the draconian ordinance against the media, when he tried to crush the radio revolution, when he tried to impose a code of conduct on NGOs. When he tried to create prohibited zones in Kathmandu where demonstrations were not allowed, the response was to reject it. Step by step by step, people realised that it could be done. Finally this happened, when in April the king decided to impose a curfew to control the People's Movement, with shoot-at-sight orders. It was the rejection of this curfew which was the immediate catalyst—which gave momentum to the movement and brought down the regime.

On the turn of the Nepali New Year, on the 1st of the Baisakh which was April 13, the king gave his traditional annual address. Many times a year, in the various addresses he used to give to the nation on radio and television, the people expected the king to see sense and to backtrack from this autocratic trajectory. He did not take the opportunity, and on 1 Baisakh he gave a bland speech indicating that he just did not understand nor care; that was to be yet another trigger. For a couple of days there was a quiet lull; and then the Ring Road, Kathmandu's 30 km-long encircling road, started burning. We were in jail, and when we heard that the political parties had announced that the Ring Road was to be filled with a demonstration, we wondered where the crowds would come from. Here we were wrong, and the political party organisers had their hands on the pulse.

Then came the king's first statement, on April 21, where he made as if finally to respond to the people's pressure. But he gave too little, the tone was wrong, and the content was inadequate. He offered to hand over executive power to a yet-to-be-formed government if the SPA gave him the name of a Prime Minister. The



political parties demurred for a while, to see what the public would say. In the meantime, India's envoy Karan Singh had come and gone, and the Indian government brought out a welcoming statement. Based on that, other governments also welcomed the statement; but in jail we were all aghast. Outside, the Nepali people spoke, refusing to accept the king's response, which was too little too late. The Indian statement was corrected immediately here in New Delhi, saying that India would go by what the people of Nepal wanted. That was also when the seven ambassadors went trooping in to Girija Koirala's residence and they were shown the door.

There was one particular day when a thundershower saved many, many lives from being lost—as there was a highly tense situation with hundreds of thousands of people on the streets, and there might have been a movement towards the royal palace. There could have been savagery on the streets of Kathmandu that day. We could see that thundercloud from where we were incarcerated at the Duwakot Armed Police Barracks. We kept up with the news, with the blow-by-blow accounts being provided by the FM radios, in particular Nepal FM, Kantipur FM and HBC FM. We would go from the news bulletin on one to the other, and it was like a revolution in real-time. I felt that lives got saved by that thundershower, and the kingship also lived to see another day.

The next two days were crucial. There was intense diplomatic activity. It seems that the army did finally, belatedly, make an approach to the king to say that things were untenable. On the critical day, Pashupati Bhakta Maharjan, the king's personal secretary, was at Koirala's residence. From 7 to 9 pm, the seven-party representatives together dictated line by line the speech to be read out by the king. That is how the king was brought down: he was forced to read word for word what was drafted for him by the political parties, restoring the House of Representatives and retreating completely.

Now, it would have been ideal if the restoration of Parliament, the proclamation of sovereignty as resting with people, had been wrested from the palace rather than forced from the king's lips. The political parties—and most importantly, Girija Koirala, for whatever reason—did not feel they had the strength to do that. Those of us on the outside feel that there was enough people power across the country to have proclaimed restoration of the House. People power would have brought us the Parliament revived, would have brought us the sovereignty in the hands of the people. Instead, it was a

concession from the king, which leaves a faint bad taste in the mouth. But there is no doubt that the king was defeated by people power, with political parties as the main actors, and the Maoists and civil society as supportive actors.

## V

### *Peaceful Pandemonium*

Where is the king now? Gyanendra is in his lair, licking his wounds—and he has shown himself to have the kind of personality that he might come back yet another day. Eternal vigilance is the need of the hour. The king is on a very weak wicket now: at the very least, the public is radicalised against this king, and to a greater extent than ever before, it is against kingship. It has never been like this before, and only Gyanendra seems incapable of understanding. It is this incapacity to understand which might have him involved in yet another adventure. What almost happened this time might happen another time.

Where do we go from here? Definitely towards a Constituent Assembly, to draw up a new Constitution. This has long been a demand of the Maoists; but it did not carry credence because they had continued with their 'people's war' rhetoric. The call became credible and now provides the possibility for short-term and long-term peace, because the rebels now publicly state that they want to move towards a multiparty competitive democracy.

A Constituent Assembly is required to fulfil the minimum agenda of the Maoists, as a way of bringing them in from the cold. It has the possibility of giving them a safe landing with dignity. But there is a deeper, underlying reason why we need a Constituent Assembly. For the historically oppressed minorities of Nepal, who make up the majority of the population, and in particular among their leadership, it is an article of faith that the present Constitution is not good enough—which is something that I personally would disagree with. Constitutions must be made to evolve. Nevertheless, the perception among large parts of the Nepali public is that the current document does not do justice to the historically disfranchised. And in the current situation of effervescence in Nepal, the political ground has shifted, and so there is across-the-board understanding

among the mainstream political leadership that the path is towards a Constituent Assembly. The exercise therefore starts belatedly to define what that body would do, how it would be elected, what would be the process.

Certainly, in the days ahead, there is going to be pandemonium in Nepal. There are going to be strident demands and there are going to be high-decibel debates, but all this will happen without the bullet. You will see a Nepal constantly agitated but proceeding without violence towards the Constituent Assembly. We had to have a People's Movement; and now that we have got it, we have to decide the shape and process of the Constituent Assembly. Beyond that, there is need for urgent discussion on questions of long-term development, reconstruction and, most importantly, peace. We will have to discuss federalism, we will have to discuss language policy and affirmative action—all of it in the context of Nepal's demography, as a country where the majority is made up of minorities.

The unkindest cut made by the king was the attempt at militarisation of the society. He converted a ceremonial army into a battering ram for the royal palace, in the process giving ambitions to the military. This militarisation was something that the people of Nepal, amidst the other burdens of history, did not need. This army did not cover itself with glory, for the kind of dirty warfare in which it engaged. While unable to engage the Maoists in combat, the army has been guilty of unprecedented torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killings. The beauty of the People's Movement was that it stopped a lot of negative trends in their tracks, one of them being the terrible process of militarisation.

As far as the political parties are concerned, it is they who will lead the way ahead. The Maoist, once they give up their arms, will also be one such political party. As long as the focus is on political parties, let me add something. People keep saying that Nepal should have a new generation of politicians; and this tends to be mostly a reference to the 84-year-old Girija Prasad Koirala. But the fact is that it took this octogenarian to unflinchingly challenge the king—no one else had the stature to do that. What I would say as a citizen who is not a member of any party is that it is the job of politicians to rise to the occasion and provide the new leadership. You cannot find new leadership by shopping under the right section at the supermarket. I personally believe that the politicians of the future Nepal are to be found not in the top or second rung, but the third

rung of politicians from the districts. Again, they will not be English-savvy, and they will not be found in the parlour circuit.

We should not hesitate to give the political parties credit for the *Jana Andolan*'s success, even if civil society at large and the Maoists certainly played their part. The nitty-gritty was being organised by the parties, in particular through an entity known as the *Jana Andolan* Coordination Committee of Seven Party Alliance, made up of individuals such as Sita Ram Tamang, Pari Thapa, Dilendra Prasad Badu, Gyanendra Karki, Subhas Nembang and Sunil Prajapati. The list shows that those active from the political parties are quite representative to the country's demographic diversity. I believe that in such a list of capable politicians rests the future of political stability in Nepal.

I trust the parties because, for all their much-publicised weaknesses, they stood by the people of Nepal. We were such sceptics when it came to the parties; each step of the way we said that they cannot bring people together at all. They did. Then we raised the threshold and said that the parties can't do it in Kathmandu. They did. We did not expect them to break the curfew. They did. Now, when the parties seem to be wrangling amongst themselves as the formation of government proceeds, then we say: there they go again! Yes they do, but I say, let us be a bit more patient. The parties are being watchdogged; they know the people are watching.

The one unhappy factor is the health of Girija Prasad Koirala, whose lungs are not in good order; and he was also injured during the agitations. He is regarded with a fair degree of scepticism among the populace of Nepal, because he has been the powerbroker who made enough mistakes for being Prime Minister the longest during the democratic era from 1990-2002. But he has been the man of the moment in Nepal, as recognised by the international community, by his peers in the political parties and even the Maoists, who found in him the only personality who could 'deliver'. I do believe that history will read Girija Prasad Koirala better than does the present.

As far as the Maoists are concerned, the last few days have seen a sudden rise in high volume Maoist propaganda, speeches, as well as a rise in extortion across the country. If you go down to the village and district levels, the language of the Maoists has not changed—they reassure their cadre whatever the leaders say at the top, nothing is going to change. The reality is that the rebel leadership has understood the way to go because they see no other way; but

they also have to take the cadre along. So we will find up ahead, when the volume will be ratcheted up, there will be anger in the speeches, but the gun will be silent. This is the expectation. This is part of the natural progression of the Maoists, as a uniquely revolutionary 'force' that is trying to come to competitive politics.

## VI

### *Respite to Action*

What we have right now is a bilateral ceasefire in place; and it is easy to forget where we were just a few months ago. It is very easy to forget that eight Nepali citizens were dying every day due to political violence; that when 60 citizens died overnight it would barely get a headline the next day. We had become among the most politically violent country in the world. This is why the ceasefire of the moment is exhilarating—it provides the respite to begin the process of healing.

Now we must crucially and immediately go into a government-Maoist dialogue. That dialogue will also deal with the goals of the Constitution Assembly and its procedures, as well as the management of arms: when and how. The term 'management' has been carefully chosen so that it does not seem to mean the demobilisation and disarming just as yet, because that would be difficult for the rebels to sell to their fighters. When the management of arms is discussed, it will be extremely important for India to understand its own crucial responsibilities on the matter of the Maoist demand for a United Nations or some other international involvement during this process. It is time for India to don a different lens when looking at Nepal, and understand that the call for United Nations specialists in the 'management' process points the way towards peace and stability in Nepal—which is what India wants as well. People tend to say 'this is impossible' and 'New Delhi will never agree'; but I would suggest that we look at the possibilities of it rather than the impossibilities.

Looking ahead, we have to have the Constituent Assembly's goals and procedures set, including electoral procedures and representational issues. There will have to be 'management of arms', after which there will be an interim government with Maoist

participation—as it is difficult to consider rebel participation in a government while they still have the run of the countryside with gun in hand. At that point, possibly once the interim government is in place and the process of the Constituent Assembly is also discussed and decided, perhaps this Third Parliament that we have just revived needs to dissolve itself. The demands by some Maoist voices to dissolve it right now leads to the question of what kind of vacuum that would leave.

If we look at the micro picture, at what the Maoists are doing, what the political parties are doing, Nepal may look a little unstable. But if you look at the macro picture, then you realise that while there is a lot of noise the guns are silent; and you can expect that it is this kind of muddle that will take Nepal ahead. Nepal is not a Bhutan or a Singapore, it is not a tightly run city-state where everything goes according to a top-down plan. It is a soft state that looks messy from the outside, even after the great and glorious People's Movement. But it is this very Nepali ambiguity that I propose will take the country ahead.

In my own case, these past days of fighting for peace and democracy have taught me a bit about what makes Nepalis tick. I have tried to present to you what led to the People's Movement and where we might go from here. But in remembering the Jana Andolan with pride, because it is fresh in our memory, we should not forget the terrible decade preceding it. We must look back and assign accountability not only for those engaged in excesses in the Jana Andolan, in the person of Gyanendra and the security forces on the streets. That is not enough. It is not appropriate to forget the past as we try to move into the future of New Nepal. I do believe that the new Nepal requires accountability for ten years of 'people's war' and the harsh state reaction. We have to have some sort of transitional justice process. There is a lot of pain out there, and while we may want to forgive, we must certainly not forget. I do believe that in taking the country ahead on the strength of the People's Movement, at a time when the country and the people feel so confident, it is important to gather the energy to do away with the culture of impunity that has had its lockhold throughout history in my country.