



The Treaty of Kathmandu

Kanak Mani Dixit
art by Santa Hritang

Author's note

This book is an expanded and 'updated' version of a story that first appeared in the collection 'The Leech and I and Other Stories' published by Rato Bangala Kitab (1998). While this history of kite-flying in Kathmandu is definitely not authoritative, hopefully, the reader will enjoy the story-telling behind the myth.

Published by

Rato Bangala Kitab 1997

Rato Bangala School

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ISBN: 99933 816 2 4

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Price: NRs. 225

Typesetting and layout

Rato Bangala Kitab

Printing by

Jagadamba Press (Pvt) Ltd, Hattiban, Lalitpur, Nepal

Tel: 977-1-5547017/5547018



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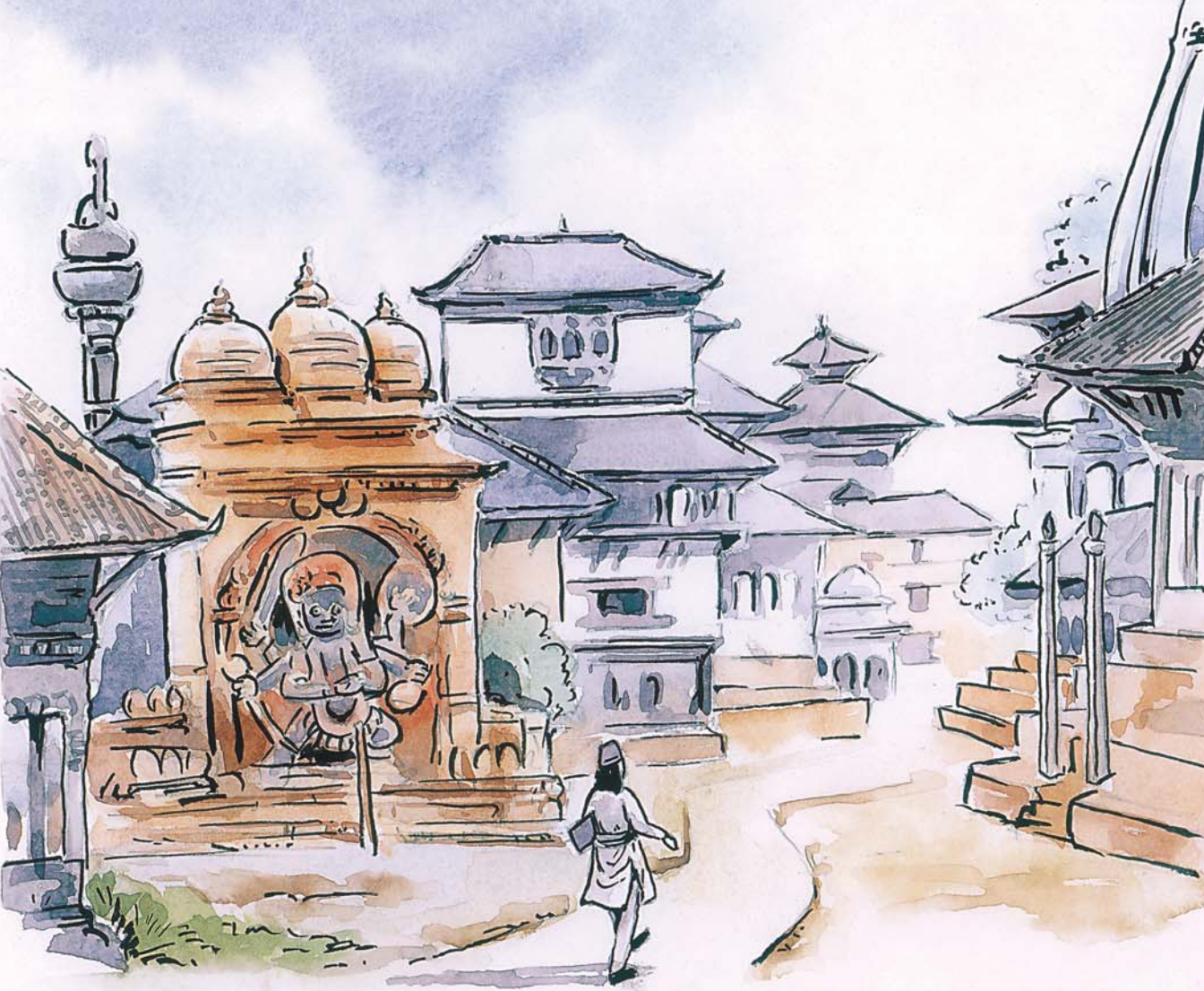
Rato Bangala Kitab

Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal

A long time ago, there lived in the city of Kathmandu a young architect named Barniko. He designed and built such masterpiece palaces and temples that the fame of the kingdom spread. Rulers from far away hills and valleys, as well as the kings of neighbouring Patan and Bhadgaun, were so impressed by Barniko's work that they asked him to come and build for them as well.

One summer evening, the king of Kathmandu summoned Barniko to the throne room of the palace. "Barniko," he said, "As you know, our country has to maintain friendly relations with the great Chinese emperor of the north, beyond Tibet. I have decided to send the emperor a gift that is unique to Nepal, and there is nothing that represents us better than our





splendid architecture. You, Barniko, will go as my ambassador to the court of the great Kublai Khan in Beijing. I want you to show the Chinese how to build with brick, wood, tiles and mud mortar in our special way. “

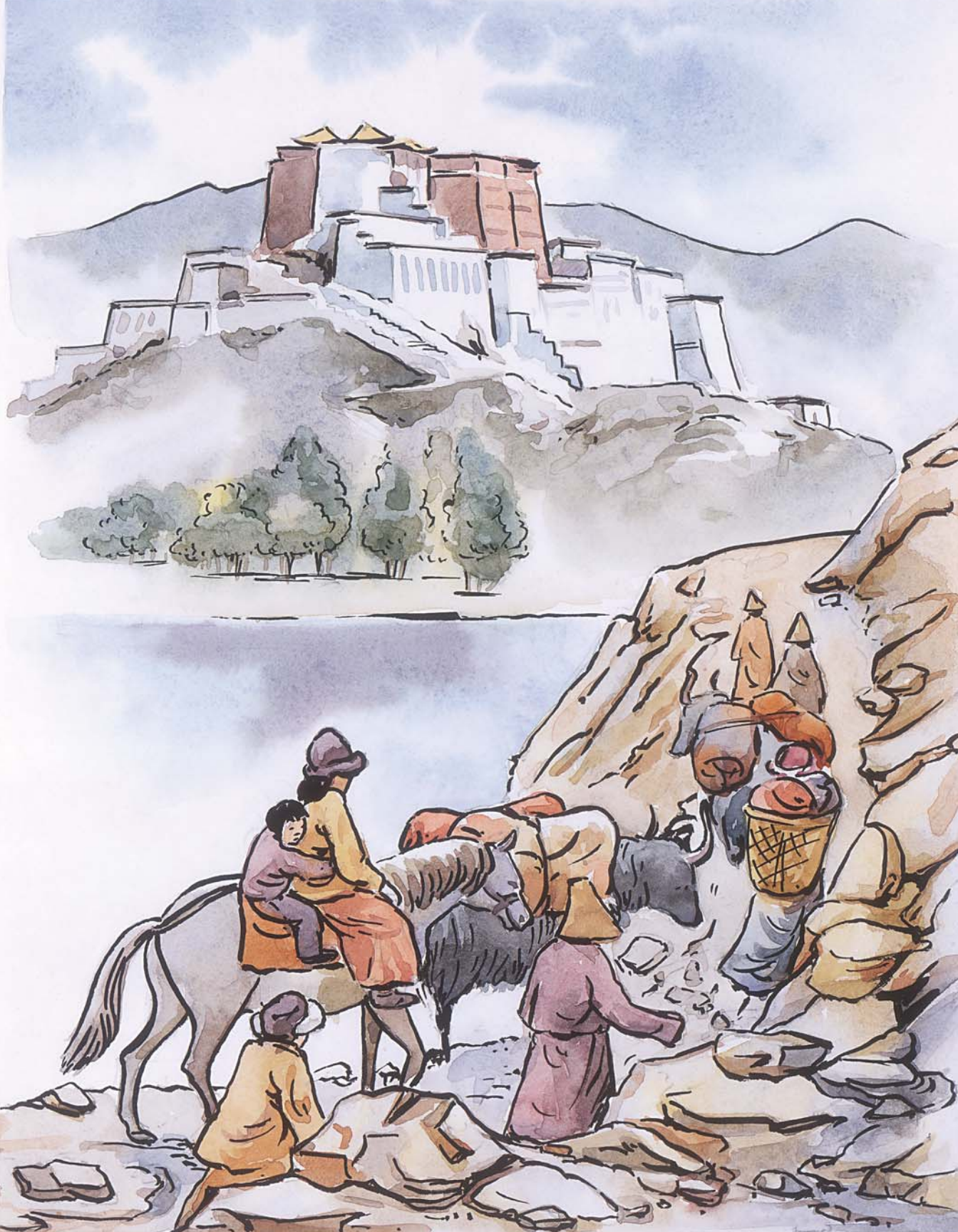
Barniko could hardly have refused the king’s request, but he actually liked the idea of traveling to China even though he knew the trip would be long and difficult. This would be an opportunity to introduce Kathmandu’s building style and techniques to the world beyond the Himalaya. Pleasing to the eye,

Kathmandu's temples and monuments were simple, strong and long-lasting, and their designs would surely be appreciated in far off lands.

Within a couple of weeks of receiving the king's order, Barniko was ready to take the journey across the mountains. He bade goodbye to his family and friends and joined a large caravan of traders headed for Lhasa. Traveling north-east through deep gorges and across swift rivers, the caravan climbed up to the Tibetan plateau. It was three weeks before the Kathmandu traders trudged into Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Under the shadow of the great Potala darbar, Barniko switched to another caravan, this one bound for Beijing.

A month and a half of travel from Lhasa saw the young man from Kathmandu arrive at his destination. As he entered the great city of Beijing, he was taken aback by the huge crowds in the marketplace. "I have never seen so many people in one place before," Barniko said to himself. The wave of people pushed him towards the great square at the center of the city.





At the square, Barniko looked up at the amazing sight of hundreds of strange objects flying about in the sky. What were these brightly coloured things, swerving and spinning so high above? Barniko forgot the pushing and shoving of people around him as he stood there, spellbound.

Barniko finally took his eyes from the skies and spotted a shop that was selling these flying objects. He went up close and studied them – they were carefully constructed out of paper and strips of bamboo bound together with glue. The architect in Barniko appreciated the fine work that went into them.

Realising that this young man in the Nepali cap had never seen such a thing as a kite before, the shopkeeper said, “These kites take to the air with the help of the wind. The strings keep them from flying away and can also be used to maneuver them about the sky.”





“How brilliant! This is next best to being able to fly oneself!” exclaimed Barniko.

“The kites fly well when the breeze is strong,” said the shopkeeper. He added, with a hint of pride, “Kites are not the only inventions of China, by the way. We also invented gunpowder, fireworks and silk brocade!”

Barniko knew that he was expected at the great emperor’s court, but he just had to buy one of those kites. He browsed through the large variety of kites on the racks – some with long tails, others shaped like dragons and mythical birds. He chose the smallest, simplest kite – a square piece of rice-paper attached to a frame of thin bamboo, with a small triangular tail.

Barniko told the shopkeeper that the kite was for his nephew back in Kathmandu. “Chandray is an energetic boy who always looks for new things to do. This would be the perfect gift to send him. He will love flying this kite!”

The shopkeeper packed the kite carefully between two sheets of hard board and handed it over to Barniko. He described how a kite is flown by launching it against the wind, how to keep it aloft with the help of the string and spool, and how to reel it in when the wind dies.

Grateful for all that he had learnt, Barniko made haste to the caravan, which was returning to Tibet the next day. He handed the kite to a friend who was going back to Kathmandu by way of Lhasa. He also sent along a spool of thread and written instructions on how to fly the kite.



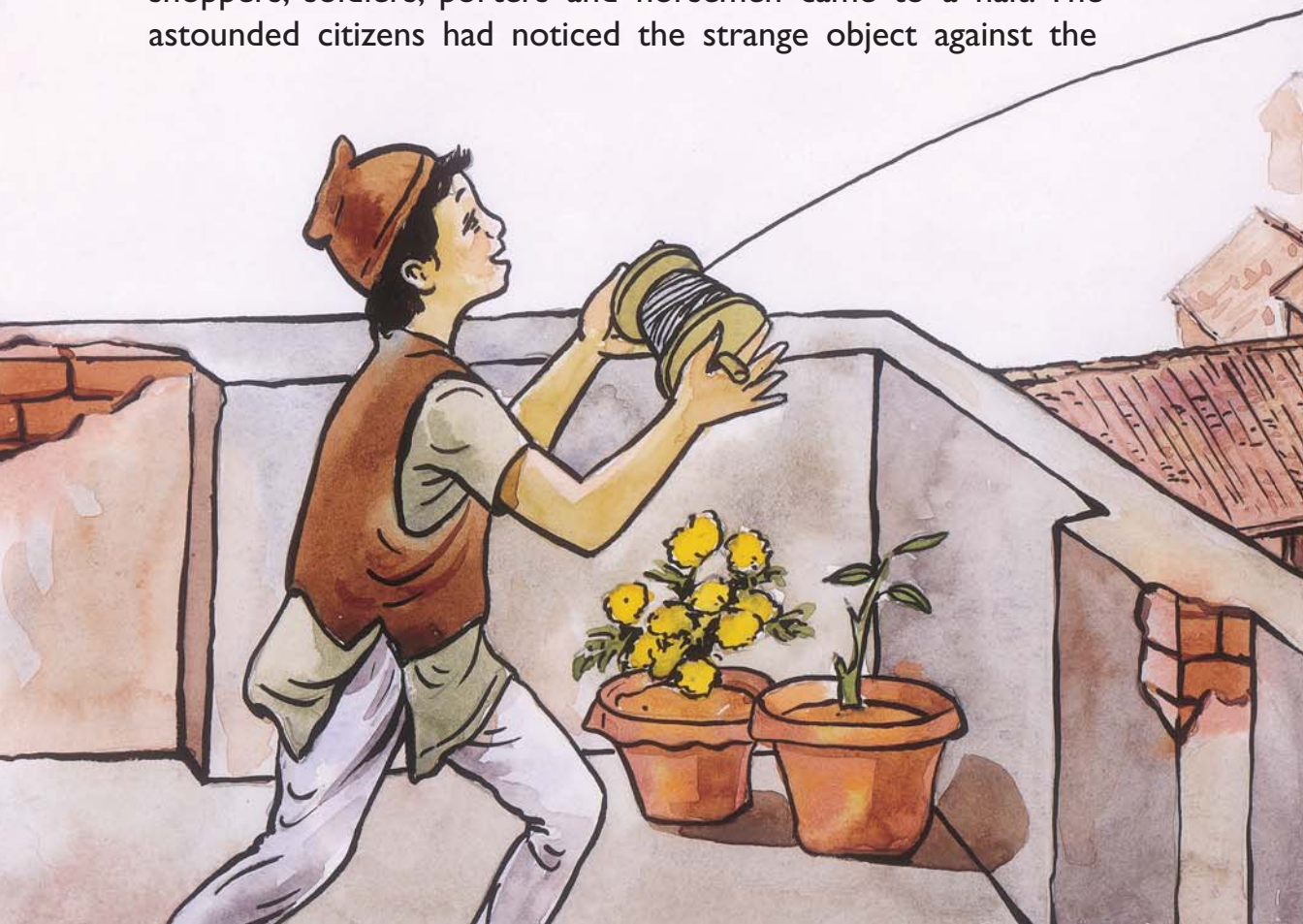


From here, the story leaves the young architect in Beijing and follows the kite back to Kathmandu. Meanwhile, Barniko's work comes to be appreciated by the emperor, Kublai Khan. The pagoda-style architecture he introduces becomes popular in China and beyond, and Barniko's fame spreads all over Asia.

The Art of Flying

The kite's arrival in Kathmandu was a momentous event for Chandray. After reading the instructions written out by his uncle, the boy picked up the kite and its over-sized spool and rushed to the attic balcony. The breeze turned out to be just right, and before long Chandray had the kite flying high over Kathmandu's rooftops.

Down below, in the bazaar of Asan, the traffic of traders, shoppers, soldiers, porters and horsemen came to a halt. The astounded citizens had noticed the strange object against the

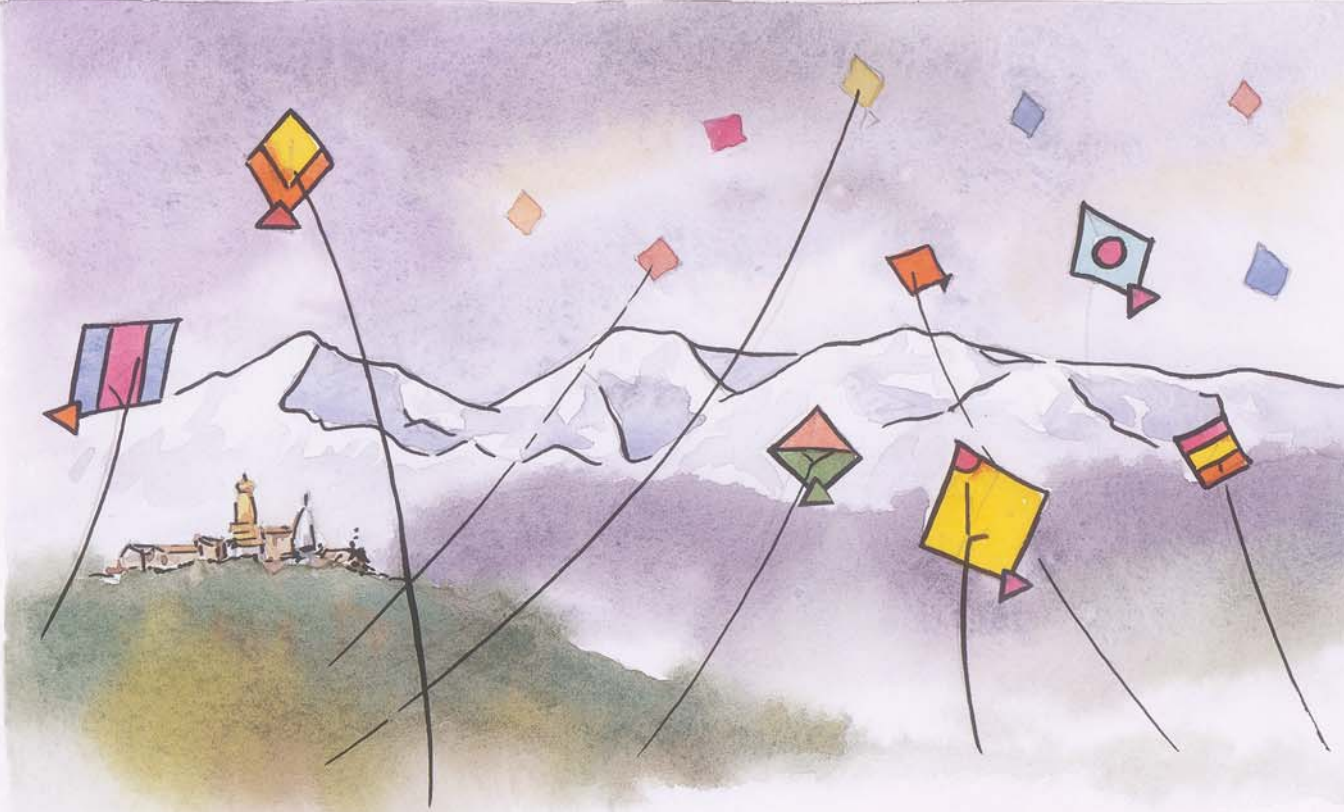




blue sky as it circled, dipped and took height. A throng of amazed people followed the kite string to its source and thus arrived at Chandray's house. They had him reel in the kite.

After careful examination, the elders in the crowd concluded that this was not a magical object. It flew on the basis of aerodynamics, the science of the movement of air. The people asked Chandray to get the kite flying again and he was happy to oblige. The little kite immediately caught the breeze and took flight. Soon it was hovering over the temple of Taleju Bhawani, the highest monument in Kathmandu. A ripple of excitement spread through the rooftops at the second sighting of the kite.





Before long, Kathmandu's skilled craftsmen were making their own kites, made of lokta paper and bamboo strips. They built large wooden spools, known as lattaïs, to hold the string.

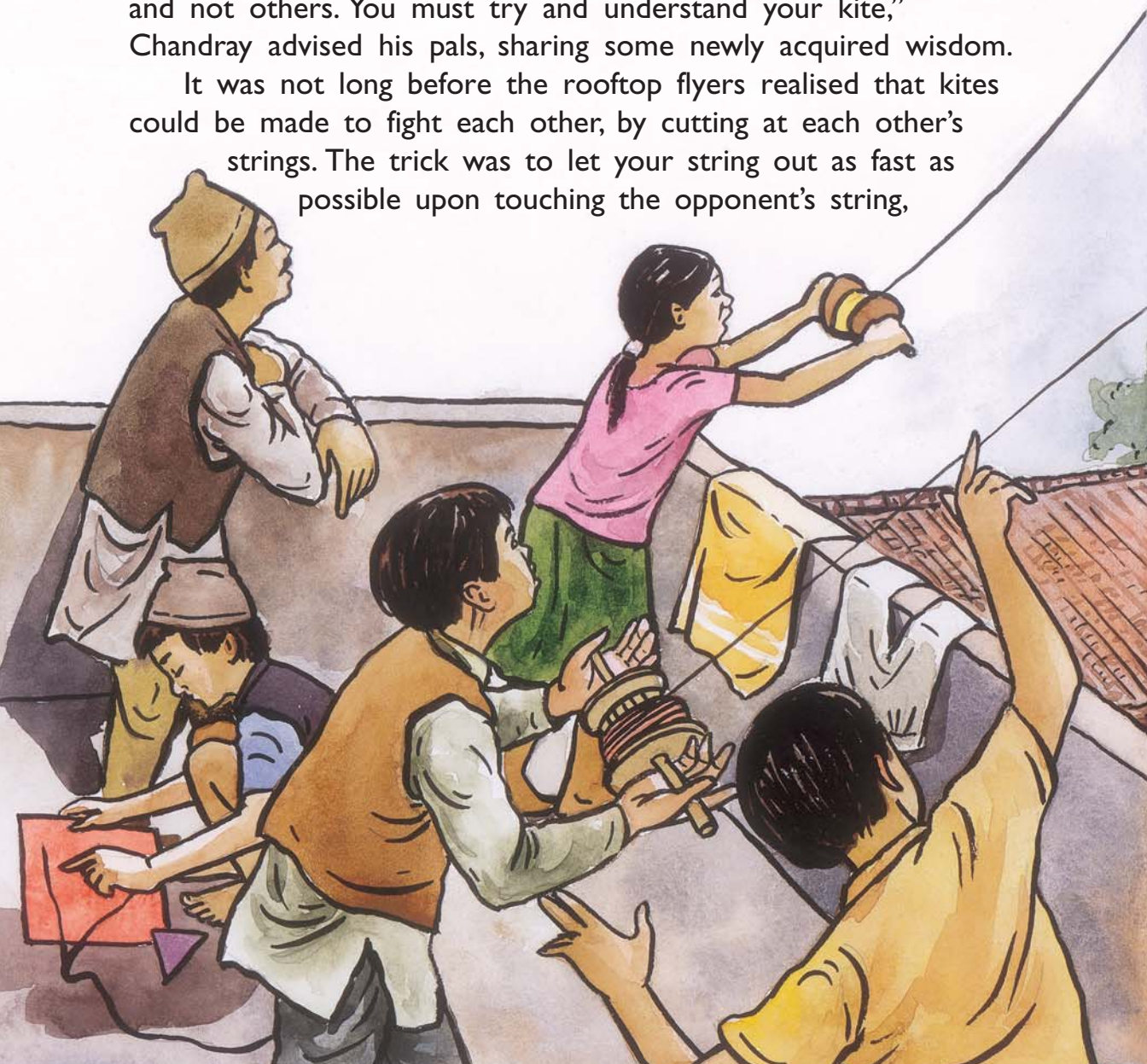
It was early autumn and the Westerlies blew briskly in the afternoons. This was just what the kites needed in order to fly. During the weeks that followed, hundreds of kites took to the air above Kathmandu. This used to be the time of year that Kathmandu's kids would play marbles in the bahal courtyards and bylanes, but this time around the ground was empty of youngsters. They were all on the rooftops and attic balconies, shouting and laughing as they mastered the art of kite-flying.

Many kites crashed, as the trainee pilots learnt to control the unstable playthings. Some snagged on temple eaves, others got stuck on high branches. But it was not long before the Kathmandu pilots became kite-flying masters. They developed the art of flying kites straight off the lattaïs, without even having to hold the strings with the fingers.

The expert fliers, Chandray being the first among them, became masters at using the tug of the string to make the kites do their bidding. When string was let out, the kites spun away in tight circles. With a pull and quick spin of the lattai, they could make kites take height, turn right, turn left, or dive deep. It was in the hands of the lattai to make the kites swoop up, down or sideways in the sky.

“Each kite has its own personality. It likes to do some things and not others. You must try and understand your kite,” Chandray advised his pals, sharing some newly acquired wisdom.

It was not long before the rooftop flyers realised that kites could be made to fight each other, by cutting at each other’s strings. The trick was to let your string out as fast as possible upon touching the opponent’s string,

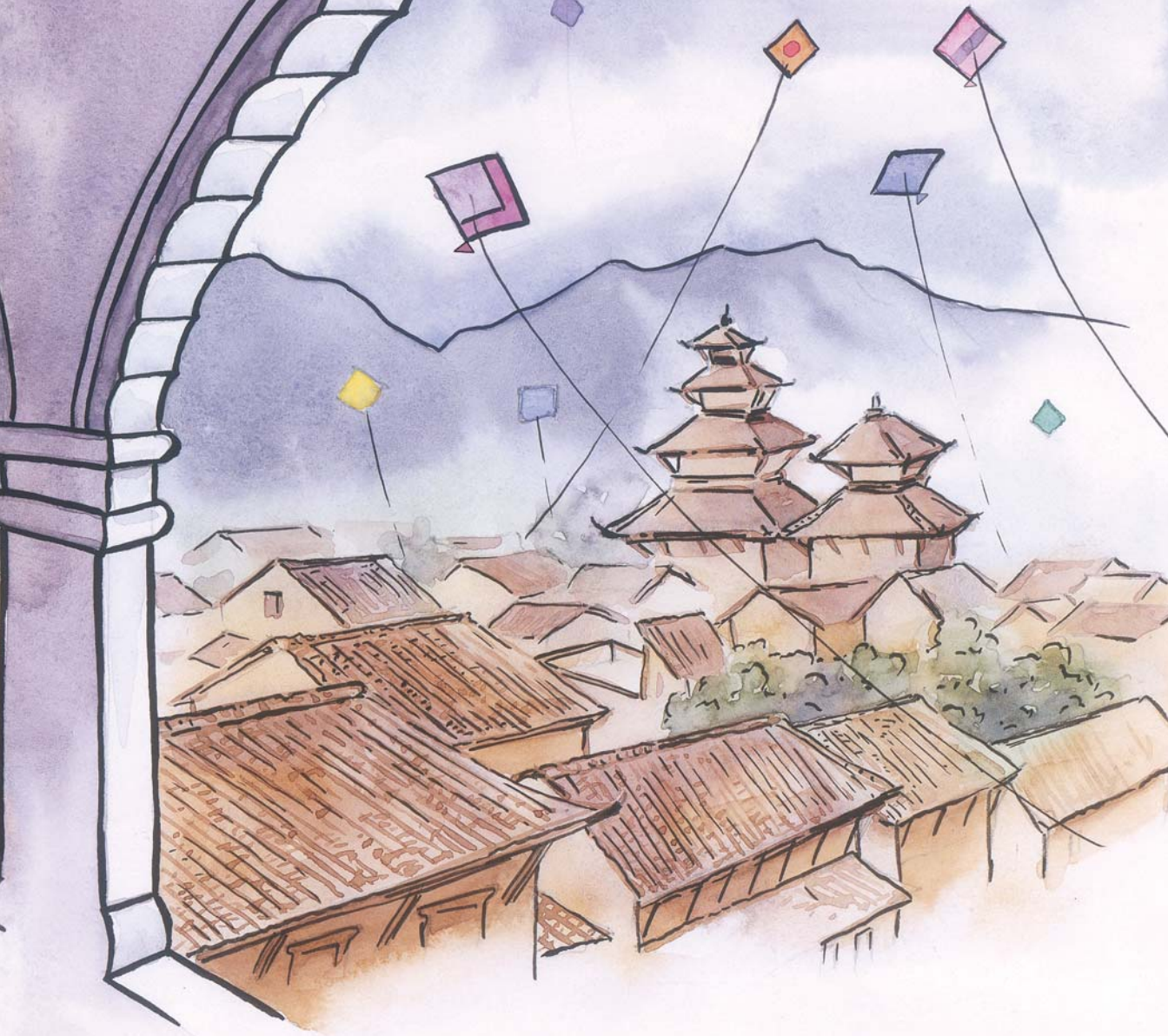






which was cut and the kite went 'chait'. Powdered glass was glued on to strings to make them extra sharp for combat. A new competitive sport was born.

Kite-flying became enormously popular, and the people could not have been happier with such a carefree and (what they thought to be) harmless activity. For a city of hard-working people, Kathmandu did not have too many leisurely activities. Kites therefore became an obsession.



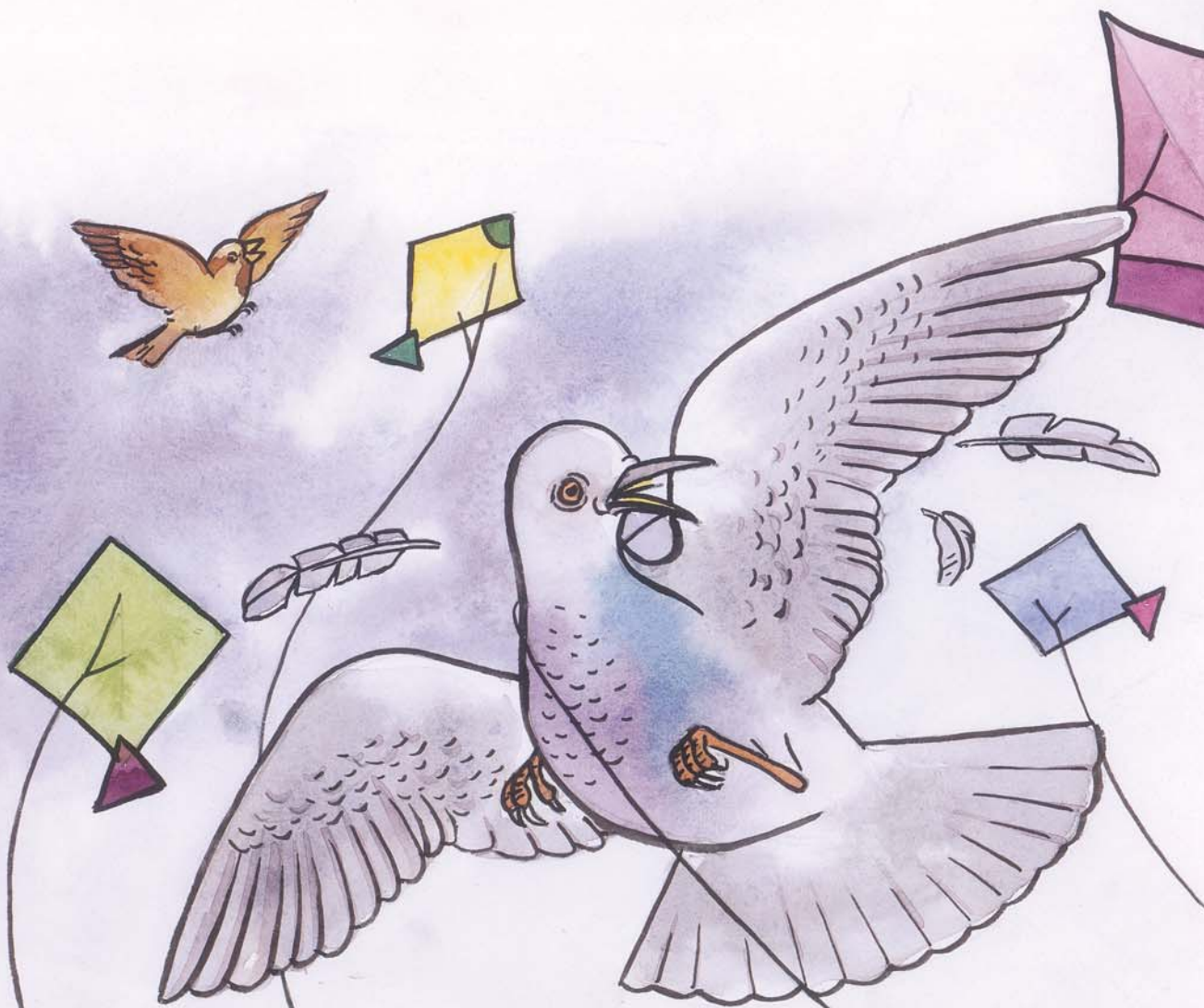
Deadly Strings

One afternoon, the king was looking out of his balcony and he saw the sky full of kites of all colours and patterns, soaring and swooping. “The people are enjoying themselves,” the happy king told his wife, the queen.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the birds. Till now, the understanding had been that the people owned the ground and the birds the air. Suddenly, the people had invaded

the airspace. The sky that had earlier been so wide and free became an obstacle course for the feathered world – booby trapped as it was with strings that stretched upwards at all angles.

No bird was safe when the kites began to fly. Not the common myna head homeward to his bamboo grove, not the circling eagle looking for prey, not the pigeon flying in to feed on temple offerings, not the crow flapping over to the Bishnumati river for a bath. Every day, scores of birds got





entangled in the nearly invisible strings and suffered cuts and lacerations. Quite a few lost control completely and crashed to the ground, injuring themselves.

Enjoying their kites, the people of Kathmandu were quite unaware that the avian world was in turmoil.

Whenever there was a crisis, the birds of Kathmandu looked to their representatives for solutions. The representatives would meet at the living quarters of Ullu Owl, who lived with her brood in an abandoned attic near the great bell in the middle of town, close to the palace of the king.

The kite menace had created a crisis for the birds, and so the representatives arrived at the owl's attic. When all had taken their perch, Ullu addressed the birds, "Fellow flyers, you realize that I am a nocturnal creature, and so am not affected by the kites swirling about during the afternoons. However, I do know how terrible these abominable playthings and their deadly strings are for us birds. The sky has always been ours, and the humans have always been stuck to the ground because of gravity. Today, they have invaded our realm. And why? Just because some flimsy paper can be sent aloft with the help of wind! The humans have no right to do this, none at all!"

An elderly sparrow asked, "O sister Ullu, what shall we do?"

The owl replied, "My friend, these kites were introduced without our consent. There is only one course of action to take. We fight the kites!"

A shrike responded, "But how can we fight them?"

Ullu said, "You have seen how the kites fight, trying to cut each other's strings? That is how we will attack! We will cut their strings with our claws and beaks! Better still, we will fly through the paper kites and rip them apart!"

There was a chirping murmur of agreement from around the loft. This was a proper response to the humans, for having been so thoughtless. Some egrets who were gathered at the back of the loft began to shout, "Down with humans! Down with kites!" Others took up the chant.

Ullu Owl let the birds continue the chant for a while so that they could vent their anger.





She then called for silence by bobbing her head animatedly. Once the gathering became silent, she said, “Friends! Tomorrow afternoon when the wind rises from the west and the kites go up, that is when we strike! Let us bring down the kites!”

“Down with humans! Down with kites!” The chanting began once again as the excited gaggle filed out of the loft and flew homewards to their roosts in various corners of town.





The Attack

The next afternoon, the people of Kathmandu were shocked to see the strangest thing happen. From nowhere, it seemed, birds of all kinds flew up and attacked the kites in the air. The kite-killer birds were of all kinds – pigeons, cranes, vultures,

shrikes, crows, weaverbirds, parrots, common mynas, hoopoes, drongos, kingfishers, sunbirds, robins, bulbuls...

The kite enthusiasts on the rooftops could not believe it as their kites were struck with single-minded determination. Some kites were shattered in midair and fluttered rudderless to the ground. Others had their strings severed by beaks, and were let loose in their hundreds. The chait kites drifted away, swaying and cartwheeling as they lost height until they fell into marketplaces and temple courtyards. Those that had been flying higher drifted out of the city limits and fell into the rivers and rice paddies, or got snagged on trees.

Satisfied with an assignment successfully carried out, the birds returned home hoping the humans of Kathmandu had learnt their lesson.





The rooftop sportsmen, generally loud and rowdy, had turned silent in disbelief. The sky over Kathmandu, dotted with multi-coloured kites till a moment ago, was now empty. Soon, however, the sense of shock was replaced by indignation. How dare the birds do this to them! The angry citizens streamed towards the darbar, which itself had many chait kites hanging from its eaves.

The king heard the clamour down below, and came out to the royal balcony, made of intricately carved wood. Chandray, the pioneer kite-flyer of Kathmandu and nephew of Barniko the







architect, had emerged as the leader of the kite-flying people. He was at the head of the crowd. Looking up at the king, Chandray recounted the strange and violent events of the day. Chandray concluded by saying, "Sir, the birds massacred our kites! We are left with only our spools and some string. Do something!"

"What would you have me do, Chandray?" asked the king.

"Down with feathers! Banish the birds!" shouted Chandray by way of answer.

The crowd took up the slogan, "Down with feathers! Banish the birds! Down with feathers! Banish the birds!"

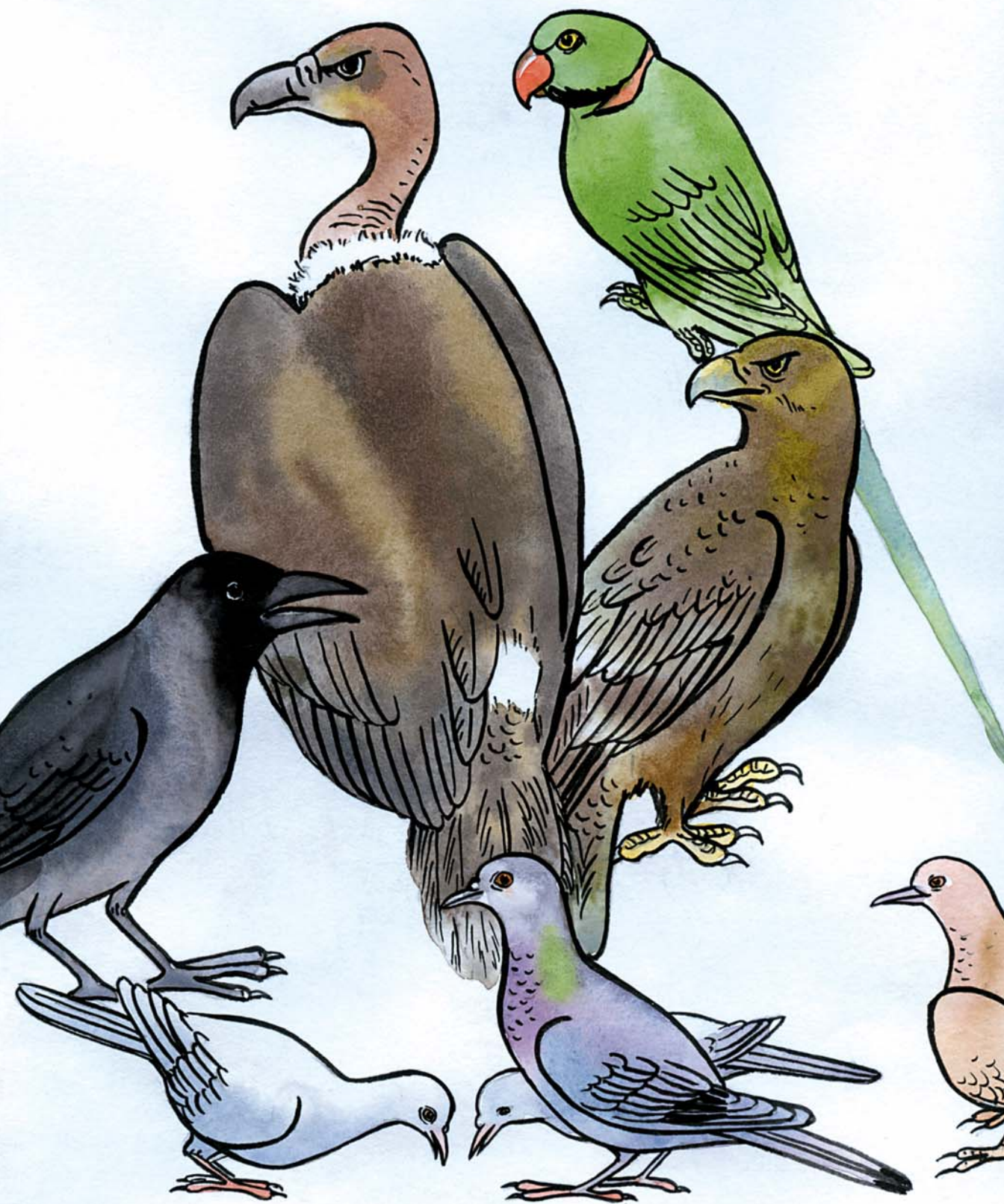
The noise of hundreds of human voices carried far and wide. In their roosts and nests all over Kathmandu, the birds heard this frightening demand for their exile. They wondered what the next day would bring.



Human Rights, Bird Rights

The people's slogans and demands were the result of confusion, anger and selfishness, but Kathmandu's monarch was a wise soul. He knew that the birds could hardly be sent away from the city. For one, such an action would wreak havoc with the natural environment. He said to himself, "If I am to banish the birds simply because my human citizens are deprived of some afternoon entertainment, then who would clear the carrion, who would eat the pests in the fields, and who would control the rat population?"





Continuing in this train of thought, the king asked himself, “And what of the loss of beauty when the birds are gone?” No more would there be the chirping of sparrows among the rafters. The pigeons would not be there to pick up grains spread by devotees in the temple courtyards. The jet black drongos would cease their swooping dances in the evenings in pursuit of flying insects. The eagles would no longer circle over the town, riding the thermals. What a terrible, deserted place this would be without the birds. Even the crow’s caw-caw in the daytime and the owl’s screeching during the night would be missed!





The king thought some more: “And above all, do not the birds own this valley of Kathmandu just as much as the people?” In fact, the birds had even more right to be there than the humans did. Everyone knew that birds were living in Kathmandu Valley’s forests long before people arrived as migrants to start agriculture and build villages and towns. The humans were demanding that the birds be banished, but as the original inhabitants, did not the birds have even more right to ask that the humans to vacate the valley?





Principle and Practicality

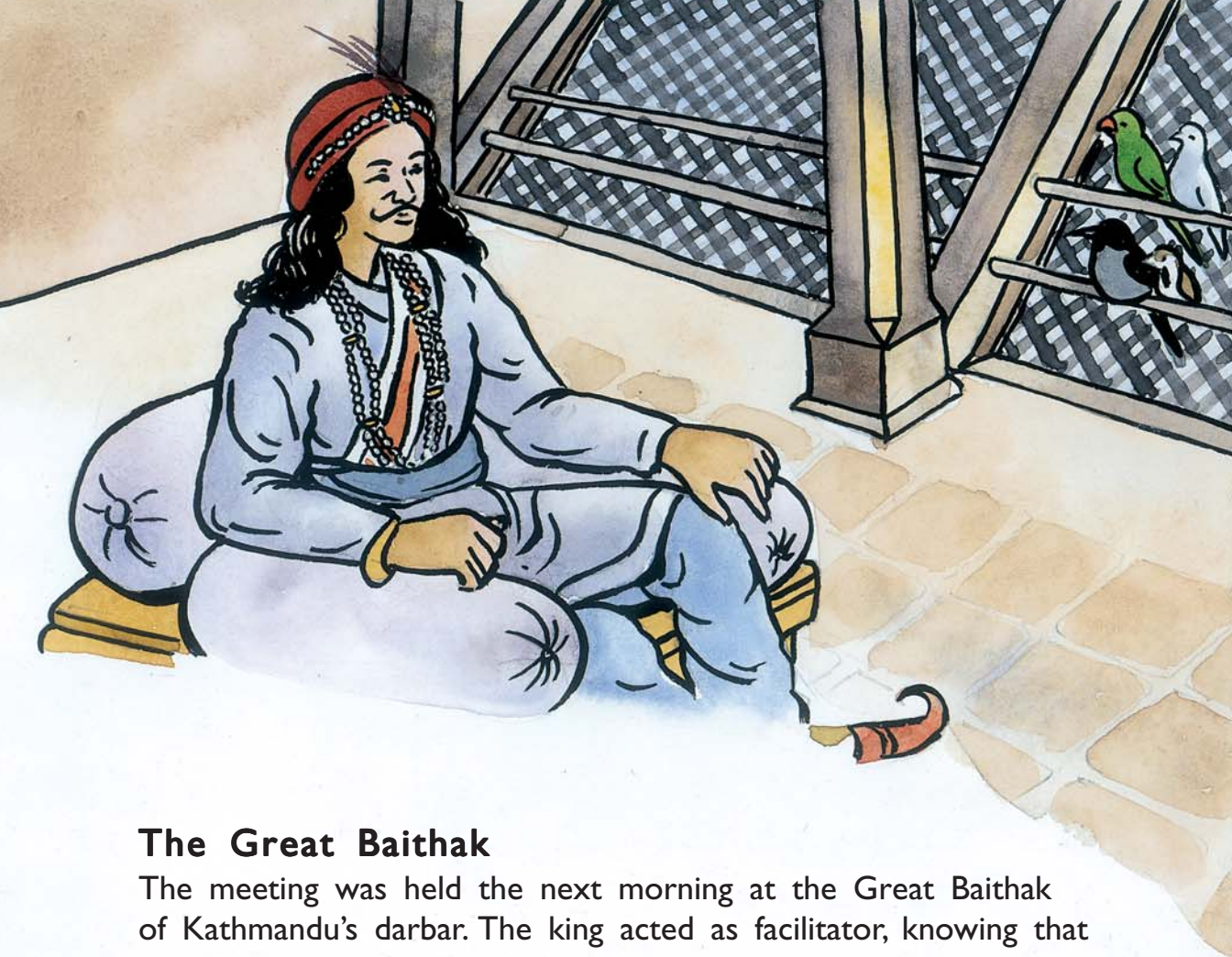
There had been wise kings and foolish kings in Kathmandu's history. The king who ruled when the kites arrived happened to be of the former kind. He had a sharp intellect combined with a sensitivity for fellow creatures, whether human or feathered. The king had the ability to look at issues from all angles. Although a human, he could study the kite problem from the bird citizen's point of view.

The king could easily have sided with Chandray and the agitating people. That would have been easy, and he would have been popular among the human citizens. But the responsibility of someone with power, whether king or commoner, is to look out for the good of all creatures. A wise ruler does not take advantage of divisions among citizens to bolster his own position. Instead, he tries to bring about an amicable solution based on principle and practicality.

As he entered the royal bed chamber that night, the king was thinking about the need to consider both principle and common sense. He shared his ideas with his wife, “Rani, on the question of principle, the birds are clearly in the right. Their traditional use of the sky has been obstructed. Thinking practically, however, I cannot imagine that the people will give up flying kites, because it is so enjoyable and they have so little entertainment to begin with.”

The next morning, the king consulted his advisers. They suggested convening an emergency meeting of the representatives of the birds and the people so that, together, they could find a solution.





The Great Baithak

The meeting was held the next morning at the Great Baithak of Kathmandu's darbar. The king acted as facilitator, knowing that it was the sky-flying birds and the kite-flying people who would have to find a solution between themselves.

Chandray and the representatives of the various wards of the city seated themselves on sukkul mats on the floor. The bird delegates, each representing his or her species, preferred to perch on the railings along the lattice-work windows which ran at a slant along the side of the hall. The birds were led by Ullu Owl. At one end of the room, the king sat on a padded platform with cushions.

The discussion went well into the afternoon. There were many heated exchanges between Ullu and Chandray, each egged on by her and his followers. Once, an angry Chandray even



tried to take a swipe at Ullu, at which all the bird representatives threatened a fly-out. But the king was able to pacify both sides, and the discussions continued. Not much progress was achieved, however, with the people insisting on their right to fly kites at any time and in any season, and the birds adamant that the sky was exclusively theirs now and for all time to come.

Seeing that something had to be done if a deadlock was to be avoided, the king spoke up. Turning to the birds, he said, "Listen, feathered citizens, you have to understand that a new kind of sport has arrived in the city. Whether you like it or not, it will be impossible for the people to abandon kite-flying. You see, humans know that they are never going to be able to fly themselves, and kites give them a pleasure that comes closest. That is why they will not give it up."

The king then addressed the humans, "People, have you considered how insensitive you have been in starting this new sport? You never sought permission from the birds! After all, the sky has been theirs' since the very beginning. They have as much of a right to the air as you have to walk on land."

The king added, "What do you think would happen if the birds left our beautiful city because of your inconsiderate action? It would become so pest-ridden and unlivable that soon all humans too would have to depart. The jungle would return and take over our lanes and courtyards. Furthermore, do you



realise that without birds there will be no crows to wake you up in the mornings, and no cuckoo's song in the evenings?"

The words of the king made their impact on both sides. The birds continued to feel grievously wronged, but as Ullu Owl herself saw, there was a limit beyond which the humans





simply would not compromise. Among the people's representatives, there was a sudden dawning of understanding that the birds had been unfairly treated. Humans had tampered with tradition and it had affected the birds' way of life. At the same time – and Chandray was also thinking about this – the people at large would never agree to a complete ban on kite-flying.

Seeing that his appeal had set the representatives thinking, the king suggested that Ullu Owl and Chandray take time off to talk by themselves. Indicating a side chamber next to the Great Baithak, the king said, "Why don't you talk in that little room?" There was a murmur of assent all around, from the people seated on the mats and the birds perched on the railings. Chandray got up and entered the side chamber and Ullu Owl flew in after him.

While the two leaders were thus engaged in the next room, the palace attendants served those present in the Great Baithak with food and drinks. Nuts and other edibles set out in bowls and lemonade was available. The atmosphere in the room improved considerably. Both birds and humans trusted that Ullu Owl and Chandray would emerge with the best possible solution.





The Agreement

While the birds and humans chatted and ate together, the king was nervously eyeing the doorway into which Ullu and Chandray had disappeared. At last, the door opened, and the king heaved a sigh of relief. Before him was a comforting sight indeed: Chandray emerged, and there was Ullu perched on his shoulder. Surely, this suggestion of friendship indicated that a solution was at hand!



The room became quiet as all eyes turned to the two leaders. Speaking for himself and for Chandray, Ullu Owl said, "Friends, we have agreed on a compromise. It seems that the birds have to recognise the fact that kite-flying is an exciting new sport for the humans of Kathmandu, who are stuck to the ground and can never hope to fly themselves. Meanwhile, one must also concede that flying has become a grave hazard for birds ever since kites and strings made their appearance in our city. Since flying is part of the very existence of birdlife, the inconvenience must be minimised."

Ullu and Chandray announced that they had agreed on the wording of a formal agreement which they would like to place before the gathering. The king brought out a large sheet of



lokta paper and used his own royal pen to put down what was dictated by Ullu, who was still perched on Chandray's shoulder. Under the watchful eyes of all present, the king wrote out the document, which began with the title "Agreement on the Use of Airspace above Kathmandu".

After the writing was done a vote was taken, and the birds and people nodded unanimously in agreement. The text on



which they agreed is reproduced here in the original (*next page*). Over time, this pact came to be known as the Treaty of Kathmandu, a document which regulated the flying of kites over the city. It bears, in the way of signatures, the thumb print of the boy Chandray and the claw-print of Ullu Owl.



Agreement on the Use of Airspace above Kathmandu

Whereas the kite is a new kind of flying object, attached to a string and spool, that has become popular with the citizens of Kathmandu as a sport;

Whereas these kites and, in particular, their strings represent a grave flying hazard for the birds of Kathmandu;

Understanding, on the one hand, that humans have a right to try out new and innovative kinds of amusement;

Convinced, on the other hand, that birds have a right to airspace free of traps or obstacles;

Recalling, that birds have always in the natural order of things used the airspace to get from place to place;

The signatory parties to this treaty agree to the following:

Kites may henceforth be flown in Kathmandu for a month and a half following the monsoon rains, when the strong Westerly winds blow, immediately before and during the autumn festival of Dasain and till as late as the festival of Tihar. Kites may not be flown at any other time of the year.



*Ullu Owl
Representative
Kathmandu Birds*



*Chandra
Representative
Kathmandu People*





The birds and the people of Kathmandu have followed the Treaty of Kathmandu, in letter and in spirit, since the day the document was signed centuries ago. This is why, even today, not a kite goes up during the winter, the spring or the summer. During this period, the birds have unhindered use of the air as they always did.

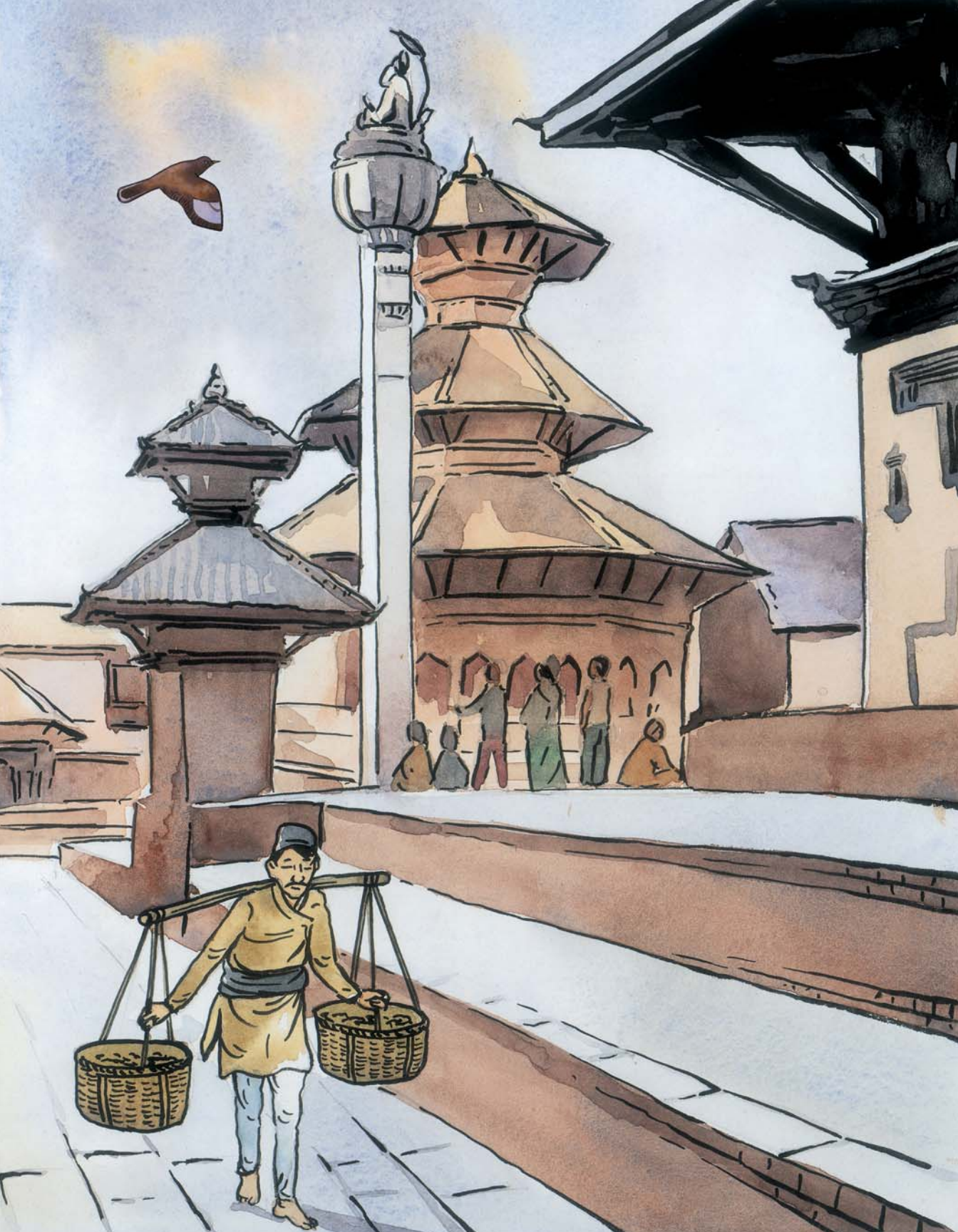


The people of Kathmandu found themselves a new sport, and the birds managed to reserve the sky for themselves for most of the year. When the monsoon rains end and the afternoon Westerlies begin to blow, according to this ancient understanding, the people dust their lattais and come to the rooftops with their kites and string. During the agreed period of kite-flying, the birds have to be extra careful as they travel. It is inconvenient to say the least, and there are occasional accidents, but the birds are content in the knowledge that the kite-flying season will be over as soon as the people's Dasain and Tihar festivals are done with.

According to historians, the king of Kathmandu heaved a sigh of relief when the Kathmandu Treaty was signed. He is said to have told his wife at the time, "You see, Rani, I had a duty to help solve the problem, because it was I who sent Barniko to Beijing. That was how the kites came to Kathmandu in the first place. And what trouble that gave to the birds of our city!"

Also according to the same historians, Chandray and Ullu became great friends and co-workers, and they continued to cooperate for the benefit of the citizens of Kathmandu. It is said that it is their legacy of co-existence that has helped develop such a level of peace and understanding between the creatures of Kathmandu.





Even today, many young people ask why kites are flown in Kathmandu only during the Dasain season. Some elders simply answer, "It is the tradition." But those who know a little bit of history – and also a little bit of myth-making – will tell you of the architect Barniko, a particularly wise king of Kathmandu, and of Ullu Owl and Chandray. They will tell you of an agreement which brought peace to the land.



