

Martin Chautari in Kathmandu

Ideas unlimited and thoughts unrestrained

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Bengalis have their *addas*. There they gather, like-minded Bengalis, to discuss the relevance of Marx, the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, deterioration in the quality of education, the poetry of Kamala Das or the horses of M. F. Hussain. *Majlis* of Awadh is less eclectic, but no less spirited - the role of religion in society can be quite engrossing.

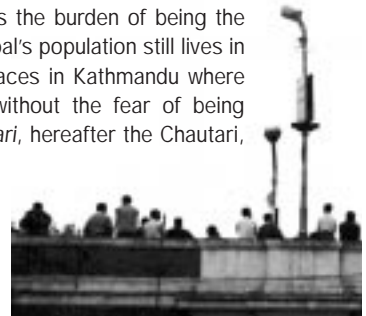
This 'Coffee House' culture was a new name for an ancient habit of us *Homo Sapiens*. We like to gossip, exchange views, share ideas, and simply let words flow in a congenial atmosphere. That is what chat rooms attempt to recreate in the virtual world of Cyberia. But Cyberia lacks the warmth of real life. It is cold out there; anonymity of the Internet fails to connect us with each other.

For women, it used to be the village pond, the community well, or the lonely tree at the edge of the forest where they rested with their load of fodder or firewood. For men, it was invariably the banyan tree, usually near a temple or school. Village elders would gather there to resolve issues of common concern, wonder at the pace of changing times, or merely gossip.

In the hills of Nepal, such a tree, often with a raised platform, is called a *chautari*. The more prosperous and aware the village, the higher the number of *chautaris* in it. But every village would have at least one. Then came the teashops and the *bhattis* - shops selling rice-wine and the cheap edibles that go with it. These took away some of the regulars from the *chautaris*. But it was the radio, and television to a certain extent, which drove the last nail into the coffin of *chautari* culture.

There still are many functional *chautaris* in the countryside of Nepal, but they aren't used as extensively as they used to be. These days, people gather at local teashops, *bhattis*, or the offices of various political parties. Does this decline in the popularity of *chautaris* have something to do with increasing intolerance in Nepali society? Difficult to say, but the fact is that people have less time, and even less inclination, to listen to the views that aren't in consonance with their own.

Kathmandu may be called a metropolitan city, but it carries the burden of being the capital of a primarily rural nation-state. Close to nine-tenths of Nepal's population still lives in villages, without complaint. Unfortunately, there are very few places in Kathmandu where one can express one's outlandish ideas or cranky thoughts without the fear of being ridiculed or worse. But then Kathmandu does have Martin *Chautari*, hereafter the Chautari, and thank God for that.



To give you a taste of the action, see what happened during one typical discussion. On 9 January 2001, second Tuesday of the month, the topic at Chautari was Darjeeling-based writer Indra Bahadur Rai's path-breaking Nepali novel, *Aaj Ramita Chha*. A rough translation of the book's title would be, *Today is Interesting*, in the sense of the Chinese curse, 'May you live in interesting times'.

The discussion was kicked off by Sangita, a working mother who had ploughed through the book with some effort. Her remark was forthright and unpretentious, "The book ambles without a beginning and an end". Her judgment even more blunt, "It's a difficult read". That is what any reader uninitiated in the nuances of high-literature feels while reading classics, but very few have the courage to accept it. Sangita did, and got an appreciative nod from other participants facing a similar dilemma.

The second reader to comment on the book was Ashutosh, a Harvard graduate and an activist. His suggestion, "Read the book twice to appreciate the slice of life that it serves." After that, an animated discussion for over an hour engaged ex-ambassador and linguist Nobel Kishor Rai, novelist Khagendra Sangraula, poet-satirist Bimal Nibha, writer-commentator Narayan Dhakal, writer-commentator Basant Thapa, novelist Manjushri Thapa and a group of young students in awe of the 'cubist' image of Indra Bahadur Rai. Discussions over, those participants who wanted to contribute to tea-kitty, Nepali rupees ten each, did so and went their separate ways - contented, and perhaps, enlightened. Most of them will come back for another *Mangalbare* - the discussion every Tuesday at Chautari.

Topics for discussion vary. From property rights for women to the lack of trust laws in Nepal, from the predicament of people of the Nepal Terai to the status of women in Vedic literature, and from the threat to democracy to the vibrancy of the press-any topic that is of interest to anyone, which means anything, can be taken up for discussion at Chautari. The procedure is simple. The program for the month is fixed in advance, and circulated through e-mail, photocopies and word-of-mouth. The main speaker - the pundit in Chautari-speak - presents his views for about half-an-hour. After that, it is a free-for-all. Anyone with a view can be an expert commentator or an interrogator. Questions and comments flow for one-and-half hours. Sometimes it can go on even longer.

This is the Chautari then - an informal platform for a free flow of ideas.

By its very nature, Chautari has no hierarchy. As one of Chautari's convenors Pratyoush Onta asserts, "Chautari disagrees with the tradition of an elite speaking from the pulpit to an audience of lesser mortals listening respectfully. It is a forum for dialogue, or even polylogue, if such a thing is possible."

That, in essence, is the mission statement of sorts - formally not declared, but universally accepted by all those who frequent Chautari. Here, Doctors of Philosophy and learners for life are equally patient in observing the many splendours of truth. "I am right, you are also right. I may be wrong, so could you. Let us think, listen, speak and re-think. Let us together develop a culture of communication". Deceptively simple, exceedingly challenging, and one hell of a good time - this business of the exploration of the mind.

It is this simplicity that has seen Chautari grow from its humble beginnings in October



1991 when water-resources engineer Bikash Pandey, Norwegian engineer Odd Hoftun and his Nepal-born political scientist son Martin initiated a fortnightly discussion forum on 'Development Philosophy'. When Martin died in a plane-crash in July 1992 on his way back to Nepal from Oxford where he was a student, Odd Hoftun made available a space for the discussion forum to continue. Since April 1995, it has come to be called Martin Chautari.

Today, Chautari is run by its members - a committed mix of idealistic activists, journalists, writers, commentators and students. Though Chautari itself continues to remain within the world of the word - spoken and written, its members have notched up remarkable successes in social activism. Recently, it functioned as the focal point of a movement for the emancipation of bonded agriculture labour in the western part of the country. Earlier, Chautari members spearheaded the campaign to oust diesel three-wheelers from the Kathmandu Valley and succeeded where better funded NGOs and INGOs had failed to make a dent. On several controversial issues, Chautari is the first place where non-conformist ideas are expressed and discussed.

After a decade of its lively existence, Chautari is engaged in reassessing itself at the moment. In an internal document floated for discussion, Ashutosh observes without hesitation, "Chautari's flagship program - *Mangalbare* - is both a success and an anomaly". Agrees Pratyoush Onta, "Even though it is exceedingly successful on its own, its failure to replicate itself in Kathmandu as well as elsewhere in Nepal needs serious attention". Though such retrospection is commendable, the charitable view could be that it is indeed lonely at the top. The kind of commitment required to run such a stimulating forum of discussion is not very common everywhere. It is even less so in a society like Nepal where intellectuals do not consider themselves 'learners', but take themselves very seriously as interpreters of divine wisdom.

But Chautari has ignited a change. The ideas propounded by Chautari - of tolerance, respect for the other, and the freedom of thought and speech without the fear of ridicule - remain with whoever comes into contact with it. How many institutions can claim to have initiated a culture, and then sustained it for over a decade, by sticking to their undeclared mission?

Call it modesty, but success seems to sit lightly on the members of Chautari. They laugh and call it the reward of a job well done for its own sake. It is this nonchalance that makes Chautari what it is - a live chat-room. Forget its Internet versions for now. In a country of twenty three million people, Nepal only has about three hundred thousand phone lines, fifty thousand computers, and less than thirty thousand Internet connections. Face-to-face encounters are still the most effective channel of communication, and for that, *chautaris* are still relevant, even important.

Chautari keeps the Socratic tradition alive in a city that is increasingly acquiring the impersonality of a metropolis without fully acquiring its urbanity. This in itself is something to celebrate.



IS A PRISON AT THE MARGINS, OR AT THE HEART, OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

