

Back at Sundarjal >18

"The ball is in the king's court."



The stress of incarceration is beginning to tell on BP Koirala in these pages from his diary. The fear of losing his supply of writing paper is more worrying than not getting books to read. Compounded with this, BP is getting increasingly worried about his health and worries that the jailers have not sent a doctor to check him up. He discusses politics with jailmate Ganesh Man Singh and concludes that it is now up to King Birendra to make his move.

9 February

Sundarjal: I am greatly disturbed since yesterday when we got the impression from the captain that writing paper wouldn't be available to us. I am anxious at the thought that we may be totally deprived of intellectual activities. Even if there are no books I could write my biography or the history of Nepal's democratic struggle in which I have very actively and at times centrally participated. Then I could jot down stray thoughts, take down notes from books (we have six second-rate paper) write stories or even attempt a novel on contemporary socio-political developments in Nepal. If paper is not supplied to us, and if we can't contact our people for it or bring it ourselves—we had asked the officer here to get writing paper from the market from our money, when we were received that kind of information—then my life will really be extremely unbearable. It is most frustrating. I have started cutting out the blank margins from the two daily newspapers (Gorkhapatra and Rising Nepal) to save as writing material. Since I have to conserve paper, I have started writing small letters so that they may not take bigger space in the paper. I have three refills for my dot pen. I have a small bottle of ink and this pen which I am writing with. I don't know how long the ink will last. I brought this pen just fortuitously when I was sorting out my things at Patna on the eve of our departure to this place. Another cause of worry is that the doctor does not visit us although we have been asking for him. I am not feeling all right with giddiness and heaviness in the head, buzzing sound and pulse in the ears and bleeding from the nose. Regular visits from a medical man would inspire confidence that at least when we are ill we will be in safe hands. Washed some clothes, didn't bathe, with this mental state I couldn't

read. The day is cold. It started with hopes of being sunny and warm, but towards evening the day was overcast with clouds and cold wind blowing.

10 February

My mental tension continues, but it is not as high as it was yesterday because the major tort that he had not understood when I said I wanted six quires of paper. He thought that the six sheets, but that was that, he said, indicating by implication that the misunderstanding would be closed and 6 quires of paper would be supplied to us. I also left it at that. But GM (Ganesh Man Singh) thinks that he made that statement just to be pleasant. And that he had referred our demand for paper to a "higher authority" which had not yet sanctioned it. GM says we should conserve paper and not be misled by expectation of relaxation in the matter. Today too they didn't send us the doctor. I became nervous and thought we would be deprived of medical attention. My present worry is that I don't get sound sleep and my head is constantly heavy with a buzzing sound.

A carpenter came to repair some of our windows. They supplied a bucket and mug for GM's bathroom. Ever since our arrival in this camp, i.e. since last 40 days GM had been asking for a bucket for his bathroom. It arrived only today.

During tea we talked about Nepal's politics and the imperatives of our return to Nepal. GM is firmly convinced that we have saved ourselves, our party and, if the response from the other side is equally informed with statesmanship, then the country [too] by this decision to return to Nepal. Now the ball is in the king's court.

CD REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

Learning Nepali the Klingon way

A new CD-ROM teaches you to ask in Nepali where the beach is.

Consumers learning European languages are increasingly faced with a choice of instructional materials, ranging from traditional pocket-sized flashcards and companions to interactive CD-ROMs. The latter have the advantage of being designed as personalisable linguistic resources that hold the learner's attention. For the most part, only commercially viable language-learning courses have been made interactive (such as Spanish, German and Russian) while minority languages materials, into which category Nepali certainly falls, offer at best an audio range of sample conversations alongside a printed course book.

It was thus with some surprise that I came across EuroTalk Interactive's Talk Now! series of CD-ROMs, offering multilingual instruction in lesser-known languages such as Awarese, Farsi, Kananda, Marathi and... Nepali. I ordered the course entitled *EuroTalk: Essential words and phrases for absolute beginners* and was rather bemused by the cover.

After double-clicking the rainbow coloured Talk Now! icon on the desktop, the user is taken to a secondary folder. While the natural choice would be to click the icon labelled 'Learn Nepali', my eye was drawn instead to a folder underneath which reads, in rather small and blocky Devanagari, *Klingon sikhinsas*. This I can only interpret to mean 'learn Klingon', the language spoken by the race immortalised in Star Trek. More surprising still, in ways that I will describe later, is that the Klingon interface resembles the whole CD-ROM. Clicking on the icon labelled Klingon sadly leads nowhere and the user is left with the feeling that a Devanagari-iterate computer programmer is having a laugh at someone's expense, in this case probably the company's (EuroTalk). After all, it is likely that neither the managerial staff of EuroTalk nor users of the CD-ROM read Devanagari script.

On double-clicking the more promising 'Learn Nepali' icon, the user is required to personalise the interface by typing a name. A very pleasant (if unrecognised) Nepali voice greets, *subha din* ('Good Day'), is then heard followed by a loud American shouting "Good Afternoon". While the top left of the home screen is dominated by administrative features, including purchasing other EuroTalk CDs, the prominent graphic of a CD (in the middle of the screen) labelled 'Learn Nepali' is strangely not clickable. The user is instead required to click a small start arrow, once again enter a name, and then the same enthusiastic American voice says "Welcome to EuroTalk", the irony of which is all too apparent when starting to learn a South Asian language.

The content of the CD-ROM is housed within a slicked modern window with a subdivided windowing, including 'First Words', 'Countries', 'Numbers', 'Phrases' and 'Food'. The subdivisions are sensible and useful, and navigation through the different sections is likewise intuitive. In each subsection, the user must choose an option fitting his or her needs: word practice, speaking practice, an essay game or a more challenging one. The overarching structure is heavily dependent on graphics rather than text, and success is measured by passing tests. This approach will appeal to younger learners, but university students, researchers, healthcare or development professionals who are hoping to learn Nepali as part of their vocational preparation may find the interface childish and frustrating. Many educational CD-ROMs offer level or aptitude testing; the lower level being visually rich and structured around guided tours, tests and games, while the higher level concentrates more on in-depth language use and rich content. This

type of stratification, if well implemented, might allow the EuroTalk CD-ROM to be less off-putting to adult learners.

Two features of the *Learn Nepali* CD-ROM stand out special prize. First, it is possible to study Nepali through the medium of language other than English. At any point in the course, the user may choose to alter the 'help' language (the language of instruction) from American English (the default) to British English, Hindi, Icelandic, Tibetan or any of 70 others. This is a powerful facility that will significantly increase the overall user base of the package, and is a feature not readily incorporated into other language-learning tools. There are some limitations, as one would expect: some languages offer voiceover tracks while others are strictly textual (for example, the written Zulu word for 'beef' is often interestingly the pronunciation of the Nepali word *nolo*). Scrolling down the list, I noted that Nepali is also available, meaning that Nepali could be learned through Nepali, a somewhat unconventional way of achieving monolingual language instruction. Star Trek is ever present in the menu structure, however, as the language listed as 'Nepali' in Roman script is written as *Klingon* in Devanagari.

A second useful feature is the option of a female Nepali speaker instead of, or alongside, a male one. The language course is presented by two animated guides, a Caucasian man and an equally white woman. On hearing a word, the user can opt for a Nepali woman's voice instead of a Nepali man's simply by clicking on the relevant icon. The importance of this feature has less to do with sexual politics, since women's voices are just as often featured in language learning tools as men's, and rather more so to with

speech variation and linguistic choice of the opposites. Users of the EuroTalk CD-ROM stand a better chance of understanding, and of being understood, if and when they finally communicate in Nepali simply on account of having heard different accents and idioms from the outset.

While the linguistic content of this beginners' CD-ROM is acceptable, it is marred by an overarching cultural uniformity. EuroTalk Nepali is an exercise in unconstructed ethnocentrism, underpinned by the assumption that each and every culture (and thus by extension, its language) has similar patterns of social and economic interaction. Sapir and Whorf would turn in their graves if they knew what was being peddled in the name of language pedagogy. The lack of cultural tuning is best illustrated with examples, and is particularly apparent in the sections *First Words* and *Phrases*. The list of *First Words* starts out, naturally enough, with 'Yes' and 'No', but then, third in the list we are offered 'telephone' (pronounced *teliphon*, sound thereafter 'win' (rendered as *wain* and finally near the bottom, *kreftit karit* (credit card). In their defence, these are all now available in Nepali (though I'm pretty sure they weren't when EuroTalk was created), and visitors to the country may indeed be in need of them, but including them seems a little far-fetched. Likewise, the *Phrases* section is indicative of this globalised approach. The learner is encouraged to repeat and commit to memory sentences such as 'where is



the train station' (ते स्टेशन कहाँ छ?) and 'where is the beach?' (समुद्री किनार कहाँ छ?). While the latter example is of little use anywhere in the Nepali-speaking world, the former may at least be of some utility in Darjeeling or Sikkim. Generally speaking, in fact, the content of the course is more suited for use in the Nepali-speaking regions of India than anywhere in Nepal itself.

My suspicion is that every CD-ROM within the *Talk Now!* series has an identical database structure which includes exactly the same words, phrases and examples. The result is a single product with voiceovers in different languages, but marketed as 75 different language courses.

EuroTalk Interactive's *Learn Nepali* CD-ROM is a mixed bag. While the interface is effective, the games and tasks engaging (if childish), and the choice of both male and female Nepali voices commendable, the utility of the

course is compromised by the problems outlined above. The seamless integration and slick interface of the CD-ROM, which has the lack of cultural applicability, make it a triumph of form over content.

EuroTalk Interactive's *Talk Now! Learn Nepali* CD-ROM: Essential words and phrases for absolute beginners. 2000. London. ISBN 1-8662-21088-8. System requirements: Windows 95/98/NT/2000 or Mac OS 7 or above. Computer must have colour display, sound, 16 MB of free memory. CD-ROM drive and preferably a microphone, price: £24.99. Can be ordered from www.eurotalk.co.uk

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