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BY LIFE & TIMES **PULSE** people

CYCLE OF AWARENESS

Three Nepalese cyclists are on a world tour promoting awareness of HIV/AIDS and the environment, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

IT'S the twilight hour in the unfamiliar surroundings of South India. A quick Google search informs that there's an ashram nearby which takes in guests. Presumably, it's a modest dwelling place and, at the very least, there'll be a good meal.

Dr Amrit Baral and his travelling companions arrived at one such ashram a few months ago to a different sort of reception. Inside the palatial building, they were greeted by a Filipino receptionist who showed them the package deals (which included a body massage) available for their stay.

The swami in charge was willing to allow them to stay for one night, but only if they forked out INR5,000 (RM300) per person. Unable to afford the fee, the trio pitched their tents outside the ashram. There was no sleeping that night because, as Amrit says: "We were next to a wildlife sanctuary and we could hear the lions snoring all night."

Amrit was in Malaysia recently with his brother, Ajit, and their friend, Shankar Poudel, as part of their World Bicycle Tour which began in Nepal six months ago. They plan to cycle through 100 countries in five years and, in the process, raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and the environment. They will use other modes of transportation only when it's absolutely necessary.

ALONE AND DIRTY

The reason Amrit chooses to focus his attention on helping people who are living with HIV/AIDS is because he sees how they are often treated unfairly by society. He tells the story of a Nepalese woman whose



For a noble cause. (from left) Ajit Baral, Dr Amrit Baral and Shankar Poudel.

husband was working in the Middle East. She was unfaithful and contracted HIV. Her family didn't want her, and she ended up alone, and dying, in a hospital.

"Lots of money is being poured into pharmaceuticals to treat patients with HIV or AIDS," says Amrit, who studied medicine in Chongqing, China. Fluent in Mandarin, he feels that there is little awareness about how to improve the quality of the lives of those who are already living with the disease. He also believes that the numbers of patients suffering from HIV/AIDS have skyrocketed because of unsafe sex practices, ineffective sex education and a general lack of awareness about the disease.

For Ajit and Shankar, it is the changes in their hometown of Pokhara that have propelled them to focus their attention on environmental issues.

Shankar, the quiet one, remembers a Pokhara that once had two restaurants. Tourists stayed in huts and cooked their own food. The 37-year-old marketing manager finds it hard to believe that today, Pokhara has many guesthouses, and residents have to endure traffic jams; in fact, it's become dirty and polluted.

There was a time, says Ajit, when he could drink the water from one of the seven lakes in Pokhara. Now, says this 26-year-old environmentalist, only three lakes are visible. Some lakes are filled with garbage and overgrown weeds like watercress. Others have undergone land reclamation by developers to facilitate housing development.

Remembering something similar he saw in a place called Lakeside in Cambodia, Ajit giggles and says: "On Google map, we

We don't count days anymore. We only count kilometres cycled.

Ajit Baral

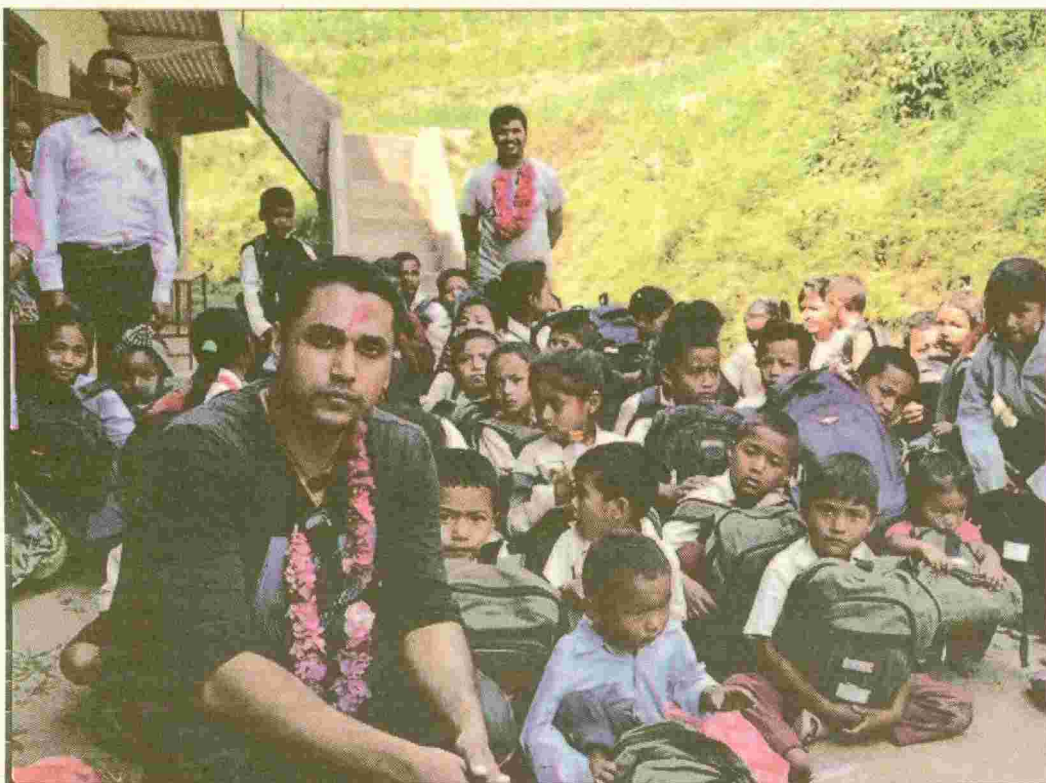
were supposed to be in the middle of the lake. But when we looked around us, there was no water at all." The lake had been filled up and the three men were in the middle of a construction site.

CATALYST TO CYCLE

The catalyst to take firm action to raise awareness for these causes came soon after the devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake last year.

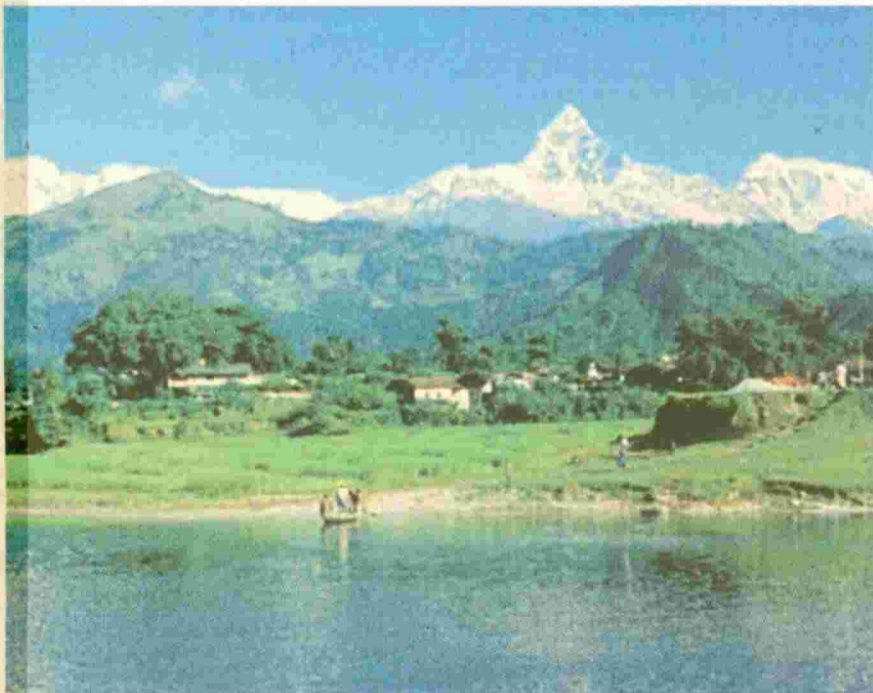
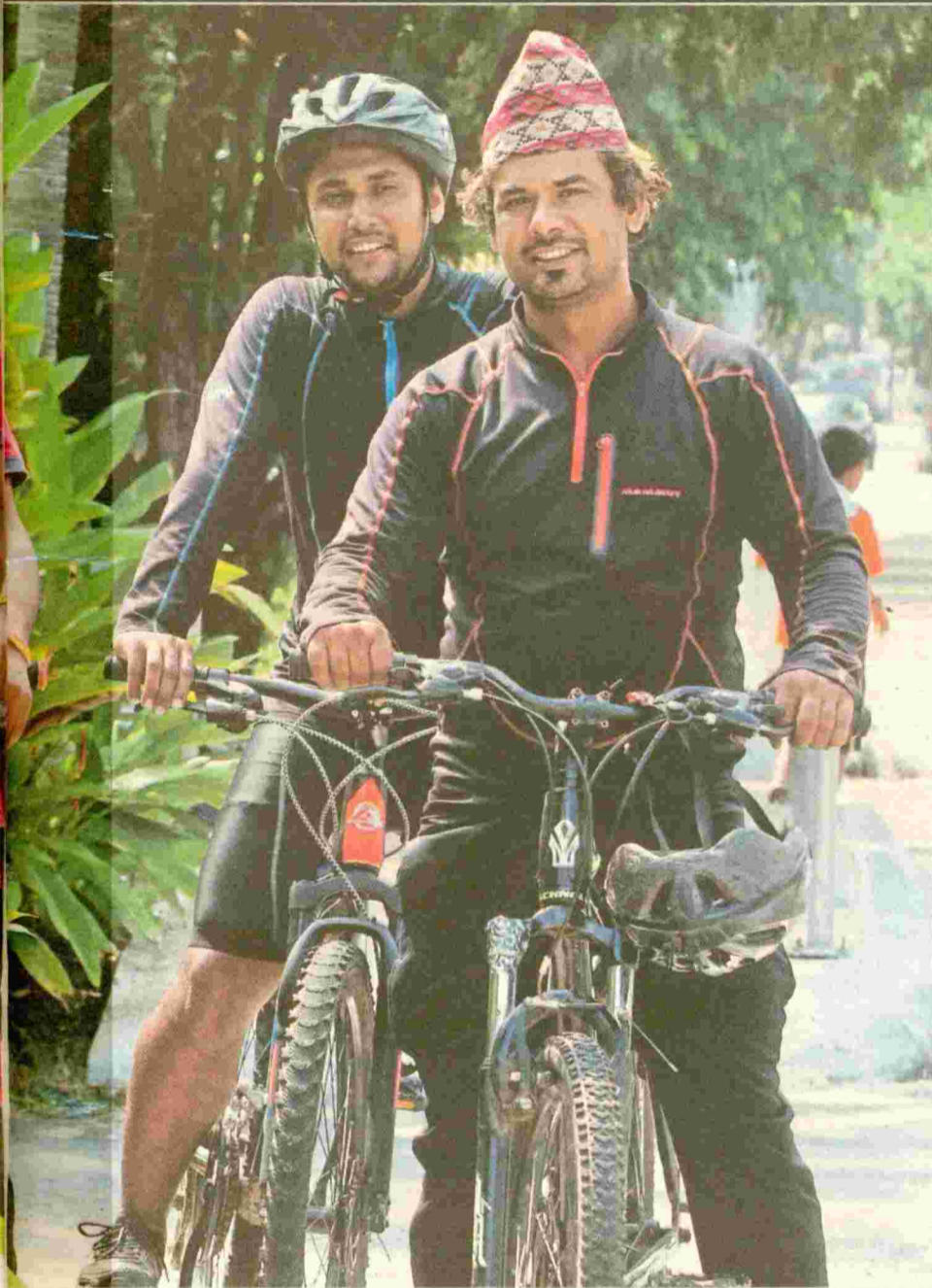
On that fateful morning of April 25, Amrit was in the Emergency Department of a hospital when the earthquake struck. Two days later, he wrote a story chronicling some of what he had witnessed during a trip to provide humanitarian aid to the people in Rautbesi, Nuwakot:

"On our way, we had glimpses of many houses destroyed by the earthquake and people were sleeping in open paddy fields. Some were busy rummaging in the ruins and taking out utensils and usable items. I was afraid to take pictures of those houses because those people who had suffered seemed angry and frustrated and very miserable.



Amrit and kids at a primary school in a village.

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View from one of the lakes in Pokhara.

"We were the first to reach (Rautbesi) with relief materials. There was a rush of poor, hungry, sick and sad victims. I asked them to stand in a line, but I was unable to control (the eager crowd) Later, policemen registered their names and put them in groups."

In the following days, more than free medical advice, many of the victims needed psychosocial counselling. Children wouldn't go to toilet alone. Men and women were too scared to go back to their homes in case there was further damage. Many didn't understand the need for hygiene or proper sanitation.

They couldn't fathom the link between man's abuse of the environment and the damage to Mother Nature.

Were these problems exclusively among Nepalese or among others as well? All these thoughts were crystallised into a fervent need to spread the message about their various causes.

When Amrit told his father about the proposed trip, he wasn't keen. "He wanted to know what the outcome would be," shares the 28-year-old. Eventually, his father relented and gave his sons this advice: "Whatever you do, don't humiliate yourself. Make me proud."



Amrit examining a baby that had breathing difficulties.



Beach cleaning event in Mt. Lavinia Beach, Colombo Sri Lanka.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

So, on Sept 20, 2015, these three cyclists left their hometown and began an adventure of a lifetime. The trip is self-funded and they use their World Tour Cyclists - An Awareness Project webpage on Facebook to communicate with people. Many have supported them in all manner of ways, including paying for and providing accommodation, covering the costs of their food and, at times, fees for their visas.

One of the most beautiful places they've been to is the Maldives. However, Ajit again giggles and explains that they finished their cycling in half a day. "Everything is an island there," he says, before adding: "There is an island for the capital. A picnic island. A prison island. A mental hospital island. And even an island for garbage."

Wherever they go, the trio make a concerted effort to speak about the causes that are close to their hearts.

For Amrit, a ready memory is the time he spoke to a group of young men in Luang Prabang, Laos about their sexual health and gave them free treatment. In

Sri Lanka, they got involved in a project to clean up the beach. With a motto like Leave Ego, Live Eco, Ajit insists that: "Children should be taught from a young age to respect the environment and understand why it is worth protecting so they can tell their friends and parents."

In addition to Malaysia, their route includes Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Asia Pacific, South America and Africa.

What will they do once this adventure is over, I ask.

Ajit, the first to respond, confides that he'd like to pursue a postgraduate qualification in anthropology. Shankar plans to start an organisation that focuses on the protection of human rights and the environment, while Amrit would like to continue working with people living with HIV/AIDS.

For now, though, these intrepid travellers seem to have lost all sense of time. Smiling, Ajit concludes: "There are days when we don't know what date it is. We don't count days anymore. We only count kilometres cycled."