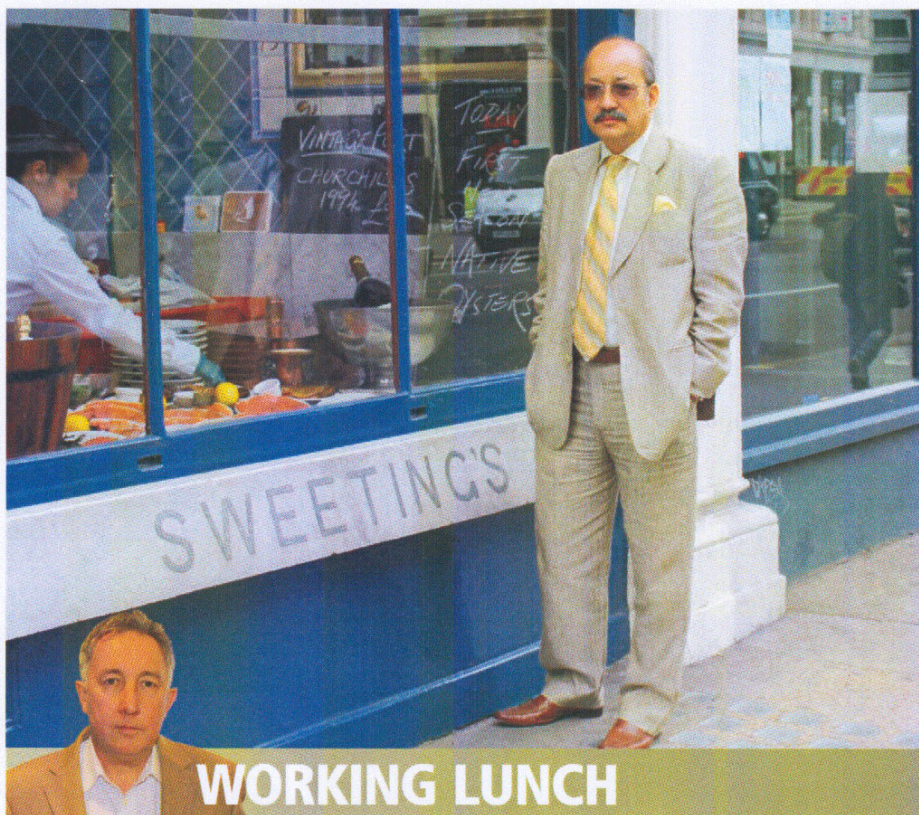


Peter Bishop dines with Diby Mani Rajbhandari, President of the European Economic Chamber – Nepal



## Diby Mani Rajbhandari

- Chairman of European Economic Chamber – Nepal
- Managing Director, Nepal Construction & Engineering Corporation
- Founder Nepal-German Chamber of Commerce
- Member of Board: Sagarmartha Insurance Company
- Member of Board: Bhansa Ghar restaurant
- Married with two sons
- Hobbies: Biographies, meeting people, and good food

He has of course played a major role in ECIBON (Enhancing the Capacity of Intermediary Business Organisations in Nepal), the EU-funded project managed in-country by his Chamber and in which London Chamber of Commerce has played a key role. Over the last two years Nepalese chambers and trade organisations have been trained in management, policy work and international trade, and introduced to networks and potential business clients.

Diby was confident that the project, now coming to a formal end, had been a success but was keen to continue self-sustaining activities beyond its funding life. A protocol soon to be signed with the LCCI would contribute to that, as would improved English language skills of the Nepalese participants. "The English language is the lingua franca of business and our people need to work on oral and written skills; a software programme for the latter would help immeasurably."

His business philosophy overall for Nepal is based on a belief that the socialist principle of equality should be blended with an innovative free market economy with public-private partnerships, and appropriate contributions from the Nepalese people.

"Those who have more wealth should give more money, those with the brains should contribute their intelligence, and those with the strength should give that."

Johanna Lumley and the Gurkhas had to come up at some point. Her welcome at Tribhuvan airport had been like "nothing ever seen there before." What did he think of the argument that Nepal would suffer financially from an exodus of Gurkhas and their pensions? "I don't think that is a major issue. Nowadays our expatriates earn more money from working in service in the Middle East." He was concerned though that the Gurkhas and their families who chose now to move to the UK should have some prior familiarisation or even job training before they went, "otherwise they could end up being a drain on the British tax system."

He declined pudding and made the two-minute journey back to the Chamber's members' lounge for coffee. What did he think of the restaurant? "Surprisingly informal, very good service, and food that you don't often see in Nepal."

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**D**iby Mani Rajbhandari was in London at the end of August, en route to Copenhagen for the wrap-up meeting of the ECIBON project, featured over the last two years in *London Business Matters*, so I took the opportunity to take him to a fish restaurant, not a common sight in Kathmandu in land-locked Nepal.

Not any old fish restaurant of course but Sweetings, operating from Queen Victoria Street since 1889, a City tradition with a school refectory feel, and the place of choice for many Square Mile notables and characters. Earlier this year Diby had entertained me at Bhansa Ghar – a traditional Nepalese kitchen in downtown Kathmandu – so an historic London venue seemed a suitable response.

Over half a Guinness and a ginger beer I asked him about the political situation in Nepal. "Since the elections in 2008 there has been a marked improvement but we still have a long way to go. We now have a coalition government with the Maoists in opposition and are busy drafting a new constitution which will embrace all parties. I am an optimist so I believe we will achieve genuine stability within two years."

What impact was the situation having on business in Nepal? "Things have been better, perhaps surprisingly given the global downturn, but we have experienced increased tourism, there hasn't been any slump in property prices, manufacturing

is holding its own, and trade is growing. That's not to say that there is not a lot to be done, and the potential for growth is enormous."

Over a starter of half a dozen West Mersea oysters and main course of grilled scampi (dishes not often spotted in the Himalayas) Diby listed the main areas of business potential of interest to British, or indeed any, business. Top of the list was hydro-electric power, fashionably green, and, with the necessary investment, in future abundance in a land which hosts the highest peaks in the world.

Next were the massive infrastructure projects the feasibility of which the government was exploring including north-south and east-west roadways and even a rail system – currently there is only about 30 miles of railway in Nepal.

Tourism-related projects were a further area of development with health, cultural and eco-tourism on the rise. The land of the birthplace of Buddha was benefiting from increased worldwide interest in the stress-busting qualities of yoga and the search for tranquillity. Not unrelated was Diby's contention that in the future more people would be considering retiring in the breathtakingly beautiful surroundings of Nepal after lifetimes of working in comparatively drab urban areas.

Nepal's economic development, he told me, was closely connected with the country's continuing good relations with its

neighbours India and China. Diby then gave me a fascinating history lesson covering Nepal's former role as a staging post on the Silk Route, China's adoption of free market Communism, and India's rejection of a 'closed' economy when Manmohan Singh became Finance Minister.

Diby's knowledge is the result of a long and distinguished career as a businessman and contributor to the community. Now managing director of a construction and engineering company started by his father, he has done business in an impressive array of countries throughout Europe, India, the Far East and the USA. An early UK partner was the British Motor Corporation (predecessor of British Leyland). Loyalty to this relationship led the company to reject a dealership offer from Toyota – "that decision must have cost us a fortune."

Chambers of commerce have been a theme in his business life. He is the founder President of the Nepal-German Chamber of Commerce, the first bilateral chamber in the country, now there are over fifty, and he has been active in Jaycee International, the junior chamber movement.

Business however is not everything to D.M. Rajbhandari. As he put it, "I work for money, I don't die for money", and this is reflected in his wide range of pro bono activity. As well as his voluntary chamber role, he has been active in a primary school project in which 54 schools have been built in remote regions of Nepal.

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