**Brief remarks by**

**Bihari Krishna Shrestha on the occasion of his**

**Pratikatmak Janko ceremony**

**(Fagun 17, 2070; March 1st, 2014)**

**First of all, I would like to thank you all for your kind and august presence on this occasion to mark my completion of 77 years, seven months, and seven days today that traditionally requires a Newar to celebrate his first janko with an elaborate ritual, feasting and gift giving to mark his passage to old age. However, despite being a devout Hindu Newar myself, I have decided, with the consent of my family, to depart from the tradition and mark this passage only symbolically, first by paying my homage to my ancestral deity, Lord Surya Binayak of Bhaktapur, this morning and now, by receiving tika and blessings from my highly revered didi, Mrs. Jyoti Mathema, who herself has gone through her second janko.**

**The reasons for drastically cutting down on ritual, celebrations and their costs are twofold. Firstly, the janko ceremony is traditionally deemed to confer on the *jankomi* or the person going through the janko ritual, some godly potency, is held in special esteem thereafter and is expected to don a demeanour of comparable spiritual elevation and detachment. Sure enough, since people’s life expectancy at birth had been very limited during earlier times, one certainly needed extraordinary or divine backstopping to live long enough to be able to celebrate a janko. But science has changed all that and has taken the celestial gloss off from the longevity of a Newar. So, these days if a Newar dies before his janko, the more appropriate question would be what has gone wrong with that Newar to have died so early.**

**Secondly, while the Newars with the highest HDI ranking in the country happen to be relatively more prosperous than other caste ethnic groups in Nepal, the fact remains that Nepal continues to be a poor country, and the money spent on lavish celebrations could be alternatively used for purposes that would serve the interest of less fortunate elderly people in Nepal. Therefore, I have decided to keep the whole exercise low key and less expensive, and have instead decided to donate a sum of Rs 10 lakh to the reputed organization called *Ageing Nepal* that has long been active in promoting the cause of the elderly people in Nepal**

**My decision for this donation is guided by the fact that the elderly already constitutes a fairly large proportion in Nepal’s population, 8.14 percent or 22 lakh according to 2011 census. This however, is only the tip of the iceberg. The proportion is headed for mounting increases with improving life expectancies in the country. Although the socio-economic misery associated with ageing in this poverty-stricken landscape of Nepal is yet to be properly studied, the available sporadic evidence suggests that elderly and poorer people in general, and elderly women in particular, suffer from a range of deprivations in the society and are left to fend for themselves just when they are beginning to be weaker physically, socially and economically in their lives. For instance, just about every single one of the 240 elderly people or so living in the old age home in Panchadewal at Gaushala remain a heart-rending story of agony, deprivation, torture and violence. But as things stand, they happen to be the luckier lot in the country with room and board assured by the government in one of the holiest places in Hinduism in the country.**

**For most elderly people in this predominantly rural country the situation is much worse. Since poverty in Nepal is mostly rural, we can only imagine what the elderly suffer in terms of constraints in access to such basic needs as food, shelter and health services in particular, and the gender-based deprivation makes matters worse for older women. Just to give a small instance, my wife, Dr. Hira Mana Pradhan, has been running a rural outreach weekly clinic in Dolalghat in Kavre district for many years which is mostly frequented by women patients from some 10 VDCs in the region. In 2013, of the total of 5,279 patients in the clinic, 73 percent were women. However, while among the patients aged 59 or less, 77 percent were female patients, the proportion dropped to only 62 percent in the age group of 60 and above, suggesting that with advancing age, women’s access to such services become increasingly constrained even in a region as accessible as the villages around Dolalghat in Kavre district.**

**While the government is now beginning to wake up to the problem of the elderly in the country and provides old age pension, however nominal, to people above 75, clearly much more needs to be done and done urgently against the prospect of their unprecedented increase in number and proportion in the years to come.**

**In this regard, as the principal architect of the two highly successful organizational approaches in the country during the Panchayat regime namely, forest user groups in the restoration of the Nepal’s once totally denuded forests, and Mothers’ Groups in dramatically achieving MDGs in child survival and maternal mortality rate reduction to the applause of the whole world, it remains my conviction that for addressing our geriatric problems too, empowering the senior citizens themselves to manage their own affairs remains one best bet yet to bring some cheer to the lives of the elderly women and men in this predominantly rural country. That is why *Ageing Nepal* and I have decided to use my donation for the establishment and management of an Elderly Empowerment Fund. I am deeply grateful to *Ageing Nepal* for having decided to entertain my donation for setting up the said fund with my initials as part of the name and to allow me to enter into partnership with this highly esteemed organization.**

**To put it briefly, I plan to work with *Ageing Nepal* to implement various advocacy activities aimed primarily at promoting reforms in the larger policy regime of the state. It is again my conviction that as in the cases of the forest user groups and mothers’ groups, what is, after all, needed is a small shift in the policy regime of the state that would empower the elderly people to plan and implement their own activities for their own well-being in the communities. In community forestry for instance, the only change that was effected in 1998 was to introduce the institution of forest user groups in the already existing forestry rules of the government and to let such user institutions to manage their own forests. Similarly, in the case of health, the policy decision was to create mothers groups in each ward in the country and to empower their female community health volunteers to access services from the already existing government health posts and bring them to the people in the communities. Over the years, however, both the forest user groups and mothers’ groups, by making full use of their autonomy, have emerged as highly ingenious organizations, managing their affairs increasingly more effectively and efficiently.**

**In the case of the elderly people in Nepal, it should be strongly emphasized that their number and proportion, as mentioned earlier, are only going to grow with each passing year, generating greater stress on the national economy and on the ever shrinking working age population among others. And this is all going to happen against the context of continuing paucity of resources in the country. Therefore, in the interest of enabling the elderly people to take care of their own wellbeing as ingeniously as possible on the one hand and of allowing the government share the task of caring for the elderly with the elderly themselves, it has become more urgent than ever that there should be autonomous organizations of the elderly people themselves in the communities. Besides, since most of our communities are characterized by acute socio-economic diversities based on caste and class differences in particular, such participatory institutions alone have the proven capacity to provide benefits to those most in need. It is in promoting reforms such as these that I look forward to partnering with *Ageing Nepal* in the days ahead.**

**Once again I would like to thank you all for your kind and gracious presence in this event and look forward to your continued blessing, support and encouragement in our endeavour, however modest, in this area in the days to come.**

**Thank you.**