

Kathmandu: When faced with great danger, the best-known gamblers of the world have been known to keep their cool, as well as their shirt on. Remember British Agent 007 James Bond in "Casino Royale" and Amitabh Bachchan as the Great Gambler in the 1979 Bollywood movie of the same name?

Now a real-life character steps into the shoes of the legendary

ones in Nepal.

Rakesh Wadhwa, self-confessed inveterate gambler and entrepreneur with the Midas touch who reigns over Nepal's casino kingdom, begins a new game on Friday even as police and the revenue officials are baying for the blood of the billion-rupee industry.

Wadhwa, a Kolkata old boy with his roots in New Delhi, joins the bandwagon of the new writers in English from Nepal with the launch of his debut novel, "The Deal Maker", published by Rupa.

Co-authored by Leon Louw, the novel is about the rise of a seven-year village boy to the prime ministership of the world's largest democracy.

However, the life of Sudesh Kumar is not the autobiography of Wadhwa though the economic policies propagated in the book are.

The 53-year-old chartered accountant, who began his career in Nepal with a five-star hotel in India after a stint at running casinos in Sri Lanka, heads Nepal Recreation Center, the organisation that runs five of the 10 casinos in Nepal and once had a monopoly on the gaming industry in the Himalayan nation.

Both his admirers and detractors would agree that Wadhwa's own life is even more interesting than his hero's.

From being a junior partner in the Nepali casino industry, he eventually edged out his American mentor, Richard D. Tuttle, and survived run-ins with both the Maoists and the son-in-law of deposed Nepal king Gyanendra, who wrested away one of the most valued casinos from NRC.

In an age when it is politically incorrect to support smoking, betting during cricket matches or killing tigers for body parts, Wadhwa has, as an advocate of free enterprise, espoused the removal of state bans on all three.

Personally, he recently triumphed over a "virtual death sentence" - the lupus, a chronic inflammatory disease that can lead to cancer, reportedly by undergoing a one-month fasting therapy.

An ardent fan of Ayn Rand and her classic, "Atlas Shrugged", Wadhwa's novel is, according to the publishers' blurb, a "miraculous yet believable, a struggling yet zealous, an overwhelming yet humble account of how one man takes India to undreamt-of wealth".

The story, conceived nearly half a century earlier, comes at a time Nepal's gaming industry is in deep trouble with police issuing warrants against some for allegedly admitting Nepalis at the gaming tables, a punishable offence in Nepal.

In addition, now the Inland Revenue Department is also hollering for its dues.

Reports Friday said the 10 casinos - two in Pokhara and the rest in Kathmandu - owe the government a whopping NRS 350 million in unpaid royalty, a chronic problem for the casino industry in Nepal since the Maoist insurgency escalated in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Casino Nepal, the oldest in South Asia and the flagship of NRC, owes the lion's share at over NRS 100 million.

There were also reports that the casinos run by NRC were behind in paying rent to the five-star hotels whose premises they operate from.

The accumulated rent due is almost NRS 500 million, the Republica daily said.

Wadhwa is hoping his novel will sell millions of copies.

"The more copies are sold, the more the chances people will be inspired," he told the daily. "People will start thinking about what's wrong with the economy. It's based in India but it could be equally applicable in Nepal..."

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