Poll drama

Candidate, cash and caste will decide Madhes vote

PRASHANT JHA IN BIRGANJ AND RAXAUL

Not even a week after the agreement with the government, the central Tarai is already gripped by election fever. Asked if elections will happen, Bidyanand Sah, a Saptari native who works as a hotel guard here replies without hesitation: “This time the government will do it. But no one will win a majority and results will be a khichdi.”

At Ghandhaghar Chok an APF sentry, rifle slung over his shoulder, says: “Nothing will stop it now, but we will have to provide security. The local police is useless.”

Parsa district will elect five members to the constituent assembly. The NC has the organisation and established faces but the cadre is demoralised. The UML has a base, especially among the town’s Muslims and Tharus. The Madhesi parties have skeletal structures but the ‘Forum’ is a known brand, and with smart campaigning can translate ethnic consciousness into votes. No one gives the Maoists any chance here.

Even candidates of mainstream parties are desperate to prove their Madhesi credentials. Babu Jan Ali of the UML is up against friend-turned-foe Bimal Srivastava of the RPP. Ali sits on his bed, forming election committees and planning mass meetings.

“We participated in last year’s Madhes movement, this time I gave my moral support, I will refuse any party whip that goes against Madhesi interests,” he says. Ali takes a dig at his opponent: “Look at Bimal. His family has married Pahadis, their lifestyle is Pahadi. And he is a royalist.” It looks like communal mudslinging will be a hallmark of his campaign. There is concern about armed groups who are opposed to the deal with the government, and candidates admit they don’t go out at night. The militants are uncertain about how the public will perceive their use of violence to disrupt elections, and they do need an exit strategy.

People here expect them to set off blasts to show their presence, but they will strike deals with candidates to get money in return for security and support.

Across the border in Raxaul, the Hindu right is divided on the question of Nepal. Baba Sanjay Nath, a local priest, has often taken processions of sadhus to oppose secularism in Nepal for which he is rumoured to have got money from royalists. He is supposed to be behind the Nepal Defence Army. But Anil Sinha, a BJP state committee member and head of Seema Jagran Manch, is in touch with both armed and unarmed Madhesi leaders. Sinha says: “Restoring the Hindu rashtra and weakening the Maoists is more important than saving the monarchy in Nepal.”

EDITORIAL

Half the sky

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Women’s Day Special p10-11

Defence Army. But Anil Sinha, a BJP state committee member and head of Seema Jagran Manch, is in touch with both armed and unarmed Madhesi leaders. Sinha says: “Restoring the Hindu rashtra and weakening the Maoists is more important than saving the monarchy in Nepal.”
No matter where
Women in the hills and plains suffer equally from gender bias

The real revolution that has swept Nepal in the past 12 years is not of politics. It is the dramatic strides this country has taken in women’s empowerment. Across Nepal on village trails, along highways, amidst the rippling terraces of rice at 8:30 every morning you see something that you seldom saw 10 years ago: long lines of uniformed girls carrying books, going to school holding the hands of their little sisters.

The value placed by their parents on education, the enormous social pressure for literacy lies at the heart of Nepal’s current transformation. Rising female literacy is the main factor behind the improvements in the whole spectrum of development parameters: reduction in the percentage of child marriages, higher birth rates, better health and education at the grassroots.

To be sure, there are formidable challenges ahead. The child marriage rate is still a high 60 percent in rural areas. Despite rapid strides in literacy, more than half of Nepali women still can’t read or write. There are pockets of Nepal, especially in the eastern tarai and western hills, where the maternal mortality rate is as bad as sub-Saharan Africa.

Come against women and domestic violence has seen a worrying rise, possibly because of the prolonged absence of family members due to migration as well as the greater assertiveness of educated women (‘No sex’, ‘Kabhi’). There are tens of thousands of women who head households because their male breadwinners were killed, disappeared or left.

The health problems of Nepal are not just a medical issue, but a direct result of the low status of women in society, as we learned from our special International Women’s Day coverage (p 10-11).

The more general participation of women in decision-making and their involvement in the elections to a constituent assembly, Nepal has an opportunity to finally bestow on half its population the justice that it has been denied for centuries.

They keep suffering in silence. I once overheard Madhesis and Pahadis women at a meeting comparing their sorrows. They were comparing not only their hardships, but also their discrimination. Hearing about the life of a woman in the mountains, a Madhesis woman said: “You are so lucky, at least you can come out and talk to other people. We can’t even go out of the house to go to the toilet, we have to wait till night.”

A woman from the hills replied: “At least you don’t have to work like a donkey fetching water up the mountain and risking your life cutting fodder from the tops of trees. A bolt in the garden is dangerous for the hills are equally cursed.” It is clear the discrimination and suffering experienced by women in the Tarai suffer from vitamin-A deficiency and have right blindminds. Given the vegetables and fruits that grow in the Tarai this shouldn’t happen, but pregnant women can’t even eat the papayas and bananas that grow in the garden because of a belief that it will cause an abortion.

Much worse is the health status of women from the ‘untouchable’ Don, Chamara or Mushahar castes. Severe malnutrition caused by poverty and taboos, lack of health care and ignorance about family planning top them in a vicious circle of malnutrition and maternal death.

When will the men who dominate the political discourse for autonomy ever look towards and address the problems of the women of the mountains and Madhes and their partners’ right to be treated like human beings?}

History and geography
New Madhesi parties must correct past injustices

The MJF plans to hold a national convention towards the end of next year and is planning a national party rooted in the membership. For the first time in Nepal’s history, a new national party rooted in the Tarai is being crafted to be led by Madhesi politicians themselves.

This development is also likely to take

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MADHES
It’s a historic achievement that the SPA and the UDMF finally struck a deal, and all Nepalis should rejoice ('Madhes Street', #389). The people must prepare for the polls with energy and enthusiasm, as they address the issues of all groups in the country.

Dhananjay Shah, TU, Kirtipur

Some people are arguing that the UDMF does not represent the majority of Madhesis, but the mass demonstrations in the Tarai last week show that this view is mistaken. The government and Kathmandu-centric media do not represent the situation in the Madhes fairly. They claim that the Tharu are opposing the demand of ‘one Madhes one region’ is also not accurate. The Madhes does not want to be a separate nation, it wants to be a federal state. That is the only way to make a country without discrimination and injustice.

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I think we (including Prashant Jha) need to accept that whereas Mahant Thakur is a responsible and principled leader, Sarbendra Nath Sukla (Janashakti Party) held senior portfolios in the Panchayat cabinet and was a central committee member of the RPP (Thapa group). Now he is proclaiming that the Nepali political establishment, which he was happy to serve before, is responsible for the oppression of Madhesis. Who is he to advocate Madhesi rights?

It is very important that people like him are not allowed to manipulate excluded and impoverished people in the Tarai for their personal benefit. They are all to some extent responsible for the continuation of an unjust society.

Amit Ranjan, Janakpur

Your survey showed a slight increase in public opinion in favour of monarchy (‘Pre-poll poll’, #386). In my view, there was no serious decline in the image of monarchy even after Jan Andolan 2, which definitely was for peace and end of hostilities, but not against the historic institution of monarchy. The rest of the world does not want to see Nepal fall into the political abyss which will result from demolishing a culturally unique country for an uncertain alternative.

Pradeepa Sharma, Mumbai

Nepal lost its geostrategic importance in 1980s after Sino-US rapprochement. (‘The king castles’, Editorial, #389). And whatever remained was lost after Sino-Indian reconciliation. Consequently, Nepal now is under India’s sphere of influence. But does it matter? Nepal’s political parties are patriotic and focussed on solving Nepal’s problems, though they differ on how to do it. They are just as capable as others and we need to help them come out of the confusion. Please stop harping on about dark nights.

Kishor Kamal, email

The SPA government under PM Koirala has done things which will have consequences more harmful for Nepal than either the Panchayat or Rana regimes. He has sowed the seeds for the disintegration and communalisation of Nepal. This government has taken long-term decisions which were not within its mandate.

Abhi Karki, Pune

This is regarding Kalpana Shrestha’s letter (‘From the Nepali Press’, #389). Being an immigrant is not like being a citizen in one’s own country. Nowhere in the world is there true peace, and people just have to learn to live in the environment which exists. Nepali people who are lucky enough to have good jobs in Nepal are better off than Nepalis anywhere else in the world, so my advice is just be happy in the motherland.

Khagendra Timilsina, USA
Women sip tea outside their homes while children play badminton and cricket on the streets of Beni. It’s Democracy Day and everyone gets to enjoy the public holiday, except the men.

Up to 80 percent of them in Myagdi have gone abroad to work: the highest proportion in any district in Nepal. They are in the British or Indian armies or in Singapore or Brunei. Others are in Qatar or Malaysia.

Those who go to the Gulf send home about Rs 10,000 a month, in Japan it may be as high as Rs 50,000. If a young man decides to stay home, he may earn only Rs 5,000 a month as a bus driver or shopkeeper. The temptation and social pressure to go abroad to work is immense.

And even if they wanted to stay home, there just aren’t enough jobs here in the hills of central Nepal. The conflict took its toll, and besides existing businesses closing down, infrastructure like highways and hydropower projects were scrapped or delayed. For example, if it hadn’t been for the war, the highway to Jomsom would be completed by now and Beni would have benefited as a transit point.

“Our economy is fully dependent on remittances,” says Surya Margani, vice-chairman of the Ministry of Commerce in Beni. He says Myagdi alone gets Rs 40 million worth of money from abroad through official channels. Adding hundi and private transfers, the total may be double that.

The effect of the remittance economy can be seen everywhere. More than ten banks have sprung up since the 1990s and there are a surprising number of jewelry shops as families of migrant workers invest in gold.

A family here that receives money from abroad save up to Rs 4,000. Most of the money is invested into land to build houses or hotels, with wealthier families going on to buy land in Pokhara and Kathmandu, sometimes migrating to these cities for better prospects.

There is also a boom in schools. Men folk working abroad find the value of learning English and want their children to also be fluent, so there has been a boom in private English-language schools. In a private school here, up to 80 percent of the children in a Grade Eight class had their father working abroad.

But prolonged absences of the men in the family have also led to family dislocations. Baburam Chhantyal was in Saudi Arabia for nine years when his wife left him for another man. With two children aged six and 11, Chhantyal returned to Beni three months ago so that he could rebuild his family.

“I’m working hard so that my family can prosper, but look what has happened,” he says. Chhantyal has since remarried but will be going overseas again. “I have to,” he adds. “It will be tough, some nights I just close my eyes and imagine that I’m in Nepal.”

The 39-year-old father says he will tell his children to study hard and not play so much. “I tell them that their father is going away for their future,” he adds. Most teenage boys here dream of becoming soldiers like their forefathers. “I want to join the British Army,” says Yeependra Tilija, 17. His father is abroad in Saudi Arabia, and he knows how hard he has to work whatever the money. There is much more prestige in becoming a Gurkha soldier.

Yeependra has been preparing for his SLC exams and runs every morning to keep fit so he will pass the recruitment physicals. His teacher Roshan Rana worries about him and his other pupils. Says Rana: “I don’t know if the men who have gone abroad will ever return. How will the country benefit? Who will look after Nepal?”
Iron plus

The Government of Nepal, Nepal Flour Mills Association and the Micronutrient Initiative (MI) are launching an iron fortification program as part of the government's five year plan of action for the control of anaemia among women and children. Under the program, mills will be adding iron, folic acid and vitamin A to the flour they produce.

24 for Everest

Everest Bank’s latest branch opened at Lekhnath in Kaski. This is Everest’s 24th branch. The bank has 19 ATM counters and connects to all branches through the Anywhere Branch Banking Systems. Everest Bank also plans to open branches at Narayanghat, Tulsipur, Bhaktapur and Besishahr.

Merchant meet

At the sixth annual general meeting of Royal Merchant Banking and Finance, the company claimed a net profit of Rs 6.7 million in the last fiscal year. It also announced a 10 percent bonus share and that deposits, borrowing, loans and investment were Rs 598.6 million.

Armani phone

Samsung’s Giorgio Armani phone is now available in Nepal. At 10.5mm thick, it has a 3 megapixel camera, 2.6 inch touchscreen display and comes with a Giorgio Armani leather carrying case. IMS TeleTrade is Samsung Mobile’s authorised distributor in Nepal.

Malaysian taste

A week-long festival was held by Tourism Malaysia at the Saatfee Crown Plaza, with exotic cuisine flown in especially from Malaysia. Last year, 38,022 Nepalis visited the country, a 200 percent increase. Tourism Malaysia will continue to highlight the country as an idyllic getaway.

The American dream

Maintain a topdog position is always challenging

Washington DC: Consumers in the US are paying the highest prices for oil, but we do not see any gross profits like in Nepal. They know it is a product which is governed by market forces, and if the prices increase more than they can afford, they will reduce consumption.

Food prices have also started to climb, and for poorer people who comprise of nearly a third of the population, life is becoming increasingly difficult. Home prices have plummeted as mortgage companies are busy foreclosing properties and writing off loans, thus creating unprecedented losses for the banks and other financial institutions.

The US government has plans to rescue the economy; taxes have been cut to actually dole out money to taxpayers so that they can spend more to stimulate economic activity again. It is a country which has always believed that so long as the cash registers at supermarkets stay ticking, the economy will keep going.

If we feel that the banking and financial industry in Nepal is not regulated and there is room to dodge the regulator, then what has been going on in the US for once makes us look like a molehill in front of a mountain.

This Beed’s seven-year-old daughter recently advised her father to wary of making more money: it was to sell money, so that he could buy more money and sell that money thus making even more money. It seems this is what has been happening in many big banks which keep on churning out innovative products.

A bond issued by one division of the bank is rated by a subsidiary, to be bought by another group company and sold to another division, at the same booking profits, paying fat bonuses to staff and giving good returns to the shareholders. But the weak foundations of this system have started to crack, and huge losses are being reported as the base of money from which more money is made is now gone.

The presidential primaries this year are witnessing a bitter battle in the Democrat camp. The bile unleashed in the showdown between Obama and Clinton may turn out to be greater than the actual election next year. But for the US, the present is not the main worry, it is the future of the country the keeping the think tanks busy.

The acceleration of economic growth in both India and China, the bouncing back of the EU and the demographic shift that lies ahead are challenging the US’ ability to maintain its dominance for the next 50 years as it has for the last 50. In what may be the start of a more outward-looking world view, there are plans for massive study abroad programs for US students. There is also much talk of the growing influence of Asian Americans, who have close links to growing markets, and their potential role in the future of the United States.

On the other hand, the looming scarcity of money may mean that the US scales back its aid budgets, which could also lead to belt-tightening in countries like Nepal.

Of course, the Americans won’t go cheap on expenses which is directly benefit themselves though, which is a good news for Nepal. To our own blessing and curse, we will remain a strategic point for the US to sit at 10,000 feet and watch what is happening to the north and south, where its key competitors will be for the next fifty years.

www.arthabeed.com

ECONOMIC SENSE

Artha Beed

Dato Mirza Mohammad Taiyab Beg, Director General of Tourism Malaysia, shares his views on the marketing of destinations and the testing of traditional cultures in the face of development.

Besides creating awareness how else does Malaysia promote tourism?

We are here in India and Nepal to promote the Malaysia ‘ Truly Asia Kitchen’ to wind the hearts and minds and stomachs.

Marketing campaigns are important, but it doesn’t end at communications. We have to be ready to receive people on our side. If we campaign well, and people visit Malaysia and see it isn’t as nice as they think, we haven’t really been successful. If people visit and they go back speaking well about the place, it’s good news. In fact, word-of-mouth is more effective than any publicity materials. If they go back disappointed it renders the publicity campaign useless. The important thing is to tell the truth.

For example, we say that Malaysia is affordable, which is true. People come here for hotels that are cheap yet have five-star standards.

How can tourism development make sure that indigenous cultures do not get displaced?

Indigenous cultures will be constantly threatened if you don’t protect them. There’s a need to make sure that various ethnicities are not disregarded. Also, it depends on what is strong and what is not. If you’re strong, any kind of temptation is not a problem. Protection is only effective to a certain degree. Let these indigenous cultures be tested, allow them to grow in strength. Let’s talk about cultural performances around the world today that used to be traditions. What brings them up on stage again is the tourism industry.

Wherever you go, if there are tourists, old things get revived. It’s easy to blame tourism for allowing foreign influences into a local culture, but look at television and the mass media – these penetrate even more. Everybody watches TV all the time for four to five hours a day. Also consider festivals, which are a positive way of presenting a country. If you don’t have festivals, how can you speak about culture? It’s just like plants – if you have no flowers, how can you differentiate the plants? Festivals are the flowers of every culture.

Will Malaysia’s tourism board strive to develop eco-tourism?

Any projects made in Malaysia that involve development are done according to strict adherence to the growing influence of Asian Americans, who have close links to growing markets, and their potential role in the future of the United States.

What is going to be critical in tourism development in Asia in the future?

Technology is an important aspect in tourism development.

Look at Singapore – it has 4 to 5 million people but 10 million tourists. That’s because the country utilises a lot of technology to draw people and to make things easy and smooth. If you have to handle things manually, it’s impossible and you won’t see a fast turnover.
Don’t forget

Editorial in RaptiPani, 3 March

The government has clinched a deal with not only the agitating Tarai bodies but also with the United Democratic Republican Front. Now that the Front’s various ethnic and regional bodies will also take part in the elections, almost all the parties will now be involved in the mass undertaking that is the Constituent Assembly elections. But amidst all the excitement, it seems that a few key elements that the parties and government should not have forgotten have fallen by the wayside. Nepal doesn’t have a very long democratic history. The agenda that was established by the people in 2007 is only now being implemented. The demand for a constituent assembly was a key principal then but slowly, even that has fallen into a whirlpool of conspiracy. Only a few of the people’s demands have been implemented but not to our satisfaction. Even during this crucial election time, there is very little happening according to the people’s desires. The documents released by the Election Commission and the Ministry of Information do not answer many of the public’s most important questions. Although the effort is laudable, it is still not enough. It is necessary that the entire nation understand the technicalities behind the elections and their importance. If awareness campaigns to explain these terms are not conducted then there will be no difference between parliamentary elections and constituent assembly elections.

The political parties still have not explained how the inclusive electoral process will work. Nor have the Election Commission or other governmental and non-governmental bodies. The CA election is not something that will happen every time its mandate runs out. It is an undertaking that will happen once in the nation’s lifetime and for which all should unite. The parties should not only be promoting their own party politics but in every other parliamentary election. People from all the nation’s sectors should also step forward and try to spread awareness about it.

Rival

Interview with Sanu Kumar Shrestha, UML candidate from Kathmandu-10 in Singha Durbar, 3 March

How do you feel about standing up against Prachanda in the elections? Everyone has come before me as the Maoist chairman but I am the local of Kathmandu. It is not only against Prachanda but also against the Maoists. I have been in the Kirtipur area for past 15 years. I have not only been able to gather the workers and the people but also the support of the party and the support of the party workers and the people. In Kathmandu Prachanda lacks both.

With talk about poll sharing going around, you have been called a dummy candidate. Will you stand up if the UML has to make way for Prachanda? Firstly, I don’t see poll sharing happening, not least in Kathmandu. Second, let us also stand for candidacy from Rolpa, Kathmandu’s specifically region no.10, as a stronghold of the UML. The UML is certain to win in Kathmandu so at least we will look towards the end he will look towards Rolpa for a victory.

What is Prachanda’s position in Kathmandu-10? Every candidate thinks that if they don’t win they will lose. As for the position of Comrade Prachanda, it might be too soon to talk about it. While Prachanda’s personality might have led many to think that he is the UML’s chief competitor, our main competitor still remain the NC.

Prachanda is an international personality, you on the other hand are a district level leader, how will the people come to know and vote for you? I am a local of this region. I have worked in the construction of the electoral regions of Kathmandu. I do not need to tell the people who I am. They already know me. The people here need to stand against Prachanda because of my image.

How are your preparations going? Although Comrade Prachanda might be more experienced in matters of warfare, we are far ahead of him in the elections. There is a huge difference between getting involved in a war and winning people over through elections.

There are rumours about the Maoists turning Kirtipur into their area. It is good to dream about Prachanda making Kirtipur a Maoist area.

Kirtipur is the native town of the Newar. While the Maoists are talking about ethnic self-governance, the candidacy of Prachanda in a native Newar town will raise many questions. Prachanda’s candidacy might backfire on him.
TOUCHING LIFE EVERYDAY IN A MORE GREENER WAY

CHAUDHARY GROUP

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CG TLE-CSR)

Carrying out business in socially and environmentally responsive manner

Sharing its good fortune with the people, Chaudhary Group has been fulfilling its social responsibility even before it got actually institutionalized as Corporate House. Even then as an Enterprise, it was conducting a lot of initiatives in the spheres of health, arts and sports. It had also hosted ample no. of initiatives- small and large for community as charity and welfare. Today, CG has structured its CSR Initiatives and established standard operating procedure for CSR. In the beginning of every year, the CSR and Code of Conduct Committee sits together to decide on the activities and programs to be taken up for the year under the long term plan framework. The focus areas for the year with defined benefits are agreed and then the execution starts after a proper evaluation of the proposed effectiveness. CG has identified the various areas as under mentioned and adopts one area per year as focus. However, regular activities and ongoing programs remain continuous. The following is just a quick summary of CG’s initiatives under its respective headings:

THE GREEN FUTURE

It can be termed as an extraordinary approach towards doing things that the future of its TLE initiatives has been made open for all other organizations as well to participate in all possible ways. TLE is now not only CG’s brand, but it is a name for corporate social responsibility across the nation. While being asked on the context, the young Executive Director Mr. Nirvana Chaudhary said- “I believe that rather than doing things in bits and pieces, it will be very wise to make any program bigger, then better, for its increased effectiveness”. CG prioritizes its initiatives towards sustainable development focusing on areas within its local spheres of influence first.

THE TLE SERIES

CG coins all of its initiatives as TLE which is abbreviated Corporate Social Responsibility. This is an innovative method of branding selflessly the initiatives for increased drive and acceptance. YGC being one of the initiatives, CG has done various programs which can not be fully accommodated in some pages. However, its vision in the social front and its fair trade intent has architectured the programs so well that the model itself given a clear picture of CG’s image for its stakeholders.

CG CSR Policy

CG is committed to operate and conduct all its business activities in socially and environmentally responsible manner.

CG understands the importance of a good relation of with all its stakeholders-employees, customers, partners and community at large and prioritizes its initiatives towards sustainable development focusing on areas within its local spheres of influence first.

CG TLE-CSR-ID-Infrastructure Development

CG TLE-CSR-ID.1. Aid to build the classrooms for local school in Divyapuri VDC.

CG TLE-CSR-ID.2. CG has supported with home pipes in the process of constructing road in the Divyapuri VDC.

CG TLE-CSR-ID.3. Significant numbers of waiting stand has been built for the convenience of the passengers in the Nawalparasi Area.

CG TLE-CSR-ID.4. Colbert construction to Divyapuri VDC.

CG TLE-CSR-ID.5. Pillars for the extension of electricity to Divyapuri VDC.

CG TLE-CSR-ID.6. 24 hour filtered water supply to the surrounding neighborhoods at CLG

CG TLE-CSR-ALC- Art and Literature, Culture and Heritage

CG TLE-CSR-ALC.1. Shree Lankunar Ganga Devi Chaudhary Academy for Art and Literature established in 1998. It has initiated several annual cash awards with citation carrying a purse of Rs. 5,10000 per award.

CG TLE-CSR-ALC.2. Literature and talent show Many programs have been organized to give an outlet to the expressions of the hidden talents of children, youth and others.

CG TLE-CSR-NE-Nature and Environment

CG TLE-CSR-NE.1. Agro-biodiversity has been set up at CLG with the purpose of minimizing pollution and maintaining ecosystem.

CG TLE-CSR-NE.2. Efficient treatment plant has been established to make the industrial water usable for other purpose at CLG.

CG TLE-CSR-NE.3. Green Circle” to promote environmental friendly and economically sustainable paper usage practices.

CG TLE-CSR-NE.4. CG supports the Bagmati Eco-Challenge (Jal Yatra) to create awareness about the status of Bagmati River.

CG TLE-CSR-NE.5. CG also involves its employees in its community and environment welfare endeavors. Employees are encouraged to volunteer in CG’s community and environment activities in different capacities. Initially, Employees interested in volunteering such activities register themselves and later participate whenever convenient.

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araswati Puja has come and gone, the days are getting warmer in Kathmandu (the air dustier and the smog thicker). We can now say that spring has arrived for this year. But up in Sindhupalchok, on the trekking route to Panch Pokhari, to most intents and purposes it is still winter, at least it was several weeks ago when we visited there. The rhododendrons were not out, there were still large stretches of unmelted snow, and it was bitterly cold as soon as the sun went down.

Admittedly it was early in the year for trekking, but we got the chance to see everything still pristine from the winter. With clear skies, there was not a wisp of cloud, not a hint of rain. Just a bright and pale sun. As long as it was shining, the air was cosy - warm, even. But the nights in the tent were subzero.

The trail used to start at Chautara but now there is a rough track all the way to Sano Okhreni, which saves four hours of walking. At this point, I must warn you: there is absolutely no water on the main trail to Panch Pokhari, as it follows the ridge and there are no springs. Being this early in the year though, we were able to melt and drink snow.

Early on there are one or two uphill stretches of moderate steepness, but then the monster hits you. From then on it’s ukalo for the rest of the day until, with luck, you arrive at Bhanjyang.

Despite our GPS, compass and map, we got lost along the way, wandering for three or four hours among dwarf bamboo and thorn bushes. That’s what happens when the single-track path you are following disappears beneath an avalanche of snow and you only have five head torches among a group of 11. Bhanjyang, which is one cowshed, had two human occupants when we arrived. And they were the only other people we saw during the entire trek.

Day two was steeper. The choice was a straight 60-degree climb over boulders, or a longer, more leisurely path to Hille Bhanjyang, announced by the presence of two more cowsheds. We boiled snow and drank tea.

If you take the steep, direct route, you can get beyond Hille to the pass at Narsingpati by evening. Here the Jugal Himal seems within touching distance. There was soft, powdery snow all around, a shed to sleep in, and even dry firewood. And the view from here is indeed one to die for, assuming you haven’t already passed away on the steep path up.

At this time of year, you can watch the big orange sun slowly slide through a clear sky into the western horizon, flashing rays of yellow light straight on to the mountains. And far off below to the south is Kathmandu Valley with its twinkling lights.

On the third day, we reached Panch Pokhari. It’s a three or four hour walk from Narsingpati or a day’s walk from Hille Bhanjyang. At last the gradient is easier, the snow not so slippery. And, it must be said, Panch Pokhari is worth the torture.

The five tarns lie in a sheltered vale below Dorje Lakpa, the largest surrounding by the other four. There is a temple, from the base of which flows a freshwater spring. You can easily camp here for a day or two, although the evening winds can be strong and chilly.

Peg out your tent properly or you’ll be running after it in the night.

As spring arrives, the route comes alive. The cowsheds will have friendly cowherds and mooing yaks. There are even a few seasonal shops along the way that sell strong chyang to put an extra jolt into your step. You can meet people coming down or going up, often followed by a big hulking mastiff. As the weather warms, the route becomes easier and more sociable. But spring trekkers will not experience the quiet solitude that we knew.

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From the lakes, it’s a day’s walk to Dudhi Pokhari, and one day more to Tilman’s Pass, more than 1,000m further up, which offers a difficult way over to the Langtang Valley and Kyanjin Gompa. From the hilltops flanking Panch Pokhari, the pass can be seen clearly - a glacier guarded by Gang Chhenpo. The return is easier, slithering and sliding down the icy paths. It should take two days, one to Bhanjyang and another to Lamidanda.

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Travelling and mountaineering companies hoping to capitalise on the recent resurgence of tourism in the country may be slightly disappointed with the coming spring season that begins in March.

Despite peace efforts and improved security, very few teams have applied for permission to climb various mountains. Election uncertainty and the recent spate of protests in the Tarai seem to have reduced the usual deluge of mountaineers to a trickle. “We should have received more than two dozen applications by now,” says Gyanendra Shrestha at the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation’s mountaineering and trekking section. But Shrestha hopes that March will see more applications to make up for the unusually low funk right now.

Last spring saw 77 Chomolungma-bound teams, whereas this year up till now, only four have applied for permits. “We were expecting at least 40 expeditions to Chomolungma this season but it may now be difficult to go from four to 40” says Shrestha wryly. Trekkers still have the entire month of March to apply for their permits but it doesn’t look like the numbers will come close to last year. There are three teams to Makalu but none so far to Manaslu, Ama Dablam, Lhotse or Thamserku, usually popular mountains. “There is a definite buzz about many expeditions, but none have applied for their permits yet. Maybe they’re waiting for something,” says Shrestha. Planned expeditions that have been in the news like the First Inclusive Women’s Sagarmatha Expedition and 77-year old Min Bahadur Sherchan bid for Chomolungma, have yet to file their applications.

Despite the slow mountaineering season, officials at the ministry and the Nepal Tourism Board seem positive that trekking will see an increase. According to Deepak Raj Joshi at NTB, this year should see more trekkers in the Annapurna and Langtang regions while Chomolungma numbers should remain the same. NTB reports a 95 percent increase in hotel and lodge bookings along the trekking routes, a sure sign that trekkers will show up.

Last season’s Maoist tax collection drive may have put off potential trekkers but it doesn’t seem to be the only reason for uncertainty in the trekking market. “Unless our political situation stabilises and the government works at projecting a better image of Nepal abroad, our business cannot increase as expected,” says Hira Dhimal of Karnali Excursions. Dhimal claims that despite burgeoning political stability, many countries have still not relaxed their travel guidelines to Nepal. “Our trekkers now are those who’ve already been to Nepal before and know that the situation is not as bad as their governments make it out to be,” says Dhimala. “We are not luring in new tourists.”

According to the Trekkers’ Information Management System (TIMS) implemented by the Trekking Agencies’ Association Nepal (TAAN), this January and February saw a total of 1883 trekkers to various regions. This number is usually expected to double in the spring. There were more than a thousand trekkers to the Annapurna region while Everest saw a little over 530. This season, more tourists seem to prefer to go into Tibet than trek around Nepal. But Rara, Dolpo and the Manaslu region are seeing more trekkers than before, says Deepak Raj Joshi.

Spring may not look so bright but with elections out of the way in April, peak mountaineering season later in the year looks optimistic. NTB expects trekking and mountaineering to increase in a big way and if the politics are under control by then, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t.

(Pranaya SJB Rana)
Treating pain

Mobile clinics in remote western Nepal provide relief, but are a drop in the ocean

PICS: SAN KANG LI

Giving credit

Women are trained in nursing and micro-credit so they will stay where they are most needed

SRISHTI ADHIKARI
in KABHIRE

It is nine in the morning and Soma Tamang, 26, is busy attending to a patient. Her small clinic consists of two rooms: one with medical cabinets and a waiting bench for patients and another with a bed where she carries out her medical check-ups.

Soma is a trained Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) and has been running a clinic in her hometown of Kusadevi for three years now. She also works with a local micro-credit institute and has a group of 15 women members to whom she provides small loans up to Rs 5,000 for animal husbandry and education.

The problem in Nepal has always been the retention of health workers like Soma in rural areas. Now, a unique Rotary project aims to augment ANM income through microcredit so the healthcare workers stay where they are needed most.

Soma was training as an ANM in the Kabhre Health Training Institute (KHTI) when she came to know about the project on safe motherhood. Half of her educational expenses would be reimbursed if she signed a five-year contract to establish a mini-clinic and work in her own village, so she jumped at the chance.

Despite the initial struggle to sustain herself on what she earned, she is now economically independent and earns about Rs 500-1,500 every day. She manages to meet all her costs from her own income. She has asked for a loan from Nepal Youth Business Foundation and has plans to privatise her clinic.

Soma specialises in family planning and caters to mothers and children, but she has also established herself as a reliable medical adviser. “I go and examine people in the villages. When I see how much people trust me, I feel really satisfied. My ultimate dream is to establish a nursing home here. I know it won’t be easy but I have the foundation and I am ready to work hard to achieve it,” she says with conviction.

After the success of the pilot project of which Soma was part, the initiative was upscaled with the help of the Rotary Club of Darmstadt Bergstrasse in Germany and UNFPA to train 52 girls from 10 remote districts of Nepal.

A group of 15 girls are already being trained at KHTI. Although lacking in confidence, that Soma has all of them is committed. Ramlaxmi Acharya, 17, says, “I couldn’t continue my studies but I have got this opportunity to get trained and I want to make the best of it.”

Rotary is looking for girls who are either willing to or have already been trained as ANMs. Sarita Ghising, another woman trained through the pilot project is currently working as medical staff of a micro-credit group in Kabhre. Due to her affiliation to a local institution with 1,500 members, she has been able to reach out to a larger group of people. The institution carried out an eye camp recently and had a camp for sexually-transmitted infection a few years back.

“I had no idea people especially women hid their health problems. There are so many cases of uterine prolapse in Paanchkhal, I am happy that people have become more forthcoming due to my advice,” says Sarita.

Rotary believes projects like these will produce many more capable, independent women. The challenge is not to train girls, it is motivating them to stay and work in their own community afterwards.

Soma’s words ring true when she says: “Completing the 18-month course is the easy part, establishing a clinic and sustaining it far more difficult.”
Hims Thapa, 66, suffered a uterine prolapse 15 years ago. Mother of 10 children, she gave birth to them at home in Rikahattage. “My uterus was hanging, the pain I experienced every day was excruciating,” she says. She decided to seek treatment and walked for several hours in the winter sun to get to the mobile health camp.

The doctors at the camp inserted a pressary ring to stop the uterus from descending. Unlike some of the other women who came to the camp, Thapa only suffered a second-degree prolapse, not the most severe form, and would not require surgery.

“If the woman is under 50 and suffers from a third-degree prolapse, we would advise that she undergo surgery to remove the uterus,” explains Sita Jirel, the uterus, “explains Sita Jirel, she underwent surgery to remove prolapse, we would advise that surgery.

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INTERVIEW

What were the signs you saw back in the 1970s when you wrote Nepal in Crisis (with Piers Blakie) that convinced you that the country was heading towards a crisis?

We saw a contradiction between a political system which was essentially top-down and constraining and the kinds of struggle that ordinary people faced in maintaining their own survival and livelihoods. It was a country where individual initiatives were not effectively rewarded, and a society with deep structures of discrimination, and hence very difficult for ordinary people to live and improve their lives.

At that time did you feel these conditions were leading towards a political confrontation?

No, I think our notion of crisis back then was not a political crisis. We saw it more as an economic and social crisis that the economy was not developing, and the level of inequality was such that Nepal would fail to resolve its problems. But we didn't foresee a political crisis at that time. In a later book called Nepal: A State of Poverty, which I wrote in the early 1980s I did begin to identify the beginnings of a movement which actually materialised in the Jana Andolan in 1990. By that time it was becoming more evident that politically the situation was unsustainable, but this realisation came gradually.

Have any of these underlying socio-political roots been addressed?

No. I think that there are underlying problems which remain: deep social inequalities and discrimination, the lack of effective representation of ordinary people. There have been certain changes. The Jana Andolan in 1990 did bring about a revival of party politics, but by the mid 1990s the hopes many people had of the parties delivering were fading and I think that gave rise to a feeling of despair, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) began to think increasingly that armed struggle was the only way in which a major transformation would take place. There are at the moment the beginnings of a political will to address Nepal's social problems, but whether the current parties and leadership have the vision and the ability to transform the political framework remains doubtful.

So there has been no progress at all?

It has been uneven. Much of the hope of 1990 was squandered, and from where I stand one has to blame the politicians, particularly the Nepali Congress politicians who were in power in the early 1990s. There was a failure to really empower the people. Many social inequalities and injustices still remain, and are not fully addressed. The caste system gives religious justification to inequality and castigates lower castes as impure. There is also in many areas a semi-feudal society with large landowners, and tenants and serfs. So as long as those relationships remain, the creativity and energy of ordinary Nepali people will go merely into survival and not into changing things.

Do you think the human and physical cost of the Maoist revolution outweighed the gains?

I don't personally. I am not absolutely convinced that an armed struggle was necessary, but as I said the structural constraints on transforming Nepal are deep and lasting, and I think a major trust for transformation was required. The costs and human suffering have been very serious, but it did bring on to the agenda the issues of social inequality and the lack of political representation, and it enhanced the position of women, dalits and traditionally excluded ethnic minorities. It also alerted people inside and outside Nepal to the need for change. Now that the Maoists are returning to mainstream politics we can be optimistic, if the polls are free and fair, about the possibility of a new political era. But the structural transformation that's required remains doubtful.
Ema Anema came to Nepal from the Netherlands for the mountains, but she fell in love with Kathmandu’s art. Anema was fascinated with the silver and copper work and the delicate intricacies of jewellery-making in Kathmandu. She came back, again and again, and worked with the Nepali artisans. She began wondering if there was potential for an exchange between Dutch and Nepali students.

“The Nepali method is different from the Dutch; in Nepal, artisans think in terms of traditions and techniques, often reproducing techniques, often reproducing

Dutch: in Nepal, artisans think in terms of traditions and

Anema tried to organise an exchange program 10 years ago, but realised that although the exchange program will get the teachers to question their every decision. The projects can’t be completed solo and the students are encouraged to question their every decision.

Now in their last week of the collaboration, the students are busy finishing off for their personal focus, which can be observed and questioned. The project will be completed solo and the students are encouraged to question their every decision.

In Between

In September, five Nepali students from the group will go to the Netherlands for the other leg of the exchange. (Mallika Aryal)

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EXHIBITIONS

- Naya Aawazharu art by Kailash Shrestha, Hitman Gurung, Rabia Koiri and Sandhya Silwal at the Nepal Art Council, until 12 March.

- Musical reflections collage paintings by Gaurav Shrestha at the Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 10-14 March, 10AM-6PM.

- Double vision prints by Nan Mulder, Gea Karhof, Seema Sharma Shah and Ragini Upadhyay, until 15 March at the Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited.

- Tibetan Lhosar photographs by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Café, Boudhanath stupa, until 31 March.

EVENTS

- Into the Wild a film by Sean Penn at the Lazimpat Gallery Café, 4 March at 6PM. 4422849

- Shastrartha on women’s issues in constituent assembly elections by Indu Tuladhar, 8 March, 3-5PM. 6910277

- Weekly human rights film screenings with Chyama Deo Tara Nabisa (Forgive but Forget Not) at the Sama Theatre, Gunukul, 5PM on 9 March. 4468956

DINING

- Malaysian food festival at the Garden Terrace, Soaltee Crown Plaza, 7 March, 12-3PM and 7-10.45 PM, Rs 990 plus taxes. 4273999

- The Kaiser Café open now at the Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels, open from 9AM-10PM. 4425341

- Steak escape with Kathmandu’s premier steaks available for lunch and dinner at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4411817

- Continental and Chinese cuisine and complimentary fresh brewed coffee after every meal at a Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.

- Ily espresso coffee at the Galleria café, every Friday espresso cocktails.

- International four course buffet at the Sunrise Café, with a range of Boris’ signature dishes at The Chimney, Hotel Yak and Yeti. 4249999

- Pan Asian evenings every Wednesday at The Café, Hyatt Regency with food from Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. 441324

- Jazz in Patan with coffee, food, drinks and dessert at the New Orleans Café, Jawalakhel. 11.30 AM-10PM. 5522708

- Saturday special barbecue, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn. Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841200484.

- Scrumptious wood fired pizzas, cocktails and specialty coffees at Rekhaun, Bhatbahari 442857, Pulchok 5251755 and Thamel 4260187.

- Cocktails and jazz with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735

- Calculotta’s rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebell Mall Food Court. 9741000735

- Lavazza coffee Italy’s favourite coffee at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700162

- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

GETAWAYS

- Relax Package with a one night stay, full buffet breakfast at The Café and access to Club Oasis at Hyatt Regency, until 29 February. Rs 5,000 plus taxes, valid only for Nepalis and local residents. 4498890

- Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, Rs 219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.

- Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu, Resident Night Rs 4,499 and two nights package Rs 9,998. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, jacuzzi and gym facilities.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com
The United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) and the United Nations family in Nepal offer their heartfelt condolences to the families and friends of our colleagues, and to those of the crew, who died in the tragic helicopter accident on 3 March, 2008.

The President of the United Nations General Assembly, Mr Srgjan Kerim, and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon have expressed their deep sadness about the tragic deaths of our colleagues, and extended their condolences to the families and the governments.

Our colleagues lost their lives while serving the United Nations and the cause of peace in Nepal. The United Nations Mission and the United Nations family in Nepal will honour their memories by continuing with our best efforts in this work.

The Secretary-General also expressed his appreciation to the Nepali authorities for their assistance provided to UNMIN in recovering the remains of the victims, and for the many expressions of sympathy the Mission has received from people in Nepal.
A new way of thinking
Moving towards technological cooperation

I
n early February, the United States National Academy of Engineering released a report on “Grand Challenges for Engineering in the 21st Century.” The goal is to focus attention on the potential of technology to help the world address poverty and environmental threats. The list includes potential breakthroughs such as low-cost solar power, safe disposal of CO2 emissions.

KARL P. SAUVANT

A number of countries in Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere are abandoning or renegotiating contracts with multinational enterprises (MNEs), and others are likely to follow suit. The costs can be high. Governments may get better terms, but they may also become embroiled in international investment disputes and discourage other investors. For companies, renegotiations mean uncertainty and possible interruptions of production and revenue.

Significant shifts in power (typically as a result of changes in commodity prices)

levelled fields
Fair contracts for poor countries

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TRAIL BLAZER: Rajeev Rai sprints for the finish line at a mountain bike race in Chisopani. Rai won the race having completed a 34km track in 2 hours and 3 minutes.

DONE DEAL: Upendra Yadav, Mahanta Thakur, and Rajendra Mahato, members of the United Democratic Madhesi Forum, sign a long-awaited eight-point agreement with the government last Thursday at Baluwatar.

MONKEY SEE MONKEY DO: A baba dressed as Hanuman poses for a photo during Shiva Ratri at Pashupati on Thursday.

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ACROBATIC ACT: At the week-long Malaysian food fest at the Soaltee Crowne Plaza, the traditional teh-tarik drink is not only a delicious treat but also a performance in itself.
Nepal's tourism planners decided three years ago to hire a rather homely-looking Rhino Dai as its frolicking brand ambassador with the suggestive slogan ‘Visit Nepal, Once Is Not Enough’. This was just after Peru nearly severed diplomatic relations with Nepal because our tourism posters depicted Machupichu instead of Machapuchre.

With a mascot like Rhino Dai, it was only a question of time before Thamel started looking more and more like Pat Pong. Sure enough, there are now bars with showers all the way from the Moroccan Honorary Consulate to Sore Khutte. And trust the resident Economist correspondent to have done some undercover bar-hopping.†

But our tourism wallahs seem to believe even bad publicity is good publicity, and decided to dash off an irate Letter to the Editor to the Economist denying there was any sex tourism in Nepal. ‘Holidaymakers to Nepal are encouraged to enjoy traditional Nepalese dancing,’ they wrote, ‘where they can mingle freely with the dancers.’ Hmmm. Are some of those dancers topless by any chance?

 dummy candidates

Anyone who looks important enough can get into the VIP room at Kathmandu domestic airport these days, and that includes the Ass. The other day it looked more like an office of the Madhesi Front. Sipping coffee was Hridayesh the Tripathi who was holding forth on electoral delineation’s effects on his constituency. Kapilbastu’s Dan Bahadur Chaudhary and Brajesh Gupta of the Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party were waiting for their Bhairawa flight to file nominations. In the corner, the MJF’s Renu Yadav mulled over her shift from Saptari-3 to 4 to make way for a TMLP candidate. There was a lot of back-slapping all around and the mood was upbeat. But when asked, most said they were flying right back after filing their nominations. If the Tarai is too dangerous for Madhesi leaders wonder what it is like for the hillbillies.

So the Americans have put out another Travel Advisory to cover their sorry legal asses. ‘The Department of State remains concerned about the security situation in Nepal and urges American citizens to obtain updated security information before they travel and to be prepared to change their plans on short notice,’ it says. Good thing most Americans are smart enough to ignore it and go wherever they want to by pretending to be Canadians. The warning, goes on to say that ‘road travel in Nepal is dangerous.’ And Americans are reminded to remain don high alert and elude microbuses. ‘And Safa Tempos are safe?’ The Madhesi leaders wonder what it is like for the hillbillies.

Comrade Lotus Flower doesn’t want his party to be struck off the US terrorist list, it gives him an international notoriety and respect he would not otherwise get. El Presidente is still thundering on about how if his party loses in the elections, it will ‘grab power with or without bloodshed.’ Back in his constituency of Kirtipur, Awesome is so scared he might lose that he has fielded 17 dummy candidates so his party is entitled to deploy 34 youths in the booths should there be a need to bash anyone up. However, there is one scenario the First Precedent of the Republic of Nepal hasn’t factored in yet. What if one of his dummy candidates actually gets more votes than him?

Over in Lalitpur, Comrade Pamfa is fielding seven dummy candidates besides herself. This just won’t do, comrade, you need at least 17 dummies to have even a remote chance of winning!!!

Meanwhile Brother Number Two is campaigning in Gorkha and is being hotly pursued by the ghosts of the people his party eliminated. Which maybe why Bhattarai Baje climbed up to the Goraknath Temple to exorcise himself, got blessed by the High Priest and gave him a Rs 500 offering. If royals can be nationalists, I suppose religion is no longer the opiate of the masses in the New Nepal.

Don’t get up your hopes of the petroleum crisis easing. The Madhes blockade may be over, but with crude oil staying above $100 per barrel, NOC is losing Rs 1 billion a month in subsidies and will not be able to pay for March imports.

And the power crisis is so bad the UML couldn’t issue its Economic Strategy Paper this week because of load shedding at the printing plant.†