Who needs politics?

What we really mean is there’s more to life than politics, despite the lack of movement in the ‘higher’ reaches of the Nepali state. In this issue, we’ve made an effort to bring our weary eyes away from the parliamentary showmans to where people are actually doing something productive. You might be surprised, pleasantly, too.
Egoistic altruism

Last week, I went to a big five-star hotel to attend the presentation of the research findings of a Kathmandu-based NGO. In a few hours, ten different people were given the opportunity to express their findings and viewpoints. There was a lot of talking, but nothing was being done.

It turned out to be a session organised merely for the NGO and its international donor to compliment each other and feed each other’s egos with kind and pleasing words. The research findings were predictable and so was the presentation of the research. There were no facts, and the findings were predictable but pleasing words. The research was a lot of talking, but nothing was being done.

The most curious call for change in the constitution comes from the ultra-left. As with all their revolutionary forebears, the end justifies the means in the single-minded pursuit of power by the shortest route to rule. Blame the driver, not the car. Blame the carpeter, not his tools.

The conclusions, one of which is:

There were shortsighted, narrow-minded, self-serving and misleading politicians who don’t deserve to rule. Blame the driver, not the car. Blame the carpeter, not his tools.

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India changing

PLAIN SPEAKING

Prashant Jha

Travelling through Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Shimla and Goa over the past three weeks gave me a glimpse into the astonishing changes taking place across urban India. Wealth and mobility are transforming the country in ways unimaginable until a few years ago.

The ‘India Shining’ narrative, based largely on high growth figures and the corporate boom, was more than half a decade old when the BJP picked it up as a campaign slogan in 2004. Congress promoted a more rooted campaign revolving around aam aadmi, the common man. Voters went with the latter, indicating that GDP figures did not really touch them. What mattered more was the simple promise of jobs, controlled prices, dignity, communal harmony, and access to opportunities.

This message was reinforced in the 2009 elections. Congress did not win because of the nuclear deal with the US, or because the economy was rescued from the global meltdown. Analysts believe it was the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that won Congress the elections.

In states across India, voters are sending out similar signals. They are rejecting politics and an economy based solely on industrial growth, which often involves displacing the poorest Indian citizens from their land. Mamata Banerjee’s success in challenging the Left in West Bengal is due to her appropriation of the latter’s ‘pro-poor’ stance to the extent of being ‘anti-industry’. This resonates with the poor, and unreported by the national media, scores of protests by slum-dwellers against the systematic demolition of their homes have taken place across urban centres. The Naxalite challenge in central and eastern India may be rooted in a complex set of factors, but the tendency of ‘democratic’ parties to readily become agents for extractive mining industries and the lack of justice are central causes.

India faces multiple challenges, from growing inequality to political discontent and armed rebellions. But we should not forget that the Indian state has never been as equipped to deal with them as it is today. This strength is based on the economic trajectory of the past two decades, which the state is now reaping the dividends of. The relentless infrastructural expansion of Delhi is striking. The metro now extends to almost the entire city. Airports have been modernised and passenger traffic has increased exponentially. More than Rs 200 billion is being invested in the Commonwealth Games, all in the name of ‘national pride’. The national highway project and the inter-related state highway projects promise to connect the country in an unprecedented way.

In Mumbai and Bangalore, young people who graduated five years ago have ‘packages’ of between Rs 1.5 to 5 million a year. Many are from lower middle class families. Their families, localities, schools and colleges now believe it is possible to improve their living standards beyond what previous generations imagined.

Thousands of Indian tourists in Goa and Shimla are testament to the steady increase in disposable incomes. There is renewed cultural confidence, visible in the proliferation in the arts, literature and both Hindi and regional films.

The sense that India’s time has arrived is unmistakable in power corridors. The bureaucracy is both younger and more arrogant, and has little patience for any real or perceived obstacle in India’s quest for a position at high table. If that means being ruthless, flouting laws, trampling on the freedom of citizens, and constricting democratic freedoms, so be it.

Nepali politicians visit Delhi often, but they spend all their time with operatives and begging for appointments with politicians. It would be far more useful for them to get out and understand the scale and significance of the changes taking place in India; the multiple ways in which the state is dealing with its challenges; and the extent to which politicians and bureaucrats are willing to work in the ‘national interest’. Unless they do so, Nepali actors will neither understand India’s recent aggressive approach in Nepal nor be able to break out of the old paradigms of thinking about Indo-Nepal ties.
Pragatinagar’s progress

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The lure of the national

FOURTH ESTATE
C K Lal

BIRGANJ—The Shankaracharya Dwar near Buxauni is something of a gateway to the country of Hindus. With miniature replicas of Krishna Mandir and Pashupatinath precariously balanced on a concrete archway, the kitschy ceremonial entrance serves as a mark of Nepalipan. A bustling business centre on the border, Birganj takes its Hindu and Nepali identity seriously. The tone of the local media is in line with the buildings along the main street: predominantly conservative, with a tinge of Hindu assertiveness. Along with Image, almost all the FM broadcasters in Bari, Parsa and Makwanpur can be clearly heard in Birganj. With the exception of Bhojpuria FM, the primary language of Prajagat FM, the primary language of broadcast of all the stations is Nepali.

Reportedly, 12 daily newspapers are published from Bari-Parsa. An exhaustive search of all the newsstands between the clocktower and Sri Ram Cinema—the commercial thoroughfare—resulted in a collection of only five dailies, all in Nepali. The obsession of the Birganj media with ‘national’ issues—what one said who said what after meeting whom in Kathmandu—is baffling. It’s not just the language: the content of newspapers and FM broadcasts appears to be even more nationalist than that of national newspapers and broadcasters. Unless it’s its Hindu militants breaking plates.

The press in the periphery is more interested in national than local events. The press in the periphery is more interested in national than local events. The sugar factory at Garuda is operational for just three months a year. Farmers, so the latter switched crops. Now there is no sugarcane to process. This should have been a more important issue for the local media than the periodic hiccups of the NepSE. The press prefers to report on the spiralling price of gold instead. For Nepalis coming home, Indian Customs has always been troublesome.

Those days, the guards rummage through baggage even more carefully, looking for dal and sugar. The explanation is terse and mocking: “You can take as much explosives as you want. That’s your government’s headache. But no dal, no sugar and no chemical fertilisers. These products are subsidised for Indian consumers.” For the local media in Birganj, these are trivial issues.

Journalists here set their priorities by what they see, hear and read in the national media. Most of them double up as stringers for television, radio and newspapers based in Kathmandu. One such journalist complained bitterly, “Unless our dispatches deal with Gyenn德拉, Hindu militancy, armed groups or Karina Begaun, they never make it to the newsdesk.” Unsurprisingly, the leftovers of such stories are used for their own papers.

As long as nationalistic aspirations are stronger, local coverage is neglected. The lure of pan-Nepal identity is so overpowering that even the daily Pratik, one of the most respected publications in the Tani, positions itself as ‘national’ and tries hard to imitate the content of Kathmandu newspapers. Tena Television, perhaps wanting to be close to the action, actually moved to Kathmandu. The best talents in Bhojpuria are mostly in the capital city. The owners of factories in the Birganj-Pailha Industry Corridor and the importers of Adrasa Nagar have their advertising-dispensing headquarters in Kathmandu. It won wonder Tena Television went where the producers were rather than stay with their purported audiences.

Everyone in the media wants to be national, because fame and fortune does not lie in speaking to or for the periphery. As long as nationalistic aspirations are stronger, local coverage is neglected. The lure of pan-Nepal identity is so overpowering that even the daily Pratik, one of the most respected publications in the Tani, positions itself as ‘national’ and tries hard to imitate the content of Kathmandu newspapers. Tena Television, perhaps wanting to be close to the action, actually moved to Kathmandu. The best talents in Bhojpuria are mostly in the capital city. The owners of factories in the Birganj-Pailha Industry Corridor and the importers of Adrasa Nagar have their advertising-dispensing headquarters in Kathmandu. It won wonder Tena Television went where the producers were rather than stay with their purported audiences. Everyone in the media wants to be national, because fame and fortune does not lie in speaking to or for the periphery in its languages.

The press in the periphery is more interested in national than local events
Who’s bad?

P rivate sector professionals in Nepal view the development sector with suspicion. They accept the easy media-fed diet of international non-governmental organisations as being ‘dollar farmers’. Their self-image is that they in the private sector are doing ‘real work’ as opposed to doing mere ‘development’, which they have a hard time seeing as work.

As someone who’s worked in and with both the private and the development sectors, I think it’s time the Nepali private sector, the way it is currently structured, looks at the development sector with an open mind to better understand the latter’s approaches to governance, accountability and providing career paths to employees.

Governance: It’s an open secret that most Nepali companies, including banks and finance companies, have lousy systems for deciding how they are directed and controlled for results. Most are family businesses, and some have only recently started hiring professional managers—that too, with mixed success. Most boards are stuffed with the in-laws and friends of the chairman, and they think of the company as a trough from which to feed. Except for some that are accountable to shareholders abroad, it’s safe to say that most Nepali companies do not see the value of having a robust governance system in place.

In contrast, organisational governance is taken much more seriously in the INGO world. The global revenue figures of some of these INGOs dwarf that of many top-line Nepali companies. Since most Nepal-based INGOs have headquarters abroad, they are more likely to have fairly well-developed and globally validated policies, procedures and processes for how staff members deliver work. That strength in governance also affects their field-based NGOs and community groups, which are held to a much higher standard of accountability than they would be locally.

Sure, instances of governance failure happen in the INGO world too. But when they do, the system tends to correct those failures much faster than they would in equivalent situations in the Nepali private sector, where much is dependent on the whims of the chairman or the CEO.

Accountability: Most INGOs raise funds from institutional and individual donors who are usually based abroad. These donors routinely demand rigorous accountability with regards to how much, where, why, and how funds have been spent for results that have been realized. Reporting requirements are stringent.

Most Nepali journalists who report that “INGOs are not transparent” are not serving their readers well when they do not even bother to read the annual reports of INGOs, who have to satisfy the demands of various countries’ equivalents of Nepal’s Social Welfare Council.

Career path: Reading the Nepali press, one gets the impression that the local retail bank CEOs who earn the most are necessarily among the best managers. What the Nepali press forgets to mention is that, in the last 10 years in the INGO world, many home-grown Nepali professionals have risen much higher regionally and globally, and therefore command a much greater influence among their global peers. This has been possible because INGOs, unlike most Nepali companies, offer a better career path for their talented employees. And a Nepali who has run a global non-profit with offices in 65 countries has a range of mental models that few high-flying local CEOs have.

Next time you hear a private sector professional launching into yet another attack against INGOs, why not turn the tables? “True, INGOs are far from perfect. But how does your company do global non-profits?”

A stimulating conversation is likely to ensue.
If wines tell stories, then Hinwa definitely embodies that of Nepal. The fusion of wild berries with an improvised Nepali distillation process, and the collaboration of local communities with one savvy entrepreneur, make this a unique Nepali creation.

Fifteen years ago, Aish Narayan Shrestha started making wines, using the wild berries that grow above 8,000 feet in the eastern hilly region of Nepal. He organised villagers in Sankhuwasabha to collect aiselu and chutro in the forests, then sell it to his factory. Here the berries were mixed with sugar and left to ferment in plastic drums for a month. “Hinwa is entirely dependent on a natural process,” says Sujan Shrestha, the son of the founder. “We have not yet adopted modern distillery technology.”

Shrestha’s Hinwa winery produces white and red wines, although the red is closer to rosé. About 12,000 bottles of Hinwa are sold every year. Some of it is also exported abroad. “We targeted the European market but could not meet its demands because of a lack of production,” explains Sujan.

Production was severely hit when the Maoists destroyed their factory in 2001 for producing alcohol. But Hinwa pulled itself together and has quietly gained popularity among wine drinkers in Nepal. With production limited to a certain season a year, don’t be surprised if your local store runs out fairly quickly. But don’t worry; there will always be another year.

Shankar Dahal

W ining and dining has long been more than just an imported cliché in the urban centres of Nepal. It’s not just the inexplicable volume of restaurants and bars popping up in every corner that testifies to the newfound Nepali desire to venture out of their dalbhat regimentation. But weddings, bratabandas and even pasnes are now cause for ostentatious celebration beyond the homestead, and every one of these occasions is witness to the clink of wine glasses to complement the ever ready beer and whiskey.

Gone are the days when the ladies tittered as they sipped a glass or two of fermented grape juice, sometimes adulterated with water. Men are as likely to join in and what’s more, venture an opinion on the calibre of what’s on offer. The wine market has boomed, and there’s no supermarket worth the name without an excellent selection from around the world. So much so that Nepali winemakers have now ventured out into the light. So far they’ve had limited success, but it’s worth bearing in mind that Nepal has only had a decade at its disposal to master the 8,000-year-old tradition of wine-making. Makalu Wine Industries’ Hinwa is at the forefront with a red and a white, while Pokhara’s Dandaghare boasts four different combos. None of these are true wines in the sense of being derived from grapes, and opt to test an intriguing mix of mountain berries, herbs and honey. On your behalf, Nepali Times took the plunge.

Dandaghare white (Rs 325 / Rs 370)

A strong bouquet one wouldn’t associate with grape wine, and a slightly murky colour. A relatively gentle taste to follow up, with some hints of dryness and sweetness. Not bad.

The cheaper of the two samples had a strong bouquet that one of our staffers described as the smell of ‘jaad’. A hint of honey, perhaps, as indicated on the label. But the taste is thin, sour and rough on the tongue, and got us hot under the collar. Not in a good way.

Hinwa white (Rs 330)

Sweetish, reminiscent of dessert wine, though we weren’t sure if this was the intention. Drinkably smooth, but you’d have to have a sweet tooth to persevere with this.

Hinwa red (Rs 330)

Also slightly sweet, with a light fruity bouquet, and more like a rosé than a red. A surprisingly sharp flavour and deceptively strong. Smell of aiselu and taste of chutro? Perhaps we’d had a few too many by then.

Dandaghare red (Rs 400)

We didn’t actually sample Dandaghare red, but were informed by usually reliable sources that it had more than a hint of liqueur to it. Hmm.

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Nepal International Indigenous Film Festival, in its fourth year, the festival will screen over 30 films from Nepal, India, Bhutan, Mexico, Sweden, Norway, and Cambodia. Friday 25 June – Sunday 27 June, City Hall and Nepal Tourism Board

Heritage Walk. Better World Family Nepal offers a chance to learn the history of your city, and the numerous temples you pass on your way to work. Anil Chitrakar will also provide some commentary. Saturday 26 June, 6.30am, meet at United World Trade Centre, Tripureshwor

Geometrics, an exhibition of paintings about the intuitive responses of elements, geometry and colours in Thangkas by American artist Piero Passacantando. Till Sunday 27 June, 11am-6pm, Siddhantha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited. 4216048

Mind Body Library, a lecture on the life and teachings of Saint Kabir. Friday June 25, 8pm, Babarmahal. 4102025

Recite your own writing, not for those with stage fright or a weak heart. Share your writing and receive constructive criticism. Saturday 3 July, 3.15pm, British Council, Lainchaur

Nepali Kukur

This one’s a real tuckaway, and perhaps one that deserves to remain so, if only for the continued patronage of those who’ve discovered it through dint of cultural curiosity. Hint: it’s above the Fuji Bakery and you’d be forgiven (though hungry) for retreating after opening the door to the sight of fine textiles on racks. Which they also sell, along with a fine selection of pan-Asian and continental dishes.

Try the Greek Taramo for starters, if you like (and you should like) smoked salmon and salmon pate on bread. If you feel a little bolder, fvely up the Newar in you and order a few slices of rare puff to boot, as much of a riposte to carpaccio as kakahi is to steak tartare. For the mains, to the strains of opera-lite, you have a choice of cutlets and steaks and what better to wash it all down than good old Star Beer, of tasty 7.5% vintage? My companion figured the plum soda was better, and she preferred the salad to her fatty pork, but we both rolled out feeling beery, and porky, and well done.

Nepali Kukur
**MUSIC**

Sam Smala in Kathmandu, they are like a family of musicians who play their own songs with five performers inspired by jazz, gypsy jazz and world music. See this French group perform live in Kathmandu. Sunday 27 June, 6pm, Rachiyas Naagh, Jamal, Call 4241163 for invitations.

Palesi - Laxmi Prasad Devkota, the popular music series will use poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota’s poems as lyrics performed by various artists. Friday 25 June, 5.30pm, Nepalaya, Kathmandu, 4437893

Chevrolet Concert Series, after a brief hiatus, the series is back with performances by Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory house bands and special appearance by Stars of Cinth and 7th Gravity. Saturday 26 June, 6pm, Mokah auditorium, Jhamshikhel, 5013554

Good football, good music, another Friday with football and music. Subhaprabhat will be playing in between the games. Chef Birju will be serving beef tenderloin in honey mustard sauce, calamari, kimchi pasta and pork chops. Friday 25 June, 7pm, House of Music, Thamel

**DINING**

Rox Bar, watch the matches on the big screen at the bar and drink special cocktails prepared just for the occasion. For the sophisticates among you. Hyatt Regency, Boudha, 4491234

Cinnamon Lounge, spacious lounge with a menu featuring grilled meat of various kinds. For the hungry man in you. Jhamshikhel, 9803160266

Le Trio, Boasts a 52” LCD screen, plenty of comfortable couches and a good selection of booze for all your football viewing needs. Jhamshikhel, 9803160266

The Factory, a bit pricey but lots of fun games, quizzes and buckets of beer. Thamel, 4701185

**GETAWAYS**

The Great Escape, retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city to The Dwarikas Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort in Dhulikhel. Just 45 minutes from Kathmandu. The Dwarikas’ Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, Dhulikhel, 447 9488.

Simsime Pani, beat the summer heat with a cool summer package from Fulbari Resort in Pokhara. Refreshing discounts and unparalleled services await you at your destination. Fulbari Resort, Casino, Golf and Spa, Pokhara. Contact 4462248 for prices and reservations.

Relax Package, stay at the Hyatt for Rs 6200 plus taxes for one night’s accommodation for two including breakfast at the Cafe. Hyatt Regency, Boudha, contact 4491234 for prices and reservations.

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Relax Package, stay at the Hyatt for Rs 6200 plus taxes for one night’s accommodation for two including breakfast at the Cafe. Hyatt Regency, Boudha, contact 4491234 for prices and reservations.
The first cycle of the monsoon stopped in eastern Nepal, failing to advance into central and western Nepal last week due to a lack of moisture. The second cycle brought heavy rains in most of the Siwalik and plains. As a result, the scorching temperatures have dropped by 3 degrees on average. Satellite pictures show the monsoon wave moving up to the hills where showery rains will continue to feature over the weekend. The Valley will catch up with its quota of rains this weekend. Enjoy the rainy nights.

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS: Prime Minister Madhav Nepal poses with South Asian ministers during talks on ending violence against children at the Soaltee, Wednesday.

NO STAGE TOO SMALL: Local youths make the most of the World Cup in Kei Tole, Kathmandu, Tuesday.


NOT FORGOTTEN: A family from Kathmandu feeds the elderly denizens of Pashupati’s Briddha Ashram, Monday.

WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDA DHAL

The first cycle of the monsoon stopped in eastern Nepal, failing to advance into central and western Nepal last week due to a lack of moisture. The second cycle brought heavy rains in most of the Siwalik and plains. As a result, the scorching temperatures have dropped by 3 degrees on average. Satellite pictures show the monsoon wave moving up to the hills where showery rains will continue to feature over the weekend. The Valley will catch up with its quota of rains this weekend. Enjoy the rainy nights.
The failed people

If we complain about ‘the way things are’, then we cannot rule out a solution because of ‘the way things are’

Minister: Don’t spend time doing nothing.
Secretary: Don’t spend time cutting ribbons.

The failed people

T
de the Fund for Peace announced that Nepal ranked 26th on its annual Failed States Index, the most powerful members of the executive were having a heart-to-heart session. The ministers, led by Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, chided the bureaucrats for inefficiency, failure to follow directives, and therefore the nation’s economic backwardness.

Madhav Nepal was particularly displeased about the lack of progress in the maintenance of shoddy roads in the capital, a highway connecting his constituency in Rautahat to his other constituency in Kathmandu, and the establishment of a republic monument, or the giant horse that could fly. “You don’t even obey the orders of the prime minister,” he droned on.

The bureaucrats said they were helpless. There was too much pressure from the politicians to do things they didn’t want to do, they said. Repeating what they had told the Public Accounts Committee last week when asked why funds were being diverted to projects in powerful politicians’ districts, they said in unison: “We are forced to.”

In the wake of a string of new corruption allegations against various members of the cabinet, the meeting was, to say the least, illuminating. If those who set the agenda and those who execute them are helpless pawns in each other’s schemes then no wonder we rank so high on the Failed States Index. No wonder we are chronically behind on development.

Only last week, it was reported that illegal tree felling in 23 locations in the Terai had left long stretches of land almost bare. All this was happening under the patronage of community forest users groups and District Forest Offices, and even the Minister for Forests and Soil Conservation Deepak Bohara was found to be involved with the timber racket. This is the same ministry that orchestrated a Climate Summit at Everest Base Camp and has accepted a £40 million grant from DFID to tackle deforestation.

After initially denying that any of the trees had been felled illegally, the ministry has finally started disciplining those involved. So far, one officer has been suspended. Not fired. Suspended. “But we can’t take action against everyone because the papers said they are guilty,” said the secretary of the ministry. Fair enough. But how about for failing to do their job, which was to protect the forests that now no longer exist?

Accountability is meaningless if you have immunity. Just 0.01 per cent of civil servants were dismissed out of a total of 77,000 last year. When bureaucrats say they are helpless, are they afraid of losing their jobs or being transferred to a less lucrative department? Haven’t the ministries of finance or home always been coveted places to work, as opposed to the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs?

Politicians are made accountable by elections. Through their actions, or lack thereof, they have maintained a sense in the voters’ minds that the electorate is incapable of bringing about change. Frank Herbert put it nicely in the Dune series: “If you think of yourselves as helpless and ineffectual, it is certain that you will create a despotic government to be your master.” Our government may not seem despotic, but isn’t despotism a system where people are treated as subordinates?

On Monday, both bureaucrats and politicians said they were helpless, even though they continue to collaborate efficiently when it comes to embezzlement and corruption. They meekly announced that new solutions were needed. The solution is simple: they should work for the people and the country; if they can’t they need to be dismissed. If we are complacent about ‘the way things are’, then we cannot rule out a solution because of ‘the way things are’.
Feeling words

Suresh Raj Neupane

Historically, there has been no way for visually impaired Nepalis to broaden their horizons. There was simply no reading material available in Braille.

There was little hope for them to keep abreast of contemporary literature, let alone aspire to emulate such luminaries as John Milton, author of “On his blindness,” and Helen Keller, who penned “The story of my life.” Now, there may be some amongst the 30,000 visually impaired people in Nepal who can dream of following in their footsteps.

A Braille library has been set up in Thapathali by the Nepal Association for the Welfare of the Blind, Rotary Club Patan and Rose International. Sumita Thapa, coordinator of Nepal FM’s Bolako boli, says this has filled a void. A similar venture in Lalitpur’s Thaiba failed, though the audio library opened in Baluwatar with the assistance of the Nepal Blind Support Association is still in operation.

But it’s not just world literature that will be available to the visually impaired, in the form of over one thousand donated books soon to arrive from the US Library of Congress, and donations from US-based Seedlings Braille Books for Children. Nepali classics such as Naso, Munamadan, Basai, Rajeshwori, Junga, Khai-khai, Gauri and Sirish ko phool are amongst the additions to the Thapathali library. Braille encyclopedias, too, will help visitors advance their learning.

Govinda Prasad Acharya, lecturer at Ratnas Rajya Laxmi Campus, points out that the Thapathali library will go a long way towards addressing the needs of visually impaired Nepal. But he stresses the need for government to take the lead, given the costs involved in translating books into Braille, as well as the thick paper that is used to imprint Braille on.

Meanwhile, Rajan Raut of the Nepal Association for the Welfare of the Blind and Rotary Kasthamandap promises that Braille books will be taken on a tour to major cities such as Pokhara and Dhanmah. The light of learning may soon be seen by those who cannot see the light of day.

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Tamakoshi bonanza

Having taken over the Norwegian utility Statkraft’s shares in Himal Power Ltd in 2006, SN Power is undertaking two hydropower projects in the Tamakoshi Basin: Kirne (67 MW) and Tamakoshi-3 (880 MW). SN Power’s Vice-President and Country Director Sandip Shah spoke to Nepali Times about the challenges and rewards for investors in Nepal.

What is your message to other investors wishing to get into hydropower in Nepal?

My message is that they need to be patient and have a long-term view of their investments. Nepal offers great opportunities and the country’s natural water resources are immense. We believe that Nepal’s hydropower resources can be harnessed in an optimum manner for the benefit of the people of Nepal. Investing in hydropower development in a country like Nepal is still very high risk, and it requires proper support from the political and bureaucratic levels and from the people of the project areas. We have an open communication system, but sponsors like us and financial institutions require that the right message, with proper research and analysis, is delivered for public consumption.

Mutually beneficial

W ith three major hydropower projects coming up with a cumulative capacity of nearly 1,500 MW, the Tamakoshi basin in Dolakha is emerging as a major powerhouse for the domestic energy grid, export to India and local development.

While the Nepal Electricity Authority is moving ahead with Upper Tamakoshi (200 MW), the Norwegian company SN Power is expanding to build Tamakoshi-3 (800 MW) and Kirne (67 MW) in addition to its existing Khimti power plant (880 MW).

What makes the Norwegians unique is that they have not just stayed in Nepal through the war years, but are now expanding into a major new venture that is designed to export peak power to the Indian grid through a dedicated transmission line. Tamakoshi-3 could be the first project that will realise the long-term goal of reversing Nepal’s balance of trade deficit with India, through energy export following completion in 2016.

Nepali Times: People are surprised that SN Power is investing in a big new project in Nepal at a time when most others are pulling out because of political instability.

Sandip Shah: SN Power’s majority shareholder Statkraft was in Nepal from the early 1990s as the majority shareholder of HIMAL Power Ltd (HPL), the company that developed and is operating the Khimti plant. We have been here through the peak of the insurgency and other periods of instability. We have braved the tough times. At SN Power, we have a long-term view of our investments in Nepal. Since the situation has improved, greater opportunities have opened up, so we have embarked on two projects, one of which is fairly large in Nepal’s context.

What kind of contingencies did you have to take into account with a big project like Tamakoshi-3?

Nepal, like other emerging markets where SN Power operates, has various risks. Geological and hydrological risks, risks of glacial floods and earthquakes, political risk...but we have good systems in place for planning, risk assessment and risk management. We feel we are strategically well-positioned and well prepared in Nepal to develop large projects.

But Tamakoshi is an export project. Doesn’t the delay at West Seti make you nervous?

The delay of the war years when its mini-power plant, needed for the construction phase, was blown up by the Maoists.

What is the response to the social development programs in Dolakha?

SN Power has gained recognition as a ‘good neighbour’ and a ‘partner’ rather than an ‘adversary’ in development.

What makes the Norwegians unique is that they have not just stayed in Nepal through the war years, but are now expanding into a major new venture that is designed to export peak power to the Indian grid through a dedicated transmission line. Tamakoshi-3 could be the first project that will realise the long-term goal of reversing Nepal’s balance of trade deficit with India, through energy export following completion in 2016.

Like other private power operators in Nepal, SN Power’s Khimti went through the disruptions and delays of the war years when its mini-power plant, needed for the construction phase, was blown up by the Maoists.

But the company persevered, and since its mini-power plant and its dedicated transmission line were designed to export peak power to the Indian grid, the company was able to move forward with its plans.

Doesn’t the delay at West Seti make you nervous?

The Indian market is a key driver for off-take of the energy from mega-sized hydroelectric projects. Of course we recognise the need for power supply in Nepal, and are discussing power sales to Nepal with the authorities while finalising our commercial strategy.

To develop such large projects, banks and financial institutions look for a robust commercial strategy that involves more than one creditworthy buyer. The best scenario for Nepal is a combination of large and small scale hydropower development driven by a mix of export and domestic sales.

By the time your Tamakoshi project comes on line in Nepal will be needing that power.

Tamakoshi-3 is scheduled to come on line in 2016/17, after commissioning of the Upper Tamakoshi Project, which will go a long way to meeting domestic demand. However, we are in dialogue with the Government of Nepal for the best sharing of benefits between the developer and the host country for Tamakoshi-3.

A lot of private power projects have ground to a halt because of local threats and extortion. How have you dealt with this problem?

Local expectations are rising due to the political and security situation in the country. We have a robust corporate social responsibility program and a good and long-term relationship with our host community in the Tamakoshi Valley. This has created an atmosphere of support for our projects. Security in Nepal is still a challenge of course, and safety for our people will always be our top priority.

What is your message to other investors wishing to get into hydropower in Nepal?

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All three projects are designed to export peak power to the Indian grid, and are expected to be completed by 2016. However, the delay at West Seti has caused some concern among investors. SN Power is confident that it can overcome these challenges and realise the potential of the Tamakoshi basin in Dolakha.
Hom Karki in Kathmandu, 22 June

The family of Ramesh Giri, who died in a motorcycle accident in Saudi Arabia, received his body 22 months after his death. His beloved mother pleaded with political leaders, trade union leaders and the prime minister, all in vain. She passed away before her son’s body was brought back home. Similarly, Krishna Lal Sharma of Syangja died in Saudi Arabia, but his body only arrived back in Nepal after 18 months. The bodies of Nepali migrant workers Shambhu Lal Shrestha, Harka Bahadur Magar, Dal Bahadur Budha, Harka Bahadur BK and Ganga Thapa are still in the morgues of various hospitals in Saudi Arabia.

Ostracised

Loghathi Kunwar in Rajdhani, 22 June

The superstition that married women should not wear white clothes or ploough the fields is still live and kicking in Nepali society. Recently, a woman in Kalauli VDC was publicly humiliated and then forced to leave her village for flooting tradition.

Locals of Gusaunala VDC, Rajuipur, took offence at Basudevi Sunar, 75-year-old mother. According to Basudevi, the ‘VDC’s main thoroughfares from 9am to 2pm. Egged on by the crowd  people who mistreated her. Damali were among the 150 people who mistreated her. Sunar claims that the police had no time to investigate the incident because of the goods of the VDC. They were covered with dense forest 15 years ago, but deforestation began when a road reached the VDC.

There are more households in Panchapokhari now. Those who have left the villages during the insurgency have returned since the CA elections. There are houses all along the road from Basantapur to Gupha Pokhari, and the forest has been cleared as far as 200 metres from the settlement.

Krishna Deckota, acting chief of the District Forest Office, Sankhuwasabha, says deforestation has continued as people do not have an alternative to fireswood for heating and cooking purposes. The only forests in the area are rhododendron, and locals estimate about 50 per cent of rhododendron forests have been destroyed so far.

Ramesh Giri’s relatives were receiving his body at the airport, Krishna Bahadur Shrestha of Dolakha, leaving for Saudi Arabia to work as a driver, was saying, “The manpower company had asked us to tear up our labour permits as soon as we board the plane. We are supposed to call the number our manpower company has given when we get off the plane, and we will be received at the airport.”

The deceased Giri had gone to Saudi through Sky Overseas, owned by Bal Prasad Dahal. Giri left the company that had hired him and joined another as he did not get the salary and incentives he was promised. Shrestha will probably do the same, but if he runs into trouble without insurance or a company willing to take responsibility for him, he risks the same fate as Giri. “There are about 70,000 Nepali migrant workers in the Saudi company and are highly vulnerable to danger,” says Dahal.

Migrant plight

They have not been brought back to Nepal because their employers have refused to take responsibility, and their families cannot cover the expenses of repatriation. As per Saudi regulations, the bodies of deceased workers should be sent back to their respective countries within two months, or they have to be buried. But many of these corpses remain unattended because of the illegal entry of the workers, the inefficacy of the Nepali embassy, the poverty of workers’ families and the irresponsibility of manpower agencies. “We won the case of Ramesh Giri,” says Khagendra Prasad Dahal, first secretary at the Nepali embassy in Saudi Arabia. “We traced the sponsor (the Saudi agency that recruits workers). There are thousands of workers whose sponsors are not known.”

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Where have all the flowers gone?

Kishor Budhathoki in Annapurna Post, 20 June

Khandbari: The deforestation of rhododendron forests in Tijapure, Milke and Jaljale is continuing unabated, threatening the existence of the rhododendron capital.

Rhododendron forests sprawl over Sankhuwasabha, Taplejung and Tehrathum districts, and are a major attraction for tourists. These forests host 27 species of rhododendron. Today, one can see the make hills of Dunda and Ratnyle which fall within the remit of Chaumala VDC. They were covered with dense forest 15 years ago, but deforestation began when a road reached the VDC.

Tampak, 9, Tutechipani, has developed into a small town. There are more households in Panchapokhari now. Those who have left the villages during the insurgency have returned since the CA elections. There are houses all along the road from Basantapur to Gupha Pokhari, and the forest has been cleared as far as 200 metres from the settlement.

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Red cards for child employers

Lalitpur: You had better be worried if you are enjoying a carefree World Cup night while forcing a child to work in your house. Like the players, you may well get a red card for your behaviour.

Lalitpur Sub-Metropolitan City is starting a red card awareness campaign to socially ostracise those homeowners who employ children. Gyani Bahadur Khadka, Community Development Officer, said that they thought of the idea to attract the attention of people.

The city has already distributed 60,000 pamphlets and cards requesting homeowners to desist from hiring children. Sri Lanka Pledge 7f heuristic has caught everyone. We thought this would be the best way to raise awareness in the community,” Sarita Maharjan of the Metropolitan Office said. According to Maharjan, families employing children will be identified and given red cards if they are found to be guilty of abuse. “The names of the abusers will be made public and they will be socially ostracised,” she said.

The sub-metropolitan office has collaborated with Child Workers in Nepal (CWN) to run this campaign. Community study centres have been opened in Kusunti, Tikhedewal and Kupondole, and about 30 former child workers are studying here. There are plans to send these children to school after one year of study in the centres.

The sub-metropolitan office will also set up child protection committees in all wards for monitoring purposes, and about half a dozen are already operational. Volunteers from the committees, the sub-metropolitan officer’s staff and CWN will carry out monitoring, hand out red cards and rescue children if they are being abused.
Musahar homes

Shivohari Bhattarai in Nepal Samacharpatra, 24 June

Rajini raj Musahars, who have been living in thatched huts built on the land of others, will now be able to live in brick houses of their own.

The 22 Musahar households in Jamuwa VDC, Saptari are thrilled at the prospect of living in tin-roofed homes. Seventy-five-year old Ramji Sada Musahar is happy that he will live to see his own tin-roofed house.

Since the government declared the implementation of Janata Awas (People’s Home) Program in Kapilbastu, Siraha and Saptari in the last budget, Rs 130 million has been dispatched to Saptari to construct houses for 1000 Dalits, the Urban Development and Building Construction Office in Rajbiraj says.

Construction work has already started in six VDCs for Dalit and Muslim household. The area has one of the largest concentrations of Dalits in the country.

Division Engineer of the Urban Development Office, Shyam Kishor Singh, says that the houses will each cost Rs 159,280 and the construction work will be completed in two weeks. Disciples had offered this box to Lord Buddha and it had been placed next to the footmark of Buddha in stone, guarded within the premises of the Lumbini Development Trust.

Group 4 security personnel stand guard at the gate and the Regional Police Post is about 400 metres from the gate. Yet there was a security lapse that seems to have encouraged others. On 7 June, a planning officer was attacked by khukuri-wielding mercenaries following a quarrel over a contract bid.

A donation box was stolen two years ago as well, construction materials have been stolen, and Nilgai have been poached. Some years ago, the Japanese monk Nawatame was murdered in front of a shrine. These incidents indicate a gang of criminals are involved in these activities.

Lumbini, as the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, symbolizes peace and non-violence to the world. The criminal activities here have become a matter of shame for Nepal and the local police administration should act before irreversible damage is done to Lumbini’s image.

Mohan Chapagain

Lumbini vice

Letter to the editor, Nagarik, 15 June

A riser in crimes in the birthplace of Gautam Buddha has locals as well as followers of Buddhism worried.

A donation box was stolen two weeks ago. Disciples had offered this box to Lord Buddha and it had been placed next to the footmark of Buddha in stone, guarded within the premises of the Lumbini Development Trust. Group 4 security personnel stand guard at the gate and the Regional Police Post is about 400 metres from the gate. Yet there was a security lapse that seems to have encouraged others.

On 7 June, a planning officer was attacked by khukuri-wielding mercenaries following a quarrel over a contract bid. A donation box was stolen two years ago as well, construction materials have been stolen, and Nilgai have been poached. Some years ago, the Japanese monk Nawatame was murdered in front of a shrine. These incidents indicate a gang of criminals are involved in these activities.

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Food adulteration

Bishna Pokharel in Nagarik, 23 June

Kathmandu: Sub-standard and adulterated beverages are being sold in the capital and in other cities, government studies have revealed.

Tests carried out by the Food Technology and Quality Control Department found adulteration in water, milk, clarified butter and cooking oil.

Senior Food Officer Pramod Koirala said that harmful micro-organisms were found in most food items. “The problem is even worse in water,” he said.

Of the 302 samples of liquid and solid food collected in four months, 60 samples were found to be sub-standard. Most were bottled water samples. Even bottled water manufacturers admit that there is adulteration in most brands. The secretary of the Nepal Bottled Water Industries Association said, “There are problems in many products. We are committed to improving them.” He also said that the problem arises from the manufacturers’ ignorance of government standards. “Most don’t even know they have to get permission to manufacture,”

Bottled water manufacturers are required to obtain a quality validation certificate from the Food Technology and Quality Control Department, but most have not done so.

The department has claimed that it will be taking action against manufacturers that do not meet government standards. According to the Food Act, industries failing to meet standards can be fined up to Rs 5000 and slapped with a jail term of two years. Punishment can increase depending on the harm to public health. But to date, no one has been punished for violating standards.
he donkey’s buddies decided to watch Portugal-North Korea at one of several Korean restaurants in Kathmandu that are run by diplomatic license (canine bulgogi was off the menu, but thanks for asking). It is probably the only North Korean establishment in the world that is sponsored by an American multinational, and at the end of the evening a waitress with a DPRK flag pinned to her hanbok delivered the bill, which added another touch of authenticity because it was all in Korean and we had no idea what we’d just eaten. The Revenue Dept will be glad to know, however, that 10%VAT was charged. No service charge, but this isn’t the kind of establishment where kantikari waiters are going to go on strike anytime soon.

Despite the rented crowd of Chinese fans complete with a cheerleader in the stands to orchestrate vuvuzela blowing, the democratic socialist Koreans are out of the World Cup. Wonder if human rights organisations are tracking the fate of the North Korean World Cup team to see what happens to them on their return home after playing Cote d’Ivoire on Friday. Before the games the North Korean captain told the media their sole aim was “to make the Dear Leader proud”. Well, they’ve probably made Dear Leader an Angry Leader. Even if the North Korean national team have their sentence commuted to life imprisonment, it is certain that the striking strikers of Les Bleus will be executed on the tarmac when they fly back to Paris.

Moving right along to something completely different. Awesome with royalists and republicans and even managed to smile at a joke or two about how the real Samrat Dahal got the girl while the wannabe-Samrat not only didn’t become emperor, he didn’t even get the prime ministership. Interesting, though, that while Jackie Shroff donned the daura suruwal with topi, the Ex-Sri Punch and Ex-PM both came in western suits.

Anyway, back at the Manisha wedding, PKD hobnobbed with royalists and republicans and even managed to smile at a joke or two about how the real Samrat Dahal got the girl while the wannabe-Samrat not only didn’t become emperor, he didn’t even get the prime ministership. Interesting, though, that while Jackie Shroff donned the daura suruwal with topi, the Ex-Sri Punch and Ex-PM both came in western suits.

Who says the Makunay Sarkar is lameduck? It has already notched up quite a few achievements. Foreign Policy magazine has ranked Nepal 26th from the bottom in its Failed States Rankings, pipping Sri Lanka (22nd), Pakistan (12th) and Afghanistan (10th). Also, we are now 127th in the development lineup and have only five hours of power cuts a day. The number of rhinos poached has been slashed from 12 last year to 11 this year, and govt-sponsored logging of Tarai forest has added 0.5% to our GDP growth.

So it’s official: GON is the best among the most awful countries on Earth.