It took them 99 days to traverse 1,555 horizontal kilometres and possibly a couple of hundred vertical kilometres from one end of Nepal to the other. But when they finished recently, the four-member team led by 21-time Mt Everest summiteer, Apa Sherpa, said he came to appreciate Nepal’s unity in its diversity. The trekkers magnified the overwhelming desire among the people they met along the way for peaceful coexistence among communities and better living standards for their children. Nepalis all along the route wanted this message to go to the rulers in Kathmandu.

BIG SKY: The great Himalayan traverse has helped spread the word about trekking tourism to lift living standards in neglected remote regions of Nepal, like this village below Mt Machapuchre where farmers get ready to sow maize.
When things are as polarised as they are in the current constitution debate, and when all sides want all or nothing, any political compromise was sure to be unpalatable to many. And so it was. The street protests by Madhesi and Janajati groups that followed the deal struck on Tuesday among the four main political forces were necessary muscle-flexing. The political leadership may be narrow-minded, near-sighted, and greedy for power and money but they have worked out the best give-and-take arrangement possible under the circumstances. They have even averaged out the number of provinces between the demand for 14 and 6.

However, the names and boundaries of future provinces were too divisive and volatile to be addressed at present. Doing that would have delayed the constitution and opened up a can of worms. By deferring the most contentious issues to the parliament of the future provinces themselves, the party leaderships passed the buck on to those who wanted such provinces. This buys everyone some time. And it makes far more sense over carving up the country even more fraught because of the potential for pitting Janajati against Janajati and Madhesi against Madhesi over what they should call of the potential for pitting Janajati against Janajati and Madhesi against Madhesi over what they should call provinces, what their territorial outlines should be, or worse: raise questions all over again the 11-state model. But, the leaders must have reasoned, we will cross that bridge when we come to it.

It doesn’t bode well for the future of the country and army continue to be dominated by mainly men belonging to the traditionally privileged caste groups. Many of them may have got there through dint of hard work, but no one can argue against the need to have more women, ethnic and gender balance in officialdom. And it’s not just the numbers, one has to be a Nepali woman, Dalit, Madhesi or Janajati to know the daily discrimination, arrogance and ethnocentrism with which Nepalis are treated. The political parties buckled under pressure and have now agreed to go with the country.

Among the many dangers we face, the two main ones now are the demolition of a damagoge president presiding over a country disintegrating into inter-ethnic squabbles. The thing to do now is to go into damage control mode to make sure that the new federalism model does not lead to the country’s disintegration, doesn’t keep our poor, and doesn’t turn us into a dictatorship.
We now have a fait accompli that Nepal will be carved up into 11 provinces. In any other country this would be called gerrymandering, but here it was just politicians who found appeasement too tempting to resist.

Even though the political leadership knows that ethnicity-based federalism would be a disaster, they were too weak-kneed to oppose it. The only benefit proponents have been able to cite is that it would ‘bring government closer to the people’. But existing evidence shows this argument to be flawed.

Nepal has had elected local councils for nearly half a century now, first called District and Village Panchayats and now known as VDCs and DDCs. After the mid-1990s, these councils had elected officials until 2002, and since then have been run by state-appointed secretaries. But local politicians still play a decisive role in the distribution of pork-barrel funds and state allocations.

These local bodies, in whatever form, have all along been bastions of corruption in which all party officials carve up the pie and collectively partake of it, irrespective of whichever party is at the helm in Kathmandu. The problem is that the feudalistic order continues to dominate. Most political leaders belong to local elites who have always derived their power ascriptively without having to be accountable to the community members in its exercise.

This is why most politicians are corrupt in Nepal, and they get away with it with impunity under the cover of mutual protection. With such a feudal order remaining intact, Nepal’s imminent federalisation would only mean dividing up the country into new feudal fiefdoms, and we will effectively be jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

Wait, it gets worse. Take the example of the West Seti project, which the Maoist government has just awarded to China’s Three Gorges after 15 years of deadlock, but which may never be built if we continue with federalism. As directed by the Natural Resources Committee of parliament, West Seti will be developed as a multipurpose project, which would mean that the 290 m high dam would submerge 2,166 hectares of land (619 hectares of that prime farmland) and displace 16,221 people in Doti, Dandeldhura, Baitadi and Bajhang. It would release 90 cubic metres of regulated water per second, sufficient to irrigate 270,000 hectares for non-paddy cultivation and 90,000 hectares for paddy cultivation in the downstream districts of Kanchanpur, Kailali and Ilam.

The project’s multiple benefits in terms of power and irrigation could fundamentally transform the life and economy of the impoverished Karnali region. However, a federalised Nepal would resurrect the same argument that has stalled Nepal-India cooperation in power projects like West Seti. Only this time the disagreements over who should pay for downstream benefits of water regulation would be between states within the country. The three-week shutdown of far-western Nepal by opposing sides this month just presages what such inter-province conflict over natural resources would look like in the future.

With the division of the country into several autonomous entities, the question would be why the upstream provinces should not settle for a lower dam just to generate power if the downstream districts are not ready to compensate them by paying for irrigation benefits? The same thing would happen on the Budi Gandagi project for which Kuwaiti funds have lately been secured. Our pro-federal politicians do not seem to realise that there is a sanctity to the unique geography of Nepal whose integrity must not be tampered with in the name of populism.

Despite our continued poverty and bad governance, Nepal is known and respected around the world for two achievements at least: the rejuvenation of our denuded forests through community forestry user groups, and the projected meeting of MDG targets on child and maternal survival through our nationwide network of mothers’ groups and female community health volunteers. Both happened because of local empowerment.

The lesson is that we need devolution of authority to communities themselves, and well beyond the feudal local elites. Devolving power to local ethnic warlords will keep Nepal poor in the name of redressing the grievances of marginalised ethnic groups.

Bihari K Shrestha is a veteran civil servant who served with the National Planning Commission, and the ministries of health and physical planning and local development.
I anyone still had any doubt that the delays in finishing the constitution was never about ideological differences between the parties, and more about give-and-take over power sharing. Tuesday’s agreement should have put those doubts to rest.

We have decided on a mixed form of governance not because that is what the country needs, but just so Pushpa Kamal Dahal can become the next directly-elected president.

To let him do that we have closed our eyes to all sorts of complications that can arise from dual power centres of having the parliament elect a prime minister, and the people elect a president. And this is supposed to put an end to political instability caused by a parliamentary system?

The number of states, their boundaries and what to call them have always eluded consensus. But this week we suddenly have an agreement on a 11-state model with names and territories of the provinces to be decided later. We would have liked to believe that the decision on 11 states was an outcome of serious discussion among academics and experts. But like the form of governance, it was just a part of the package deal of power-sharing. The parties cut themselves a political deal, and voila all contentious issues on the constitution were suddenly resolved. This has always been how decisions have been made in this country. Not, as we naïvely believed, because the parties had woken up to the urgency of meeting the constitution deadline, or because they were concerned about the country’s future.

It is becoming clear that if the Indian ambassador had not speeded up the power sharing deal among the parties, they would be squabbling till D-day and beyond. It is pointless to lament foreign interference when our leaders are so hapless. If we don’t clean up our mess, our neighbours will do it for us.

But Tuesday’s agreement sets a precedent: the ambassador of a foreign country midwifing a new government in the parlour of the chairman of the largest political party. Where else on earth does this happen? And so it is with the Europeans and their stoking the chaos and anarchy.

A constitution is not just about content, but also about process. Will the country have the constitutional right of having a CA if the constitution was going to be written by a donor party? Who writes the donor party’s constitution? Far from reflecting the aspirations of the Nepali people, it seems our CA members and leaders will stand for the interests of donors and pressure groups to which they have sold their loyalties.

Last week’s Himalmedia poll shows that the caucus and other proponents of ethnic federalism are out of sync with public opinion even among their own communities.

And this is why federalism, when it is finally instituted, will not improve things. We are going to remain a country that will have top-down governance, except that instead of having one centre we are now going to have 11.

A strong, united and independent Nepal seems hardly to be on anyone’s priority list. We are too busy fighting amongst ourselves to notice what we have lost. This is exactly the kind of situation demagogues hope to get us into so they can benefit from the chaos and anarchy.
Last chance on FATF

In our obsession with the constitution, let’s not forget the other deadline Nepal has to meet

Our lawmakers and politicians are notoriously bad at multi-tasking and they don’t work well with deadlines. They have stayed up past midnight to extend the CA’s mandate on four occasions. There is an 11th hour attitude about everything.

In February, Nepal narrowly escaped being blacklisted by Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global anti-money laundering watchdog for not endorsing three bills against money laundering: Bill on Controlling Organised Crime, Bill on Extradition and Bill on Mutual Legal Assistance, as well as other recommendations.

The commitment was made two years ago. However, the extension until June granted through some arm-twisting by European embassies in Kathmandu and strong pressure from PM Baburam in Kathmandu and strong twisting by European embassies.

Nepal has already shown leniency that the cost of non-compliance will be devastating for our financial system, create a positive investment environment and boost international trade.

The FATF deadline coinciding with the constitution deadline has been unfortunate, but there is still time. Nepal’s inability to endorse the bills and failure to deliver on other commitments will be tabled in the next FATF meeting, scheduled for June in Italy. The lawmakers should understand that the cost of non-compliance is high for the country’s reputation and economy.

FATF has already shown leniency once, we cannot use the excuse of ‘political transition’ to buy time again and again.

Our financial system will lose its credibility as FATF has warned its member nations to take strict measures against blacklisted countries that pose substantial money laundering and terrorism financing.

The letters of credit issued by local banks may or may not be honoured. Local businessmen will not be able to survive the charges placed on blacklisted countries, and trade will suffer. Nepal’s reputation and its economy will be hit.

It will also strain inflow of foreign investments and ties with multinationals: not good news for Nepal Investment Year 2012-13. Already, we have nothing new to show except for new directives issued by NRB in March to track the flow of dirty money.

Three months since the extension, the three bills are collecting dust in the parliament. Nepal is yet to fully comply with the 49 recommendations laid down by the FATF. Asia Pacific Group (APG), the regional wing of FATF, may rates Nepal as one of the poor performers in the region.

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It took them 99 days, 1,555 horizontal kilometres and possibly a couple of hundred vertical kilometres to get from one end of Nepal to the other. But when they finished it, the four-member team led by 21-time Mt Everest summiteers, Apa Sherpa, said they got an unparalleled lesson in Nepal’s natural and human diversity.

“T” have climbed Mt Everest many times by going up and down, but this time I was going sideways, through the villages, forests, glaciers and along rivers and lakes of Nepal,” Apa Sherpa told Nepal Times, “and I realised just how rich our country is.”

Other members of the team, all bearded by the end of it, concurred. Journalist Saurav Dhakal took four months off from his job at Kantipur Television, and says he learnt more from this trip than earning degrees at university: “I realised just how interdependent Nepal’s different regions are on each other, and how we live in perfect social harmony.”

As for people’s reactions to the debate on federalism and the new constitution, Dhakal said,
“While politicians in Kathmandu are busy hashing out last minute agreements, the people we met during our trek told us they still don’t understand what federalism means or how the new constitution is going to affect them. But regardless of the changes that might take place post-27 May, they are determined to maintain the harmony which exists between different communities. Even groups who are more aware of their ethnic identities are adamant about not letting group interests override the nation’s unity."

Dawa Steven Sherpa, who has also climbed Mt Everest twice, has become somewhat of an environmental expert. He says the effects of climate change can be seen all over Nepal: in the receding glaciers, the dry springs, the forest fires, erratic rains.

“The only way to deal with it is to raise living standards so the poorest Nepalis can cope with the disruptions that climate change will bring,” he says.

Photographer Samir Jung Thapa is a man of few words, but he took thousands of stunning photographs which will be turned one day into a visual chronicle of this epic trek. Some of Thapa’s photographs are printed here.

The Climate-smart Celebrity Trek was organised by the Himalayan Climate Initiative (HCI) to help draw global attention to the effect of climate change in the Himalaya, and to strengthen the resilience of Nepalis to deal with the changes it will bring.

“Our aim was to spread awareness, and in this we have succeeded beyond our expectations, the trek got worldwide publicity and Nepalis came out in overwhelming numbers to support Ama and his team as they walked across Nepal,” Prashant Singh of HCI said.

HCI hopes that the trek will also help spread the word about the beauty of the Himalayas and the adventure of trekking across some of the world’s highest mountains. Tourism income will then help lift living standards in the neglected remote regions of Nepal.

Says Ama: “Every one knows Nepal is a scenic country, but what I learnt from this trip is that the Nepali people are kind, generous and friendly.”
Events

Exhibition on Everest, a photography exhibition by Jeff Botz which showcases Mount Everest in its true glory, 26 April to 26 May, 9.30 am to 5pm, Image Ark Studio, Kulimha Tole, Patan.

World Trade Fair Day, exhibition of handicraft and agro food products by 40 FTG Nepal members. Visit food stalls serving typical Newari cuisine. 19 May, 10am to 5pm, Baitak Event Venue, Tiquepurkharai.

Master Harold and the Boys, explore a beautiful play by Athol Fugard set in the apartheid era of South Africa. Rs 200 (students) and Rs 500 (adults). Tickets can be purchased from Dho karma Café (Patan Dhoka).

Buddhism in Russia, an exhibition by the Russian Centre of Science and Culture and Lumbini Buddhist University. 07 April to 27 May, 10am to 5pm, Russian Centre of Science and Culture.

Satya in Pokhara. If you find yourself in Pokhara in the coming weeks, be sure to visit Satya and take part in their numerous workshops and film screenings. 15 May to 30 May, Freedom Café, Lakeside, Pokhara.

Modern Metamorphoses, a modern take on one of the most renowned Latin poems, Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Rs 800 (including tea), every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 4 May to 20 May, 7.15 pm, Hotel Jalpa. 4271640, vajra@mos.com.np.

The New Faces of Tibet, Spanish artist Andrea Lopez Iglesias’ presents a brave new look on Tibet. 11 May to 24 May, 11am to 5pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, Babar Mahal.

Music

Degaa Saturday Music Nights, enjoy live performances every Saturday with bands like Uendra and Friends who will serenade you while you relish Degaa’s special Newari food. 28 April to 19 May, 7pm to 10pm, Degaa Restro Lounge, 5008879.

Rewind at Trishara, take a break. This Friday with a revamped menu, cocktails and great music. 18 May, 8.45 pm, Trishara Restaurant, Lazimpat.

Karaoke Night, a karaoke night to support Ayes Nepal’s fund raiser along with Filipino Community Nepal for underprivileged, adopted children in Budhanilkantha. Rs 450, 19 May, 9pm onwards, 8 degrees, Jhamsikhel.

Dining

Irish Pub, for the simple reason that the place actually feels like a bar. Don’t miss out on their Irish coffee. Lazimpat, Ananda Bhawan, 4416027.

JapaneSE Crepe Station, try the uniquely Nepali khwa crêpe for a quick fix. Kichopaskhali and Basantaapur. Call 4259655.

Manny’s Eatery and Bar, special lunch packages for a quick snack or filling lunch. Jwalakhel, Shaligram Complex, 5058919.

Live Band at The Corner Bar, Radisson Hotel Kathmandu every evening except Saturdays and Sundays. 4418118 ext. 1300.

Yellow Chili, enjoy renowned chef Sanjeev Kapoor’s dishes as this restaurant serves mouthwatering Indian delicacies, Thapathali.

Pesto Vostro, a pretty place which serves great pasta. Their bacon wrapped sausages are a must. Thamel, 985101043.

Tonic Restaurant, amazing food fit for family dinners or a night out with friends. Pokhara.

Lhasa Bar, enjoy a beer or a splash of cocktail at this springboard for excellent young musicians starting out on the Thamel circuit. Thamel, 9853010143.

Mike’s Breakfast, huge breakfasts and a never-ending supply of coffee amidst a lush garden setting characterise this café, popular among tourists and locals alike. Nadald, 4424303.

Bistro Carolina, a highly recommended place to eat and relax, their chocolate mousse and fish dishes are a must for foodies. Lakeside, Pokhara.

Alfresco, for homemade pastas and other lip-smacking delights. Scoltee Crome Plaza, 4238989.

Sai’s Pizza, almost round, almost cheap, always delicious, try out the cheesiest pizzas in town. Lakeside, behind Jazz Upstairs.

Chopstix, savoury Asian food cooked in true Chinese fashion sure to charm and impress. Try the famous drums of heaven. Kumaripati, 5551118.

Black and White Café, a great place to spend a quiet afternoon surging the net with some bakery items with great ambience and good food. Lakeside, Pokhara.

Café Du Temple, famous for its delicious food, warm ambience and a beautiful roof top view. Patan Durbar Square, 5527127.

Saigon Pho, spacious interior with authentic Vietnamese dishes. Lazimpat.
I can't stop beating myself up about all the snacks to accompany the beer, but that is the perfect reason to go eat. And am I glad that the powers that be guided me to Jhamsikhel, 5522708.

HANKOOK SARANG, from Bibimbab to Samgyeopsal, HANKOOK offers a wide range of Korean delicacies at affordable prices. Thamel

New Orleans, offers a great variety of western dishes that are scrumptious yet healthy. Try the rosemary chicken and hamburgers. Jhamshikhel, 552708

CHONGQING FAST FOOD, gear up for some mouth watering Chinese dishes like Sour and Spicy Pork and Kung Pao Chicken. Thamel

HANKOOK SARANG, from Bibimbab to Samgyeopsal, HANKOOK offers a wide range of Korean delicacies at affordable prices. Thamel

NEW YORKER, offers a great variety of western dishes that are scrumptious yet healthy. Try the rosemary chicken and hamburgers. Jhamshikhel, 552708

A lazy afternoon found me with nothing to do and time to kill in my book the perfect reason to go eat. And am I glad that the powers that be guided me propitious to Moksh. I walked in with no expectations and came out satiated and satisfied. The Bacon Wrapped Potato Sticks (Rs 250) and the Greek Salad (Rs 275) were adequate but nothing to write home to mama about.

My eloquence waits to describe the Rack of Lamb (Rs 800) - perfect cuts of Australian lamb served with steamed vegetables and rosemary sauce. My initial trepidation at ordering a dish that could go so wrong in so many ways turned out to be unfounded. Yes, it is lamb and therefore has a sharp rank taste to it that many Nepali palates accustomed to our emasculated khasis will take a little time getting used to. But Kiran Thapa, the head chef at Moksh, treats the ribs tenderly using dulcet tones so the meat is so soft, it falls off the bones. Moist, succulent and seasoned with just the right amount of rosemary- discernable but not overpowering- each bite is a gustatory extravagance.

The Banana Crêpes were not the most appetising to look at and I turned my nose dismissively at the gratuitous amounts of freshly made white cream sauce that covered the crêpes for being savoury and not appropriate for the dessert, but the sauce actually provides a very nice foil to the sweetness of the fruit and syrup; a piquant marriage of flavours.

Kiran sat down to have a little chat and informed us how all the meat is imported from Thailand and the green produce sourced fresh from organic farms in Bhaktapur, that the Duck Breast with Mushroom Sauce and Beer Batterfish are the most ordered items from the continental menu. He talked about the food he prepares and listening to him you realise that cooking is more than just a job for him- it’s his passion and the dishes are all the better for it. He also told me about customers who keep coming back just for the fish and prawn specialties he conjures up using Indian spices that he serves with naans and rotis.

Moksh, you know I will be back.

I have been to Moksh countless times- to enjoy the music, watch plays, visit the yoga studio, buy books, at photo shoots and never have I had a meal there. Don’t get me wrong- I had sampled the fare on a few occasions but that was the extent of it. I didn’t really think of Moksh as a place one went to dine and I can’t stop beating myself up about all those lost eating opportunities.

Moksh was one of the first establishments in that stretch of Patan which has now been dubbed, to the trepidation at ordering a dish that could go so wrong in so many ways turned out to be unfounded. Yes, it is lamb and therefore has a sharp rank taste to it that many Nepali palates accustomed to our emasculated khasis will take a little time getting used to. But Kiran Thapa, the head chef at Moksh, treats the ribs tenderly using dulcet tones so the meat is so soft, it falls off the bones. Moist, succulent and seasoned with just the right amount of rosemary- discernable but not overpowering- each bite is a gustatory extravagance.

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Moksh, you know I will be back.

Ruby Tuesday

Enter Jhamshikhel road from the Pulchowk Fire Brigade, cross St Mary’s School wall and look for a large signboard on the right. Enter the alley and go down the driveway.
The advent of increased travel during the 18th and 19th centuries. With the slave trade from India and the spread of dengue fever by mosquitoes are up to, especially in dengue-endemic places like Bangkok and Delhi. The dengue mosquito transmit different diseases. So the mosquito that transmits malaria will not transmit dengue. Mosquitoes that transmit dengue are called aedes, whereas it is the female mosquito which transmits malaria. The other important vector (culex mosquito) that transmit malaria will not transmit malaria, i.e., different species of mosquitoes transmit different diseases.

Importantly, different species of mosquitoes transmit different diseases. So the mosquito that transmits malaria will not transmit dengue. Mosquitoes that transmit dengue are called aedes, whereas it is the female mosquito which transmits dengue fever.

In recent years, dengue has been widespread in the Tani regions especially during summers. Even in Kathmandu, dengue has been seen in the occasional patient.

This rise is not surprising because of two reasons: a migrant population with the disease and an abundant supply of the particular vector (carrier) mosquitoes. Due to our porous borders with India, many migrant labourers (both Nepalis and Indians) with the disease enter Nepal. The vector mosquito enjoys a blood meal from these infected patients and transmits the disease to a healthy person after a bite. Importantly, different species of mosquitoes transmit different diseases. So the mosquito that transmits malaria will not transmit dengue. Mosquitoes that transmit dengue are called aedes, whereas it is the female mosquito which transmits dengue, unlike the malaria mosquito which prefers a rural environment.

In most patients, dengue illness, which comprises of fever, headache, eye pain and joint aches, subsides in about a week’s time. Doctors will treat only the symptoms in dengue as there is no specific antidote. There is, however, good news. It was believed that a second dengue infection predisposes patients to dengue haemorrhagic fever, the dreaded form of dengue; but this does not seem to be true. For prevention, use mosquito repellents like (odoms or DEET) and wear full-length clothing even during the day as dengue mosquito is a day time insect unlike the malaria mosquito which is active at night. In addition, turn over watering cans and pails after use so that the dengue mosquito does not breed in them.

With many viral illnesses, it is hard to predict how severely the population will be affected this summer. However, it is clearly a good idea to take precautions and avoid mosquito bites.
The ghosts of past failures finally disappeared and the three parties struck a deal that had been eluding them for four years. On Tuesday, the parties removed a final hurdle to broadly agree on all outstanding issues. But this agreement is driven by the sole purpose of avoiding a void on 27 May, nothing more.

In the name of a compromise, the parties have left gaping holes in the form of governance and state restructuring that have been the sticking points during negotiations. On governance, there is a fundamental divide between those who believe traditional parliamentary system did not work in Nepal because it led to instability, and those who think a directly-elected executive will solve that problem. The compromise agreed is a ‘mixed model’ which is going to cost this nation even more dearly in the near future.

If stability was the concern it would have made more sense to give executive powers to a directly-elected president or prime minister and make them accountable to parliament through strong checks and balances. This was not about stability, but rather about securing the ambitions of a few men at the top. In a country like Nepal, where rulers have yet to learn how to play by the rules, the ‘mixed’ model will only lead to a de facto and de jure power struggle.

On state restructuring, the compromise looks even more ominous. After poring over maps, the leaders arrived at a 11-state model based on multi-ethnic identity, but the entire exercise seems futile because they do not have the numbers to back their decision in the CA.

I spoke to Prithvi Subba Gurung who heads a cross-party caucus of Janajati lawmakers, and thinks this is a ploy to divide the Janajatis. He warned, “The leadership must not force us into an action that is going to leave everybody bitter.”

Even the Madhesi Front which was part of the agreement has now protested the inclusion of Jhapa, Sunari and Morang in an eastern Tarai province, the exclusion of Chitwan from central Tarai and consolidation of Kailali and Kanchanpur into the proposed Seti-Mahakali region.

Overnight after the agreement, the ‘Akhanda’ movements throughout the country against large ethnic enclaves fizzled out, leading to speculation that this was all about saving electoral bastions of influential leaders, and not really about saving Nepal. The three Tarai districts in the east have traditionally been the stronghold of the Koirala family. Chitwan is home to Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, while Kailali and Kanchanpur are the constituencies of influential leaders from three parties, like Sher Bahadur Deuba, Ramesh Lekhak, Lokendra Bahadur Chand and Lekh Raj Bhatta. Needless to say, all are non-Madhesis. The tacit support these leaders gave to the Brahmin and Chhetri samaj during the agitations proves this.

To be sure, besides concerns about ethnic confrontation, ordinary Bahuns and Chhetris took to the streets across the country because they had reasons to fear they would become second-class citizens in future ethnic-enclaves. “This has been one of the weaknesses of our movement, we just could not convince our fellow non-Janajati brothers and sisters that we are only claiming our own rights, not trying to take theirs away. We would never want anybody to undergo what we ourselves have suffered for so long,” Gurung told me. He blames the media for demonising the indigenous movement.

It was actually the parties who used the media to polarise public opinion to increase their own bargaining positions in negotiations, and when that failed they took the dangerous gamble of polarising the streets, provoking each side to neutralise the other. These are the seeds of social unrest that could plunge the nation into another conflict, the one with no ideological or political basis and driven only by deep hatred and intolerance.

After Tuesday’s agreement, one side has vacated the streets, but what happened in Dhangadi last week shows how far the leaders are prepared to go to fulfil their personal and partisan interests. Nepal’s problems are far from over.

BY THE WAY
Anurag Acharya

FOOLING SOME PEOPLE ALL THE TIME

A new constitution may eventually be declared on 27 May but the compromised document will leave many dissatisfied.
The Nepali people seem to know which way they want to go, but do their leaders?

**Consolidated data**

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<thead>
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<th>Service Provided</th>
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<th>Remained Same</th>
<th>Worsened</th>
<th>Don't want to say</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
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<td>3.2%</td>
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**Think nationally, act locally**

The Nepali people seem to know which way they want to go, but do their leaders?

KUNDA DIXIT

The results of this year’s Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2012 that were released last week proved once more that the main concern of most Nepalis are mundane day-to-day issues like jobs, education, health, or roads. Politics figures way down on their list, and when it does, there is widespread disillusionment with politicians at the national and local levels. But what is even more surprising is that compared to the cynicism and disenchantment in the capital with the state of the country, most Nepalis are upbeat about the future and think there have been marked improvements in development. This is borne out by statistics that show dramatic improvements in Nepal’s literacy rate, child and maternal survival and the spread of roads over the past decade.

The 3,210 respondents in 38 districts across Nepal were asked in which areas they have seen improvements. More than 61% ticked roads, showing there was a dramatic decrease in the number of don’t know/can’t say answers. People seem more outspoken, not afraid to voice their opinions, but not always to complain. Sixty per cent of respondents felt things were improving, or were hopeful they would improve.

Interestingly, more people in eastern Nepal and in the Tarai felt things were getting worse, and that they wouldn’t improve. Disaggregated data shows that more men than women felt things were getting worse as did city-dwellers, educated, hill ‘upper’ caste, Newars and Madhesis. When those who felt things getting worse were asked who was responsible, nearly one-third blamed the Maoists and 27% felt ‘the government’ was responsible. Various ethnic groups, it was felt, were responsible for strikes and shutdowns in the poll which was conducted in the third week of April.

In all three regions and from east to west, most people thought political violence, extortion, property seizures, and crime have gone down in the past two years. When asked to name the three main problems the country faced, more than three-fourths of the 3,210 respondents cited inflation, and more women (81%) were worried about price rises than men (71%). More among the illiterate (82.3%) felt inflation was a problem, whereas the educated ranked corruption higher. In fact, the corruption perception index rose from 56% in the Himalmedia Poll last year to 75% this year.

Asking which institutions they trusted the most, respondents still held the media in high regard both at the national and local level and felt journalists were doing an even better job than before. However, the police and civil service were not held in such high regard. At the local level more than half the respondents said their trust in local politicians had dropped in the past four years. Surprisingly, the erosion of trust of the VDC and municipalities was not as marked, with 29% thinking they were doing a better job and half saying they were the same.

There is a feeling that local service delivery has improved across the board in health, education, roads and drinking water, but there was frustration over the lack of progress in electricity and garbage disposal. People in the west and mid-western districts were most positive about improvements in road access.

If that is the case, respondents were asked, what should be done to improve basic services? The top three answers were: hand over management to local communities (21.5%), increase local budgets (21.2%) and remove political interference (18.8%). Asked when there should be new local elections, 41% said ‘right away’ and 26% said after the new constitution but before the general election. There seems to be an obvious correlation in the minds of people between accountable elected officials and service delivery.

Also, at the rate things are going the people seem to have less and less respect for local leadership of the political parties with most equating them with discredited national leaders. These results, together with the popularity surge of Baburam Bhattarai, the plummeting support for Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the negligible endorsement for the leaders of the NC, UML and Madhesi Front, provide one big message to our leaders: work on integrity and performance, listen to the people and maybe they will vote for you in the next election.
At 28, Begum Bahadur Shahi (pic, above) is already a renowned farmer and entrepreneur in Kalikot. His hard work and determination have not only made him rich, but also inspired other residents to begin commercial apple farming. Shahi’s remote village in Phoi Mahadev VDC is quickly becoming an organic farming hub.

Spread across 5 hectares, Shahi’s farm earns him Rs 300,000 annually. “When I was a kid, my father grew apples in our backyard,” recalls Shahi and adds, “so I knew that the soil quality and rainfall pattern around the area was ideal for apple farming.” At a time when locals were fleeing the conflict and seeking jobs in nearby cities like Nepalgunj and border towns in India, Shahi left his school in Surkhet and moved back to his village in 2001.

Shahi began with 700 saplings brought from India’s Himachal Pradesh under the district agricultural program. Three years later he added another 500 saplings and was selling apples in district headquarter Manma and neighbouring Jumla. Back then there were no road networks and the nearest market town in Surkhet was two or three days walk away. Shahi’s profits were limited, but he did not give up. In 2004 he hired three locals from the village and opened Begum Nursery and Fruits Processing Centre. Besides selling apples, he started grafting saplings and training villagers in apple farming. In order to increase the value of his product, Shahi also taught himself how to make and package apple candies, juice and jam. These methods allowed him to store products for a longer time, and doubled his profits. “If there was better connectivity to other towns and villages, I could triple my profit,” claims Shahi, who earned a national award for exceptional farm management in 2007.

Shahi’s achievement is even more remarkable given that Kalikot’s arid climate barely allows farmers to grow enough food for a few months. The district suffers chronic food deficit and families are forced to find alternative means of sustenance. Thousands of men flock to Indian towns few months every year in search of jobs, but only the lucky ones manage to earn enough to bring back home, while many others are deceived by their employers. “After months of back breaking labour, my contractor refused to pay me. I was heartbroken,” recounts Man Bahadur Buda who was cheated three months worth of wage.

The onset of peace and construction of Karnali highway have given people a reason to hope. In recent years, farmers in the district have made healthy incomes by growing apples, mushrooms, herbs and tea organically. Agriculture expert Chuman Singh Giri believes that with practical irrigation schemes like rain water harvesting, most farmlands in Kalikot can be irrigated even in drought. And if more farmers can replicate Shahi’s example, it could even reverse the economic dynamics of the region.

Kalikot is overcoming its past, and although its journey from pitiful to plenty may have just begun, with pioneering entrepreneurs like Shahi, the prospects will only get brighter.

ANURAG ACHARYA in KALIKOT

From poverty to plenty
A farmer in Kalikot leads the way into a future full of opportunities

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**ANURAG ACHARYA in KALIKOT**
Never to return

Durga Prasad Sharma,
Kantipur, 11 May

Rupa had just called her husband Dil Bahadur BK who worked in Saudi Arabia as a carpenter for a construction company. Dil Bahadur had promised to call her back in a few hours, but that conversation turned out to be their last one. BK whose home is in Parbat district died in a workplace accident on 23 April. He had been working as a labourer in Qatar and Saudi Arabia for the last eight years. Although his fellow workers contacted his family and informed them about the tragedy, the company has not contacted Rupa yet.

BK’s body has been lying in a morgue at a local hospital in Saudi Arabia’s Taif city for the last three weeks. Since his family did not have money to bring back the body for last rites, they approached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the manpower company which sent BK to Saudi Arabia for help. But so far neither the government nor the agency has responded. Already buried in debt, the death of the sole bread earner has made the family’s life more difficult. “He was our only hope. How are we supposed to send his children to school and take care of them?” lamented BK’s elderly mother, Nanda Kali.

Heart of gold

Doctors had prescribed Gharti, a long time heart patient, a monthly dose of Benthazin injection, but she was unable to take the drug because of her financial status. On Saturday, not only did she get a free dose, but the district health office also promised to pay for her monthly treatment.

Along with 44 health personnel, eight doctors specialising in heart conditions, ENT, skin diseases, gynaecology, paediatrics, ophthalmology and dental problems were involved in the camp.

According to senior public health specialist Sagar Dahal, around 300 types of medicines were distributed to hundreds of women and children. The camp was especially beneficial for women suffering from uterine prolapse for a long time. The doctors operated on 38 women at the camp, while five patients who needed further medical attention were taken to Dhulikhel Hospital.

“If only the land I call home would shelter me”

Devendra Bhattacharyya and Dinesh Regmi, Kantipur, 13 May

Devendra Bhakat is a farmer and he ploughs fields all day long in a remote border town between Qatar and Bahrain. Every time he meets a recent arrival from Nepal he asks the same question, “Will the constitution be drafted this time?”

Choked by manpower agents, Bhakat who hails from Gorakhpur has been forced to work illegally for the last five years. But the 38-year-old worries more about his country than the pain he endures in this distant land. “No matter how much I toil in this desert, every night I dream about my village, the green forests and the day when the constitution will be drafted,” says Dhakal who believes there will be more jobs once the statute is written and is hopeful people like him can return back to earn a decent living.

Like Dhakal, Bir Bahadur Buda of Dong who has been herding sheep for the last nine years is also confident that things will change for them soon. “We have heard that monarchy was abolished and the nation is now a democratic republic. If we go back, our lives will be much better,” says the 58-year-old who has spent 24 years away from home working in various Gulf countries.

Bastaridin Musalman of Lumpini says he left Nepal because he was not recognised as a citizen and is currently living and working in Jamalia as an illegal immigrant. He laments, “If only the place I call home would shelter me, I would not spend another day here.”

Many other workers like Chetman Rai of Thahan, Ram Balak Mandal of Mahottari, Chhaya Chandra Guimire of Syangja and Madan Shiris of Baglung who are toiling in various cities across the Middle East are eagerly waiting for the new constitution to be written so that they can come home to their families.

Driving the economy

Yogesh Khatiwoda, Kantipur, 12 May

Nepal’s transportation sector has been hit hard by frequent strikes, fuel shortages and lack of security and business owners are being forced to seek out alternatives. FNCCI, the umbrella organisation of business houses in Nepal said in a recent press release that the country is losing over a billion rupees due to bandhs. Night buses have suffered the most, because people are wary of travelling long distances when they are not sure if they will reach their destination or return on time. Sometimes passengers even cancel tickets if they hear rumours about bandh.

Businessmen are bitter at parties and other groups for using the streets as battle ground and targeting vehicles. Head of Transport Association, Yogendra Nath Karmacharya says banks have started blacklisting transportation companies because they have not been able to pay regular instalments on bank loans. “How do we pay back our loans when there is a band every day? People avoid travelling in public transport and business is down,” says Karmacharya.

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Kantipur, 11 May

Regmi, Kantipur, 13 May

Nagarik, 14 May

FROM THE NEPALESE PRESS

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FROM THE NEPALESE PRESS
It was bound to come to this. The Baidya Kaka faction of the Baddies has finally decided to take the plunge and use the “F” word against the Gang of Three Baburam-Prachanda-Prakash Clique. It has called them “fascist” for the first time. Not only that, it urged Jhusil Koirala to head a kangresi-led coalition post-27 May, and accused Chairman Awesome of having “dictatorial tendencies”. Hey, isn’t this supposed to be the hardcore faction? Chairman Awesome has always been well known for speaking through both sides of his mouth, depending on who his audience is. He has been caught on candid camera doing this so often, one would think he’d have learnt his lesson not to blabber away. The latest was his exhortation to the Janajati Caucus “to take to the streets” to put pressure on the NC-UML to agree to their demands on federalismo. He is supposed to have told the activists:

“I tried my best, but I just couldn’t get the kangresis to agree.” And a few hours later he was back at the three-party meeting in Baku Water where he said that under no circumstances should the far-west be divided, or the three districts in the east made a part of Limbuwan. Comrade Chhabilal Baje is showing that he is as clever a politician as he was a guerrilla leader: he doesn’t want to alienate the Bahun Chhetri vote bank. By now, he has got pretty much what he wants with the consensus on directly-elected executive president, so he doesn’t really care what happens to the rest of the constitution.

Awesome has often compared himself to the Buddha and Gandhi, both of whom he has described as “peaceful revolutionaries” like himself. We will let the Buddha decide what PKD can do to attain nirvana, but a keen Nepal watcher told the Ass he thought the Great Leader may think he is like Bapu because he considers himself a “Gun-dhian”?

The parties came up with a deal to carve the country into 11 provinces, and from the looks of it they have just rearranged the jig saw pieces a little bit from the current Anchals. And from on top of it, no one is happy. Brahmins are on warpath even though the deal was done between the all-Brahmin leadership of the parties, the Madhesis are up in arms about getting a Tarai chopped up into little pieces, the Janajatis don’t agree with the names and boundaries, the Tharus feel cheated. The Newars are about to organise a motorcycle rally. So they have all called for indefinite bunds. There are days in the next two weeks where there are multiple bunds simultaneously happening on the same day. And this just in: even jailbirds want to be freed after 27 May and if their demands are not met, they have announced a phasewise protest.

Janajati Caucus is a bit of a misnomer because as far as I know it is made up solely of non-Janai wearing non-Caucasians.

Ex-Minister for Abduction and Extortion, Shyam Sunder Gupta, to vote in the CA. For the first time in the history of this nation, a legally certified criminal will be legislating from behind bars. Can’t wait for the day when Chakre Milan will be running the PMO from Nakhlu Jail.

When ex-mayor Ketchup Sthapit says he wants to turn Kathmandu into a “sexy city” in five years, we hope he doesn’t want to make Thamel even more like Patpong, Pokhara like Pattaya, or turn Surkhet into Phuket?