The Seventies

The percentage of desperately poor people in Nepal has declined from 65 per cent five years ago to nearly 40 per cent today. At this rate, the poverty rate in the country will fall by half in 10 years. Poverty could be eradicated in 20 years says the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative in its new multidimensional poverty index report for Nepal.

On Sunday, the Nepali calendar starts a new decade of the Seventies. In 10 years time, this Grade 4 student in Dadeldhura (pictured) will be 22 and of voting age.

Nepal has made the most dramatic progress in development among the world’s low income countries. This has happened despite war, corruption, political disarray, and instability. Imagine how much farther ahead we would be by 2080 if only we had a peace dividend, a more inclusive constitution, elections, and better accountability.
Eating and defecation. Activities so vital to our everyday lives, but which we take for granted. We don’t think about them much, so we turn over the pages with coverage of charpis or chulos.

No one cares much whether this country grows enough food or not, whether farmers get proper prices for their products, what happens when children don’t get enough calories at a young age, or how Nepali mothers spend their entire lives gathering firewood and cooking for their families next to smoky stoves.

The media doesn’t care much either about open defecation, hand-washing, diarrhoeal dehydration, separate toilets for girls in school. These subjects are too distasteful to write about, we backs would rather focus on important subjects like the debate about whether or not elections will be held in November.

Yet, these are matters of life-or-death for most Nepalis. Eighty per cent of Nepali mothers (they are almost always women) cook with biomass: firewood, straw or dung. In remote hilly and mountain villages, insole from the stove is a major killer of children. If it’s not acute respiratory infection and pneumonia, come summer children die from diarrhoeal dehydration or cholera because water sources are contaminated by open defecation.

On World Water Day on 22 March, we carried a story that pointed out the glaring fact that only 40 per cent of schools in Nepal had toilets and only one-fourth of those schools had separate facilities for girl students. Only one-third of the population washed hands after defecation and only 14 per cent of them with soap. More than 50 per cent of schools had no handwashing facilities.

Nepal is a major killer of children. If it’s not acute respiratory infection and pneumonia, come summer children die from diarrhoeal dehydration or cholera because water sources are contaminated by open defecation. The media doesn’t care much either about open defecation, hand-washing, diarrhoeal dehydration, separate toilets for girls in school. These subjects are too distasteful to write about, we backs would rather focus on important subjects like the debate about whether or not elections will be held in November.

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We don’t think about them much, so we turn over the pages with coverage of charpis or chulos.
A bout 1,000 Nepali Congress leaders gathered at Triveni of Nawalparasi this week to chart out the party’s vision and mission for the upcoming CA elections. The Mahasamiti meeting was expected to clarify the NC’s political position for which the party has been criticised from within and without.

Two days of meetings later, expectations turned into frustration and discontent as the leaders headed home. Things didn’t get off to an auspicious start because a religious guru reportedly criticised secularism and hinted that the party should try to revert the country back to a Hindu state.

“We were hoping that the party would take a progressive stance on issues of federalism, inclusion, and the Madhes, instead we got whiff of a dangerous conspiracy against fundamental achievements of the People’s Movement,” NC leader Indrajit Gurung told me over phone as he prepared to board a bus back from Nawalparasi on Wednesday.

The political document presented by Ram Chandra Poudel failed to impress Mahasamiti members, particularly those from Janajati and Madhesi background, who criticised it for failing to offer a clear position on federalism and identity.

“We have consistently maintained that federal states must be multi-ethnic with no front rights, but each ethnic identity must be recognised with rights to cultural (not political) self-determination,” Gurung explained. “So to create confusion and say that Janajatis are trying to upset communal harmony by asking for ethnic states is nothing but a lie.”

The strong rebuff from Janajati and Madhesi leaders has once again exposed the democratic deficit inside the oldest party which claims to be the bastion of Nepali democracy. The leadership, primarily consisting of elderly Brahmin men, will be increasingly under pressure to address the grievances of the marginalised within the party.

The disgruntled members have given the heads a week to clarify the party’s position on federalism and identity and warned that ignoring the voice of the marginalised could cost the NC dearly in elections.

Leaders like Gurung may still be hopeful that their concerns will be addressed, but they have no illusions about exclusive coterie politics that plagues the party.

Madhesi members who spoke at the meeting also expressed their displeasure over the proposed Madhes pradesh in the document. They said they did not support the single Madhes demand, but they were equally critical of Poudel’s proposal of carving out north-south states.

The frustration of being out of power for over a decade and angst of defeat in the last CA elections have seeped into the old party as it looks to improve its performance in the upcoming polls. Like the Maoists, the NC also hopes to tap into dipping popularity of Madhes-based parties and reclaim its original position in the Tarai.

But despite their tainted record in office, Madhes-based parties still champion all the necessary agenda to rally voters while the NC has failed to impress even party loyalists.

After the demise of Girija Prasad Koirala, the NC suffered a leadership crisis with a coterie of old men holding the party hostage to their personal ambitions. These men have neither commitment nor vision to lead a party that can negotiate the constitution-drafting process.

The NC’s wish of securing popular support to become the biggest force in the next election will remain a dream unless the elders make way for younger visionary leaders who can show both flexibility and commitment to democratic norms.
Kenichi Yokoyama, Country Director of the Nepal Resident Mission of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) spoke to Nepali Times this week about infrastructure bottlenecks, political fluidity affecting the investment climate, and Nepal’s macroeconomy.

Nepali Times: The ADB has been working on a five-year plan for Nepal, what is its main thrust?
Kenichi Yokoyama: ADB’s draft new country partnership strategy has three thrusts: accelerating economic growth, pursuing inclusive and employment-centric growth, and emphasising institution building. Our assistance will be about $2.5 billion per year and will focus on addressing bottlenecks in energy, transport, and urban infrastructure, building human capital, and transforming agriculture.

Multilateral agencies in Nepal seem to swing wildly between deep pessimism and unrealistic optimism about the country’s future. Where do you fit in?
No one questions the bright prospects for hydropower, tourism, high value agriculture and agro-processing, IT, and other industries. But there are also substantial hurdles to overcome in triggering high growth process. Developing industries call for infrastructure bases, particularly power, better enabling environment, and strategic and proactive promotion policies. To resolve power shortage, foreign investment needs to be drawn with rigorous attraction of investors while enhancing credibility of the off-taker, that is, the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA).

But we have seen countries with political instability doing pretty well economically. Why is it necessary to get politics right first in Nepal? Countries growing strongly and resilient against political changes tend to have firm and diverse growth bases. For example, a system that can maintain high level of quality public investment in physical and human capital will provide resilience. So will stable policy and legal frameworks that can protect the interest of private industries and investors even in times of political change. FNCE3 has been pursuing political consensus on the minimum economic agenda, which can serve such a purpose.

What are the challenges in promoting investor confidence in Nepal?
Recent business surveys indicate political instability, power and other infrastructure deficit, weak governance, difficult labour relations, low confidence on macroeconomic stability, etc. While some would require medium-term efforts, there are areas that can bear immediate results. We think the government can be more proactive in attracting foreign investment by welcoming them as invitees and providing attractive incentives commensurate with the level of the country risk. Also helpful would be strong anti-corruption drives and enforcement of law and order to protect public investments, industries, and their employees. Stable policy and legal and regulatory framework can also help provide predictability to investors.

How important are remittance inflows in sustaining Nepal’s economy?
There is no question that remittance has played a vital role. It accounts for 23 per cent of GDP in official statistics and could be much higher if informal inflow is included. It has contributed to reduced poverty and higher human development indicators (education and health) at household level, helped finance burgeoning imports and maintain balance of payment and overall macroeconomic stability. On the other hand, this has increased the country’s dependence on global economic conditions. There is a higher risk of disruption due to external shocks. High remittance is also a reflection of insufficient jobs in Nepal, stemming from a lack of viable investment opportunities that can create jobs for 450,000 youths entering the labour market each year.

What can be done to maximise benefits from remittances, as the Philippines or Sri Lanka have done?
Countries like the Philippines are also facing the same dilemma since remittance is largely used for consumption. In Nepal, the challenge is bigger, since the import content of consumption is high, that means consumption does not induce local production so strongly. The good news is that nowadays we hear a lot of stories about returnees investing in high value products in rural areas and generating good incomes. Such new dynamics can be nourished by rural business incubation and value chain development and other technical support. Improved access to rural finance will also help to channel remittances to productive usages.

You mentioned energy as the big obstacle to future growth. Is the ADB planning bigger involvement in hydropower generation?
ADB has just approved a $150 million loan for 140MW Tanahau Hydropower Project, together with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and other co-finance providers $280 million. In the new assistance strategy ADB is putting highest priority to help fully resolve the power crisis. Nepal may also see the development of hydropower not only for domestic use but as a major source of export. In this regard we are exploring further and larger hydropower projects to fully satisfy the domestic requirements while targeting export potential.

Sufficient investor confidence needs to be built, with reforms within NEA and establishing a regulatory environment conducive for rapid expansion of the power sector. The governments of India and Nepal are discussing a umbrella power purchase agreement, which can substantially facilitate private sector investments.

How about other infrastructure?
Water and transport are high priorities, the former including water supply and sanitation in urban areas, irrigation in rural areas, and integrated management systems. Above all, ADB is strongly committed to deliver clean water to Kathmandu by early 2016, by completing the Melamchi tunnel, water treatment plant (assisted by JICA), and associated distribution systems. Besides roads, ADB is also extending assistance for airport improvements in Kathmandu, Bhairawa, and remote domestic airports. We believe these will provide essential bases to attract investments in domestic industries and tourism.

How can Nepal benefit from its strategic location between India and China?
We see tremendous opportunities. ADB is considering to think beyond national borders, since district areas along the borders are strongly connected with the neighbouring economy. The five bordering Indian states alone have a population of over 400 million and have seen rapid growth in recent years. China has also waived tariffs on a large number of export items, including agriculture products. Nepal can greatly benefit from regional economic integration by substituting imports and exporting energy and other goods and services.

Low project performance has always been an issue in Nepal. Are things getting better?
When measured by implementation timelines, impact, and sustainability, Nepal’s performance has been low compared with ADB-wide average. ADB along with the World Bank, DFID, and JICA have long been jointly pursuing improvements through a forum called Nepal Portfolio Performance Review (NPPR). Over the years, the performance has been improving, although this year is a challenge due to lack of full budget and other constraints.
Cleaning out our cabinets

Nepal has a long way to go before it can be electronically governed

A young man from Darchula travels to the capital to make his passport. After a three-day bus ride, he has to wait in line for hours before he can even enter the passport office in Narayanghati. Not to mention the hours he will spend trying to find his way through Nepal’s notorious bureaucratic maze. Now imagine if there was not only a passport office, but an office in the district headquarters connected to a national digital database, the same task could be completed within an hour or two, helping save the man (and the state) his time and money.

E-government or digital governance is not a new concept in the west. States have been using technology to provide public services and information 24 hours a day in an efficient and transparent manner. Submitting documents, paying bills, taxes, filing tax returns can all be done online, substantially reducing the time and cost involved. Most importantly, e-governance vastly improves access to state services. It also leads to standardisation of services, enhanced transparency, and accountability.

India began computerising its data and records in the seventies. The National e-Governance Plan intended to ensure access to all state services through electronic media is being implemented aggressively. In Pakistan the prime ministerial secretariat has been automated with applications for Hajj and even salaries for government officers processed online. Even countries like Ghana and Sierra Leone in west Africa have set up new electronic technologies and systems. Although the Nepali government created a master plan for e-governance in 2006, transition to the new system has moved at a snail’s pace and ubiquitous filing cabinets and grey folders are still a very common sight. The potential remains largely untapped. Nepal looses millions every time there is a banda. Electronic service delivery could compensate for this loss to some extent and provide relief to common citizens and businesses. Such technology will become indispensable as Nepal gradually transitions into a federal set up and will help facilitate better coordination between provincial governments and the central government. Furthermore, to make Nepal more conducive for investments from abroad, foreign investment procedures could be delinked with visa processes for investors and their technical staff.

Going electronic, however, requires major improvements in IT infrastructure (like latest computers, well-equipped data centres, fast and reliable internet connection) and a qualified labour force to set up and run the system. Overall development in terms of electricity supply, improved road networks, and a population which has basic e-knowledge is also crucial.

However, more than physical infrastructure, transforming the habits and makeup of the current bureaucracy will perhaps be the biggest challenge for Nepal. Government officials will most likely resist change because it will close many of the existing loopholes that make corruption and tardiness an epidemic in the country.

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If Arvind Kejriwal can take Delhi in elections, he could do an Obama in India

I t is possible the pugnacious Aam Admi Party leader, Arvind Kejriwal, could emerge as Barack Obama when the Indian capital elects its state assembly in December 2013. Five years before Obama became the first black president of a country torn by race prejudices, India’s Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party should remember this as elections to the Delhi assembly nears. The Delhi assembly will be conducted 45 days before elections to the Delhi assembly in November 2013.

The young, promising politician is not without his shortcomings. He has had his share of controversies. For example, Kejriwal’s satyagraha against privatisation as also his electricity and water bills and consumers in Delhi have been reeling under high bills to the party, pledging not to pay. Consumers in Delhi have been reeling under high electricity and water bills and Kejriwal’s satyagraha is a protest against privatisation as well, apart from introducing a new style of political formation.

A public opinion survey of voters in Delhi showed that the AAP could muster between 14-18 per cent of votes, a commendable feat for a party established only a few months ago. Since the poll was conducted 45 days before Kejriwal went on his fast, it won’t be off the mark to predict that AAP could soon breach the crucial barrier of 20 per cent: the figure beyond which support begins to translate into votes.

Should this indeed turn out to be the case, the vote share of the Congress and the BJP would dip below 30 per cent, at which point they will begin to lose seats in far greater proportion than the swing against them would have ordinarily caused.

Further, this opinion survey asked voters to list their preferences for the chief minister of Delhi. No names were provided; it is the kind of question for which a substantial percentage of respondents tick the don’t know/can’t say box. Nevertheless, Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit topped with 16 per cent of votes, Kejriwal was second with 11 per cent, and BJP’s Vijay Goel logged behind with just five per cent. The pollster’s questionnaire were provided; it is the kind of opinion survey asked voters to list their preferences for the chief minister of Delhi. No names were provided; it is the kind of question for which a substantial percentage of respondents tick the don’t know/can’t say box. Nevertheless, Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit topped with 16 per cent of votes, Kejriwal was second with 11 per cent, and BJP’s Vijay Goel logged behind with just five per cent. The pollster’s questionnaire

On a visit to Sundar Nagra, I discovered that the support for Kejriwal has percolated below the middle class, from which he had drawn sustenance during the anti-corruption movement, to those who are fired less by promises of turning our cities into Shanghai or New York and more by rhetoric hoping to make their tomorrow a tad more tolerable.

Perhaps comparing Kejriwal to Obama is inappropriate in a parliamentary democracy which, unlike the presidential system, is theoretically said to be impervious to the charismatic influence of individual leaders. But in India we have seen leaders spearhead their parties to victory on their individual steam. Think of the impact Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Sonia Gandhi have had on the fortunes of the Congress. Or look at the BJP cadre clamouring for Narendra Modi, believing the party under his leadership can triumph in the 2014 election.

AAP’s growth, as also its ambition, could still get nixed for various reasons. For one, the perception that a fledging outfit, however well meaning, doesn’t stand a chance to win often prompts even its disinterested supporters to cast their votes in favour of one of the two leading political parties they consider as a lesser evil. Second, it is still uncertain whether AAP’s politics of interest, as spell out through the agenda of bijli, pani, and corruption can neutralise the irresistible lure the politics of identity (caste and religion) invariably has for the Indian electorate.

Should the AAP manage to spring a surprise in the Delhi assembly elections, it could have implications for the 2014 General Election. A victory in Delhi for AAP augurs well for Delhi, for it could hold out the hope of changing the complexion of the existing political class, whose members boast family lineage, are often rich, and consider power not as an instrument to transform society but to enrich themselves.

ashrafajaz3@gmail.com

A greener way to fly....

In 2010, Yeti Airlines took an initiative and launched “Green Far West Project” with a strong partnership with RAARKA Tours and Travels, DRSP (District Road Support Programme) and Tiger Mountain Nepal.

Under this Green Project, for every ticket sold in Kathmandu, Dhangadi or Nepalgunj sector, Yeti Airlines plants a tree sapling on passenger’s behalf in one of the chosen community forest in the Far-Western region of Nepal. Till date, more than 0.1 million tree saplings have already been planted and taken care of. Yeti Airlines contributes Rs. 20 (/one way ticket) and Rs. 40 (/a round trip ticket) for Kathmandu-Dhangadi or Kathmandu-Nepalgunj sector only. You are welcomed to visit any of the community forest sites where your tree saplings are planted and taken proper care.

Come, be a part of this step with the nature. Fly with Yeti Airlines and help make the world greener.
The only reason it wasn’t hotter than it was this week was because of the wind-blown sand from the west, from the Indian desert and even from the Arabian peninsula. This is the time of year when tiny sand particles shroud the Arabian Sea and northern India till and up to an altitude of 3,500 m. This week was made worse by smoke and ash from wildfires that raged across the Tarai and some high up in the mountains. A slight low pressure system will bring some localised storms across central Nepal this weekend. In Kathmandu maximum temp will still stay below 30.

KATHMANDU

Flashback to the future

With half a dozen different new years, we Nepalis have an excuse to eat, drink, and be merry every few months. This year, the planets have conspired to let us party for 48 hours straight as we welcome Bikram Sambat 2070 on Sunday. So book those weekend getaways, send out Facebook invites for your wild house party, or get hold of concert tickets of the band you have been dying to hear. Short on ideas? Let us help you

Experiences that although oddly familiar, seem straight out of history books. They have lived through the devastating earthquake of 1930 BS, witnessed the rise, fall, and extinction of dynasties and several political systems, and seen Nepal take baby steps towards democracy. But they also remind us of things worth hanging onto: green trees, open spaces, and the occasional jere swari at the local mithai pasal. Find out the history behind the Bikram Sambat calendar. And discover how our neighbours around the region celebrate the big day.

Flashback to the future

Mark your calendars

In a country with 90 days of public holiday (and 103 ethnic groups), it’s not surprising that sometimes we have new years within two weeks of each other. Put your party hats on and get ready to celebrate and then some more!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nepal New Year</th>
<th>2070</th>
<th>14 April 2013</th>
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<td>Sherpa/Tibetan Gyalpo Losar</td>
<td>2141</td>
<td>2 March 2014</td>
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MR CATRA THE FAITHFUL, a documentary on the Brazilian singer who sings about poverty in the favelas of Rio Di Janeiro and is mistreated by the police in return.

24 April, 6.30pm, Sattya Media, Jawalakhel.

Free hit, watch the Indian Premier League everyday.

6pm, Bagchica Restaurant, Jawalakhel, (01)5548148

Pranamaya yoga, learn the healing techniques of emotional freedom technique with Maggie Hankamp.

Rs 3000, 13 April, 11am to 4pm, Pranamaya Studio, Patan.

NYE Resolution, bid farewell to 2069 with tabla, trance, and a countdown to 2070.

24 April, Red Carpet Restro and Lounge, Sherpa Restaurant, Budhanilkantha, (01)4375280

Beyond 2070, celebrate the new year undisturbed by the chaos of Kathmandu.

Rs 4,000, 13 to 14 April, Kathmandu College of Management, (061)821927/827975

The Boys Next Door, book your new year’s eve for a night in the company of this popular band.

Rs 200, 31 March, 7pm, Asian Village Restaurant and Bar, Jawalakhel

Saturday brunch, if you’re heading to Shikupur for bird-watching, a sumptuous meal awaits you on the way back.

Rs 2,400, 2am to 3pm, Poolside Garden, Park Village Resort, Bhuhanbandhu, (01)4357280

Sal’s Pizza, almost round, almost cheap, always delicious, the cheeseiest pizzas in town.

Lajimpat, behind Jazz Upstairs

Cafe Du Temple, famous for its delicious food, warm ambiance, and a beautiful roof top view.

Patan Darbar Square, (01)5557127

BOOMERANG RESTAURANT AND GERMAN BAKERY, offers a large selection of cuisine for those who want to enjoy a full meal and desserts.

Lakeside, Pokhara, (061)461412/461431

Dechenling, the place to head for Bhutanese and Tibetan cuisine, its pleasant and spacious garden is ideal for big gatherings. Thamel

Rs 1,000, 17 to 21 April, Sattya Arts, Jawalakhel

Rs 1,000, 20 April, Kathmandu College of Management, (061)327599/3457206

Cross-cultural documentary workshop, learn from award-winning Natasa Muntean how to develop informed, intelligent, and creative films that contribute directly to critical cultural practice.

Rs 2,100, 10 to 14 April, 10am to 5pm, Satty Arts, Jawalakhel.

Think, eat, save, 200 million people could be fed with the amount of food wasted in Europe. Vote for bloggers who are actively urging the public to shift from conspicuous eating to conscious eating.

www.unep.org/wed/blog-competition/bloggers/, #WED2023

Girls on wheels, ride your scooters around town in a treasure hunt, solve puzzles, and complete tasks to win a grand prize of Rs 50,000.

3rd International Tattoo Convention.

26 to 28 April, Yak and Yeti Hotel, Thamel

Girls on wheels, ride your scooters around town in a treasure hunt, solve puzzles, and complete tasks to win a grand prize of Rs 50,000.

200 En Bikers day out

13 to 15 April, Jhamsikhel, (061)461412/461431

Bikers day out, get on your bikes and ride! 200 En Bikers day out

www.eldpokerrun.com

Chongqing fast food, gear up for some mouth watering Chinese dishes like Sour and Spicy Pork and Kung Pao Chicken. Thamel

Byanjan, enjoy great food at an affordable price. Shrimp cocktails, grilled fish, and desserts are favourites among guests. Lakeside, Pokhara

Dragon Chinese Restaurant, try the Kung Pao Pork if alone and the Mai Cao if with company. Lakeside, Pokhara

Chopstix, savoury Asian food cooked in true Chinese fashion sure to charm and impress. Try the famous drums of heaven. Kumariapati, (01)5555216

Dragon Cafe, enjoy momos, sizzlers, and vegetable coins at the most reasonable prices. Kumariapati

Fuji Bakery, tucked in Chakupat this bakery offers homemade goodies like apple pie, pain du chocolat, and banana cake. Chakupat, Ladipur

PHOTOSHOP, get out of the comfortable confines of digital image manipulation and learn the art of photo-collage as done in the good old days. Rs 1,500, 13 April, 7.30pm, Reggae Cafe n Bar, Thamel

Inked for life, compete with tattoo artists from home and abroad at the 3rd International Tattoo Convention. 26 to 28 April, Yak and Yeti Hotel, Thamel

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Hadock, big compound with ample parking space, its western and Thai dishes are done to perfection.

Jhamsikhel, (01)5546431

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www.unep.org/wed/blog-competition/bloggers/, #WED2023

Basantapur festival, celebrate the coming of Nepal New Year 2070.

12 to 13 April, Kathmandu Darbar Square

Expressions of devotion, an exhibition of etching, unique print, and video installations by Uma Shanker Shah and Seema Sharma Shah.

Runs till 17 April, 10am to 5pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal

OH TO BE A GOONER, watch Arsenal take on Norwich as they chase the Champions League spots.

23 April, 7.30pm, Reggae Cafe n Bar, Thamel

Natas Muntean how to develop informed, intelligent, and creative films that contribute directly to critical cultural practice. Rs 2,100, 10 to 14 April, 10am to 5pm, Satty Arts, Jawalakhel.
MUSIC
Suramya Sandhya, acclaimed Hindustani classical singer Guru Dev Kamat will give a rare Kathmandu performance. 20 April, 3:30pm, Academy Hall, Kamaladi
Earthwatch, live music over dinner every Friday. Rs 2,250, Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha, (01)4375280
GUERILLA GIG, top bands Jindabaad and Albatross will perform with lots of others at the historic Patan Museum. 20 April, Patan Museum, (01)4375280, 9841266444
Jumpin’ bar, bid farewell to 2069 with much fervour. Rs 290, 22 April, Attic Bar, Lajimpat
Live at Cafe 32, live music and delicious food every Friday. 6pm onwards, Cafe 32, Battisputali, (01)4244232
Loadshedding, catch this exciting new band live on new year’s eve, 15 April, Bagacha Restaurant, Jawalakhel

GETAWAYS
MARUNI SANCTUARY LODGE, nestled in a Tharu village on the border of the Chitwan National Park. Rs 9,999 for twin-sharing, 2 days 3 nights, Chitwan, (01)44700632, 9841792225
Mango Tree Lodge, indulge in culture walks, rafting in the Karnali, wildlife exploration, and jungle safaris at the Bardia National Park. Bhethani, Bardia, info@mangotreelodge.com
Mum’s Garden Resort, head out to Pokhara for a peaceful and comfortable stay in beautifully designed cottages surrounded by a lush green garden with great views of Phewa Lake and the Annapurna range.

SHIVAPURI COTTAGE, good food and fresh air, far from the madding crowd. Rs 3,500 per person per night inclusive of dinner and breakfast, Shivapuri, 9841371927, 9802012245, info@shivapuricottage.com

Graphic voices
Adapting testimonies of trafficking survivors into comics, Dan Archer chronicles the abuses they suffered and gives a voice to the most unheard members of Nepali society. The unique combination of graphics and illustrated reportage lets interviewees see their likeness being created in real-time, gives them a window into the creative process, and preserves the impact of their stories without revealing their identity. Dan hopes the cartoons will appeal to a younger, hard to reach audience, engage them, and teach them about the dangers of human trafficking.

The exhibition will form part of a pioneering survey in conjunction with Stanford and Vanderbilt universities to measure the impact of awareness-raising materials across a range of media in remote areas of Nepal.
www.graphicvoices.com
www.archcomix.com
www.image-ark.com

Graphic voices from Nepal: An investigation of human trafficking 16 April to 14 May, 10am to 5pm except on Saturdays Image Ark Gallery Kulimha Tole, Patan (01)5006665, 9851016572

Hit the highs
Time-travel to yesteryears as bands pay tribute to the legends of music at the first music and film festival in Kathmandu.
April 12
Kurt Cobain, 6 to 10pm, Reggae Bar, Thamel
Charlie Parker, 7 to 10pm, White Horse, Baluwatar
Jim Morrison and the Doors, 7 to 10pm, Haid bar
April 14
Mr Catra: The faithful, 7 to 9.30pm, Satya Media, Jawalakhel

Wishing you all a prosperous New Year 2070!!

KHANHAU GUEST HOUSE Thamel, Kathmandu
PARK VILLAGE RESORT & SPA Budhanilkantha, Kathmandu
WATERFRONT RESORT Sedi Height, Lakeside Road, Pokhara
MARUNI SANCTUARY LODGE Bhotahati (Bhadrai/Kantha) Kathmandu

POKHARA VIEW GARDEN Lakeside, Pokhara
PARK VISION INN Teikot, Bhaktapur

12 - 18 APRIL 2013 #651
For decades the white washed wall linings of Kathmandu have fought a losing battle against layers and layers of political slogans and posters. Yuki Poudyal, the brains behind Kolor Kathmandu, along with Sattya Media Arts Collective (see box), however, are on a mission to replace the sea of red letters and give the battered walls of this city a much needed facelift.

"Kathmandu’s residents have been treated to visual pollution all their lives. I wanted to change this by making our streets more appealing through mural art," says the 27-year-old project director who was inspired by street art in Philadelphia (see interview).

A team of local and international artists are transforming Kathmandu into the second mural city in the world held in Bara every five years. Along with resuscitating the Valley’s sick walls, the project is nurturing young talents and providing them an opportunity to learn from veterans. First-timers are asked to shadow an experienced artist, after which they can submit their designs. Once their plans are approved, they can lead their own mural. Eighteen-year-old Sangrachana Chamling is one such aspiring talent who assisted an international artist before creating her own mural at Sanepa.

As the popularity of the murals spreads through word of mouth, support for the project is gaining steam. When Kolor Kathmandu posted a request for aluminum ladders on its Facebook page, there were plenty of takers. Recently Pushpati Paints agreed to provide supplies for the artists. Not to miss out on the fun, people living outside Kathmandu, support for the project is gaining steam. When Kolor Kathmandu posted

With 12 international muralists including popular German street artist duo, Herakut, and 25 local artists, Kolor Kathmandu has painted 25 murals in Baluwatar, Shankhamul, Bhotahiti, Jawalakhel, and other parts of town so far. They receive Rs 7,000 each for their hard work. The goal, says Yuki, is to create 75 murals by September and name them after the 75 districts of Nepal.

While some artists have focused on landscapes, others have chosen to depict social stigmas and problems faced in their districts. Anish Bajracharya’s Bara in Bhanimandal for example pays homage to the popular Newari lentil dish which shares its name with the district and also incorporates the Gadhimai festival.
Nepali Times: How did Kolor Kathmandu start?
Yuki Poudyal: When I lived in Philadelphia, I was amazed by the amount of art that filled the city. The paintings and graffiti brought a sense of positivity to the community and inspired me to do something similar in Kathmandu. Nepal is fragmented at so many levels, but art is one way to show our unity. And this is why we are creating 75 murals to represent each district.

Was it difficult to get funds?
Surprisingly, money wasn’t a big problem. Sattya is supported by Open Society Foundations, a grant-making organisation based in New York and we also receive funding from Prince Claus Fund of Netherlands.

Why did you choose mural art?
We didn’t want to create art that would only be displayed at galleries and exhibitions. This is our way of reaching out to a larger Nepali public and saying we will not stand and see our city get more damaged than it already is.

How do you pick locations?
Finding places to paint has been the biggest challenge so far. We have a team of volunteers who go around town searching for locations, but sadly people still see street art as vandalism and are not very accepting. For most murals we ask for permission from owners or whoever is in charge, but with some we just go ahead and paint.

Do you think politics and art can go together?
There is so much filth in Nepali politics these days. It is constantly abused by those in power. Only if we can clean up our politics can art become a part of it.

GROWING ART
Started in 2009 by Anya Vaverko and Yuko Maskey, Sattya today is a hub for artists, photographers, filmmakers, and writers. “We wanted a place in Kathmandu where creative people could connect, learn from one another, and share their ideas,” says Anya.

The media arts collective regularly organises photography, documentary making, graphic design, and screen printing workshops. Along with supporting Kolor Kathmandu, Sattya holds free screening of documentary films and discussions in public places around the Valley — aptly called Bato Ko Cinema — as well as teaching urban farming and ways to create green spaces in a congested Kathmandu through its Hariyo Chowk project.

www.sattya.org
I

In 2008, British Irish playwright Martin McDonagh, came out with his first feature film, In Bruges, a sublimely violent, darkly comic caper of a film that delighted people who have an affinity for clever writing, a nonchalant attitude towards extreme violence on screen, and a love of the absurd.

Admittedly there is more to Donogh’s writing than just the love of the absurd. His plays were lyrically brilliant satirising the plight of the Irish post conflict era. Works like The Lieutenant of Inishmore, is very much worth watching for its own brand of film-making. Roger Ebert, the great film critic who passed on the trebly, clanging sound that emanates from its sides. Of course, ultra-violently is beautifully designed for heavy multimedia use and sound does improve on headphones, but a well-rounded multimedia performance would have more than benefited it to more buyers.

Fujitsu has layered some good features onto its introductory ultrabook, but has ignored some of the basics. For example, the Lifebook includes Wi-Di, a wireless technology that projects laptop displays onto televisions, but somehow an elementary Ethernet port is missing and internet access is possible basically only through the Wi-Fi. However, with two USB 3.0 ports, one of which charges other devices even when the Lifebook is powered down, one USB 2.0 port, an SD card reader, a 1.2 megapixel webcam, and an HDMI port, connectivity is not limited.

The Lifebook scores high marks on handiness, visuals, sturdy construction (something that Fujitsu is known for), but it could have done better in other areas. The four-cell, five-hour battery life is just not enough for a long day at work, especially with Wi-Fi turned on. The keyboard provides no backlit, but the touchpad is quite handy in that you can get from one corner of the screen to another in one swipe. The Lifebook comes with Windows 8 pre-installed, but has ignored some of the features onto its introductory portable for those who are used to ultra-books, is quite adequate for multimedia performance would have been more interesting for the ‘slim’ market.

As thin as they get

A s smartphones and tablets continue to set the bar for all consumer technology, one can imagine all computing of the future will take place at the swipe of a finger. What, then, of personal computers? A few years ago, the IT industry came up with an answer: the ultrabook. Larger than a tablet and smaller than a laptop, it is made for long hours on the go. Lightly known as a maker of computing equipment, Fujitsu also has ventured into the personal computer market, with its flagship product - the Lifebook UH572 - leading the line. Priced with a third-generation processor, 4GB RAM, and a roomy 20GB hard disk, the Lifebook offers precisely what it is made for: a mobile professional workstation.

Weighting in at 1.6 kilos and lying flat at just 23mm thick, the Lifebook is certainly on par with its competitors. Its 33.1 inch wide screen, a requirement for ultrabooks, is quite adequate for office work and its LED backlit HD screen even provides deep saturated colours for viewing photos and videos. Where it does underperform is on the trebly, clanging sound that emanates from its sides. Of course, ultra-violently is beautifully designed for heavy multimedia use and sound does improve on headphones, but a well-rounded multimedia performance would have only benefited it to more buyers.

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Clearly a good day

Hari Maharjan is many things at once. Those who frequent Thamel will recognise him as a gypsy jazz guitarist par excellence. Followers of Nepali popular music will discover he created the riff of some of the most memorable Nepathya songs in the last few years. And to those who look up to him as a teacher and senior musician, Maharjan is by far the best guitarist in Nepal. Now, two years after the release of their first album Kalakarmi, Maharjan's band Hari Maharjan Project is back with another.

Sudina, Nepali for ‘a good day’, is finally out for those who want a made in Nepal semblance of seclusion in the streets of Asan and Patan. Because of his vast experience in arranging over 15,000 songs, Maharjan’s music too escapes conventional genres and nomenclature, even though all the songs in Sudina are structured around a virtuoso guitar.

We don’t have to cry anymore is a relaxed sit-down as the sarangi wails along with the guitar, while the next track Spirit of Shiva takes you right into Tandav mode, guitar ascending and descending in tandem with the Destroyer’s limb movements in tabla beats. Again, Sequence and things provides a moment of calm, while Keep on running accelerates proceedings. The album is rounded up by two of the strongest tracks in Birds of a feather stick together and Enough is enough.

In addition to Hari Maharjan’s regular band members, Riju Tuladhar on bass and Daniel Rasaily on drums, guest musicians from the Netherlands have also contributed to the album. Peter Keijers, executive producer, is omnipresent with his bass. The famous Nepali folk-band Kutumba also

Degaa Resto Lounge

Along, tiring climb is not what you want when you are delicious with hunger. And as you huff and puff your way to the top of the building to Degaa Resto Lounge, you will probably curse the owners for being ‘inconsiderate’. But once you step in, your weary legs will find comfort and your taste buds will be pleased because there is something for every type of foodie at this Kumaripati restaurant. Along with the usual selection of Western dishes and cocktails and mocktails, Degaa offers incredible Newari and Indian cuisine that makes it stand out among the litter of restaurants in the neighbourhood.

After flipping through the extensive menu, we wanted to sample as much as possible. Our ‘first course’ was a round of Newari dishes. The vegetable and egg chatamari (Rs 70) and the buff and egg bota (Rs 50) were perfect starters to share around the table, light and crisp with the egg serving to hold both the vegetable and buff fillings together. The buff seanaka (Rs 170) was a little tough and the portion was rather small but went well with the other starters. We added a plate of BBQ chicken wings (Rs 250) to fulfil our craving for ‘western’ food. The wings may be the best thing on the menu. Marinated in spices and covered in herbs they got our taste buds rolling.

We decided to go Indian for our main meal and ordered a plate of chicken biryani (Rs 200), garlic and butter naan (Rs 30 and Rs 50), along with chicken tikka masala (Rs 280) and chicken and apricot curry (Rs 200). And as we waited patiently for a bite of our neighbour’s food down south, we comforted our still hungry tummies with fruity drinks. But the pineapple mocktail (Rs 125) was too sweet for my taste, I suggest the virgin flamingo (Rs 125)

Instead since it is smoother and more refreshing. When our biryani arrived, I must say I was a little disappointed. Although the chicken and the coconut flakes combined surprisingly well, the rice itself was a bit stale. However, the fluffy naans were superb, going especially well with the spicy masala. The apricot curry tasted more exotic, definitely a choice for the gastronomically adventurous. A visit to Degaa is worth for the spectacular views of southern Kathmandu alone and is perfect for a dinner with a large group of friends. We don’t recommend visiting during the afternoon because load-shedding means there is no music, no mood lifters. The music and lights definitely make Degaa a pleasant place to eat and chat while looking out at the city skyline.

How to get there: From the roundabout in Jwalakshek turn into Kumaripati road and walk until you see Sikkhartha Bank and Phillip’s showroom on your left. Enter the building, walk up to the top floor.
Making safety a high priority

WHEN American Peace Corps volunteer John Skow travelled to Khumbu region in 1973, he was disheartened to see the number of Nepali porters and trekkers who died from something easily preventable like acute mountain sickness (AMS). The same year, Himalayan Rescue Association (HRA) was started with the goal of saving lives and improving trekking safety.

For the past four decades, HRA has been instrumental in bringing about a sharp decline in AMS casualties. From March to May and September to November, volunteer doctors run an hour long class every day at the clinics in Pheriche (Everest) and Manang (Annapurna) where trekkers and their guides are taught about the importance of acclimatisation through gradual ascent. They learn how to prevent and identify the onset of frostbite, hypothermia, AMS, and life-threatening complications like water collection in the brain (high altitude cerebral edema, HACE) or in the lungs (high altitude pulmonary edema, HAPE).

The clinics, run completely by volunteers, also treat hundreds of injured or sick trekkers and locals. While international patients pay for the services, locals are charged a nominal fee so they don’t abuse the system. HRA ‘rescues’ patients by treating altitude sickness and other illnesses and saves lives, but it is rarely involved in actual rescue of climbers in the Himalayas using high-powered, medically-equipped, state of the art helicopters.

HRA has been successful in fighting acute mountain sickness. However, despite its best efforts, many porters and climbers still suffer from severe frostbite every year. Not much has changed in the treatment of frostbite since the 19th century when Napoleon’s army succumbed in its attempt to conquer Moscow in subzero temperatures. In Nepal, there are no readily available, cost-effective, modern breakthroughs to treat frostbite. Therefore prevention is critical. Even as it attempts to address these challenges, HRA’s work in the field of alpine safety and rescue remains unparalleled in South Asia and as the organisation completes 40 years, the entire team deserves praise for quietly carrying out methodical and conscientious medical work and research under difficult conditions.
You can’t eat elections

People have no time for polls in the mountains of north-western Nepal, they are too busy trying to stay alive

DAMBAR K SHRESTHA  
IN BAJURA

The talk is all about elections under the CJ-led government in Kathmandu, but here in remote north-western Nepal people are too busy finding enough to eat to care.

There are still two months to go for the monsoon, the fields are dry and dusty. Last year’s food ran out long ago. Farming in the rain-fed fields only provides food to last three months in a year, so the men have always migrated to India. Undernourished children fall prey to infections and the child and maternal mortality rates in Mugu and Bajura are more than twice the national average.

These two districts are among 33 that are supposed to get food assistance from the state. Although the quota of 1,000 tons of rice allocated for Bajura has been nearly met, officials are planning to fly in 600 tons more from Kathmandu to meet increased demand this year.

Sixty-year-old Pune Sarki of Boldik village of Bajura and his family of 10 depend on subsidised rice for nine months of the year. Since there is no fixed distribution schedule, sometimes Sarki makes the five hour journey back home empty handed because the rice runs out. At other times he doesn’t have enough money to pay Rs 40 for a kilo of rice. People from Humla walk for up to two weeks round-trip to get rice from the depot at Kolti airport in Bajura.

“I am taking rice on credit for now. My husband will pay back the loans when he returns from India in June,” says 30-year-old Dewu Tamata, one of many women here who have to buy food on credit.

In Mugu’s Talcha airport, only 400 tons of the allotted 1,440 tons of rice for the district have been flown in this season. Nepal Food Corporation’s regional chief in Dhangadi, Surendra Raj Bista, says food is on its way. The government budgets Rs 370 million every year to subsidise and fly in food to these roadless districts, but it is always late and never enough.

The UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) distributed 2,370 tons of rice in Bajura and 900 tons in Mugu as part of its ‘food for work’ initiative under which families can earn up to four months worth of food by working on roads.

Even 17-year-old Hiru BK from Mugu, who studies in ninth grade, helps in construction during holidays to earn food for his family.

About 65 per cent of Mugu residents have calorie intakes of less than the minimum daily requirement of 2,709 kilocalories and the district has the highest rate of stunting among children. When children do fall sick, there is no treatment. The district hospitals in Bajura and Mugu never have doctors, nurses, x-ray machines, and labs.

Says 66-year-old Badri Prasad Regmi of Kolti: “We are being cheated by nature and the government. We don’t have food at home, we don’t have money to pay for treatment even if there were doctors.”

Flying food

It has been a chronic problem of the trans-Karnali: the government and donors fly in subsidised rice to address the food shortage so people have stopped growing traditional nutritional crops like millet, wheat, corn, buckwheat, oats. They walk for weeks on end to queue up outside distribution depots for their sacks of rice. The rice culture is now so pervasive that even irrigated land is left barren, making the districts increasingly dependent on the outside. Mugu politician Gopal Bahadur Bam says: “Rice has become a staple here and people don’t want to eat anything else. Local food is not seen as real food anymore.”

Millet is a good source of iron and magnesium and has higher protein and carbohydrate content than polished rice. Buckwheat is also rich in protein, calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, and Vitamin B. But most people still prefer rice, says Parshuram Mandar, a school principal. He adds: “If the government had encouraged and helped people to be self-sufficient in traditional crops, there wouldn’t be a food crisis here.”

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Depending on who is counting, the proportion of Nepalis who are poor is either 44 per cent, 19 per cent, or 25 per cent. But no matter which criteria is used, all indicators point to Nepal's poverty rate declining dramatically in the last 15 years.

The sharpest fall was announced earlier this month by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Index which showed that Nepal’s Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) had come down from 0.350 in 2006 to 0.217 in five years. The percentage of poor people declined from 65 per cent in 2006 to 44 per cent in 2011.

The MPI employs 10 indicators to measure poverty using health, education, and living standard parameters and is regarded as the most accurate measure of the prevalence of poverty in a country. Sometimes, it is widely different from other indicators like international absolute poverty levels and the national income poverty line.

For example, on the basis of the percentage of people earning less than $1.25 per day, 25 per cent of Nepalis were absolutely poor in 2010. But when the threshold is raised to $2, the proportion of poor people jumped up to 57 per cent. The National Planning Commission’s own survey in 2011 showed that 25.2 per cent were living below the poverty line.

As a measure of deprivation, the MPI is the most comprehensive indicator of poverty because it looks not just at income, but also the status of health and education and indicators like access to safe water, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel, and assets.

“Nepal is doing considerably well for a low-income country and if it continues at this rate it will eradicate absolute poverty in 20 years,” said Sabina Alkire of Oxford University’s Department of International Development. In fact, Nepal did better than India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh jumping from the poorest country among seven South Asian states to the fourth poorest.

The biggest factor seems to be remittances from Nepali workers abroad, which has improved the assets of Nepali households. Health indicators like under-five child mortality, maternal death rate, and nutrition have also improved, as have enrolment rates and years of schooling. One reason could be that the baseline data for Nepal was 2006, which was just after the conflict and a low point.

Within Nepal, the fastest reduction in poverty has been in the western Tarai where the total number of poor went down from 67 per cent to 33 per cent in five years. The far-western Tarai also saw a dramatic drop from 81 per cent poverty to 50 per cent.

However, in terms of incidence of poverty, the mid-western districts had the highest proportion, 60 per cent, with the far-western hills slightly lower. The districts of the western region had the smallest proportion of poor people at 33 per cent.

“Nepal surprises everyone for poverty reduction despite low economic growth and political instability,” said Bimal Baidya of the research group, New Era, at the launch of the MPI results last month.

The MPI is closely linked to the concept of ‘human security’ which defines security not just in military terms, but also takes into account human rights, transparency, accountability, governance, social justice, and delivery of basic services.

This is the subject of the new book, *Human Security in Nepal: Concepts, Issues and Challenges* which looks at the broader definition of security ever since 1917.
LESS POOR: Group of women in a village near Baglung where there are no young men because they have all gone abroad to work and send money home to their families.

quality education

A 10-point checklist to improve the quality of education in Nepali schools

1. Expand early child development programs: Nepal’s politicians and community leaders tend to give higher priority to upgrading schools from primary to secondary and from Plus-2 to universities as signs of educational progress. We need to reverse this trend and give greater priority to building a strong foundation for life-long education starting in the earliest years of a child’s life.

2. Make schools child-friendly: Many children fear going to school. Teachers are often untrained, uncaring, and quick to give corporal punishment. Schools are dirty and lack minimum sanitary facilities, especially for girls. The method of instruction involves rote learning rather than encouraging children to explore and understand what they are learning.

3. Increase women teachers: A strategy for making schools more child-friendly is to vastly increase the number and proportion of disabled children in Nepal is impressive, the 10 per cent who are out of school are mostly from the historically, geographically, economically, and socially deprived communities. Only 38 per cent of children from indigenous communities, 20 per cent of Dalits, and a mere one per cent of disabled children are enrolled in primary schools. An aggressive affirmative action plan is needed to ensure extra support in basic education for the disadvantaged.

4. Affirmative action for the disadvantaged: While enrolment of over 90 per cent in primary schools is impressive, the 10 per cent who are out of school are mostly from the historically, geographically, economically, and socially deprived communities. Only 38 per cent of children from indigenous communities, 20 per cent of Dalits, and a mere one per cent of disabled children are enrolled in primary schools. An aggressive affirmative action plan is needed to ensure extra support in basic education for the disadvantaged.

5. Make education inclusive and multi-cultural: Historically our education system has not been responsive to our diversity. Our text books perpetuate a stereotypical image of traditional ingenuitarian Nepal society. The language of instruction is mostly Nepali or English, both neglect inequitable Nepali society. The language of instruction is mostly Nepali or English, both neglect inequitable child representation in the classroom, organized by Rato Bangala Foundation from 4-7 April 2013.

6. Focus on quality: Our new slogan should not be just education for all, but quality education for all. These interventions require changes in attitudes and behaviour, not necessarily huge capital intensive investments. Overcrowding in classes is another problem, especially in the Tarai. Nepal has a shortage of at least 60,000 primary teachers. We need more teachers, not more soldiers.

7. Cultivate public-private partnership in education: While some private schools offer quality education, many are seen as highly commercialized enterprises. Nevertheless, private schools do meet a felt need of parents for quality education. Instead of threatening to close private schools, or compelling them through excessive political interference and over-regulation, Nepal should harness the power of public-private partnership to improve the quality of basic education.

8. Transform schools into Zones of Peace: During the conflict, many schools became battle zones, much intimidation and violence was inflicted against children, and education was seriously interrupted. A number of Nepali and international organisations introduced the idea of children and schools as Zones of Peace.

9. De-politicise basic education: Currently Nepal suffers from hyper-politisation that affects all aspects of life. Teachers’ unions, students’ organisations, and educational institutions, even at the primary level are not exempt from political action. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues. All political parties in Nepal are guilty of such politicisation of educational issues.

10. Education as genuine peace dividend: Now that peace and democracy are at hand, we must make up for all the lost time and opportunity. Let us re-double our investment in education by creating a peace dividend of reduced military expenditure and other wasteful expenses. Let us recognize that education is not only a human right, it is the engine of all human development.
Down the drain

Biswambhar Prakashyal, Kathmandu, 10 April

An annual budget that comes three times a year in three instalments is a clear indication of this country’s badly stuttering economy. Even Iraq and Afghanistan that are emerging from decades of devastating conflict have posted impressive growth rates. It’s time we looked at our neighbours for a few lessons.

Although every successive government says the budget is progressive, growth stimulating, and pro-poor, there is always a wide gap between what’s written on paper and what actually happens on the ground. We spent only 26 per cent of our total budget in the last eight months.

The partial budgets have arrived at a time of sluggish economy and also damped whatever hopes ordinary Nepalis might have had from their government. In July and November 2012, the budget wasn’t on time and when it was finally announced I didn’t stimulate any growth. Instead it was used to cover general expenses and as a result, the growth rate dipped from 5.3 per cent to 4.2 and has now nosedived to 3.65.

Nepal is an agricultural country, but only 13 per cent of all agricultural produce finds any market. Farmers can’t even sell 3 per cent of their incomes and thus have little possibility of improving on their returns. Not surprisingly, growth in this sector has fallen from five per cent to one in the last seven months.

Our trade deficit has also surpassed last year’s total within eight months. Currently import volume is eight times all exports and exports to India even shrunk to a quarter from last year.

Some friends in the government and the private sector have been championing mantra of double digit growth. But even if we are able to invest Rs 700 billion (the current budget is Rs 400 billion), our track record suggests we will not be able to sustainsuch growth. From 1997 to 2003, GDP formed four per cent of the budget, from 2003 to 2008 it dropped to three, and from 2010 to 2013 it hasn’t gone above 3.6 per cent.

Nepals spend 48 per cent of their income and whatever little free space is not enough to revolve into the economy. There is such a huge gulf between savings and investments that trying to bridge this gap through domestic products is nearly impossible.

Poverty is one of the biggest challenges for citizens and government alike. Different local and international agencies have their own definitions and reports on poverty, but despite the decrease in the absolute number of poor people, severe inequalities still exist.

We are heading from an unregulated and centralised economy to a decentralised and self-sustaining federal structure.

But the centre still spends 32 per cent of Nepal’s districts earn only five per cent of their annual expenses. Our greatest challenge now is to make these regions capable of contributing to the entire economy.

‘We are protecting Nepalis from this circus of elections’

Interview with Mohan Baidya, chairman of CPN-Maoist, 8 April, News24

Dil Bhushan Pathak: Looks like we’re going back to its old days - destroying property, imposing bandas, capturing land, and terrorising people. Our aim is not to terrorise people. A new kind of dictatorship has been forced upon us, that is trying to forge a protest against it through this movement.

Is shutting down the whole country a part of your struggle? We are aware that bandas are bothersome, but it was a last resort to make ourselves heard in this so called democracy which doesn’t do something dramatic nobody will even bother to listen.

Do you have any idea how harmful bandas are? There are many other things that are harmful for the country, so our banda alone cannot be blamed. Nepal was shut down for 19 days in 2006. In fact all the parties who are in power today reached there after a similar struggle, so it is not just us.

You obstruct people’s right to free movement because you want to showcase the party’s strength. How do you justify that? We are compelled to come out on the streets because democracy in Nepal has failed to embrace thousands of marginalised people who are still suffering and being exploited. Look at any other country and you will see that revolt is necessary to achieve democracy. These struggles will carry on forever. People will continue to fight unless they are truly liberated.

Moving on to vandalism, how many laptops has your party seized or destroyed so far? Let’s not put it that way. We are only trying to protect ordinary Nepalis who are being forced into this circus of election. When certain people tried to prevent our peaceful protest, we had to respond and some damage might have taken place at that time.

When you were with UCPN (M) the party was in power. What reform and changes did it usher? When we were in government we didn’t have much power because the existing bureaucracy with its old ways didn’t allow us to make much change. Also some of our party members diverged from the goal of working for the people and the country.

So what was the point of the decade long armed conflict, which allegedly began after foreign intervention and killed thousands of Nepalis? These are all conspiracy theories of the reactionaries who do not understand the spirit of the revolution we undertook to free the Nepali people. Thousands have been killed in other countries as well, there is nothing unique about us, in fact our revolution was less destructive in comparison.

Since your party hasn’t registered with the election commission yet is there still any possibility of unifying with UCPN (M)? We tried to resolve our differences while we were still one party. When that didn’t work we had to split so it will be difficult to go back and reconcile. We haven’t registered at the EC yet because of technical issues.

How much faith does your party have in democracy? We believe in a democracy that is for everyone in the country and not just for a handful of powerful men. The present democracy in Nepal is run by five per cent of the privileged class. We want a system where people from marginalised communities are also equally represented. And our ultimate aim is to establish a socialist state.

Why is your party hesitant to go to polls? We haven’t decided on that yet. This election is not going to take the country out of turmoil since the decision was forced on us by the four party syndicate. They have overstepped the values of democracy in the name of polls. We won’t go for election until this government is scrapped and all the fringe parties are included in discussions about the country’s future.

Nameplate: CHAIRMAN, Council of Ministers

Batsayan, Kathmandu, 7 April

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

If they can prove that my government or party was involved in corruption, I am ready to face all charges.

Baburam Bhattarai on President Ram Baran Yadav’s concern over the previous government’s abuse of authority, Annapurna Post, 10 April
“We don’t need international approval for everything”

The last time Nepal Times interviewed UCPN (M) Pushpa Kamal Dahal was four years ago just after he had been elected prime minister and the Maoist YCL attacked the Himalmedia office and physically assaulted the editor, CEO, and other staff. This time Dahal was more relaxed, forthright, and made eye contact as he answered questions from interviewers on everything from the TRC Bill to elections.

Nepal Times: You must be thinking: how can I back out to power and lead the country? Pushpa Kamal Dahal: Not really. I am still learning the art of competitive politics and the dynamics of this process is still new to us. For 10 years we were in a different struggle and since then we have been in and out of government.

What do you like and dislike about this process? It is fair to all since one has to prove oneself through competition. But the chronic power struggle, corruption, and coalition crafting just to get to the government isews. Once a party accountable to the people is elected, it should be allowed to govern for full five years so it can get things done.

Our recent Himalmedia Public Opinion Poll shows that 60 per cent of the respondents also favour an executive presidential system. It is the most appropriate system for our country which will soon have federalism. There has to be a strong unified centre to hold all regional forces together. And that is best done through a directly elected president.

But there is a fear that an executive president may breed a dictator? The only people saying that are the ones still held hostage by the status quo. Nepalis in the world has a directly elected presidential system ever led to a dictator. The UML and NC may be opposed to this idea, simply because it is our proposal.

You seem to have reached the conclusion that the Regmi government isn’t in a hurry to hold polls? All I am saying is that the government should have announced the election date in June immediately after forming the cabinet and letting the Election Commission get on with the job of putting the logistics and laws in place.

Doesn’t it also prove that the parties have no confidence in a government they formed just three weeks ago? When I had proposed a government under the leadership of the chief justice it was on conditions that elections should be held in June. Had the other parties gone along with that proposal earlier, it would have been possible to hold polls in June.

So the CJ idea was yours, or was it on advice of a neighbouring country? The talk about foreign hand stems from an inferiority complex. We had been in talks with both our neighbours and America for months about elections, but the CJ option wasn’t in the cards. When the parties refused to form a unity government under Baburam Bhattarai we decided to pass the leadership to the NC, but even that didn’t work so we decided to settle for an incumbent government under Baburam Bhattarai and it is said Bhattarai vetoed it? Baburam Bhattarai had agreed to the party’s decision on the package deal to make Sushil Koirala the prime minister. As per the package it was decided that the NC and UML would at first serve in a Baburam-led government briefly to sort out legal issues related to elections, after which the leadership would be transferred. Bhattarai was in Mugu and misunderstood my statement in the media, but there was no difference between us on offering the NC premiership in a package deal.

If elections can’t be held in June, does that mean this government will be in power until polls take place? If elections can’t happen in June, there will have to be a political consensus for a different provision. The continuation of the election government will be in doubt if I can’t hold polls in June.

How do you plan to get the CPM-Maoist along with 33 fringe parties to take part in polls? The High Level Political Committee, which I currently chair, has invited them to talk and involve them in the committee to address their concerns about elections.

Bal Krishna Dhungel is a murder convict, but you are often publicly seen with him. The case against Bal Krishna is against the spirit of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that states war time cases should be dealt through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Everything in the TRC needs international standards. Dhungel has already spent eight years in jail, he has suffered. We Nepalis listen a bit too much to outsiders. We have to get out of the habit of seeking international approval for everything we do.

Are you visiting China to clarify their concerns about ethnicity-based federalism? Federalism isn’t the agenda of my visit there. I am visiting China to strengthen the relationship between the two countries and the two parties.

You talk of inclusiveness, but the country’s politics is still driven by four-five male Brahmins from the hills. That is not true this time since we also have five leaders from Madhes taking part in all discussions. We are committed to bring the marginalised communities and regions into the mainstream. We feel the people of the Madhes are still neglected, Kathmandu is still dominated by the hill feudal class, and they are the ones who have lowtowed to foreigners, not the Madhes.

filed by BIKRAM RAI

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To tell you frankly, the Ass is getting sick and tired of listening to some of you who have insisted on whining on and on at the neighbourhood watering hole about the current load shedding regime chaired by CJ Khil Raj Regmi.

Thankfully, people like you are in a minority and an overwhelming number of Nepalis are optimistic and have a positive outlook about the fact that we have become creatures of darkness. We hole-heartedly welcome load shedding because we see its brighter side. You may well ask, so what are the silver linings of power cuts? Whoa, not so fast, can’t you see I’m thinking?

As I was saying, all you need is a positive attitude to take advantage of our return to the pre-industrial age. In fact I would go as far as to venture that cutting off power to the people for 70 hours a week is the single most outstanding achievement of the post-Comprehensive Peace Accord dispensation and we should all be singing hosannas (if we aren’t already) in praise of He who made this possible.

There is even more delightful news that the people may have to do with even less power than they have at present which can only mean that, god willing, the little power there is will be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. But, as the adage goes, let’s not get too excited about that and start counting our chickens before they die of a mysterious flu-like epidemic. So ladies and gentlemen, thank you for waiting. As promised, and totally off the top of my head, here are some reasons why load shedding is good for this great nation of ours that has never suffered under the Colonial Yoke:

- Current load shedding timetables are very complicated and one needs a PhD in Plasma Physics to figure them out. With the layman in mind, future schedules will be much simpler: power supply every alternate day for 15 minutes.
- Nepalis will be watching less television. This means that instead of engaging in our national pastime of fondling the remote, we will be indulging in a new national pastime of playing interactive games with each other in the dark. As a result, the country will see a new baby boom and a demographic bulge to quadruple the nation’s GDP by 2025.
- Nepal Tourism Board will use the Berlin Travel Mart this week to unveil its new promotional campaign under the slogans: ‘Once Is Not Enough, Take Another Trip to the Dark Ages’ and ‘Visit Nepal-The Heart of Darkness’.
- Nightvision goggles will no longer be a restricted military item but an essential consumer electronic gadget for everyday home use. This will facilitate finding one’s way from the bedroom to the bathroom and taking accurate aim in the general direction of the waterloo. (Important Reminder for Male Nightvision Customers: Our Aim Is To Keep This Place Clean Your Aim Would Help.) Kids can catch up with their homework using nightvision equipment and one can go bar-hopping in Thamel again without the threat of inadvertently finding oneself neck-deep in a booby-trapped pot hole.
- Load shedding means less time wasted aimlessly surfing the net. The time saved can be employed in taking long walks with kith and kin and ensure strong family bonding. My particular favourite is to stroll along the Bagmati Promenade inhaling the full methanogenic aroma of our very own Sewage Canal.
- The proposed 32-storey skyscraper coming up in Purano Bus Park will be a symbol of national pride since it will be the tallest erection in South Asia when it is completed by 2015. But since projections show load shedding will still be in the vicinity of 28 hours a day, the high rise will enter the Guinness Book as the tallest building in the world without a functioning lift.