The November elections is being held in a time of uncertainty, with neither the excitement nor the preparation that the country saw in 2008. It is as if the political parties ran out of excuses to keep postponing polls and have no alternative but to see it through. The CPN-M, despite its tough talk of shutdowns and protests, risks being marginalised.

The NC and UML now think elections are the only way to shorten the lifespan of the chief justice-led interim electoral council. The UCPN (M) is worried about the effect its split will have on the result and would have liked to put the polls off. Sensing the unfavourable mood in the midhills, the party is concentrating in the Tarai, especially districts with large concentrations of hill settlers. The fragmented parties representing the Madhes are so hopelessly split that they may end up cancelling each other out in many constituencies. The four have a tacit understanding not to let their most senior leaders lose.

Among the parties, the UML has fielded the most new faces. The NC tried, but just couldn’t balance pressure from powerful party figures. The UCPN (M) was so desperate for candidates, it gave an NC defector a ticket overnight. All the parties have had a hard time finding women candidates to fill their quotas and none of them have more than 12 per cent female candidates. An NC aspirant who came to file his nomination, ended up having to give his seat to his wife.

Kathmandu can learn from the way Mexico City has cleaned up its air pollution problem, says Amico Panday.
HYDROPOWER AND MANPOWER

The international media attention on the mistreatment of Nepali workers could spur Gulf states to put safeguards and labour protection laws in place. However, it goes without saying that the ultimate responsibility to take care of our citizens is on us, especially since much of the worst cruelty and abuse Nepalis suffer is perpetrated by Nepali officials and the middlemen who bribe them to look the other way.

Of the many examples of governance failure we see around us, perhaps the most striking is the way we have mismanaged our two most important resources: manpower and hydropower. We are headed to another winter with daily 14 hour power cuts and the most shocking thing is that it is happening despite everyone in government being fully aware for the past 10 years as the power crisis got worse.

A new constitution, general and local elections to vote in more accountable governments would be the answer to this problem. It is long past due that the representatives were announced this week show that the November election is already rigged so that none of the top leaders of the four main parties will lose. We can be sure it will be the same failed faces that will dominate the new Constituent Assembly and you can almost predict that they will get stuck on the same issues as last time. If that is the polity as the political classes, let’s run this as an investment. No new investment means no new jobs. No jobs means continued unemployment. One short term measure is to urgently begin vocational schools to teach graduates basic skills and trades. That way, they can be self-employed or employ others at home, or if they do go abroad, they can earn more.

We boast that the $6 billion in remittances from the estimated three million Nepalis working in India and overseas props up our economy. But most of that is spent on imports or on basic survival. An investigation in this paper two weeks ago showed widespread malfeasance and extortion of overseas workers with airport officials collecting and distributing among themselves an estimated Rs 2 million in bribes from the 2,200 Nepalis flying out or in every day. The statistics break down into heart-wrenching stories of abuse and deceit, with an average of four Nepalis every day returning home in coffins.

There are steps the government can take right away without waiting for elections. The candidate lists of the parties that were announced this week show that the November election is already rigged so that none of the top leaders of the four main parties will lose. We can be sure it will be the same failed faces that will dominate the new Constituent Assembly and you can almost predict that they will get stuck on the same issues as last time. If that is the polity as the political classes, let’s run this as an investment. No new investment means no new jobs. No jobs means continued unemployment. One short term measure is to urgently begin vocational schools to teach graduates basic skills and trades. That way, they can be self-employed or employ others at home, or if they do go abroad, they can earn more.

For a Kingdom
Thank you, Nepali Times for keeping your eyes out for positive stories like these (Fit for a Kingdom, Lawrence Miller, #676). The restoration of Patan Darbar Square is one of Nepal’s best-kept secrets, thanks to the dedicated work of people like Ranjit Ranjitkar and his team at Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPF). This is sensitive cultural restoration at its best.

Yala
I was very happy to read the piece on the restoration of Sundari Chok at Patan Darbar. It pains me to see the demolition of some of our heritage sites. I hope KVPF will work on other palaces and temples as well.

Raj Kumar

FOR THE RECORD

THE OBSERVERS

We don’t expect our own government to do much, but...
Failed experiment

New Delhi’s overt and covert efforts to influence Nepali politics haven’t been in India’s own national interest

T here is a popular story in Panchatantra, the collection of animal fables in Sanskrit passed down as oral tradition in the subcontinent for generations. Two cats fighting over a morsel of food are unable to decide for themselves and turn to a monkey watching from the top of the tree who of course is unable to decide for themselves and turn to a monkey watching from the top of the tree who of course

agreement, to their role in stand-off between the Maoists and the Nepalese Army, making and breaking of the governments, and brokering various political agreements.

New Delhi’s main intention all along, it seems, was stability in the region by containing Maoist conflict from spilling over into its own territory and countering growing Chinese interest by consolidating its own influence in Nepali politics. The idea of top level political engagement with disguised diplomacy was working well, but as Sharma notes, national and international developments distracted the Indian political establishment and exasperated with the Maoist tantrums they handed over the stick to South Block which made a complete mess of it.

So, what did New Delhi gain out of this protracted experiment? It could not weaken the Maoists even after the party went through a vertical split. In fact, the Badiya faction has become more anarchic. Despite their efforts, Madhesi parties remain a loose coalition of differing political actors who may be close to New Delhi, but remain independent and driven by political mood on the ground.

Traditional ties with the Nepali Congress that went sour after 2006 CA elections are still cold and frequent incidents of Indian soldiers bullying Nepalis in border towns have stoked anti-Indian sentiments among ordinary Nepalis. Reading Prayogshala one comes to the sobering realisation that India did what all great nations do to weaker neighbours: use its vulnerable politics to influence actors and consolidate its own interest.

What is appalling though, is our own greedy leaders continued their cat fight, salivating at the idea of the monkey sitting atop to drop the bread right into their mouth. By now, every major political actor of this country, be it the ex-king or the president, the Maoists, Madhesis, NC, UML, and other institutional players including those in Nepal Army and the judiciary must have realised how it feels to be used and abused, discredited and humiliated in front of their own people.

The last CA was dissolved not because of foreign conspiracy or big ideological differences. It was dissolved because the leaders refused to negotiate sincerely, instead seeking help from the ‘hidden hand’.

The second CA elections is an opportunity for our netas to reclaim their pride and get their own house in order by finalising the statute drafted by the people and for the people in a true spirit of democracy. It is also an opportunity for India to salvage its image and support the political process in Nepal.

The best way to do it, is to do nothing.
Low cost housing for low income families

Housing insecurity has become a pertinent issue in Nepal. Millions of citizens lack home ownership and are forced to live in deplorable conditions. For those lucky enough to possess home ownership, accessibility to basic facilities is still a far cry. To remediate these housing issues, Nepali-based NGO Lumanti, has been working to create a proliferation of safe, secure housing for the country’s low-income demographics.

Four projects are currently underway which look at supplying low-income residents with low-cost, adequate shelters. Supported by UK-based Homelessness International, the projects have provided safe and secure houses to 512 poor families in Pokhara. Lekhnath, Tansen and Kofalpur with the goal of completing 750 houses by next fiscal year. Having completed the first ever rental housing model two months ago in Dhobhat, Lailitpur, Lumanti plans on introducing these types of housing structures in Pokhara and Lekhnath.

Safe and secure house for poor

For most of her life Goma Devi Kami of Kofalpur, Banke district lived in a mud hut. The shanty house provided little protection against bad weather leaving her family to live in constant fear of rain and thunderstorms. “Whenever there was heavy rainfall, my children would all huddle together. ‘We never have to worry about the poor weather,“ Goma reflects.

With a low-interest loan from a local cooperative with support from Lumanti’s Community Led Infrastructure Finance Facility (CLIFF) program, the Kami family are now proud owners of a concrete house consisting of two rooms, a kitchen, and a balcony. Joyfully, Goma tells, “It was my life-long dream to have a permanent house. My children’s future is now secured.”

New housing projects spearheaded by Lumanti were also completed in Prithivinagar, Siddhannagar, Shantinagar, Babar Nagar and Bhawampur benefiting some 300 hundred and eight families. According to Jagat Baragare, social mobiliser at Lumanti’s Kofalpur branch, Lumanti aims to build 200 to 250 concrete houses in the area in the coming year.

Housing the poor in Lekhnath

Housing rejuvenation and building construction has taken place in Lekhnath focused on supplying low-income families with secure shelters. A total of 82 families in Lekhnath have built new homes and 51 have repaired their deteriorated homes with loans provided through Kamana Development Bank with support from Lumanti. Individuals can take out loans of up to Rs. 250,000 at an interest of eight percent which they are expected to pay back in seven years.

Bishnu Bahadur Kami who earns 15,000 a month recently took a loan worth Rs. 200,000 to renovate his leaking house. Says Kami, “With my salary, it would have been impossible to collect such a large amount of money at once.”

Lumanti is also providing technical assistance to families so they can build earthquake resistant homes. In addition, a women’s saving group has also been started in Lekhnath aimed at reducing women empowerment and women economic development.

According to Kishor Kumar Karki who serves as field coordinator in Lekhnath, “the second phase of the project will see about 200 families making use of the loan. In addition, we are planning for rental housing in Lekhnath with the municipality providing the land for this project.”

New community in Pokhara

Forty-three year old Ram Moni Dahal always dreamed of owning his home. Occupied as a vegetable salesman in Pokhara for the past thirteen years, he assumed this dream would never materialize due to his lack of income and economic resources. But with support from Lumanti via Lekhnath, Dahal recently moved into a home at Kirtipur at eight per cent interest and is currently constructing his dream house. So far, 75 families have started the process of being built in Chautha, Pokhara-14 through Lumanti’s Community Led Infrastructure Finance Facility program.

Furthermore, Lumanti is planning to install bio-gas plant in the community and has started a project with the objective of supplying the community with clean water facilities.

Lumanti has started the second phase of housing developments for 65 houses in Kushang, Raatmatra, Pokhara. A total of 379 houses are under plan in Pokhara by next year with Lumanti planning the construction of rental housing units in the community.
Geetanjali Jewels, the world’s largest integrated jewellery manufacturing company is launching its first authorised retail outlet in Nepal this month through Urja Ventures. Nepali Times caught up with director of Urja Ventures, Prausn Jalan, to talk about the brand, its products, and the prospects in the domestic market.

Who are your target customers? There is a misconception in the public that because Geetanjali is endorsed by well-known personalities, its products are very expensive. But Geetanjali is for everyone. We have jewellery starting from Rs 10,000 and our main aim is to give customers genuine quality products at affordable prices. Earlier Nepalis had to travel to India for Polki and other designer jewelleries. Today they can find it right at Darbar Marg.

How do you see the domestic demand for jewellery? Nepalis mainly prefer classic and traditional designs. When it comes to diamonds, they generally look for big rocks because they think that the bigger the diamonds the better. But this is not true. Even small diamonds which are genuine have a lot of value. Gradually, the market is changing and the demand for well-designed jewelleries is on the rise. This is where Geetanjali comes in. We offer an eclectic selection for people from different socio-economic background and all age groups.

Do you think there is enough awareness among customers regarding the quality of jewelleries here? Very few people come into our store with full knowledge of what they want. So we not only sell products but also educate customers on quality and the different types of designs.

How will fluctuations in the price of gold affect the market especially during holidays? Fluctuation in price is something that no one can predict. It is always wise to therefore break purchase rather than buy in bulk. In April this year, the government discovered that many jewellery traders in Kathmandu Valley were selling sub-standard products. What is your reaction? The government’s market monitoring drive created much needed awareness among people, therefore we welcome such steps and look at them positively. Earlier clients never asked questions about quality, but now they are becoming increasingly alert. For a company like ours which has always focused on quality, this is great news.
After we thought this year’s southwest monsoon beat a bit too hasty a retreat in the first week of September, it is now back with some force. This follows a recent trend for the monsoon to be pushed back into October. The reason is a low pressure trough over the Bay of Bengal, and it is strong enough for the nascent westerlies to be pushed back to where it came from. Expect the monsoon-like drizzles into Saturday with things clearing up a bit by Sunday. This will bring down the max and min temperatures by about two degrees below normal.

**KATHMANDU**

BHRIKUTI RAI

Fourty-seven-year old Shiribati Mandal from Janakpur in Dhanusa district has never seen the inside of a school, but always had a keen interest in art. Whenever she found time from household chores, she would paint the earthen walls of her home with stunning motifs. Wanting to break out of the confines of the four walls of her kitchen, in 1998 she joined Janakpur Women’s Development Centre (JWDC), a cooperative of local female artists which has been promoting Mithila art and providing jobs for women in town and surrounding villages. Shiribati is among 39 women at JWDC who are earning a living, while also preserving an ancient art skill passed down through generations. “I never imagined I could earn money with my paintings,” she admits. The mother of two has graduated from wall painting and is now an expert screen print designer. She says her family has no problem when she leaves for her ‘office’ every afternoon: “Time management is the key and my husband is happy that I am contributing to support our family.”

When JWDC was set up in 1989, women working outside their homes was unheard of in Janakpur. “People used to stare at me when I cycled to work in the 80s, so you can imagine what they must have thought of working women,” says vice-chairman Manjula Thakur, who joined the centre in the early 90s. The cooperative not only helps artisans sharpen the craft they learnt from their mothers and grandmothers, but also gives them literacy classes and business skills so they can market their products. The women even have their own savings and microcredit program.

Mithila art dates back to 3,000 years to a region in what is now north Bihar in India and southeast Nepal. Inhabitants decorated walls of their homes with scenes from everyday life, rituals, festivals, and Hindu gods and goddesses. Its capital Janakpur was a seat of learning, a centre of spiritual and intellectual discourse, and the first city to make contact with Oriental cultures.

Although JWDC mostly produces traditional Mithila art on canvas, it has also ventured into ceramics, textiles, and papier mâché. Its products have been featured at national and international fairs including the famous Santa Fe International Folk Art Market in New Mexico, USA. Last year the cooperative made Rs 3.5 million in profits. Says Thakur: “I am happy that women in Janakpur can now freely ride their bikes, earn their living, and make decisions for themselves.”

(041) 521080
info_jwdc@yahoo.com

**COLOUR PLAY**

Women in Janakpur are gaining financial independence through indigenous Mithila art
**EVENTS**

**DASAIN AAYO**, make merry with copious amounts of food, drinks, and good ol’ family love. 3 to 18 October

Treasurer of Himalaya, an exhibition of photographs that document the omnipresence of water in the mountains of Nepal and India. Runs till 8 October, 10am to 6pm, Alliance Francaise, Tripureswor

Swim and lunch, enjoy your weekends with a dip in the pool and savour mouthwatering lunches with a glass of beer. Rs 999, Saturdays, 11am to 6pm, Waterfront Resort, Pokhara, (61)466303/304, www.waterfronthotelnepal.com

**MUSIC**

Waterfront Resort, the lakeside hotel invites you for special barbeque dinners on Friday and lunches on Saturday, Sedi Height, Lakeside road, Pokhara, (61)466303/304, www.waterfronthotelnepal.com

**BARAHI RESORT**, luxury has a new address. Andrauli, Chitwan, Nepal

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Taste of Europe

Every four months the menu at Hotel Neyatt’s Rox restaurant gets a fresh makeover. Executive chef Subhati Debnath along with his team produce a choice selection of items for the revamped menu letting diners experience a little more of the Southern European cuisine the restaurant is known for.

Who wouldn’t want to start their day with a crunchy garlic crab cake? Served with fresh arugula on the side and a well cooked fried egg on top, this is chef Debnath’s take on the classic American breakfast dish of eggs benedict. Another popular dish that makes its way into the menu is Caesar salad. The salad gets a refreshing new boost with the inclusion of crunchy maple glazed bacon.

Eyes on Afghanistan

To help audience sift through the many offerings of the festival, Film Southasia has organized two special curations for more directed viewings. While Alpavirama 2011, was screened on 1 October, Afghan Eyes, will be shown throughout the festival.

Curated by journalist Taran Khan, the selections from Afghan Eyes showcase the war-torn, globalised, and otherwise fluid environments of various communities in Afghanistan and offer insights that are often lost, despite extensive media coverage on the region. Nepali Times caught up with Khan over email to get her views on the selected films and her expectations of FSA.

Taran Khan: Afghanistan is at an interesting juncture in its modern history: on the eve of the NATO withdrawal and with uncertainty looming over its future. It is important to give space to voices of Afghans and Afghan filmmakers, who represent a window into the country. At the same time, while curating the package, we wanted to represent in some ways the process of these changes and how they have unfolded over the past decade. So watching these films will give a sense of movement and transformation, as they are from different periods over the last few years.

What are your expectations from FSA 2013?

Usually films made by foreign crews or well-known channels and production houses get good visibility and publicity, whereas films like the ones we are screening in Afghan Eyes are harder to access and fewer people know about them. The festival provides a good platform for such kind of work. When we screened these films at other venues we got very encouraging response and I am hopeful that the audience in Kathmandu will be similarly receptive. I also hope the films will create an understanding of the diversity of the kind of work being attempted by contemporary directors and encourage viewers to talk and look at Afghanistan differently.

Film Southasia

3rd-6th October
GFX Kumari, Kamal Pokhari
www.filmsouthasia.org
www.filmsouthasia.org

Nepali Times: What is the importance of showcasing Afghan films given the current circumstances in the country?

Khan: While Alpavirama 2011, was screened on 1 October, Afghan Eyes, will be shown throughout the festival. Curated by journalist Taran Khan, the selections from Afghan Eyes showcase the war-torn, globalised, and otherwise fluid environments of various communities in Afghanistan and offer insights that are often lost, despite extensive media coverage on the region. Nepali Times caught up with Khan over email to get her views on the selected films and her expectations of FSA.

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The butterfly effect

Nepal is a treasure house for butterflies

The flutter of a butterfly’s wing, according to chaos theory, can cause a typhoon halfway around the world. But for most of us, the real ‘butterfly effect’ is the immediate joy in watching these insects in their own habitat.

Nepal is one of the best places in the world for butterfly watchers. Of the 17,500 or so species of butterflies in the world, 660 are found in Nepal, and 20 of them are on the endangered list. Because of Nepal’s topographical and climate variation, they can be seen round-the-year here in different parts of the country. Nepal is also located at the meeting point of the palearctic and oriental species. Like birders, there are tourists who come to Nepal just to watch butterflies.

Colin Smith is in his 80s and used to be a Nepal-based butterfly guide. He is so passionate about butterflies that Nepalis call him ‘Putali Baje’. The British national has dedicated more than 50 years to the study of butterflies in Nepal, has published research papers and books, and his pictures of butterflies adorn calendars, postcards, and posters.

People are happy watching and photographing butterflies and not collecting them, as it was fashion some time ago,” Smith says, citing increasing awareness in the public about the need for biodiversity conservation. Even so, butterfly watching hasn’t caught on as much as birdwatching in Nepal.

Dhan Prasad of Ethic Himalaya Treks in Thamel says he gets many customers interested in birdwatching tours but not so many for butterflies. But he admits birdwatchers also look out for butterflies. Last year he handled a group that came all the way from France just to look at butterflies in Kathmandu Valley.

Mahendra Singh Limbu is a tour guide specialising in butterflies and lives in Godavari, which is next to Pulchoki, the mountain that alone has 350 species of butterflies. “My passion for butterflies comes from my appreciation for life,” he says, showing an extensive collection of pictures of butterflies.

GLASSY BLUEBOTTLE

Common throughout Nepal, flies from February to October, often high round tree-tops.
Lepidopterists Limbu and Smith both believe there is great potential if Nepal marketed expeditions in the peak butterfly watching seasons in March–June and August–October. Smith says it is important not just to show visitors Nepal’s fabulous diversity of butterflies, but also detailed information about each species. “We can provide not just anecdotal information but about their habitat, life-cycles, and why certain species behave the way they do,” explains Smith. Bhaiya Khanal of the Natural History Museum in Kathmandu says butterflies are not only beautiful but very important markers about the state of the environment. Many butterfly species rely on just a single species of plants and if the flower disappears, so does the butterfly. Butterfly habitat shifts can also be early-warning signs of climate change.

For instance, Khanal found in 2008 that the Apollo B species had shifted up the mountains as temperatures rose. Butterflies have a delicately balanced seasonal cycle and lay their eggs on the food-plant when the leaves are still young. The butterfly comes out of its cocoon and chrysalis when certain flowers are in bloom and upsetting this balance could not only affect the feeding of the caterpillars, but the pollination of the flowers.

Khanal has been taking a regular butterfly census in Nepal and has found that in the last three years there has been a decline in numbers of certain species like the Hockey Stick Seller, due to habitat destruction or perhaps pesticide use.

www.silkroadgroup.com
www.nepal-safari.com
www.ethichimalaya.com

INTO THE WILD

There are 660 species of butterflies found in Nepal, which make up 4 per cent of globally known species.

More than 300 species are found in Kathmandu alone throughout the year due to mild day temperatures during winter and surrounding mountains.

PEAK SEASONS:
March–June and August–September.

COMMON:
Common Mormon (Papilionidae), Indian Cabbage White (Pieridae), Pale Orange Blue (Lycaenidae), Lemon Pansy (Nymphalidae)

LARGEST:
Golden Birdwing (Teoides aeacus) with a wingspan of up to 188 mm

RAREST:
Chrysozephyrus disparatus interpositus

HIGHEST RECORDED:
Banded Apollo in Manang (5,200m) in 1985 and in Everest in 1990

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No Fire Zone and Expecting

This year I have been lucky enough to preview two of the films playing at the Film Southasia, both of which are thought provoking, and one of which in particular is devastating in its portrayal of the final few, intense months of the 26 year long conflict in Sri Lanka which ended in 2009.

No Fire Zone chronicles the last bellicose attack on the Tamil dense north-eastern region of the island by the Rajapaksa regime. While it is true that Sri Lanka was able to end its debilitatingly long conflict in a few short months, the cost at which the army succeeded in defeating the rebels was intolerably high. While mainstream media spewed government propaganda claiming that no civilians were hurt during the siege on the north-east of the island, the truth is actually the horrifying opposite. No Fire Zone is named thus because it chronicles through anecdotal and video evidence, the targeted onslaught of the government’s forces on areas deemed ‘No Fire Zones’ and more particularly on hospitals tending to the wounded even while they carried the banner marking them clearly as being part of the Red Cross.

Skeptical? Well, any intelligent watcher should be when faced with such grave accusations. However, in addition to being brilliantly put together and narrated by the grave voice of Rufus Sewell, No Fire Zone is journalistically sound, every statement made in the film regarding human rights violations being backed up with searingly violent footage corroborated by expert forensic scientists.

Similarly Expecting, a short but poignant documentary about a couple, the Afghani Jawed and the Kosovar Dashurije, who meet and fall in love in a refugee camp in Belgium brings us into the reality of a world that is (thankfully) not our own. Young, imminently expecting a child and without legal work-papers, the two are fighting off penury in a country where they sought refuge from violence and discrimination in their own conflicted homelands.

Unsentimentally observed but sympathetic, Expecting gives us a window into the lives of people whom we would perhaps ordinarily never meet, filling in with colour and compassion the situations of thousands of such political refugees all over the world who are fighting their individual battles to try and gain a better life for themselves and more importantly for their children.

Go to Film Southasia for experiences such as these from films that will widen your horizons and wrench at your heart – but with good reason.

Film Southasia
3-6 October, QFX Kumari
www.filmsouthasia.org

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

No Fire Zone and Expecting

No Fire Zone

Expecting

NAMASTE NEPAL: Newly appointed Indian ambassador to Nepal Ranjit Rae (left) at a welcome reception organised by Nepal-India Friendship Association at Battisputali on Monday.

BOOKWORM: Visitors browse through books during the National Book Exhibition at City Hall, Exhibition Road on Wednesday afternoon.

HEAVY DUTY: A year after it was marked for expansion, the road from Kalopul to Siphal Chaur is paved with concrete on Monday.
Japanese Noodle Kitchen’s bright, airy, and modern dining room is a welcome surprise: outside is the Dhobighat stretch of Ring Road, all chaos and cacophony, dust and debris. The staff may seem slightly overburdened, carrying out multiple duties at once, but the slightly manic lunchtime service doesn’t detract from this venue’s food, ambience, or its welcome presence in a location not normally known for high quality, low cost cuisine.

The restaurant closes at five, making the lunch rush the restaurant’s main source of business. Indeed, the hall was nearly at capacity at the time of our visit—demonstrating the interest owner Yuko Matsui’s bowls of fresh udon noodles have generated among his predominantly Korean clientele.

As the name suggests, JNK focuses on noodles, whether in ‘dry’, curried dishes, or by adding substance to steaming bowls of broth. The chicken curry option I’d seen delivered at the next table just moments before was unfortunately sold out—it looked fantastic, so definitely one for next time around. The fried chicken udon (Rs 250) was served in a slightly bland tomato sauce and didn’t deliver the kick I’d been hoping for.

My fellow diners were more successful: seaweed udon (Rs 230) and an udon noodle soup with prawn tempura on the side (Rs 320) delivered on the uncomplicated, clean flavours we associate with East Asian dining. All came with a side of kimchi and a range of condiments (powdered and pickled chili, soy sauce, and others) to spice things up a little.

We decided to skip dessert, as the offerings of pancakes and rice cakes seemed slightly underwhelming. Matsui knows his strengths lie in noodle production and has rightly chosen to expend his efforts in that arena. If you’re looking for variety, JNK is definitely not for you. But if you’re looking for something different during your working lunch, in a part of town with few attractive or inspired options—a warm welcome (if they’re not too busy) awaits.

How to get there: coming from Jawalakhel, turn right onto Ring Road at Nakhu Dobato and you’ll find Japanese Noodle Kitchen wedged between On the Grill and Kwality Food Café. Both of which, I’m sure, are lovely.

As for those of you unfamiliar with Japanese cooking, there’s a handy display in the foyer with photographs of each of the dishes, so you can order with confidence. Along with cute, handwritten menus, we were given complimentary glasses of iced ‘bhote’ tea with regular refills throughout our meal. First up was a sharing plate of vegetable tempura (Rs 100)—the delicate coating of crispy batter being the only overtly fatty thing we ate—and then looked ahead to our main courses.

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RAKSI LAGYO

With Ghatastapana a day away, it’s a good time to talk about alcohol. Many people, including doctors, do not know what comprises a single drink in terms of quantity. In order to know what alcohol abuse is, it is important to understand how a drink is defined. We can broadly categorise drinks into three groups: beer, spirits (whisky, rum, vodka, gin), and wine. The regular alcohol content is about five per cent in beer, 40 per cent in spirits, and 12 per cent in wine. About 350ml of beer (one regular can), about 100ml of wine (about two thirds of a regular wine glass, not full), and 45ml of spirit (not a ‘Pintala’ peg) each comprise a drink. Based on these figures, a healthy man without any contraindications to alcohol may have two drinks per day and a healthy, non-pregnant woman can consume one drink per day, as women metabolise alcohol differently. Because it isn’t known whether any amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy, the US Surgeon General urges abstinence for women who are or may become pregnant. The quantity should not exceed more than 14 drinks per week for men and seven drinks per week for women. When people cross this limit they risk abusing alcohol.

What about all the news about alcohol being good for you? Drinking like most things in life is a double edged sword. There is some good evidence to show that moderate consumption of alcohol may be cardioprotective. Alcohol in moderation also enhances the fun and frivolity of any party. People are more keen to attend parties which say ‘cocktail dinner’ instead of just dinner.

All people who drink are certainly not alcoholics and individual responses to liquor vary. But homicides, liver diseases, stroke, certain heart diseases are all problems associated with alcohol. Heavy drinkers face greater risk of hypertension, gastrointestinal bleeding, sleep disorders, major depression, hemorrhagic stroke, cirrhosis of the liver, and several cancers. Being able to ‘hold your drink’ does not afford protection against all the ill effects of excessive drinking. In addition, trying to drink in moderation is difficult given the addictive power of the drug.

Screening for heavy drinking is important because about three in ten adults drink at levels that elevate their risk for physical, mental health, and social problems. Clinical trials have demonstrated that brief interventions by clinicians can promote significant and lasting reductions in drinking levels in at-risk drinkers. Heavier drinkers, especially in our part of the world, however, often go undetected. Doctors very rarely ask their patients how much they drink. Or, there is a misconception that what makes an alcoholic. For example: when a patient reports that he drinks only one drink a day, he may be mistakenly labelled an alcoholic. For example:

Teetotalers should certainly not start drinking based on what they have read in the papers about alcohol being good for health. Specifically cardiovascular health. By the same token, healthy adults who drink according to the above guidelines and have no contraindications, need not necessarily stop drinking because their mother-in-law does not like them consuming raksi.

The Z effect

Successor to the highly successful Sony Xperia Z (reviewed earlier in this column), the Xperia Z2 is Sony’s latest flagship smartphone capable of challenging behemoths like the iPhone 5s and the Samsung Galaxy S4.

Available in white, black, and purple, the Z2 retains the original Xperia Z’s stylish aluminium, tempered glass design, and a beautiful five-inch high definition screen boasting a resolution of 1920x1080 pixels (Full HD). The five-inch screen is equipped with Triluminos display technology and combined with the ‘X-Reality Picture Engine’, offers vibrant colours and razor sharp pictures, videos, games, and web pages. The Z2 is also designed to be fully waterproof thereby protecting your expensive acquisition safe from all manners of liquid ‘accidents’ that would put an end to most other phones.

Running on Android’s mobile operating system (version 4.2.2) and powered by a 2.2GHz Quad Core Processor and a 2GB RAM, the Z2 is capable of handling graphics and memory intensive videos, games, applications, and internet browsing with ease. The main highlight of the device, however, has to be its camera, which packs a whopping 20.7-megapixel sensor. The Z2’s camera is built with the same components as Sony’s legendary Cybershot compact digital cameras, meaning the Z2 really is the best camera phone available in the market today. The gadget utilises the company’s award-winning mobile image processing engine to deliver stunningly sharp, clear, bright, and detailed images even during low light, while Sony’s clear image zoom allows for blur-free photos. Capturing videos on the Z2’s also a treat as the gadget churns out detailed and distortion-free videos at full HD resolution.

The pictures and videos that you are likely to capture with the Xperia Z2 demand heavy storage and the 16 GB of on-board storage might not be adequate. However, you can upgrade by a further 64GB (via a micro-SD card) to fulfill your storage needs. Expecting heavy multimedia usage, Sony has packed the Z2 with a massive 3200 mAh battery, which compares favourably to the Samsung Galaxy S4’s 2600mAh battery and the iPhone 5s’ 1570mAh. As with any high-end handset, the Z2 comes loaded with most of the standard connectivity options including LTE, NFC, DLNA, MHL, HSDPA, GPS, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth to meet your internet and multimedia needs.

Yantrick’s verdict: expected to sell in Nepal at approximately Rs 70,000 after its early October launch in Asia, the Xperia Z2 is a top of the range smartphone and truly ‘the best of Sony’.

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GIZMO by YANTRICK

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Scoops about spooks

Intelligence reporting is really embedded journalism

Come to think of it, retired Gen VK Singh’s recent disclosure about the Indian Army paying politicians in Kashmir had all the ingredients for a career-defining story reporters on the intelligence beat would have loved to scoop. Yet, despite all the cups of coffee they have gulped with spooks in plush restaurants, they had little idea about what a serious subversion of democracy it was.

As Gen Singh spoke, Indian spooks mounted a special sideshow of their own. Through them we came to know that Yasin Bhatkal, guilty of killing at least a 100, had ordered an apple pie and cold coffee in Pune’s German Bakery before leaving his bag with a bomb under a table.

Decidedly delicious stories, but begging the question: why do spooks mostly feed us the apple-pie-cold-coffee stories, instead of revealing information that have the flavour of apple pie and cold coffee.

It tells you, one, that there isn’t a whistleblower among our spooks willing to accord primacy to uphold the ideal of democracy and not just servicing organisational goals. Two, media reporting on intelligence agencies is an example of embedded journalism. Reporters are so embedded inside Indian intelligence that they report only what they are told, or rather, dictated.

The problem inherent to the intelligence beat is that, more often than not, it is impossible to verify what sources tell you, thus undermining the defining principle of journalism: counter-check information from informants who can’t be identified. How can a reporter ever check the number of militant camps operating in Pakistan or Burma, or verify an intelligence leak about Nepal?

But over the last decade and more, the leaks from intelligence sources have become richer in description, conveying to Indians their deep penetration into subterranean terror groups. It is impossible for journalists to verify whether their claims are real or imaginary. Yet, if you were to read today the stories spun in the months following the terrorist bomb blast in Hyderabad’s Mecca Masjid on 18 May 2007, you can’t but conclude that their authors were schooled in the genre of magical realism.

Almost all newspapers claimed that the Harkatul-Jihad-i-Islami (HJI) was behind the Mecca Masjid blast and its Indian commander, Shahid Bilal, executed it. Shahid’s real name was Abdul Rehman and around him breathless narratives were created, based, obviously, on the intelligence the agencies had gathered about him - why and when he left Hyderabad for Pakistan and the other bombings in Hyderabad he was involved in.

Subsequently, though, these stories turned out to be fiction. Nevertheless, they helped justify the picking up of Muslims in midnight swoops and their torture in custody. Months later, one Swami Aseemanand confessed that he and other members of Abhinav Bharati, a Hindu chauvinist group, organised the blast not only in the Mecca Masjid, but also at the dargahs in Ajmer and Malegaon and the Samjhauta Express. In all these cases, too, jihadi groups were blamed.

The flawed narrative around the Mecca Masjid isn’t the only example of kite-flying by Indian spy agencies. Considering the method they use to gather information, however inane the results, keep a source happy is part of the job description of an embed. Indian editors must get together to evolve a protocol for covering the intelligence beat. Otherwise, we are doomed to consume intelligence stories that have the flavour of apple pie and cold coffee.
In 1993 I published an article titled Kathmandu: Another Mexico City? describing the geographical similarities of the two cities, analysing population and vehicle growth rates to establish the potential for Kathmandu’s air pollution to get as bad as Mexico City.

Twenty years later, I finally visited Mexico City, met policy makers and scientists, and toured its air pollution monitoring network. The similarities to Kathmandu are uncanny: Mexico City is the historical capital of a remittance-dependent country sprawling out across a former lake bed that is water-starved outside of the rainy season from June to September.

Mexico City has fragile historical brick houses in an earthquake zone (a 8.1 magnitude quake in 1985 killed 10,000) and it is also surrounded by mountains that trap choking air pollution within an inversion layer that often obscures views of snow-capped peaks.

But while congestion and air pollution have steadily worsened in Kathmandu, they have improved in Mexico City. At its worst in 1990-94, Mexico City’s ozone levels exceeded WHO standards of 90 per cent of the year. 70,000 people a year died of respiratory illnesses. There were even serious discussions about leveling a mountain and installing fans to blow the pollution out. While still polluted, Mexico City today is much more liveable, with pollution levels often below WHO standards.

What can Kathmandu learn from Mexico City to improve air quality? Air pollution is reversible and disappears quickly when emissions are cut. Mexico City closed its most polluting petroleum refinery in 1991. Fuel standards were gradually improved. It switched to unleaded petrol and reduced diesel sulfur content to cut atmospheric sulfur dioxide by three quarters. Catalytic converters cut carbon monoxide by two thirds. Focusing on taxis, microbuses, and buses yielded the biggest improvements, since those vehicles spend the most time on the roads.

Mexico City’s air quality monitoring network has 29 state-of-the-art stations that transmit live data to a control centre which uses radio, Twitter, and even a children’s website to inform the public about where the day’s air quality is on a scale ranging from ‘good’ to ‘extremely bad’. Local technicians maintained the network at a fraction of what it would cost in the West.

There were also failures. In 1989 Mexico City introduced ‘Hoy No Circula’ (no driving day), banning private vehicles one day per week based on the last digit of their number plates. Within a year people bought 275,000 used cars to drive on days when their primary cars were banned and then drove both cars on days when both were allowed. Lagos, Nigeria, tried a similar policy, but there people just ‘bought’ secondary number plates for their cars. Mexico City now has strict vehicle inspection and maintenance programs to restrict the most polluting vehicles.

Widening Kathmandu’s roads may provide temporary relief, but ultimately it just creates bigger traffic jams. A transport system that takes riders away from cars and motorcycles to bicycles and public transport is the answer. Mexico City today has attractive bicycle lanes, a subway train network, and has copied the Bus-Rapid-Transit (BRT) system from Curitiba in Brazil in which big buses run on dedicated lanes, while cutting stopping times by having passengers prepay the fare before entering boarding platforms. BRTs match the capacity of urban trains at a fraction of the cost. It is not too early for Kathmandu to think about an urban train network, but road widening should include BRTs on the Ring Road. While Mexico City still has major air pollution problem, it has come a long way: 20 years ago it was used to warn Kathmandu. Now it is turning into a role model.

Arnico Panday is Senior Atmospheric Scientist at ICIMOD in Kathmandu.
like most visitors to Kathmandu, Norwegian professor Viggo Brunn was fascinated by what people of Kathmandu take for granted: the ubiquitous use of bricks for building construction. Wherever Brunn turned, there were ‘bricks, bricks and more bricks’: in houses, walls, and palaces, temples, wells, waterways, and the Darbar Squares. The professor’s curiosity was further piqued when he couldn’t find much literature on brick production. Thus began a decade-long research into construction materials in Kathmandu Valley and resulted in the book, *Fired Earth*, which was released in July by Himal Books.

Through Brunn’s research, we learn that the bricks of the Chang Nu Narayan temple were baked 2,500 years ago and are probably the earliest fired bricks found in the Valley. He uses Google Earth to take a census of the kilns and maps 114 of them. Brunn interviews brick workers who say harvests fall by 20 percent when the land is set out to brick kilns because of the loss of fertile silt. But the loss is compensated by the rental cash and the possibility of finding non-farm work during the peak brick season.

The author also looks at less polluting forms of brick baking, like the forced-draught Habla model. This kiln is cheaper and more energy efficient, but is yet to catch on. The biggest problem for brick kiln owners now is how to get land, which has become expensive. Farmers would also rather sell it to real estate agents than rent it for bricks.

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After reading this book, the reader will not look at bricks the same way again. The conclusion is that brick baking will soon go extinct in Kathmandu, not because of popular outcry about urbanisation or the environment, but because there is just little suitable soil or real estate left. In effect, the kiln-produced bricks killed the kilns.

Kunda Dixit
With the nomination date inching closer, businessmen have started competing for PR seats and political parties are negotiating with interested individuals for donations ranging from Rs 10-50 million. Madheshi Janashakti Forum, Forum Loktantrik, and Tarai-Madhes Loktantrik have openly offered seats to those negotiating with interested individuals for donations ranging from Rs 50 million to Rs 100 million.

Many in the business community feel that the exorbitant amounts demanded by the parties and the subsequent negotiations are unhealthy. “The private sector shouldn’t merely be used as cadre and donors for parties whenever they need money,” says Manoj Kedia, vice-president of Confederation of Nepalese Industries.

With business houses for contributions of up to Rs 50 million.

The final countdown

Interview with Chief Election Commissioner Nikanthu Lujel, Him 29 October

Nepali Times: Are you certain elections will take place on 19 November?

Nikanthu Lujel: Well there are security issues and other concerns. But days left up to elections are always uncertain, the day of the poll itself turns out fine. We are committed to holding elections in 10,017 centres across the country on 19 November. Our job is to make sure everything is in order, the government is responsible for providing resources to make it possible, and now the parties should have realised they must reach all their constituencies.

What about the role of election monitors?

It would be ideal if we could create an environment where election monitors aren’t necessary, because we can then say that democracy in Nepal has been truly institutionalised. India has election observers who unlike monitors are not required to write reports. In the last elections there were complaints that some of the monitors were affiliated or close to certain parties and that the parties used them for political gain. Only 32 of 148 monitors submitted reports last time. We don’t want a repeat of that.

How much is the elections going to cost?

Polls are going to be really expensive this time round. There is no point becoming a part of the CA when all the decisions are made by the four parties,” says Khetan who was nominated by the Nepal Communist Party-ML in 2008.

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No Ass column will be complete this week without some asinine comments about the way political parties have distributed tickets for candidates for the forthcoming elections. Bollywood actors and actresses are apparently running helter skelter and some have actually gone semi-underground to escape the dragnet of political parties vying with each other to pull screen idols who pull voters.

But the most dramatic story is of yesteryear’s heartthrob (today’s myocardial infarction) Bhuwan Kesi who had agreed with Lotus Thapa to join RPP Nepal for the Kathmandu #1 constituency. It was announced on FB, the journos had arrived for the photo-op, but no Bhuwan Dai. On further investigation, it turned out he had been hijacked overnight by the UML. So far so great.

But guess what, after his name appeared on the UML’s candidate list, the Unfettered Marxist-Leninists started having second thoughts and retroactively retracted Bhuwan Dai’s name. “BAMF-OMG-WTF,” Kesi was overheard swearing on the phone.

Charisma, meanwhile, deserves the Nepali equivalent of the BAFTA Award for playing coy and refusing to hob-nob with politicians. Rekha can have best supporting actress for pretending to be excited about standing in Parsa, where she’s never been.

The other breed of people fighting tooth and nail for tickets are family members of leaders. Now that the Koirala family has been further subdivided into five warring factions, Sujata has leveled a serious charge against Jhusil Uncle and accused him of ‘nepotism’. She walked out of the kangresi konklave the other day and called a presscon where she invoked the wrath of her ancestors on the cousins and uncles running her party.

The Bracket Baddies have also turned out to be as naughty as everyone else so far as spreading candidates among kith and kin goes. Five Cash candidates are joining the election fray with their wives, including ‘Be Right Back’ BRB. And setting the trend is none other than the Great Helmsman himself who is fielding dotter Renu, dotter-out-law Bina and bro Nayan. Prakash (‘Son Also Rises’) Dahal was exiled for sowing his wild oats far and wide, but has been rehabilitated and his third wife Bina Magar also got a ticket. This is all becoming nice and cosy and Comrade Atom seems perfectly happy attiring himself in police, commando, and football uniforms and doesn’t want to run in no elections. Which is just as well because a Dash Baddie who was PKD’s former bodyguard has spilt the beans about the alcoholic and other escapades of Dahal & Son, Pvt Ltd. The other Comrade Prakash, on the other hand, is in the dog house and rumour has it he seriously mulled defecting to the UML.

And what’s with this outbreak of letter writing to Ban ki-Moon? First it was Shambhu Thapa, dashing off an email to Uncle Ban whining about being fingered by the CIAA’s Autopilot Baba. Thinking it was now de rigueur for Nepali politicians to tattle to Uncle Moon, Baidya Ra also shot off a note to tell him not to believe a word that Kill Raj told him.

At this rate, the Ass will also have to write to the UNSG and begin by saying: Dear Mr Ki-Moon (or shall I call you Ban)? Will you be my penpal?