AGAINTHECURRENT

Famous as one of the last strongholds of the one-horned rhino and the Bengal Tiger in Nepal, Chitwan National Park is now caught in a battle against ambitious projects of national pride. Initial alignments of the East-West electric railway and the postal road both pass through important wildlife corridors in the protected area and experts now fear that 40 years of exemplary conservation could be wiped out by hasty planning. See page 16-17.
The new CA has to base its exercise on accepted ideals of national unity, integrity, and equity.

To be sure, the Indian Constitution failed to prepare democratic institutions for eventualities like the Emergency of 1975-77, the over-centralisation of democratic institutions, the chronic inability of the Union government to resolve problems like insurgencies, entrenched poverty, inequality, and widespread corruption. India’s federal model was always fraught, but the recent breakups of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar or Uttar Pradesh states have more to do with the failure of regional leaders to accommodate dissent than with a failure of the constitution.

Here in Nepal, as elected members of the new Constituent Assembly sit down one more time to try to draft the constitution, there are hopes and doubts about whether this last will be able to do within one year what the previous assembly could not despite four tenure extensions.

Learning from India, it would be useful for our CA to base its exercise on accepted ideals of national unity, integrity, and equity. The way to national unity is by making Nepal more of a ‘union’ than a ‘federal’ state. At the same time, we will safeguard the country’s integrity by making it less unitary and by dismantling the Kathmandu centralism that led to neglect and exclusion. And the path to equity and equality is through meaningful democracy, strengthening democratic institutions, enshrining the separation of powers and the rule of law.

As Austin wrote in a 1999 preface to his book: ‘Constitutions do not “work”, they are inert, dependent upon being “worked” by citizens and elected and appointed leaders.

The constitution is a working document, a work in progress, that can be improved as we go along. We don’t have to foresee all contingencies, just defend our agreed core values.
Govinda KC, a physician at the Tribhuvan University Institute of Medicine (IOM) in Kathmandu has a reputation for integrity and service, especially to underserved people not just in Nepal but all over the world.

He is unmarried, lives frugally in the staff quarter at the Teaching Hospital and unlike most doctors in Nepal, doesn’t have a parallel private practice. Whenever disaster strikes in the country or any corner of the world, like the earthquake in Haiti or the tsunami in Southeast Asia, he packs his bags and flies off at his own expense to treat survivors.

Last year, when the government tried to install a political appointee as the dean of IOM, Govinda KC went on hunger strike for two weeks until physician Prakash Sayami was appointed. It is a lucrative position since the institute has a direct say in inspections of existing private hospitals and also granting coveted affiliations to new medical colleges.

Last month, Sayami rejected the affiliation application of four new teaching hospitals: National Medical College, People’s Dental College, Mammoshan Medical College, and Nepal Police Medical College.

There is a long and sordid story of corruption and greed in the health sector that is behind Govinda KC’s hunger strike.
COFFEE WITH GAGAN
An entrepreneur who turned his passion for the beans into a successful franchise

When Himalayan Java opened for business in 2000, coffee culture was almost non-existent in Nepal. While the Valley was littered with chiya pasals, even in the narrowest of gullies, a search for a freshly brewed cup of joe meant taking a trip to one of the five star hotels around town, a luxury few could afford to indulge in.

Gagan Pradhan, whose love affair with the beans began while he was a student in Australia, sought to change that. The small, independent coffee shops that he frequented while pursuing his bachelor’s degree in hospitality management at William Blue International School in Sydney, became the model and inspiration for his own franchise.

Himalayan Java Barista Coffee School opened in January last year at Civil Mall in Sundhara. Since then, the school has trained more than 2,000 students in the art of coffee-making. Program director Madhav Devkota says the course has been specifically designed for individuals who are planning to go abroad. Besides foreign employment seekers, the course also caters to those who are looking to enter specialty coffee business. The 10-day course, which costs Rs 25,000, includes classes on history of coffee, espresso equipment, steaming and foaming milk, cleaning and roasting and blending techniques, safety and maintenance, customer service, occupational health and safety.

With Himalayan Java, the first of its kind coffee house in the city, Pradhan brought coffee within the reach of the middle-class and demystified this once foreign sounding drink. But the 38-year old admits the initial days were far from smooth. Convincing natives who enjoyed their sugar and milk laden tea to switch to a steamy brew, not of the instant variety, took time and patience.

Pradhan had opened his first outlet at Heritage Plaza in Kamaladi to attract office-goers. But the outlet was later shifted to its current location in Thamel, a move that proved to be utterly fruitful. Once in the tourist hotspot, the foot traffic increased, but few Nepalis left satisfied recalls Pradhan. Many a time, customers simply refused to pay because they didn’t like their ‘bitter’ beverage. “I know I had taken a huge risk by trying to offer something that Nepalis were not necessarily ready for,” he says.

But that was 14 years ago and the risk has clearly paid off. Himalayan Java is now the most recognised coffee house in the city. Growing demand and surging popularity paved the way for expansion and today, it is the largest Nepali coffee chain with eight outlets in the country. And with outlets in Toronto and Lhasa, also the only coffee business to expand beyond borders.

But Pradhan shows no signs of slowing down. This year alone, the coffee connoisseur has plans to expand to four more locations within the country which include tourist favourites Pokhara, Jomsom, Lukla, and Namchhe and add a few more international locations.

From its humble beginnings, Himalayan Java has grown into a ‘coffee institution’. Other than the fact that it only uses locally grown coffee, the organisation is also involved in bringing in high-quality machines such as roasters, grinders, espresso machines, and commercial urns through Mocca Trading, an arm of the company that also exports Nepali coffee to other countries.

Pradhan, who made a conscious decision to use only organic beans at his shops since the start, says the government should develop programs that would encourage more farmers to plant this cash crop. Nepal’s climatic conditions is said to be particularly suitable for growing the Arabica variety. Although coffee plantation has taken off in places like Kavre, Nuwakot, Palpa, and Syangja, studies show only three per cent of the total cultivable land for coffee is currently in use, thus limiting the production output. Of the 600 tonnes produced annually, 70 per cent is consumed in the country leaving little to export to the foreign market.

“The amount of coffee that we produce is miniscule, we need to boost our production to make our presence felt outside the domestic market,” he explains.

Ramjee Dahal
www.himalayanjava.com

MR BEANS: Founder and owner of Himalayan Java, Gagan Pradhan, at the chain’s outlet in Civil Mall, Sundhara.
Inequality by the click

ADAIR TUNER

In many emerging countries, rapid economic growth has raised living standards to at least some degree for almost everyone, but the share of the rich and ultra-rich is increasing dramatically. Once these countries approach the average income levels of developed economies and their growth slows to typical rich-country rates, their future may look like America today.

The bottom quarter of US households have received almost no increase in real (inflation-adjusted) income for the last 25 years. They are no longer sharing the fruits of their country’s growth. The top one per cent of Americans, however, have seen their real incomes almost triple during this period, with their share of national income reaching 20 per cent, a figure not seen since the 1920’s.

Globalisation explains some of the bottom-quarter income stagnation in the US and other developed economies. Competition from lower-paid Chinese workers has driven US wages. But technological change may be a more fundamental factor – and one with consequences for all countries.

Technological change is the essence of economic growth. We get richer because we figure out how to maintain or increase output with fewer employees, and because innovation creates new products and services. Successful new technologies always cause job losses in some sectors, which are offset by new jobs elsewhere. Tractors destroyed millions of agricultural jobs, for example, but tractor, truck, and car manufacturers created millions of new ones.

But new technologies come in subtly different forms, with inherently different economic consequences. Today’s new technologies may have far more troubling distributional effects than those of the electromechanical age. Information and communication technology is not costless magic; but it is closer to it than were the innovations of the electromechanical age. The cost of computing hardware collapses over time in line with Moore’s law of relentlessly increasing processing power. And once software has been developed, the marginal cost of copying it is effectively zero.

The consumer benefits of this technology are large relative to its price: the cost of each year’s latest computer, tablet, or smartphone is trivial compared to the cost of a new car in 1950. But the number of jobs created is trivial, too.

In 1979, General Motors employed 400,000 workers. Today, Microsoft employs only 100,000 people worldwide, Google employs 50,000, and Facebook employs just 5,000 (pic. centre). These are mere drops in the ocean of the global labour market, replacing very few of the jobs that information technology has automated away.

But increased unemployment is not inevitable. There is no limit to the number of service jobs that we can create in retail, restaurants and catering, hotels, and an enormous variety of personal services.

However, the wages at which the market will set these jobs may result in yet greater inequality. And there is no reason to believe that politicians’ all-purpose answer to the problem – “increase workforce skills” – will offset this tendency. However many people learn superior IT skills, Fablebook will never need more than a few thousand employees. And access to high-paid jobs is likely to be determined not by absolute skill level, but by relative skill in a winner-take-all world.

At least, the rapid growth of IT products and services are very cheap, so even the relatively poor can afford them. That might make very unequal societies more stable than many fear. In his recent book AVERAGE IS OVER, the economist Tyler Cowen makes the deliberately provocative argument that while new technology will produce extreme inequality, the relative losers, satiated by computer games and Internet entertainment, and provided with the basics of a minimally acceptable life, will be too docile to revolt.

Cowen may be right; the poor may not rebel. But extreme inequality should still concern us. Beyond a certain point, unequal outcomes inevitably fuel greater inequality of opportunity, and extreme inequality of either outcomes or opportunity can undermine the idea that we should all be equal as citizens, if not in material standard of living.
China’s one-child policy lifted living standards, but set a hard-to-reverse trend of demographic decline

JOSEPH CHAMIE

In an attempt to mitigate a near-certain demographic future of rapid ageing, shrinking workforce, and critical gender imbalance, the Chinese government has adjusted its one-child policy. The decision demonstrates that, irrespective of a nation’s politics-economic system, governments cannot avoid demography’s juggernaut consequences. This mid-course correction in population policy will have marginal effect as China is ageing at a much faster pace than occurred in other countries.

The new policy, set at the provincial level, will permit couples to have two children if either the husband or wife is an only child. Under the previous policy, two children were allowed for the husband or wife is an only child. Under the firstborn is a daughter, and couples with both spouses as only ethnic minorities, rural families whose previous policy, two children were allowed for the husband or wife is an only child. Under the policy, two children were allowed for the husband or wife is an only child.

China instituted its one-child policy in the late 1970s because it feared that its rapidly growing population placed an untenable burden on economic growth and improving standards of living. At the start of the 1970s, China’s fertility rate was above five children per couple and its population was growing at more than two percent per year, adding more than 20 million Chinese annually. If the demographic growth of the 1970s had persisted, China would perhaps have added 400 million people more to its current population of 1.39 billion.

As a result of rapid declines in birth and death rates over the past four decades, China’s life expectancy at birth has increased by more than 10 years to 75 years. With steep declines in fertility and increasing longevity, China’s population has aged rapidly over the past 40 years, with the median age nearly doubling from 19 to 35 years. The adoption of the one-child policy also accelerated the decline in the proportion of China’s children, falling precipitously from 40 per cent in 1970 to 18 per cent today.

In contrast, the working-age population aged 15 to 64 years jumped from 56 to 73 per cent, higher than the US per cent average for more developed countries. The extraordinary age structure transformation allowed China to benefit from the demographic dividend, a short-term productive advantage due to a large labour force relative to small numbers of dependent young and old. Also, before the one-child policy, China’s sex ratio at birth averaged around 107 boys for every 100 girls. Ten years after the policy’s adoption, the ratio reached 115 boys for 100 girls and may exceed 125 in some provinces, reflecting the strong preference for sons, especially in rural farming areas. China’s unusually high sex ratio at birth indicates extensive use of sex-selective abortion. The number of young males unable to find brides is estimated at more than 25 million.

Administrators and some scholars suggest the relaxation in policy may lead to an increase of up to two births per year, possibly a 10 per cent increase – increasing China’s fertility rate from the current 1.6 births per woman to about 1.8 births per woman. If China decided to further relax to a ‘two-child policy’, the number of additional births might reach five million annually, with the fertility rate perhaps rising to replacement level. Under the instant replacement scenario, China’s future fertility does not decline, but stabilises around 1.6 billion by mid-century. The Chinese population, however, would still age, with the proportion of elderly increasing to a fifth and the potential support ratio falling to three working-age persons per retiree.

In addition to increasing fertility, the relaxation of the one-child policy may improve China’s gender imbalance at least at birth. With more couples allowed to have a second child, the effects of the sex preference on the sex ratio at birth should, in principle, be reduced. But the overall gender imbalance will persist for generations. Even if China were to experience a baby ‘boomlet’, the country would continue to age, its labour force shrink and its gender imbalance carry on for decades. Also, while a rise in the birthrate would increase the demands for housing, education, food, care and related services, at least two decades would pass before the boomlet babies entered the workforce and paid taxes.

Finally, irrespective of China’s decisions to relax its one-child policy, fertility is not likely to increase markedly in the foreseeable future. Major forces pointing to continuation of low Chinese fertility include increasing urbanisation, smaller and costly housing, expanding higher education and career opportunities for women, high financial costs and time pressures for childrearing, and changing attitudes and lifestyles. China may soon discover, as many countries have concluded, raising low fertility rates is more challenging than reducing high fertility.

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Heroes on Everest

With role in new Hollywood film, pilot-actor Vijay Lama’s life comes a full circle

At age 50, Vijay Lama feels his two careers are merging again. When he acted in his first Nepali movie, Adarsha Xaari, at the age of 17 he had the role of a pilot. From reel he went on to become a real-life airline pilot, flying Twin Otters to remote mountain airports, and later, Boeing 757s. Now, he has got the role of a rescue pilot in the new Hollywood film, Everest, based on the Jon Krakauer’s book, Into Thin Air.

When he was a boy, Vijay Lama used to tell his mother he wanted to be an actor in a Hollywood movie. It nearly happened with a major role in Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1993 film, Little Buddha, but it took another 20 years before he finally fulfilled his childhood dream. “I feel really humbled,” Lama told Nepal Times while filming on location at the Army Golf Course near the airport on Tuesday, “I am proud as a Nepali, and hope I can be an inspiration and a catalyst for young Nepalis everywhere.”

Directed by Baltasar Kormákur who made The Deep and Contraband, and starring movie stars Jake Gyllenhaal, Jason Clarke, John Hawkes and Josh Brolin, the film is based on the tragedy on Mt Everest in 1996 in which eight climbers died near the summit after a storm.

The story revolves around Beck Weathers, the American climber who miraculously survived two nights above 8,000m, and was rescued, together with a Taiwanese climber, by Nepali Army rescue pilot, Col Madan KC from Camp II. The risky rescue was the highest-ever helicopter landing in history at the time, and Col KC was commended for his confidence and flying skills.

Vijay Lama called up Madan KC recently for a pilot-to-pilot talk to understand exactly what was going through his mind 18 years ago when he decided to try once more after a failed first rescue. Col KC emptied his Eureka of all unnecessary equipment to make the aircraft lighter, and flew solo up the Khumbu Ice Fall. In Tuesday’s shoot, Vijay Lama plays Col KC as he is approached by a US Embassy diplomat and an expedition member on the golf course. He is asked if he can fly up to 6,500m on Mt Everest to rescue injured climbers. Lama delivers his line like the laconic aviator that he is: “I don’t know if it can or can’t be done. All I know is that it has never been done.”

This week, Lama and a group of 12 real-life Sherpas are off to Val Paradiso in Italy to do the outdoor part of the shoot in a make-believe Mt Everest. After that Lama will go to Pinewood Studios near London to film his role of the rescue inside a Eureka simulator.

Gyllenhaal is playing Scott Fischer, the American guide from Mountain Madness who died on Everest, while Jason Clarke plays Rob Hall, the New Zealand climber from Adventure Consultants who made the poignant last phone call from the South Summit to his pregnant wife in New Zealand just before he died.

The part of Beck Weathers, who lost his right arm to frostbite, is played by Josh Brolin. This movie should not be confused with another feature film about George Mallory being released in 2014, which is also called Everest.

Vijay Lama is impressed by the professionalism of the cast and crew of Kormákur’s team in Kathmandu, and says Nepali filmmakers can learn a lot from them. Lama has convinced the director to have the cockpit conversation between Madan KC and his co-pilot to be in Nepali with subtitles, and Lama’s producer at Black & White, Ranjit Acharya, is working on the lines.

 Says Lama: “It is an honour to be honouring the true heroes of 1996, the pilot and the heroic Sherpas who risked their lives to save the lives of others.” Kunda Dixit

KATHMANDU

ON LOCATION: Capt Vijay Lama at the Nepal Army Golf Course (above) in Kathmandu on Tuesday preparing for the shoot of Everest. Lama with Josh Brolin (in black) and Martin Henderson.

ON LOCATION: Capt Vijay Lama at the Nepal Army Golf Course on Tuesday for the shoot of Everest. Lama with Josh Brolin (in black) and Martin Henderson.

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Other Unforgiving Places

Capt Vijay Lama

This New Year 2014

Get Big Gear Offer on purchase of Big Bikes

Honda

Unfortunately, this text does not appear to be related to the main content of the article. It seems to be a promotional offer for Honda motorcycles.
EVENTS

FRAME BY FRAME, a two-week workshop for photographers who want to take their digital photography to the next level, participants will work on aesthetics, ethics, editing, and digital workflow and produce stories on the issues of climate change, sustainable living, migration and themes related to the ongoing Climate+Change exhibition.

Rs 4,000 ex. VAT, 2 to 16 February, 2 to 6pm, Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal, learning@photoconclave.com.np, apply by 2pm, 28 January.

Easel work, learn the basics of painting landscapes in water colour. 25 January, seats limited, Park Gallery, Pichhola.

Climate+Change, an awe-inspiring educational science exhibition about climate change and Nepal’s Himalaya. Runs till April, Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal.

Of the young, listen to Anil Chitrakar and Chitrakar expand on entrepreneurship opportunities for engaging the youth. 9 February, 4pm, free entry, Nepal Bharat Library, New Road.

Salut, be one of over 150,000 students all over the world to learn French. Session starting on 27 January, Alliance Francaise Centre, Teku

Jai Ho, watch Bollywood’s favourite muscle-man Salman Khan send villains packing to hospital beds, with proceeds going to Bhaktapur Animal Welfare Society and Poor and Helpless Girls Home. 24 January, 6.30pm onwards, Kumar Cinema, Mall 2.

Trading paint, an exhibition of the work by artist Julian Parker-Bums. Runs to 21 February, 10am to 5pm, Image Art Gallery, Kothimohini Tol, Patan Darbar Area.

WOOF! if you think your dog’s the best, enter it into competition with all the other furbabies. Parallel Journeys, an exhibition of the works of artists Binod Pradhan, Sunila Bajacharya, and Asha Dangol. Runs till 8 February, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal.

Birdwatch, spot a bird that has migrated from Siberia to Kathmandu for the winter. 21 February, 7pm, Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park, 9841330576.

Art attack, revisit the highlights of the 2nd Kathmandu International Art Festival. 25 to 31 January, 10am to 4pm, Patan Museum, (01)4218048.

The public sphere, join an informal discussion with veteran Indian journalist Bharat Bhushan on ‘Media ethics and changing structure of media’. 24 January, 5pm, Hotel Annapurna, Darbar Marg, entry free of cost.

DINING

Sun Cafe & Bar

Jhamsikhel, Lalitpur
01-5013574

The Human Touch

As Nepal’s most-recognized printing facility, Jaipal Kishor Prasad is known for its state-of-the-art equipment. But we never forget the human touch.
Learn more about the culture of the land of the rising sun at the Japanese Film Festival.

24 January
3pm, Always sunset on third street, dir. Takashi Yamazaki, 142”
25 January
11am, Brave story, dir. Koichi Chigira, 111”, 1.15pm, Waterboys, dir. Shinobu Yaguchi, 91”, 3pm, A midsummer’s Okinawa dream, dir. Nakae Yuji, 105”
26 January
11am, Rail truck, dir. Hirofumi Kawaguchi, 116”, 1.15pm, The chef of south polar, dir. Shuichi Okita, 125”, 3.30pm, Ballad, dir. Takashi Yamazaki, 132”
1 February
11am, Chibimaruko-chan, 94”, 12.45am, Three for the road, dir. Hideyuki Hirayama, 108”, 2.45pm, Osaka hamlet, dir. Fujiro Mitsuishi, 107”

Japanese Film Festival
24 to 26 January, Rastriya Nachghar, Kathmandu
1 February, Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Pokhara
(01)4426680, np.emb-japan.go.jp

Noodling

Feel like you could do a better job than most of Nepal’s graphic designers? Well, here’s a chance to stake your claim among contemporaries in the first ever annual graphics art competition. Submissions may be in one of the following categories: graphic design, hand lettering and/or typography, poster art, comic art, illustrations, collage, and altered photographs. Judging the competition will be Nepali designers Sahara Shrestha and Prachin Siddhi, British designer Sam Hodges and American illustrator Gabriella Cetrulo. Selected submissions will be exhibited and the winners will get up to Rs 25,000 in cash.

Send your entries by 20 February to

events@thecitymuseum.org

Meltdown

The ongoing Climate+Change exhibition brings exciting programmes this week:
25 January, animals of the Hindu Kush region, workshop for children to learn about and create, from junk, toys of wild animals.
26 January, journalist Kunda Dist gives a guided tour of the entire exhibition to print, radio, and tv journalists from Nepal to link them to scientists and experts.
26 January, 3 to 5pm, Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal.
27 January, a talk by Bernard Amade, a professor of civil engineering at the University of Colorado, about engineering for the ’other 90 per cent’.

Entry and participation are free of charge.

Climate+Change
Runs till April, Nepal Art Council
9849519933, nischal@photocircle.com.np

There are more articles in this issue...
After he received the USA-Nepal Humanitarian award from Ambassador Peter W Bodde in front of a packed Ashok Hall in Patan on 10 January, Dayaram Maharjan went to the back of the auditorium and sat with his students so that they could collectively partake in the celebrations.

"I am happy that the award has encouraged more people to visit the school and support us," said the 49-year-old, who teaches children with physical and mental disabilities at Adarsha Shaulah Yuwak Higher Secondary School in Bungmati.

Maharjan along with Dhurba Bahadur Raut, Hari Man Shrestha, Uttam Sanjel, Rotaract Club of Dharan, and Chunumunu Publications were recognised for their perseverance and significant contribution in the fields of health, education, and youth leadership.

In a country where disability is seen as a curse and schools have no resources to work with them, Dayaram has helped integrate hundreds of handicapped students into mainstream school environment. He started out 24 years ago when he saw a blind student at Adarsha struggling in class, because the teachers were not equipped to teach visually handicapped children.

Maharjan learnt braille and then painstakingly translated textbooks, word for word, so that the visually impaired could study alongside their peers. When deaf children were admitted into the school, he started learning sign language too.

Having been abandoned by their families because of their handicap, many of the children that Maharjan taught had nowhere to call home. So in 1997, he established the Disabled Services Association, a hostel adjacent to the school, which now houses more than 40 children. Besides quality education and art and music classes, the school also provides vocational training in basket-weaving, coffee making, and massage therapy, so students can earn a living for themselves and become self-reliant.

But Maharjan admits his work is far from over. As the number of children that he takes in is always increasing, the living quarters are getting rather crowded. With the savings and donations he has accumulated over the years, the teacher is currently building a new hostel that is going to be completely disabled friendly.

Through all these years, Maharjan has refused to let society’s prejudice against children with disabilities define them, hoping that his school will change the prevalent mindset. "Earlier people would look at our students and call them unlucky. Now they see the children living and working as equal and active members of society and their attitude is slowly improving," he says.

Dayaram Maharjan can be contacted at 9841490490.

HARIZ BAHARUDIN and TOH EE MING

A teacher helps integrate hundreds of handicapped students back into the community.
UTMOST IMPORTANCE:
In addition to vocational lessons, children at Adarsha Shaulah Yuwak Higher Secondary School in Bungmati, also receive regular education with the help of braille books that their teacher, Dayaram Maharjan, makes himself.

Currently, the children live in three different buildings, moving from one to another has been a safety concern. There are plans to build a new residence and equip it with proper facilities for disabled children. Maharjan does a sound check on a newly donated computer, which is installed with special software to help the visually-impaired students.

STRONGER NOW:
Gyaltsen Lama was brought to Maharjan at the age of two with a severe case of cerebral palsy. Now, with therapy, Gyaltsen’s limbs have grown stronger and he communicates through gestures.

WORD FOR WORD:
Maharjan translates textbooks into braille with the help of a machine, one word at a time, so that visually impaired children in his school can study together with their peers.

FULL-TIME JOB:
Maharjan enjoys reading to the children at school. He also conducts classes on his own whenever time permits.
The awards season has started again and with it come the real contenders, those heavy weight films that are built to win that ultimate golden statue. This year has been a disappointing year for me personally. Up to now, I still hadn’t seen anything that I thought was exceptional, that one film that I could root for and that might persuade me to watch a certain deathly boring three-hour long ceremony. I will certainly try to review all of the nine nominees this year, but I will say that aside from Alfonso Cuaron’s Gravity (reviewed earlier) which I very much admired, I cannot think that any of them will compare, at least in my mind, with Spike Jonze’s latest film – the sublime Her.

I will certainly try to review all of the nine nominees this year, but I will say that aside from Alfonso Cuaron’s Gravity (reviewed earlier) which I very much admired, I cannot think that any of them will compare, at least in my mind, with Spike Jonze’s latest film – the sublime Her starring Joaquin Phoenix as the lovable, fumbling Theodore Twombly who falls in love with his operating system called Samantha (played beautifully by the voice of Scarlett Johansson). Jonze started his career directing gimmicky music videos for people like the Beastie Boys, but it was 2009’s adaptation of Where The Wild Things Are – Maurice Sendak’s beloved children’s book that made us all sit up and notice. Here was a new voice worth listening too, possibly not fully formed, but beautifully sensitive and with a kooky but finely attuned imagination.

With Her Jonze has very much come into his own, writing and directing a film that is both hilarious and heartbreaking – a film about human loneliness, our growing relationship with the now ubiquitous and encroaching smart technologies, and about our deepest and sometimes our darkest desires.
Jhamsikhel in hopes of washing friends, this writer visited the specialises in its cuisine, than to hear of a restaurant that straight after graduating from school in Nepal, Maskey left for the United States in 1999 where he was to complete his under graduate, masters, and finally a PhD degree from Columbia University, New York in 2008. He has worked for IBM as part of Tramtech, a team chosen by the US government to develop a speech synthesiser which can recognise, translate, and respond to languages like Pashto, Dari, and Arabic. “The instrument was greatly beneficial to the Americans during their occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan,” recalls Maskey. After years of studying and working abroad, the 33-year-old researcher wanted to start a project that could benefit his home country. In 2013, Maskey opened a company called Fuse Machines that would produce, market, and sell conversation systems. The software he is currently developing allows people to text or web-chat a company with a query or complaint and the system will respond with an answer or solution straight away. “Think of it like a cross between Apple’s Siri and IBM’s Watson,” explains the native of Thamel, “the software completely eradicates human effort.”

In laymen’s term, data analysts from Fuse Machines and analysts from their respective clients exchange information based on what kind of services and complaints individual consumers demand of them. This data is catalogued in the system, so when a customer asks a question from within this inventory in any language, the software is able to give the answer. If a consumer asks a question the system does not have the answer to, within 24 hours with the help of an analyst, it will find the solution and retain the answer for next time. The computer science professor at Columbia has spent the better part of last year training 20 almost or recently graduated business and commerce students from around Kathmandu in order to replicate his software.

But Dr Sameer Maskey says just that. In true Singaporean fashion, this medium-sized eatery doesn’t concern itself with fancy frills. This medium-sized eatery doesn’t concern itself with fancy frills. “Think of it like a cross between Apple’s Siri and IBM’s Watson,” explains the native of Thamel, “the software completely eradicates human effort.”

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In a country where the most successful companies do not have adequate face-to-face customer service centres, Maskey is hopeful that his conversation systems based on web chats and artificial intelligence will take off and improve the way organisations handle queries and complaints. “If a while technology does leapfrog in Nepal, here’s hoping this is one of those times,” says the professor. Although this popular Magh Bidi

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here is perhaps no sweeter note to the ears of a homedick Singaporean than to hear of a restaurant that specialises in its cuisine, thousand miles away from home. After multiple recommendations from friends, this writer visited the popular Sing-Ma Food Court in Jhamsikhel in hopes of tasting some of the blues away. In true Singaporean fashion, this medium-sized eatery doesn’t concern itself with fancy frills. The interior is clean and simply furnished and seats a dozen tables, most of which were occupied even after lunch hours on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Our first order, the chicken tom yum gai (Rs 310), was quick to arrive, its aroma setting the tone gastronomically. The piping hot tom yum had just the right blend of coconut milk and lemongrass to give its characteristic tangy spiciness. The portion of mushrooms and chewy chicken chunks just enough to whet up an appetite. For a dish that’s featured in the best-selling menu, the hokkien mee (Rs 190) was a huge letdown though. Drowned clumsily in thick, brown gravy, the noodles didn’t appeal to the eyes. The chewy prawns and stir-fried vegetables that seemed meagerly thrown in did little to salvage the overpowering taste of dark soya sauce thus failing to impress the taste buds too. Ingrained like shiitake, fish cake slices, and bean sprouts, which made generous appearances in the noodles back home was dearly missed. We had a similar lack with the majo tofu (Rs 230), which lacked the usual zing and spiciness that one comes to expect of this Sichuan favourite. As I and a fellow Singaporean sat contemplating whether the restaurant really deserved to boast about serving authentic Singaporean-Malay cuisine, in came the nasi lemak set with chicken rendang (Rs 430), with succulent chicken pieces cooked in a delicious curry and accompanied with a bowl of fluffy basmati rice. I, finally felt I was home. The sides, which included a fried egg, cucumbers, and ikan bilis (fried anchovies), crisp to perfection made this the dish of the day. Our mixed luck continued with our order of desserts. Tau huay (Rs 115), a soy based bean curd that is renowned for its silky texture was grainy at Sing-Ma’s and simply refused to melt away. But we ended our lunch on a right note with the gorenji pinang (Rs 140). These banana fritters, which came in a plate of four, were deep fried to a rich golden brown and tasted sunnily delicious. Although this popular eatery failed to live up to its expectations, I know I will be returning to Sing-Ma because one. I have yet to taste its signature cheeeseke, which patrons swear by, and two, it did satisfy my hunger for a taste of home, albeit in the smallest of way.

Toh Le Ming

www.singmafoodcourt.com

How to get there: past the fire engine station on Jhamsikhel’s Restaurant Lane, opposite New Orleans.
A question that is frequently asked to doctors during medical exams is: which one preventive intervention leads to the largest average increase in life expectancy in a target population?

a) A regular exercise program
b) Quit smoking
c) Mammogram (breast cancer prevention screening) for women
d) Pap smear (cervical cancer prevention screening) for women
e) Prostate gland cancer screening for men

The answer is B. For a targeted population, more than all the other choices listed above, quitting smoking will add three to five years. Regular exercise program will add one to two years and the rest will each add a couple of months. This question illustrates the importance of quitting cigarettes and exercising. Does this mean that options C, D, and E are not worth pursuing? Possibly not. Predicted increases in life expectancy are average numbers that apply to populations and not individuals. For example, mammograms may increase the overall life expectancy by only two to three months, but for an individual at risk of breast cancer (patients with a family history of breast cancer, smoking etc), the screening may add many years by detecting the disease earlier. This holds true for those at risk of cervical and prostate cancer too.

Importantly, many of us do not know if we are at risk for common diseases because they may not be obvious, like family history. So while carrying out recommended screening tests like the ones in the question above, it is important to assume that we are average Joes (or Ram Bahadurs and Sita Devis if you wish) who may be at risk.

In a country like Nepal where day to day existence is so difficult for so many people, it may be hard to understand the concept of ‘wellness’, which the above medical question evokes. But this idea of wellness is in our interest because prevention is better than cure. And crucially, care is more expensive. Therefore, not only quitting smoking and exercise, but tests like breast and cervical cancer screening may help a great deal in promoting wellness. So raising awareness about the importance of some screening tests (not all) in the community is a very good public health practice.

And for those looking to quit smoking, there is another reason to do so right away: smoking ages you prematurely. A study published in the *Journal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons* in January this year corroborates this statement.

For the study, 79 pairs of adult identical twins were categorized in three groups: a group in which one was a smoker and the other a non-smoker; another group consisted of pairs in which both were smokers; a third group consisted of pairs of smokers with at least five years difference in the duration of their smoking. The researchers photographed them and had an independent panel of judges, who were oblivious to the smoking history of the individuals, rate the pictures which were arranged side by side.

The rating was done on the basis of elements like wrinkles, crow’s feet, jowls, bags under the eyes, creases around the nose, and lines around the lips and other general appearance of skin aging. It was important to ‘control’ for other confounding or misleading factors such as stress at work, alcohol consumption which could be involved for premature skin aging. Indeed, the differences between the twins regarding these confounding factors were found to be insignificant.

Amazingly, the panel’s decision on which twin looked older completely matched their smoking histories; that is, the longer you smoked the worse you looked. So clearly smoking affects not only your longevity, but also how you look while you live.

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“Live long, look good”

*Dr. Shivanand, Ministry of Health*

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**Time to play**

Having defined and subsequently dominated the console gaming industry with the PS3, PS2, and PS3, Sony unleashed the latest iteration of its popular PlayStation consoles, the PS4, in November last year. While console and PC gaming have always drawn the more serious gamers amongst us, the convenience of mobile gaming has seen a large demographic lean more towards casual gaming on mobile devices. However, with the PS4, console gaming is back with a big bang.

Straight out of the box, the PS4 looks the part, while packing a lot of power under the hood. Black with sharp, angular edges and a blend of matte and high-gloss plastic, it truly appears next-gen. Also included in the box are a power cable, a game controller, a micro-USB charger cable, a HDMI cable, and a mono earphone. The PS4 runs on a x86-64 AMD Jaguar right-core chip CPU, with graphics powered by a 1.8 Tflops AMD Radeon engine, and is backed up by 8GB of DDR5 RAM, which might seem like incoherent technical jargon, but suffice it to say, the PS4’s specs are in line with a mid-to-high end gaming PC.

All those specs allow for a visually striking user interface which is quick, smooth and simple to navigate around. The real fun starts when you boot up your first PS4 game. All devices now ship with 500GB of on-board storage, which will be utilised mainly to store game data. All games now require a one-time installation, whilst an addition hassle to gamers, is forgivable as this installation allows for quicker game loading times.

Post installation, the games looks stunning, the Helghast city in Killzone: Shadowfall looks enormous, the Nisu Camp stadium in FIFA14 feels positively gigantic, with stunning detail which has to be seen to be believed. The PS4’s controller, the Dualshock 4, has also been tweaked from the Dualshock 3, for the better, which allows for easier controls and comfortable gameplay. The built-in audio speaker and the headset jack on the controller now make for more immersive gameplay, with particularly the option to plug in headphones for game audio proving to be quite handy, especially during night-gaming.

Selling for around $500 in the US, the PS4 console is grossly overpriced in the Nepali market at Rs 70,000. Local gamers, it’s time to bundle your aafno maanche in bidesh.

Yantrick’s verdict: The PS4 makes a strong case in favour of console gaming and is a machine excellently backed up by great specs, killer graphics, and with the gaming library set to expand in the coming months, Sony’s console is set to be the home of gaming once again.

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**GIZMO by YANTRICK**

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**“I recommend Sensodyne for all day every day sensitivity protection.”**

-Dr. Spiro Condos, dentist practicing in the US

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Brush twice daily for continuous protection
Sensodyne is a registered trademark of GlaxoSmithKline Group of Companies.
EVEN as politics in Kathmandu looks to simmer down with the first session of the second Constituent Assembly convening on Wednesday, the Indian capital found itself in the grips of high drama this week. Delhi’s newly-elected Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) sat on dharna for 33 hours, protesting against the reluctance of the state police to raid a place allegedly running prostitute and drug rackets.

The uproar came at a time when heavy criticism is being leveled against top AAP leaders. The shrill denunciation of lawyer Prashant Bhushan for his remarks on Kashmir and then, subsequently, Delhi law minister Somnath Bharti for his alleged vigilantism, are illustrative of the pressure on the party to abandon concepts of the left and left-wing groups, as it disengages from their keenness to ensure that the mainstream consensus will trip and fall in wielding power. The Congress fears its state to have the people’s mandate.

The Left smugly lectures the AAP for not perceiving the link between corruption and neo-liberal economic policies, for not firing booming volleys against Modi. Kejriwal’s men believe he would echo, parrot-like, the mainstream consensus on security, but then quickly turned to cautioning Bhushan to speak contrary to his belief. This is what TV voices in primetime shows meant as they seemed inclined to echoing the main road of political rivals whose agenda would be to reduce the AAP to a poor imitation of them.

This is why the AAP will have to sharply portray its attributes about which have been taunting the AAP as a disparate group of secessionist sympathisers, closest communists opposed to the market, and misguided activists wishing to diminish the Indian state’s prestige. The BJP fears Kejriwal’s party could become a seductive alternative idea to its pitch on economic growth.

The Congress, until the Delhi shock, portrayed the AAP as a lightweight having the tenacity to fight in the heavyweight category. Now chastened, it hopes the AAP will gather itself to produce a badly hung Lok Sabha and check BJP’s rise, but wish to carry on in its current state to have the people’s mandate.

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Thus, the BJP projects the AAP as a disparate group of secessionist sympathisers, closest communists opposed to the market, and misguided activists wishing to diminish the Indian state’s prestige. The BJP fears Kejriwal’s party could become a seductive alternative idea to its pitch on economic growth.

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When Finance Minister Shankar Koirala presented the annual budget last July, he highlighted “projects of national pride” that he said would be the “lifeline for the economy”.

Besides hydropower and irrigation projects, he unveiled the East-West Electric Railway and the Tarai Hulaki Highway. No one would argue against more efficient mass transit along the Tarai, but the proposed route of the two projects cut through Chitwan National Park, threatening tourism and decades of conservation that has rescued the tiger and rhino from the brink of extinction.

On paper, the idea of upgrading the East-West Highway completed 30 years ago makes sense, since more than half the country’s population now lives in the Tarai and the plains provide easier connectivity than the mountains.

All proposed alignments of the new railway, however, would slice through the sanctuary. Chitwan Valley lies in the Inner Tarai and unlike other parts of southern Nepal, does not have plains bordering India to its south. The national park and its buffer zones therefore lie astride the proposed railroad alignments.

“What will remain of the national park when we have trains passing across the protected areas in 10 years?” rues Chief Warden Kamal Jung Kunwar of Chitwan National Park.

A feasibility study prepared in 2000 for the East-West Railway first took the tracks along the foot of the Someswor Hills near the famous Tiger Tops Resort in Meghauli. But that region is an important corridor for wildlife migration and the national park objected to it, proposing that the railway alignment follow the current Hetauda-Bharatpur road which skirts the park.

“There is no rationale for building a road or railway through one of the world’s most outstanding and successfully operating national parks,” says Hemanta Mishra, Nepal’s foremost tiger and rhino conservationist and architect of the Chitwan National Park in 1973. “A railway line and a road through the park without a comprehensive environmental and social impact assessment would undo 40 years of investment by the government, private sector, and the local community.”

A leaked detailed project report (DPR) prepared by the Department of Railways and obtained by Nepali Times shows various routes have been proposed, all of which cut through the sanctuary (see online). One of the routes involves digging two tunnels 14km and 1km long, but has been abandoned because of...
Planned new east-west railroad and Hulaki highway threaten the Chitwan National Park

The balancing act

Jhamak Karki, former chief warden of Chitwan National Park, was labelled ‘anti-development’ when he protested the construction of the bridge connecting Ghailaghari and Kasara in 2001. Two years later, the Rapti River flooded the bordering Jagatpur VDC killing nine and destroying 16km of canal, 180 metres embankment transmission line, and 18km of National Park fencing.

“If it wasn’t for the short-sightedness of the planners, people wouldn’t have lost their lives. The bridge should have been built five kilometres downstream,” explains Karki. “The state cannot afford to neglect the well-being of local communities and the environment when building infrastructure.”

Ramita Chaoudhary (pic, above) of Ghailaghari is among the hundreds who lost their land and property in the 2003 disaster. “The river destroyed everything and I lived at make-shift tents after the flood,” she says. “It took me more than year to build a new house.”

The current chief warden of the park, Kamal Jung Kunwar, now worries that bridges being built for roads and railways might overlook social costs in the name of reducing construction costs and there might be a repeat of the Ghailaghari tragedy.

Passing the buck

It is not just the prospect of trains roaring through the Chitwan National Park that is giving conservationists nightmares, it is the construction of feeder roads that will soon criss-cross the sanctuary in eight locations (see map). The Ministry of Infrastructure Development awarded a contract for a bridge across the Narayani inside the reserve for the road, but after the park objected, the bridge was shifted further upstream.

“Upgrading the feeder roads around Chitwan and Narayani River will cut through the national park and the government is trying to circumvent the Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environment Assessment despite our constant reminders,” says Chief Warden Kamal Jung Kunwar.

The Hulaki Road network is an Indian-assisted project launched in 2006 and entails upgrading old postal and feeder roads, totalling over 1,456km across the Terai. The Rail India Technical and Economic Services (RITES) is involved in the Rs 11 billion project that is designed to improve connectivity in the Terai.

Project chief Bijendra Bade Shrestha insists that the proposed route of the feeder roads in Chitwan National Park can be changed based on an Environment Impact Assessment. Shrestha says his office has asked the park to conduct the study, while Kunwar says he has received no such request.

people visited the national park in 2013, bringing in reverse of over Rs 177 million in entry fees alone.

Director General of the Department of Railways Rameswar Man Singh, however, says it is too early to say with certainty if the railway will go through the park. “We still haven’t prepared a final report and we will recommend the contractor to take all precautions to make sure the national park is not disturbed.”

The department doesn’t seem to want to follow the exiting East-West Highway because it will add about 30km to the length and prefers a shortcut through the park. If that happens, the question will be which route would be the least harmful to the reserve. In the future, Bharatpur will be a strategic hub for not just east-west transportation, but also the shortest rail connection between Uttar Pradesh in India and Kerung in Tibet. Already five km of railtrack has been commissioned westward from Simara and the department is requisitioning land along the proposed route and five border links to Indian railways.

Some conservationists think a railway cutting through Chitwan is inevitable and are proposing underpasses for bridges being built for roads and railways might overlook social costs in the name of reducing construction costs and there might be a repeat of the Ghailaghari tragedy.

Eco-tourism activists are also worried about the potential impact of a reduction of wildlife and drop in visitor numbers to Chitwan. More than 150,000

cost. The report most favours an alignment that will take the railway south along the Madi to Jagatpur track, across the Narayani in Amapur, then south-west across the Chure Hills to Tribeni (see map, left).

Chief Warden Kunwar doesn’t understand why the railway has to go through the park at all when it could easily follow the existing East-West Highway. He says the impact of the road and railway would be what has been seen on the Tikauli jungle corridor where traffic has seriously disturbed wildlife. “If we cut the national park into pieces with road and rail, it will discourage animals from breeding and reduce the number of tigers and rhinos,” he says.

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From The Nepali Press
24 - 30 January 2014 Issue

Try, try again

Editorials in three mainstream Nepali dailies about the new Constituent Assembly

Kantipur, 22 January

More than 80 percent of the members in the new CA are newly elected, and this has given the assembly new energy. However, the political parties that govern them are the same. Hence, the parties should learn a lesson or two from the past and not make the same mistakes again. This time, they can’t use any excuse to delay the writing of a new constitution. Their commitment to write a new constitution within a year should not be construed to just being a slogan.

There has been a fundamental shift in the composition of the new CA; however, it is still dominated by the three main parties: NC, UML and the Maniast. Therefore, it should be difficult to continue with the existing work on the constitution. However, the RPP-N has emerged as a new party and its views have to be taken into account to work on the basis of a two-thirds majority.

Even though the fist CA was unsuccessful, it had some positive accomplishments which need to be built upon. The issues that were agreed upon can form the basis of its work, and there has been enough debate on issues like federalism, status-quoist parties and other issues. The new CA has the opportunity to learn lessons from the past and incorporate views based on the new mandate after the elections to come up with a long-term document.

If they fail again, they must know that the voters will not forgive them and reactionary powers can stage a comeback.

Annapurna Post, 22 January

Nepal has the dubious distinction of being the only country in world history that has conducted two elections to form a Constituent Assembly. The House is meeting two months after the election results were announced. The first as its first epoch-making decision voted to turn the country into a republic, but that CA itself was unfortunately dissolved. This time, there wasn’t even an agenda for the first day of the CA meeting on Wednesday.

Despite all this, the pronouncements of the new members have been positive, and the political parties can also learn a lot from the experience of the past. They have also got a message from enthusiastic voters to work for peace, constitution and progress. They have a lot of doubts about whether these will be fulfilled because of past behaviour. The public is now aware and alert, they can’t be fooled all the time anymore.

NA, 22 January

Although the CA that is meeting two months after the election results has tenure of four years, it is supposed to finish writing the constitution in a year. After the first year the CA will serve as a parliament. There are plenty of reasons to doubt whether the CA will be successful in finishing the constitution in one year, but if they fail again the people will not forgive them. And if the elected members can’t write a democratic constitution, they can’t dismiss the possibility of the rise of dictatorship.

The main obstacle to a democratic constitution is the disagreement over the kind of federalism. The reality is that no one part of the country is dominated by any one ethnic group or caste. This is why there is no basis for carving the country up along ethnic lines. While demarcating federal units, it’s not to let that be the basis for future conflict. The other two obstacles are state structure and election process. The Proportional Representation provision, though well-intentioned has been misused in this CA, and in future could be used by autocratic leaders. There are good and bad examples of parliamentary and presidential systems around the world. The members have to decide what is best for Nepal and under Nepali conditions.

Connecting people

Interview with Anupjan Dhakal, the newly appointed Managing Director at Nepal Telecom, Himal Khabarpatrika, 19 January

What do you plan to achieve during your term as the Managing Director?

We will focus our attention towards expanding mobile internet. We want to improve the quality of our network and tie up with handset companies to make smartphones accessible to more users.

Why hasn’t Nepal Telecom’s quality improved over the years?

We have formed committees to look into the quality improvement of GSM mobile service. People in Kathmandu will notice a significant improvement in our network’s quality within a month.

Is it true that Nepal Telecom is incurring heavy losses like other government owned enterprises?

Nepal Telecom is a brand recognised across Nepal. I will tap into its brand name to make the company stronger. The only path now for us is to move forward.

Why hasn’t Nepal Telecom brought about aggressive expansion strategies and new programs for its long term benefit?

We are a government enterprise so bringing new services takes longer time through the public procurement. By the time we introduce a new service, the technology is too old for the users. We are working with Public Procurement Monitoring Office to ease the process so we can introduce our new services faster. 3G internet will be expanded across different districts and home-to-home technology for those who want higher internet bandwidth will soon be made available.

In retrospect

UCP(N)P) Chair Puspa Kamal Dahal’s speech to party members, Nepal, 19 January

The results of the second CA election may have been unprecedented for our party, but this is a result of both internal weaknesses and shortcomings of external elements. Even though conspiracies, irregularities and downfall fraught characterised this year’s elections, it is important also to reflect where we as a party went wrong. I have prepared this draft with the hope of correcting past mistakes and for a historical rebulding of our party.

External reasons for our loss

• Long-standing status-quest pro-monarchy forces became prevalent after the change of government and brought about by the Peoples’ War and the 1956 historical uprising
• Many of our own supporters were denied the right to vote because their names were removed from the voters’ list
• Since the 2006 uprising, many of our rural supporters have gone abroad
• Anti-change media tempered with our messages of identity and federalism thus undermining the people of our true agendas
• Our party’s split divided our own supporters against each other, and other opposition parties like NC and UML took this opportunity to buy votes in bulk
• Because the last CA failed to draft a constitution, people paid more attention to candidates promoting development plans
• Surprising and unlimited spending by parties
• Widespread vote fraud

Internal reasons

• We were the largest party, but still the people never warmed to our ideals
• We couldn’t take a stand regarding who should lead an electoral government and we made a suicidal move by trusting the bureaucracy by overlooking its conservatism
• Internal squabbles made both our government and party ineffective

Weekly buzz poll

In weekly polls conducted with the support of The Asia Foundation, Himal Khabarpatrika asks 361 respondents in 12 cities across Nepal every Monday for their opinion on contemporary issues. This week’s question was on the politics and state restructuring.

Who do you think should lead the government?

Sushil Koirala 9.6%
Ram Charan Paudel 8.9%
Don’t know 11.9%
Ram Bahadur Thapa 8.6%
Others 1.3%

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Basanta Pratap Singh,
Annapurna Post, 28 January

If government records are to be believed, 21 VDCs of the remote hill district of Bajhang in western Nepal boast near 100 per cent literacy. And district education officer, Jagannath Upadhyay, claims the remaining 26 VDCs will become fully literate within a year.

Volunteers and monitors, however, are skeptical about the scope and effectiveness of the literacy drives. More than Rs 80 million – from state coffers and donor agencies – has been splurged on the campaign in Bajhang so far, out of which nearly Rs 30 million was spent in the past two years alone. For the fiscal year 2012/13, the District Education Office’s (DEO) report states Rs 1.56 million was spent on training 793 volunteers and 45 inspectors, an additional Rs 6 million was earmarked as ‘volunteer encouragement allowance’. Rs 750,000 was used for inspecting classes, Rs 2 million on stationery, and Rs 1.8 million on transportation and textbooks.

For a person to be considered literate, she must be able to read and write short and simple sentences in Nepali, perform simple mathematical calculations, and know how to use the internet and cell phones. However, almost all the villagers we talked to, were infuriated when they found out what was going on behind their backs. Leave alone operating mobiles, they say they cannot even sign their own names and have to still rely on fingerprints.

According to official documents, 555 women and 236 men participated in adult literacy classes in Bajhang in the previous fiscal year. But long time resident, Birma Devi Kami, says she has never heard about such classes. Another local, Khiri Khadka, said: “We are illiterate, not ignorant. We know that officials are lying about the literacy campaign and siphoning off money in the name. Both their names are listed in the ‘literate’ roster.”

Similarly, the DEO report from Hemantawada VDC shows 871 individuals were taught to read and write last year for which 56 female volunteer teachers were mobilised. The village is considered ‘100 per cent literate’. However, resident Parvati Giri claims most volunteers did not even conduct a single class.

Speaking anonymously, a volunteer admitted that she has been receiving a stipend without teaching for the last three years. “Everybody does the same, so why should I bother?” she added without hesitation. Most of the textbooks that she was given to distribute to students have either been sold or have piled up in a corner of her house.

Other teachers argue that locals are simply not interested in learning. Pushpa Jetha, a volunteer in Kailash-9, says she waited fruitlessly for two weeks before cancelling classes. Sharmila Singh, a volunteer from Kailash-7, claimed she went door-to-door asking people to join the literacy class, but all of them turned her down. “Villagers told me they had no time for lessons because they had to work and some even said there is no point in learning to read and write. I lost my enthusiasm after a week,” states Singh.

In Kailash, another VDC listed as fully literate, 635 participants are shown to have attended classes conducted by 43 volunteers. But according to former head of Kailash, Surat Bahadur Singh, while a few women took classes, most locals are still illiterate. District education officer Upadhyay, on the other hand, says it does not matter if ‘a few locals’ did not participate. “It is internationally established that a VDC with 95 per cent literacy is fully literate,” he claims.

The literacy campaigns are being conducted through various high schools, community learning centres, and NGOs in the district. These institutions were supposed to provide five-day orientation to their volunteer teachers, but cut short the training to only two days. Volunteers and inspectors complain that they got less than their promised salary, but no one lodged a formal complaint because they had been found short of performing their duties as well. “What do we protest against when we have been pocketing money for work we have not been doing,” says one, grinning.

None of the schools have completed the full duration of the program: one hour classes daily for three months. Most wrapped up lessons up within 15 days and pocketed rest of the budget.

The monitoring mechanism of the program required inspectors to fill up evaluation forms for each centre before the District Education Office could disburse the stipends. Volunteers too had to submit similar forms for their students. However, the DEO violated the guidelines and as a result, millions were embezzled.

The government has allocated nearly Rs 20 million for literacy campaigns in Bajhang this year, targeting 28,317 women and 6,285 men in 26 VDCs. The same 26 organisations have been assigned the task.

Translated by Centre for Investigative Journalism nepalitimes.com

For longer version
The reason the CIAA has such a difficult time controlling graft and corruption in Nepal is not, as you might expect, because it has a soft spot for beetle nuts. The real reason is linguistic and religious. In Nepal we don’t eat to live, we live to eat. We also love to eat. In this country, we will eat anything that moves, even if it not strictly fit for human consumption.

The crux of the biscuit is the verb in Nepali for ‘eat’ (‘khanu’), which is used for a lot more than ingesting dal bhat and tarkari. We don’t smoke cigarettes, for example, we eat them (‘churot khanu’). Beer is a liquid, but we never drink it, we eat it (‘beer khanu’). We don’t shoot the breeze, we eat it (‘hawa khanu’). When Nepalis greet you with “Khanu bho?” they don’t really want a detailed listing of your lunch in the order that you ate it, they are just saying “How’s it hangin, bro?” or words to that effect. When students fail their SLC, believe it or not they have to eat their report cards (‘fail khayo’). The great thing about kissing someone in Nepali is that you can also get to eat that person (‘moi khanu’).

And when they got elected to power, the Maobadis came to be known as ‘Khaobadis’ because they ate up other people’s money. On Tuesday, the new Constituent Assembly members didn’t take their oaths of office, they ate them (‘sapat khanu’). Which is why, to cut a long story short, here in Nepal, we don’t take bribes, we eat them (‘ghoos khanu’). Which is why, to cut a long story short, here in Nepal, we don’t take bribes, we eat them (‘ghoos khanu’). When they got elected to power, the Maobadis came to be known as ‘Khaobadis’ because they ate up other people’s money. On Tuesday, the new Constituent Assembly members didn’t take their oaths of office, they ate them (‘sapat khanu’). Which is why, to cut a long story short, here in Nepal, we don’t take bribes, we eat them (‘ghoos khanu’). When they got elected to power, the Maobadis came to be known as ‘Khaobadis’ because they ate up other people’s money. On Tuesday, the new Constituent Assembly members didn’t take their oaths of office, they ate them (‘sapat khanu’). Which is why, to cut a long story short, here in Nepal, we don’t take bribes, we eat them (‘ghoos khanu’).