After turning out in huge numbers five months ago to vote in a new government and Assembly to write the constitution, the people are feeling left out. Just like the bystanders kept out of Tundikhel on Sunday (above) as VIPs watched the annual Nepal Army horse parade. Prime Minister Sushil Koirala faces flak for not making much headway in filling vacant positions in the government, the CA, the Supreme Court, constitutional bodies and in Nepal’s embassies abroad. The political will to act must come from the party leadership which needs to look beyond narrow partisan advantage to the long term national interest.
perhaps no prime minister in Nepal in recent memory has enjoyed a shorter honeymoon period than Sushil Koirala.

While no one doubts his integrity and sacrifice during decades of struggle for democracy, Koirala is coming under withering attack from inside and outside his party and this onslaught is reflected in prominent and scathing disapproval. They haven't been able to fulfill cabinet posts, nor has he added 28 nominated members to the Constituent Assembly. Constitutional bodies are still headless. We don't have ambassadors in member states to the Constituent Assembly. Constitutional half months since he assumed office, he hasn't even been able to sort the interdepartmental committee into a cabinet body. This is despite heading to one of the last meetings. I am thinking Dajo.

Dwivedi

Thank you Nepal Times for this wonderful tip sheet for destinations in Nepal, I have posted it on my travel website. I think I will start with Pashupati

McCallister

QUEEN'S ENGLISH

I seriously don't understand the logic behind teaching curriculum at school in a foreign language instead of mother tongue or a national language of a sovereign country ('Queen's English in a new republic', 'Teering Doker Gurung, #700). To develop ourselves in their own languages, Nepal needs better coaching to compete on the world stage. If you know English well, you may not really have to learn any other language to be successful this world.

Lal Thapa

There is no doubt that English is extremely important in the international arena. However, this does not mean that we stop respecting our mother tongue. In Nepal, the English medium schools fail to place equal importance on Nepal and children are taught their ABCs before xia, xha. It reflects a colonial mindset of our educationists, parents who think that learning to speak English is greater than the content of education.

Santosh Aryal

THE DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE

The benchmark of democracy should be performance, i.e., accountability and transparency in governance. ('The democratic imperative', Rubena Mahato, #700).

@swamiand

Democracy is not just about voting in elections but it has also to do with the structure inside parties and is concerned with the inclusiveness of political regime.

The democratic imperative

TO VOTE GO TO: www.nepalitimes.com

Weekly Internet Poll #701

UTERGENCY: NEED FOR A SENSE OF URGENCY

To say that the government is on autopilot would be inaccurate because that presumes it is on a pre-planned flight path.

There is an urgent need for a sense of urgency. To say that the government is on autopilot would be inaccurate because that presumes it is on a pre-planned flight path. Governance is suffering the absence of leadership at the top and there is confusion down the line. The recently agreed on Common Minimum Program between the coalition partners looks great on paper, but there is no indication anyone is actually following it.

In the longer term, the likelihood of the coalition actually being finished by December looks more and more doubtful by the day. There was some much-delayed forward movement in the past week with the setting up of the CA committees and good sense did prevail when the number of committees was reduced. Now we are all waiting with bated breath for the constitutional timetable. Things are moving with slightly more velocity than the first CA, but that is not say much.

Much of the paralysis is due to the members of the ruling coalition emulating the winner-takes-all mentality of the Maoists after the 2008 elections. At a time when the constitution is a clear priority, and time is running out, there needs to be a spirit of compromise and sacrifice. But those seem to be qualities that are in short supply in the top echelons of political power.

CA Chairman Subhas Newarw, gentleman that he is, has responded to criticism about his lack of assertiveness in the last CA by twisting some tails. But the political will to act must come from the leadership of the parties who, even at this late stage, need to look beyond narrow partisan advantage to the long term national interest.
As it ever becomes clearer that Narendra Modi will be the next prime minister of India, questions abound as to what the elevation of the Hindutva hawk will do to his country, and how it will impact on Nepal. On India, unless Modi unexpectedly turns benedictous upon entering 7 Race Course Road, one can expect a further build-up of societal acrimony as the high-caste, hard-line agenda defines discourse, governance and geopolitics.

A candidate's oratory and his war chest are bursting with patriotism and narco-corporatism. The RSS bandwagon. The Congress is adrift and open to ridicule, its Anointed's lacklustre performance and inability to effectively counter the BJP campaign. The competing parties seem unable to effectively counter the Modi bandwagon. The Congress is adrift and open to ridicule, its underbelly soft after a decade in power leading the UPA coalition. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's reticence contrasts with the fiery Prime Minister Mammon Singh's. It is better for Kathmandu to take its own decisions. Perhaps the RSS sledge hammer. Perhaps the polity to emerge capable of setting its own priorities and making its own decisions.

There are many ways a Modi administration could affect Nepal, from the cross-border capillaries to Singh Darbar and the Constituent Assembly. This is a country that has opened itself up so wide to external influence that one hopes Modi's plans do not require Nepal as a prop for any purpose. The idea of a Modi bandwagon could affect Nepal, from the cross-border capillaries to Singh Darbar and the Constituent Assembly. This is a country that has opened itself up so wide to external influence that one hopes Modi's plans do not require Nepal as a prop for any purpose.

As sometimes happens with radicals once they enter office, the responsibilities of governance may modulate Modi's activism. 

The Gujarat Chief Minister comes from so far to the right, however, and his mentor-organisation, the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is so keen to dig in that the move to the centre will take time, if it happens at all. His loyalty to the RSS seems total, as confirmed in a TV interview on Wednesday: “I learnt to work hard from the RSS... I owe it all to the RSS.”

PM Narendra Modi was a master tactician, but his resignation said to have an IT battalion that pounces on anyone who dares criticise 'NaMo'.

The RSS and Sangh Parivar are looking forward to a Modi win. The RSS and Sangh Parivar are looking forward to a Modi win. Many in Hindi-speaking northern India seem to be looking forward to a Modi win. The RSS and Sangh Parivar are looking forward to a Modi win.
Healthy makes wealthy
Making traveller’s health a priority could attract more tourists to Nepal

KARIZ BAHRUDDIN

I t has become a joke among tourists visiting Nepal that a stomach or chest infection is mandatory. No one has calculated the opportunity cost to Nepal’s tourism from poor water and air quality, but everyone agrees that it must be preventing a lot of people from visiting the country.

US Ambassador to Nepal, Peter Bode, told the second Nepal Travel and Tropical Medicine Conference in Kathmandu last month that health concerns are always at the back of the minds of tourists. “It is now not a question of what Nepal has to do, but what Nepal must do for the tourists coming here,” Bode said.

The conference, which was organised by CIWEC Clinic’s Travel Medical Centre, saw the participation of medical and tourism professionals. CIWEC says diarrhoea tops the long list of ailments that afflict tourists. One-third of all sick tourists suffer some form of stomach infection. Sixteen per cent of tourists suffer respiratory problems. The proportion of diarrhoea cases has been consistently high over the years, but CIWEC believes it can be lowered if proper measures are enforced.

“The high rates of diarrhoea have not changed in the 32 years...we can lower these rates by improving restaurant hygiene,” says CIWEC Medical Director Prativa Pandey, adding that this would involve proper training of staff and maintaining regular checks of restaurants.

This is a view echoed by David Schlim, who is president of the International Society of Travel Medicine: “Everyone thought if you don’t eat certain things you won’t get diarrhoea, but that is not the case. Around the world it has been confirmed that eating at unhygienic restaurants is the leading cause of diarrhoea. If we improve hygiene, people will eat here, they will remember they did not get sick, and they will return.”

Five per cent of all sick tourists are afflicted with Acute mountain sickness (AMS) which is also the main cause of death for trekkers and mountaineers. But AMS is preventable if there is awareness of symptoms and care during ascent.

Those who suffer from AMS climb too fast, not giving their bodies time to acclimatise. It is recommended that climbers stop for a day or two of rest every 700m, and sleep at lower altitudes whenever possible. CIWEC feels there is still not enough awareness about these preventive measures.

“Although quick helicopter rescues can be arranged these days, the number of deaths caused by altitude sickness hasn’t gone down,” says Pandey.

Nepal’s tourist numbers doubled in the past four years to 800,000, and is expected to cross 1 million in the coming years. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, total visitor numbers is expected to grow by nearly 9 per cent in 2014. Last year, tourism contributed Rs 145.3 billion to the GDP (8.2 per cent) and supported 1.12 million jobs. Investment in tourism in 2013 was Rs 14.8 billion and this is expected to rise by 3 per cent.

As the numbers go up, CIWEC says the health of visitors should be a number one priority. The Clinic is also worried about death and injury to tourists in highway and aircraft accidents as well as adventure sports like rafting and paragliding, and even rhino attacks in national parks. The number of paragliding companies has increased from one to 19 in the past ten years, and there have been two accidents in the past two months alone, one of them fatal.

Still Schlim remains optimistic: “Nepal is definitely a safe place to visit. The medical infrastructure we have here is excellent, and people are taken care of. What we need to do now is make travellers’ health a priority in tourism.”

Killer Clima #986
Trekkers Bring Medical Care to the Annapurnas, #193
Himalayan Health Hazards, #144

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Kadoorie in the land of Gurkhas

W hen one of Asia’s richest men whose family fortune came from electric power flew into Kathmandu in his own Gulfstream 3 executive jet last week, some thought he was here to invest in hydropower.

Sir Michael Kadoorie, 73, the descendant of Iraqi Jews who settled in Shanghai in the 19th century and set up China Light and Power Holdings Ltd, has a net worth of $9.5 billion and is on the Forbes list of the world’s biggest billionaires. His company provides 75 per cent of Hong Kong’s electricity in Hong Kong, and his family is involved in hotel chains across Asia and in Australia.

“I know Nepal first-hand and its infrastructure even after he died to provide power to 250 households. The charity is also involved in installing solar units in Dolpo, building foot bridges across Nepal, helping leprosy and burn patients.

The family’s involvement in Nepal began with Michael Kadoorie’s uncle, Horace, who had been involved with helping refugees from China in Hong Kong in 1949. A British Gurkha officer convinced the family that retiring soldiers needed help with agriculture back home in Nepal. What started out with Michael Kadoorie’s involvement with Gurkhas has now diversified into health, education and infrastructure even after he died in 1995.

“The joke in the family was that my father Lawrence earned money and my uncle Horace spent it,” Kadoorie says. “My uncle had a deep attachment to India ever since the 1960s,” Kadoorie said at a stopover during his whirlwind tour of Nepal last week, “I would love to feel that next time I come here, I may plunge into the pool.”

Kadoorie charitably through Kadoorie Charitable Foundation to support the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre near Banepa in 2008. Last week he inaugurated Phase 2 of the Centre for physiotherapy, occupational therapy and Nepal’s first hydrotherapy pool for patients undergoing rehabilitation (pic. above).

“I know from my own experience that rehabilitation needs a lot of passion that comes from the heart,” Kadoorie said, “and it was a facility like this in Nepal, especially the hydrotherapy, that enabled me to recover quickly.”

The Centre helps with long-term rehabilitation of spinaly injured patients, most of them women who have fallen from trees while collecting fodder. But there are an increasing number of patients who are injured in highway accidents.

After inaugurating the hydrotherapy pool that he helped support, Kadoorie’s parting quip was: “Next time I come here, I may plunge into the pool.”

Kunda Dixit
Crop diversification helps farmers deal with climate change and deters labour outmigration

NINA HOLMELIN
IN DOLAKHA

K
huwani, labrun, kerou and alachi might be all common ingredients in Nepali cooking, but until recently they have not been widely cultivated. But as midhill farmers grapple with erratic monsoons and uncertain markets, these crops are providing an alternative source of income.

Farmers in remote parts of Nepal grow a few vegetables for their own consumption, but with spreading roads, irrigation systems, seed distribution and training programs, they are diversifying to vegetables, spices and tree crops. As in Dolakha (pic, above), this has enhanced the adaptive capacity of farmers to deal with climate change and unpredictable markets for food and labour.

Sixty-six per cent of households in Nepal are still engaged in farming, mainly growing rice, wheat, maize and millet. However, as land fragmentation continues, most people are not able to fulfil their food and consumption needs. Many migrate for work to Kathmandu, Malaysia or West Asia. However, they do not earn as much as they were promised. The remittances they send back to Nepal are no doubt of crucial importance, but the price may be high.

Male outmigration is also increasing the workload for those who remain - the women and elderly. Food inflation and fluctuation in the last six years have put additional strain on subsistence households.

A pressing question is whether there is potential for value creation and increased productivity in rural Nepal, if more people choose to or have to return to agriculture. What are the options and the challenges for those who want to invest in local farming as an alternative to migration?

Here in Dolakha young people have started moving back to the countryside and are profiting from cultivating new crops like cardamom, tea, garlic, cauliflower, potatoes, peas, tomatoes, chilli peppers and ginger, alongside traditional food production. Some people are focusing on medicinal plants, such as the canker medicine Himalayan Yew (Lozithallia) or in honey production, while others are experimenting with kiwis, pears and oranges. The local bimiro, fruit with its sweet melon-like pulp and slight lemony flavour, is another potential cash crop.

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The poor in the Himalayan region have been forced to adapt to hardships, and water stress caused by global warming impacting on weather, with erratic rainfall patterns, frequent cloudbursts, delayed onset of monsoons. The report says there is already ‘a breakdown in food systems’. This is much more worrying than receding glaciers.

“We are not primarily responsible but are the victims of climate change,” says Sandeep Chamling Rai, international adaptation coordinator for the World Wildlife Fund.

Where water management is poor even at the best of times, this will impact on harvests. “Changes in rainfall pattern, temperature and extreme weather events will ripple through the entire food production and distribution system,” says water resource analyst Ajaya Dixit.

Nepal can adapt by giving subsistence farmers a choice of crops, (see adjoining article) testing dependence on rain-fed agriculture by investing in irrigation and creating new rural jobs in agro-processing to improve farmer incomes. The poor in the Himalayan region have been forced to adapt to hardships, and water stress caused by global warming is an added burden. Global warming is here and now, it is affecting the most vulnerable people, and it will get worse in the years to come, experts say.

Apocalypse here and now

The new report by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is much more pessimistic than most had expected. The Fifth Assessment Report of Working Group 2 was released in Yokohama this week and states that continued emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases are a clear and present danger, and not something that will happen in the future.

For the Himalaya, the report is a sobering reminder that global warming is not just about melting glaciers and mountains devoid of snow. Climate change is already impacting on weather, with erratic rainfall patterns, frequent cloudbursts, delayed onset of monsoons. The report says there is already a breakdown in food systems. This is much more worrying than receding glaciers.

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Change within, change without

ICIMOD’s multimedia exhibition has engaged a range of Nepalis, and may trigger the shifts in mindset needed to adapt to climate change

Over the years, Nepal has hosted any number of events related to climate change, hardly surprising considering we live in the shadow of the Himalaya, the ‘third pole’. Receding glaciers and Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) are only, if you’ll excuse the pun, the tip of the iceberg in this regard.

Many such events have been limited to publicity stunts: if turning the lights off for ‘Earth Hour’ in a nation chafing against power cuts is harmless enough, one can’t say the same for flying a cabinet of politicians to Everest Base Camp (and 600 delegates to Copenhagen) in the lead-up to climate negotiations. Climate change has never been cooler (or hotter, if you prefer), but few comprehend what exactly it means for Nepal, and what we should do about it.

The Integrated Centre for Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is well positioned to explain. It has been conducting scientific research in the eight countries of the Hindu Kush Himalaya for three decades, but more recently has concentrated on outreach to the communities that live in the Himalaya. The major multimedia exhibition Climate+Change could be seen as the culmination of this approach, and ICIMOD found worthy partners in the American Embassy, UNICEF, Thinc and photo. circle, among others.

The permanent exhibition, which opened at the Nepal Art Council in December, was impressively comprehensive. The ground floor introduced visitors to climate change in urban Nepal through text (in English and Nepali), photos, visuals and installations, the most striking of which were the plastic cubes sealing in found objects from the beleaguered Bagmati River – batteries, locks of hair, used condoms – which said as much about the recent history of our civilisation as our attitudes towards the environment. The first floor, in turn, focused on the importance of transboundary cooperation in addressing risks. But it was the top floor, with GlacierWorks’ sweeping Himalayan vistas interspersed with short profiles of mountain residents, including Everest summiter Apa Sherpa, which really brought home the reality of climate change in Nepal – a veritable Damocles’ Sword if there were one.

The genius of Climate+Change, however, has found expression in the wild variety of events it has hosted, from the ICIMOD Haat Bazaar featuring agro-products from across the Hindu Kush to treasure hunts and critical mass cycling events. Students in particular have been encouraged to visit and make use of the activity room (with free wif fi) on the ground floor, where they are not engaging in the Saturday workshops or attending screenings of Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth or the animation classic Fern Gully. A series of seminars, including on how Nepal’s tourism could adapt to climatic challenges, provided platforms for discussion. The ever-popular PechaKucha staged its latest edition on 23 February, with mini-presentations ranging from the hazards of medical waste to sustainable housing.

Finally, the temporary exhibits, including the eye-catching creations of SUS. TAIN.KTM, have highlighted the emotional impact of environmental issues. Zadie Smith notes that “there are hardly any intimate words” for climate change, so when Nepali artists expose their book and disgust at what is happening to their neighbourhoods, they take us with them: the first step to effecting positive change rather than submitting to it.

Sometimes the longevity of an exhibition is its worst enemy. But all good things come to an end, although the organisers’ outreach with the travelling Bookbus means it’s not just Kathmandu that has benefited from certain inconvenient truths. Climate+Change runs for another week, even as the valley begins to simmer for the summer. So what better time and place to make sense of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s latest, sobering findings? Nepali kukur

Climate+Change Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal, runs until April 13. www.climatepluschange.org

THE GREAT Drive

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The transporters, an exhibition of New York based artist Sahara Shrestha. Runs till 8 April, The City Museum, Darbar Marg

Film Lab, learn film history, storytelling, screenwriting, cinematography, editing, project handling and network with professionals. 12 April to 15 May, Docskool, Gaurighat, register at (01)4251335

Chopstix, savoury Asian food cooked in true Chinese fashion sure to charm and impress. Kumaripati, (01)5551118

Bandipur festival, spend this new year at Bandipur, a quaint old Nepali trading town and now a popular tourist destination. 12 to 16 April, 9am to 7pm, Bandipur, Tanahun, 9851046368

All that glitters, an exhibition of the art of British artist Annette Ashworth. 9 to 22 April, Classic Gallery, Pulchok, 9841224753

Kurakani, writers Sandhika Shrestha and Amar Neupane in conversation. 4 April, 4pm onwards, Nepal Bharat Library, New Road Gate, free entrance

Climate+change, the four and half month long exhibition on the changing environment in the Himalaya comes to an end next week, be sure to catch it if you haven’t been there yet. Runs until 13 April, Nepal Art Council Babarmahal

Boudha Stupa, don’t miss out on the Gyakok, authentic hot pot with dumplings, meat and vegetables. You can also choose from the many wood-fired pizzas or have a candle-lit dinner every full moon night. Boudha, (01)4485585

The Heritage, escape the hodgepodge of the tourist hub as you relish delights like paella and panna cotta. Thamel

Ghar-e-kabab, serving the best of north Indian cuisine, with live Sarod recitals on some days. Hotel Arnapurna, Darbar Marg

Lanhuwa, for the best of Nepali cuisine at great prices. Lakeside, Pokhara

Lal Durbar Restaurant, authentic Nepali dinner with cultural shows. Hotel Fali & Nai, Darbar Marg, (01)3424999, reservation@laldurbar.com

Capital Grill, the American style diner offers a large assortment of appetisers and entrees to suit everyone’s tastes. Bhaktalbazar

Dhokaima Cafe, exquisite ambience, friendly service, cozy bar, place to see and be seen at. Patan Dhoka

Czech castles, the National Museum of Czech Republic comes to Kathmandu with an exhibition on the country’s castles. 9 to 25 April, 10am to 5pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal

Ram Nawami, celebrate the life and deeds of the Lord of Satyayug, 8 April

Random impact, an exhibition of contemporary arts and performances. 5 to 10 April, Alliance Francaise, Teku

Strings for smiles, a concert to raise funds to build a community-run library in Daineikh. Re 150, 5 April, 1 to 4pm, St Xavier’s College, Maitighar

Climate+change, the four and half month long exhibition on the changing environment in the Himalaya comes to an end next week, be sure to catch it if you haven’t been there yet. Runs until 13 April, Nepal Art Council Babarmahal

Health camp, free screening for vector-borne diseases on the occasion of World Health Day. 7 April, 2 to 4pm, Chirayu National Hospital, Basundhara, 9801138222

Boudha Stupa, don’t miss out on the Gyakok, authentic hot pot with dumplings, meat and vegetables. You can also choose from the many wood-fired pizzas or have a candle-lit dinner every full moon night. Boudha, (01)4485585

Mulchowk, the blend of culinary expertise and charms of a bygone era. Babarmahal

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

Capital Grill, the American style diner offers a large assortment of appetisers and entrees to suit everyone’s tastes. Bhaktalbazar

Dhokaima Cafe, exquisite ambience, friendly service, cozy bar, place to see and be seen at. Patan Dhoka

The Heritage, escape the hodgepodge of the tourist hub as you relish delights like paella and panna cotta. Thamel
GETAWAYS

Raniban Retreat, situated at the edge of the Phewa lake and nestled inside Raniban forest and the World Peace Stupa, this retreat has one of the best views of the Annapurna range. Phewa Lake and Pokhara. World Peace Pagoda, Pokhara, (01)4932136, 9841362013

Barahi Jungle Lodge, the first eco-jungle lodge of Chitwan directly overlooks the Chitwan National Park. Spa, boutique guest room, individual and two-in-one private villas, including a suite with a private swimming pool. Androoki, West Chitwan, barahijungelodge.com

Pokhara Grande, a swimming pool to escape from the tropic heat, a massage parlour and spa to loosen up and a gymnasium to release stress. Lakeside, Pokhara

Relax!, yoga, detox and ayurveda treatment in a quiet corner of Kathmandu. Himalayan Peace and Wellness Center, Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha (01)4375280, 980106661. peace@wellness.com.np

Starry Night BBQ, catch Grey Gurung live as you chomp on your meat stick. Rs 1,299, 7pm onwards, Fridays, Shambala Garden Café, Near Shangri La, (01)4442999 (Ext. 7520/7515)

Kripa Unplugged, young aspiring musicians give their own renditions of classics. 8.30 and 10.30pm, TV, youtube.com/user/KripaUnplugged

Music Jams, enjoy great live music every Tuesday. Moksh, Jhamsikhel

MUSIC

1974 AD live, Nepal’s premier rock band in concert. Rs 200, 4 April, 7pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

Musical nights, five days of jazz and eclectic music. 2 to 6 April, Casa de Class, PatanBhik, (01)5200100

Shastriya sangeet, dabble in the magic of Hindustani classical music. 15 April, 7pm onwards, Ram Mandir, Baitasiwar

Music Jams, enjoy great live music every Tuesday. Moksh, Jhamsikhel

The living goddess

Kumari has embodied the Nepali nation. The health and mood swings of the living goddess could portend epidemics, earthquakes and the fall of rulers. Many articles, books and films have come out about Kumari, including one by former Kumari Rashmila Shakya in 2005.

The latest book on Kumari is British travel writer Isabella Tree’s The Living Goddess, which was released in Kathmandu this week. Join Tree for a discussion on the Kumari tradition and dive deep into the heart of Kathmandu.

Tree is the author of three other non-fiction books and writes frequently for Conde Nast Traveler, The Sunday Times and The Observer.

4 April, 9.30am, Shanker Hotel, free entry

Boudha Stupa view Guest House & Roof top Restaurant with Cafe

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Kutumba is the first-ever band to perform atop Swayambhunath

Giving and receiving

For the past three years, the Surya Nepal Asha Social Entrepreneurship Awards has been honouring individuals, who with their creative approach to businesses, have become valued changemakers. This year’s recipients were noted for their efforts in promoting organic farming, developing eco-friendly methods to avoid water wastage, advocating for farmers’ rights, combating respiratory diseases and demonstrating continued commitment towards women empowerment. The third edition of the awards also presented a special recognition to Sanduk Ruit and the team of Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology for their contribution in providing medical services to Nepalis from every social strata.

The five other finalists were Ratna Bahadur Newar of Tamakoshi Community Resin and Turpentine, Shanti Shrestha and Nirjala Shrestha of Friend Handicraft, Sunita Nhemaphuki of R&D Innovative Solution, Tej Kumari Tiwari of Nepal Society of the Disabled Multipurpose Cooperative and Ujjwal Chapagain of The Himalayan Rabbit Farm. Sponsored by Surya Nepal, the award was organised by ChangeFusion Nepal.

Dipak Prasad Koirala
Dipak Prasad Koirala comes from a family of farmers. Determined to combat unfair practices in farming and save farmers from exploitation by dishonest middlemen, Dipak started Junar Kendriya Sahkari Sangh. The cooperative, which now represents 7500 households, and 48 local level cooperatives, produces, processes, and markets sweet orange (junar) at a commercial scale. Through the collective effort of both the government and private sector, this project has been able to provide farmers a higher source of income and also help them gain administrative knowledge and expertise.
Fulmaya Tamang
With the aim to encourage the women in her village to become more independent and assertive, Fulmaya Tamang of Kavrepalanchok started the Bhattedanda Women Farmers Cooperative. Initially, accused of being a thief for collecting monthly membership fees to start informal savings account for members, Fulmaya is now a respected name. With over 400 members, Bhattedanda Women Farmers Cooperative today is the most successful cooperative in the district. Besides providing low interest loans to farmers, the cooperative has also introduced a savings program which has given hundreds of children a chance to attend school.

Madhukar KC
Over 80 per cent of Nepal’s population, mostly women, cook on firewood, straw or dried dung. Indoor smoke caused by traditional wood stoves is seen as the number one cause of respiratory tract infections in the country. In a bid to reduce these health risks, Madhukar KC decided to improve the stove’s design. It took KC 13 years, and a grueling 33 attempts before he perfected the air flow filter, which ensured proper oxygen flow to the fire. An impact assessment in Lele, Lalitpur, found these improved stoves use up to 70 per cent less wood.

Prem Bahadur Lama
When Prem Bahadur Lama of Sanga in Kavre first established Ashapuri Organic Farm, he was ridiculed by other farmers in the area. But Prem, who began growing and consuming organic produce after being diagnosed with arthritis, wasn’t deterred by the mockery. Spread across five hectares, the farm now produces 30 kg of vegetables daily, helping Prem earn Rs 1.5 million each month from the sale of 60 varieties of vegetables and fruits in Kathmandu and Singapore. Prem has also been providing training to farmers from nine districts at the farm, after which they are then given the freedom to sell their produce and earn a living for themselves.

Suman Shakya
As an eco-friendly answer to Kathmandu’s acute water shortage, Suman Shakya started SmartPaani, a company that develops, installs and maintains environmentally friendly rainwater harvesting systems, water filtration and water recycling. Within two years of its establishment, more than 400 SmartPaani systems have been installed in schools, offices and homes across the city. Suman plans to further his eco-friendly cause by expanding SmartPaani beyond the valley and develop more water systems to help as many people as possible.
During Suharto’s military takeover of Indonesia in 1965, more than 500,000 people were murdered in state-sponsored anti-communist purges that lasted months. Families of victims were stigmatised and ostracised, the perpetrators of the war crimes were rewarded, and are still enjoying power. History books airbrush this sordid slaughter.

American filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer has gone where no one has dared to tread in his film The Act of Killing. He gets former executioners, death squad leaders and torturers re-enact their crimes. Not only are they unrepentant, but they boast about their sadism, looking forward eagerly to the stardom they think the film will give them.

We are introduced to gangster-turned-assassin, Anwar Congo who recruits subordinates and accomplices to make his own movie by re-enacting the killings he carried out in the manner of Hollywood movies he loves best. Congo is a willing participant and his ‘co-actors’ all behave as if they have nothing to hide or be afraid of. What about revenge by children of communists, Oppenheimer asks off-screen. “They won’t dare. We will exterminate them,” is the reply.

Congo takes Oppenheimer to the offices of politicians, mayors, newspaper editors, and leaders of the Pancasila Youth paramilitaries who are more than happy to recount on camera the atrocities they perpetrated half-a-century ago.

After filming each sequence, from dreamy dance numbers to police style investigations to village raids, Oppenheimer lets the wiry Congo and his obese assistant Herman sit down and watch the dailies, as it were, to assess their progress. In these episodes of analysis and planning, Congo is openly facing up to the past for the first time in his life.

Congo admits he has nightmares from “killing people who didn’t want to die” and seems especially troubled by one victim he beheaded who stared at him lifelessly. As the film progresses, the initial appeal of becoming famous by filming his past seems to be replaced by Congo having to confront his past. Will Congo finally flinch?

Oppenheimer started working on the film back in 2003 by interviewing victims’ families, and was forced to improvise after survivors and families of the killed felt it was still unsafe for them to appear in person. You see how raw this wound still is when most of the film crew are credited as ‘Anonymous’.

By departing from standard documentary practice and getting the perpetrators to play victim to their own crimes, Oppenheimer achieves what generations of Indonesians have been held back from: acknowledgement, empathy and dialogue. His film is a stark reminder of how easily humans can go from being ordinary citizens to monsters. Snubbed by the Oscars, even though it won every other major award, The Act of Killing is important cinema, and will be a benchmark for filmmakers for years to come.

Sunir Pandey
When Nepal opened up to the outside world in the 1950s and the first early tourists started coming in, they were mandatorily required to photograph cremations at Katmandu, monkeys in Boudha and monkeys on Swayambhunath. The other must-see was the Kumari Temple, and the living goddess of Kathmandu soon became a subject of enduring fascination for foreigners.

Many articles, books and films have come out about the Kumari, including From Goddess to Mortal: The True Life Story of a Former Royal Kumari written by former Kumari herself, Rashmila Shakya in 2005. The latest book on living goddesses, is by British travel writer Isabella Tree’s The Living Goddess, which was released in Kathmandu this week. Because it is written by a journalist, The Living Goddess is heavy on research and interviews as it delves into the cultural history of the tradition of the living goddess. There is not a lot if it that is new there, but Tree digs deeper to investigate the symbolism and faith that has allowed the Kumari tradition to evolve and survive several regime changes in Kathmandu in the past centuries.

Tree goes back to the history of the Malla dynasty in Kathmandu Valley and the Shah kings from Gorkha who conquered them in 1767. The Kumari tradition may have emerged as a Mahayana Buddhist practice, but is inextricably tied with the Devi-worship of Hindu kings and the emergence of Kathmandu as a centre of tantric beliefs and rituals. For Prithvi Naryan Shah to arrive at Hanuman Dhoka Palace on the day of Indra Jatra and touch the feet of the Kumari was a dramatic public relations move, and attempt to ensure that the Valley that he had finally conquered would accept him as king.

As Tree explains, the Kumari then came to embody the Nepali nation. The health and mood swings of the living goddess could portend epidemics, earthquakes and the fall of rulers. The book lists instances where premonitions have come true: King Tribhuvan died in 1955 six months after the Kumari reportedly refused to put a tika on his forehead, his son King Mahendra died when he failed to pay his respects to the Kumari in 1971, the Kumari’s hair was untruly and couldn’t be tied properly into a knot during the first People’s Movement of 1990 and apparently the caretaker could only successfully tie it after King Birendra decided to become a constitutional monarch, or that three weeks before the royal massacre of 1 June 2001 the Kumari had broken into rashes.

In the great political churning after the royal massacre, King Gyanendra’s rule and the Maoist conflict, the Kumari’s royal links became the reason that its accepted religious role started being questioned, human rights activists said the Kumari tradition was ‘child abuse’ and even filed a writ in the Supreme Court in 2005 to have it discontinued. Tree interviews activists, priests, former Kumaris and concludes that allegations of mistreatment and abuse of the young girls are mainly based on rumours - just like the false belief that the husband will die if an ex-Kumari marries.

There are obvious reforms that can be made into the practice, the Kumaris should be allowed to lead more normal lives with better education, but Tree makes a convincing case for keeping a tradition that has come to be the symbol of the unique cultural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation. After all, it even survived the transition from monarchy to republic and the dramatic instance in 2007 when both the King and the President came to pay their respect to the living goddess at the Kumari Chen.

Indeed, cultural preservation is not just about renovating temples, it is also about preserving the rituals and festivals.

Isabella Tree will be speaking at the Cultural Studies Group Nepal at Hanumandhoka on Friday, 4 April at Shanker Hotel, Lajimpat.
**Staying in Nepal**

What percentage of the new medical graduates from Nepal will stay in Nepal? Of those that stay in Nepal, what demographic features characterise them versus those that leave? These questions were posed to Dr Mark Zimmerman and his colleagues in their paper published in the Aug 14, 2012 issue of the British Medical Journal.

**WHERE ARE THEY NOW?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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1. The authors tracked 710 graduate doctors from the first 22 classes (1983-2004) of IOM to their current practice locations. They analysed seven factors including type of pre-medical education, place of birth, place of high school, gender, age entering medical school, current practice locations. They showed that from these 22 classes, roughly a third each were working in rural Nepal, doctors to stay. There are obvious exceptions to this rule, and one of them is young Dr Amogh Basnyat who recently graduated from IOM and works in rural Kalikot District. And there is also the new Patan Academy of Health Sciences, which through a series of elaborate tests and interviews focuses on choosing potential medical students with a science background.
2. The study had limitations. Clearly the study had limitations. Only one medical school was taken into consideration, and it was limited to the time period of 1983, the first graduating IOM class, to 2004. The data is therefore ten years old now during which time many medical schools have mushroomed and many students have graduated. Nonetheless, this is a painstakingly carried out baseline study with important, unique findings.

**WHERE ARE THEY NOW?**

More than a third of the doctors who graduated from the government, Institute of Medicine between 1983-2004 now work abroad. Breakdown by country:

- **United States**: 188 (43 per cent)
- **United Kingdom**: 20 (27 per cent)
- **Australia**: 8 (12 per cent)
- **New Zealand**: 2 (5 per cent)
- **South Africa**: 8 (12 per cent)
- **Bangladesh**: 2 (5 per cent)
- **China**: 4 (10 per cent)
- **Sweden**: 2 (5 per cent)
- **Other**: 9 (2 per cent)

In a world where a rural birthplace was important for policy makers, a rural birthplace was important for policy makers. And in keeping with studies from high income countries, a rural birthplace was also independently associated with working in rural Nepal. Entrance to medical college at an older age also made it more likely that the doctor would work in rural areas. Clearly the study had limitations. Only one medical school was taken into consideration, and it was limited to the time period of 1983, the first graduating IOM class, to 2004. The data is therefore ten years old now during which time many medical schools have mushroomed and many students have graduated. Nonetheless, this is a painstakingly carried out baseline study with important, unique findings.

**Staying in Nepal**

These questions are obviously important for policy makers. These questions are obviously important for policy makers. Previous studies in high income countries have shown that medical graduates with rural backgrounds are more likely to work in rural locations. If all the population over 1 billion and a long track record of many English medical medical graduates, does not seem to have published any recent studies in good quality, peer-reviewed journals tracking its medical students as this study has done. So in a sense, this study from Nepal has filled an important void, and the authors are to be commended.

However, the results of the study give us cause for thought. The IOM which admitted most medical students with paramedic background stopped doing this for unclear reasons and clearly reversed its procedure and limited its admissions to generally very young doctors with a science background.

Based on the findings of this study, the unnecessary shift has been counterproductive to efforts to get doctors to stay. There are obvious exceptions to this rule, and one of them is young Dr Amogh Basnyat who recently graduated from IOM and works in rural Kalikot District Hospital in western Nepal as a MD GP providing vital medical service (including performing the life-saving Caesarian section when necessary) in this remote area. And there is also the new Patan Academy of Health Sciences, which through a series of elaborate tests and interviews focuses on choosing potential medical students who are truly motivated to work in rural settings.

**Slim and svelte**

Electronics giant Sony, with its Xperia range of smartphones, has established itself as a force to be reckoned with in the smartphone market. However, when it comes to tabs, Xperia’s popularity still lags behind Apples and Kindles of the tech world. This may soon change with the release of Sony’s newest the Xperia Z2 tablet.

An improved version of the existing Tablet Z (launched last year), the Z2 packs in a new processor, adds the latest Android KitKat software, and further slim the design down. Yantrick has to give it up for the designers who not just managed to make the tab lighter (Tablet Z was already the thinnest, lightest tablet around the time of its release) but also more powerful.

Measuring at a mere 6.4mm thick, and weighing in at just 426g, the Z2 tablet is portability definite. Design-wise, the Z2 tablet has followed in the footsteps of Xperia smartphone cousins; an all-glass front design, while the back panel is a smooth expanse of matte white or black plastic, and tucked into the top-right corner sits an 8-megapixel camera. Also like the Xperia phones, it is completely waterproof. An infrared blaster also sits atop the Z2 tablet, allowing you to use it as a remote control for your TV.

The Xperia Z2 Tablet’s 10.1-inch screen boasts full HD resolution (1920 x 1200 pixels), giving it a pixel density of 224 ppi, making it well-equipped to tackle high-definition videos, games and web pages. The display is extremely crisp, which is helped by the high brightness of the screen and the Z2 Tablet’s excellent handling of colour.

The Z2 Tablet is powered by Android’s mobile OS, and ships in the latest version of Android (4.4.2), tweaked to Sony’s Xperia feel. New users might quickly get hooked just by navigating its simple interface.

2. 3G/LTE, 3GB of RAM, and on-board storage of 16GB (additional storage of up to 128 GB is available via a microSD card)—an impressive lineup of specs that allow for a smooth gaming, web browsing and HD movie viewing experience. Capably backing up the specs is the Z2 tablet’s battery—designed to last despite a full working day of fairly intense use.

Yantrick’s Verdict: Solid specs, extremely light, thin frame, and a beautiful screen, along with its dust and water-proof features make the Z2 a suitable choice for those on the lookout for a top-end tablet.

**GIZMO by YANTRICK**

**Slim and svelte**

The Z2 Tablet is powered by Android's mobile OS, and ships in the latest version of Android (4.4.2), tweaked to Sony's Xperia feel. New users might quickly get hooked just by navigating its simple interface. Stuffed into that innocuously sleek Z2 tablet frame is a hefty quad-core Snapdragon 801 processor (clocked at 2.3GHz), 3GB of RAM, and on-board storage of 16GB (additional storage of up to 128 GB is available via a microSD card)—an impressive lineup of specs that allow for a smooth gaming, web browsing and HD movie viewing experience. Capably backing up the specs is the Z2 tablet’s battery—designed to last despite a full working day of fairly intense use.

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

-Dr. Spiro Condos, senior practicing in the US

**Sensodyne Fresh Gel**

World’s No.1 Sensitivity Toothpaste

24x7 Sensitivity Protection

World’s No.1 Sensitivity Toothpaste

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By Yantrick

SUMMARY by YANTRICK

Sony’s newest the Xperia Z2 tablet is portability definite. Design-wise, the Z2 tablet has followed in the footsteps of Xperia smartphone cousins; an all-glass front design, while the back panel is a smooth expanse of matte white or black plastic, and tucked into the top-right corner sits an 8-megapixel camera. Also like the Xperia phones, it is completely waterproof. An infrared blaster also sits atop the Z2 tablet, allowing you to use it as a remote control for your TV.

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Too little, or too much freedom
“We used to have lots of don’ts but now we have lots of do’s”

BURMESE STUDENT ACTIVIST Soe Myint had practiced the hijack many times. But when the real day came to brandish a fake bomb and force open the door at the front of the plane, he found he had burst not into the cockpit, but the toilet.

Today, 24 years later, Soe Myint laughs heartily at the goof-up as he drives us through leafy streets to the office of the Mizzima magazine that he edits.

It was 1990, the Burmese junta had launched a brutal crackdown on students who had led the street uprising in Rangoon two years previously. Soe Myint fled to Bangkok, but was appalled that the world wasn’t paying attention.

As a result, some students decided to carry out a “peaceful hijack” of a Thai International flight from Bangkok to Rangoon and take it to Calcutta with 220 passengers.

“I have no regrets,” says Soe Myint, “we didn’t use guns or bombs and no one was hurt.” The Burmese students got support from Indian politicians like George Fernandes to set up Mizzima, a Burmese news service in exile. In 2003, Soe Myint and other hijackers were acquitted by an Indian court.

Soe Myint is now back in Rangoon as editor of Mizzima, proof of just how fast Burma has changed in the last two years. Among his partners are businessmen close to the same military junta that once hunted down democracy activists.

Mizzima now has a strong business and development focus, while still supporting political reforms, takes the line that political stability matters more than democracy in order to attract foreign investors to Burma.

Potential investors are arriving by the planeloads to cash in on the opportunities that have opened up after four decades of isolation, to exploit Burma’s huge mineral and petroleum wealth, its mobile penetration rate of less than 2 per cent, and the country’s enormous tourism potential.

There is also geopolitics - strategically located Burma is leaning more towards ASEAN and the West to limit the overwhelming past Chinese influence over the economy and politics. For western donors and NGOs, Burma is the flavour of the month.

After nearly 50 years of being banned, private media has exploded with new newspapers and online sites. Burma has risen six places to rank 143th in the 2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, ahead of Malaysia and Singapore.

“We used to have lots of don’ts but now we have lots of do’s,” says U Kyaw Yin Hlaing of the Burma Peace Centre, “the question is how will the media use that freedom. Where will the responsibility lie?” There are worries that unbridled freedom will hurt ongoing efforts to forge peace with ethnic separatists in the north and east who have been fighting the Burmese state now for more than half a century.

Even Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent 21 years under house arrest for freedom is worried there may now be too much freedom.

“Without a free press to check those who are in power, we will not be able to defend the rights and freedoms of the people,” she conceded at a recent international media conference in Rangoon, but added, “but democracy doesn’t give unlimited rights...it demands equal responsibility back.”

Recent arrests of reporters who exposed a chemical weapons factory, and intimidation of journalists, show that press freedom in Burma still comes with strings attached. Time’s Hannah Beech was refused a visa to attend the media conference after writing a cover story with a picture of radical Buddhist monk Wiratha that was straplined, ‘The Face of Buddhist Terror’.

The Burmese media itself has also been criticised for muted coverage of the organised killings of Muslim Rohingya people in Rakhine state, or carrying openly racist content supporting the government’s insistence that the Rohingya register as ‘Bengali’ in this week’s controversial census, the first in 30 years.

Even Suu Kyi has refused to condemn the anti-Muslim policies of the state outright so as not to spoil her chances ahead of next year’s presidential elections. Burma’s military constitution has a clause that bars presidential candidates with foreign spouses and children, which was written specifically to exclude her.

The constitution also ensures that the military retains its dominant role by allocating 25 per cent of seats in parliament for officers appointed by the army chief. Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) is pushing to amend the constitution, while the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has launched a signature campaign against the amendment.

The military has also won the support of the radical Buddhist clergy led by Wirathu, and many here believe that the USDP is mixing religion and politics for electoral advantage. Suu Kyi, even though still reverently called ‘The Lady’, isn’t as vocal in supporting Rohingya rights as she may want to be.

The only hope for Burma may be that there is so much money to be made here that the transition will inevitably lead to political stability and reconciliation.
THE SHAKY PILLAR OF INDIAN

This month’s Indian election is a battle to preserve the country’s founding principle of secularism.

BY THE WAY
Anurag Acharya

A never-before 814 million people will be exercising their franchise this time. The retirement of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, coming of age of the young Gandhi acion Rahul who leads the Congress, and the dramatic rise of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) out of an anti-corruption citizens’ movement make this election interesting.

But the real dramatic part is the emergence of Narendra Modi, Gujarat’s chief minister and the leader of India’s Hindu right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), leading his party into the election that has pushed up the electoral barometer. Nabin, as he is known to his Hindu admirers, has led every public opinion survey. Besides being touted as India’s most successful chief minister, Narendra Modi is also arguably the most controversial political figure in Indian history. Blamed for presiding over the massacre of hundreds of Muslims in 2002 Gujarat riots by Hindu extremists closely linked to his party, the Indian Supreme Court in 2004 called him ‘a modern day Nero’ who looked the other way when women and children were being raped and slaughtered.

Although Narendra Modi was given a clean chit by the Special Investigative Team (SIT), national and international reports condemn his role in the riots. A US government report actually compares Modi with Hitler in his promotion of racial supremacy and hatred against minorities. The report states how Modi’s Gujarat government prescribed school textbooks in which children were taught about Hitler’s ‘charismatic’ personality without reference to the Holocaust, and referred to Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews as ‘foreigners’. Unsurprisingly, Gujarat under Modi has outlawed religious conversion infringing upon the fundamental right to choose one’s faith. Modi is standing from the Hindu right BJP in India’s elections next month.

Challenging him in Varansi is the leader of the citizen’s party, the AAP.

VARANASI — The chant of ‘Har har Modi’ filled the air in Hinduism’s holiest city of Varanasi. That the supporters of Narendra Modi dared to equate him with Lord Shiva was audacious. Modi is the candidate from the Hindu right BJP in India’s elections next month. Challenging him in Varansi is the leader of the citizen’s party, the AAP.

The battle for India’s soul is being waged in the Hindu heartland in next week’s election.

Kejriwal, on the other hand, is puny, and in every way the man next door. He refuses to make the sartorial switch from kurta-pajama. This places him outside the entrenched political class, and imparts credibility to his obnoxious followers he quintessentially remains the Emperor of the Hindu soul (Hindu Hriday Samrat).

Kejriwal’s decision to contest from Varanasi has triggered a countervailing force, now coalescing around Kejriwal. Modi and Kejriwal exemplify two contrasting philosophies and personalities. Modi has assiduously cultivated a persona of a decisive leader, emphasises growth, flaunts his proximity to big business, and is unlike engaging in debates. He struts and throws innuendos against his rivals, puffing up his 56-inch chest. Though his campaign focuses on development, to his obsessive followers he quintessentially remains the Emperor of the Hindu soul (Hindu Hriday Samrat).
The Muslim myth

A t election time in India, the mainstream media likes to predict that Muslims will turn out in overwhelmingly high numbers to vote, driven by their passion for the politics of identity. No empirical evidence is ever furnished to sustain this narrative. This has acquired the aura of truth in the last two decades as the Hindu ‘upper’ castes and middle class switched over from the Congress to the BJP. But what diminished the political heft of these groups was that Muslims and Dalits, who had sustained Congress domination for decades, didn’t follow them into the BJP.

The reverse, if anything, happened. Alarmed at the BJP’s habit of demonising Muslims to consolidate the Hindu vote, they sought to combine with other social groups to tactically exercise their franchise in favour of groups best placed to defeat the saffron alliance. In determining their primary interest and identifying parties most likely to promote it, Muslims don’t behave any differently from other social groups. But what distinguishes the choice of Muslims from that of others is the importance they place on their own security.

Despite this, the voting pattern among Muslims is as diverse as any other social group. A Centre for the Study of Developing Societies survey of the 2012 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election shows that 39 per cent of Muslims voted for the Samajwadi Party (SP), down from the 45 per cent in the 2007 assembly election. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) mopped 20 per cent of Muslim votes, an increase of three per cent from 2007.

These figures show that Muslims don’t rally behind one party, both Muslims and upper castes have their own political favourites, but the degree of support for them varies from one election to another.

There is no denying that the BJP’s support among Muslims is negligible. And this is understandable since it has defined its politics as anti-minorities in order to shore up its Hindu vote. The BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi may have chosen to harp on development, but for Muslims his very persona rekindles memories of the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in his home state of Gujarat.

The apprehension among Muslims about Modi could inspire them to turn out in extremely high numbers on the polling day. Or persuaded by the media hype that Modi’s march to power is inevitable, they could be dissuaded from voting. Indeed, both have an appeal cutting across the caste divide. Modi’s platform is grassroots Hinduism with the Gujarat development model. Kejriwal’s crusade against corruption resonates across the religious, caste and class divide, especially in Varanasi where the crumbling infrastructure is blamed on corruption.

Ironically, the fact that the upper castes vote the BJP overwhelmingly is viewed as secular. It is this media narrative which creates communal polarisation in India, much to the BJP’s advantage.

The media is the message in stereotyping the Muslim voter in India

Reservation of jobs for the disadvantaged is now considered an irreversible aspect of social reality. Blunting the backlash from the upper crust. Then there is the inability of subaltern caste leaders to mobilize the heterogeneous Dalits through policies to improve their economic conditions.

Kejriwal has goodwill among Muslims for taking the fight into Modi’s Gujarat, but this is not grounded in the politics of identity. The popular refrain among Muslim voters is that Kejriwal speaks of social and economic justice, which is what the community wants.

Incredible as it may sound, Modi hasn’t as yet won Varanasi, as India’s mainstream media make it not to be.

The battle lines have been drawn. The Modi-led BJP and National Democratic Alliance will fight the Congress’ United People’s Alliance, with Aam Aadmi Party: the Left bloc and regional parties looking for a post electoral alliance. This Indian election will not just decide who rules in New Delhi, it will test the democratic credentials of India’s 80 per cent Hindu population and their faith in one of the formidable pillars of democracy: secularism.

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This isn’t to imply that caste identities have melted away. But there are cracks in the mould of India’s identity politics, perhaps because of two national personalities contesting from Varanasi. The reason caste divisions are eroding is partly due to migration to metros and people thinking beyond the politics of identity.

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Incredible as it may sound, Modi hasn’t as yet won Varanasi, as India’s mainstream media make it not to be.

The battle lines have been drawn. The Modi-led BJP and National Democratic Alliance will fight the Congress’ United People’s Alliance, with Aam Aadmi Party: the Left bloc and regional parties looking for a post electoral alliance. This Indian election will not just decide who rules in New Delhi, it will test the democratic credentials of India’s 80 per cent Hindu population and their faith in one of the formidable pillars of democracy: secularism.
The death of popular folk singer Manju Mahat in a traffic accident last week in Kathmandu has once again brought home the high fatality rate in Nepal’s roads and highways. In the past decade road accidents have claimed thousands of lives across Nepal. According to the World Bank, almost 1.7 million people lose their lives in road accidents annually and developing countries contribute 90 percent to the number of casualties, most of whom are youngsters. Nepal’s public transportation is badly affected by the over commercialized private sector that is an example of market failure.

Although the crackdown on drunk driving has reduced the number of traffic accidents, much more needs to be done. Poor monitoring, reckless driving, technical failure of engine, lack of proper traffic signals, and several economic reasons have turned Nepal’s roads into highways of deaths. Here are the main causes of the high fatality rate on Nepal’s roads:

1. In the absence of proper monitoring, several old and overcrowded buses charging high fares run in rural areas that have poor roads. When these overcrowded buses have a mishap, the number of casualties is significantly high.

2. Influential cartels and committees running buses ensure that the drivers get away with minimum punishment, so there is no deterrence. It is cheaper for transportation companies to pay a high compensation to the victims killed in road accidents than pay for their medical bills, which has increased the number of people being run over by vehicles on purpose to kill them.

3. Public buses in Kathmandu compete for passengers by speeding recklessly and risking the lives of several others.

4. Reckless driving is also a result of the fixed minimum amount that drivers have to pay vehicle owners daily. This leads to increased time at bus stops to put in as many passengers as possible and they make up for lost time by competing with other buses on the road.

5. Most drivers work long hours which increases their stress levels while driving.

6. Most road accidents involve collisions between two-wheelers and public vehicles. The number of cheap but unsafe bikes on our roads needs to be reduced, and a reliable public transportation system must be introduced as an alternative.

Everyone - pedestrians, motorcycle riders and bus drivers - need to follow traffic rules so that people who make mistakes are punished irrespective of the size of their vehicles.
Lording over the grassroots

Chandrakishor Jha, Himal Khabarpatrika, 30 March-5 April

After the perpetrators of the Janakpur bomb in April 2012 that killed five Mithila activists were caught by the police, Madhesis are debating who really is in charge in the Tarai. That crime was the result of two local clans trying to finish each other off to control the budget allocations for local councils.

Sanjay Saha and Jwanath Chaudhari, who were competing against each other in Janakpur, had risen to prominence because of the vacuum in local councils created by the absence of local elections. But they are not the only troublemakers in the Tarai. There are other members of organised crime who have political protection and have lined their pockets at the expense of the people.

It’s been 16 years since the last elections for village, district and municipal councils were held. Without elected councillors, Janakpur like other towns had an all-party mechanism, but even this has been disbanded. Now, there is a distinct group of people who have assumed charge of local resources as if it is their personal property. These local warlords are a new class unique to the Tarai; they control the political economy that thrives on the open border and politicians are powerless to stop them.

The second Constituent Assembly elections were Nepal’s most expensive, and part of the blame goes to the lifestyle of these middle men. Candidates are forced to distribute cash as soon as they enter villages, where local eateries have done away with beaten rice and yoghurt and have started serving barbeque and alcohol.

The politicians have a symbiotic relationship with the thugs. Also, by aligning themselves to new powers like ethnic committees, the local mafia enjoy more power than politicians. They use local youth as muscle to intimidate government offices to award tenders and even mobilise a rent-a-riot at anyone’s behest.

In many cases, government officials themselves have planned and benefited from fraud. When officials resist graft, they are threatened into making decisions favourable to the armed groups. A lot of the violence in the Tarai is directly related to this. Trans-border organised crime has a monopoly over natural resources: roads, canals, bridges, levees and other infrastructure take longer than planned to be built because the middle men always want their cut. Illegal sand-mining, smuggling of aggregates and rocks, logging are a result of the demographic deficit at the grassroots.

It is now up to the government to hold elections in order to stop them. The delay in appointments of ambassadors has slowed the government’s overall speed and efficiency. Prime Minister Sushil Koirala this week recommended a new Chief Justice but there are still a lot of decisions he needs to spearhead through the constitutional committees and the cabinet. “The procedure involved in day-to-day governance and administration is a new turf for PM Koirala and he keeps losing track of several important things that we constantly remind him of,” says a close Koirala aide. “We have requested him to form an effective secretariat to guide him but he is yet to take a decision.”

Two months after taking office, Koirala still doesn’t have a team of advisers. In the absence of a strong secretariat, there is very little coordination between Koirala and other ministers. Besides Dinesh Bhattarai as foreign affairs adviser, Chiranjivi Nepal as economic advisor and Secretary Basanta Gautam there is no one else by his side. Key central members of the NC don’t want to advise the PM because they were not inducted into the cabinet.

Law Minister Narahari Acharya feels that the government is working inefficiently. “It is not the PM’s job to get things done, he only directs the ministers and we have been working very hard lately,” he says.

Koirala has been criticised for being distracted by officiating in minor programs when he should be taking the initiative. He has been travelling across the country, visiting his constituency in Banke. Says the aide: “He hasn’t been able to move beyond meeting party cadres and doesn’t know when to speak and when not to.”
Replacing hammers and sickles

The latest from the Bolsheviks at Balkhu is that the Unified Communist Party of Nepal Marxist-Leninist wants to lose Comrades Karl and Vladimir from its suffix, and even drop the hammer and sickle as its official symbolism. The party had tried to do the same back in the early 1990s mainly to assuage the Americans that they were not real commies because the Soviet Union had just imploded and the Berlin Wall had come down. But the pragmatic comrades were overruled by the dogmatic ones and the hammer and sickle stayed as did the acronym, CPN-UML.

Now, to differentiate itself from the Maobaddies, the UML is trying one more time to banish the two tools of workers and peasants. The makeover is long overdue and coincides with the UML commissioning one of Nepal’s better known architects to design a new HQ. Just as well because the edifice at Balkhu has always looked like a cross between a crematorium and a mausoleum.

There is, however, a hot debate raging in UML circles about what to replace the hammer and sickle with. If the Ass may be so bold, it would like to present a shortlist of possible new party symbols that would more accurately represent what the UML party now stands for:

1. Two shoes

2. A rupee symbol

3. A toilet seat

4. Another komunista looking for a new symbol is Comrade Red Flag, who is getting more and more disenchanted with the mother of all parties and its Chairman-for-life. BRB has been hinting aloud that he either wants to raise goats or start a new party, whichever comes first. The Third Force idea isn’t getting much traction, though, because the prospective Young Turks from the other parties want him to first divorce his ex-First Lady who they think will be a liability. Still, BRB is already preparing the ground to exit his party or re-enter academia. He was at KU last week lecturing management students and quoting Comrade Picasso, and didn’t utter the ‘M’ word even once. And now he’s got TU to invite him in as visiting faculty and eventually get tenure, just in case politics doesn’t work out. BRB has been venting his frustration that he didn’t get the credit he deserved for having contributed to the dissolution of the last CA and said, and I quote: “I did all the work but Baburam is Thandaram”. Guy should’ve been a poet. Seeing the rise in frequency of his tweets, @brb_laldhwoj appears to have a lot of time in his hands (or shall we say fingers) these days. Doc did make a faux pas tho when he tweeted about Mahathir Mohamad being invited by @FNCCI and @GOI. It was only after his followers ridiculed him that he deleted the tweet and quietly replaced it with @GON. However, the most remarkable visual involving BRB this week was of the Ideologue-in-Chief of the Mau Mau demonstrating outside the CDO in Bharatpur office against police investigating the murder of Krishna Adhikari by his henchmen back in 2004. Guess who his bodyguards were: police.

5. CA Chair Nembang is sick of people calling him a wimp, so he is cracking the whip. He issued an edict banning cell phone use in the chambers. Why not just jam the signal? To be really taken seriously, however, he should also issue a ban on dumpster diving, spitting, nose picking and chair-throwing.