COMING RIGHT UP

Cheer up, we have a draft constitution and so far it's only been set alight by Madhesis, women and minorities.

ONE TO MANY
BY BIDUSHI DHUNGEL
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KASTHAMANDAP

The shrine after which Kathmandu was named withstood many quakes in the last 900 years, but came down in this one.

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ENTER:
CHIEF JUSTICE SHRESTHA

Kalyan Shrestha has the challenging task of restoring the reputation of a tarnished Supreme Court.

LEGALESE
BY BINITA DAHAL
PAGE 6
Nepal’s tourism was in crisis long before the earthquake struck

Build Back Better’ has become a mantra for post-earthquake rehabilitation in Nepal. As the motto it strives for an ideal outcome: the reconstruction of roads, schools, homes, government buildings, hospitals, utilities should not just be physical rebuilding, but reconfiguring each of these sectors from the ground up.

Nepal was a disaster zone long before the earthquakes struck. Education was in shambles because despite enrollment numbers being up, quality remained dismal. The health arena was either over-commercialised or under-served, putting basic medical care out of reach of most of the population. Kathmandu’s haphazard urbanisation and unsafe buildings made it a ticking timebomb, and it was not defused by the 7.8 quake on 25 April.

The root reasons for all these problems have been poor governance, political unwillingness and a disturbing lack of accountability on the part of elected officials. The earthquake, therefore, has given us the chance for a paradigm shift not just in the 15 affected districts, but in the rest of the country as well. And the constitution offers the mechanism to make politics more just and equitable.

The Planning Commission has taken the lead in ensuring that this happens. This would be the start of a long-term process of reversing the output of desperate young men and women to work overseas in appalling conditions.

The other mainstay of Nepal’s economy is tourism, and this has taken a direct hit from the earthquake. Saturation coverage in the international media of the immediate aftermath has spread the perception that Nepal is completely destroyed. The fact that many tourist spots like Pokhara, Chitwan, Lumbini, Muktinath or Mustang are not affected is not widely known.

In addition, alarmist travel advisories by some governments have frightened off potential visitors. Insurance companies cut their cave from these blanket notices and the high premium is further deterrence. Happily, as we write this, the United States, UK, and New Zealand have relaxed their advisories and there are indications they will be revised further as independent assessments of the Everest and Annapurna trekking trails and Kathmandu’s heritage sites become available.

Nepal’s tourism was also in crisis long before the earthquake. Visitor numbers were stagnant, spending per tourist was down, average duration of stay was getting shorter, repeat visitors were getting rarer.

It isn’t hard to figure out why: the quality of the product was going down with the chaos at the airport, the visa lines and the squalour of Kathmandu. The Annapurna Circuit and other trekking areas were marred by new highways.

Chitwan suffered a 70 per cent drop in visitors after lodges were relocated and Sauraha became more and more unpleasant. There were concerns of safety in domestic air travel after a series of crashes. Airfare was another factor: it cost more for a tourist to fly from Kathmandu to Rara than to fly to Europe. Helicopter rescue in Nepal is as expensive as in the United States, and is the highest in the world. Then there were the high profile disasters like the Everest avalanche last year followed by government bungling on permits, the tragic loss of lives in the Annapurna tragedy raised questions of the lack of early warning and shelters along the trail.

The Turning Point in Tourism: Role of International and National Tour Operators’ conference organised by the group, Samarth, last week drew attention to these intrinsic factors already affecting Nepal’s tourism before the earthquake. Robin Bousted of the Great Himalayan Trail Alliance said: “Nepal has fantastic mountains to climb, but it is becoming a much harder place to climb them in.”

Visitor numbers to Nepal have gone down in the past. It plummeted by 40 per cent after the 2001 royal palace massacre, went down by 80 per cent during the 2003 Gulf War, and shrunk to a third of normal during the Maoist conflict. But in all these cases, arrivals numbers revived in a few months. This time, even the most optimistic scenario predicts a 70 per cent drop in the autumn season, and a 40 per cent drop in bookings for the spring. It will take longer to bounce back this time.

The Samarth conference drew up a checklist of things to be done to revive tourism revenue:

- Set up a verifiable third party online knowledge base with up-to-date information on the safety status of trekking trails
- Relaunch the Nepal brand in target markets, especially India and China
- Clean up the airport, streamline visas, make it easy for visitors
- Don’t reduce prices, improve safety and quality of services
Egos at the door, please

Cheer up, we have a draft constitution and so far it’s only been set alight by Madhesis, women and minorities

It’s safe to say that attention has now fully been diverted away from the 25 April earthquake and the limelight is back on our splendid and seasoned leaders. It’s as though the International Conference on Nepal’s Reconstruction (ICNR) on 25 June was but a ploy to swiftly sidetrack the media and citizenry, while leaders rushed in haste to pull together a grand heist.

That may explain why the Prime Minister only stuck around for the inaugural session, and most Cabinet members and leaders of other political parties didn’t even bother to show up. Clearly, the Conference was not as important as it was made out to be. And before the media or the public could even begin to press the state, they forgot that these are rights already guaranteed by the Interim Constitution. And as if that wasn’t enough, instead of prioritising the recently-announced Reconstruction Authority by nominating members to the board and getting the ball rolling, the leadership manipulated the narrative to make it seem as though a constitution was mandatory for the reconstruction process. That would require some serious multi-tasking abilities, which going by past record, hasn’t been a strength for any Nepali government, much less this one.

Instead, what we have now is a situation where there is a draft constitution unacceptable to the majority of people, even those who speak in favour of the ‘consensus’. Other pressing rebuilding concerns have been forgotten. At the ICNR, the PM, Foreign Minister and Finance Minister all shamelessly claimed that the conference was organised in such haste so as to not waste any time, and that monsoon was coming, which meant that unless swift action was taken, more disaster was guaranteed. They must have been referring to next monsoon.

Since then, no progress has been made on the reconstruction front towards meeting the promises the state made in front of 58 delegations attending the ICNR. Unless, of course, we consider the ludicrous argument that the super fast-track constitution is a precursor to the reconstruction zeal of this government.

If only the focus were on reconstruction, it’s clear to see that something positive could come of the aid pledges. Big chunks of the promised amounts are loans and reallocated budgets from already existing programs, but the goodwill and eagerness of many countries and partners to help is evident. Even our neighbours came forward and offered token amounts and technical assistance, like Bangladesh which kindly offered expertise in dealing with disaster, and 10,000 tons of rice. Or Bhutan, which basically pleaded with the international community on behalf of Nepal for assistance. Even the Breton Woods giants offered condition-free loans and budgetary support. Yes, there are all kinds of foreign interests and politics at play, but a grant is a grant and a condition free loan is better than one which manipulates the way our economy is governed.

However, the likelihood of any of this aid being channelled properly through the Reconstruction Authority, or even being approved (which would require programme proposals from the Nepali government to each donor and partner for each task) is slim considering the government priorities and intentions. In all likelihood, the political elite will identify the Big Money and distribute the spoils quota-wise among themselves.

But, hey, cheer up! We have a draft constitution. And so far, it’s only been set alight by Madhesi lawmakers, some women and minority communities. It is an ‘evolving’ document and there will be plenty of opportunities for reform so, in the name of progress, Nepalis, women in particular, should basically shut up and sit down. Only time will tell how ‘gradual’ the ‘evolution’ will be.

What is evident is the intent of this state, leadership and the entire political pack. A quick read-through of current events should be plenty to understand that at the root of all this ‘progress’ are only the pitfalls of the male ego, and its eternal obsession with power and money.

One to Many
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“India wants to start afresh in Nepal”

Interview with Deep Kumar Upadhyay, Nepal’s ambassador to India

Nepali Times: What initiatives have you taken after being appointed Nepal’s ambassador to India?

Deep Kumar Upadhyay: The earthquake struck just 12 days after I arrived in New Delhi, and I had to immediately start coordinating relief supplies even before submitting my letter of credence. Our embassy was turned into a relief collection centre. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called me immediately after the quake and assured full support. The assistance pledged by India’s Foreign Affairs Minister in Kathmandu was on behalf of the Indian government, but more aid came from state governments, the private sector and the Indian people. The Indian parliament, for instance, decided to provide one month’s salaries of all MPs to support rebuilding of Nepal.

They say you have a good personal rapport with the Indian establishment. Does that make your job easier?

It does. In India, every government official receives a month’s paid leave to go on vacation. Nepal has now been added to the list of places where they can go on holiday. We also have a new agreement that allows Indians to visit Nepal using their own vehicles for one month and vice versa. It will boost Nepal’s tourism. A new plan is being designed to build six-lane roads connecting the East-West Highway to India’s border. We can end our power outage by importing cheap electricity from India after the construction of the Dhalkebar-Muzzafarpur transmission line is completed. Unfortunately, we have not been able to use the loan provided by India for our energy development. It took us years to decide the project’s name, and we still do not know when it will start. Other countries that took loans from India along with us have already completed 40 per cent of their projects.

The Indian bureaucracy and intelligence agencies have been blamed for hurting Nepal-India relations. Is that changing?

I feel India’s new political leadership wants to start afresh and right the wrongs of the past, open a new chapter in Nepal-India diplomacy. Indian Prime Minister Modi has taken the initiative to create a fund from the private sector to support Nepal’s post-earthquake reconstruction. That will further consolidate our relations.

So, Nepal-India diplomacy will now be guided from the political level? India willingly or unwillingly micromanaged Nepal’s affairs in the past, but its new political leadership seems to have realised that was a mistake and should not be repeated.

You really believe that? It’s evident in India’s actions so far. Instead of always making a mountain out of a molehill, we should acknowledge the change and work towards strengthening our relations. We have assured India that anti-India activities will not take place in, through, or from Nepal. We have also explained our concerns. As a result, several agreements that got stuck for years have now been inked. So, there is hope.

Was that change possible because a political person like you was sent to New Delhi as ambassador?

Change is possible only with our own initiative. India is a vast country, and it would be difficult to fix appointments with Indian political leaders even for our top leaders. So, we should maintain our protocol. We should be sensitive about whom we can meet and whom we should avoid meeting. We should not hurt our nationalism by meeting anyone against protocol. I think many of our leaders have a problem following protocol.

Is it true that a section of the Indian political leadership is against the draft of Nepal’s new constitution?

India’s official policy is to endorse whatever decision Nepal takes. India is not against the draft, but some of its agencies might be. But they don’t really matter. If they did, we would not have arrived at this point.

How does India’s political leadership see Nepal’s constitution drafting process?

They think consensus should be forged among a majority of parties if an all-party consensus is elusive. They see the constitution drafting process as being in relation with Nepal’s peace and prosperity. There is a growing protest against the India-China deal on using Lipu Lekh as a new trade hub. Have you raised that concern?

I have yet to fully understand the nitpicky of the Lipu Lekh deal. I was too busy with earthquake-relief effort but I am now studying all agreements signed after the Sugauli Treaty. The Lipu Lekh issue will be solved diplomatically.

What about other border issues?

A team from the Department of Survey has just finished inspecting border pillars along the Nepal-India border. We are also trying to sort out disputes related to Susta and Kalapani at the higher level.

Do you have any programs planned to ensure protection of Nepalis living in India?

The data about Nepalis living in India is not convincing. Nepalis have been living in India since the Sugauli Treaty and the estimated number of Nepalis in India varies from 3-7 million. We are now collecting the real data of Nepalis in India.

Nepal could not send an ambassador to India for four years. Has that created problems?

India is an important country not just because it is huge and our closest neighbour but also because 82 countries see Nepal through the eyes of India. So, we should not have kept our embassy in New Delhi without ambassador for such a long time. We should give more importance to Nepal-India diplomacy.
Rebuilding businesses better

Industrialist Pushpumi Muraraka is the new leader of Nepal’s businesses. The general convention on 1 July of Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) decided to forego an election and unanimously selected him as the new President.

Nepali Times: There were two other candidates to the post of FNCCI president, how did you get them agree on your name?

Pushpumi Muraraka: We all thought we should sour relation by opting for elections especially when FNCCI is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary. When we decided to forge a consensus on the FNCCI’s new leadership, I was a clear favourite because I had worked as senior Vice President in the immediate past executive committee. Former FNCCI presidents and friends from district committees also helped me secure this post.

What do you think are your challenges?

My foremost challenge is to retain the unity that we showed in the FNCCI convention by coming to a consensus. Wounds of those who felt hurt will take time to heal. But there is no alternative to unity among us in the business fraternity. The earthquake dealt a blow to small and medium-sized enterprises, and we need to work together to rebuild and rehabilitate the businesses. We also face challenges in getting the new Labour Act and Company Act passed by the Parliament.

How will you keep this unity intact?

Disputes that surface during the FNCCI conventions are not about ideology. We all want to help the private sector flourish. In the past FNCCI elections, those who won were too arrogant to work together with the defeated candidates and those who did not win also questioned the legitimacy of elections. But I will work together with everyone.

Is the private sector ready to help Nepal’s post-earthquake reconstruction?

We are ready to work with the government on Public-Private Partnership or any other models.

What is the take of the business community on the draft constitution?

Our main concerns are market-driven economy and rights over private property. We will make public our official statement on it very soon. We will demand amendments to the draft, if needed. We had interacted with political parties to express our concerns about the constitution. We hope the new constitution will certainly address the concerns about ensuring a free market competition and the right to private property.

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Enter: Chief Justice Shrestha

Kalyan Shrestha has the challenging task of restoring the integrity of a tarnished Supreme Court, and protecting the separation of powers

Compared to his predecessor from whom he took over on Wednesday, Justice Kalyan Kumar Prasad Shah was appointed some nine months ago, he promised that he would respect the separation of powers and never compromise the independence of judiciary. This was a legacy of the controversial appointment of Chief Justice Khil Raj Rana as Chairman of the Interim Election Government in 2013. But it was under Shah’s watch that the Supreme Court got embroiled last month in another tussle between the Legislature and the Judiciary with the interim order issued by the single bench of Justice Girish Chandra Lal on the 16-point agreement between four political parties.

Some of Shah’s other verdicts like the one on ex-crown princess Prenara Rajya Laxmi has been criticised for its lack of transparency even by other justices and the Nepal Bar Association. The case which was filed on January was hastily decided in four months, unprecedented in Nepal’s judicial history.

His decision to appoint Deepak Timilsina as the FT adviser, a person who was fired by former Chief Justice Ram Prasad Shrestha was investigated by Himal Khubchandrata two weeks ago. But the most damning blot was his acquittal of Vesha Lama, a fake doctor from Humla who had embezzled millions from the American charity, Citta, to build a hospital in Simikot. The story has been doggedly pursued by Bhirikut Rai of the Centre for Investigative Journalism for three years.

Shah also failed to appoint justices of the Supreme Court which has a massive backlog of cases despite saying time and again that it was his top priority. In the end, he blamed the Nepal Bar Association for not recommending its representatives to the Judicial Council.

Justice Shrestha’s foremost challenge now is to face the new constitution and its provisions related to Judiciary. Most provisions in the draft like a separate constitutional court and the reappointment of justices after the promulgation of new constitution have always been criticised by the Judiciary.

The Constituent Assembly on Tuesday put the draft up to the general public for feedback, even though the full court comprised of all the justices of apex court had suggested to the CA that some of the provisions regarding the Judiciary be revoked.

This move has already been criticised by some former justices like Balaram KC, Bharat Babadur Karki who have argued that the court can only give its view through writ petitions or unless asked by the Constituent Assembly itself. The full court’s suggestion also includes extending the retirement of judges to 79 years, cancelling reapointments, curtailing the CIAA’s (Center for Investigation of Abuse of Authority) right to investigate the justices after their retirement.

All these provisions are driven by the personal agenda of the justices, and send the wrong message to the public about the Judiciary. Despite his clean image, the new Chief Justice Kalyan Shrestha is equally involved in backing these demands, and he will be under scrutiny during his tenure.

Justice Shrestha will have his plate full during the political transition. The written statement regarding the interim order given by Justice Lal on the 16-point agreement is likely to come up for review by a full bench which is likely to decide to scrap it. When we met Justice Shrestha on Tuesday morning at his residence, he said: “I have a very short tenure as the Chief Justice, and people have many expectations. I cannot bring any drastic change but will try my best to restore the public trust in the Judiciary.”

Chief Justice Shrestha has established much precedence in cases involving human rights and women’s issues, and has a reputation for competence and decisiveness. On the other hand some people from legal fraternity argue that Shrestha may be influenced by the non-government sector with which he has been involved.

But even if he can just start cleaning up the image of the Supreme Court as being a den of self-serving judges, he will have fulfilled a much-needed task. @binitadahal

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The fact that this week’s brisk showers were accompanied by localised lightning and thunder meant that this is still not a 100 per cent monsoonal. A real monsoon is relentless, steady rain covering an entire section of the Himalaya. The fact that we are still getting convection storms means that a lot of the activity is still isolated. This increases the chances of cloudbursts, landslides and destructive flooding. The rains accompanied by lightning will continue into Friday, but things are expected to settle down to quiet and sometimes heavy squalls more characteristic of the southwest monsoon.

KATHMANDU

PLAYTIME:
Sushil Marik plays with toys made by his grandmother who says the three-year-old has grown smarter with increased playtime (top). Radha Devi Thakur of Saptari uses toys she made to educate her children (bottom).

TOYS ARE US

Mothers in Saptari get together to make toys to educate their children

Karo Marik beams with pride as her three-year-old grandson, Sushil, picks up a clay bird and says ‘chunmun’, Maithili for baby chick. Sushil’s mother, Babita Marik stands on the side, smiling. Sushil then picks up a dozen empty nail polish bottles and starts naming the colours, one by one. Figures of birds and animals, colourful corn cobs, and rag dolls lie scattered all around him.

All of Sushil’s play things were made by his grandmother who learnt the skills at a workshop conducted earlier this year by Seto Gurans, which works in the field of early childhood development (ECD) in Saptari. The workshop, a part of the Ek Tokari Khelauna (A basket of toy) campaign that encourages mothers to use ‘learning by playing’ method has been conducted in 30 communities in this Terai district.

“Ever since we gave him toys he’s grown smarter, he now recognises different colours and shapes,” says Babita. Karo adds: “He has also become more active. Earlier he would only cling onto his mother but now he plays independently.”

During the training the women are taught to make toys from locally available resources like clay, paper and old clothes. Empty shampoo bottles, juice cartons, old clothes which would otherwise be disposed are recycled to make new toys. The women also learn how to craft toys from bamboo and clay.

At the end of the workshop each participant walks home with a basket of toys for her child. Some are distributed to ECD centers in the communities.

“This is the first time we introduced the campaign here and it’s already become very popular,” says Laxmi Rai of UNICEF, which provided technical assistance and funding to the program.

Parents say children have become more interactive, creative and confident since they were given toys a month ago. The women in the community have also had to come out of their shells to participate in the workshops.

Most of the participants are daily wage earners and work in the fields. Around 30 women participate at each workshop.

“I attended the training for my son,” says 23-year-old Binita Thakur as she watches her three-year-old son Ayush play with the house she made. Thakur herself wasn’t allowed to play much as a child and she doesn’t want her son to suffer a similar fate. “I want my son to play as much as he wants,” she says.

Even though Ayush keeps breaking the toys she makes, Thakur has no complaints about making a new set of toys almost every week. “Because I use whatever resources is available in the house, it doesn’t cost a thing,” she says.

The workshops have targeted women from socially marginalised communities with poor economic background.

Nineteen-year-old Kalawati Thakur says her mother Radha Devi has grown more attentive to her sister’s upbringing after attending the workshop. “In my case, I was left on my own. But she’s become more attentive towards my sister’s development,” says Kalawati.

“I did not know how to make toys or the benefit it brings to my children back then,” says Radha Devi, “but things are different now and I feel glad to see the joy these toys bring to my child.”

SAHINA SHRESTHA
in SAPTARI

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MOBILIO
Gallipat Patan, A storytelling workshop by Katha Satha in collaboration with Photo Kathmandu, with a focus on using mixed media. This time the subject is Patan and the workshop will be facilitated by Pravin Adhikari, Muna Gurung and Shumeetiya Pradhan. 20 to 24 July. Application deadline: 15 July. Rs 1000 (partial scholarships available). kathasatha.org.np

Critical mass, A monthly meet up of cyclists who go on a ride, their purpose: reclaim the streets. 31 July, 6:30PM, Restro Papa Square

Community yoga, Learn the basics of Hatha yoga and enjoy Community yoga. 18 July, 6.45am to 4.45pm, for a birthing centre in Pyutar, Lalitpur. ride for 50, 75, or 100 km to raise money Kathmandu Kora, the benefit of four porters and their struggle to make ends meet.

Nagarjun Hike, Hire up the Nagarjun this weekend with the hike for Nepal which aims to motivate young Nepalis to explore a different location every Saturday. 17 July, Rs 200 includes a Tabib, snacks, park ticket, and first aid; 7am, Shakupath Nagarjun National Park, for bookings contact: 9841738536, 9815278644

Child wellbeing, Classes on basic wellbeing skills for children aged 3 to 12. Starts 14 July, 4 to 5.15pm, every Tuesday, Gyanmandala Complex (Moksh), Jhamsikhel, Kathmandu

Café Aamu, If you are a rice lover and crave Chinese food all-day, all-week, then the tofu and Chinese Black Mushroom with Rice is a must try.

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Child wellbeing, Classes on basic wellbeing skills for children aged 3 to 12.

Learning meditation, A five-day course on fundamentals of meditation with Vishal Mishra. 17 July, Rs 2000, Swastik Wellness Kathmandu, LIC Building, Lajimpat

French speak, Admission open for July intake of students at Alliance Francaise in Kathmandu. 16 July to 28 August, Alliance Francaise, (01)4451163, 0144542832, general.gk@gmail.com www.alliancefrancaise.org.np

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Singha Darbar ko Tender

The inefficiency of government and corruption that riddles give steady grip to the govt in tea shops, informal family gatherings and diplomatic receptions. Development projects have a way of stretching on for years: folks in Kathmandu are still waiting for Melamchi and after seven years the humble citizens of Nepal have finally seen a draft of the new constitution. The inefficiency and the corruption that goes on behind the scenes of government are so obvious and yet so veiled. Now, Dilip Ranabhat has adapted Ajay Obvious and yet so veiled. Now, Dilip Ranabhat has adapted Ajay Shukla’s satirical play 'Taj Mahal ko Tender' from Hindi to Nepal’s parallel universe making fun of the inefficiencies and corruption that plague Nepal’s politics and bureaucracy.

The play introduces the audience to Sarkar, a self-important, Candy Crush-playing, level video-viewing fellow whose dream is to build a Singh Darbar so his legacy lives on. He has Thapa, an engineer with questionable morals, for the project and wants it to be completed as soon as possible. But Thapa and other opportunist middlemen have different plans. While Sarkar waits for the foundation to be laid, Thapa erects two multi-storey houses of his own, and initiates the building of a new five-star hotel. Leaders claiming to be working for the people and contractors fill their pockets with easy money. All this has resonance in post-earthquake Nepal because there is talk of demolishing the damaged secretariat building and rebuilding it.

From creating 'Singha Darbar Construction Corporation' to setting up an international corporation to sell shares, the audience are reminded of various real life CEOs of multinationals who control our destiny but whose true intentions are highly questionable.

First time director Ranabhat succeeds in creating memorable characters and the actors hold on to them throughout the play. Actor Bholu Raj Sapkota of the Barfi fame shines as Thapa. Played by Prakash Dahal, Toya’s gait and ‘hajji’ succeeds in raking in laughter from the audience every time the character appears on stage. Although the play has its moments (like when the main characters talk about how hard it is to work in a system where corruption is rife without any self-introspection, hiring 601 engineers to work on the plan and a peon getting caught for accepting a cup of tea from someone while a CIAA official openly demands the remaining ‘waff’ from the contractor and engineer) there are times one feels that the story has dragged on for too long. After 1:20 hours of playtime, this viewer felt a bit of splicing would have helped to keep it crisp and tight. ❗

Sahina Shrestha

Revolution Café

Finding a quiet place to dine on the busy streets of Thamel can be quite a challenge. But once in a while you stumble across cafes that lets you forget your location. Revolution Café is one such place.

The cafe is spacious with both indoor and outdoor seating. Its garden is pleasant and despite the rains makes for the more preferable of the two seating options.

Judging by the presence of diners during the day of our visit, Revolution café it seems has been successful in attracting both local and international customers.

The menu is a mix mash of popular Nepali favourites with starters like chips chilly, chicken chilly, mushroom chilly. You get the idea, right? The chef has also introduced a special menu featuring mango-inspired dishes. Revolution also serves stick food items like fried potatoes, sausages and grilled chicken. So if you ever wanted to try street food but worried about the stall’s hygiene, you know now where to come.

Because my partner and I wanted to have a healthy full-course meal we decided to forego the aforementioned items. To start with I had a small Green Garden Salad (Rs 270) while my partner decided on the Green Spinach Soup (Rs 290). The salad was neither fresh nor tasty. The greens were soggy before I’d even put the dressing on them. But my partner had better luck. The soup had a beautiful consistency, and tasted absolutely delicious. I even liked the brown garlic bread served on the side.

For our mains we chose the Cajun Grilled Chicken with mashed potatoes, grilled veggies and mango salsa (Rs 490). The serving was huge and enough for two to share. The dish was well presented to the eye. The hotness of the tangy sauce was offset by the sweetness of the potato and mango salsa. A big thumbs up.

We decided to end our meal with a plate of Nutella Crepes with Vanilla Ice cream (Rs 270). While the crepe had a generous amount of Nutella spread over, it lacked the lightness that sets apart crepes from pancakes. Nonetheless, the presentation of the dish and copious amounts of ice cream and Nutella made up for the not-so-perfect pan-crepe.

For the spiritual souls, the café offers a unique breakfast experience every morning from 8.30AM to 9.30AM where a healthy breakfast is accompanied by a session of yoga. Like many other cafes in Thamel, Revolution has also caught the live music bug. We decided to try more of its mango infused dishes and to eat in quietude.

Karma Gurung

How to get there: Revolution café is located in Bhagwan Bihal, Ameri Marg, Thamel.

REVOLUTION CAFE

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To
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Resurrecting Kas

The shrine after which Kathmandu was named withstood many quakes in the past.

Rabi Bhandari was lining up for a blood donation program organised by Nimbus Savings and Credit Cooperative that Saturday morning at the historic Kasthamandap. More than 50 other employees of the cooperative had also gathered for the event. Some of the women were reclined on chairs with IV needles stuck to their arms, others were chatting with colleagues when the wooden structure started shaking violently.

"Those of us at the edge of the building ran outside," Bhandari recalls, "but when we looked back we saw that the whole structure had collapsed. Some of our friends who had been in the middle were crushed by the falling beams."

The shock and horror of that day and the grief of having lost so many friends is still written large upon Bhandari’s face. Altogether 10 employees from Nimbus were killed.

"Bricks and mud started falling on us, and nearby temples began going down one by one," Amit Awale told Nepal Samacharpatra. He went back into the ruins of Kasthamandap to rescue alive three others, including a nurse and two blood donors.

Besides the cost in human life, the destruction of the 900-year-old structure was also an enormous symbolic loss for the Valley’s cultural heritage. Kathmandu owes its name to Kasthamandap, which is said to have been originally made from the timber of a single tree, hence its name. It is also called Marusattal.

The first historical mention of Kasthamandap goes back to 1090 AD which makes the structure one of the oldest among the monuments of Kathmandu Valley – far older than Dharara which has dominated conversations about the loss of historical monuments in the April earthquake.

Kasthamandap was primarily a public pavilion, a rest-house which sat along two ancient Himalayan trade routes as they passed through Kathmandu. Traders did not just rest here, but also stored their goods on their way to Tibet or India. They enjoyed the services of the Malakar flower sellers and Sarafi money exchangers, who even today neatly fill up Kasthamandap’s corners. While Hanuman Dhoka and other palaces were built for kings and the nobility and temples were dedicated to the Gods, Kasthamandap was built for the people," says Bhushan Tuladhar, a heritage conservationist with UN-Habitat. Kasthamandap had a multiplicity of functions and was also a shrine for Karphata Yogis, a group of holy, ear-piercing renouncers. The inside of the
Kasthamandap is no more. What is perhaps almost as unfortunate is that a majority of Nepalis believe Kasthamandap was built many centuries after its actual construction. For this reason, experts, journalists, and city-dwellers have not lamented Kasthamandap’s loss to a great extent.

But the fact remains: Kasthamandap was easily the oldest standing public structure of any kind in the valley, dating back to at least 1143 AD. While much of the building interior and façade was renovated over the intervening centuries, experts believe the large central platform (mandap) and the enormous four wooden columns most likely date back to the original construction.

The misinformation about Kasthamandap’s much younger age stems from 19th century Western publications, unfairly denying Kasthamandap the fame it deserves because it is ‘only about 400 years old’.

There is now talk about restoration of the more popular structures in Kathmandu Durbar Square (Upper floors of the Basantapur Tower, a devastating loss in itself), Tralîköya Mohan, build at least 537 years later, and the iconic Mājus Dewal, built at least 549 years after Kasthamandap. But few seem as concerned about Kasthamandap’s fall or about the makeshift tents build right atop the unclear and unsorted rubble more than a month after the devastating earthquakes.

Luciano Petech in Mediaeval History of Nepal mentions an unpublished manuscript account, according to which the Kasthamandap satal already existed in 1050 AD, during the reign of Harsadeva (ruled 1048–1099 AD). The polymath Rahul Sankrityayan, traveling under great duress to Tibet in 1936, found in the Sakyas Monastery a worn-out palm-leaf copy of a manuscript called Namasangiti.

The colophon of this manuscript contains the word Sri Kasthamandap and is the first confirmed record of the name ‘Kasthamandap’ to date. According to Petech, this colophon and transcription was completed in Brahma Tol, Kasthamanda in ‘the last hours of Friday, September 24th, 1143’ during the reign of Narendra Deva and somehow made its way into Tibet.

That makes Kasthamandap around 900 years old at the time of the 2015 earthquake. If we do not restore Kasthamandap, and search for the historic treasures within, we will lose a part of our heritage and a part of our identity forever.

Read the full original of this post by Dipesh Risal in rebuildingkasthamandap.org

A heap of history

DIPESH RISAL

The last 900 years but came down in this one

Kasthamandap structure had priceless ancient copper-plated inscriptions, and a rare statue of Lord Gorakeshnanath, which the Yogis say is the earliest among other figures in Gorakeshnanath and Gorkha. All these treasures still need to be rescued from under the ruins of Kasthamandap.

Although the timber structure stood for a millennium, enduring massive earthquakes that have struck Kathmandu every 100 years or so, it didn’t survive this one. “It would not be right to call this building old and weak. Structures like Kasthamandap need to be maintained and repaired often,” says architect and urban planner Sudarshan Raj Tiwari. He adds it is possible Kasthamandap’s wooden joints were rotting away and simply could not support the weight of the building during the big earthquake. Kasthamandap was last repaired 50 years ago during the reign of King Mahendra, but that did not save it.

Yet, for a building with such historical and cultural significance, Kasthamandap has drawn less attention compared to other temples and shrines. For heritage documentarian Alok Siddh Tuladhar, Kasthamandap was a memento from his forebears who were traditionally engaged in kasthamando’s trade with Lhasa. “It is possible my ancestors also rested here, so whenever I pass through Kasthamandap with my children, I make it a point to tell them about its history and significance,” he says. Nevertheless, efforts are underway to fundraise to rebuild Kasthamandap. Dipesh Risal, a Nepali in the United States has collected and published a trove of information on Kasthamandap in an effort to ease the reconstruction process (see sidebar, right).

One was The Heritage Cycle Ride and the other a marathon led by Baikuntha Manandhar.

Questions are now being raised about how true to the original material and design the new structure should be, or whether adding concealed steel or concrete reinforcements should be allowed. It is felt the project should be led by a government body and include historians, structural engineers, heritage experts and also religious groups for whom Kasthamandap holds special religious significance, like the Kanphata Yogis, who are already feeling left out of the discussions about their temple’s future. There are also pressing questions of how to protect and retrieve the copper inscriptions and figures buried under the rubble.

Says Alok Tuladhar: “It helps to see rebuilding Kasthamandap as really a part of the cycle of birth, life and death. Things, like people, rise up and come down. We must accept that and move on to rebuild this great monument of our history and culture.”

The last 900 years but came down in this one
Earlier this week, the International New York Times’ two veteran film critics, A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis, published a discussion, as they periodically do, on their thoughts regarding a marked rise (at least this past year) in female centric films such as Pitch Perfect 2, Spy, Inside Out, and most recently Mad Max: Fury Road starring Charlize Theron as a ferocious, furious character who makes war against the patriarchy.

Their discussion is a crucial one at this time as films and TV shows move further away, however slowly, from white, male centric plotlines that are designed for the usual audiences that mostly consist of the aforementioned.

Both Ms. Dargis and Mr. Scott (the latter of whom self-admittedly falls into the above category) speculate on the effect that increased female viewing power has on the nature of the content of successful shows, which brings us, quite neatly, to the question of the smashing success of Call the Midwife, a wildly unlikely BBC One production that is now firmly in its fourth season with a fifth in the works.

Based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth, a real life midwife who served in London’s impoverished East End in the 1950s and 1960s – the series follows the dedicated nuns, and the trained midwives who commit to Nonnatus House and its mission of delivering infants from all walks of life safely into the world.

If the words “midwife” and “babies” have already sent you screaming into the hills, whether you are a man or a woman, I would regardless ask you to watch this gem of a series, so rooted in historical context, with a spectacular ensemble cast, and written with equal parts humour and compassion, with many episodes that will leave you openly weeping. To quote Dargis who, in turn, so astutely and eloquently quotes George Eliot, we need art that can help people “to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures.”

Watching cinema is an instinctive act of empathy. If we are to evolve further, and not just in the way we view art and cinema, we must extrapolate the lessons learnt from the arts, moving towards practicing a deeper, truer version of empathy starting with the writing of our constitution, the drafters of which do not seem to understand that the country around them is made up of a complex mixture of people who may differ from them in gender, culture, and colour but are as deserving of the rights as themselves.

**MUST SEE**

Sophia Pande

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**FIRST DAY:** Newly appointed Chief Justice Kalyan Shrestha takes office on Tuesday.

**GRANTING HELP:** German ambassador to Nepal Mathias Meyer and Finance Secretary Suman Prasad Sharma sign a grant agreement on Wednesday. The German government has announced an assistance of €29 million.

**HERITAGE RIDE:** Chief Secretary Leela Maui Paudyal participates in a cycle rally to raise funds for reconstruction of Kathmandu Durbar Square last week.

**HAPPENINGS**

Tourists take a selfie in front of a temple at Kathmandu Durbar Square last week.

**COURTESY CALL:** American ambassador to Nepal Peter Bodde meets Prime Minister Sushil Koirala at Baluwatar on Monday.
The chariot of Machhindranath was on its way from Bungamati to Patan on a more-important-than-usual 12-yearly commemoration of the annual festival when the earthquake struck. The chariot had arrived in the township of Chyasikot with its colourful pendants flying in the breeze, and excited youth pulling it with fervor. But at 11:56 AM on 25 April, everything came to halt. Houses started swaying and temples came tumbling down. The tall wooden chariot itself swayed from side to side, although it did not topple. In Bungamati itself, the temple of Machhindranath where the deity is usually housed, collapsed. But the god survived because it was in the chariot.

Tradition demands that every 12 years the chariot has to be rebuilt from the scratch by the Barahis and Yewals belonging to the community of Newari carpenters with their chariot-making skills passed down from generation to generation. This year, they used special types of timber, reed and ropes since nails are not allowed to be used on the holy chariot. Unlike the journey in other years, the festival route this time was different: every 12 years the chariot is pulled from Bungamati to Patan and Jawalakhel, and back to Bungamati.

If there hadn’t been an earthquake, the festival should by now have been in full swing with the Bhoto Jatra in Jawalakhel attended by the President. But this year, the chariot is still in Chyasikot, exactly where it stopped on 25 April. It needed repairs even before the earthquake, but now has additional structural damage. It has to be completely rebuilt before it can complete its journey. However, no one seems to know when that will be.

“The chariot should be pulled and must complete its journey, it must be concluded,” said Dil Kumar Barahi of the Barahi Society. Popular myths of doom and destruction have always surrounded Machhindranath if the journey is disrupted for any reason. In 2000, the chariot of the red rain god toppled over and the Bhoto Jatra festival that the King would have attended had to be postponed. The very next year was the royal massacre in which King Birendra and many other members of the royal family were killed. Myth or no myth, the show must go on, and the chariot has to be pulled to its destination. The Guthi Sansthan which is responsible for the construction of the chariot had decided to rebuild it after an inspection, but it has yet to send out a formal letter to the carpenters. This hasn’t only left the makers of Machhindranath uncertain about the future of the 12-year festival, but also disrupted their everyday life.

“We are carpenters, we’ll rebuild it but when the organisation that has to speak up is quiet, there isn’t much we can do,” said Barahi. “But the bigger issue is we have other jobs we have to complete to earn a living. Rebuilding the chariot will take two months.”

Also waiting for Machhindranath to arrive in Jawalakhel is the chariot of the consort goddess, Minnath, which is itself parked at Gabahal in Patan.

Ashok Raj Shakya, the priest of Minnath, says that there is nothing to do but wait until the Guthi Sansthan decides on rebuilding Machhindranath so that the festival can go ahead. Despite this, there are still devotees who come to worship at the chariot. Says Shakya: It is unfortunate that the earthquake happened in a year when Minnath invites Rato Machhindranath as a guest.
**Foreign affairs**

**Hi again,**

The rise of foreign employment has led to an increase in the number of extramarital affairs in the country. While having relationships outside marriage is condemned in almost every country and culture, in Nepal married couples usually turn a blind eye to their partner’s unfaithful ways because divorce still continues to be a social taboo.

The result: a lot of unhappy families, where the children will most likely grow up questioning the sanctity of marriage.

Please send more questions to: anjana.rajbhandary@nepalitimes.com or @AnjyRajy

**ALL IN THE MIND**

Anjana Rajbhandary

Dear Anjana,

I am a 28-year old married woman living in Kathmandu with my five year old son. My husband and I have been married for six years. He works in Doha so I only see him once or twice a year for a few weeks at a time. I feel like we barely know each other. We behave like strangers when together and the atmosphere automatically gets tense around us. I don’t think we love one another anymore. But I would never consider divorcing him. My family would disown me!

On the other hand, I hate being alone. A man I have known for several years recently suggested having an affair with him, and I must admit I found the offer extremely tempting. After all I need a friend and want to be intimate with another person. I know I am a good mother, but I don’t know how long I can continue being a good wife if my husband is a distant stranger?

Sincerely, Loveless in Lalitpur

A: Long distance marriages are challenging. Long term absence can pose a significant risk to a family’s stability as you have stated, however, in your case you clearly do not want to stay with your husband and are only with him for the sake of your family. You could either choose to stay in an unhappy, loveless marriage and suffer for a long time or address the problem by talking to your family and putting an end to the relationship. This will take a lot of courage but will most likely make you happier in the long run. Being a divorcee brings new sets of challenges in a society like ours. That said, living a life to please society is something that does not seem practical to me when the society actually does not really care about the person’s happiness. You have a son and you probably want to provide the best for him, the choices you make will affect him in the long run. As for your friend’s offer, it is entirely your decision. Does it have the potential to become something more? Are you comfortable with having a secret continue? How will this affect your friendship? Most extramarital affairs do eventually end, and given your child, it is important you consider the consequences of all your possible options. Personally I would never endorse an extramarital affair, but in the end it is your decision and you need to do what makes you feel best for you. Remember, it is impossible to please everyone, so choose the one that makes you most important to you before you take the next step.

Anjana is a certified mental health rehabilitation technician and has four years of experience in child mental health in Maine, USA.

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**Local is best**

Instead of micronutrient additives for children living in earthquake shelters, we should promote nutritious local foods

When the National Planning Commission carried out a post-disaster needs assessment last month, its final report underlined the need to use local indigenous foods wherever possible to overcome malnutrition among children and infants living in temporary shelters.

**GUEST COLUMN**

Aruna Uprety

That was a welcome statement, however that is not what is happening. In fact, the reason nutritious local foods are not being used is because we are inundated with so-called ‘emergency’ food supplements and micronutrient additives.

Children everywhere are nutritionally vulnerable when disasters strike not just because of the lack of proper diet, but also because of poor hygiene, sanitation and physical stress. Post-earthquake children in the 15 worst-affected districts suffer from deficiency in the intake of iron and other trace elements in their diet because of emergency dry foods like biscuits and noodles they have been eating.

In Sindhupalchok a parent told me recently: “We have food, they have given us enough noodles to last us a year.” This is worrying. Children brought up with this diet will refuse to go back to their healthy staple of grain, vegetables and meat which carry all the energy proteins and micronutrients their growing bodies need.

The Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) has taken steps to address this problem. Combat those challenges through the community management of acute malnutrition including Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF), counselling, breast milk substitute code monitoring, and establishment of Outpatient Treatment Programmes (OTP’s) in health facilities in the affected districts.

Another worrying aspect of emergency food relief is the distribution of supplementary Micronutrient Powder even though donor surveys have found that its use in normal settings over the past five years in 20 districts haven’t produced any of the anticipated nutritional outcomes that benefit health and population of children.

Indeed, one report says: ‘Large and strong populations where malnutrition is common and so are diarrhoea and pneumonia among children micronutrient powder aggravates diarrhoea.’

Mothers I have met in the districts have all said the children don’t like the taste of the powder and they confirmed that children had diarrhoea after consuming it. Our argument against Micronutrient Powders in Nepal is that we already have nutrient rich food but this fact is ignored by those who bring in these supplements from outside and pressure local communities to use them.

Why don’t we pay as much attention to traditional foods available locally which have all the micronutrients children need? These are easily available and much cheaper. An Ethiopian doctor once told me how his country was able to reduce malnutrition among children by making flour from sprouted soyabeans and chickpeas. Being full of protein, vitamins, calcium and other micronutrients, it helped Ethiopia overcome malnutrition among children.

The Nepali diet has sprouted beans, and this could easily be distributed to earthquake affected areas instead of imported supplements of dubious efficacy.

In emergency situations, nutrition interventions tend to focus on the treatment of acute malnutrition through therapeutic feeding and food aid. But it should not be blanket use, and interventions should be based on the need of the child. Assistance may also be required to help restore local food production and community access to safe and nutritious foods, and we have enough experience in that here.

For instance, we have sesame (til), flax seed (lalsi), peanuts, many local green vegetables and pulses rich in micronutrients which can be used as supplements for children as well as for adults. Research on the preparation of carrot and sprouted lentil flour has been done and these results could be used to increase supplementation.

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Gurkhas at Gallipoli - 4

July 1914

In 1914, Nepali Gurkha battalions (‘Gurks’) and Allied forces were deployed in what was predicted to be a disastrous campaign to take control of the high ground of the Gallipoli peninsula in order to threaten Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. This is the fourth installment of a series of flashbacks of the involvement of Gurkhas in the First World War.

DAVID SEDDON

The casualties suffered at Gallipoli by both sides at the end of the first week of June 1914 were appalling. After the failure of the assaults mounted in late May and early June by the Allies, they were exhausted. The Ottoman forces, which had attempted to take advantage of this by launching a counter-attack, had found resistance greater than they anticipated.

In the bloody fighting that ensued, all three Gurkha battalions (1/6th, 1/5th and 2/10th) were engaged, often using their khukuris to good effect. The 1/6th Battalions (1/6th, 1/5th and 2/10th) were engaged, often using their khukuris to good effect. The Ottomans lost an estimated 10,000 men in a week, but the casualties on the British side were also terrible, around 7,000. With both sides badly punished, only a few small-scale attacks were launched by the warring sides during the rest of June and Allied progress was slow. Towards the end of the month, however, the right flank had been pushed forward and Hunter Weston decided now to take the left flank forward as well. Three brigades, including 29th Indian Brigade, were ordered to drive the enemy back 1,000m from their position northwest of Gurkha Bluff. They would advance along Gully Spur and Gully Ravine. The first assault of the Battle of Gully Ravine began on the morning of 28 June 1915. The battle went well on the left but very badly on the right. The 2nd/10th Gurkhas followed up the heavy bombardment which the British guns had maintained for about two hours and moved under a cliff, then, using all the cover available, climbed to the top of the cliff and routed the defenders. It was, perhaps, the most successful set-piece attack of the whole campaign, for the battalion took five lines of Ottoman trenches.

On 28 June-5 July, the Ottomans lost 16,000 troops, most of them around Gully Ravine during their counter-attacks on 3rd and 5th July. But the British and allied casualties were also heavy. General Hamilton expressed himself well pleased with the result of the Gully Ravine battle, but the repulse of the Ottoman attacks on 5 July marked the end of serious fighting for the 29th Indian Brigade in the Helles area, and after a few days spent in bivouac on the coast, it was moved on 9 and 10 July to the island of Imbros for rest and recuperation. By then it had been reduced to a skeleton. The three Gurkha battalions were badly affected but were the other units of the Brigade, particularly the Sikhs. But it was the shortage of British officers that was the primary reason for withdrawing the brigade from the front.

The 2nd/10th had lost 40 per cent of their force, and by 1 July, only three officers, all subalterns, remained with the unit. Under the command of these young men and the surviving Gurkha officers, the battalion held on to all its territorial gains but was effectively decimated by 5 July. It was only five weeks since their arrival at Gallipoli. The 1/5th and 1/6th Gurkhas had to be temporarily amalgamated because of their losses, and the 14th Sikhs were by now so depleted that they had only one British officer, 1 VCO and 117 other ranks that they were attached to the 2/10th Gurkhas for rations and maintenance. Like the 14th Sikhs, the 1/5th Gurkhas had only one surviving British officer, with only eight in the 5th Gurkhas as a whole, including the staff officers, and every unit was severely reduced in numbers.

The battle of Gully Ravine on 28 June marked the end of serious fighting for the 29th Indian Brigade in the Helles area, and after a few days spent in bivouac on the coast, it was moved on 9 and 10 July to the island of Imbros for rest and recuperation. By then it had been reduced to a skeleton. The three Gurkha battalions were badly affected but were the other units of the Brigade, particularly the Sikhs. But it was the shortage of British officers that was the primary reason for withdrawing the brigade from the front.

KENNETH ROGGOFF

Cambridge – Most of the debate around China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has centered on the United States’ futile efforts to discourage other advanced economies from joining. Far too little attention has been devoted to understanding why multilateral development lending has so often failed, and what might be done to make it work better.

Multilateral development institutions have probably had their most consistent success when they serve as “knowledge” banks, helping to share experience, best practices, and technical knowledge across regions. By contrast, their greatest failures have come from funding grandiose projects that benefit the current elite, but do not properly balance environmental, social, and development priorities.

There is a general tendency to overestimate the economic benefits of big infrastructure projects in countries riddled by poor governance and corruption, and to underestimate the long-run social costs of having to repay loans whether or not promised revenues materialise. Obviously, the AIIB runs this risk.

That said, there are huge infrastructure needs across developing Asia, and it is high time for the world’s needs. Anyone who attempts to undermine the long-run social costs of having to repay loans whether or not promised revenues materialise. Obviously, the AIIB runs this risk.

Given the legacy of problematic loans and projects funded by Western-led infrastructure banks, it is reasonable to ask whether another one is needed. Still, if the AIIB views itself mainly as a knowledge bank, rather than a funding vehicle, it could provide real added value.

World Bank’s record is that its role has been most consistently positive when it helps countries with “soft” development infrastructure: technical assistance and serving as a global knowledge bank. When its main role has been to provide financial muscle, the results have been less impressive.

Indeed, a strong case can be made that development aid would be more effective if it took the form of outright grants, rather than loans that solely need to be repaid. Headline aid numbers might seem less impressive, but long-run results would be better. Moreover, the world is awash in liquidity right now, and even when a government’s own money is inadequate, it is often possible to establish public-private partnerships to build genuinely high-return projects. Competent government is a far scarcer commodity than cash.

Unfortunately, it is far from clear that the Chinese model of infrastructure development can be exported universally. China’s strong central government and its immensely powerful state-owned enterprises overwhelm opposition from people displaced by new roads, bridges, and dams, and for many years has required little over environmental concerns and workers’ rights. Whereas, in democratic India, for example, it took 10 years to rebuild Mumbai’s airport, because courts forced the government to respect the rights of squatters on its outskirts.

Given the legacy of problematic loans and projects funded by Western-led infrastructure banks, it is reasonable to ask whether another one is needed. Still, if the AIIB views itself mainly as a knowledge bank, rather than a funding vehicle, it could provide real added value. www.projectsyndicate.org

Will the AIIB work?
The trilateral path
Nepal stands to benefit from the rapprochement between India and China, and not just in earthquake reconstruction

During his visit to China last month, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a pitch for trilateral cooperation to help Nepal with earthquake assistance. He and Chinese President Xi Jing Ping agreed to work with Nepal for mutually coordinated reconstruction and rehabilitation.

No doubt, this is a great leap forward in Indian foreign policy, which has traditionally preferred to deal with its neighbours bilaterally. In fact, New Delhi has steadfastly opposed any attempt by Nepal and Bangladesh to work together with India in regulating the flow of Himalayan rivers.

At the International Conference on Nepal’s Reconstruction in Kathmandu on 23 June, India and China together pledged more than half the $4.4 billion in grants and loans – leaving Nepal’s traditional bilateral donors trailing far behind. This was the best indication yet of how the two giants as our immediate neighbours to the north and south.

Nepal’s governance failure pre-dates the earthquake. In fact, ever since 1960, we have seen a polarised partisan paralysis that has kept Nepal from leapfrogging about in energy, infrastructure, investment and tourism. Even with Nepal’s much-touted successes in community forestry and maternal-child health, the groundwork was laid with the move towards decentralised development during the Panchayat.

For now, it is clear that Nepal’s needs in post-earthquake reconstruction is not so much in cash to rebuild physical infrastructure, but to enhance our governance and management capabilities. That is not something money can buy.

Besides their monetary assistance, therefore, India and China should aim at building the management capacity of their landlocked neighbour so that it is able to emulate both of them in accelerated, sustainable and equitable growth. India, under Prime Minister Modi, has departed significantly from the policies of previous New Delhi rulers in dealing with neighbours and beyond.

Indian analysts themselves have said that New Delhi’s earlier strategy was to create ‘intrinsic instability’ in the neighbourhood in order to gain advantage in bilateral dealings with them. India seems to have shed this policy and, particularly in relation to constitution drafting in Nepal, has left it more or less to the elected Constituent Assembly to come up with its own solution.

There seems to be a sense that Nepal politics is so unpredictable that micromanaging affairs here is nothing but counterproductive to India’s own interest.

China and India are bound by a convergence of interests in Nepal’s stability. China has an additional sensitivity about Tibet, and has been openly casting doubts about whether ethnicity-based federalism along Nepal’s northern border is desirable in the long term.

The failure of Westminster-style democracy in Nepal to ensure development, growth and stability worries both our neighbours. With its feudalistic and stratified state structure, a large proportion of the population has been confined to perpetual poverty.

The entrenched interest of the high caste elite who have traditionally dominated rent-seeking extraction from the governance process has kept the country backward. Chronic corruption among politicians, the bureaucracy and even the private sector is just one of the manifestations of this culture.

So, while most people have continued to suffer in this ‘democracy’, its elected leaders seem to be always in the seats of power to perpetuate their plunder and neglect.

Now, following the massive commitment of aid for earthquake rebuilding there is new dynamic in sight. The constitution-drafting process has dragged on through two elections since 2008, but a handful of politicians have now got together to bulldoze a new constitution through the CA and the so-called public hearing process. The driving force here is not the constitution, as we all know, but power-sharing in a new national government that will include the opposition which wants its hands in the earthquake relief honeypot.

However, without some far reaching transformation in the political culture, even the massive earthquake aid package would be unable to make a lasting impact on the lives of the poor in this country. What Nepal needs is the reformulation of her polity to build democracy from the grassroots up. Since both India and China have dealt with Nepal’s politicians from close quarters, the two countries must contribute to redefine Nepal’s democracy and eventually help the country grow to become a well-governed and prosperous neighbour between them.

GUEST COLUMN
Bihari K Shrestha

POLES APART

After the Constituent Assembly (CA) endorsed the first draft of the new constitution on Tuesday and presented it to the public for comments, Nepal Times asked Laxman Lal Karra of the Sadbhavana Party and Agni Kharel of the CPN-UML for their views. Excerpts:

What is your first impression of the draft?
Agni Kharel: I am aware that the draft has several contentious issues that require serious deliberation.

The Supreme Court issued an interim order against the 16-point deal. Isn’t the draft a violation of the court’s verdict? I have read the full text of the verdict. and I find it difficult to believe that the SC actually issued it. I don’t understand why the SC issued this kind of verdict without listening to our arguments. But we are clear that the statute drafting is a jurisdiction of the CA and no other state organ can take that away, even the apex court.

The SC says the draft violated Article 138 of the Interim Constitution which gives the CA full mandate to restructure the state. Drafting a statute is a political process, and every decision that is taken to this regard is also political. Having said that, the future legislature parliament that will take final decision on demarcation of federal units will have the same members of this CA. Simply put, the CA’s involvement will not end with promulgation of the constitution.

So the CA will not honour the SC’s verdict? We will not end the process because we have a mandate from people.
Who is against zero-cost migration and why?

Labour recruiters are protesting their right to keep on cheating poor Nepali migrant workers

OM ASTHA RAI

After the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) began issuing labour permits from its Tahachal office last year, the road leading to it past Soaltee Crowne Plaza was perpetually teeming with migrant workers lining up for their travel documents.

But this week, after the government’s new zero-cost migration policy came into effect, the road is crowded not with workers but with labour recruiters to protest the rule that would exempt Nepali workers from paying for visa fees and airfares.

The ‘manpower agents’ say the new policy that would benefit hundreds of thousands of Nepali workers is “impractical” and accuse Labour Minister Tek Bahadur Gurung of favouritism towards those who own big recruiting companies.

“We will not move from here unless this zero-cost policy is retracted,” said Janak Khadka of Deluxe HR Solutions Pvt Ltd which enlists Nepali migrant workers for jobs in Qatar.

Khadka is among hundreds of others that have locked out the DoFE in Tahachal and say they will not give up unless they are allowed to charge Nepali workers air fares and visa fees.

They say the zero-cost policy sounds good, but will be practical only when all employers in the Gulf and Malaysia agree to bear the cost of visas and air fares. “Only big employers are paying for air tickets and visa fees of migrant workers,” said Khadka.

To be sure, Labour Minister Gurung did own a manpower company before receiving a ticket from the Nepali Congress (NC) to contest the last Constituent Assembly (CA) elections from Manang. After winning the election he transferred ownership of all his recruiting companies to relatives.

The NC’s decision to appoint a former manpower agent as Labour Minister was already a case of conflict of interest. And it is possible, as the protesting recruiting companies say, that Gurung was motivated to implement the zero-cost policy to benefit agencies run by his nephews and brothers.

However, instead of persuading the Gulf-Malaysia based employment companies to provide free air tickets and visas in tune with international conventions, protesting recruiting companies have been lobbying for withdrawal of the new policy. This would mean Nepali workers going overseas would have to bear the additional cost of visa fees and air tickets.

Gurung defends the zero-cost policy, saying it will end exploitation of Nepalis. “Poor migrant workers have to sell or mortgage their land, borrow from loan sharks or spend most of their savings to pay for airfares and visas, and then they end up not getting the salaries promised,” he told Nepali Times.

Gurung admits that the zero-cost policy may lead to a 30 per cent drop in the outflow of migrant workers, but he says at least they will not be exploited. He is adamant that the zero-cost policy is irrevocable and he will not back down.

Some leaders of the UML, which is a coalition partner of the NC in government, have publicly criticised the policy and are putting pressure on Prime Minister Sushil Koirala to persuade Gurung to back down.

Even within the NC there are some leaders opposed to Gurung who is said to be from the Sher Bahadur Deuba faction. Meanwhile, as the sit-in by the agents goes on, it is the workers waiting for their labour permits who are suffering the most. A policy meant to protect them from being overcharged is jeopardising the jobs waiting for them overseas.

Where we are

Numbers of Nepalis who went to receiving countries (except India) to work between 1994-2014.

Source: Department of Foreign Employment

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OM ASTHA RAI

Where are we?

Who is against zero-cost migration and why?

Labour recruiters are protesting their right to keep on cheating poor Nepali migrant workers
Letter to the President

Honourable President, Sital Niwas, Kathmandu

I am glad you fulfilled your official duty as President to read out the government’s official policies and programs in parliament on Wednesday. An honest and competent leadership can implement these programs, of that there is no doubt.

Mr President, I have read that you have repeatedly expressed the wish that ordinary Nepalis should not be inconvenienced while you travel to and from official functions. This is a benefit which the government calculates that the loss to citizens adds up to loss to the nation, we will be forced to conclude that the state is only giving us hollow assurances. This will only push us backwards.

Mr President, if there aren’t any concrete changes we will be forced to conclude only the personalities have changed for the torture we are forced to bear on the roads when a head of state passes. Still, we haven’t given up hope that you will be able to convert your official good intentions into action.

Sunil Poudel, Kotovoor
Road original in Nepali. www.setopati.com

Leaving home to rebuild it

Dhruba Dangal in Nagarkot, 8 July

Sang Tumba Sherpa of Ghoratli in Sindhupalchok owned a provision store at the Tatopani Lipping border. The earning from the shop was enough to run his household and pay for the education of his children in a private school. But the earthquake on 25 April brought down both his house and shop, setting one challenge after another for the father of four. He has now decided to go abroad to build back his life.

“We cannot depend on relief materials forever. What will we eat once the emergency food stops coming?” asked Sherpa as he stood waiting in line outside the District Administration Office (DAO) in Sindhupalchok for documents to get his passport process started. “I know how to drive and will work as a driver abroad.”

After receiving a recommendation from the DAO’s office, Sherpa left on a bus for Kathmandu. Sherpa’s eldest daughter, Choden is giving her SLC exams this year and he knows he has to make extra money to pay for her college.

When Motimai Dong of Nimlung returned home last month after working in Kuwait for four years, she thought she’d never leave the country again. She last month after working in Kuwait for four years, make extra money to pay for her college.

From the DAO office, Sherpa left on a bus for Sindhupalchok for documents to get his passport. “I know how to drive and will work as a driver abroad.” After receiving a recommendation from the DAO’s office, Sherpa left on a bus for Kathmandu. Sherpa’s eldest daughter, Choden, is giving her SLC exams this year and he knows he has to make extra money to pay for her college.

When Motimai Dong of Nimlung returned home last month after working in Kuwait for four years, she thought she’d never leave the country again. She last month after working in Kuwait for four years, make extra money to pay for her college.

Dong’s family house and turned to rubble whatever little they owned. Dong is once again preparing to leave for Kuwait.

She says that with her experience she can earn 100 dinars per month. “The work is easy, if they increase my salary I’ll go there. If not, I will go to Kyrgyzstan where the pay is better,” said the 25-year-old.

Teenage brothers Daulat and Dale Lama of Selang were also waiting outside the DAO for a recommendation. The brothers who were studying in a private school. But the earthquake on 25 April brought down both their house and school, setting one challenge after another for the father of four. He has now decided to go abroad to build back his life.

“We cannot depend on relief materials forever. What will we eat once the emergency food stops coming?” asked Sherpa as he stood waiting in line outside the District Administration Office (DAO) in Sindhupalchok for documents to get his passport process started. “I know how to drive and will work as a driver abroad.” After receiving a recommendation from the DAO’s office, Sherpa left on a bus for Kathmandu. Sherpa’s eldest daughter, Choden is giving her SLC exams this year and he knows he has to make extra money to pay for her college.

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Although a large number of Sindhupalchok’s residents were already abroad even before the earthquake struck, the number of people applying for passports has shot up after the quake. Deputy CDO Surya Prasad Upadhyay says earlier young Janajati and Dalit men formed a majority of passport applicants, now it’s an equal mix of men from all communities.

Since the DAO resumed office on 25 May, more than 2,500 passports had been issued. It receives up to 70 forms a day and recommends 10-15 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs daily.

Airlines says, “We searched for the consignment in every possible place, but we didn’t find it. We are not sure if it went missing after being delivered to Nepal or it did not arrive here at all.”

Max Khatri, President of Nepal Share, says QuickClot combat gauze were precious first-aid items and could have been helpful to save lives of people wounded by the earthquakes and landslides. “We lost a precious gift due to someone’s negligence,” he says. “Nepal Airlines must investigate the matter.”

Which Chief Sec?

Nagarkot, 7 July

Three candidates are in the running to replace Chief Secretary Lila Mani Poudel when he retires on 8 August after completing three years in the post. The three probable civil servants are: Ministry of Cooperative and Poverty Alleviation secretary Shreedhar Gautam, Ministry of Federal Issues and Local Development secretary Somal Subedi and Ministry of Industry secretary Jay Mukunda Khanal.

All three candidates were promoted to their posts on 13 April 2011. According to tradition, the present chief secretary stays on holiday a few days before his retirement date and the new chief secretary is announced by the cabinet. The Civil Service Regulation states that the government promotes a secretary to the post of Chief Secretary on the basis of seniority and competence.

Education Ministry secretary Bikram Prakash Pandit is said to be in the running too, but not through the usual process. If he becomes Chief Secretary, Shreedhar Gautam will have to retire on 31 July 2016 because of the age limit of 58. This is why Bishwa Pandit is supporting Gautam who has a clean reputation, but is said to be indecisive.

Som Lal Subedi has worked for a long time in the Ministry of Local Development and has a PhD in Financial Deconcentration and has served in the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and most recently in National Planning Commission. He is known to be close to the NC. Jaya Mukunda Khanal served as CDO in various districts and is a quiet person, close to the UML. Who becomes Chief Secretary will hang on the composition of the national government next month.
Nepal's earthquakes killed people belonging to all castes, class, ethnicities and religious groups. But it was the Tamang people who traditionally live in the 15 worst-affected districts who were disproportionately hit. The death toll from the 25 April earthquake and its 12 May aftershock has been put at 8,844 by now, with 3,012 of them members of the Tamang community. More than half the people killed were in Sindulpalchok district northeast of Kathmandu, which has a high concentration of Tamangs. As many as 1,385 Tamangs died in Sindulpalchok.

It may seem inappropriate to break down the victims by caste, ethnicity, gender, or religion but the fact that more than half the victims were women has gender implications. So does the fact that more than 50 per cent of the people killed were from marginalised communities ranked low in the Human Development Index (HDI).

Analysing these statistics offer glimpses into which communities are most vulnerable to natural disasters, and how they should be protected while designing post-earthquake reconstruction projects. “In Tamang villages worst affected by the earthquakes, we should now implement integrated reconstruction programs with their active participation,” said economist Keshav Acharya.

The most apparent reason behind why the earthquakes killed more Tamangs than people from other castes and ethnic communities is that they lived in Sindulpalchok, which has the brunt of the shaking, and their stone and mud homes didn’t stand the test of time. Around 80 per cent of concrete houses in the Kathmandu Valley withstood the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in April and its 7.3 magnitude aftershock in May. But houses made of stone and clay-mortar by untrained masons in unsafe areas went down. Most Tamang families were living in such unsafe houses. According to the latest report by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the earthquakes damaged 607,212 buildings (private, public houses, health posts and schools). Of them, 381,976 buildings were in areas dominated by Tamangs.

Based on approximate tally of surnames in the MoHA list.

Jagdish Chandra Pokhrel, former Vice Chair of National Planning Commission, says it is also an opportunity to understand why the Tamangs are vulnerable to natural disasters and what can be done to protect them from future calamities. He says the government needs to learn from its past mistakes.

Anthropologist Mukta Singh Lama says despite living in the vicinity of the capital the Tamang community which he belongs to has historically been as neglected as the people from Nepal’s most underdeveloped Karnali zone in the HDI listing. It is the poverty, neglect and outright discrimination against Tamangs that makes them even more vulnerable to disasters like earthquakes, landslides and floods. The literacy rate in the Tamang community (62.6%) is lower than the national average (63.8%). Only 38.3 per cent of the Tamangs can reach nearest health facilities by walking for 30 minutes. In terms of access to safe drinking water, the Tamangs rank sixth from the bottom. Almost all indicators show that the Tamangs have not benefited from their geographical proximity to the capital Kathmandu.

Kumar Blon, General Secretary of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung says these places are not safe to live in and outright discrimination against Tamangs that makes them even more vulnerable to disasters like earthquakes, landslides and floods. The literacy rate in the Tamang community (62.6%) is lower than the national average (63.8%). Only 38.3 per cent of the Tamangs can reach nearest health facilities by walking for 30 minutes. In terms of access to safe drinking water, the Tamangs rank sixth from the bottom. Almost all indicators show that the Tamangs have not benefited from their geographical proximity to the capital Kathmandu.

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Advisory on advisories

A word of advice for all of you out there who take seriously travel advisories and warnings about visiting Nepal: your government is just trying to cover its legal ass. Be brave, ignore it. Better still, hire your own lawyers and bring them along for your Annapurna trek.

Now, here is a little known fact: three times more Nepalis left Nepal in the last fiscal year than tourists entering Nepal. Which means that we should be more concerned about the security of our own nationals than the safety of visiting alien anti-nationals.

We shouldn’t take all those advisories by western countries laying down because according to the Vienna Convention and its amendment on Rules Governing Reciprocity in International Relationships to which Nepal is a signatory, we reserve the legal right to declare war on countries that are willing to stand in line for a Nepali to get a bloody visa. All non-essential travel to Great Britain has therefore been suspended unless such journeys are absolutely essential for purposes of illegally overstaying, and if you wear swastika tattoos it may not otherwise be prevented.

1. UK

MoAF advises against all but essential travel to Great Britain at the present time, mainly because it’s all but impossible for a Nepali to get a bloody visa. But if, by some divine luck, you are awarded a visa and are sober enough the next morning after a night of wild partying to catch your flight out, Nepal are strongly advised to be on high alert. Skinheads are not Brits who are in mourning, and if they wear swastika tattoos it may not necessarily mean they are Hindus. Approach with extreme caution in East London, do not greet them in Hindi with “Namaste”. Avoid other extremists with distinctive red necks, wearing heavy boots, studs and rings in their eyebrows.

2. USA

MoAF has upgraded the threat level for all Nepalis travelling to the United States in the unforeseeable future. All but the bravest of the brave should defer travel to the US because of an uncertain international situation caused by the lack of Nepali passports. All non-essential travel has therefore been suspended unless such journeys are absolutely essential for purposes of illegally overstaying, and if you are willing to stand in line for three months outside Naryanhati for your MRP.

But, if you have to go then you have to go. However, exercise maximum caution when visiting inner city Chicago, south-central Los Angeles, Miami, and parts of Texas unless armed with your own khukuri, the Nepali’s Knatical Knife. MoAF says that although there are no instances of Nepalis being specifically targeted because they are from Nepal by dudes carrying automatic assault rifles, visitors are nevertheless warned to exercise extreme care, and wear Kevlars, body armour, helmets and grins guards at all times when venturing out. Oh, yes, and avoid all essential travel to California unless accompanied by Dwayne Johnson aka “The Rock”.

3. Malaysia

Nepali contract workers going to Malaysia should be aware that they face high risk from immigration officials, manpower agencies and labour brokers – at Kathmandu Airport.

Labour should exercise extreme caution, and offer appropriate baksheesh, otherwise they may be prevented from leaving. Despite a government order abolishing fees and offer childcare to all Nepali workers, manpower agencies have padlocked the Department of Labour to demand their right to exploit and extort fellow-Nepalis. Things should be fine once the workers actually reach Malaysia.

4. UAE

The UAE is a giant asteroid. So, if Earth is hit by a giant asteroid. So, the world will end when the world will end one day, and the sky will fall one day, and the sky will fall one day. The UAE is also a giant asteroid.

Nepalis are also urged to exercise caution when travelling with dependents anywhere in the world because of the threat of catastrophic volcanic eruptions accompanied by giant tsunamis that may plunge Planet Earth into a new Ice Age. There is also the possibility that the sky will fall one day, and the world will end when the Earth is hit by a giant asteroid. So, stay home. Don’t go anywhere.