No oil for Oli

In the 60 years since Nepal and China established diplomatic relations, 12 Nepali prime ministers, three kings and a president have visited China. On Sunday, Prime Minister K P Oli will be the 13th. Oli is meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang before heading to Hainan to attend the Boao Forum for Asia. In Beijing, he will sign new deals on trade, transit, banking and road connectivity. But the much-hyped petroleum deal under which Nepal is expecting to import one-third of its oil needs from China is not looking possible. A highly-placed source at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told Nepal Times: “We will discuss the memorandum of understanding that Foreign Affairs Minister Kamal Thapa signed with China to import fuel, but an agreement to this effect is not in the PM’s agenda.”

However, we have learnt that the petroleum agreement had been on the list of talking points of all meetings that Oli held to prepare for his China visit until a few days ago. “I don’t know why it is suddenly no longer on the list,” an Oli aide told us.

After India’s crippling five-month blockade, there is pressure on Oli to diversify energy imports, and reduce Nepal’s overwhelming dependence on India. Madan Regmi of the Kathmandu-based China Study Centre says: “We must strengthen our relations with China and have alternatives against future blockades.”

Oli has shown that he understands realpolitik. He visited New Delhi last month and his government has also gone out of its way to assure India that Nepal is not playing ‘the China card’. And now, he is no longer interested in a deal which he himself fervently pushed.

Coincidentally, Oli met the Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj and Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar in Pokhara on Wednesday at a SAARC event two days before leaving for China.

Meantime, Laxman Lal Karn of the Tarai Madhes Democratic Party told Nepal Times: “We are meeting the Chinese ambassador on Friday to explain why we are fighting the Nepali state.” Madhesi protesters had burnt Chinese flags to protest Beijing’s gift of 1,000 tons of petroleum during the height of the blockade last year.

Most analysts believe that the sudden suspension of the petroleum deal is less because of logistics and lack of infrastructure and more because of Indian pressure. And it looks like the bustling blockade means that Nepal’s leaders have got the message and there is little they can do.

Former ambassador Khash Bahadur Thapa says that although the blockade has ended, Nepal-India relations will take time to normalise. “We are at a point where it is not warm enough to take off our winter clothes and it is not cool enough to take off our summer clothes,” he quipped.

Thapa thinks it would be too much to expect a good step forward in Nepal-China relations during the Oli visit. He added: “Beijing can take advantage of Nepal’s increased distance from India, but is unlikely to help us at the cost of angering New Delhi.”

Oli Artha Rai

THE CHINA SYNDROME
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

The China Syndrome

No oil for Oli

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Oli Artha Rai
After his fence-mending visit to India last month, Prime Minister K P Oli embarks on an official visit to China this weekend during which he will also attend the Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan.

Although he bungled the fast-track constitution that led to a breakout of violence in the Tarai, and he was unable (or unwilling) to get the Indians to lift their five-month blockade, we have to give him credit -- somewhat grudgingly -- for being an astute politician. He has pulled it off.

First, he wrangled an invitation to New Delhi (where to say that he wasn’t particularly liked would be an understatement), craftily exploiting the Narendra Modi government’s need to find a face-saving exit from a purposesless and counterproductive blockade. To the domestic gallery, Oli projected himself as a Nepali leader who, for once, went to New Delhi on his own terms and gave nothing away.

The fact that the visit was largely symbolic and the agreements signed were merely for delayed and pending projects seemed not to matter. The deal to buy an extra 80MW of power from India was no longer material. The extent of deciding by themselves on the Lipu Lekh border trijunction dispute without consulting New Delhi, Xi and visiting Prime Minister Modi even went to the extent of deciding by themselves on the Lipu Lekh border trijunction dispute without consulting New Delhi. Xi and visiting Prime Minister Modi even went to the extent of deciding by themselves on the Lipu Lekh border trijunction dispute without consulting New Delhi. Xi and visiting Prime Minister Modi even went to the extent of deciding by themselves on the Lipu Lekh border trijunction dispute without consulting New Delhi. Xi and visiting Prime Minister Modi even went to the extent of deciding by themselves on the Lipu Lekh border trijunction dispute without consulting New Delhi. 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Noble ends through noble means

The blockade might have been lifted, but we are nowhere close to addressing real Madhesi grievances. The five-month blockade came to an end in much the same manner as it started. Nobody knows for sure what prompted such a drastic course of action on India’s part, or what led to its lifting. We can only speculate.

For that matter, 25 years later, we still don’t know the reason behind the 1989 Indian blockade either. Many things have changed in the intervening years but what hasn’t changed is a passive acceptance of reality. Movement should continue in more constructive forms. The blockade became an opportunity for some to display their racist intolerance towards Madhesis and dismiss their experiences of discrimination and exclusion. As a Madheli, it was shocking to see the extent of denial that plagues the privileged circles of Kathmandu who see no reason for Madhesis or any other minority to complain. They cannot believe how ungrateful the Madhesis have been after all the adjustments the government has made to accommodate them in government and state institutions. For them, the action of some is enough to question the loyalty of millions of Madhesis who had no part to play in enforcing the blockade. Madhesis were seen to be causing unnecessary trouble, and there was a fear that even after the blockade was lifted the sentiment could persist. We cannot and should not justify the actions that caused the Tarai to burn for five months. Secessionist and violent rhetoric are unacceptable, but I can understand why a section of Madheshi youth got radicalised in the way they did. Every Madhesis has a story of the constant belittlement and everyday racism. Things have improved in the last decade because of growing literacy, mobility and exposure as well as the first Madhesh Movement of 2007, but Madhesis are only a few questions or insults away from a painful reminder of their status. While other communities in Nepal face discrimination too, it is only the Madhesis whose nationalities are questioned on a regular basis.

One way to address such grievances is for the state to introduce more inclusive policies, as it has been doing. What is even more important though, are gestures that communicate that the state is serious about correcting past wrongs. In some cases it can be simply an acknowledgement or apology. At a societal level, it can be dedicated efforts to reshape discourses and narratives about national identity through constructive and meaningful conversations.

The first step would be acceptance on the part of other Nepalis that Madhesis have been subjected to historical injustices and discrimination, and that Kathmandu should take steps to end them. The second would be for Madhesi ring leaders and supporters of the blockade to realise that noble ends demand noble means.

Now that frayed nerves have been calmed and both parties are in a position to gain some perspective of their actions, it is a good time to get these conversations going. Nepalis are generally tolerant, and we saw in the past six months that despite repeated provocations and hate speech Madhesi and Pahadi communities did not succumb to them. The journey from tolerance to acceptance is not that long if instead of presenting on hatred, suspicion and shaming, we promote conversations rooted in trust, respect and forgiveness.

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Welcome to the Time Warp

Nepal has been hijacked by a coterie of highly incompetent individuals.

Each morning he set out to visit the temples and scenic spots of the Valley, returning home to sing praises of the beautiful sights and wonderful people he’d met before launching his next interrogation. Why are there so many communist parties? Don’t Nepalis know communism has collapsed world-wide? And what about Suberam Bhattarai’s New Force? How can a lifelong Marxist ideologue expect to be taken seriously as a born-again capitalist? Does Prachanda really mean ‘awesome?’ What did the blockade achieve for the Madhesis? For Delhi? How could the black market thrive so openly despite being illegal? I shrugged so often my shoulders began aching. If only he’d spent some time in Nigeria or Pakistan on the way here, I thought to myself. Nepal’s dysfunction might not appear quite so alarming. ‘The fact so many questions went unanswered began taking a toll on both my guest and my liquor cabinet. He was clearly suffering from a severe case of Logic Syndrome, that consuming compulsion to make sense of the inexplicable that’s driven many a Westerner in Asia to drink. The Hand thinks of it as Kathmandu’s version of altitude sickness, with similar symptoms of nausea, confusion and disorientation.

Hiding the morning papers to get a break didn’t help when he began visiting the news-stand and doing further research online.

By the time he discovered the hapless TNC and many cases of war-era crimes being ignored and dismissed it felt like he’d stumbled on a dirty little family secret. Your columnist, of course, had long stopped trying to excuse the inexcusable, amused that his questions proved the citizens of other countries demand much more from their leaders than we do here.

It seems Nepal’s enduring time warp, once rather charming and quaint (Times warp gone wrong, #338) has endured far too long, nurtured by an elite that’s neither willing nor able to change with the times. Worse still, after so many years of abysmal governance this appears almost normal.

Readers don’t need the Hand or any other alien meddler to tell them Nepal has been hijacked by a coterie of highly incompetent individuals who, for all their self-importance and elevated status locally, would be laughed off the political stage elsewhere. The dysfunction that’s become the local norm is considered totally unacceptable in most places, and I thank my visiting Martian for reminding me it doesn’t have to be this way.

The fact there are so few sensible answers to the many serious questions indicates something’s very wrong with this picture, and perhaps it’s time for the voices to finally demand satisfaction and results from those holding the country back.
Thakali delights

When it comes to homely Nepali food, nothing beats Thakali cuisine

AYESHA SHAKYA

S
tuated next to Club 23 Hours within the

Tangibodh Resto Cabin Hotel

promises, Nilgiri Thakali Delights is the newest addition to the

Valley’s long list of restaurants specializing in Thakali cuisine.

With an extensive menu prepared by Chef Shankha Basnet, who has been preparing this distinctive trans-Himalayan cuisine for the past 18 years,

expectations were high from the start. Instead of jumping straight for the Thakali Khana Sets, we

controlled our dal bhat urges and began with a couple of Nilgiri’s specialties, Kanchhehmba (Rs 210),

Sukrit Sandekho (Rs 770) and Sukrit Pala (Rs 590).

The first dish of Sukrit Sandekho was a slight disappointment, as it tasted like any other basic sandekho dish. Garnished with tomatoes, onions and coriander, the only distinct feature of the dish was the lingering aftertaste of the Chyagras meet.

Contrary to its name, the Sukrit Pala comprised less of Sukrit and more of vegetables.

Made up of potatoes, beans, sukuta and jimbu, it was more reminiscent of a humble meal made at home rather than a dolled up restaurant dish.

Although the flavors were mild, it was better suited to be eaten as a main dish with rice rather than a standalone snack.

While those two dishes did not really strike a chord, the Kanchhehmba was a winner.

With a crispy exterior and soft filling, the buckwheat fries were truly Thakali and a healthy replacement for the usual fried, oil-dipped snack options.

We then tried the Alankhu (Rs 430), a breakfast soup commonly made in the mountains. Extremely spicy and with a strong taste of the meat, a few spoons were enough to leave us sweating and reaching for tissues. While the flavor was bold, this dish is not for the faint of heart.

Since no Thakali meal would be complete without everyone’s favorite dal bhat combo, our main course was the Thakali Chicken Khana set (Rs 516). The set came with all the essential elements of a Thakali meal: white rice, aalo dal, chicken curry, fried fish curry, zayo ko aang, aalu simi, gundruk ko achar, mauna ko achar, lapas ko achar and golbeeds ko achar. While the chicken curry was slightly watery, the thick Mustung ko dal more than

made up for it. With two meat options in the same khana set, the variety of fish and chicken in the same dish is a delightful surprise for carnivores.

For guests not keen on white rice, the restaurant serves brown rice (Rs 75) and daal (Rs 100) as well. Apart from chicken, they also have vegetarian and mutton khana set options. Although slightly on the pricier side, Nilgiri Thakali Delights boasts good food and great ambience. With its brick-styled walls and wooden interiors, the restaurant has a very earthy, Nepali feel, suitable for an upscale restaurant. With its vast selection of items, and mouth watering Khana sets, the restaurant proves that when it comes to homely Nepali food, nothing beats Thakali cuisine.
Going with the flow

World Water Day on 22 March must be an occasion to preserve Kathmandu’s ancient waterspouts

Kathmandu’s water scarcity problems date back to the Lichchhavi period, when the Valley experienced a population boom due to an influx of settlers. To meet their water needs, ancient royal engineers constructed an impressive hydraulic system via underground channels and stone waterspouts.

Today, Kathmandu’s population is exploding once more and the Valley is facing another water crisis. A 26 km tunnel to bring water from the snowfed Melamchi is still two years away, and the capital’s 3.5 million people have had to fall back on the network of water channels built 500 years ago. But even these sunken water sources, called hitis, are running dry because of the lack of maintenance.

“I remember as a child there was lots of water in the hitis, till even 30 years ago it would be gushing out and people bathed in it,” remembers Rekhi Ranjitkar of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT), who says the taps are drying up because the foundations of new buildings destroyed the channels.

There were once more than 600 hitis in Kathmandu, and by 2008 only 400 were functioning. Today, they are down to 60, according to the Forum for Urban Water and Sanitation (FUWS). Most of the spots are ‘dead’, with no outflow at all.

“Poor urban planning and a lack of information about the network of underground conduits contributed to the disappearance of hitis,” explains Anil Shalit at FUWS. As communities around the waterspouts grew, foundations for new houses were dug recklessly, often severing underground channels.

Ponds that served as aquifers feeding the channels were built over, drying up public spots like the oldest stone spout in Patan, Munga Hill. “This is the first time I’ve seen it dry,” says Ranjitkar, “even last year during the dry season at least there was a tiny trickle of water.”

The ground water table under the Valley is also falling because of over-extraction. With no regulations on digging wells, families desperate for water have been drilling deeper. Surface runoff that used to recharge groundwater is intercepted by buildings and sidewalks and there is no seepage.

Even when the water does flow in the remaining hitis, it is now increasingly contaminated. A study in 2007 found high iron content and mica in samples of water from hitis across Kathmandu. Hitis and well water also contain organic pollutants because of seepage of untreated waste from septic tanks.

The conservation of the Valley’s hitis is important not just to ensure water supply, but also because they have historical and cultural significance, and form an important part of Newari festivals and rituals.

With no other water source, will the people turn back to the hitis? Shalit’s answer is no. “We lost ownership of protecting our hitis years ago. Now we have lost the ponds, it is too late,” he says. Even so, there is a revival of interest in heritage conservation among local communities and the Lalitpur municipality. Attention is slowly being given to reviving stone waterspouts in neighbourhoods of the Valley’s towns. In Patan, restoration work has begun on another ancient waterspout, the Sanga Hiti.
No matter the time and place, every time Sristi KC heard music growing up she’d get up and dance – it was a creative outlet for self-expression. But when she developed an eye allergy in Grade 8, her doctor failed to warn her about the prolonged use of steroids and KC contracted glaucoma. She lost her eyesight at age 16.

She still retained her passion for dancing, but no dance school was willing to accept her. Worse, no college would give her admission.

“Private colleges didn’t want me, they saw me as a drawback,” recalled Sristi. She finally got admission to Padma Kanya Campus, but KC had to struggle to keep up with her studies. As someone who lost her eyesight later in life, she didn’t know how to read or write Braille.

Yet she persevered and developed tools to help her write, she recorded her lessons and asked her friends and family to read out loud to her. With hard work and help, she earned the highest grades in her class and received the Nepal Chatraa Bidya Padak, a top academic award, from the President. Later, she was also awarded the Arjun Swarna Padak gold medal for the highest scores in Nepali in her Bachelors exam.

“When I first lost my sight, I was dejected. But then I realised that it was only my eyes that were missing and not my hands and my feet,” said KC, giving full credit to her mother. Today, the 25-year-old runs Blind Rocks an institute training the visually impaired in interpersonal skills, dance, fashion and adventure sports to change society’s attitude towards them.

“When people talk about helping the blind, they usually mean education and jobs. Those are important, but even more important are life skills blind people need to assimilate into society,” KC explained.

When she first started conducting workshops on body language, posture, facial expressions and art forms like singing and dancing, people questioned whether these skills were even needed for the blind. But with more publicity, interest grew even from sighted people.

“The situation of the blind is similar around the world, so I want to empower them and make them proactive members of the society and change the way society views us,” KC said. Blind Rocks has conducted workshops abroad also in India, Poland, Russia, France, Norway, and Hong Kong.

“I have found that the workshops are better suited for foreign countries because in Nepal we disabled people and our families are too caught up in meeting our basic needs. Skills needed to assimilate and integrate into society takes a back seat,” KC added.

KC is currently studying dance and acting at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and as the only visually impaired student, she has had to come up with innovative ways to take in the lessons. She told us this has made her more determined to open an arts school for the vision impaired in Nepal too.

“I lost my sight but gained a vision for my life,” says KC. “To others like me, I want to say that opportunities are out there. All you need to do is reach out.”

nepalitimes.com
Once again this week, a man refused to give Smriti KC a bus seat entitled to the handicapped. The visually impaired 45-year-old was infuriated, and called out to a policeman when the bus stopped at a checkpoint in Pharping.

Finally, after the police pointed to the notice that said the seat was reserved for the physically handicapped the man relented.

“If you don’t ask, people don’t offer you the seat 70 per cent of the time,” said KC.

Though KC started losing her vision at five, it never stopped her from building a life for herself, working as a front desk manager with UKAID. But that stint ended last year, and since then the English Literature masters student has struggled to find another job.

KC said: “Even if they don’t say it to my face, I know people are rejecting me because I am blind. Otherwise why would they? I know I am qualified.”

The 2011 Census counted 96,000 visually impaired people in Nepal, with blindness affecting less than 0.5 percent of the population. “More than 70 percent of the cases are avoidable,” explained Sanduk Ruit at the Tilganga Eye Hospital and Nepal’s internationally renowned cataract surgeon.

Nepal’s high blindness rate is due to cataracts, uncorrected refractive errors, and emerging factors like diabetes, glaucoma and trauma, Ruit said. According to WHO, Visual Impairment and Blindness, global estimates, the prevalence of blindness in India is higher at 0.7 per cent and China 0.6 per cent.

Many have been pressing the government to prioritise awareness and access to education, employment, infrastructure and life skills training for the visually impaired, and although textbooks in Braille from Grade 1-10 have been introduced, the lack of books after SLC is a problem. “There is no trace of Braille after we complete Grade 10. We can’t write in Braille because teachers don’t understand it,” said Sinebhabha Aryal, a psychology student at Tribhuvan University Campus. Students like Aryal must depend entirely on classroom lectures and have to arrange for writers to sit with them for exams.

Additionally, annual revisions of textbooks make it hard for organisations like the Nepal Association for the Welfare of the Blind to translate them into Braille.

“Publishers are very market driven, they cater to only sighted children,” said Gopinath Pandey, education specialist at Save the Children (SCF).

Laboratory School in Kirtipur, which introduced Braille in its curriculum as far back as 1964, is one of the few schools that provide inclusive education for visually impaired learners. With 53 blind students enrolled this year, six will be appearing for SLC this April.

“The investment is huge, and not every school opts for it,” said teacher Binita Shrestha at Laboratory which has a separate resource centre where teachers, both sighted and nonsighted, instruct children using computers equipped with Braille adapted embossers, slates and styluses. Still, Gopinath Pandey at SCF said education is only an entry point and the government should also push for job opportunities for the visually impaired.

The Public
Service Commission of Nepal has granted 5 per cent of its budget for people with disabilities and private organisations have also been instructed to hire one person with a disability out of every 25 employees, but there is no monitoring if this is followed. “We have the policy, what is lacking is its implementation and enforcement,” admitted Horn Kaixi Pandey, Under Secretary of Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare. The government is trying to catch up with the tactile sidewalks in the city centre, but there is a long way to go to ensure full mobility for visually impaired people in a city that is dangerous even for sighted people.

Said Kumar Thapa of the Nepal Association for the Welfare of the Blind: “It is very difficult to move around, manholes are left open, there are poles in the middle of the footpaths, cars are parked everywhere.”

However, their conviction and will to become self-reliant have seen them through the challenges and taught them to where they are today. And the sisters, co workers have changed their mind about them and taken them under their fold. Eight more job openings for the blind have been announced at the airport after management saw their performance.

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### EVENTS

**Film festival**
Experience European culture and lifestyle with the fifth edition of the European Union Film Festival. Free tickets at the hall on a first come first serve basis on each screening day.

19 to 24 March, QFX Kumari Hall 1, (01) 4409456.

**KJC for Kids**
Music lessons, vocal training, ballet dance, beat boxing, arts and more for your kids at the KJC Spring Camp for Kids. For children aged 5 to 11 years old.

4 to 15 April, 10am to 4pm, Mondays to Fridays, Extended week: 28 March to 1 April, 4 to 15 April, 10am to 4pm, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5013554.

**Art for Nature**
Kaired an exhibition showcasing artworks of Chitwan National Park’s wildlife.

7 to 19 March, Taragang Museum, Boudha, (01) 4981234.

**Holi**
Mark your calendars for the eagerly anticipated festival of colors, join in on the fun, and thousands in Kathmandu claim the streets to celebrate the advent of spring with unmatched enthusiasm and fanfare.

Note: Government has issued a strong warning against the harassment of women and children.

**Shivapuri Heights Cottage**
Celebrate the festival of colours with your family by addition to a sumptuous meal at Shivapuri Heights Cottage.

Price: Rs. 2500 per person, free for children under 6 years, and half price for children aged between 6-12 years old.

22 March, 6-10 am onwards, Shivapuri Heights Cottage, 584-13798027
info@shivapuricottage.com

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### DINING

**Dining**

- **Shangri-La Hotel and Resort, Garden and Club Sundhara**
  Enjoy your Saturdays with a wide spread of shwarmas and pastas at Shambala Garden and Club Sundhara.
  Rs. 1500 per person, 18 March, 8 pm onwards, Shambala Garden Cafe, Hotel Shangri-La, (01) 4412999

- **Heritage Kitchen and Bar, Sundhara Bazaar, Boudha, (01) 4907500**
  Enjoy your Sundays with a wide spread of shwarmas and pastas at Heritage Kitchen and Bar, Sundhara Bazaar, Boudha.
  Rs. 2000 per person, 18 March, 6.30pm onwards, Heritage Kitchen and Bar, Sundhara Bazaar, Boudha.

- **Fine dine with Ciney Gurung, Regency, Boudha**
  Mark your calendars for the eagerly awaited Ciney Gurung’s Album release.
  500 including album, 18 March, 8 pm onwards, House of Music, Thamel.

- **Hotel Yak & Yeti, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5013554**
  Don’t miss out on the poolside fun featuring house music by the resident DJs, barbecue and a wide variety of international beverages.
  Rs. 2000 per person, 18 March, 7.30pm onwards, Brewery Pub, Yeti, Durbar Marg, (01) 4409459

- **Legends of Nepal, Shambhala Garden, (01) 4409459**
  Music by The Mixtapes and relish mountain food.
  Rs. 1500 per person, 18 March, 7.30pm onwards, Legends of Nepal, Shambhala Garden, (01) 4409459

- **Cafe Cheeno, Comfortable and elegant, this is the perfect place to enjoy a cup of coffee and chat with friends on a cold day.**
  Patan, (01) 2121623

- **Cadenza Collective live, Friday evening with Cadenza Collective’s Afropop tunes.**
  Rs. 400, 18 March, 8 pm, House of Music, Thamel.

- **Shangri-La Hotel and Resort, Garden and Club Sundhara**
  Enjoy your Saturdays with a wide spread of shwarmas and pastas at Shambala Garden and Club Sundhara.
  Rs. 1500 per person, 18 March, 8 pm onwards, Shambala Garden Cafe, Hotel Shangri-La, (01) 4412999

### MUSIC

**Hyatt Regency, Boudha**
Join us in the celebration of St Patrick’s Day celebration at Hyatt Regency’s Blue Bar. The restaurant will be rolling out a delectable a la carte Irish food menu for the occasion.

A selection of Irish cocktails will be available along with a cash bar throughout the evening. Guests will also be able to enjoy live traditional music by The Mixtapes and folk starters like smoked salmon on Irish soda bread, fish and chips, and Guinness drunken wood fired chicken.

So book your tables now, put on green and go Irish.

18 March, 6.30pm onwards, Hyatt Regency, Boudha. For reservations: (01) 4990134

**Regency’s Rox Bar**
The restaurant will serenade you. Rs. 2000 per person, 18 March, 11.30 am onwards, Rox Bar, Thamel.

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  Rs. 1500 per person, 18 March, 8 pm onwards, Shambala Garden Cafe, Hotel Shangri-La, (01) 4412999

**Jazz it up**
Groove to the beats of Willamette Underground’s dynamic music inspired from avant garde jazz fusion, rock & pop, and contemporary classical music.
Tickets: Rs. 500 without invitation, Rs. 300 with invitation
7.30pm onwards, Base Camp, Arun Thapa Chowk, info@atithiresort.com

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### MISS MOTIVATION

**Kripa Joshi**
The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago.

The second best time is now.

- Chinese Proverb
As the anniversary of last year’s April earthquake approaches, a unique crossborder art initiative tries to remember the tragedy and pay tribute to the victims. Shortly after hearing about the disaster, over 90 Bangladeshi artists donated works and held a fundraiser at the Athena Gallery in Dhaka in solidarity with Nepali artists. Supported by residencies at Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre and BINDU, Space for Artists, ‘The Solace of Art’ showcases the work of five artists severely affected by the earthquake, illustrating the nation’s collective trauma.

Sandhya Silwal and Anil Shahi’s pieces on the First Floor of the exhibition focus on the simplicity of the everyday. Silwal uses light colored backgrounds juxtaposed with black cutouts, signifying the need to remove negativity from our lives through her intricate works channeling the Wheel of Life. Similarly Shahi, through his theme of ‘Diaries of the Unsung’, envisions the daily lives of people on the street, utilizing both broken and unbroken mirrors to inspire the viewer to interactively reflect on their own place in the community. “Normally in our society, many people on the street are thought of as unsuccessful or broken. So in this piece, the visual pattern represents all kinds of people,” says Shahi. “It’s a sketch of everyone’s diary.”

Jeewan Suwal of Bhaktapur captures his city’s heritage in a combination of aesthetics ranging from striking colours of bright yellow and orange of monks’ robes to dark hued skies in varying textures. The spontaneity in his work encapsulating losses of home demonstrates the pains of overcoming trauma. “After the earthquake I lost my home, I lost my father and I was traumatised. I was confused and I didn’t know how to start new work,” he says. “But then the mind clicked, and with support from Bangladeshi artists, everything became my inspiration. Gradually elements became more defined and I found my peace inside.”

Jenney Ghale and Muna Badel’s works occupy the final floor, dovetailing journeys of memory and self-reflection. Ghale from Dhading invokes the ‘selfie’ as a technological phenomenon that breeds superficiality and leaves the self paradoxically more isolated even in a crowd. As Ghale explores the gnawing human desire to be someone else, Badel’s series depicts a woman aging through time yearning for what once was. She portrays a stoic, wrinkled face that is guarded by vibrant dress, covering up emotions that changed vastly from those of a free-spirited youth.

Thirty-one other Nepali artists from different disciplines and a community in Sankhu were also supported by artists from Bangladesh in an effort to preserve culture and livelihood in the wake of the destruction. The launch on March 13 was dedicated to recently deceased award winning Bangladeshi film director Khalid Mahmood Mithu, who along with his wife, Kanak Champa Chakma, spearheaded the fundraising effort.

His powerful words echo the themes of unity and resilience: “Because of the earthquake, all artists united for one aim, one goal. It was truly something inspirational and marvellous.”

**Michael Nishimura**

‘The Solace of Art’
Till 29 March at Siddhartha Art Gallery
Baber Mahal Revisited.
Like the Twilight Saga, which remains an inevitable, but unfortunate comparison to The Hunger Games trilogy, these books were written for what is known as the ‘young adults’ (YA) category. Both made millions for their authors, and then proceeded to make hundreds of millions for the producers who bought the film rights. This is also why the final books in each of the series were broken into two films each, purely to maximise revenue.

Fortunately, because of the complexity of Suzanne Collins’ original vision, Mockingjay Part 2 does stand alone as the final film in a harrowing conclusion to a riveting story about youth, human nature, war, survival, and, of course, love.

Katniss Everdeen (played by Jennifer Lawrence in the role that made her famous) is reeling from the return of her friend, partner, and lover, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson) who had been captured by the evil Capital after the dramatic end of the last Hunger Games. All of the districts that were once ruled with an iron hand by the Capital are now in revolt against President Snow (Donald Sutherland), a cruel, psychologically astute dictator who knows how to hit where it hurts.

Over the course of the Hunger Games, an annual event where the youth of the 12 Districts are pitted against one another in an arena and broadcast live all over Panem (a dystopian version of North America), Everdeen, with her stoic nature, moral courage, and unexpected beauty, becomes the inadvertent face of the revolution. Dubbed The Mockingjay by the rebels, who use her image to incite rebellion, Katniss has now become enemy number one for President Snow, who kidnaps and tortures Peeta, altering his perception of reality making him hate Katniss, in a heinous attempt to break the Mockingjay’s spirit.

As Katniss struggles with the brutality of war without Peeta by her side, she becomes alienated from Gale (Liam Hemsworth), her childhood friend and competitor for her affections, while he becomes ever more ruthless regarding the rules of the game when it comes to winning the battle. It is rare, in Hollywood, to see such an exceptional heroine who is anchored by her own humanity, but is neither perfect nor invincible. Katniss’s surprising choices (not every woman would have ultimately chosen shy, brave, kind Peeta, over the fiery, headstrong, Gale), her sound instincts, and her commitment to justice, help Mockingjay Part 2 succeed as a character study of a compelling figure who owes her complexity to Suzanne Collins, the writer of the original source material. The world of YA literature is ultimately a better place with heroines like Everdeen versus the Bella Swans of melodramas such as Twilight.
Oli in China

Rameswor Bahara in Anil
Khabapatrika, 13-19 March

Exactly one month after he flew to New Delhi for a meeting, Prime Minister KP Oli will fly to Beijing next week. However, his purpose in China will be different from his India visit. While he headed south to mend fences, he will travel north to explore new frontiers of trade and transit. Oli downplayed his India visit, calling it “just an effort to clear misunderstandings between the two countries”. No new deal was signed with New Delhi, but in Beijing he will ink multiple agreements on trade, transit and development.

Oli is visiting China at a time when Nepal has not fully recovered from the Indian blockade, and there is pressure on him to begin diversifying trade away from India. China also looks keen to welcome Oli and is preparing to roll out the red carpet in Beijing. During the Indian blockade, Nepal decided to import one third of its fuel from China. When Foreign Affairs Minister Kamal Thapa visited Beijing in December, Nepal and China reached an understanding to this effect. This time, Oli will likely take it one step further by solidifying a petroleum trade deal.

It is not clear which development projects Oli will be seeking China’s support for. But the 1200 MW Budi Gandagi hydropower project, international transmission lines and petroleum storage projects top his list. Oli has denied playing the ‘China card’ against India, but everyone is interested to find out what he brings back from Beijing.

Narayan Kaji Shrestha, Foreign Affairs Chief of the UCPN (M), says Nepal must sign trade deals with China to reduce its dependency on India and save Nepal from future blockades. “Just because the blockade is lifted now, we should not stop whatever efforts we initiated to diversify our trade,” he says.

Oli is expected to help bridge the present trust gap between Kathmandu and Beijing and assuage Beijing’s concerns about the seemingly endless political instability in Nepal.
How to braid two cultures

Kathmandu Valley’s exemplary assimilation of generations of Newar Muslims

SEULKI LEE

On a bright morning this week, Ayesha Banu greeted her first customers of the day at her sidewalk bead and bangle shop in Bhaktapur’s Sukul Dhoka. Pratiksha, a 28-year-old lawyer, was there with her mother sampling green glass garlands with gold pendants.

A Hindu woman buying from a Muslim vendor a necklace of glass beads made in the Czech Republic in a town in Nepal shows just how harmoniously Muslim merchants have assimilated into society here.

“I’m the sixth generation of my family in this business,” said Banu, 23. “From the time of my great great grandfather we have been stringing beads here.”

Banu’s ancestors first came to Gorkha in the 16th century as gunpowder makers for the Shah Kings, and later migrated to Bhaktapur. Today, from her attire and looks, Banu is indistinguishable from the Newar inhabitants of a street bustling with traders, shoppers and tourists.

After her father left to work in Saudi Arabia five years ago, her mother taught her to string beads. “It took me some time to master the skill, but now I can make a poty [glass bead necklaces] in five minutes,” she said, as her mother Hanum Nisa Banu attended to Pratiksha who has been buying necklaces from the Banu family for years.

Muslim merchants are known as churoute (from the Nepali word for banglow) and have sidewalk stalls near the Darbar Squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur.

There are about 15 bead, bangle and hair braid shops at Bhaktapur’s Sukul Dhoka, 35 vendors in Indra Chok in Kathmandu and a dozen in Patan’s Mangal Bazar.

“The location of these shops near Malla palaces proves that Muslim traders had good relations with the local Newar community and the king,” explained Rajan Joshi, 41, a lecturer at Tribhuvan University.

There are said to be 211 ‘Newar Muslim’ household in Kathmandu Valley. One of them is Indra Chok jeweller merchant Mohammad Ashraf.

“We Kathmandu Valley Muslims are very close to the Newar people,” he said in fluent Newari.

It was jewellery that brought the Muslims and Newars together. While we Muslims specialise in glass, gems and diamonds, the Newars are good in gold and copper craftsmanship,” Ashraf, 47, is the sixth generation tending the shop located in a bazaar established by Prithvi Narayan Shah after his conquest of Kathmandu, 181 years ago.

Despite this proud heritage, however, the Newari Muslim identity is at a critical transition.

“I’m not bringing my son into this business,” said Ashraf, “there are so many options for them. Most probably my generation is the last in the Muslim jewellery business in Nepal.”

Mohdin Khan, 49, decided to write a history of Nepal’s Muslim merchants because his ancestors were too busy and the younger generation is also not interested.

His book chronicles the history of Kathmandu’s Newar Muslims with socio-ethnographical and linguistic records. It includes the story of Begum Hazrate Mahal, the Queen of Awadh, who sought asylum in Nepal after the Mutiny in Lucknow. She died in 1879 and is buried at the Jami Masjid in Kathmandu.

In his flowing white beard, Feruzuddin Khan attends to a bangle customer next to Patan’s Krishna Mandir. The 75-year-old has been tending the shop at this exact spot for the last 50 years, but says none of his six sons and one daughter are likely to carry on in the business.

“I’m the 16th generation doing this, and it used to be...
Together

Muslims of Nepal

Since the 10th century, Muslims from different parts of the subcontinent and Tibet migrated to Nepal. They traded in glass beads, bangles, gunpowder, perfume, and textiles. The major settlement of Nepal’s Muslims, mainly Sufis, are in the hills, in Palpa, Syangja, and Kaski districts in the hills, and Kathmandu Valley.

The Muslims of Kathmandu Valley have three main origins: Kashmiri, north Indian, and Tibetan. According to the Vamshavali, the oldest chronicles of Nepalis ancient history written during the 14th century, Kashmiri Muslims arrived during the reign of King Prithvi Malla (1482-1520). They built a mosque, the Kashmiri Maha, and worked for Nepal’s kings as artists, sculptors to correspond with the Delhi Sultanate, master manufacturers, musicians and bangle suppliers. Some were admitted as craftsmen to the Malla Dynasty, and many traded with Tibet.

The north Indian group entered the Valley in Prithvi Malla’s reign (1481-1520) and during the 16th and 17th centuries mainly being Moghul Iranian. They were allowed to build new mosques like the Nepali Jam Masjid in Kathmandu. Muslims from northern India were also invited by hill-riders to manufacture military hardware including cannons and later as makers of agricultural implements, stoves and utensils. Some Muslim descendants of north Indian migrants are known as the charote (Bangalee) and many are farmers.

Muslims from the north migrated to Nepal from Lahore and other parts Tibet, mainly after the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the 1960s. Another wave of Bhar Musalim settled in the eastern Tara after the Bangladeshi war in 1971.

Sources:

Silent minority

Muslims in Nepal officially make up 5 per cent of the total population, but members of the community claim their numbers are double that. Either way, they still do not have a proportionate say in Nepal’s political structure.

Historically, Nepal’s Muslims are descendants of those who migrated in waves from northern India, Tibet and Ladakh, and more recently from Bangladesh. Even compared to Nepal’s other minorities, Muslims were treated as outcasts. Women who shopped at Muslim bangle shops had to wash their hands when they came home.

"Until 30 years ago Muslims were regarded as untouchables together with Christians. We were the outcasts of mainstream Hindu Nepal society," said Rahmat Khan (pic above), 63, a medical doctor educated in Gauhati’s Al-Azhar University and chairman of Madrasa Islamia School in Kathmandu which has 200 students until Grade 10.

Indeed, the 2014 book Muslim of Nepal by Tribhuvan University anthropologist Prakash Upadhyaya highlights the exclusion. 'The Muslims’ feeling of insecurity being surrounded by majority Hindus has created an inconceivable psychology in which culture of fear and despondency has become a part and parcel of their lives.'

Ramesh Asshat, the central committee member of Upendra Yadav-led Federal Socialist Forum-Nepal and Mohammad Aabab Aliam, the ex-chairman of Rautahat working committee of Nepali Congress are the most prominent Muslim names in Nepal’s political arena today.

"It isn’t easy to launch yourself in a high level appointment without political party affiliation in a culture of political patronage. And I never had that," said Mohra Asshat, the member of National Human Rights Commission and the only female attorney from the Muslim community in Nepal.

The word ‘Muslim’ appears exactly six times in the new constitution and alongside mentions of other traditionally discriminated groups like women, Dalit, Adivasi, Janajati, Madheshi and Tharu.

"You can write anything about Muslims but please don’t touch the political part. We suffered a lot in history, but we do have hope about the new constitution that guarantees equal rights to all Nepali citizens despite ethnic, religion and gender," said Khan.

With the hope of more equal treatment, the younger generation of Nepali Muslim has been told that Nepal is the best example of harmonious co-existence of Islam in South Asia. Said Nabil Shrestha (pictured at centre, below), a Grade 10 student of Madrasa Islamia School: “This is a secular country and we are all Nepali people. I haven’t faced any discrimination because of my religion."- Suniti Lee
When I’m 64

Meanwhile, without any further ado around two birds in the bush I’ll let you in on some tricks some of us have perfected over the past century to look younger than our age.

1. Hair. With recent advances in Trichological Genetic Mitigation Techniques and the successes of the Community Forestry Program, it is difficult to tell that a guy is old just by inspecting his or her canopy. Hair can be deceptive. For one thing, a person may have a full head of hair, but it may not be his or her. I have devised a simple yet effective test for this approach said senior citizen and without warning clutched a handful of the alleged hair and yanked it. If old guy howls in pain, then Ali! he’s not that old. Us older chaps tend to lose hair from where it is supposed to grow (head, chin, chest, armpit, cockpit) and gain hair where it is not supposed to (our canals, eye brows, nostrils, bathtub tub outlet). That is why a closer inspection of the ear lobe of a senior citizen is mandatory to determine his true age within a margin of error. If he has lobes like a lynx, then let’s face it, bugger’s getting on in ears.

2. Teeth. It has been proven by scienologists that the older we get, the fewer of these we have. That is the general rule, anyway. But some of us who greasers try to fool society at large by donning a mouthful of 32 manmade molars. Some of these crowns look like the genuine article, but the test is to carefully observe the subject as he or she takes a bite at a guava slice. If teeth attach themselves to guava instead of the other way around, then said subject is a specimen for carbon dating and you should accord him and her all necessary respect and assistance.

3. Belly. According to Newton’s Third Law of Thermodynamics and the Archimedes Principle, a body attracts another body with a force equal to the square root of the acceleration of both bodies. This is why my lower abdomen has of late started moving in general direction of the Centre of the Earth. When I hear young passersby say “Ooo, that one’s got guts”, therefore, I don’t take it as a compliment anymore. There are several ways to get one’s suiting fanny to defy gravity. One is to wear wired corsetry that gives our soft underbellies some cantilever support, but the trouble with this bit of engineering is that it constrains the diaphragm and makes it hard to breathe. Which in itself can be the kiss of death, and reduce one’s average lifespan.

4. Clothes. One way to feel people that you are not as old as you look is to take tips from teenage magazines and dress like younger people. Which in this day and age, means wearing jeans that look like they’ve passed through a combine harvester, have whiskers in the general vicinity of one’s pelvic tattoo, and offer passersby a fleeting glimpse of one’s rectal cleavage. And never wear black underwear. That is so 2015. In vague these days are fluorescent green boxer shorts that glow in the dark, which is specially useful when there is head-shedding.

5. Speech. Clothes aren’t everything, bro, and it is important to learn, like, to speak like other young dudes and liberally spinkle your conversation with the word “cool” (pronounced “kewd”) and make every sentence sound like a question, so no one can tell that you’re actually just another old dork. Speaking of sprinkling, I don’t even know whether I should tell you this, but when you get to ripe old age like some of us sentiment citizens, “toilet training” takes on a whole new meaning. But thanks to modern technology we can use our smartphones to geolocate urinals and escape our immediate vicinity.