

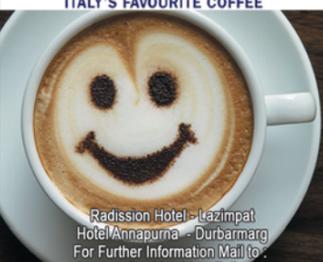
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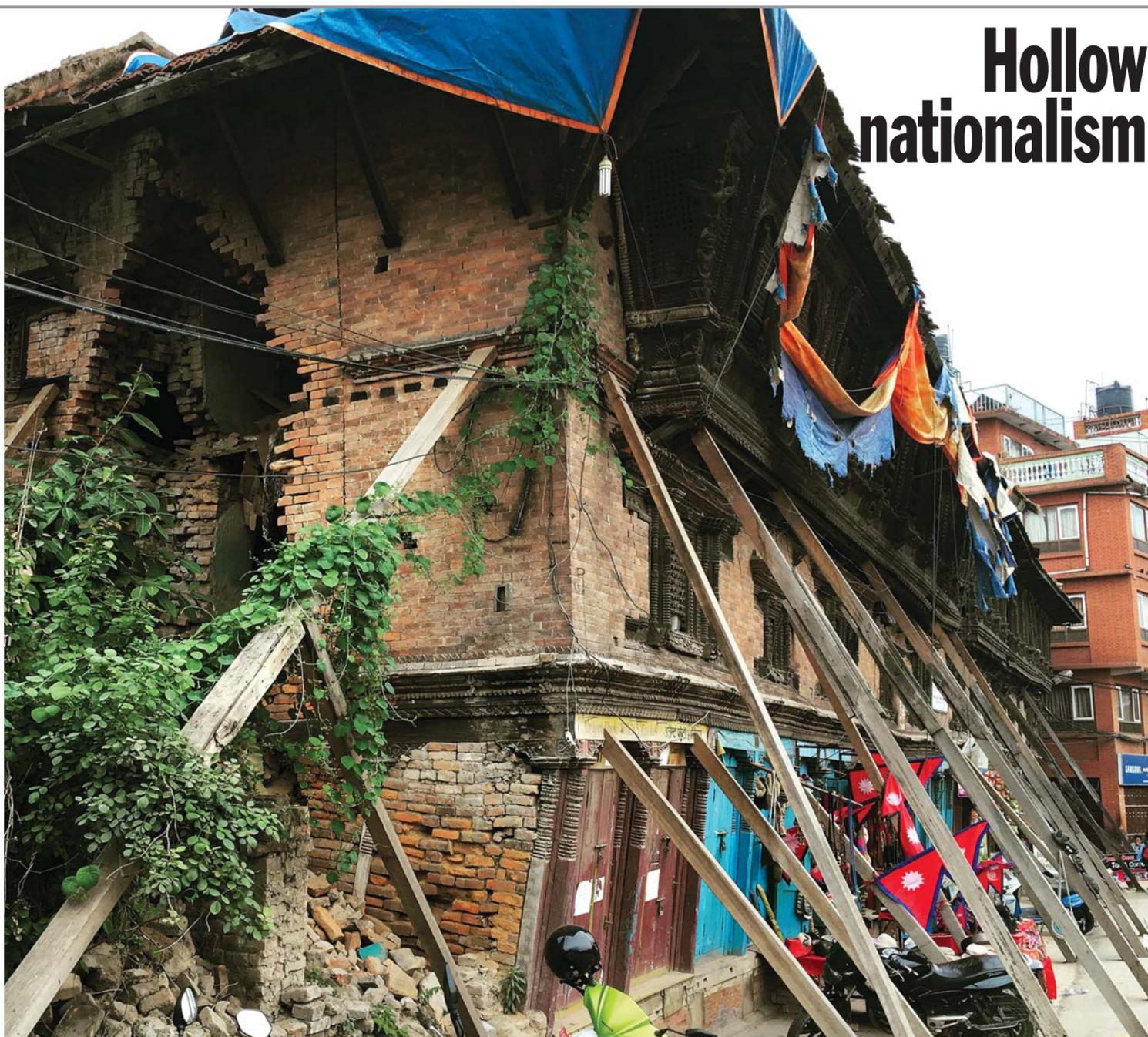
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KUNDA DIXIT

## Hollow nationalism

A week after surviving a 'coup' by the opposition Nepali Congress, a plot widely believed to have been hatched in New Delhi, Prime Minister K P Oli told diplomats in Kathmandu on Wednesday that his government is not in crisis, and will be replaced only when a new parliament is elected in 2018.

This contradicts the assurance Oli apparently gave Maoist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal that he would step down after the budget. This means not everything is hunky dory in the ruling coalition, and the NC is waiting for the right opportunity to strike again.

Dahal is under pressure from his party's ministers in

government, and is not publicly pressing for regime change, but he faces counter pressures from other comrades who are not ministers to unseat Oli. The leaders of breakaway Maoist factions, who are finalising a deal with Dahal to rejoin the main party, also want a new government so they can claim a share.

Rajan Bhattarai, one of Oli's trusted aides, denied there was a secret deal last week to make Dahal PM. "Dahal backed off not because Oli promised him prime ministership but because he realised it was not possible to forge a ruling coalition with the NC and Madhesi parties," he said.

To make things murkier, Maoist leader Janardan Sharma told us:

"Forget the wording, the spirit of the very first line of the deal is to form a new government under our party's leadership."

New Delhi appears determined to break the communist coalition which it believes was masterminded by Beijing. Last week, former Indian ambassador KV Rajan is learnt to have secretly met UML leaders, including Madhav Nepal, to break the UML-Maoist partnership. Oli is convinced India wants him out, and in retaliation cancelled President Bidya Bhandari's visit to India, and recalled Nepal's ambassador Deep Kumar Upadhyay. 🇳🇵

Om Astha Rai

**buzz** TOURISM IN HOT WATER

Himalayan thermal springs have a vast potential to boost local economies

BY SAHINA SHRESTHA

PAGE 4-5




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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

# DECAY OF DEMOCRACY

History keeps coming full circle, and is repeated as a farce.

Democracy and press freedom are two sides of the same coin: while they strengthen each other, undermining one weakens the other.

But western parliamentary democracy has a design flaw, it allows unbridled freedom to express the most outrageous views, which in turn permits populist politicians to propel themselves to power. Usually, this happens during times of economic turmoil or conflict, when the mass media can be used to whip up the electorate by chauvinism, xenophobia, ultra-nationalism, religious bigotry, racism or identity politics.

Modern history is replete with examples of democratically elected demagogues who, after coming to office, dismantle the very institutions that got them there. History keeps coming full circle, and is repeated as a farce. Just look at the rise of the racist right in Europe. Or the terrifying prospect of Americans electing Donald Trump as their next president. In the Philippines, itself a former American colony and a country made in its image, foul-mouthed mayor Rodrigo Duterte who once led death squads, was elected executive president this week.

In Nepal itself, the exhilaration of democracy after the 1990 movement is now a distant memory. The hope that political competition through elections would usher in a spirit and practise of accountability has long since evaporated, as political leaders who suffered under dictatorship and devoted their lives for the struggle proceeded to squander hard-won freedoms. Twenty-six years later, Nepal is still in political transition — having lived through war, a royal massacre, a military coup by the king that led to his ignominious downfall, and the endless political upheavals after that. A constitution that was supposed to end this instability is still contested, and the squabbling continues.

More than 17,000 people were killed in a pointless and misguided war. Millions were displaced, thousands were tortured and disappeared. Nepal's fledgling democracy was violently uprooted, and development set back decades. In 2006, the rebels and government found neither side could win, and signed a peace deal. They



then ran the country under a quasi-democracy so a political cartel could divide up the spoils. The Madhes Movement represents the frustration of leaders from the plains that hill-based parties have monopolised power, but only because they also want their hands in the till.

Nepal's rulers have given each other amnesty for war crimes, and left the bleeding to bleed. They watch as millions work in slave-like conditions in the Gulf and Malaysia,

often exploited and robbed by Nepali recruiters who enjoy political protection, in return for a share of the loot. They treat the treasury as their personal piggybank, plunder our forests and rivers, and poison our people.

The rulers still rule, but they stopped governing long ago. Earthquake survivors are left to their own devices as they prepare for their second monsoon out in the open, and western Nepal reels under a drought that threatens an unprecedented food shortage. Inside Singha Darbar, meanwhile, they go about the business of 'politics' without any sense of urgency, trying unsuccessfully to topple each other every so often at the behest of external powers and agencies.

The most recent 'coup' attempt last week by Sher Bahadur Deuba to get his Nepali Congress to team up with Madhes-based parties and the Maoists backfired when Prime Minister Oli deftly out-maneuvered him in a counter-coup. Suspecting that the Indian establishment had had a hand in it, Oli cancelled a visit by President Bidya Bhandari to India and abruptly recalled our ambassador in New Delhi. This petty tit-for-tat approach has unnecessarily ratcheted up tensions between Nepal and India at a time for much-needed healing after New Delhi's grave blunder in foisting a five-month border blockade on Nepal.

It would be naïve to assume that this latest spat is only about strained relations between India and Nepal. Actually it is the result of intense political polarisations within India itself between the BJP and the rest, and within Nepal between the NC and the UML. Prime Minister Oli has found it convenient to once again play the nationalist card and gain stature by being seen to be standing up against India, while in New Delhi the anti-BJP forces are using the Beijing bogey in Kathmandu to embarrass Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The sooner we get out of all this populist posturing, the better for the peoples of both countries, who have not given up hoping for good governance, people-centred development and a better quality of life. The media in India and Nepal would do well not to fall into the trap set by politicians, by fanning the flames of conspiracy and intrigue at the behest of demagogues.

Times

THIS WEEK



GOPEN RAI

### Most reached on Facebook

A time to every purpose  
Many traditional occupations are on the verge of vanishing forever in Kathmandu.  
(31,254 people reached)

### Most shared on Facebook

A time to every purpose by  
Sahina Shrestha (35 shares)

### Most visited online page

It's about us by Puru Shah  
(1,180 views)

### Most popular on Twitter

A time to every purpose by Sahina Shrestha  
(50 retweets, 98 favourites)

### Most commented

More exercise, less soft drinks...  
by Sonia Awale

## YOUR SAY

[www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)

### NOT SILENCED

It is clear that the CIAA case against Kanak Mani Dixit is an act of vengeance (Not Silenced, Editorial, #807). I don't know what promises he made before he was elected as the Chair of Sajha Yatayat, but I think he surely revived it. The way he turned around Sajha should be replicated to save other dying institutions like Nepal Airlines.

**Bal Yonjan Tamang**

Karki seems more powerful than Prime Minister and ministers. Where does he get so much power from? To find the answer, we need to understand that ours is a banana republic. The silence maintained by our politicians over the Dixit case proves they are corrupt too.

**Narendra Basnet**

### MORE EXERCISE, LESS SOFT DRINKS

It is a simple but great article on public health ('More exercise, less soft drinks', Sonia Awale, #807). There is a need to create awareness about how harmful sugary drinks are. Equally important is to regulate the companies who produce and advertise these products.

**Rajendra Bhadra**

Everything in moderation! Even beneficial medicines will be toxic, and can kill, if the recommended doses are exceeded. Common sense should prevail. Do not overindulge, and don't be a couch potato.

**A Nepali**

### PULLING THE RUG

Maoist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal appears to be a winner, but he is a loser ('Pulling the rug', Kunda Dixit, #807). Even after overthrowing the KP Oli government, he would not have become the PM. And even after signing a deal with the UML, he is not going to be the PM.

**Hira Pradhan**

Last week's political drama surely provided entertainment for a few, but it always diverts our attention from the real issues.

**Amulya R Tuladhar**

### A TIME TO EVERY PURPOSE

I enjoyed reading this article ('A time to every purpose', Sahina Shrestha, #807). But this is how things should be. We cannot tell the children of a potter to learn pottery. We cannot

tell them to not pursue modern professions. With the passing of this generation, our knowledge about pottery may be gone, but there is nothing we can do.

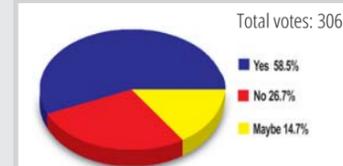
**Krishna Tamrakar**

Our intangible heritage is indeed on the verge of vanishing forever, but our political leaders are obsessed with just themselves. They do not care about us, let alone our intangible heritage.

**Sudha Raut**

Times nepalnews.com  
Weekly Internet Poll #808

Q. Do you think Nepal as a state is growing more intolerant?



Weekly Internet Poll #809  
To vote go to: [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)

Q. Should UML and Maoists scrap their nine-point deal?

# Tweet that

Politically-charged predators on the prowl to pounce on the next prey with 140 characters

Twitter is an odd phenomenon. It is a sinking ship and Silicon Valley predicts its imminent downfall. Around the world Twitter's use has already peaked and is slowing down, and in the Nepali perspective it will be gone before most Nepalis even know what it is.



**ONE TO MANY**  
Bidushi Dhungel

What a shame. People here are only just finally getting the Twitter groove on. Unlike Facebook, this is not the platform for posts about birthdays and anniversaries or the mediocre accomplishments of one's kids ('My 6-year-old can use the loo') but a repository of comments on current affairs. One might say that for Nepal, social media has been filtered to create an online space for political activism via Twitter.

The street may remain eerily quiet, but Twitter is the new hotbed for political activism. It has brought to surface the most scathing criticism: of the state, of the left, of the right, of opinion pieces, of people and personalities. No stone is left unturned. Who knew people who didn't write columns even had

opinions? Well, now we know. Unfortunately, however, the real-world polarisation of public opinion manifests itself on Twitter in an even more wretched manner. We all know this, and yet we continue to egg on our preferred sides and actors with a 90:10 ratio of negative to positive energy.

Since people no longer even bother to have real conversations with people they disagree with, Twitter happily accommodates these fierce

debates in a warped way. Fundamentally, when we have a heated debate face-to-face with someone we generally are guided by a code of conduct that is based on the overall demeanor of the person/group that one is debating — the gestures, tones, facial and body expressions.

On Twitter, you take away all of that and throw in intolerance in 140-characters. Being accountable to one's opinions, choice of words, or tone is almost impossible. In real conversations

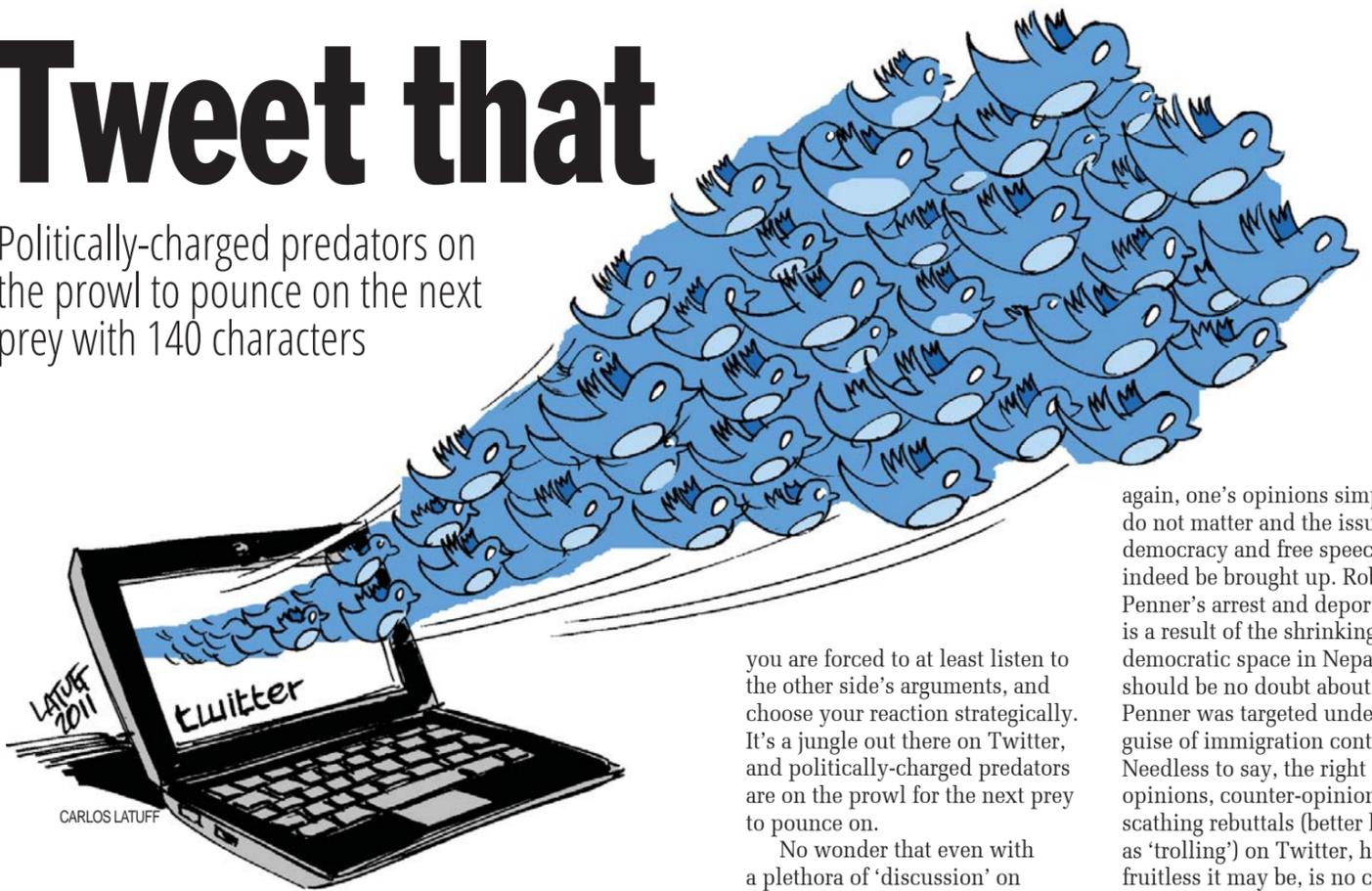
you are forced to at least listen to the other side's arguments, and choose your reaction strategically. It's a jungle out there on Twitter, and politically-charged predators are on the prowl for the next prey to pounce on.

No wonder that even with a plethora of 'discussion' on Twitter, nothing ever really changes in real life. And yet, even the 'best and brightest minds' spend so much time and energy tweeting, mostly just calling other people out but with little to no positive result — only screen-shot tweet rebuttals.

With everyone so interested, no wonder that Big Brother is watching the Tweetosphere so astutely. In the case of our Oligarchic state, Big Brother has ventured beyond cyberspace and into real lives. And at that point,

again, one's opinions simply do not matter and the issue of democracy and free speech must indeed be brought up. Robert Penner's arrest and deportation is a result of the shrinking democratic space in Nepal, there should be no doubt about it. Penner was targeted under the guise of immigration control. Needless to say, the right to voice opinions, counter-opinions and scathing rebuttals (better known as 'trolling') on Twitter, however fruitless it may be, is no crime at all.

Sure, trolls are annoying. But, more importantly, they become 'trolls' only when they disagree with you. In reality, most active Twitter users, who do more than just tweet the news, are 'trolling' one school of thought or the other and victims emerge left right and centre. One would think the Nepali and foreign intelligentsia at least would be above all this, but sadly, Twitter brings out the worst in us all. Maybe it's best if Twitter folds up soon. 🇳🇵



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# Getting tourism out of

Nepalis have been using Himalayan hot springs for health reasons, but their full tourism potential has never been tapped

SAHINA SHRESTHA

Millions of years ago, when the Eurasian and Indian plates smashed into each other, they formed the Himalayan mountains and gave Nepal its prime tourism attraction. The two tectonic plates are still rubbing against each other and have given the Himalaya another tourist attraction which has not been fully tapped: hot springs.

The same geological reason Nepal has frequent earthquakes is also what gives us the country's at least 32 identified geothermal springs dotted across what geologists call the Main Central Thrust, that marks the suture between the two plates deep beneath the earth.

Geothermal expert Mahendra Ranjit says although research on geothermal energy started in



KUNDA DIXIT

**SOAKING IT IN:** Tourists on the Annapurna circuit at the Bhurung Tatopani in Myagdi district. Upgrading thermal springs could add value to Nepal's tourist attractions.

Nepal more than 30 years ago, the emphasis was misplaced. "We looked mainly at generating electricity, which is difficult and costly due to the relatively low temperature of the hot springs in Nepal. What we need and should focus on is the direct use of these springs, like in tourism development and farming," Ranjit told us.

All over Nepal, locals have traditionally used hot springs for balneotherapy, to cure everything from back pain to arthritis, but the thermal springs are yet to become a stand-alone selling point for international tourists.

All the towns next to hot springs in Nepal are called Tatopani, and there are dozens of them from Humla to Taplejung. The Tatopani at Kodari is the more famous hot spring among travelers since it lies right on the highway to the Nepal-China border. The Bhurung Tatopani in Myagdi and another in Ghorepani are popular because they are on the Annapurna trekking circuit. Many other thermal springs are not visited due to lack of road access, infrastructure and marketing.

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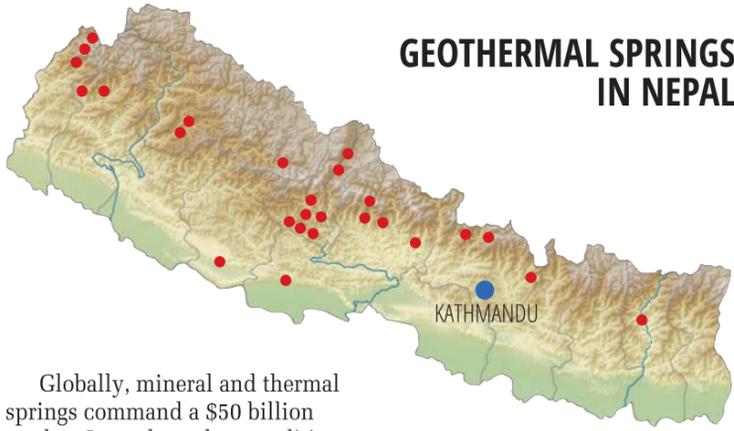


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# hot water



**GEOHERMAL SPRINGS IN NEPAL**

GEOHERMAL ENERGY UPDATE OF NEPAL, MAHENDRA RANJIT

Globally, mineral and thermal springs command a \$50 billion market. Japan has a long tradition of bathing in natural hot springs (called 'onsen'). China is speeding ahead with luxury hot spring resorts and in Europe: Iceland, Austria and the Czech Republic have cashed in on the health market with wellness spas located near hot springs.

In Nepal, the huge potential of hot springs remains untapped. Tourism experts say the scope of hot spring tourism is vast and if properly developed can be a lucrative addition to the tourism market.

"With the current infrastructure tourists may visit hot springs for the quaintness of it, but to attract international tourists we need to scale it up or leave everything natural," says tourism entrepreneur Raj Gyawali. Combining thermal springs with yoga, ayurveda and even shamanism can make it a viable product, Gyawali adds.

For the time being, Nepal could just cater to the domestic market and then expand to attract foreign tourists with additional services like spas and hotels as infrastructure is developed.

Chattra Karki, whose company offers hot springs in a package to trekkers, says infrastructure is the main bottleneck. "The Bhurung Tatopani is popular among tourists because it falls on the Annapurna circuit. The Singa Tatopani is popular among domestic tourists. But there is an equally picturesque hot spring in Rasuwa anyone hardly visits because it is difficult to get there."

Nepalis believe that the natural minerals in hot springs relieve ailments associated with joints, gastritis and skin among others.

Since the springs are on public

land, the private sector is not able to develop them to suit upmarket customers. Local communities lack the expertise and market reach to attract international tourists. Tourism entrepreneurs and local committees already running hot springs say that if the government provides the roads and tax breaks to invest in upgrading hot springs the private sector would jump in.

In Myagdi, the Singa Tatopani on the way to Dhaulagiri Base Camp is often overlooked by foreigners but Nepali patients have been coming here for centuries believing in the healing property of the spring. Income from the spring is used to operate the local Sarvodaya Secondary School with over 300 students. Income from the Bhurung Tatopani is also ploughed into the Saraswati Higher Secondary School. Earnings from the springs are used in the development of not only the springs but the community as well.

"If the government and the private sector help to develop the springs, we are willing to contribute in any way we can," says Yogendra KC of Singa Tatopani Management Committee. "Developed the right way, hot springs can be the pride of Nepal just like the mountains."

Apart from tourism, the hot springs can be used in space heating, greenhouse farming, fish farming and crop drying. Says geothermal expert Ranjit, "There are multiple uses and we need to change our mindset about springs only being useful for geothermal energy and tourism." 🇳🇵

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**IMS in automobile**

IMS Group has acquired distributorship of Korean automobile company SsangYong in Nepal. The first fourteen customers will get a chance to win a Bajaj Pulsar NS 200, Samsung S7 edge, Samsung TV 40 inch and washing machine.

**Nepal to UEFA**

Carlsberg announced the winners of its 'Live it LIVE' campaign offering 11 customers a chance to watch



UEFA EURO 2016 live on an all paid expenses trip to France. The winning coupons were drawn by Biraj Maharjan, Raju Kaji Shakya, and Evana Manandhar.

**Qatar helps rebuild**

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# It's about us

... it's not about Ansari, Dixit or Penner

After prioritising a fast-tracked constitution instead of earthquake recovery, the Nepal government seems to have a new priority: persecuting its critics.

It first began when Prime Minister KP Oli reprimanded Human Rights Commissioner



**GUEST COLUMN**  
Puru Shah

Mohna Ansari for her statements in Geneva at the Universal Periodic Review. Soon after, senior journalist Kanak Mani Dixit was arbitrarily arrested and detained by the corruption watchdog, the CIAA. The very day that the Supreme Court ordered Dixit's release, a Canadian computer scientist named Robert Penner was arrested from his work place, detained and asked to leave Nepal within two days. Both arrests were widely publicised in national and international media.

A country best known for its mountains, a unique flag, and the most dangerous airport in the world started to gain notoriety as the tinpot nation. Dixit is a well-known and highly respected journalist not only in Nepal but also in the region. Expectedly, his arrest sparked outrage in national and international media with statements of solidarity, public condemnations and many signed an online petition for his release.

Penner's persecution for his critical tweets about Nepali affairs got even wider international coverage on The New York Times, BBC, BuzzFeed, Vice, and

Canada's Globe and the Mail. They provided free negative publicity about Nepal and its laws when the country is struggling to improve its international image after bungling earthquake relief.

Outside Nepal, Penner is best known for his mathematical functions for creating motion using computer programs. Despite all the news and unprecedented publicity he received after his arrest, on search engines it is the 'easing functions' that come on top. Inside Nepal, he is best known as 'that guy on Twitter'.

Most people know of Penner, they do not know him. Many have created mental images of him by reorganising his public tweets to fit that imaginary person. Some have accused him of harassing users, a charge not uncommon on social media. I have also been harassed until I discovered two tools called 'mute' and 'block'. Since they are freely available to any Twitter user, I would recommend their use since they have no known side effects.

Even though I have met Penner in person, my first interaction with him was through Twitter which many people can relate to. He asked me for statistics on the number of children with Nepali mothers, but a foreign father. He seemed to have taken interest in the gender inequality provisions in the new constitution. He was neither the first nor the last to opine on this controversial topic. Manjushree Thapa wrote a lengthy piece in The Record titled 'Women have no nationality, Why I burned my country's new constitution'. Even the US ambassador to Nepal, Alaina B Teplitz, wrote an op-ed



ROBERT PENNER/FACEBOOK

in The Kathmandu Post titled 'Women's day, every day' and admitted that 'a provision in the constitution on citizenship is unfair to women'. While Thapa lives in Canada and Teplitz enjoys diplomatic immunity, Penner has no defense other than his basic human right to the Freedom of Expression, which is (un)constitutionally denied in Nepal.

Penner has been accused of 'making provocative statements that may jeopardise national integrity'. Penner is also accused of engaging in political activities. He has neither participated in any street protests nor contributed financially to any political parties. Recently, Tilak Pokharel, a journalist-turned-UN worker revealed through his Facebook that Penner donated Rs 10,000 after he shared the sad news about the death of his cousin. The donation was for the education of his cousin's two children.

Penner certainly took an interest in Nepali affairs as admitted in the memo revealed by his company's boss Mark Sears, who wrote: 'He quickly learned the Nepali language and immersed himself in the culture and customs of his new home. I for one always loved seeing a 6'6" Canadian performing traditional Nepali dances and songs.'

A brief review of his Twitter timeline shows that he has actively engaged in debates about Nepal's issues whether it is about gender equality or human rights violations. It would be wrong to conclude however that his remarks 'incite social discord'. He is merely pointing out the social problems that already exist. If the emperor has no clothes, he is stupidly logical to state so without worrying about its consequences.

In reality, the much publicised events about Ansari, Dixit, or Penner is not about them, it is about us. The primary question is: what type of a new Nepal do we want to create? A Nepal that preserves our values as a tolerant Buddha's nation or the one that has no respect for rule of law where champions of democracy are squashed by powerful elites, while we silently watch until they come for one of us. 🇳🇵

*Puru Shah is the founder of Madhesi Youth.*



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As if on cue, the heavens opened up on Tuesday just as the chariot of the rain god, Rato Machindranath was being pulled in Patan. Some 10mm of extremely welcome rain fell in Kathmandu Valley and across the Himalayan mid hills. This ends a six month drought in western Nepal and allows farmers to belatedly plant corn. The weather will now settle into a more routine pre-monsoon pattern of evening and night thunderstorms with localised showers. Expect brief bright mornings, but a largely wet weekend. Weather modelling predicts a normal monsoon in most parts of Nepal. Keep tuned in.

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homes reduced to rubble in last year's earthquake. All employees are first trained in use of sewing machines and taught various stitching methods. Depending upon the individual's ability the training period can last from a week to a month.

Pariyar says his workshop is targeted towards the youth in his village. "Even if they don't want to continue working here, they would have at least learnt a new skill," says the master tailor who worked for 20 years in Kathmandu before moving to Malaysia.

Each employee makes Rs 20 for every pair of jeans stitched which are sold to a supplier in Kathmandu. On average a worker makes 15 pairs of jeans a day, but there are those who can finish up to 25 pairs.

"Yes, the pay is nominal but when you add up an employee earns close to Rs 400 in a day which is a lot more than what he/she would make working as a farm help, the only other job available in the village," says Pariyar.

Apsara Sunuwar, 20, was one of the first to join Pariyar's workshop. A high school student Sunuwar says working at the shop has enabled her to pay for her own tuition and also contribute to the family's income. The flexible working hours at the workshop has also helped Sunuwar balance her work and school life.

"My classes run from 6 to 10am and after that I come here," says Sunuwar.

Murahari Pariyar, 41, worked in construction before joining the workshop six months ago. His wife Sita Pariyar is also training to be a jeans tailor here.

"It's definitely much easier than what I used to do before," says Murahari. His wife agrees.

Pariyar's workshop produces only children's jeans for now, but he hopes to diversify his products with an increased workforce and better equipment.

"The goal is to have a factory with 30-35 sewing machines and a lot more people working," says Pariyar, "that will not only be a sign of my success but also of the village."

The only thing that stuck out in the denim produced here was the 'Made in Thailand' labels attached at the back. When asked, Pariyar admitted sheepishly: "The material is provided by the supplier so I have no say in it but you can be assured they are as good as any jeans made in Bangkok." 🇳🇵



PICS: CATHERINE FELTHAM

# MADE IN KAVRE

A former migrant worker returns home to set up a jeans shop

TSERING DOLKER GURUNG  
IN KAVRE

Former migrant worker Raju Pariyar (*pic above*) is one of the lucky ones. During his four-year stint as a tailor in Malaysia, he was never once abused by his employer, he always received his pay on time, and he had decent living conditions.

He earned Rs 50,000 a month and was well treated by his boss who even offered to pay for his

airfare back when he decided two years ago to return home to Kosi Dekha, a small farming village in Kavre to set up a jeans workshop.

"I spent a large part of my life living away from my family because of work," says Pariyar who is married with two children, "opening this workshop was an effort at providing job opportunities to people in my

village so they don't have to move elsewhere."

Starting with three sewing machines 18 months ago, Pariyar's business now employs over ten people, men and women from surrounding villages. They work in a spacious corrugated tin shack that stands out in a village that had more than 90 per cent of its

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# LANGTANG IS READY FOR YOU

The scenic national park is open to trekkers again after last year's deadly



## LIEW YU WEI IN LANGTANG

Last year's earthquake at 11:56 am on 25 April shook off a chunk of the southern flank of Mt Langtang Lirung (7,227m) and sent it crashing into the glacier below, bulldozing the ice over a cliff and down on the valley. The shock wave that preceded the

avalanche literally blew away the village, and buried what was left under ice and rock 100m thick. About 200 people perished, 70 of them tourists hiking in the national park.

One year later, Langtang Valley is as scenic as ever and it is hard to imagine that such a catastrophic event happened here. The only sombre sign of the disaster is the debris field above what was once a thriving town amidst some of the most stunning scenery in the

world. There are scars on the cliff above, and tree trunks on the other side of the valley all knocked down by the force of the blast.

Langtang Village is gone, but as is the Nepali way of life, people have moved on and rebuilt. The trail is open and guesthouses dot the path from Syabru to Mundu and Kyanjin Gomba. The sound of hammer and saw is everywhere.

With trekking numbers

down, those who have been lucky enough to escape damage in the earthquake are facing worries of a different kind: even though the blockade is over, everything from food to building supplies has to be ferried up via porters.

Chhemble Lama runs the Sherpa Hotel in Kyanjin Gomba, two hours walk from what used to be Langtang Village. He says his neighbours used to grow their own crops, but stopped ever since the earthquake, now they rely

on porters to deliver essentials, which cost two to three times more than before. But incomes are down because tourist numbers plummeted, and Lama worries about making ends meet.

Proprietor of Hotel Ganesh View Lodge at Rimche, Tenzing Dorje, said there were far fewer trekkers this year even though the trail was open and the lodges were in operation. In previous years, his lodge, which accommodates 20 people, would be fully occupied



ALL PICS: LIEW YU WEI

# ARE YOU?

earthquake and avalanche



during the trekking season. This season, he has managed to fill only two rooms per night.

The trail up into the Langtang National Park, though littered with rockfall debris in some places, is clear. There is no shortage of teahouses, with at least one in every settlement with beds to spend the night comfortably in. Bedding and blankets are provided, which removes the need for a sleeping bag, although bringing one is recommended,

especially in the higher elevations.

A typical itinerary sees trekkers starting from Syabrubesi to Lama Hotel, then to Mundu on the second day and Kyanjin Gumpa on the third, and then returning the same way. To avoid doubling back, those game for a lengthier journey can also opt to trek back up and over Ganja La and return to Kathmandu through Helambu taking 14 days. However, in the three-day journey between Kyanjin Gumpa and Melamchi Tarkeyghyang, there are no teahouses, and trekkers will have to set up tented camps. That, and the technical demands of crossing a glacier, make this circuit for experienced climbers only.

Rooms in Langtang cost between Rs 200-400 a night and trekkers also have the choice of an all-vegetarian menu. And if you feel low on energy there is always the Snickers Momo, which is exactly what it sounds like. Or try the 'Sea Buck Throne Juice', a widely-propagated misspelling of seabuckthorn juice - the Vitamin C rich berry extract that is the specialty of the Langtang region. 🇳🇵

# Selling ourselves short

Nepal needs to raise the bar urgently for sustainable high-value tourism

ARILD MOLSTAD

Arriving in Nepal recently to disburse funds collected from enthusiastic friends in Norway, I encountered the harsh realities of a partly-ruined country with an ambivalent mixture of amazement and disappointment.

What was amazing was the irrepressible optimism and indestructible survival instincts of Nepalis rebuilding homes and homestays with their bare hands in a race against a second monsoon out in the open. They were working on their potato and rice terraces surrounded by scarred mountain slopes and dangerous rockfalls, or selling fresh produce and juice from bicycle trolleys to tourists slowly returning to Thamel.

But I was also saddened and disappointed by the slow pace of the state bureaucracy, making life in devastated towns and villages much harder than it needed to be in the year since the earthquake.

The donations were from a fund-raising campaign in Norway called 'Reis Nepal' with its

trekking guide and myself. Five dollars. It simply does not add up.

While there have been great strides in conservation like the Annapurna Conservation Area, the crux of the matter is that tens of thousands of hard-working Nepalis receive only a pittance of the true value they provide affluent visitors. This is not sustainable. Tourism in Nepal, like some other countries, suffers from a dramatically undervalued nature capital. Adding to Nepal's woes is that its own government underappreciates the importance of tourism.

Small grants from a mountainous country on the other side of the planet is a drop in the bucket for those dependent on tourism in the earthquake hit areas of Rolwaling, Gorkha, Manaslu. All along the trails, in tea houses and homestays villagers look in vain for the assistance they have been promised to rebuild their trails and housing.

Now is the time to revitalise and upgrade Nepal's tourism product in a sustainable way. Wouter Schalken, a tourism expert at the Samarth Nepal Market Development Programme believes it is necessary to be less dependent on Kathmandu-



ARILD MOLSTAD

double meaning in Norwegian: 'raise Nepal's economy', as well as 'travel to Nepal'. The campaign motto was: 'From one mountain people to another'.

Organising the effort were people with backgrounds in international sustainable tourism and development assistance. We know well how the multipliers and ripple effects of tourism can quickly reach out into poor communities and generate a long value chain in many other sectors: transportation, agriculture, forestry, fishing, food distribution.

Nepal's tourism, once an efficient, enlightened model for the entire world via its pioneering sustainable mountain trekking and lowland safaris, has now been aptly described as 'a race to the bottom'.

For decades, Nepal's tourism presented a healthy, sustainable blend of high-end, medium-priced and budget backpacker menus to global travellers. Now, much of its core, the trekking industry, runs the risk of becoming a 'failed sector' if measured in terms of the traditional sustainable criteria. The absence of repeat tourists is only part of the problem.

It doesn't help that Nepal's tourism resources are pegged to visitor count -- with fewer arrivals leading to lower promotion funding from the government.

On the first day of my trek north of Pokhara, when presented with a bill for a night in a perfectly comfortable, clean, friendly homestay with solar heated showers and a knockout view of the Annapurna range, the problem stared me in the face: the bill amounted to Rs 500 for my

based trekking operators and actively promote a greater variety of actual destination areas like sections of the Great Himalaya Trail, national parks, and conservation areas.

He supports a 'hub-spoke system' that encourages shorter treks, but longer stays in the country, and remind international travellers of the presence of shelters constructed according to earthquake-resistant methods and helipads within a half-hour walk. Schalken is concerned about the downsides of Nepal to acquiring an image of 'being a cheap backpacking destination ... a low-value model that keeps on reducing itself in value'. Samarth hopes to facilitate 'investment in entrepreneurial skills and development towards a more sustainable model that includes certification and higher rates'.

As somebody who travelled in Nepal when the country's high income/low-impact tourism in the seventies and eighties brought huge admiration and the first waves of affluent visitors to Nepal's incredible diversity of attractions, I share Schalken's sentiments. The bar needs to be raised higher, and urgently.

There is no reason why Nepal cannot once again become a world leader in sustainable tourism. Let's not waste this chance. 🇳🇵



Arild Molstad is a writer, photographer, and consultant on sustainable tourism to governments and institutions such as National Geographic and Unesco.

# EVENTS

# DINING

# MUSIC

# GETAWAY

## Experience Sikhism,

Don't miss out on the tour of Guru Nanak Satsang in Kupondole with Cultural Studies Group Nepal to learn more about Sikh culture and customs. 13 May, 9.30am, Hotel Himalaya, Kupondole, [csgninkathmandu@gmail.com](mailto:csgninkathmandu@gmail.com)



## Amar Panchhi,

Join Bollywood stars Sonakshi Sinha and Malaika Arora in a concert organised by the Nepal Army Wives Association to raise funds for earthquake victims. Tickets: Rs 500 onwards, [www.ap.esewa.com.np](http://www.ap.esewa.com.np) 14 May, 6.30pm onwards, Tundikhel, Kathmandu



## Facing the camera,

A photography exhibition that traces the history of studio photography in Nepal. Until 12 August, 10am to 5pm, Inner Courtyard, Patan Museum, (01) 5521492

## Karnali dialogue,

Attend a talk on Karnali's governance, drought and kaike magars by Karnali Immersion Fellows Manisha Lamsal, Sunita Pahari and Dil Bikram Angdembe. 17 May, 3pm onwards, Martin Chautari, Thapathali, (01) 4238050, (01) 4102027, (01) 4240243, 9849206303, 9851001569

## Literary launch,

Celebrate poetry, short stories, music and expression at the launch of *These Fine Lines*, an anthology of poems, and the sixth volume of the literary magazine *La.Lit*. 14 May, 6pm onwards, RS MOTO, Gahanapokhari, 9808844258, 9808771281

## Art of doodling,

Master art therapy using Zentangle Method with Linda Kuehne in a workshop organised by Sattya Media Arts Collective. 14 to 15 May, 2pm to 5pm, Sattya Media Arts Collective, Jawalakhel, (01) 5537406, [collective@sattya.org](mailto:collective@sattya.org)

## BAC mela,

Local products, foodstuff and a second-hand garage sale plus entertainment for the whole family in BAC'S first monthly mela. 28 May, 1 to 7pm, BAC Art Café, Pulchok, [www.bikaplaartcenter.org](http://www.bikaplaartcenter.org)

## Coffee queries,

A chance to explore and share business ideas with Clock B business innovations and meet enthusiastic young minds over coffee and bakes. 16 May, 9am to 11am, Bodhi Books and Bakes, Maharajgunj [bidush@gmail.com](mailto:bidush@gmail.com)

## Design Workshop,

Pick up tips and tricks to curating an exhibition, as well as display techniques. Registration necessary. 15 to 18 May, 9am to 1pm, Yalamaya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, 9849519933/ 9818239744

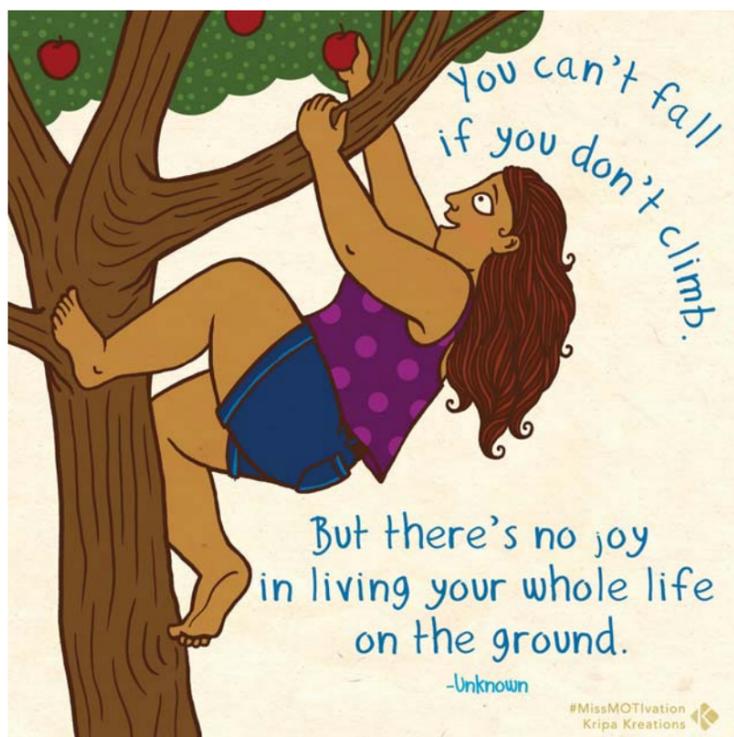


## Solidarity,

An exhibition featuring veteran artist Kiran Manandhar celebrating his collaborations with budding artists as well as seasoned experts. 19 May, 5.30pm, Alliance Francaise, Kathmandu

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## Vootoo,

The new home of Newari cuisine that also has a safe continental menu for those who are not yet ready to experiment with new dishes. Lajimpat, (01)4005222

## Hyatt Regency,

Try the new scrumptious dishes added to The Cafe's à la carte menu. From Pan-Asian to Western cuisine, it has it all. Boudha, (01) 4491234, [Kathmandu.regency.hyatt.com](http://Kathmandu.regency.hyatt.com)



## Mezze by Roadhouse,

Spot a superstar at one of Kathmandu's most popular restaurant. Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg (01)4223087

## Dhokaima Café,

Enjoy the summer and chill with indigenous cocktails at the Rukhmuni Bar. Patan Dhoka, (01)5522113, [dhokaimacafe@yahoo.com](mailto:dhokaimacafe@yahoo.com)



## The Vesper House,

Stop by for the best in Italian and all local favorites, in their breezy outdoors seating. Also a great venue for wine connoisseurs. Jhamsikhel, (01) 5548179, [www.vespercafe.com](http://www.vespercafe.com)



## Nepathya Live,

Nepal's famed folk rock band performs live in the country after a long break. 14 May, 5pm onwards, Jawalakhel Football Ground, Lalitpur

## Top of the World Festival,

Join the Top of the World Festival at Jiri with music and art, held in celebration of Buddha Jayanti. Tickets available at [www.rocknrollnepal.com](http://www.rocknrollnepal.com). 20 to 21 May, 11am onwards, Jiri, Dolakha



## Tribute to Dylan,

Celebrate late American singer-songwriter legend Bob Dylan's 74th birthday, and sing along as they play classics like Like a Rolling Stone and The Times They Are a-Changin. 24 May, 8pm onwards, Tickets: Rs 1000 (including drinks), Moksh, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5528362



## Ankit Tiwari Live in Nepal,

Catch Bollywood sensation Ankit Tiwari, who was behind hits like Gallian and Sunn Raha Hai Na Tu, at this event. 21 May, 4pm onwards, Jawalakhel Football Ground, Lalitpur

## Metal Monsters Tour,

Rock out with metal bands Crown of Thrones, Kamero, Human Dementia, and X-Mantra at Purple Haze. 14 May, 11am onwards, Purple Haze, Thamel, Kathmandu



## Kasara Resort,

A luxury resort located in the lush setting of the Chitwan National Park. For those who value their privacy and prefer a more secluded stay, Kasara offers two private villas with private pools. Chitwan (01)4437571/4438570, [kasararesort.com](http://kasararesort.com)

## Jhule Mountain Resort,

Resting 2,050m above sea level, the eco-resort boasts a farmhouse that stretches across a hill covered in fresh pine. Enjoy an organic homestay experience. Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park, Lapsipedi-3, Jhule, (01)6212399, info [at] [jhuleresort.com.np](http://jhuleresort.com.np), <http://jhuleresort.com/>



## Pokhara Grande,

A swimming pool to escape from the sweltering heat, a massage parlour and spa to loosen up and a gym to release stress: a great place to unwind. Lakeside, Pokhara, (61)460210, [dosm@pokharagrande.com](mailto:dosm@pokharagrande.com), [www.pokharagrande.com](http://www.pokharagrande.com)

## Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel,

Add value to your travel in Lumbini with a stay at probably the best hotel in the area. Lumbini, (71)580220, 9801033109, [info@ktmgh.com](mailto:info@ktmgh.com)

## Barahi Jungle Lodge,

The first eco-jungle lodge of Chitwan directly overlooks the Chitwan National Park, spa, boutique guest room, individual and two-in-one private villas, including a suite with a private swimming pool. Andrauli, West Chitwan, (01)4411113, [bjl@barahi.com](http://bjl@barahi.com), [www.barahijunglelodge.com](http://www.barahijunglelodge.com)

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# Charles McDougal

1930-2016

Charles ('Chuck') McDougal (*pic below*) was a leading tiger ecologist, conservationist, researcher and writer, who pioneered responsible wildlife tourism standards in Nepal and the region.

Chuck first came to the subcontinent as an anthropologist studying the Juang tribal people in Odisha, and then undertook the definitive study on the Kulung Rai in Nepal. Inspired by the jungle life of Jim Corbett's books, Chuck switched his attention to tigers in the 1960s, initially to hunting then soon to research and conservation. He was a dedicated and self-effacing man with a gentle and modest manner, widely respected for his uncompromising approach to tiger conservation, and exacting standards for wildlife tourism.

As Director of Wildlife of Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge, Chuck's base for tiger research after 1972 was the Chitwan National Park, working with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, the Smithsonian Institution and teams of Nepali trackers and naturalists.

His painstaking research yielded in one of the largest and longest-running data sets of any tiger population in the world. It uncovered the secret world of tigers and what they need to survive in their forest habitat, providing today's

wildlife managers with the vital information required to protect these iconic animals.

Crucial to the data collection was Chuck's innovative development of camera-trapping through a homemade pressure plate in the 1970s. Over the years he photographed hundreds of different tigers and also an impressive inventory of other creatures including sloth bears, leopards, jungle cats and the rare honey badger.

Chuck's authoritative book, *Face of the Tiger* in 1977, was the result of thousands of hours of observation and tracking. He published many scientific papers himself and with colleagues, notably Professor J L David Smith of the University of Minnesota with whom a major work on the tiger is being published by Harvard University Press. He recently completed a collection of jungle tales that will be published posthumously.

In Nepal, Chuck teamed up with English-born A V Jim Edwards to found Nepal Wildlife Adventures, an early hunting company in the Tarai. But they soon realised it was time to abandon hunting and embrace conservation ideals. In February 1972, Jim and Chuck took over the management of Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge from the two Texan millionaires and big game hunters.



CHARLIE VARLEY

**TIGER SELFIE:** The famous tiger selfie that Chuck McDougal took in 1980 with his innovative pressure plate camera capture technique.

McDougal stands on a track in the Chitwan National Park in Nepal (*left*).

Together their brand of purist wildlife expertise combined with commercial realities to set global standards for the adventure tourism industry.

Chuck avoided the limelight and based himself in Chitwan to study tigers. With a strong emphasis on nature interpretation, Tiger Tops wildlife lodges and tented camps extended throughout India as well as Nepal, with activities in Sri Lanka, Bhutan,

Tibet and beyond. Tiger Tops formula of responsible wildlife tourism and conservation synergy was an acknowledged model long before ecotourism became a buzzword.

In later years, Chuck developed a pessimistic ambivalence towards the more rampant impacts of tourism, advocating that benefits only accrue when tourism is more carefully controlled and channelled as a positive force for

conservation.

Many wildlife operations in Nepal and the region today are still managed and staffed by Chuck McDougal-trained specialists, who regard the quiet American as their guru and inspiration. Chuck retired from Tiger Tops in 2001, and devoted himself to travel, research and writing, continuing his tiger monitoring program in the Tarai through the International Trust for Nature Conservation of which he remained an active trustee.

Charles McDougal died on 11 May in Kathmandu and is survived by his wife Margie, and children Robert, Juan Carlos, Malcolm and Linda. Lisa Choegyol

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# CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR

The thirteenth film in the Marvel cinematic universe, *Captain America: Civil War*, is miraculously substantial, choosing to engage in matters of friendship, loyalty, and most riskily for a film about

Yes, Iron Man (reprised with the usual verve by Robert Downey Jr.) and Captain America (Chris Evans) go head-to-head, but not in the same flash of humourless, over-pumped male egos that reduced *Batman v Superman* to such a bore. This clash between Tony Stark and Captain Steve Rogers is not just about their differing opinions. It involves addressing the very issues at the crux of humanity such as accountability, respect for one's fellow creatures, and a few ethical issues that are exclusive to the fictitious Marvel universe, such as the extra-legal privileges accorded to *the Avengers* because of their powers, and dealing with the very real insecurities that can embitter even a super-hero.

Fortunately, the plot too is fairly captivating aside from the emotional intricacies. The

Avengers team, minus Thor, the Hulk, and Iron Man storm a building in Lagos, trying to stop a biological weapon from being stolen by an old nemesis. They recover the weapon but Wanda (Ashley Olsen), a young Avenger with telekinetic capabilities, accidentally blows up an entire building while trying to save the Captain from a bomb that he missed seeing.

On the heels of the destruction in Sokovia (the plot of last year's Avengers film *Age of Ultron*) the world is aghast at the impunity that these potentially dangerous superheroes apparently enjoy. Tony Stark, himself, haunted by his missteps from past films, and the (surely temporary) loss of his moral anchor Pepper Potts (played in previous films by Gwyneth Paltrow) feels compelled to err on the side of the United Nations, who proposes that the Avengers be managed by a committee - a vast encroachment on their powers, and a restraint that Captain America does not take well.

As the Avengers split over these crucial decisions, the Captain is further torn by the framing of his boyhood friend Bucky Barnes aka The Winter Soldier (Sebastian Stan), a super-soldier manufactured by Hydra, who also happens to be the dear friend of Steve Rogers from way back when he was a skinny lad in pre-World War II Brooklyn. What ensues is a fine film with amusing surprises, stunning action sequences, and a bit of real heart.

[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

Trailer



**MUST SEE**  
Sophia Pande

superheroes, in "feelings". Perhaps the reason for the success is the strong ensemble cast that have all, to date, been allowed to develop into complex characters with priorities and agendas and deep, dark pasts, saving this film from descending into the posturing frat boy antics that made *Batman v Superman* (also released earlier this year) so wince-worthy.

**HAPPENINGS**



BIKRAM RAI

**HEAD OF THE STATE:** President Bidya Bhandari takes the army salute before entering parliament to present the government's policies and programs on Monday.



ANANDA RAM DANGOL

**HUSH-HUSH :** PM KP Oli with Indian Ambassador Ranjit Rae after briefing Kathmandu-based diplomats in Kathmandu on Wednesday.



ELITE JOSHI

**EMIRATE EMBASSY:** Foreign Affairs Minister Kamal Thapa and UAE's Minister for Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan inaugurate the UAE embassy in Kathmandu on Sunday.



BIKRAM RAI

**TRANSITIONAL INJUSTICE:** War victims and human rights activists protest against the UML-Maoist deal on dismissal of conflict-era cases in Kathmandu on Wednesday.



GOPEN RAI

**HERE COMES THE RAINGOD:** Devotees pull the chariot of Rato Machindranath on the first day of a month-long festival in Pulchowk, Lalitpur on Tuesday.

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# Kakistocracy

The human rights situation is deteriorating with those in power quite used to overstepping their legal authority

Despite having tried everything from absolute monarchy to absolute anarchy the goal of finding a system of governance that's accountable to the people seems more distant than ever. Instead, aristocratic privilege and the divine right of petty rajas seems to be back in vogue, including time-honoured concepts of staying 'above the fray', so nobody has to work, and being firmly 'above the law', so nobody goes to jail.



**MOVING TARGET**  
Foreign Hand

For eternal outliers like your columnist, getting here has been a journey of linguistic discovery, rich in terminology if poor in meaningful change. During the Panchayat days everyone hoped for *prajatantra* (democracy) and *bahudal* (multi-party system), soon followed by cries for *janatantra*, *loktantra* and the Maoist specialty: *ganatantra*, or communist 'democratic people's republic', which, history shows, is neither democratic nor the people's.

So what does Nepal have now? Though supposedly democratic, village level elections haven't been held for almost 20 years. Any pretense of internal democracy within the parties has long been abandoned and the last national election in 2013 was for a Constitutional Assembly that no longer exists.

With six Deputy PM's and an absurdly bloated cabinet this government was designed primarily to enjoy the spoils of power rather than actually govern. KP Oli's coalition brings Marxist-Leninists, Maoists, Royalists and a Moonie together in an improbable cabal that's best described as kakistocracy (from the Greek '*kakistos*' meaning 'worst'), rule by the least

qualified and most unprincipled citizens.

As a high-school dropout and life-long communist our PM has proven himself to be consistently out of his depth at every turn. His abrasive attitude towards Madhesis surely added months to the blockade, enriching the black marketers at everyone else's expense, while his sheer determination to enjoy his turn at the top was especially inappropriate when disaster struck. The great earthquake's recent anniversary brought international attention that, though mercifully brief, was clearly unwelcome, captured in a BBC interview that must be one of the shortest on record.

When asked why reconstruction had yet to begin, our remarkably relaxed PM agreed it was slow, delayed, and stated he wasn't happy, though he looked much less upset than the agitated journalist. Sounding like a guru explaining the mysteries of the Orient to an impatient acolyte he delivered his punch line with fatalistic gravitas: but that is reality. Indeed, yet surely those still living under tarpaulins, waiting for aid promised a year ago, deserve better from the man most able to help.

But there's more to the new ethos permeating the parties than simply forgetting the peasants or trying to get rich quick.

Recent headlines declared Congress was 'even ready' to support Prachanda as PM in their efforts to topple the government, showing the voters that once the horse trading begins their vote counts for nothing. These Congress MP's seem to forget the only reason most of them got elected in the first place was to keep these same Maoists at bay. Does it not occur that such opportunistic support of a party their voters rejected is a betrayal of their constituent's sovereign right to choose? (Picture our lawmakers asking: Who? What?)



When asked why the Maoists were withdrawing support from the coalition, spokesman Haribol Gajurel explained they're upset because so many of their leaders were getting arrested. Ten points for frankness, though he doesn't explain why arresting convicted criminals isn't a good thing. This threat of desertion was enough for KP Oli to sign a nine-point agreement giving the Maoist leadership everything they want, including immediate

dismissal of all war-era crimes. The fact the PM has no legal authority to do so, proven by the Supreme Court's previous ruling that dismissal of such cases is illegal, was conveniently ignored.

In yet another betrayal of democratic principles the deal makes Prachanda our next PM, despite the Maoists getting only 15 per cent of the votes/seats in the last election and the unfortunate detail he's been charged with war crimes.

Further examples of this

departure from democratic norms include KP Oli's unprecedented confrontation with the Human Rights Commission, demands from the military for details on those filing complaints of war-era disappearances, and more recent reports of open intimidation at regional TRC offices. Needless to say, such behaviour goes against the spirit of the peace agreement and is illegal.

The arrest of prominent journalist Kanak Mani Dixit on spurious charges, widely seen as a personal vendetta/reign of terror conducted by the anti-corruption chief against all who get in his way, was followed by the random deportation of a foreigner for tweets that 'threaten the state'.

By all accounts the human rights situation is deteriorating and those in power, now quite used to overstepping their legal authority, aren't even pretending to play by the rules anymore. One wonders if there's a term for governance geared specifically to gaming the system and subverting the functions of state. Suggestions are welcome.

In some ways the war still continues 10 years later, for the victims who await justice as well as the perpetrators who continue to doggedly undermine the system and institutions of good governance. We suspect more of the same to follow and can only hope the judiciary and civil society can save the nation from those without principles.

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# Hounded out of Malaysia

OM ASTHA RAI  
IN KUALA LUMPUR



After getting his boarding pass for a Kathmandu-bound plane, Basanta Basnet, 22, looked relaxed at Kuala Lumpur airport last week. He was going home after four years in Malaysia. When asked if he plans to return, he replied firmly: “No way.”

Basnet is from Dang district, and was only 19 and newly-married when he first went to work in a poultry farm in Pedas in Malaysia. From the beginning he was often beaten up and robbed by local Tamils. The last straw was when a fellow-Nepali worker was beaten to death by a local youth when he resisted a robbery attempt.

“We could not save him, but we collected money to send his body back to Nepal,” he said.

Nepalis are preyed on not just by jobless young Malaysians, but also by

employers. Last month, when a few chickens died in the farm, Basnet was stripped naked in front of co-workers. “He would cut my pay every time I made a mistake, but this time he humiliated me,”

he said.

Unable to bear the abuse, and constant threats from the locals, Basnet decided to return – together with 27 others in the poultry farm. “Malaysia is a

jungle and we were the easy prey, the locals are always hunting for us,” he said.

Exploitation, an increase in the Malaysian government levy on worker’s earnings, a falling

Ringgit and a temporary ban on foreign workers are some of the reasons why the number of Nepalis going to Malaysia has plummeted (*see article, below*). But in interviews last week with

## Staying home

The number of Nepalis going to work in Malaysia and the Gulf showed a drastic drop this year

SONIA AWALE  
IN KUALA LUMPUR

Till recently Air Asia flights between Kuala Lumpur and Kathmandu would be full of Nepali migrant workers flying out to jobs in Malaysia, or returning home. But in recent months, while flights out are mostly empty, those to Kathmandu are full. Nepali workers in Malaysia are returning home for good, and there aren’t too many to take their place.

After the earthquake in Nepal last year, experts had predicted a surge in workers migrating overseas for work. But the opposite seems to be happening. A lot fewer Nepalis are leaving, and the most drastic drop has been in workers going to Malaysia.

Figures from the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) show that only 312,000 Nepali workers left for work abroad in the last nine months, whereas 513,000 left in the same period

last year – a whopping 40 per cent decline.

The reason for the drop to the Gulf appears to be the Nepal government’s inability to negotiate better terms for its workers. In Malaysia it is an inhospitable working environment, the falling Ringgit and a moratorium on foreign workers. The falling numbers will shrink remittances and raise the unemployment rate in Nepal itself. About 18 per cent of Nepal’s population works in India, Malaysia, and the Gulf countries, and they send home more than \$6 billion annually – making up nearly a quarter of the country’s GDP.

Malaysia and the Gulf countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE have been the most popular destinations for Nepalis seeking jobs. At the time of the earthquake, 1,500 Nepalis were leaving for overseas employment each day. That figure has come down by 40 per cent today.

One of the reasons is the shortage of construction workers after the earthquake has raised

salaries in Nepal itself, so prospective migrant workers are finding it worthwhile to stay and work in Nepal.

The other reason is that the government’s effort to enforce a free visa and ticket provision for its migrant workers has met with stiff resistance from recruitment agencies, and led to a sharp drop in outbound workers.

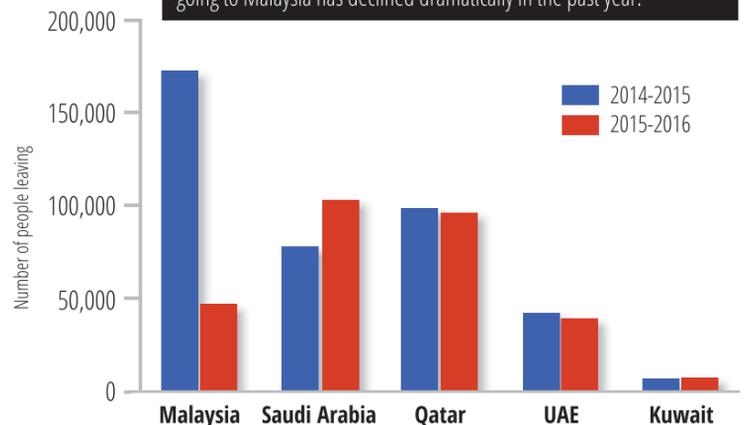
Kumud Khanal, Vice-president of Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA) disagrees that the decline is because domestic salaries have risen, but because of the Nepal government’s new regulation banning recruitment agencies from charging workers for visas and tickets.

Janak Regmi, spokesman of the DoFE says that the earthquake should have increased the number of people leaving, but says the reason for the decline is that the government is stricter in enforcing new regulations.

“Yes, our statistics show the numbers of Nepali workers going overseas has gone down,”



WORKING OUT: The number of overseas contract workers from Nepal going to Malaysia has declined dramatically in the past year.



Among the factors dissuading Nepalis from working in Malaysia is widespread harassment and robberies by locals



ALL PICS: OM ASTHA RAI

Nepali workers here, another reason became apparent: robberies and beatings by locals.

Every second Nepali interviewed said he has been robbed or repeatedly harassed

#### LEAVING IN DROVES:

Nepali migrant workers queuing up for flights to Kathmandu at Kuala Lumpur International Airport last week.

on the streets. Shyam Bahadur Thapa from Parbat was on a recent flight to Kathmandu, he had been robbed so often that he decided to return to Nepal after five years. But on the day before his flight, while waiting for a ride to the market to buy presents, he was robbed again of his savings. "I am never coming back. Malaysia is hell for Nepalis," he told us.

Prem Magar of the Nepali trade union, GEFONT, in Kuala Lumpur says most Nepalis are weak and vulnerable, and never seek police help. "We don't go to the police because of the fear of more harassment, and the Nepal embassy is powerless to protect us," he said.

Magar has been working at a factory in Klang near Kuala Lumpur for six years, and has seen many of his friends robbed and beaten by locals. "Nowadays, we only travel in groups and we never retaliate, because if we do we get deported," he said.

Nepal's ambassador to Malaysia, Niranjan Man Singh

Basnyat, says his embassy has started a hotline service to help Nepali migrant workers, but admits that they rarely call the embassy when they are robbed.

"It is useless to call the embassy for help," says Keshav Khadka, another plastic factory worker in Klang who remembers submitting a petition at the embassy after a Nepali worker was brutally assaulted two years ago. "The embassy could do nothing," he told us.

Nepali workers are more vulnerable to abuse and harassment in areas like Pedang and Johor Baru. They even get harassed by police who frequently check them for documents.

"Our earnings have fallen because the value of the Ringgit is still low, and the labour levy is increasing," says 35-year-old Anil Chaudhary, one of the 150 Nepalis working to build an under-ground metro rail network in Kuala Lumpur. "But whatever little we earn is also not safe from robbers."

The Malaysia government has increased minimum salary of migrant workers to \$249 effective from July, but it has also raised the labour levy.

G Rajasekaran, General Secretary of Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC), says: "The Malaysia government is forcing employers to pay more to migrant workers so they can collect more taxes from them." ❏

workers less competitive, and there is the fall of the Malaysian Ringgit," he said.

Additionally, the Malaysian government in late February announced that it wouldn't be recruiting any foreign labour, but on Wednesday lifted the ban.

The drop in traffic to Malaysia has meant an increase in the number moving to the Gulf, mainly Saudi Arabia. A total of 102,728 people left for the Gulf nation in the last fiscal year 2015-2016, compared to 78,400 a year before.

#### Jobs at home

The decline in number of people leaving for overseas migration and especially Malaysia will increase joblessness at home since the Nepal government has no systematic plan to employ young workers at home for earthquake reconstruction. Many Nepali workers interviewed in Malaysia said they would gladly stay home in Nepal if the government could guarantee them jobs with a minimum salary.

Mahendra Kumar Thapa Chhetri, 26, is one of them. "Many of us work for less than US\$200 a month. If the government could give us jobs with just that much pay in Nepal for earthquake reconstruction we'd never leave," said Chhetri, who works as a security guard in Johor Bahru in Malaysia, "Why should we come here to face all this exploitation and harsh conditions?" ❏

for reconstruction. Only 30,000 of the total houses destroyed have so far been rebuilt. Nepal needs its workers at home.

Over the course of 12 months, right after the Nepal earthquake, there has been a dramatic decline in number of Nepalis going to Malaysia for employment (see graph). Khanal of NAFEA lists several reasons for this.

"The Nepal government is not lobbying hard enough to promote our workers and there is competition from Bangladesh. The free visa and ticket requirement have made Nepali

he said. "There are many reasons, one of them is that we have tightened procedures and loopholes to protect the interest of workers, and this could be having an effect."

There was hope that post-earthquake reconstruction would lead to a demand for workers, but even a year later rebuilding is slow to pick up due to the Indian blockade, apathy of political leaders and government indecisiveness.

A Post-Disaster Needs Assessment last year estimated 700,000 workers would be needed



OM ASTHA RAI

## Illegal, ill-treated

Nepali workers are unlawfully forced to become 'illegal' by unscrupulous employers, recruiters and the government

When Malaysia launched a massive crackdown on illegal migrant workers in 2014, thousands of Nepalis without passports here were left with only two options: return home or get arrested.

To return home without passports, Nepali workers would require travel documents. But the Nepal embassy in Kuala Lumpur was under-staffed, and issuing travel documents for so many of them at such short notice was not possible.

The usually slothful embassy staff worked extra hard to protect fellow-Nepalis from being detained by Malaysian immigration authorities. They worked all night, issuing travel

documents as thousands of anxious Nepalis waited outside. The crackdown tapered off in a few days, but the embassy kept sending back Nepalis deemed illegal by Malaysia.

Between September 2014-December 2015, some 58,000 Nepali workers were deported. However, over 500 'illegal' Nepali workers are still in Malaysian jails and detention centres, and Nepal's ambassador to Malaysia, Niranjan Man Singh Basnyat, estimates that there could be another 20,000 Nepali workers whom Malaysian authorities can detain anytime and anywhere.

Most of those detained are classified as illegal because they lack proper documents, not because they committed any crime. They just happen to be poor and vulnerable, and trying to earn enough to support families back home. Many lack papers because they were exploited by Nepali recruiters, or thrown out by Malaysian employers without documents.

Malaysia is obsessed with managing foreign workers, often jailing undocumented immigrants, and occasionally declaring amnesties. Even now, after the sudden temporary ban on the intake of foreign labourers in February, there is a chance 'illegal' migrant could be rehired by new employers. But this rehiring program, a new amnesty period, or a fresh crackdown mean nothing unless Malaysia realises why and how a migrant worker becomes 'illegal' in the first place.

Resam Bohara (pictured, above) is a security guard in Kuala Lumpur and came to Malaysia as a legal migrant worker in 2010. One year later, he failed a health test, and was disqualified to work. His supervisor did not send him back, but demanded a bribe of 3,000 Ringgits (\$747).

Bohara did not have money, but promised to find it. A few weeks later, he damaged a mop and the supervisor threatened to cut one month's pay. Bohara got angry, and demanded his due salary and passport which was refused. Without passport and job, Bohara became 'illegal'. For the next four years, he has kept changing his workplace to avoid arrest, earning a reduced salary. He has finally got a passport, and says he will return to Nepal soon.

There are many similar stories of migrant workers in Malaysia not just from Nepal but also Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines who are 'illegal'. In some cases, workers who do not get promised salaries join other companies and have to leave their passports behind. In other cases employers don't bother to get their work visas renewed.

Three Nepali workers from Rautahat have been working 'illegally' in a pipe factory in Klang for the last four months. Their visa expired in January, but the company did not bother to have it renewed. If the immigration authorities raid the factory, they will get arrested. They haven't committed any crime, but they are 'illegal'.

Once 'illegal', migrant workers always have to be on the run, and earn less. They cannot go to the police even if they are harassed, robbed and beaten. Corruption is so rife that Malaysian politicians, bureaucrats and employers together with Nepali recruitment agencies have created a system to fleece Nepali workers by making them unlawful migrants.

It is illegal for employers to hold employees' passports in Malaysia, but migrant workers are victims of this unlawful practice. Unless Malaysia cleans up its act, it will be known as a country that exploits workers' rights, tainting its prosperity and growth. ❏





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## Tax on kickbacks

It was completely wrong on the part of Belayati Prime Minister David Cameron to tell Queen Elizabeth on candid camera the other day that Afghanistan and Nigeria were the most “fantastically corrupt countries” in the world. He left out Nepal.

Not only was this a gross misinterpretation of facts (because Nepal is both “funtastic” and “corrupt”) but it also belittled the enormous effort we as a country and people have put into downgrading our rankings in the Transparent Index over the last decades so as to be placed at the bottom of the heap among the corruptest countries in the known universe. It is due to these efforts that Nepal was successful in overtaking Afghanistan, and the only reason the Nigerians are at the bottom of the TI rankings below us is because of match-fixing — their government officials bribed our government officials to be ranked as more corrupt.

By leaving out Nepal in his briefing to the Queen in the presence of the Lord Chamberlain and other dignitaries at the Buckingham Palace, Cameron missed a great opportunity to highlight Nepal's achievement as a tribute to a loyal ex-vassal state during this double centennial year of the establishment of



bilateral diplomatic niceties between Great Britain and South Asia's oldest nation state. The remnants of the British Empire meeting in London this week therefore missed an opportunity to hear from us pros how we have perfected embezzlement into an embarrassment.

Since corruption has become such a part of everyday life in the Demographic Kleptocratic Republic of Nepal, we might as well legalise it — even if it means we have to bribe someone to do it. There are many advantages

to decriminalising graft, and it's time to bite the bullet, swallow the bitter pill, take the plunge, cross the Rubicon and burn the bridge after we get to it and cross it.

Nepal's GDP would get a huge boost because under-the-table deals, which form such an important segment of our economy, will henceforth be legitimate transactions that will be counted in the national accounts statistics. The way it's going to work is like this: since bribery is an economic activity that spreads the wealth around, reduces the

income gap between rich and poor, and helps alleviate poverty, a Corruption Tax will be calculated on net profit and net gains from business and computations thereof will be determined by a flat pay-as-you-earn rate. In other words, the briber has to hand over to the bribee, the agreed bribe amount under the table, and proffer an on-the-spot bribe to avoid paying VAT.

The Department for the Avoidance of Death and Tax has drawn up a list of various types of corruption levies that

are applicable to citizens in the frothcoming fiscal year:

**Fat Cat VAT:** This is a flat rate on individual bribes great and small that will deduct 13 per cent of the amount at source and will be added to the tax payer's annual returns.

**Panama Rebate:** Nepali businessmen named in the Panama Papers can bribe the fox who guards the chicken coop at the Commission to Abuse Authority not to be investigated, and will be granted a tax rebate on the earnest money handed over under the table.

**Wide-body Duty:** Officials involved in kickbacks on purchase of wide bodies for the national flag-carrier will be assessed on a pro-rated basis on the extra abdominal inches added to their girth before and after the purchase.

**Oil Tax:** The amount of palm grease that exchanged hands to lubricate the deal on private petroleum imports during the Blockade will be retroactively taxed, unless we get our 10 per cent.

**Pre-paid Tax:** Bribes paid by ministers, ambassador designates, corporate heads and Commissioners to get their

appointments approved will be taxed according to a sliding rate based on a formula that will include income, capital gain, net worth and state-sanctioned extortion.

**Kickback Tax:** Since bribes are also given in kind, and to prevent these from falling through the tax net, the Dept of Taxonomy will physically dis-assemble 13% of the body weight of the chassis of an SUV given in lieu of a bribe.

**Inheritance Tax:** Since a lot of officials have enriched themselves during their tenure as Director General of Customs and Culture, in the unlikely event of his/her demise, the state will repossess 50% of his/her ill-gotten wealth. Sorry lads, half of Daddy's moolah is ours.

**Excise Tax:** These taxes on bribes are hypothecated by keeping them very low in order to encourage corruption and contribute to growth. After all, if there was no corruption all transactions would stop and the economy would grind to a halt.



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