As pre-monsoon showers brought much-needed rain this week, the Nepal Electricity Authority reduced power cuts by one hour a day from this week. But consumers still face up to 12 hours without electricity in a country said to be the richest in hydropower in the region.

The five-month Indian Blockade drew attention to this failure to harness hydropower and the growing dependence on petroleum imports. The government announced the Energy Crisis Reduction and Development Decade to end power cuts within a year and generate 10,000 MW of electricity in 10 years. Nepalis have heard these promises before and have ridiculed the targets.

Officials at the Ministry of Finance are finalising the new budget for presentation this weekend. Will Prime Minister KP Oli’s government set aside the resources to end the energy crisis? Will there be incentives for quick solar and wind energy projects? The Ministry of Energy wants Rs 7 billion to supply 1,000 MW by next winter. But mega hydro projects have been delayed by the earthquake and Blockade, and to meet the shortfall, the government is upgrading transmission lines to import another 300 MW from India.

Navraj Dhakal, Director of the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre, says the new budget is important because it would be Nepal’s first fiscal planning after the blockade: “We are expecting the budget to restart nearly 300 earthquake-damaged micro hydro projects, and renewable energy subsidy for earthquake survivors.”

International investors are in Kathmandu next week for the Nepal Power Investment Summit 2016 to attract energy partners. Hydropower developers expect policy changes in the budget, including tax incentives for hydropower construction. Khadga Bahadur Bista, President of Independent Power Producers’ Association says: “Because of the quake and blockade we need force majeure incentives for energy projects.”

Om Astha Rai
POWER STRUGGLE

We laugh at our leaders when they promise to end power cuts but are unaware of Nepal's energy potential, but because we are aware of their ineptitude.

Prime Minister KP Oli is the victim of his own success in cultivating a reputation for swift reprisals. But what worked to disarm reporters and get legislators rolling on the aisles with laughter when he was in the opposition, is now landing him in trouble. As head of government, his jokes seem callous, disrespectful and inconsiderate.

Which is why his remarks on why rhinoceros conservation should concern every human being, piping cooking gas to every home, Nepal having its own merchant marine fleet, striking crude oil deposits in the Tanai and generating wind power, have been the butt of ridicule. And rightly so because when he makes these wild promises at a time when Nepal grapples with day-to-day survival, the Prime Minister comes across as someone who is out of touch with reality.

However, to be fair, some of these grand declarations have merit and can be implemented. Most modern cities have gas utilities through mains just like urban water supply, oceangoing ships have in the past flown the Nepali flag in the high seas, and Nepal can indeed be self-sufficient in power very rapidly by harnessing hydro, wind and solar energy.

Prime Minister Oli’s target of generating 10,000 MW of electricity in the next ten years is actually quite conservative. Nepal can generate much more in that time if we only had the political will, and a leadership team with vision and integrity. One of the biggest lessons from the Indian Blockade is that we should immediately fast-track hydropower, utilities through mains just like urban water supply, ocean-going ships, and solar-wind-solar stations and wind farms to make the country energy self-sufficient. The surge in petroleum imports from India is making us economically bankrupt and politically submissive.

Oli sounds like just another leader promising to turn Nepal into Switzerland or Singapore, and we have heard it all before. In 1994 Prime Minister K P Bhattarai promised to wash the streets of Kathmandu with Melamchi water, all before. In 1994 Prime Minister K P Bhattarai promised to wash the streets of Kathmandu with Melamchi water, 22 years later we are still waiting for the project to be completed. In 2008, the elected Maoist government led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal said Nepal would generate 10,000 MW within ten years. A decade has nearly passed and we have added barely 40 MW capacity to the national grid.

In 2009, Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal laid out an even more ambitious plan: generating 25,000 MW in 20 years. But because it came from a man who once said we could export power to China via microwave radiation, he was mocked.

The trouble is that Nepal’s leaders have always been talkers, not doers. Their targets are set far into the future, beyond their political lifespans, that they don’t really have to think about implementing them. Dahal laid out a 10-year strategy, but resigned after just nine months in power in 2009. Nepal also stepped down within 10 months of promising mega power.

Successful governments have declared energy emergencies four times in the last decade. The latest was by the Oli administration in February this year after the Indian Blockade. The purpose was to streamline ministries, end red tape and expedite projects, but none of that happened even though it was a real emergency.

As our Energy Now special coverage in this issue (pages 4-5, 14-15) shows, the statistics are a stark reminder of governance failure. Nepal’s electricity demand is 1,300 MW, we generate less than half that. There is suppressed demand, so if there was enough power people would start using more electrical appliances and demand would quickly surpass 10,000 MW in the next ten years.

When we laugh at our Prime Minister when he promises to end power cuts within one year, it is not because we are unaware of their potential, but because we are aware of the fearlessness of our political leadership. As a result of the failure, Nepal’s import of petroleum from India has quadrupled in the last two decades— from $50,000 KL in 1995 to 1.8 million KL in 2015. Our petroleum import bill has soared six fold in the last 10 years: from Rs 20 billion in 2005 to Rs 125 billion in 2015.

Generating more electricity to be self-sufficient in energy, and then exporting power to northern India at premium-price to redress our balance of payments should have been Nepal’s national strategy. The Indian Blockade should have been a wake-up call, but it looks like our leaders are still pretending to sleep.

Solar and wind energy can be stopgaps to cover shortfalls till new hydropower projects come on line. Their advantage is low cost and quick installation. Luckily, hydro, wind and solar are all renewables: they will help us have an ecologically, economically and politically sustainable energy solution.
Contempt of State

Politics as entertainment only got better last week as the lunatic fringe went through convolutions, mutiny and high profile splits. Mohan Badayu’s GP Revolutionary Maoists, a near forgotten entity that considers elections to be a capitalist trick, was torn asunder as Comrade Badayu (CII) jumped ship amid cries of revolutionism and treason.

In the past your scribe wondered why the press bothered with such ridiculous parties with so little support but now feels grateful for the comic relief. There aren’t many countries on earth that will feature communist factions battling it out in epic sagas of betrayal and power-bust.

As Comrade Cloud’s faction went through the motions of setting up a new party Prachanda (Awesome) was writhing with open arms, promising high level posts and downy future back in the mother of all Maoist parties. It felt like being privy to the mating rituals of an exotic, endangered species as Awesome and Cloud were reunited, the stuff of Kollywood, and in the heat of the moment the inevitable lure of all, Matrika Yadav and his band of Marxists (Feverish) joined the unity parade.

The sight of grown men sporting teen-age nicknames, puffed up with self-importance as they debate the finer points of a discredited ideology, is as good as it gets these days and would be even funnier if the whole song and dance wasn’t a ruse. It’s surely no coincidence this sudden push for Maoist unity comes at a time when thousands of complaints on war era crimes are being registered with the TRC. Perhaps the real reason for this newfound fraternity among communists, who normally squeak for a living, is the fear of prosecution, with the promise of impunity held out to all who join.

Prachanda’s recent pleas to ‘come home’ were rebuffed by Babaram Bhattarai (IBB), who, in his new avataar as Capitalist Routier, declared it was time to polarize instead of unify as he desperately tries to leave his past behind. In what sounded like an admission of guilt, Prachanda retorted that IBB can’t escape responsibility for conducting the war ‘that caused suffering’ just because he ‘joined hands with the bourgeoisie’.

If your correspondent could make this stuff up he’d be working overtime in Bollywood. The action continued apace as Prachanda got slapped with a contempt of court charge last week, citing his statements at a recent program called ‘People’s War and Court Verdicts’, which just goes to show what’s on his mind these days. According to the charge sheet the accused showed contempt of court by saying the judiciary was involved in ‘conspiracy’ and “tried to create rift in society’ while boldly declaring he’d never abide by the court’s verdict.

The Supreme Court has since ordered Prachanda to appear in person within three days (which he won’t) or provide a written explanation (which he might) for such disrespect.

Perhaps a charge of contempt of state for all of our leaders would be more appropriate. To be fair, the Maoists are only furthering an age old tradition dating back to the Rana period, when the rulers considered the state the state their personal property and rules only applied to others. The advent of democracy in 1990 brought little change to this mindset, as leaders of all the mainstream parties showed contempt for the nation by frequently breaking the law to get what they want.

The Maoists only took this long standing ethos to new lows. While Congress and UML undermined the state through corruption and negligence the Maoists did the same by attacking and disploting it in districts they controlled. All of this behaviour denotes a profound lack of respect for the nation’s institutions, differing only by degree and impact. If Bollywood script-writers had their way our entire political class would be banished to the wilderness to stone for their sins. Also, such a happy ending eludes us the recent political drama only produced yet another makeshift party; the GPN Maoist Center, which sounds like a downtown shopping mall selling hammer, sickles and ill-fitting suits, where the sales-clerk indoctrinates you and parking attendant hijacks your car.

All Kollywood aside, there’s little doubt Nepal has suffered from too much politics and too little policy over the past two decades. A troubling pattern is already well established, whereby the country is held hostage to the needs of a small cabal of individuals while the economy and people’s welfare is completely neglected. Getting to the top through war and violence cost 10 years and a national trauma, followed by another 8 years pretending to write the constitution, miking the system while keeping the country constantly off-balance. Throw in another year for the earthquake and blockades and one wonders whether such instability will ever end, especially since most of the country’s many problems stem directly from this chronic lack of effective governance.

Recent events indicate more trouble on the horizon. As the Maoists unite in their campaign against the judiciary the state’s development, barely alive after 20 years of chaos, is sure to be sacrificed yet again in this latest pursuit of personal agendas.
Send a key message to the world that Nepal’s energy sector is open for business. The Nepal Power Investment Summit (NPIS) will be held from 31 May to 3 June in Kathmandu. The summit will provide a platform for investors, contractors, and government officials from all over the world to discuss the future of the Nepal energy sector.

The summit will focus on renewable energy projects, including hydro, solar, and wind power. The event will feature talks from government officials, industry leaders, and experts in the field. The summit will also include a business forum where investors can meet with government officials to discuss potential projects.

The summit is expected to attract a wide range of participants, including investors, contractors, and government officials from all over the world. The event will provide an opportunity to network and discuss the future of the Nepal energy sector.

Nepal has a large potential for renewable energy projects, with significant hydropower, solar, and wind resources. The country has set ambitious targets for renewable energy, with a goal of sourcing 10% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2027.

The summit will provide a platform for investors to learn about the potential of the Nepal energy sector and to discuss potential projects.

Sujit Acharya

Guest Column

The future power house of South Asia

The Nepal Power Investment Summit next week will send a message to the world that Nepal is ready for foreign investment in renewable energy projects.

Nepal has large scale opportunities in the renewable energy sector. The urban solar opportunity in the country could easily cross the $1 billion mark. Hydropower projects from both the government and private sector showcased during the Summit are in a similar range. Nepal offers the highest power purchase rates offered in South Asia for hydropower and solar energy. The highest electricity generation per unit from both hydropower and solar plants are again found in Nepal. We will prove that Nepal is the place in South Asia offering the highest returns on investments in renewable energy projects.

We are going to continue to make our case to investors and improve our regulatory environment. Next time, we plan to take the Summit overseas to where the investors are located. We will also be presenting the findings for policy improvements requested by our foreign delegates to the relevant stakeholders in the government, who will also be attending.

Sujit Acharya is the chairman of the Energy Development Council, sujit@edcnepal.org

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PRIVATE SECTOR LEAD IN GRID SOLAR SYSTEM

Raj Kumar Thapa of Solar Solutions on what the current budget should look at to promote solar energy in Nepal.

Nepali Times: Why opt for solar when Nepal is so rich in hydropower?

Raj Kumar Thapa: Solar should be seen as a complimentary energy source to hydropower and not as a competition. For the last 20 years we have focused largely on only one source of energy, big hydro projects have been delayed due to political instability and lack of investment. We have built small run-off-the-river systems but these are not going to really solve the country’s problem. Most hydro projects are working at 14% capacity during the dry season. It is time for Nepal to look at a mix of energy sources. Hydro is going to take a long time but the demand for electricity is going up no matter what.

Where does solar fit into this energy mix?

The load profile peaks in the mornings and evenings, but solar is perfect for daytime demand. At that time, hydropower can be stored and used during the peak hours.

What are the advantages of solar over hydropower?

Solar energy is more reliable, quick to implement, world over the costs of solar energy has come down and the technology has improved. A hydropower project takes three years to build but for solar it will take only six months. Agreed, solar is a bit more expensive but the load centres can be closer. Currently, we lose almost a third of electricity generated in transmission.

Should solar generation be decentralised or installed at utility scale?

The best system in Nepal is to go for the grid connectivity systems. If we install solar projects that go up to 5 MW, 10 MW, or even 100 MW then our daytime load shedding will be removed in 2-3 years. The right time demand can be met through hydropower.

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What are the key concerns the solar industry wants addressed in the current budget?

The government has removed taxes on solar panels, inverters, batteries, which are major components and should continue. The subsidised interest rates should also be kept for some time to tackle energy deficiency with a multi-pronged approach. At the macro level, however, government has to give incentives such as tax rebates like they have given to hydropower. They should think of it as a mainstream energy and give it the same facilities. Centralised power is cheaper, so instead of subsidies for off grid projects in urban areas, bigger solar projects should get incentives.
elements of humanity. These are represented by shockingly narrow-minded rulers of planets who govern areas barely large enough for them to stand on. Their huge egos limit them to the world they perceive through their senses for they have not understood the words that the story brings on: “It is only with the heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye”.

Those who have read the classic will be pleasantly surprised by the genius with which Studio 7 has combined and contextualised the characters. From the beautiful rose that The Little Prince left behind to the historically inaccurate Historian on Asteroid B-312, the sets, costumes and creatures that the group have created together are highly inventive. It is in these smaller sequences that Studio 7’s particular flair truly comes through.

The heart of the Studio 7 art calls for the audience’s reflective detachment brought about by a very specific style of performance taught by director Sabine Lehmann. Relative new-comers, Kusung Lama, Kudrong Shakya and Sujan have managed to adopt this style in a short amount of time. The musician who goes by "Ghotemeshi" enhances the performances with music from all across the spectrum, wonderful effects and expert timing.

The play begins with the bold colours of the Nepali flag, and this journey through red and blue is not one to miss. If you have never seen a play put on by Studio 7 before, this is the perfect first ride to catch. The stage is set for The Little Prince in all of us to open our minds, find the purity of our intention, and come to understand what is truly essential.

Belum Dixit
27 to 29 May, 3 to 5 June
and 10 to 12 June
7:15 pm onwards, Hotel Vaja, Dalli,
011/2371645
Tickets: Rs 1000, 500 (for students)
In an illustrious career spanning over four decades, Gautamata V Vajcharyya has won many hats: Nepali Sanskritist, art history scholar, author of multiple books on South Asian art and guest curator at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York.

Renowned within art circles globally as one of the focal people with knowledge in South Asian art and iconography, Vajcharyya’s achievements had humble beginnings. As a young boy growing up in the inner gilla of Mahabodhi in Katmandu, Vajcharyya spent most of his childhood in a family environment that put a huge emphasis on Sanskrit.

He was home-schooled by his father in Sanskrit until age 13 and later attended Samsodhana Mandals which laid the foundation of his knowledge of Indian and Nepali history. While still a student, Vajcharyya met Smithsonian scholar Mary Slusser who was fascinated by his knowledge in Nepali art and invited him to Protopadiya Pal, Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at The Los Angeles County Museum of Art. After assisting Pal in writing a book on Nepali art, Vajcharyya got an invitation to work at the museum after which Vajcharyya wanted to pursue his Master’s degree in Claremont Graduate School but the lack of a Bachelor’s Degree put his plans into question.

“My father did not believe in the Western schooling system and hence I had no formal degree. However, Mary Slusser was familiar with the Deans and she vouched for me and my ability to learn,” adds Vajcharyya. He went on to complete his Master’s Degree in History of Art and a PhD in South Asian Languages and Literature from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

“Given as a child, I was a logical thinker. If I can’t find logic in something, I can’t believe it. It was because of the logical explanation of historical material that made studying historical methodologies so interesting,” says Vajcharyya.

After completing his studies, Vajcharyya switched sides and continued to teach Sanskrit and Indian art and civilization in the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Since retiring, he has published two books in Nepali and four books in English, namely Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure (2009) as a contributor, Watson Collection of Indian Miniatures at the Elvehjem Museum of Art (2005) and Frog Hymns and Rain Babies: Monsoon Culture and the Art of Ancient South Asia (2013).

His most recent publication Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual was released in May 2016, along with an ongoing exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art showcasing more than 50 works of art highlighting the deep interconnection between the natural environment and the people of Kathmandu Valley.

Each object of art is related to a Nepali god of season, and the exhibition highlights the country’s dependence on the rains and how monsoon still plays an important role in agriculture, culture and art,” says Vajcharyya.

A recurring theme in his research, Vajcharyya states that the references to the monsoon culture in delites and sculptures highlights the fact that Newari culture in agrarian and predates Hindu and Buddhist religious culture at least 700 BC.

“Much of what is written about Newari culture is only by Western scholars. If it is not written about, our culture will be completely forgotten within 100 years,” says Vajcharyya whose role as guest curator at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York has boosted the profile of Nepali religious art in the global arena. Vajcharyya has also shifted his focus a bit. He says: “My previous books were written for scholars. But now, I write for everybody because I want the general public to understand.”
SAHINA SHRESTHA
IN KAVERI

For 16-year-old Sangita Magar, this school year marks an important milestone in her education—she will be appearing for her high school exams along with about half a million children from across Nepal. Magar has been preparing carefully for the exam, but she worries about her results because studies have been disturbed by the earthquake which damaged the 24 classrooms of her two-storey Azad Secondary School in Banepa.

The government assessment team gave both buildings at the school red stickers. But when schools reopened last May, few classes still ran on the ground floor of the damaged building till it was taken down. Most classes are still held in temporary learning centres. Known as TLC, the bamboo and tarpaulin shelters have become synonymous with the neglect and delayed response of the state to the needs of quake-damaged schools. Azad’s TLC have gaping holes on the bamboo mesh that make do as walls between classrooms, other schools in southern Lalitpur are even worse.

“Thera is a lot of noise coming from the other classes and it is difficult to hear the teachers,” says Magar. “The heat and the rain make it difficult to concentrate.”

Since the earthquake, students have not been able to attend science and computer practical classes, their playground is occupied by the TLCs, and the girls use temporary toilets.

“Since it is hot inside, we try to come out of class every opportunity we get. It is cooler outside, the classroom is too cramped and we have constant headaches due to the heat,” says tenth grader NabinWalpa. Teachers agree the students are more distracted and since the classroom space is small, they have not been able to monitor each student individually.

“There is a fear among students that the TLCs may become permanent classrooms,” says Prem Bahadur Krajel of the School Management Committee. “But we are trying to build permanent structures instead of spending money in repairing the TLCs.”

Around 5,000 schools were affected by the earthquakes in the 14 districts last year, and more than 30,000 classrooms were either completely destroyed or damaged, leaving more than 110,000 children without a place to study.

While the government struggled to give a final shape to the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) to begin reconstruction and recovery, the TLCs at least allowed the children back into school. More than a year later, many of the classes are still conducted in tents.

Nearly 550 schools were damaged in Kaveri, and 90 per cent of the classes are running in TLCs, according to District Education Officer Nandral Paudel. He said half of them
will be too leaky to use in the coming monsoon.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the government are reconstructing 11 schools in Kavre, but it will take a year-and-half to complete.

"Not all the TLCs are in bad condition, but schools with better leadership and resources have started to build semi-permanent structures," Paudel says.

Reconstruction is not the only problem, it is also demolition of damaged structures. Even in the heart of Kathmandu at the Darbar High School the main building has a gaping hole and is so weak that students fear it will collapse on top of the TLC. "It is scary, the building could fall even without an earthquake," says eighth grader Nischal Balami.

Meanwhile at the Sankeshwari Secondary School, which shares the building with Darbar High School, students have moved back to the damaged building because they find the heat and noise in the TLC unbearable.

"We tried to reason with them but the students did not listen," says principal Sudhi Prasad Dalal. "We don’t have a safe space to rebuild the school or to construct safer learning centers."

Earlier this month, the Ministry of Education started the reconstruction of schools in Lalitpur with the help of JICA in a project that will also include Dhading, Nuwakot, Rasuwa, Gorkha and Makawanpur. ADB is helping rebuild schools in Sindhupalchowk, Kavre, Dolakha, Ramechhap, Okhaldhunga, Kaffirmandu, Sindhuili and Bhaktapur.

The Post Disaster Recovery Framework published by the NRA plans to complete the recovery and reconstruction process in five years at a cost of Rs 1.8 billion, with 88 partners to rebuild 652 schools and 3,867 classrooms

The European Union (EU) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have also started work on 650 transitional learning centres in Gorkha, Kavre, Makawanpur, Nuwakot, Okhaldhunga, Ramechhap, Rasuwa, Sindhuili and Sindhupalchowk.

"There is big pressure from the teachers, from parents to keep children in school," says Marilyn Hour of UNICEF. "People want to see the schools being built faster but we also need to make sure they are built safely."

Sangita Magar knows one thing. It is impossible to study in a TLC. She says: "They need to rebuild our school, even if it is only one storey."

nepalitimes.com

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Bowls
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Heritage walk
Explore the alleyway of Patan in a heritage walk organized by the Rastar Club of Kapanbale and know your heritage. 11 June, 6 am onwards, Mangalbazar, 084653287. http://www.rckpark.ru

The Little Prince
Mark your calendars for Studio 7’s musical based on A.S. Esopus’ famous novel The Little Prince. 27 May to 12 June, 7 pm onwards, every Friday to Sunday, Hotel Hyrax, (01) 4271345, Rs 1000, Rs 500 (for students).

Futsal for women,
Join in on the fun and participate in the 5-a-side women’s football tournament. Rs 3000 for team registration and Rs 400 for individuals. 4 June, 10am to 6pm, Government Recreation Centre, Last day for registration: 27 May. http://www.thef4womenproject.com

Writing for arts,
Attend a three-day workshop on creative writing and art facilitated by editors of Lalit, Prajwala Anthos, Namrata Kumar, and Robi Thapliyal. Mail writing camps to sgatyal@gmail.com. 31 May to 2 June, 10 am to 2 pm, Halolay Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 9870397940. www.artwords.org/aply

Critical Mass,
Join hundreds of other cyclists to encourage a cycling culture in Kathmandu. 27 May, 6 pm onwards, Jawalakhel.

Moonface Restaurant,
One of the few places in Patan that you just can’t miss. Wash down its superb pizza and lemon chicken with a glass of wine. Patan, (01) 464258.

Kaiser Cafe Restaurant & Bar
Have a Billah lunch and a glass of wine or beer inside the peaceful Garden of Dreams. (01) 4621841

Cafe Soma
Enjoy scrumptious brunch and indulge in crepes with sugar and lemon. Jawalakhel, (01) 5057932.

Cafe Du Temple
Famous for its delicious food, warm atmosphere and beautiful roof top view. Patan Durbar Square, 527137

Music with Moktan,
Don’t miss out on the live performance by Moktan Moktan followed by DJ Sridhal Limbu and DJ Rizane Shetra. 27 May, 7 pm onwards, Club Vince, Bikentugu, Sureshwar, 987 8744959.

Top of the World Festival,
Join the Top of the World Festival at Sij with music and art, held in celebration of Buddha Jayanti. Tickets available at www.navarupa.co.com. 4 to 5 June, 11am onwards, Sij, Dolskha.

Rock’estival,
Veteran music artists came together with newcomers in the industry to bring back the glory of rock and roll music. Rs 1500 (general), Rs 2000 (door sale), 7 to 11.15 pm, The Victory Lounge, Durbar Marg.

Shangri-La Village Resort,
Escape the heat this summer with a two-night and three-day package at Shangri-La Village Resort. Gorkhnath, Koltun, (01) 4450245/ 9864783075, Rs 5999 nett per person.

Balthali Village Resort,
A small, cozy retreat with a bird’s eye view of green terraces fields dotted with active painted houses. Balthal, Kune, 9851705618.

Raniban Retreat,
Situated at the other end of Phewa Lake and nestled inside the Raniban forest, offering the best views of the Annapurna range. Phewa Lake, Palmand, (01) 4447855.
C lick, upload, share has become a way of life for the selfie generation, and it is hard to imagine a time when studio photographs were limited and prized, and it took weeks to develop a roll of film. For a glimpse of simpler and more innocent age when families in Nepal trooped off to a photo studio to take portraits, photo circle has put together “Facing the camera” an exhibition of 60 images from family albums and archives. Digitised and reprinted for the exhibition, the images are from photo circle’s Nepal Picture Library initiative and are from Kathmandu, Dharam, Birgunj and Palpa.

Three brothers dressed in daura suruwal pose solemnly, group portraits of joint families, children posing by themselves, three generation of men all staring at the camera — the sepia images hark back to family life and the importance of print photography in decades gone by.

“As there were very few studies, people used to call photographers in public spaces and gather their family to click photos. This was probably how the idea of family portraits emerged in Nepal,” explained Bhusan Shilpakar, who curated the exhibition for photo circle. The dress and the postures in the photographs indicate the status that people accorded to photography. Not a hair out of place, the subjects are in their best clothing and postures resemble that of the Rana and Shah royalty. “Photographs afforded a sense of importance and early progression,” writes Jibin Gautam, who researched Nepal’s early studio photography and his explanations are placed throughout the exhibition giving audience a deeper understanding of how the art form evolved. Not only does the audience get a chance to explore the culture of that period, but we also see how technology impacted the kind of photographs that were taken. In most early photographs, the only movements are blurred children in family portraits. Due to the long exposures required, poses were limited to sitting or standing, but no movement. This changes as cameras get more sophisticated, and the public taste with it; subjects are seen holding guitars, cigarettes, flowers and even posing as popular Bollywood celebrities, or wearing kimono, jeans, suits, shades, hats and caps. One can spot a Bruce Lee, a Amitabh Bachchan, people dressed in police uniforms and even veils.

The pictures don’t have any captions, and viewers are free to make their own judgements. With creases and folds, some of them torn at the edges, others defaced by fungus, each print holds its own story of how it survived all these decades.

The exhibition ends with a digital album showing recent photographs taken in studios. They are now in colour, with portraits of recent graduates posing with diplomas. With mobile phone cameras and Facebook taking over, the exhibition forces us to remember an earlier time of studio photography and its ritual importance.

Smiti Banerjee

Until 12 August, 10 am to 9pm, Patan Museum, Patan Darbar Square
THE FAMILY FANG

What is emotional abuse and how do you measure it? This is the crux of The Family Fang - a film that, considering its small budget, and independent origins, could have gone the route of massive self-indulgent historiocracies, but instead manages the careful balance between dark comedy and psychological horror with a light, careful touch.

Based on a novel from 2011 by Kevin Wilson, The Family Fang was bought by Nicole Kidman’s Blossom Films for adaptation. Fortunately, the brilliant actor Jason Bateman came on board as both co-star to Kidman, and perhaps more importantly as director. American independent films or ‘indies’ like The Family Fang can be hit or miss, often descending into depicting minor existential crises that are particular only in young, middle class North Americans and thereby banal and entirely irrelevant to the rest of the world. A case in point are the mumblecore films – a particularly annoying development from early 2000 that involves barely intelligible, unscripted, mumbling, demotivated young urbanites looking glum because they cannot find the meaning of life.

Thankfully, Kidman and Bateman’s joint venture from last year (the film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2015) is a tightly written, nuanced story about screwball families, unapologetic parents, and the ineffable but often inexorable bond between siblings. Caleb Fang (played by Christopher Walken) and Camille Fang (Maryann Plunkett) are highly driven performance artists who stage incidents that upset the daily quotidians of people’s lives, filtering their reactions and using them as art works. When their children are born, Annie and Buster who are referred to by their parents, albeit playfully, as Child A and Child B become key catalytic elements in their pranks. It will not describe them for you here, suffice to say that they are both hysterically funny and horrifying in equal parts until the children revolt, unfortunately carrying their emotional scars into adulthood.

Kidman plays the adult Annie in her usual high-strung manner, but thankfully, once again, Jason Bateman, as the adult Buster provides a marvellous foil for his across sister, eyes, Annie is a奉献er actor. The younger Fangs live firmly away from the their goofy, sociopathic parents, desperate to leave behind their widely celebrated, highly scrutinised childhoods when circumstances force them to return to the family home; the reunion is sweet, funny, and provides a great deal of insight to the very real bonds between parents and children, a set up that makes the rest of the film so much more poignant.

When the Fang parents embark on a road trip and are reported missing with their abandoned car full of blood, Annie and Buster are convinced their (incorrigible, ruthless parents have staged yet another art event. What ensues is a tragicomedy that will leave you bewildered, horrified, and bewildered.

nepaltimes.com
Sashi Kumar Thitung of Makwanpur sold fish and repaired bicycles. Four years ago, the police arrested him from his home for no reason at all. He was taken to court next day and charged with human trafficking. The Makwanpur District Court then slapped a 20 years sentence on Thitung. He is now in Birgunj jail.

It was a case of mistaken identity based on a complaint lodged by Bindiya Tamang who was forced to India and sold to a brothel in Mumbai in 1989. Bindya returned to Nepal after 22 years and filed a human trafficking case against her husband Sitaram Thingu, and his friends Shyam Bahadur Benjani and a man who went by name ‘Satya’.

Sitaram and Shyam Bahadur were arrested, after which police nabbed Thitung because his nickname was ‘Shakee’ and it sounded like ‘Satya’. Thitung, who can hardly read or write, was made to sign a three page long statement prepared by the police. We revealed Thitung’s case files and even met the accused husband Sitaram Thingu, who is also in the same jail. “I told the police that they had got the wrong guy,” he told us. “I don’t know Thitung, and he was not person who went to Mumbai with me to sell my wife. They didn’t listen and burnt an innocent man.”

Bindiya died eleven months after giving a statement to the court in June, 2012 in which she said Sashi Kumar Thitung was innocent and had no role in her being trafficked. Desperate, Thitung wrote to the Parliamentary Hearing Committee from prison, pleading his innocence. He is now awaiting a Supreme Court verdict on his case.

Attorney General Hari B Paryl admits Nepal’s criminal justice system needs a major overhaul. “There is something really wrong when most innocent languishing in prison are from poor and marginalised sections of society unable to prove their innocence.”

Three years ago, Chitra Bahadur Mahil and his son Kamal from Okhaldhunga, got into a scuffle with 60-year old Gyam Bahadur Mahil from the same village. But Gyam Bahadur went missing later the same day. His wife filed a police complaint against Chitra Bahadur and his sons, Kamal and Surendra.

Sarwoti had committed suicide, but social pressure and public outrage forced police to file a complaint against Krishna Prashi and his family. Despite police investigation showing no foul play, then Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai ordered police to file a case. Prashi was later acquitted.

Pashupati Biju was a hotel owner in Rutwal, who tried to mediate in a brawl outside nine years ago in which a man was killed. Police arrested him after finding blood stain on his shirt. The Rupandehi District Court sentenced Biju to life in prison. Eight years later, the Supreme Court ruled him innocent and he was freed. But Biju says his life has been ruined.

“In cases like human trafficking, kidnapping, or drug offences, innocents getting tough sentences because police, government lawyers and judges do not take time to dig deeper,” an administrative police officer says, having investigated several such cases. Talking on the condition of anonymity, a judge admitted being swayed by public pressure in cases of sexual assaults and human trafficking: “Sometimes we are compelled to overlook the truth due to intense public pressure.”

(Additional reporting by Rabin Dhamle in Mahottari and Kumlabpur in Okhaldhunga)
Petroleum is volatile, wind is uncertain, solar has storage issues, there is no alternative to large-scale hydropower.

OMASTHA RAI

When India turned off the tap on Nepal’s petroleum imports for five months last year, Ranjana Silwal (pictured, top, right) spent entire days waiting in line for precious cooking gas. She then bought an electric stove, and realized that it was more energy-efficient and cost-effective than gas.

Silwal started cooking on electricity, as did tens of thousands of Nepali families. But overloaded transformers started exploding all over the country. The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) reported 35 transformer explosions in just one day in November in Kathmandu.

“I wanted to see my electric stove, but there was no electricity,” Silwal recalled. “But if there was enough electricity, no one would use gas cylinders.”

The Indian Blockade was a stark reminder to Nepalis that dependency on imported fossil fuel is not sustainable and it was time to have a national policy to switch to cleaner, cheaper, and more efficient energy like electricity, solar and wind.

During the blockade, Prime Minister KP Oli made ambitious promises to rid Nepal of electricity rationing in one year. Early this month, the government announced a target to generate 10,000 MW electricity by 2022 and talked about fulfilling ‘basic’ and ‘actual’ demand.

Water resource analyst Ratna Sansar Shrestha says the prime minister’s promises ring hollow, and is panned by what Oli meant by meeting ‘basic’ and ‘actual’ demands. “It will be a waste of time to pin our high hopes on what the prime minister says. His target is 10,000 MW in 10 years, but we already need 8,600 MW right now if we really want to provide power in adequate quantum to industries and replace fossil fuel.”

Despite having a potential to generate 43,000 MW of electricity, Nepal’s per capita electricity consumption is less than 100 kWh – the lowest in South Asia. Nepal’s installed hydropower capacity is just 787 MW, which is less than half of the demand. The import of 90MW from the Bhalske-Bhutan transmission line doesn’t even make a dent on the shortfall.

Shree Raj Shakya of the Centre of Energy Studies (CES) says: “People have woken up to the need for an integrated policy.”
face the future

SMRITI BASNET

Just as awareness about building seismic resistant homes lasted only a few months after last year’s earthquakes, the public demand for electric vehicles that soared during the Indian Blockade appears to have tapered off. Kathmandu’s traffic jams are as bad as ever, the import of petroleum products for the ever-growing numbers of diesel buses, trucks, petrol-driven cars and motorcycles have soared.

“It seems the public has a very short term memory,” says Gulmohit Shrestha of Agni Incorporation, which sells the Mahindra e2o battery cars in Nepal (pictured). Sales doubled during the blockade, but interest has now waned.

High taxes on electric vehicles still put them out of the range of most potential buyers. And while Nepal has a long history of electric public transport with the first ropeway connecting Kathmandu to the plateau installed 85 years ago, and upgraded in the 1970s. An electric trolley bus line connected Kathmandu to Bhaktapur. None of these are operational today.

“They were hugely successful until shut down, and they go to prove that electric transportation is feasible in Nepal,” said Shubham Tuladhar of UN-Habitat.

The Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport had drafted an Environment Friendly Vehicle and Transport Policy, but its guidelines have not been implemented. Some experts hint darkly at the powerful groups lobbying the government to prevent tax rebates and subsidies for electric vehicles in the coming budget.

What is proven is that except for a provision two years ago to cut excise tax on electric cars by half, and the waiver of road tax, successive government haven’t shown the political will to make an aggressive push to cut petroleum demand by introducing electric transport.

To raise demand, petroleum has to be less attractive,” said Tuladhar. He said increasing petrol prices and ploughing the revenue into development of electric transportation market could be a win-win.

With recent innovations in lithium ion batteries, electric vehicles have now become the rage with most mainstream manufacturers like Nissan, Chevrolet, Toyota and Honda entering the market with affordable vehicles. But the lack of incentives in Nepal has kept sales stagnant.

“We will just have to wait until the big manufacturers start promoting electrical vehicles,” said Bibek Chhajed, an e-car enthusiast. “They also need longer range to be more acceptable to the public.”

With the new budget due next week, Shubham Tuladhar feels the government should promote electric vehicles, especially for public transport, to reduce traffic congestion, air and noise pollution, and reduce the growing trade deficit with India caused by the rise in demand for petroleum products.

Kishon has announced that 70 per cent of its private cars will be electric in the next decade, and this is the kind of political commitment that is missing in Nepal. Most experts don’t expect a breakthrough in the new budget.

“When we plan for energy, we have to look at not just the supply side but the demand as well. If tomorrow we have a surplus of electricity, what are we going to do with it?” asked Tuladhar. “If planned properly electric trolley buses, electric Bus Rapid Transit system or electric railways can be a reality.”

Sunny and windy tomorrows

The five-month Indian Blockade was a blessing in disguise for Nepal’s solar industry. The Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPC) had declared a solar subsidy for city dwellers, but few had taken up the offer. But during and after the Blockade, the sale of solar photovoltaic (PV) cells increased dramatically (see interview page 6).

About 600 households have installed PV cells in Kathmandu after the blockade began in September of last year, and installed capacity from solar has now crossed 40MW. This week, the AEPC revised its policy, declaring more solar subsidy for those whose houses were destroyed by last year’s earthquake.

“Solar subsidy is an excellent policy,” says Jagn Nath Shraddha, President of Nepal Solar Energy Society. “We are making slow but steady progress in generating solar energy. Hydro is definitely our top priority, but it takes years to build one hydro project, but solar is right here with minimal subsidized investment and can be up and running in no time.”

But the AEPC is wary about people installing solar only as long as there is a subsidy. Ram Prasad Dhital of the AEPC explains: “This is why our subsidy policy requires people to invest their own money, too.”

Prime Minister K P Oli was indifferent when he proposed the development of wind power, but it is not a wild idea. Nepal has the potential to generate 3,000 MW from wind energy, with the hills on the rim of Kathmandu Valley alone capable of producing 70 MW.

Wind is erratic and utility-scale solar power needs storage for non-daylight hours, they can never be alternatives to hydropower. But relatively quick and easy installation and low operational costs, experts believe, give Nepal the potential to have a sunny and windy future.
News in Briefs

Due to space constraints, many important events taking place in the last 24 hours did not make it to page one. All the same, being a newspaper of record, we must mention them briefly in passing so that, centuries hence, researchers poring through the dustbins of history can glean interesting facets of early 21st century life in Nepal. No item of news is therefore too trivial for us, as we can see from a peek into this week’s episode of News in Briefs:

Visa Relaxation for Old Geizers
Kathmandu - In an effort to lure visitors back to Nepal, GOCN has announced a special category of Relaxation Visa for senior citizens in the autumn of their lives, it is learnt.

Details are sketchy, but sources confirmed that octogenarians and above will find safe haven in Nepal for the remainder of their natural lives provided they agree to certain terms and conditions like: not to make rude remarks on Twitter about our rulers, bequeath a large chunk of their assets to the national exchequer in their last will and testament, and to respect local culture by adhering to Nepali standards of hygiene and sanitation. In return, GOCN will provide each retiree a free voucher for a once-in-a-lifetime Dhaulagiri Sky Bureau, and a guaranteed fast-track roundtrip to heaven and back to be reincarnated as an Asian One-Horned Rhinoceros calf.

Acute Acronym Shortage Hits NGOs
Kathmandu - Non-government Organisations (NGO), Quasi Non-government Organisations (QANGO), Fly-by-night International Non-government Organisations (FLAMINGO) and Mainstream Non-government Organisations (MANGO) are facing an acute shortage of acronyms which is delaying registration of new organisations. It was revealed today at an all-Nepal Convention of Government-supported Non-government Organisations (GONGO).

“I don’t see how we can go on like this,” said the incoming secretary of the un-governmental group, INSIST. “At this rate, the registration of new NGOs will grind to a halt.” The outgoing chairperson of another non-governmental organs, HEFRED, agreed: “This is an emergency. The government should do something about it.”

Coke and Pepsi to Merge
ATLANTA - Faced with huge losses after allegations that pesticide residue was found in samples of cola in the Sub-Indian Continental, Coke and Pepsi announced today that they are merging. “People were mixing us up all the time, so we decided why not?” said the CEOs of the two companies in a joint statement. The new company, Pepsa Inc., is now the largest manufacturer of carboniferous beverages on the planet. The new Enzy giant will soon launch a range of new products, including Poca Cola, Diet Cokai, Frite, and Puke Lax.

Journo Held
Kathmandu - A journalist carrying a large stash of counterfeit Indian currency hidden inside his fake bottom was held up by police at the airport today. “We apprehended the perpetrator for questioning because he was walking suspiciously on all fours as he went through the x-ray machine,” DIG Vijay Singh said. “On closer examination, his x-ray immediately raised eyebrows because none of us had seen humanoids of that size before.” Besides counterfeit Indian currency, the journalist was also found in possession of several items of fake news. Said DIG Vijay: “We know the news was totally fabricated because none of the quotes were properly sourced.”

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