Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has deployed his two deputies on twin rounds to the north and south to forge equidistance between Nepal’s two big neighbours. But his diplomatic dealings are fraught with uncertainty, and could further strain Kathmandu’s relations with New Delhi and Beijing.

A day before Deputy PM and Finance Minister Krishna Bahadur Mahara’s return from Beijing, Deputy PM and Home Minister Bimalendra Nidhi jetted off to New Delhi on Thursday. While Mahara was in Beijing to invite Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Kathmandu, Nidhi is inviting Indian President Pranab Mukherjee to do the same.

Dahal is only too aware — from his first tenure in 2008 — that playing India off against China comes at a political cost. This time, he is trying to be more careful, but foreign affairs experts say the strategy may be a liability.

“Dahal talks of equidistance, but he does not know what it actually means,” says Rajan Bhattarai of the Nepal-India Eminent Persons Group tasked with reviewing the 1956 treaty. “Maintaining equidistance is to manage the dynamics of ties with India and China, not increasing their influence in Nepal.”

Leaders in Dahal’s coalition partner, the Nepali Congress, are also critical of sending Mahara north and Nidhi south. Ask the NC’s Narayan Khadka: “Is it to show that the NC is closer to India and the Maoists are closer to China?”

Nidhi is indeed being seen to be doing New Delhi’s bidding, particularly after overtly backing an Indian company to build the Kathmandu-Tanahun fast-track highway. Mahara, for his part, was caught in a telephone tap asking the Chinese for money to buy off GA members in 2010.

Says Khadka: “Instead of sending an NC leader to India and a Maoist leader to China, he should have sent his Foreign Affairs Minister to the two countries. Dahal is trying to please New Delhi and Beijing, but he might end up irritating both.”

Om Astha Rai

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Politically Correct

While the Big Four parties can paralyse the polity, they are also the only ones who can bring the country to a safe landing.

The first (and foremost) hurdle to cross on the route to restoring stable politics in Nepal is to make operational the Constitution that was passed last year by an elected Constituent Assembly. The promulgation was followed by an eruption of violence in western Nepal and Tarai, and led to a border blockade that ruined the economy and silently wrecked countless lives.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s opening order of business in the timebound nine-month tenure ought to be to recognise what caused that violence and how to address the root grievances. Some of these were popular dissatisfaction in the plains with the way Nepal’s governance and decision-making has been centralised and monopolised by Kathmandu. But he will also have to look at the geopolitical ramifications of why the Madhesi parties were backed by India, as well as try to understand New Delhi’s concerns and allay them.

It will be tricky and ill-advised for him to move ahead without looking at the domestic and cross-border antecedents to the Tamu violence and the blockade, because they hold important lessons about the amendments that need to be agreed to before the Constitution is finally a working (and workable) document. There is a deadline of mid-January 2018 for local, provincial and parliamentary elections in order for the Constitution to be in full force. The initial step is to get the Madhesi parties on board in government. Cynics will say that Madhesi leaders are only interested in plum posts, and this may be true. But it is also undeniable that including them will be politically expedient — elections would not be possible without addressing their demands for modifications to reform the constitution.

The second step, and this may be even more onerous, is for Dahal to win the trust of KP Oli of the UML, a person whom he just ousted. The UML and the RPP-N (the second and fourth-largest parties in parliament, respectively) command an important swing vote even from the opposition bench, in pushing through amendments. This means the future of the country is in the hands of the four main parties — whether they be in government or out. The past decade of post-war transition has proven that just as the four parties can paralyse the polity, they are also the only ones who can bring the country to a safe landing, if they act collectively.

By supplanting Oli and forging an unwritten agreement with the Nepali Congress for rotational prime ministership, Dahal has also inherited the task of ensuring that the three elections are held. Inability to hold elections will throw the Constitution into limbo, and could have unpredictable and unimaginable consequences. In that period, if ethnic, religious or nationalist factors that simmer under the surface are added to the volatile political mix, it will only allow dangerous rightist or fascist forces to take shape. Such an outcome would not benefit anyone in Nepal, nor will it in the interest of Nepal’s big neighbours, which ostensibly prefer stability and predictable politics in Nepal.

If elections are not held by January 2018, the country will be without a parliament, which could invite a similar outcome as the appointment of Chief Justice Khil Raj Regmi as prime minister in 2013. It is the responsibility of the current political leadership in both the government and the opposition to prevent such a perilous eventuality.

Alas, the inter- and intra-party feuds within the Maoist Centre, NC and the Madhesi Front in the past two weeks do not bode well for stability. It seems no lessons have been learnt, and short-term power games still prevail, with scant attention being paid to averting the political cliffhanger we will face in a little over a year. Already, the politicians and wannabes seem oblivious to the fact that there is a high-handed parallel government running in this country that has the police, bureaucrats, politicians, media and even parliament in its vice-like grip.

The Maoist-NC partnership was touted as a way to bring the Madhesi and fringe parties into the mainstream to activate the Constitution. That premise is already looking like wishful thinking. By now there should have been serious negotiations about amendments to the Constitution, but all we have is backroom haggling over the doling out of ministerial posts.

Just about the only decisive option Dahal has been able to take was to send his two Deputy Prime Ministers, one north and the other south, to assuage our nervous neighbours. The Prime Minister should know that Nepal’s problems are located within the country, not without. But his action is proof — if indeed proof were still needed — that Nepal’s domestic politics is a mere plaything in the hands of outsiders.
A
fter backing Maoist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s prime ministerial bid, Madhesi dissidents are now considering to join the ruling coalition. Dahal (and the NC strategists who installed him as the new PM) sees no point in keeping Madhesi parties out of Singha Darbar after they joined hands to topple the KP Oli government. Indian lobbyists have also apparently prodded top Madhesi leaders to join the Maoist-NC government.

So will Madhesi parties go in with the government? They find it hard to resist the temptation, but the possibility is low. There is fear of a backlash from their constituencies down in the plains, where things may look calm after last year’s eruption of violence, but there is a lot of resentment about the way Kathmandu continues to treat them. Madhesi leaders themselves say their agitation is not over yet — only its form has changed. However, by vowing to vote for Dahal and against Oli in Parliament, they have sent a message: the Madhes wants to be seen to be part of Nepal, and with Kathmandu.

Madhesi parties had signalled this message even when the Tarai was burning last year. They voted against Oli even though they knew they would not be able to stop him from being Prime Minister. There were dark rumours that they were acting at India’s behest, but that was an indication to the international community that they had no intention to deviate from mainstream politics, unlike Mohan Baidya, Netra Bikram Chand and CK Raut.

The Madhes does not want separatism; if anything it wants to be connected to Kathmandu even more. It is up to Kathmandu to make that happen. The Madhes feels alienated, and Madhesi are angry about not being treated with respect, as Nepalis. The distance that grew between Kathmandu and Madhes in the wake of the Constitution promulgation last year needs to be bridged in three phases.

First, the demands that can be met by a cabinet meeting must be addressed immediately. Second, the government needs to announce special development plans for the Madhesi people. Third, and most importantly, the Constitution needs to be amended so that the Madhesi people feel ownership of it.

But the UML, which is a key to amending the Constitution, still views Madhesi grievances negatively. If a broader consensus were required to write the Constitution, the same is needed to amend it. And the UML commands the swing vote.

The Madhesi parties are also divided, and the Front that led last year’s agitation is not the representative voice of all the Madhesis. The Front has realised that street protests alone will not help, and wants to move forward by forging deals with the Maoist-NC coalition. But there is another political force in the Madhes that The Madhes message aims to discredit the Front, and create a political vacuum in the plains: the hardliners who are just waiting for the right time to strike.

There is a danger that if the Madhesi parties join the government, the hardliners will expose them as being lackeys of Kathmandu. Public opinion in the plains will turn against the leaders, and be swayed by the radical rhetoric of the hardliners. But if the Front is kept out, it will also harden the hardliners, and efforts to bridge the Kathmandu-Madhes gap could fail. Either way, the situation is thorny.

Madhesi are fighting for the recognition of their identity, but it is also a fight to be recognised as Nepalis — that was what they were trying to say — mostly peacefully, sometimes violently. Those who claim to be nationalists in Kathmandu need to understand this sentiment.

Oli has time and again demonstrated disdain for the Madhes, and contemptuously ignored their voices. The way he conducted himself in negotiations with Madhes leaders made it difficult to find a compromise. But the Madhav Kumar Nepal camp of the UML is now challenging Oli’s way, which offers a silver lining. Nepali and other UML leaders can contribute to creating a conducive environment to resolve the Madhes crisis.

But the onus lies on Prime Minister Dahal, who has already made some symbolic moves but needs to do more to get Madhesi parties on board.
A battered future

Amrit Gurung’s striking photograph of two Kailali boys has come to represent the kind of Nepal we are heading over to the next generation

SMRITI BASNET

Children in Motipur of Kailali used to avoid going near the ruins of a police station near their school. Six policemen had been killed in a raid on the post, and the students thought the place was haunted.

One day in 2005, a van stopped on the highway and a familiar-looking person with a camera slung over his shoulder stepped out, taking pictures as he entered the police post. Curiosity overcame fear, and six-year-old Hemanta Bista and his classmate Aman Nahi followed the man cautiously inside.

Well-known folk-rock singer Amrit Gurung was on a peace concert tour of western Nepal headed towards Dhangadi, and had stopped with his crew in Motipur. An avid photographer, Gurung was snapping pictures of the ruined building with his Nikon which was loaded with a roll of Kodachrome slide.

Just then, he saw the two boys looking out through a hole in the wall of the police station made by a mortar bomb explosion, and he took a few shots. It took a few weeks to get the film rolls developed, and when he finally held the slides up to the light, Gurung remembers being emotionally moved.

That image of Hemanta and Aman reminded me what our generation had done to this country,” Gurung said, “we have left our children a ruined land.”

The photograph was chosen as the cover image of A People War, a picture book of the conflict curated by Kunda Dixit and published in 2007 — and came to be symbolic of the waste of war. Twenty years since the start of the conflict in 1996 and 10 years after it ended in 2006, Amrit Gurung’s photograph is still a haunting representation of the legacy of a brutal war on the next generation of Nepalis.

Eleven years after the photograph was taken, Bista, now 20, still remembers the day he followed Amrit Gurung into the destroyed police station. He also remembers the night the post was attacked by the Maoists: the terrifying gunfire and explosions, helicopters landing the next morning, and the bodies of the dead.

“We were really afraid, even at the mention of the word ‘Maoists’,” Bista recalls. His father was a policeman stationed in Motipur, and had to crawl through puddles fields to escape after hearing that the Maoists were coming after him.

The wrecked police station

Trilogy of photo books on the Nepal conflict curated by Kunda Dixit

http://nepalizar.com

To order: http://www.store.nepadirect.com/3523-NVR-People-War.aspx

Imitating nature

Nepal’s most modern printing facility, Jagadama Press, now makes natural colours come alive with its state-of-the-art equipment.
schools in the district closed. Bista only realised how far behind he was academically when he struggled with the subjects taught in English while enrolled in college in Kathmandu.

But Bista is determined to move on. He feels strongly that he should do something for his hometown, where he says little has changed for the better since the war. There are more schools in Motipur because of remittance money, and the community installed a drinking water supply recently, but there are no jobs and most young men are leaving for overseas jobs or to the cities for education.

“The Maoists are now in government again, they fought a war and have seen the difficulties in the villages with their own eyes. They should at least help rebuild what they destroyed,” he said.

Bista’s father retired, and works as a bank security guard in Motipur, struggling to pay for his two sons’ education. “It has been a challenge,” said Bista, who walks with a limp because of a rare bone disease that the family cannot afford medical treatment for.

Now in the eighth semester of his BBA program, Bista hopes to get an MBA degree and dream of someday running a business of his own to support his family.

nepalitimes.com

Bottoms up
Diageo PLC, with its official distributor Global Trading Concern Pvt Ltd, has launched two new single malt whiskies: the Singleton of Glen, 15 Years Old and 18 Years Old, priced at Rs 6,900 and Rs 16,050, respectively.

Venturing into reality
Applications for the second season of Pulsar Dare Venture 5, the bike reality show by Bajaj Pulsar, are now open.

Bajaj bikers will get an opportunity to explore the terrain of Nepal on the new special Pulsar bikes, with the top two winning a Pulsar NS and cash prizes worth Rs 1 million and Rs 500,000, respectively. Register at www.pulsardareventure.bajajpulsar.com.np, www.facebook.com/pulsarnepal, or Bajaj showrooms.

Extra allowance
Qatar Airways has introduced an exclusive offer for students travelling from Nepal to Australia, Canada, USA and Europe. Students who book and travel before 30 June 2017 will be allowed three pieces of baggage: 23 kg for USA, and 45 kg for Europe, Australia and Japan.

Sportiest SUV
CG NEX 6GEN has launched a sporty new SUV, the Suzuki Vitara Brezza. Bookings are open for the car which is available in six variants. Priced starts at Rs 3.599 million.

Rebranding Ncell
Ncell Private Limited and Aarohi Group Berhad have unveiled the new brand logo of ‘Ncell’—an Asiatec camp. Asiatec is the sole investor in Reynolds Holdings, which holds 80 per cent of shares of Ncell.

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Watch video clip of Amrit Gurung
nepalitimes.com
Second monsoon in the earthquake zone

Survivors have received little help, but no one seems surprised

Walking in the monsoon across the earthquake-affected districts north of Kathmandu, it is evident that the region has been turned into one huge tin shanty. This is the old heartland of Nepal, historically prosperous. But where there used to be handsome old villages with homes in varied styles, the texture of village architecture now consists of shacks and tin sheets where villagers squat in the ruins of their homes.

All along the walk from Chautara to Sindupalchok across Nuwakot, Rasuwa and Dhading to Gorkha, families are surviving their second monsoon, wet in the open. There is almost no rebuilding to be seen. Visible everywhere are village council meetings about how people will qualify for the Rs 200,000 rebuilding grant per family. Everyone agrees the policy makes no sense, for all sorts of reasons. For example, the money is not nearly enough to build any of the approved designs, so many people only hope to get the first payment of Rs 50,000, and to do with it whatever they think makes the most sense.

An exception to this general picture is on the trail to Gosainkunda, where people make money by operating their houses as lodges, and have rebuilt immediately without waiting for help. Also, the government is preparing to punish them. A new Langtang National Park regulation means that people who always lived there will have to bid for the right to run a lodge. In exchange for payment, the National Park proposes to give them nothing besides a licence to earn a living.

It is not true that people have received no help at all. They have been given tin sheets. But the perception that those who survived the earthquake have been abandoned by the government is universal, and if you ask whether they expect any different, the answer is usually the same: “What will they ever do for us?”

Nothing we saw surprised us, nor did anyone we met seem surprised.
CHILDREN IN TIME AND SPACE
Picturing Himalayan children and how little their lives have changed

RAISA PANDÉ

At a time when the availability of wi-fi determines the quality of communication we have with people near and far, it is difficult to fathom what life would have been like in the isolated regions of the Himalaya where the closest motorable road was as far as a week’s walk away.

Until the 1970s, the lives of the people of the Himalaya remained distant and isolated from the mainland. In Himalayan Children, Swiss development worker and photographer Fritz Berger has documented children growing up in Sikkim, Nepal and Pakistan from the 1970s until 2014, and in doing so helps bring us closer in time and space to their realities. The images transport us back to the innocence of an era before roads and smartphones.

I photographed my own children too, but photographing local children has turned out to be a more interesting passion for me. These children appeared very new, unusual and colorful to me,” writes Berger in the introduction to his recent release, a collection of black-and-white images ranging over four decades.

Much like his previous book, In the Shadow of Gangesdrucker (2014), a pictorial comparison of Dolakha from 1973 to 2011, Himalayan Children is a photographic flashback, and is informative and enduring. As photographer and documentary filmmaker Robert Frank would have put it, Berger’s work “contains the humanity of the moment”.

The book is neatly chatted out into sections and comes to resemble a visual journey of children across borders, right from their birth to their advancement into adolescence. In addition to reflecting on the lives of the children and their assimilation into their surroundings, his pictures highlight the inherent cultural and social practices that are prevalent in the region. Where women from Nepal and Sikkim are photographed alongside their children, all but one photograph of children in Pakistan depict them with their fathers. Fathers play an important role in the lives of their children, especially in public.

It is not difficult to tell the photographs apart despite the similarity in terrain and lifestyle, the clothes, facial features and social settings make them easily distinguishable. However, despite their apparent differences the pictures fit seamlessly into Berger’s pictorial narrative. The photographs children look content in their plain, minimilistic surroundings, and are often seen helping out with chores. The images help convey the message more eloquently, adding personality to the pictures and reinforcing the lives portrayed, without the distraction of colour.

Flipping through the pages, trying to let the reality of close and distant lands and times slip in, what grows on you is the realisation that the children photographed in the 1970s are in their mid-fifties today. How little their lives have changed in the last forty years.

This is a picture book, so the test is sparse. Even the captions only have the name of the area with the year, nothing closer. Words, where they do appear, are used to introduce each section and provide readers with a run-through of the writer’s experiences.

Berger has once again taken us back in time. Unlike his portraits of Dolakha, there are no before and after images here, just photographic documentation of what lives were like and how little things have changed for the children of the mountains even as they arrive at the cusp of change.
200 YEARS OF BOTANICAL ART

Britain and Nepal mark a bicentennial of cooperation in documenting our country’s biodiversity

Britain and Nepal are marking the bicentenary of diplomatic relations this year, and the start of the recruitment of Nepali soldiers in the British Army in 1816 is garnering a lot of attention. But less well known and even older than the establishment of bilateral ties is the involvement of British botanists in documenting Himalayan flora.

It was in 1802 that Scottish naturalist Francis Buchanan-Hamilton of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) made the first expedition to Nepal to collect plant samples. Buchanan-Hamilton’s work was way ahead of its time, and yielded samples and exquisite drawings of plants found along the southern slopes of the Himalayas in Nepal. It’s no wonder that Buchanan-Hamilton is called the “father of Nepali botany”, and the tradition started by his expedition 214 years ago has continued with a collaboration between British and Nepali botanists and artists. The ongoing ‘Flora of Nepal’ exhibition at the RBGE has on display dried herbarium pressed samples, and drawings from Buchanan-Hamilton’s expedition as well as more contemporary ones by botanical artists, including Nepal’s own Neera Joshi (see sidebar).

During his stay in Nepal in 1802, Buchanan-Hamilton collected and documented over 1,100 plant varieties, most of them new species at the time. Some of them were meticulously rendered by a Bengali expedition artist in coloured drawings, and selected ones are on display in Edinburgh.

Nepal’s topographical extremes — stretching from tropical plains situated 80 m above sea level to elevations of nearly 8,900 m — give the country an exceptional floral range. There are more than 7,000 species of vascular plants here, many of them found nowhere else: 2,000 of them have medicinal properties, and 600 are edible. Nepal is classified as a Global Biodiversity Hotspot because some of these species are endangered due to habitat loss.

The ‘Flora of Nepal’ project spearheaded by the RBGE is a continuation of the research of scientists like Buchanan-Hamilton, and puts together the first comprehensive listing of Nepal’s plants. With more than 100 botanical experts from Britain, Nepal and Japan on board, the project illustrates, collects and studies the plants, hoping that the knowledge can be used for biodiversity conservation. www.floraofnepal.org

The botanical art exhibition titled ‘Flora of Nepal, a 200-year Connection’ (pictured, left) runs until 6 November at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Scotland.
Flower power

Last March, seven botanical artists from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) headed across Nepal to study its rich flora and conduct botanical painting workshops for Nepali students. A number of these detailed botanical drawings are on display at an exhibition at the RBGE to commemorate the bicentennial of British-Nepal diplomatic ties. The artists also collected information about local names and the traditional uses of the plants.

Six of these drawings are being exhibited at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh alongside botanical art made during the expedition of Scottish surgeon-botanist Francis Buchanan-Hamilton to Nepal in 1802. The exhibition marks the bicentenary of diplomatic relations between Nepal and Britain, and features five other botanical artists and illustrators.

“Nobody told me to pursue this. I got into it not by weighing my prospects for the future but simply because of my love for nature and art,” said Neera Joshi.

Twelve years later, she is the most acclaimed botanical artist in Nepal.

The fine realistic drawings depict plant specimens much more accurately than even pressed samples. At the same time, they are also aesthetically pleasing and works of art in their own right.

“The beauty of botanical art is that your studio can be anywhere in nature,” said Joshi, pointing out that her priority is to paint plants live — as they are in their natural habitats, rather than in her studios or based on photographs. This means Joshi is occasionally travelling to pick plants in the wild to draw; she has been from Kathmandu to London, and many places in between.

Joshi’s only formal training was the three-month long course she undertook in Maria Selby Botanical Gardens in Florida, USA. But she inherited most of her talent from her father, the famous artist Ramananda Joshi, founder of Park Gallery. Under his tutelage, she learned the basics of drawing and painting, and this early exposure to painting gradually steered her towards an art career.

“You don’t necessarily need a background in science. All you need is the patience and passion for art,” said Joshi, for whom the art form is both educational and a pleasure. Experimenting with water colour and gouache, it typically takes Joshi up to three weeks to complete one drawing.

While the free hand botanical paintings do not require any tedious planning, the scientific illustrations have their own rules. They must be painted on a white background and with precision, using tools such as proportional dividers and microscopes. Even more difficult is learning and applying the techniques to give the plants in the drawings a 3D effect.

“It is a powerful visual communication which helps document biodiversity,” said Joshi. From culturally significant plants like papal and tulsi to rhododendrons, Nepal is a floral paradise, and Joshi is determined to make full use of the natural studio of her homeland.

Today, besides managing her father’s gallery in Pulchok, Joshi also runs Studio Neera in Kathmandu, mixing science with art, hoping to inspire young minds. She says, “I really want more people taking to botanical illustrations, especially young artists who are the future of this country.”

nepalitimes.com

SMRITI BASNET

Plants paintings

Botanical artists Neera Joshi mixes science with art
National Poetry Slam, Spoken Word Nepal is organising the first-ever national poetry slam, with eight teams from Lalitpur, Kathmandu, Sunauli, Dhangadi, Pokhara, Chitwan, Ilam and Kavre.

3 September, 7:30 to 9 pm, City Hall, Dristiya Saddle Gotha, Kathmandu. Tickets: Rs 200 (Rs 100 for students)

Ride to Khokana, Contribute to restoring Nepal’s cultural heritage by participating in a cycle ride program from Kathmandu to Khokana, organised by Khokana Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Committee.

20 September, 7 am onwards, Price: Rs 600

All about literature, Organised by the Drama and Debating Club of Budhanilkantha School, the Nepal Youth Literature Festival features talks programs, interviews of Nepali writers, workshops and literature related competitions.

19 to 22 August, Budhanilkantha School, Kathmandu. Registration: Rs 400 (Start competition), Rs 200 (Long competition), Rs 100 (KAR program), bike116@gmail.com, 9881381571

Fragments exhibition, Save the date for Kabir Raj Lam’s “Fragments” lithography prints exhibition. 29 August (inauguration at 5:30 pm) to 9 September, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Bikker Motoo Residency, Kathmandu

Female authors, Join a discussion on female writers in contemporary Nepali literature and what they are coming up with.

20 August, 3 to 4:30 pm, Nepal Bhawan House, Bolwatta, Kathmandu

Getaway

Uttar Dakshin Food Festival, Give your taste buds a treat at the Uttar Dakshin Food Festival with an exciting range of cuisines from Punjab, Chandigarh, Uttarakhand, Himachal, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and others.

25 to 27 August, 7 am onwards, Salleri Crown Plaza, Kathmandu

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Wunjala Moskra, Treat your palate to sushi and Japanese dishes in this garden with ancient trees and trickling streams.

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Dan Ran, Join the Cycle Rally to show your solidarity for International Youth Day 2016. The rally is jointly organised by Collective Campaign for Peace and Cycle City Network Nepal.

20 August, Starting Point: Rikshu Mandap, Kathmandu, (01) 266104 / 4326046, 9851196167

Le Trio, The bestmAtrahan (aubergine) momos in town.

Kathmandu Park and (Roshme), (01) 4543490 / 5521697

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Miss Moti-Vation

Kripa Joshi

Hide not your talents, They are for use were made. What’s a sun dial in the shade? ~ Benjamin Franklin

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The beginning of history

A debate between purists and pragmatists is delaying reconstruction of earthquake-damaged heritage sites

Central Nepal and Kathmandu Valley are going through their second monsoon after the April 2015 earthquake. The pace of reconstruction of homes, monuments and heritage sites has been frustratingly slow. In six out of seven World Heritage Sites in the Valley that saw extensive damage, rebuilding has not even started. In this third edition of the Nepal Times Heritage Live Series, we try to find out why.

One of the reasons is so fundamental that the process will not pick up speed until it is addressed: it has to do with how authentic we want the reconstructed sites to be. Authenticity is tricky because over the years heritage conservationists have employed different methods in reconstruction, taking into account the architectural idioms of Kathmandu Valley and conservation methods employed in past decades.

Conservation architect Sudarshan Tiwari describes Kathmandu Valley’s unique architectural form as “distinctive construction and craftsmanship in the brick and wood of the tiered temples.” Exquisitely carved they may have been, but they had to face two destructive forces: earthquakes and monsoons. Kathmandu’s private and public buildings were designed to safeguard against them. For instance, the deep overhang of the pagoda structure was a conscious design choice to keep out the rain from the brick-mud mortar walls of tiered temples. Our forebears also developed ingenious methods to protect the monuments from earthquakes, with wedged joints between wooden members and brickwork to add structural integrity. Kathmandu’s early builders adapted building technology to contextual challenges, but recent reconstruction disregarded these in renovation and conservation efforts. Such restoration in past decades introduced a host of new material to our monuments. The reconstruction of the Chyasalin Mandap — carried out in 1989/90 with German technical and financial assistance — introduced a steel frame for structural support, and steel trusses were also used in the restoration of the Patan Darbar and Museum (below, left). Similarly, reinforced concrete also found its way into our traditional structures.

These architectural methods opened the floodgates of debate. Reaction from heritage conservationists to such additions ranged from the mild “not really needed” to an outraged “grave mistake.” Rabin德拉 Puri, the heritage conservationist who has struggled to save the traditional architectural fabric of Bhaktapur, falls somewhere in between; but even he thinks modern materials should not be allowed in the reconstruction of public heritage structures.

“The use of such materials isn’t justified,” he says. “You cannot just look at a few fallen structures and point out that our traditional methods failed, when other equally old monuments are still standing like Nyatapola in Bhaktapur and Indreswor in Panauti.” He adds that a blanket conservation approach should not be applied to all monuments based on one example of a damaged heritage site. It gets trickier still, because international conservation charters can be interpreted

Restoring two ways

The 55-windowed palace (left) and the Chyasalin Mandap sit near each other in the same square in Bhaktapur. Both are exquisite specimens of Mallar era architecture, and add to the outstanding universal appeal of the palace square. Artistic monuments highlight a distinct conservation approach.

Unlike the Monday, the palace was restored in 2005 largely employing traditional methods. Though it did involve an additional timber element as structural reinforcing, it follows the ways our craftsmen and artisans have always employed through centuries of trial and error. “We had to show that our methods work,” says Ram Prasad Makhad, a structural engineer and a member of the team that oversaw the palace renovation.

The Chyasalin Mandap (above, left) introduced a steel frame for structural support. The jury is out on which approach is better when reconstruction begins.

Approach vs style

The post-1934 reconstruction of temples and monuments had gone through the roller coaster of last year’s earthquake. Many historical structures were simply left in ruins, and some that were rebuilt employed styles that were not traditional.

Numerous tiered temples of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur were restored with Mughal influenced stucco designs like the Kirti Lama temple in Swayambhunath, the Kala Debi temple in Tangyong and used to be an elegant pagoda temple before it was destroyed in 1934, but it was rebuilt to look like the Taj Mahal. It is now being restored using its pre-1934 design.

While it is likely that reconstruction will take time to get off the ground, it appears that this time Nepal has enough architects and urban planners who understand heritage conservation. The world is watching, and local communities are enlightened enough not to allow architectural fiascos to occur this time.

To justify the use of modern materials in the reconstruction of Malia-era buildings. For example, it can be argued that the use of steel truss supports in the east wing of the Patan Museum is justified because of the adaptive re-use of the building as a museum. The newly opened building has to be structurally strong enough to accommodate additional visitor footfall, which would not be necessary if it were just a renovated palace complex.

The debate is focused on authenticity of materials, and not form or other intangible aspects of our heritage. And while it is easy to get all worked up about this, it is important that we agree that both sides are advocating the same thing: better reconstruction of heritage sites, and efficient conservation policies.

What we need is a system that respects our traditional conservation ethos, and allows space for modern materials to strengthen the structures without altering the spirit of our architectural heritage.

Learning from the past, this time around, the Department of Archaeology has tried to do so. They have introduced new reconstruction guidelines that favour a traditional approach but do not give modern methods the cold shoulder. These methods can be introduced during reconstruction, provided they are scientifically warranted and approved by the department.
THE X-FILES

Growing up watching The X-Files was one of the weirdest, most wonderful, defining moments of my adolescent life. When international television providers had just entered the mainstream in Nepal, and Mulder and Scully’s antics could be watched from our suddenly more-connected living rooms.

What had started in 1993 was resurrected this year — nine full seasons and two feature films later with a six-part series that came back to life because fans just could not let go of the aforementioned beloved duo, who have become as much a part of popular culture as they have contributed to changing gender stereotypes in terms of how men and women in law enforcement are depicted on television.

The enduring charm of The X-Files — in addition to the very special dynamic between the lead characters Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) — is the way, almost kooky humour that often accompanies the most chilling, creepy, outlandish story arcs that the series creator, Chris Carter, delights in. This has served the series so well by carving out a niche in a television landscape that had never seen a show with an outrageous, unapologetic, science-fiction ethic before the Mulder-Scully duo captured our imaginations in 1993. Co-creating generations of viewers who never dreamed they might like this kind of geeky immersion. If you have never watched The X-Files, you are in for an interesting time: the series is an odd hybrid of police procedural, murder mystery, screwball comedy, sci-fi/fantasy, and sometimes just plain tongue-in-cheek slapstick that is so well written that re-watching the series as an adult is disconcerting in these days where well-written shows abound. The X-Files, which first aired more than two decades ago holds its own, sometimes surpassing the quality and originality of the best series around today.

The newest six-part instalment, Series 10 released in January, which is set in the now, is therefore a welcome return for this iconic cult hit that brings back Mulder and Scully with their usual odd couple chemistry that I am happy to say, continues to work through the decades.

Their finely tuned, intricately wrought character and relationship dynamic — Mulder with his specific brand of beatific nerdiness, he is an Oxford educated psychological profiler and was a star at the FBI until his obsession with his sister’s abduction by aliens turned his job into a personal crusade, and Scully, a precise medical doctor whose skill in forensic detection and practical mindset will win over your heart and mind — complement already very strong episodes, which are thrilling, engaging, cheeky, and terrifying, all at once. If you have not followed these two through their fight against massive government conspiracies over the years, you will become a fan at least, if not, as Mulder insists, a believer.

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EXTENDING INVITATION: Deputy Prime Minister Krishna Bahadur Mhiru meets with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Wednesday, to invite Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Nepal later this year.

FOR JUSTICE: Rights activists stage a sit-in outside Sir Hospital, Kathmandu, on Tuesday demanding justice for Ganeg Maya Adhikari, who has been on a protracted hunger strike to put pressure on the government to arrest her son’s murderers.

UNFULFILLED PROMISES: Crusader Govinda KC urges Prime Minister Dahal to address the agreements reached with the government before he ended his eighth hunger strike, during a press meet on Wednesday.

SAVING LIVES: Nepal Army personnel carry a Kavee bus accident victim to an ambulance on Monday. 17 people were killed and 45 injured when an overcrowded bus veered off the road in Buta, Nepal’s DDC, Kavre.

SACRED THREAD: A Hindu priest ties japa (sacred thread) around a devotee’s wrist on the occasion of Janai Purnima at Pashupatinath on Thursday.
The game changer

Rameswar Bahadur in
Kathmandu (14 August)

Three months ago, Nepal Congress (NC) President Shital Bahadur Deuba was sidelined by some of his own party leaders for having been seen to side with Mustak Chhal Pahada Ram Bahadur Deuba had proposed an alliance with Dahal to topple the Koirala government, and Dahal “had agreed to form a new ruling coalition with the NC.” But Dahal backed out at the last minute, prompting political pundits to conclude that an NC-Maoist partnership was not viable. But sure enough, Dahal did end up pulling the rug out from under the NC government, forming a new government with the NC’s last month — surprising many sources. Cynical to this merger of convenience was NC leader Surya Koirala, who held several secret meetings with domestic and foreign leaders to make regime change happen. But it is now known, played a pivotal role in breaking the Maoist-UML communist alliance, creating a “reinvigorated” Oli government, culminating the NC in power, and facilitating the entry of Madhesi dissidents into Sinha Dahal.

“Nidhi turned out to be a game changer,” says political analyst Puranjan Acharya. “He was behind every political move that eventually resulted in the NC-Maoist partnership, and he has allowed him to take a great leap in his political career.” Sinha expressed Nidhi’s contribution by making him Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister. In the new government, led by Dahal, however, as often happens in Nepali politics, senior NC leaders are now feeling insecure because of Nidhi’s sudden rise and influence. Sources say Deuba is also thinking of appointing Nidhi as the NC’s Vice President, further fueling animosity in Congress circles. But those who understand the recent history and dynamics of the NC say that while Nidhi’s rise is dramatic, it is not unexpected. Nidhi was always by Deuba’s side when he emerged as the leader of the anti-establishment camp in the NC. Nara Chandra Khadka, Minendra Rijal, Bal Bahadur KC and Prakash Man Singh later defected from the Deuba camp, but Nidhi’s support has never wavered.

The Congress once saw Nidhi as the ultimate leader of the Deuba camp, and Nidhi has now demonstrated what they meant. Nidhi’s father, Mahendra Narayan Nidhi, was close to Krishna Prasad Bhattarai. When Bhattarai chose Deuba as his protégé, the junior Nidhi also joined the Deuba camp instead of the Congress. After Koirala Bhandari became President and Mahat Thapia and Bijaya Jachhad broke off to form their own Madhesi-based parties, Nidhi became the senior-most Koirala leader in the NC.

Nidhi’s biggest drawback is that he is seen as an Indian stag, and overly acting at New Delhi’s behest to persuade Dahal to topple the UML government. He has also been embroiled in controversy for allegedly building an Indian company to build the Kathmandu-Tarai fast track highway.

“Watch the watchdog”

Translated excerpts of interview with Stanford University political scientist Larry Diamond in Kathmandu, 16 August

Kantipur: Why is it so difficult for democracy to work in Least Developed Countries like Nepal?

Larry Diamond: Democracy often fails to take root, and gives way to instability, polarization, secession, military coups, dictatorships and violence in countries where corruption is rampant. Corruption weakens laws, erodes the people’s faith in governments, divides society, and increases nepotism. As a result, democracy becomes ineffective, and eventually fails. To strengthen democracy, we need to have good governance, the judiciary and bureaucracy must function properly, and strong measures must be taken to curb corruption.

But in Nepal the anti-corruption watchdog has been accused of being the source of corruption, with its Chief Commissioner accused of abusing his constitutional authority. Who appointed him? Countries that have good governance do not just set up an anti-graft body but also an independent agency to watch the watchdog. If the head of the anti-corruption body is appointed by political parties, the corruption cannot be effective, because a political appointee is usually not accountable to the people. Only someone whose career is not tainted and who cannot be tempted deserves to head an anti-corruption agency. And the head of such a body should not be beyond being investigated and monitored himself. If he is given unlimited authority, there is always a chance that he can abuse it.

I think this is what must be happening in Nepal. If the chief of the anti-graft body is accused of abusing his authority, he must be investigated, and punished if found guilty. Civil society, NGOs and the media must play a role to put pressure on the government to do that.

But the civil society that played a crucial role in the 2006 Democracy Movement is now polarised and ineffective. Civil society must always be active to ensure accountability. Its role is even more important when it comes to curbing corruption. It may not always be influential, but its leaders must not lose hope. They must be persistent.

India imposed a blockade against Nepal for five months to express its dissatisfaction over our constitution. Is it natural for a country’s constitution to be shaped by geopolitics? One democratic country cannot do this in another democratic country. Nepal can listen to India’s concerns. But neither should forget that they are both independent and sovereign nations, free to make their own decisions.

How should Nepal conduct itself, being in such a sensitive geopolitical situation between India and China?

Nepal needs to learn from Mongolia, which is in an even more sensitive geopolitical situation. Mongolia is surrounded by China and Russia. But it has protected its independence wisely. Nepal needs to be smart and maintain equidistance between India and China.

Is it true that the US views South Asia through an Indian lens? The US’s foreign affairs policy is guided by its hard security (and strategic) and soft (economy and democracy) interests. US-India relations are important, and I do not think the US gives Nepal importance in terms of strategic and economic interests. But it always shows goodwill for democratic countries like Nepal, which has to have its own strategy to protect its sovereignty.
Home they bring the workers

The grim task of delivering bodies of deceased migrant workers from Kathmandu airport to their homes falls on these men

UPASANA KHADKA

It is just before midnight at Kathmandu airport. Hiru Dhakal is waiting for a coffin to arrive on the flight from Kuala Lumpur. Dhakal is one of the delivery men for bodies of deceased migrant workers, and this is the 73rd casket this month.

Tonight, it is a young man from Bara who had an easy desk job in Malaysia, but died in his sleep like hundreds of other Nepalis who die of ‘natural’ causes there.

Some families’ members are at the airport parking lot to receive the body. Dhakal loads the coffin silently with a practiced hand on top of the van that one of his employees will drive down to Bara overnight. He does not linger, and does not talk to the relatives.

Dhakal is from K Durbar, one of the four coffin delivery services contracted by the Foreign Employment Promotion Board (FEPB) to transport migrant workers to their homes free of charge. The four companies have divided up Nepal’s 72 districts among themselves.

Dhakal has lost count of the number of coffins he has received at the airport in the past few years since his company was hired. Malaysia had the highest number of fatalities of Nepali migrant workers, with 425 dying from July 2014 to July 2015. Most died of sudden death syndrome in their sleep. Qatar, which also has about 550,000 Nepali workers, registered 175 deaths in the same period.

In contrast to the eerie silence in which the body is loaded at Kathmandu airport, Dhakal knows that when it arrives in Bara there will be wailing and commotion.

“To the Tani people from surrounding villages all gather to receive the bodies, and that is what will happen tomorrow morning in Bara,” says Dhakal, as the van drives off. He says the intensity of mourning varies depending on whether it is the hills or the Tarai, or on how much time has elapsed since the death.

“Sometimes the coffins arrive soon after death, and the families are still dealing with the shock.”

The cycle of migration
What perpetuates it, and why it is important to break it

OM ASTHA RAI

Man Bahadur Limbu went to Malaysia in 2002, hoping to escape poverty and war. He worked in a factory for four years and was allowed to visit his family only once, in 2004.

He endured the burden of a lean, inhuman working conditions and separation from family. Man Bahadur, a fifth-grade dropout, ploughed his savings into education for his children so that they would never have to suffer what he did as a migrant worker.

However, his 20-year-old son Prakash Limbu (pictured) also dropped out of school in Grade 9, and went to Malaysia last year. Like his father, he is now working in a factory on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

“My father worked abroad for years, but he could not earn enough,” says Prakash. “I decided to leave home so my little brothers could study.”

With his savings, Man Bahadur built a stone and mud house in Nangin village of Panchthar district in the eastern mountains. With no more money left, he migrated again in 2008, this time to Saudi Arabia as a cleaner.

Most of the money he sent home was spent on food and clothes for his family, and paying children’s school fees. When he returned after five years, he had only Rs 50,000 saved up.

When Prakash decided to go abroad, Man Bahadur did not even have the money to pay for his visa and ticket for Malaysia. They took a loan of Rs 155,000, but even though the recruiting agency he promised Prakash a monthly salary of Rs 38,000, he is earning merely Rs 29,000.

Prakash sends home money every four months for his parents, his wife who lives with her parents, and their two-year-old daughter. Now, his younger brother, 17-year-old Kungendra, who also dropped out of school, is applying for a passport so he can also leave.

Man Bahadur is now 49, and is himself planning to work overseas for the third time. “This time, I will try to save more money,” he said.

His wife Piali Maya is not happy, she is trying to persuade her husband and sons to stay back and help with farming. “Neither my husband nor my son listens to me,” she says. “If they both leave I will not be able to work the fields by myself.”

Like Man Bahadur, most migrant workers who experience the hardships of overseas work do not want their children to suffer the same fate.

Socialologist Ganesh Gurung says there are two factors that perpetuate this cycle of migration. The biggest chunk of remittance is spent for daily consumption such as food and clothes, and
DELIVERY OF THE DEAD: Hira Dhakal’s employees led the casket of a deceased migrant worker onto a van at Kathmandu airport.

He explains, “But at other times there are long delays in bringing the bodies home and the families have usually made peace with their loss.”

Dhakal recently delivered to a village in Maketari, the remains of a migrant worker who had died nearly two years ago, and says the mounting was much more subdued.

Whether at midnight or in the early morning, employees of the four delivery companies are always on call at the airport. Occasionally several coffins arrive on the same flight from the Gulf or Malaysia, and they have to scramble to arrange vehicles and drivers. On average, these to four coffins arrive every day at Kathmandu airport.

“After a while, they just become boxers to deliver,” says a matter-of-fact Purna Bahadur Jung, owner of Sri Gandesh Bhawan. The drivers and their helpers try not to get too attached to the families, because the job then becomes too stressful and emotionally fraught.

Every plywood box with ‘Pragali’ and ‘Thin Side Up’ stickers bears the tale of a tragic reality of shattered dreams, personal sacrifices, grieving families, and the desperation back home that drove the workers overseas.

Invariably, there are family members who find solace in talking about their loved ones. But Jung says he and his colleagues have little to offer in return, except a few words of consolation as they transport the bodies.

“Sometimes, we have to be a bit stern in dealing with grieving family members, they get very emotional and this can distract me from concentrating on mountain roads at night,” says Jung. He remembers a widow who wept continuously all the way from Kathmandu to Saptari, and faint ed en route. After ensuring that she was all right, he had to ask her to either swap her components or transfer to another vehicle as a safety precaution, after which she calmed down.

Sunil Bhandari of Meen Laksh Supplies, another coffin delivery company, says there is a story of one deceased migrant worker that he will never forget. Family members, including the widow, travelled in a separate vehicle from his coffin van and reached Udayapur before him.

“When I reached their house, the wife was lying unconscious on the floor after having consumed poison,” Bhandari recalls. He rushed her to hospital, but she did not live.

Death keeps no calendar. While missing festivals and family events is routine for the delivery companies, it is the strikes in Nepal that make the job difficult. Bhandari says the worst time was during the Indian blockade. Once, he had to deliver a body to Bhaga by buying fuel in the black market, and his vehicle carrying a coffin got smashed in Saptari.

Says Bhandari: “This is an essential service, we have to get the bodies home, and not let such events deter us.”

most migrant workers fail to invest their money or start their own businesses. Second, family dynamics change when the head of the household leaves home to work abroad for years; the children drop out of school and follow their father’s footsteps, as in the case of the Limbu family.

In 2016, Nepal Rastra Bank began issuing foreign employment bonds to encourage migrant workers to invest their money in development projects in Nepal. But few workers have taken up this opportunity.

Last year, the government set up Renmi Hydro Limited (RHL) to encourage migrant workers to invest their savings in two mid-sized hydropower projects. However, migrant workers may not trust a government-owned company.

“I am not hopeful, as migrant workers prefer to invest their money in land that they can own and sell,” says Ganesh. Foreign employment bonds and RHL are great concepts, but they will take years to show results, he adds.

Despite being a potentially useful idea, the proposal to set up a Labour Bank to provide business start-up loans for migrant workers has hit a snag due to lack of a clear policy.

“We are preparing guidelines so returning migrant workers can turn entrepreneurs and invest their savings,” says Labour Ministry spokesman, Govinda Mani Bhattel.

Surveys have shown that nearly 80 per cent of the remittance is used in buying foods, clothes, home appliances and electronic items. Given the slow economic growth, the $6 billion in annual remittances plays an important role in propelling up the national economy and reducing Nepal’s poverty rate, but does not contribute to development and job creation.

“Remittance alone cannot develop any country,” says economist Bhubanesh Pant. “We need to have a strategy to use remittances for development.”

Pant has three suggestions: promote remittances through legal channels, encourage migrant workers to hold savings in assets in Nepal itself, and to become entrepreneurs.

He warns: “If migrant workers continue like this and if the remittance economy suddenly collapses, Nepal will face a huge financial crisis.”
Journalism exam paper leaked

As we all know, the mass media plays an important public service role in a democracy — to present the news without fear or favour, and let the potato chips fall where they may. We take our adversarial role very seriously indeed: to confront the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, to hold government to account, to tell truth to power, and publish all the hearsay that is fit to print.

We should not be the first to grant new Constitution, which gives the freedom to publicly lynch anyone who disagrees with us even slightly. We don’t have to think twice about saying what a terrific guy Conrad Pierremont is. We only have to think once.

There is no malicious rumour going around town that we in the Fourth Estate aren’t free to be as sympathetic, hypocritical and unscrupulous as we want to anymore. There is freedom to press in Nepal, it’s just that we don’t have freedom after press.

As you can see for yourself in the pages of our newspapers, our aforementioned freedoms are perfectly intact. We journalists have never been free to lock ass, kiss ass, or be kicked in the Ass.

Nevertheless, we mustn’t rest on our laurels and let complacency get the better of us as we go out of our way to kowtow even when we are only asked to bow. We have eager reporters more than willing to print handouts in exchange for handouts. But let me assure you in no uncertain terms that, unlike some of our peers, we are not the type to take the money and run.

Our journalist code of ethics requires us to be true to our salt and committed to toe the party line, but only once adequately compensated. We intend to keep our end of the bargain and print any official announcement, press release or notice in its ‘as is’ condition.

There are absolutely no curbs on free media movements in the new Constitution, and state-controlled media is free to report at great length on all official pronouncements. As part of the government’s laudable efforts to help the media industry become more self-reliant, self-important, self-righteous and self-consumed, the Ministry of Disinformation and Newspeak has decided to require all those desirous of pursuing journalism career to first get a license by passing a test to be conducted by the Nepal Press Councils. It is a tough exam, but once through we can confidently tell everyone: “Forgive us our press passes.”

As a service to Nepal media and to help aspiring journalists, we reproduce below the leaked question paper in which examinees can answer objective questions subjectively.

What kind of event qualifies as ‘Breaking News’?
- An electoral defeat
- A first date breakup
- A national crisis
- A murder trial

NOT-SO-OBJECTIVE QUESTIONS
Write an essay on three of the following subjects:
1. Press freedom means singing harmony to hive in power.
2. We shouldn’t blame the messengers, we should look them up.
3. Good thing more than 45 per cent of Nepalis can’t read or write, otherwise they could actually become something for the media to be sorry.
4. How does press freedom in Nepal compare with, say, India?

The Answer

Do these cause a sensation in your teeth?

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