Pulling a poll cart

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is under mounting pressure to announce a date for local elections, but so far he has only promised a date on which he will announce the date: 19 February.

Sunday is the Election Commission’s deadline for polls to be held in two phases on 13 May and 4 June. But voting will only be possible if constitutional amendments are first passed. Many suspect Dahal is hoping to stay on as PM if he can keep putting off elections. NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba is getting suspicious that Dahal wants to cling on to office despite their agreement to swap the post.

Dahal’s spokesperson Pampha Bhusal told Nepali Times: “It will be difficult to hold elections without first deciding on local bodies and the amendment.”

The Local Body Restructuring Commission’s proposal to create 719 councils has been rejected by Tamil-centric parties. And the second amendment to the constitution is stuck in Parliament due to opposition from the UML. Madhesi parties also want the amendment to be passed before elections dates are announced. Election Commissioners Ayovilli Prasad Yadav has submitted a three-month schedule for local polls, and Dahal may no longer be able to avoid it.

But if Dahal fixes election dates on Sunday, the Madhesi parties that have lent their support to the NC-Maoist government will pull out. This will not topple the government, but will make it difficult to conduct polls. Rajendra Shrestha of the Federal Alliance warns: “We will go for a fresh stir if local polls are announced without amending the constitution.”

So, why would the NC and the UML want local polls, however unlikely? “It is all about power,” not about implementing the constitution,” says Manish Shuman of the Sadbhawana Party. “They just want election dates, not real elections.”

Dahal needs to show he wants elections, otherwise the NC and UML could gang up against him. But he cannot go ahead with polls as long as the Tamai parties want the amendment first. He is caught between a rock and a hard place.

Om Astha Rai

Nepal’s Silicon Alley

Asian laws and restricted e-commerce hard build the new motorcycle ride-sharing app, Teacute, and an IPO for Sagoon, a global social media brand started by a Nepal engineer.

2 million by 2020

As tourism rebounds, Nepal has set an ambitious target to increase visitor numbers in the next three years.
INBOUND REBOUND

Nepal’s tourism industry has taken some hard knocks lately. There was the human tragedy of the earthquake, and just as the country was beginning to recover, the blockade devastated the economy. Images and posts on social media of Kathmandu’s sprawl and pollution have deterred visitors. News of air crashes, the chaos at Kathmandu airport, and shaky domestic transport infrastructure haven’t helped.

However, Nepal’s picturesque scenery, vibrant culture and easy-going people make it a brand strong enough to withstand setbacks. It didn’t even take a year for tourism arrivals to spring back to pre-earthquake totals. The Nepal Tourism Board is projecting arrival figures to surpass 800,000 this year, and break the 2012 record.

Increased hotel capacity, the addition of two international airports, Nepal Airlines expanding its wings with four new Airbus are reasons behind the government’s optimism, and setting the target to boost annual arrivals to 2 million by 2020.

This is not unrealistic: The country’s location between the world’s two fastest growing and biggest economies puts Nepal at a huge advantage. Tapping just 1 per cent of the 120 million Chinese tourists who travel overseas every year will represent a ten-fold increase in the current annual total of Chinese guests in Nepal. Just concentrating on pilgrims from India can be an enormous boost to tourism.

Once Lumbini Airport is operational, Buddhist pilgrims traffic will see a sharp increase. Pokhara Airport can accommodate direct international flights from India and China. Those two airports will hopefully reduce the current congestion at Kathmandu.

Tourism now provides direct employment to 700,000 Nepalis, and brought in Rs 90 billion in foreign currency in 2016, making up nearly 5 per cent of the GDP. However, attaining the 2 million visitor target by 2020 will only be meaningful if tourists spend more here, which means government policy should not be to squeeze tourists with more fines and visa hassles, but encourage the private sector to expand products and services.

Foreign investors, including international hotel chains and airlines have noticed Nepal’s potential, which is why they are pouring money into joint ventures here. The ultimate test for the tourism industry will be if more of its income is routed to parts of the country where it can lift living standards. Part of the revenue the government earns from tourism should be recycled into conservation of our natural and cultural heritage.

The rebound of inbound tourism will only make sense if its benefits are decentralized.

A solid tourism brand

Nepal’s tourism industry survived a devastating earthquake two years ago. It hit rock bottom, and now it can only get up. Nepal is a gold mine, and we have shown we can withstand shocks.

Many things were done right. First, the government showed it was quick to get back on its feet by holding a high-profile International Conference on Nepal’s Reconstruction in Kathmandu itself two months after the earthquake in 2015. There was donor pressure to bring it to India or Japan, but Prime Minister Koirala and Shararat Mahat believed it was important to hold it in Nepal to demonstrate to the world that the country was open for visitors. Second, international forecasters and media highlighted the fact that despite suffering so much Nepalis living in shelters were as hospitable and friendly as ever.

We will be completing two new international airports, the Kathmandu gateway is being expanded to take more flights, new luxury hotels are coming up, and hospitality is adding five new rooms (Article 331), I don’t think it will be difficult to bring in 2 million tourists by 2020, in fact we can get even more if we can tap our tourism potential. So far we have only toured only Everest, Annapurna, Pokhara and Chitwan. The Far West, for example, has tremendous adventure and pilgrimage tourism potential.

There are some hidden gems: mainly poor infrastructure and isolation, Kathmandu Airport is congested, and flights are expensive. People from Japan can fly to Australia twice for the price of a round-trip to Kathmandu. There are no direct flights to Europe. Within Nepal, it is difficult to get around.

It helps that I am a pilot and understand aviation. In the last few weeks, I have been trying to bring displaced remote airports into operation. Last week we inaugurated Kailash, which had been under construction for 33 years. We are persuading airlines in Bajhang, Dung, Doli and Simi. Nepal Airlines aircraft were sitting in the hanger, we have got four Chinese planes new flying license and remote routes. Our next step is to upgrade management and take the shortage of pilots by arranging salaries.

Arrival numbers are picking up, and we have everything in place to achieve the target of bringing in 2 million tourists by 2020.

JIWAN BAHADUR SHAHI

Guest Editorial

VIURAL ON THE WEB

FUMING KATHMANDU

An unregulated monster of CO2, smoke, and filth we only call Kathmandu.

BIKER BUDDY

Nepal’s start-ups have no dearth of ambitious young talent, and they are working on cutting-edge technologies. A young team of entrepreneurs have developed a new motorcycle ride-sharing app called Fastie. Watch videos on Nepal Times calls a fastie ride this week.

HIGH ON TOURISM

The April 2015 earthquake has not been a deterrent to Nepal’s tourism, and last year’s figures prove that Nepal is still a sought after destination, (yet to be labelled as a Tourism Minister Jiwani Shahi discusses how Nepal can bring in more than 2 million tourists by 2020).

BAD AIR

Steps have been identified before to clean up Kathmandu’s air pollution such as banning vehicles more than 20 years old, but the transport syndicates have resisted the move. (Figuring out what to do, Amico Pandey, Friday).

The government needs to ban old vehicles with an iron fist. What about using compressed natural gas (CNG), which is used as a substitute for fossil fuel? (Trishna)

LIMITING NUMBERS OF VEHICLES VISITING THE ECONOMIC FREEDOM OF THE PEOPLE. (EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE, Sonia Awale, Friday).

Improptu and unmanaged road expansion in the major cause of the rising pollution. But road expansion is necessary, and needs to go on. The solution is simple: have 10-20 street cleaning trucks run every day for three months.

Bikash Rummy

TRANSPORT SYNDICATE

We need a strong partner like the new NEA to clean up public transport sector. (Highway robbery, Shreebala Shrestha, Friday).

Sumeet Chalermpanich

WHAT’S TRENDING

Every breath we take

The answer to Kathmandu’s worrisome rise in air pollution and its sad toll on public health is to improve the valley’s public transportation system. Vehicle emissions are much more dangerous than dust.

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Most popular on Twitter (116 mentions, 77 likes)

Most visited online page (11,740 visits)

Most commented (823 comments)

QUOTE & TWEETS

Nepali Times: @nepalitimes

Waste people in Kathmandu breathe out and smoke on major roads of the city. (tweeted) http://nepaltimes.com/stories

Nepali Times: @nepalitimes

We used to breathe for survival but now it’s the other way round. We are struggling to breathe. Immediate actions are indistinguishable.

SAMRAT BIKRAM. @bikram_shrestha

Ameriun burners, local, national, concerned authorities, construction companies has resisted the same at all we can try to.

Bikash Rummy. @shrestha_bikash

Greater operating costs and enforcement may by Nepali government, hope this bill gets passed away?

Praful Raj Pant. @Pant:

WASTHAI: please do not make this issue just passing through the/otaker in Kathmandu.

Times: @timesnewspaper

Weekly Trending: 846

Which should come first, Constitution amendment, amendment?

Total votes: 771

Weekly Trending: 845

We are happy about the Nepal TV

Weekly Trending: 845

Can Nepal fall on 2 million tourists by 2020?

Nepal Times: @nepalitimes

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Fire in the afternoon

Once upon a time, Lady Elephant helped put out the flames at Tiger Tops

A
fternoons in the Tarai jungle in May are endless, oppressive, sepulchral with the heavy smell of dense grass awaiting revival by the monsoon. The thick sweltering heat shimmers as the afternoon haze dances on the horizon. Chitwan’s tangled grasslands are dry and dying, matted into heaps of cracking gold and brown.

I was a newcomer to the Tiger Tops world and keen to be part of the team. Not just with the boss Tim Edwards, his brother John and Chuck McDeeugal, but particularly with the Nepali staff, many of whom had been there since the Lodge first opened in 1984. My special favourites were the Subedar headman, whose flat-top coiffure, features and cropped hair bellowed an air of unsalvable authority, and master tiger tracker Krishna Gaurang, who had a shy smile that lit up his face and a fluid gait hard to keep up with on jungle trails. I already had earned a nickname, I learned later – Hattini, which means Lady Elephant. I like to think this was due to my nearly six-foot height.

The Tiger Tops lodge community numbered about 200 people if you included the elephant camp and the chapas who laboured to pump the water and tend the roads. Dressed in shades of buff and khaki, we were a self-contained group with lives defined by our jobs, a hierarchy of interlocked relationships. Like living on a ship, I used to think, sailing in a sea of trees.

Room boys doubled as waiters, shikaris guided walks and safaris, and drivers were also skilled mechanics, which was just as well given the aging Land Rover fleet. Some of the open green jeeps were peppered with bullet holes, allegedly acquired in some non-specific regional warzone before being diverted by the British Army, and one had a tin-opener gash in the door made by a charging rhino.

Mornings were busy with organizing logistics – elephant safaris, wildlife walks, jeep drives, elephant camp visits, room lists, menus, supplies. Right and road arrivals and departures. The black board in the cramped wood office with screened windows behind the kitchen was our blueprint for the day.

A hot afternoon soon after I arrived, I was battling the humidity pouring with sweat even while I rested motionless on the bed. It was that quiet time of dusk when guests had been disembarked on their safaris and we had a rare hour to ourselves.

Someone hammering on the door jolted me out of my reveries. “Come quickly, memsaab, the kitchen is on fire!” As I raced down the packed mud path, the cracking in the air reached me at the same time as the shouts of the boys. The smell of burning was unmistakable and as I crossed the rickety wooden footbridge I could see flames rising from the kitchen roof. A stone building with wooden beams and glassless windows, only sheets of corrugated iron separated the sparks of the open cooking fires from the grass of the thatched roof.

It was a chaotic scene. Water was being carried from the pumps and river in buckets, and a few brave souls were on the kitchen roof, trying to separate the grass from the flames so it did not ignite further. The air was filled with flying black clinders and everyone was shouting advice as I took my place, using my height to lift the pots up to the men on the roof. Soon a more orderly relay line was formed as the buckets were passed from person to person, then to me to hoist up to eager hands. It was not long before the embattled were drenched, the danger subsided and fear of the fire spreading was quashed. The main lodge rooms, central gil ghar, office and store were all safe.

Smeared with ash and soaked with spilled water, we hugged each other with relief. I can still smell the burning grass stalk that filled our throats and nostrils.

“That was close,” observed Chuck, ever sparing with words. “Your height came in handy.” Krishna smiled at me kindly, and the Subedar unexpectedly shook my hand. On that hot afternoon, Hattini earned her stripes and now belonged to the Tiger Tops team.

Lisa Choegyal is a Bill who has made Nepal her home since the 1970s.

NOT TOO FAR BUT TOO CLOSE

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Mango Chili

Located in the newly renovated Lalmit Mall in Pulchowk, Mango Chili promises a fresh and unique vibe this side of the river. With modern décor and an interior design unlike that of any other traditional Thai restaurant in town, the restaurant offers a contemporary twist to lemon grass, tamarind and shrimp Tom yum.

Greeted with a smile on arrival, the impeccable service and over-accommodating waiters make dining at Mango Chili an experience comparable to that of a five-star restaurant. If you’re having trouble choosing from the array of meals on offer, the waiters are glad to oblige with rational advice.

Mango Chili offers curries, rice and noodle dishes, soups, an Asian pan range and salads.

We were also excited by the array of dessert options which were all under Rs 225 and included sorbet, chocolate brownie, and blueberry cheesecake. Nothing Thai about these items, of course, but they complemented the spicy main course.

The choice extends beyond the usual Thai items to seating, with the option of high bench tops and stools, tables in front of the bar or closer to the back of the restaurant with some visibility of work in action in the kitchen. Mango Chili also offers an extensive variety of presentation standards. While it lacked in stay-sauce, the generous portioning made for a satisfying start.

Do take note of the helpful chilli guides on the menu, and if you’re after a kick, the classic Tom yum with a choice of prawns (Rs 475) should be first on your order. The famous tangy Thai taste stays on your tongue, and a warm sticky taste that warms up your insides. The dish easily fed two people, and can be a good option if you are in a hurry.

The next dish on our table was the Massaman Curry (Rs 475) with a side order of Steamed Rice (Rs 50). The thick curry had a medley of tastes from ingredients like cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, nutmeg, and among the exotic spices were chunks of chicken and potato. Although at times, Nepal may feel the curry too sweet for their taste buds, it did settle well with the rice.

To round off our meal, we tried the hot Thai Tea (Rs 150) against the waiter’s recommendations and we understood why. We were let down by its partially bitter flavour, but for regular Thai diners or those seeking an authentic Siamese experience, you could finish off the meal with the warm brew.

Although the much anticipated arrival of Mango Chili lacks traditional Thai décor and atmosphere, the famous Pad Thai dish, which patrons swear by, has renewed interest in a quick Thai lunch for the denizens of Kamalpokhari and Jawalakhel.

Reasonable pricing and generous portion, as well as location in Kathmandu’s fanciest mall makes this a destination for those who need to mix predictability with good taste.

EAT BEAT

Jenica Ellis

House of music

M.A.W. Music, authorised distributor of Yamaha Music, opened its showroom for professional audio systems and musical instruments in Nepal, inaugurated by famed Nepali band, 1974 AD, the showroom will also display musical accessories of renowned international companies like Kong & Meyer and D’Addario.

On air delights

Cathy Pacific in partnership with Tessa, the Mother’s choice for Italian restaurant at The Sky Captain in Hong Kong, launched an inflight menu promotion. Offered till 30 April, it will be available for first and business class passengers on selected flights departing from Hong Kong.

Prize for paint

Sergei P Pavlova, announced the launch of its season after ‘Sergei Nagapad’ with Nepali actresses Puja Ram and as its campaign ambassador. Each customer will receive a 100 sq. ft of 104 illusion designers finish of their choice on participation. Winners of the campaign can get cool prizes up to Rs 1 million.
Mango Chili

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Jessica Curtis

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**EAT BEAT**

**House of music**

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**On air delights**

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**Prize for paint**

Bergen Paints launched the launch of its season’s offer “Bergen Nagadau” with Nepali actress Pratiksha Ram as its campaign ambassador. Each customer will receive a 100 sq. ft. of Elk illusion designers finish of their choice on participation. Winner of the campaign can get cash prizes up to Rs.1 million.

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Chicken or egg?

What comes first, election or amendment?

The Election Commission (EC) has been repeatedly asking the election date. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has responded by giving a date when he will announce the date: 19 February.

That is also the deadline that the NC gave the government if the first of three elections that are supposed to be completed by 2017 to avoid a constitution crisis can be held by May.

Dahal was already under pressure to forge a consensus with the Tarai-centric parties that have flatly rejected elections if their demand for constitutional amendments are not met. Now, there is an added sense of urgency as the opposition UML has started exploratory meetings with the Madhesi parties.

Dahal’s meeting with Chief Election Commissioner on Wednesday was not the first time that he has promised a date for elections. But he hopes to negotiate over the weekend with the UML, NC and the Madhesi parties to forge a consensus by then.

If wishes were horses, however, Dahal would ride. The UML, has been obstructing parliamentary proceedings for over two months, delaying not just debate on the amendments but also the passage of necessary election bills. Tarai-centric parties have warned of new agitation if elections are held without amendments. And now the UML and the Madhesi parties are talking – that is not good news for Dahal.

Even if the government can announce the date, there are still doubts about whether local elections can be held. The Maoists do not want to face elections, the UML is confident it has public opinion in its favour, whereas the NC wants to consolidate its hold in the Tarai. The Tarai-centric parties, for their part, think they can dominate neither local nor provincial councils. They would rather stand aside to show that the government has failed to implement the constitution and hold the elections. This opposition to Dahal is what has brought the UML and the Madhesi Front together.

Meanwhile, NC Chairman Deuba who supported Dahal last August to lead their coalition, is having doubts about Dahal stepping down as agreed in April. Meanwhile, President Bidya Devi Bhandari has urged all parties to agree on elections and focus on implementing the new constitution.

Dahal got to be prime minister in August after ditching the UML and forcing K P Oli to step down. Dahal doesn’t want to make the same mistake he did in 2009 after sacking the army chief, and wants to be seen as wanting elections even if he doesn’t. Oli is angling for revenge. Deuba is in panic mode.

The Maoists are now so badly split and the governing Madhesi Centre is so discredited that it fears falling to fifth place in Parliament if elections are held. Dahal wants to go through the motions of an elections, but doesn’t want it to actually happen. The Madhesi Front has also sensed that it is not going to do well even in its own heartland since most people are fed up with the leadership. Which is why it is raising one objection after another on the amendment, determined to stall polls.

When the government is taking too much time to fix the date of the local level election people have started predicting that the government will not be able to hold all three elections within the time. Because of the delays, there are now serious doubts not just about local elections but also voting for provincial assemblies and the federal parliament. This could lead to a constitutional crisis.

Now, that it is time to go to Supreme Court. There is a precedent for the Supreme Court to allow the First Constituent Assembly to extend its term, and the full bench giving it the last chance to sign. Faced with such a crisis, the political cartel is also expected to finally reach a compromise to extend its own term, showing that in Nepal – just like in love and war – anything is possible.

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A whole day of stories, workshops, panels, performance by women for women this Saturday

SMRITI BASNET

In 2010, Britisher Jude Kelly Labovit started a Festival called WOW (Women of the World) to encourage conversations, celebrate stories and experiences of women from different walks of life.

Seven years later and the festival has grown into a full fledged global movement, way beyond what Kelly had expected.

“I really wanted to say that if you are a woman, or if you know a woman, this festival can celebrate your history and challenge any obstacles that are being experienced in the world,” Kelly told Nepali Times over e-mail.

Kelly is also Southbank Centre’s Artistic Director.

This year, Kathmandu too, will host its own WOW festival in partnership with the British Council on 18 February, weeks ahead of International Women’s Day on 8 March. The festival has already been held in 20 cities across five continents.

“Through celebrating the achievements of the women they provide powerful role models, and through bringing together people from across South Asia they help to build a powerful network,” said Jim Hollington, Director of Arts South Asia of British Council.

The event comes at a time when women’s issues are being strongly voiced in the country - in both social and political context. Kelly noted, “There is still too strong a perception that women’s equality would undermine men’s identity and destroy cultural traditions.”

Kelly will be among 99 speakers, panelists, mentors and performers who will be present at the event on Saturday. Other speakers include Amrutadha Koirala, Sunita Danwar, Malvika Subba, Loomibha Tuladhar, Kopja Jupdi and others.

Nepali mountaineer who climbed Mt Everest, Jayanti Kuru Utumpala will also be attending to talk about the challenges of not just climbing the world’s highest mountain but also fitting into a male-dominated sport.

“My experience has shown that one’s gender really does not matter,” said Utumpala who hopes to inspire others.

Pakistani tech innovator Jehan Ara hopes to bring in her experiences of working in technology and the media at the event. Passionate about empowerment of women and youth, Ara believes it is technology that has enabled cities to engage with policy makers and make their own viewpoints known.

“I can’t wait to get up and go to work where I am surrounded by young men and women with stars in their eyes,” said Ara who has helped start initiatives like Pakistan branch of Women on the Web, Take Back the Tech, and Women’s Virtual Network.

Nepal social entrepreneur Sumara Shrestha lays emphasis on data to assess and find solutions to existing problems. “Numbers give us target, and they give us something to fight against,” said Shrestha, founder of the Facebook group Carpool Kathmandu which offered rides during the Indian blockade last year. Shrestha will share the stage with Ara and many other speakers to talk on “Taking over Tech”.

“I hope feminists connect over this event, that will be the single best outcome,” said Shrestha of her expectations.

However, apart from women themselves, the event has gone on to include men like Kapi Kafe, who has actively been involved with WomenEngage Alliance, an NGO established in 2007 in Nepal to encourage men to also fight gender inequality.

“There have been some male politicians who have raised issue of women’s rights and female foeticide, dowry giving, property rights and several other issues have also been taken up by male MPs,” said Kafe. However, despite such progress, he feels more needs to be done.

British Council hopes to host another WOW event in 2018 in South Asia.
Kathmandu’s Silo

Archaic laws and limited e-commerce hold back start-up offering a new motorcycle ride-sharing app

SONIA AWALE

On his daily commute from Chabahil to Jawalakhel, Asnath Subedi used to give rides to friends going in the same direction. He saw others who needed rides, and many like him who could share.

So, the 27-year-old engineering student who came back to Nepal after graduating from an American university, designed a motorcycle ride sharing app. However, even though talented young people like Subedi are ready for Nepal, Nepal may not yet be ready for them.

Subedi is not allowing obsolete rules and the bureaucracy to deter him. He says, “Despite start-ups being risky business, I believe things are changing, more people are turning their ideas into new ventures.”

After returning from the US, Subedi started working on tech products with Three60 Consulting, and designed an app to track Sajha buses with which users could save time by finding out when the next bus would arrive. But the app didn’t take off, and out of sheer boredom the team started working on a motorbike ride-sharing mobile platform called Tootle.

At the glass panelled nerve centre of Three60 in Jawalakhel, Subedi projects a map of Kathmandu with the location of available drivers and demonstrates how Tootle works (see box). Initially we were worried about the response and did not have high expectations,” recalls Prince Koirala who looks after the business development and marketing. “But Tootle must be meeting a need because it is becoming popular with consumers and the technology is translating into a brand.”

Koirala, 26, is an electronics engineer with an MBA degree from Nepal, and has worked from scratch on tootle with Subedi. She also feels that Nepal’s laws lag behind innovations possible in the IT industry. “Working in a technology company I have realized that the expertise is there, and because the industry is new there are challenges. But that is what makes it exciting,” says Koirala. “I tell young Nepalis to go overseas, study, learn skills and come back. There are a lot of opportunities here, and the country needs us.”

Subedi, for his part, had a job as a graphics designer and worked in server architecture in the US before deciding to return to Nepal. He is excited about the future of Tootle which completed its first 1,000 rides in just a month after launching on 1 January. Asked why he returned to Nepal, Subedi replies: “In the US you work because you need to, not necessarily because you like what you are doing. My job wasn’t bad, but I wasn’t getting to do what I wanted which was programming. Here in Nepal you get to be someone.”

Nepal’s start-up sector has no dearth of motivated young talent like Subedi and Koirala, who have found fulfilling jobs despite archaic laws and underdeveloped e-commerce.

“The younger generation is coming up with new ideas, yet the government is reluctant to encourage them. But if you don’t push you don’t innovate,” explains lawyer Anup Vijesh. He says there is nothing in the law to actually restrict a shared economy, but the culture of cartels and monopolies adds to the challenge of doing business in Nepal. Innovative ideas like Tootle will not

Soon, Sagoon

A Nepali sets out to change the way the world uses social media

With Facebook, Twitter and YouTube dominating the social media, one would have thought there is no room for anyone else. But IT entrepreneur Govinda Gill (above) is out to change that.

A Nepali based in Washington DC, Gill launched the social media platform Sagoon in 2014 to try to transform the way young people around the world network on the web. Born and brought up in Sankhuwasabha in eastern Nepal, Gill was doing his master’s in Literature in the 1980s when he happened to take MS DOS classes at a computer institute in Pulchowk. “I knew there and then that I had to be in IT,” recalls Gill. With limited opportunities in Nepal, he knew that he would have to head out to a wider world. He started from scratch in the United States, enrolling in a community college in Virginia to study English and joined Andrew University in Michigan to study Computer Science. Gill then got a job as a network engineer at the Pentagon.

“Every day I went to work, I asked myself, what was I doing there,” says Gill. “The job paid my bills, my family was proud of me, but I was never satisfied.”

Gill was obsessed with the idea of a search engine to rival Google and Yahoo and launched Sagoon in 2009. It was designed to use semantic searches to generate more relevant results by pairing traditional keywords with algorithms that

Nepal wherever you are.
BIKER BUDDY
nepalitimes.com
Follow Eelesh Rajkarnikar, one of the Tootle bikers, as he picks up a passenger by a phone app and helps her get to her destination in Kathmandu faster than a bus and cheaper than a taxi.

Kathmandu, Nepal - Nepali Times

Tootle co-founder Shital Bhalla has a telecommunications background, and says he had to engineer a means to get around the limitations of payment gateways. Because credit card payment is complicated in Nepal, users pay for rides using an eSewa account.

Although Tootle hasn’t been officially registered, the Department of Transport Management says Tootle is illegal, citing a rule that private vehicles are not allowed to serve as taxis.

Bhalla maintains that Tootle is not a taxi service, but works on the concept of a shared economy made possible by mobile connectivity. He says, “It is a platform for our bikers and normal people to connect. We are not competing with the transport authority. Our bikers are connecting with customers who are looking for a better and safer mode of transport.”

Net Architects: Prernaa Kamala (left) and Kaylah Subedi (right) represent a new breed of young Nepali techies designing world-class apps like Tootle for sharing motorcycle rides.

You Tootle, too?

You don’t want to budge in Kathmandu because of the pollution, and avoid buses because they are crowded. Just download Tootle on your phone and provide your name and email address. A registration code is automatically generated.

If you have a motorbike and want to make money on the side, download Tootle Partner. It also allows you to upload a picture of your driving license and open an eSewa account for online transactions.

And you are all set. Users book their rides by setting a pick-up and drop-off location with options of right-now, 15 minutes later, 30 minutes later and an hour later. The location of the users and available bikers can be easily tracked with Google maps.

To get the free eSewa app on Google Play.

High tech black hole

Fayd, outsized rules, bilking and implementation policy and a lack of clarity on guiding principles are hindering the growth of the tech industry in Nepal. New investments and a surge of youthful talent in recent years have expanded it, but innovation is held back by archaic laws and bureaucratic red tape.

"Without a doubt, our laws are outdated. But laws follow technology and not the other way around," says Dhanabhiram Thapa, Secretary General of the Federation of Computer Associations of Nepal.

The Department of Transport Management has a legal issue with the motorbike-sharing app, Tootle. The government segregated green and black plates for tourist unions and taxis, while red plates are for private vehicles, mainly motorcycles. The green and black plates pay taxes, whereas there is no such tax for red plates.

"Tootle disrupted the market, there is no policy to hire red plate vehicles, so Tootle will demand a demand for the law to evolve. Just as e-payment systems have been demanding a banning license," says Thapa.

The cost of payment gateways is a major hurdle for Tootle to start up, and Nepali law doesn’t have a reliable mode of online credit card payment and making cash in hands is rarely taken all. Payment systems like eSewa are regulated and don’t have a banking license.

"There is no law in Nepal that allows people to pay online security. But the most important thing for freeing e-commerce is making financial access possible," says Sandhya Shrestha.

The free market economy is also not functioning normally because of a renting system and controls protected by political patronage. Location and logos are also a hindrance because many streets in Nepal do not show an on Google maps.

Soneja Awale

Recent, Sapon, an American social media start-up funded by notorious Nepali has launched a mini IPO, but hopes wanting to invest found them cold because of strict laws banning Nepalis from sending money abroad.

It is possible to invest outside Nepal if we follow certain channels, we do have good policies in place. The problem lies in implementation and the lack of clear guidelines. We need to see some clarity for mentoring abroad,” says Srestha.

The Civil industry, especially needs strong financial mechanisms for e-commerce and cross-border payments. This limit the full potential for growth of ventures like Sapon and Tootle. The good news is that the government is coming up with a new draft regulation Naranjara ‘Intellectual Property Policy 2016’ and at Nirmala, Act No. 1 which should streamline e-commerce regulation.
**Events**

- **Bird watching**
  Enjoy a hike and spot birds with a group of fellow birders led by Vinay Thablo. 18 February, Jogeshwari Forest, Worli, Meeting Time: 7 am, Meeting Point: Jogeshwari Temple, (022) 44178003, 440217

- **Textile art**
  Mark your calendars for an exhibition of Mexican textiles from the state of Chiapas. Until 27 February, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Dadar, Meeting Time: 11 am to 5 pm, (022) 4303500, 4310848

- **Discussing pollution**, join Dr. Anita Kathmandu for a meet and greet session with individuals and groups working to fight air pollution. 17 February, 5 pm onwards, Neral Community Hall, Palghar, (0251) 262505

- **Pinkathon**
  Gear up for the Kathmandu Pinkathon, a women’s only event, and choose to run in 3km, 5km, 10km or 21 km run to promote and encourage women empowerment. 24 February, 7 to 11 am, Neral, Jogeshwari, Kothrud Stadium, PimpriChinchwad, www.kathmandupinkathon.com

- **Meal for a cause**
  Watch a Veda, a Russian and English group, performs a spiritual dance and dance. All proceeds from the event go towards the mid-year meal program for underprivileged school children. 25 February, Sheroes Canteen Plaza, NHERI, 1200 per person (Veg, available at Jogeshwari, Juhu, Worli, Olive Mira, Kala Ghoda, Patidar Bazaar, Borivli, The Great Escape, Offering Restaurant and Bar, Jogeshwari and Juhu)

- **Bombay Vikings**
  Save the date for Indian pop and rock group Bombay Vikings. Visit them and beat out some of their hits in this live appearance. 18 February, 4:30 to 6 pm, Jogeshwari Football Grounds, 98778936/9350790304

**Getaway**

- **Famous Farm**
  Wake up to the sounds of chirping birds and a fresh morning breeze waiting in through the earth’s play. Nowok, (022) 40760436, info@famous-heritage.com

- **Arithe Resort**
  A perfect place to stay, nearby pool, massage, sauna, and delicious food of your choice. Shivapati, Latikade, Palghar, (91) 6546789/ 480307, info@arithestort.com

- **Chisapani, Kathmandu**, 9891579344, palatenboulding.com, Temple Tree Resort and Spa.
  A peaceful place to stay, comprise with a swimming pool, massage parlor and sauna, will be hard to leave once you arrive. Ghorepani, Ghorepani, (604) 568719

- **The Yellow House**
  Best bar and restaurant for the light traveler. Shivapati, (91) 655889/ 5529019, www.theyellowhouse.com.in

- **Pataleben vineyard Resort**, 16 km west of Kathmandu city, the resort is a perfect place to spend your weekends with food and wine. The resort offers amazing views of sunsets and the mountains. Chisapani Bazaar, Bhungyong Bazaar, (021) 4316377

**Music**

- **All about funk**
  Tap to the beats as 14 national and international funk artists belt out some groovy numbers. 18 February, 9:30 pm, Motel, Jogeshwari, (022) 5528630

- **Soothing sufis**

- **Fusion Friday**
  Enjoy the sitar, bass and percussion trio, Kanta Sri Ali, performs soulful fusion numbers for its audience. 18 February, 7:20 am to 10:30 am onwards, Base Camp, Jogeshwari, 9844263891, Cover charge Rs 500

- **Classical night**
  Spend a meatball evening, listen to Nepali classical music featuring Rabin Lal Srestha, Prahlad Raj Dhakal and Surekha Rai Shrestha. 26 February, 7:30 to 9 pm, Kantajore Temple House, Jharia, (022) 4505173, Rs 500

**Dining**

- **Hyatt Regency**
  Relish everything strawberry this month. Choose from a variety strawberry balloon mirror cake, cheekie, tart, cucumber and other delicacies. 7th to 28 February, Lobby lounge, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Boudha, (01) 517123

- **Cafe Swotha**
  An intimate setting in the heart of Patan, with an atmosphere of sophistication, romantic warmth. Patan, (011) 5517946, info@cafechandanahomes.com

- **Vootoo**
  The new name of Newari cuisine that also has a safe continental menu for those who are not ready to experiment with new dishes. Jogeshwari, (022) 4855222

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Relic of a legacy

SHUVECHHYA PRADHAN

Politically correct history books depict the century of rule by the Rana dynasty that ended in 1950 as being feudal and despotic. What is largely hidden is their contribution to knowledge and the arts.

One of the jewels in the Rana crown was the library set up by Field Marshal Kiser Shumsher Rana in 1908 after he visited Great Britain with his Anglophile father, Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher. Kaiser Shumsher’s collection of rare books was once regarded the largest private library in Asia with titles dealing with history, philosophy, geography, politics and religion.

The library was already suffering from government neglect, many books had pages missing and the stacks were falling apart, when the April 2015 earthquake struck. The historic palace was badly damaged, causing the roof to leak, and large cracks opened up on the ornately decorated pillars and walls (above).

The books that once lined the halls and the corridors are now packed in sacks and the photographs, paintings and animal trophies are in storage. Almost two years since the earthquake, the library is still awaiting repairs and is now functioning from two rooms on the ground floor.

“We have stored away the books and haven’t given full access to the public. Visitors can only read newspapers sitting on the desk outside but the other floors are not accessible,” says Filin Maharjan, showing a visitor around.

During Kaiser Shumsher’s lifetime, the library was private, accessible only to family members. But scholars and researchers from the country and abroad were welcome to use the resources.

“All you had to do was ask my father’s permission and then return the book on the due date. He hated it when people didn’t return books on time,” recalls Lok Bhakta Rana, Kaiser Shumsher’s youngest son.

Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had visited the library and it was also used by noted orientalists Percival London and Sylvain Levi for research after Kaiser Shumsher’s death in 1964, the family donated the Kaiser Mahal library along with its 1.7 hectare property to the government.

The Garden of Dreams that Kaiser Shumsher modelled after palace gardens that he saw during his trip to Britain and France was restored by Gotzi Hagemuller and his team, and is today a popular oasis for the public.

The library didn’t only come with a treasure trove of books and paintings, it also had a collection of rare manuscripts that Kaiser Shumsher had brought from locals. Among them is a 1,134 years old Salotartantra written in palm leaf which is listed in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register and is considered to be oldest treatises on Ayurvedic medicine.

“My father used to buy these manuscripts mostly from the Shaktas and the Rajbhandars for around Rs 400, which could actually fetch one rupee paid at that time,” says Lok Bhakta Rana. Almost all of the manuscripts have now been digitised with the help of the German Government.

After the earthquake, the staff rushed to save the books on the upper floor. Lok Bhakta got an Israeli rescue team to assess the damage. But progress in rebuilding has been slow and the future of the palace wing is still in limbo. Vibration from the construction of the nearby Sheraton Hotel have also impacted on the building which was already weakened by the quake.

Dash Raut Mishra, the chief librarian, says, “The National Reconstruction Authority has told us there is a budget for the library but we haven’t received any money yet. The place is to retrofit the building, since it is so historic.”

Lok Bhakta Rana says the library is neglected because it is now government property, and wants it to be restored along the same self-sustaining public-private-partnership model as the Garden of Dreams that an autonomous committee.

He says: “The government should work as fast as possible to restore the library. We don’t want to regret donating my father’s private collection to the government.”

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Occasionally, a mainstream film like Arrival blows the viewing experience out of their seats with concentrated intensity and an application of the usual tricks of cinema in such an unusual, uniquely original manner.

Denis Villeneuve, the creative force behind Arrival uses the poetic language of cinema to the maxumum, or as much as is allowed in the mainstream, non-art house pictures for the real deal you'd have to go back to films like Jacek Cobat's Orpheus from 1950 or the crazy, wonderful, 1966 feminist manifesto Dasiles by the Czechoslavok filmmaker Vera Chytilová to bring about his vision, based on Ted Chiang's short science fiction story, Your Life, which explores what happens when two extraterrestrial visit the Earth for the first time but there is no common language for communication.

Amy Adams plays Louise Banks. Banks is a linguist who lives a fairly solipsistic existence after having tragically lost her young daughter to an illness. Louise is recruited by the United States Army to decipher the language written by the aliens, a symbol based communication system that has mystified people across the 12 points on the globe where the aliens have chosen to hover in sleek black capsules that are as enigmatic as they are seemingly impenetrable (except when they want).

Visually, the film is stunningly beautiful, with a carefully designed minimalistic ethos that provides an unusual foil for the essential through line of the film which is, underscathed its sci-fi exterior, really an attempt at an ode to our own humanity, a trait that has been recognised by these visitors from far away, even as they have witnessed our war-mongering tactics with a hmong, unfailing gaze.

Denis Villeneuve, also the auteur behind Sicario (2011), a spectacularly humourless film that still won basketfuls of accolades, evolved somewhat with Sicario (2015) – a tale of drugs and violence. Unfortunately, while there has been some progression, Arrival is another apogee of self-seriousness which has nonetheless been nominated for Best Picture.

Arrival is a stupendously accomplished film with a few flimsy loose ends, but it stands out from the director's usual grim oeuvre because of its cinematic beauty, and due to the strength of the performances by Amy Adams and the wonderful Jeremy Renner and Forrest Whitaker who play a theoretical physicist and Army Colonel respectively. If you can take the 130 minutes of extreme solemnity, heaved a tad by Johann Johannsson’s gorgeous score, then Arrival is your film of the year. If, however, you like the tongue in cheek that often goes with science fiction, this is not the place to look for that kind of goofing around – Villeneuve is way too arty for actual humour, which explains why no one ever even cracks a smile in a film that would have benefited infinitely with a laugh or two.

nepalitimes.com
Mahabir’s dream coming true

Bhuchar BK in
Himal Khapalpatika
12-18 February

Mahabir Pun (pictured) used to pen love letters during his school days. His memories are stanzas from Bhupi Sherchan’s famous poem: ‘A country can’t move ahead unless some are willing to die for their motherland.’

Now, Nepal’s from around the world are helping to make telecommunication expert Mahabir Pun’s dream of a donation-based National Innovation Centre (NIC) come true.

“Sacrificing life for one’s country isn’t relevant anymore. We need donations for development, not martyrdom,” says Pun.

After waiting three years for government help to build the NIC, he has now turned to the public for donations and is happy with the response. “It’s not about the government anymore. With the help of the people, the innovation centre will start working from this year,” he declared.

He started the donation campaign nearly six months ago with a target of raising Rs 500 million. He also wants to build a 10MW hydropower plant to supply energy to the centre as well as sell power to the grid for its long-term sustainability.

There are hundreds of experts working at the Ministry of Science and Technology, Nepal Academy of Science and Technology, Nepal Agriculture Research Council and universities which were formed solely to work in the field of innovation and carry out scientific studies. So why do we need another similar organisation?

Pun’s reply: “We need an innovation centre because scientists are being treated as civil servants with 10-5 office hours. A country will not prosper unless it invests in science and technology.

Registered as a non-profit organisation, the centre’s executive committee also includes economist Rameshwor Khanal, hydropower expert Dambir Nepali, scientists Parmod Dhakal and Dinesh Bhusan and chartered accountant Hari Silwal. The centre’s temporary office is at the Nepal Connection Café in Thamel and 26 of 70 internationally-recognised Nepali scientists are involved. Rs 50 million has been collected from Nepalis around the world who have given amounts from Rs 100 to Rs 5.7 million each. Pun himself donated 27 rupiae of his ancestral land located in Pokhara worth Rs 30 million. Nepalis in Nepal and outside the country can donate at least Rs 50 and $50 respectively. He has also put up all the medals he has been awarded.

The 10 MW hydropower project will take 5 years to complete, and will make an annual income of Rs 330 million. Pun also has an alternative model of Public Private Partnership (PPP), in which 70 per cent of the shares will be owned by the Centre.

Joy and sorrow in Kalikut

Kalidanda Sujal in Kapilvastu, 13 February

Man Bahadur Singh of Kaliya of Kalikut never thought he would live to see the day when a plane would crash on an airfield where 35 civilian workers still be buried.

On Saturday, when a Tara Air flight carrying 14 passengers and a Marshal officer of this remote district ( pictured), Singh couldn’t hold back his tears. “We had lost hope that this cemetery would ever become an airfield, but today it really has!”

The construction of the airfield commenced in 1935 with an investment of Rs 100,000 but the massacre of workers in 2002 stopped all work. “During the war it was a battlefield, and remained a graveyard for those who were killed here,” said Singh, who himself was injured in an aerial attack by the Army.

On 22 February 2002, a week after the Maoist attack on Mahakali Airfield, soldiers in hot pursuit of the attackers killed 35 civilian workers, mistreating them for Maoists. Seventeen of them were from the village of Jagari of Bhairungi.

Many of the thousands who thronged the airfield on Saturday were witnesses and survivors of that massacre. The first flight brought tears of joy and sorrow to the people of Kalikut.

Work on the airfield was expected only after the construction of the airfield was completed. Now, the new airfield has opened up opportunities for the local people.

Humla MP Jame Bahadur Shachi became the Minister of Tourism. Shachi visited the site three times after becoming the minister and took personal interest in its completion. Kalikut was one of the few districts in Nepal still to be connected by road. But now the Kalikut Highway has reached the town, the airfield will have to prove its worth.

“Sure, there is a lot of infrastructure is in place to ensure smooth operation of daily flights,” says Shachi. “It’s easier for the aircraft to compete with the road.”

With the new airport now operational, locals want the state to honour those buried here. “We can’t really be happy until the blood of our heroes who worked on this airfield is remembered,” said health worker Ramji Cho, who traced many of the names on the list 17 years ago.

Firmakers Mohan Mainali who made a documentary on the 17 Jagari workers also says the state needs to respect the dead: “People need to know how the workers were killed and a memorial should be built for them.”

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2 million by 2020

Nepal has set an ambitious target to increase tourist numbers, but is it realistic?

SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

When the 25 April 2015 earthquake jolted Kathmandu, the world was given the wrong impression that the whole of Nepal was utterly devastated. Visuals of ruins in the international media did not show that most of Kathmandu was intact, or mention that the earthquake had affected only 12 of Nepal’s 75 districts.

The number of tourists in 2015 plummeted to a six-year low, and just as the country began to recover, the Indian blockade and resulting fuel crisis crippled transportation. However, annual visitor numbers last year rebounded to pre-earthquake totals, and if bookings are any indication, the number of tourists in Nepal is expected to break the 2012 record of 800,000 tourists this year.

“2016 was a year of survival for us and we pulled through,” says Deepak Rai Joshi of the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), “we need to spread the messages that Nepal is safe and the heritage sites have remained intact.”

Immediately after the quake, the NTB notified tour operators that only three trekking routes (Langtang, Manaslu and Rolwaling) out of 35 main hiking trails in Nepal were affected by the earthquake. A few out of eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites and monuments were damaged, and only three out of 18 national parks and conservation areas were affected.

Joshi says the impact of the Indian blockade on the tourism economy was much more severe. Not only was air and road transport disrupted, but negative publicity affected the arrival of tourists from India—the largest source country for visitors to Nepal.

Encouraged by the current upturn, NTB has set a target of 2 million arrivals by 2020. By then two more international airports (Lumbini and Pokhara) should be operational. Nepal Airlines is adding Airbus 320-200 widebodies, Himalayan Airlines has expanded, and the delayed upgrading of Kathmandu Airport should be completed. NTB also hopes to target newer markets such as Russia and the Gulf, as well as pilgrimage traffic from Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam.

In addition, 4,000 new hotel rooms in the four and five star category are being added in Kathmandu, Chitwan and Pokhara. At least 30 new hotels are coming up, including five international chains like Hilton, DoubleTree, Sheraton and Marriott.

Hotel entrepreneur Karna Shrestha has a different take on tourism, and says Nepal has a strong brand, and was always a sought-after destination. In fact, he says the earthquake actually boosted tourism because many people hoped to help the country’s economy by visiting.

“We haven’t lost anything after the quake because people came to see the damage, and the disaster opened new doors for tourism instead,” says the indefatigable Shrestha, who recently opened two new hotels: Maya Manor Boutique Hotel in Kathmandu and Himalayan Front Hotel in Pokhara.

Despite immense tourism potential, Nepal has not been able to attract a higher number of tourists due to various factors including poor air connectivity. China is the second largest tourist source country to Nepal, but arrivals from there that dropped after the earthquake haven’t really picked up. There used to be at least 50 flights a week from Chinese cities before 2015, but the number has dropped by half.

The real bottleneck is Kathmandu Airport, which is congested and poorly managed, and has earned the distinction of being consistently ranked among the worst airports in the world. There are now 28 international airlines from 14 countries serving Nepal, and the airport cannot add any more slots. Tourism within Nepal is also affected by poor domestic aviation infrastructure and safety concerns.

Despite all this, Amaran Shakya of the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) is optimistic: “The national and foreign investment proving that business sees a future for tourism in Nepal, however the challenge is to bring in more tourists to sustain existing investments and new businesses.”
Always high on the list

Nepal has soared considerably high on lists of the most popular travel destinations in the world. After the April 2015 earthquake, international travel guides and newspapers contributed to the rebound by highlighting Nepal’s nature and heritage attractions. Nepal made it to the following lists this year:

Number One in Best Valued Destination 2017
Lonely Planet
"It remains a fabulous choice for budget-conscious travellers, who can access the best of its world-famous trekking routes and untamed wildlife for well south of US$100 a day."

Fifth among the Top 10 Countries To Visit in 2017
Lonely Planet
"By visiting Nepal now and supporting local culture and people, you could help a nation rebuild and bounce back even stronger."

52 Places To Go in 2017
New York Times
"The newly opened portion of Langtang National Park called the Tamang Heritage Trail offers an opportunity to meet the Tamang people, originally Tibetan horse traders."

Number One
Rough Guides UK
"With varied landscapes – from the Himalayas to jungles inhabited by tigers, elephants and rhinos – Nepal should be your first choice for travel in 2016."

Ranked Sixth in Cool List 2016
National Geographic Traveller Magazine
"Tourist numbers to Nepal plummeted by 85 per cent after the devastating earthquakes, but the country is once more open for business and safe to visit."

14 Coolest Places to Visit in 2016
Forbes
"Visiting Nepal is one of the best ways to help with post-earthquake recovery. Tourism is a main income generator, and the Adventure Travel Trade Association (which also urges people to go now) warns that the longer it lags, the more damage will be done to the social fabric of the country."

Go List 2016
Podor
"If you’d like to help out with earthquake relief, consider booking a voluntourism trip that combines adventure with community service."

Imitating nature

Nepal’s most modern printing facility, Jagadamba Press, now makes natural colours come alive with its state-of-the-art equipment.