Kovav Patel (pictured, a 50-year-old rickshaw puller in Birganj), was watching for passengers one late evening this week underneath the border city’s iconic clock tower. It was a moonless night, and he looked somewhat sad.

 Asked how he will cast his vote in local elections, he face lit up. “Yes,” he said enthusiastically. “I had to vote for the government for my son’s education. He wouldn’t have dared if we had an elected mayor.”

 The Madhes-based parties which united last week and on Wednesday registered at the Election Commission seem to have heard people like Patel. Many in the Tarai want an end to the politics of agitation and local elections. However, there are no visible signs of impending polls.

 Campaigning is in full swing in the hills for the 14 May elections, but here there is still time till the second phase of voting on 14 June, and the fever hasn’t caught on. Also, there is still uncertainty about whether it will actually happen.

 Despite an unwritten deal with the ruling Mani-NC coalition, the Madhes Front has not formally called off its agitation, and in fact has threatened to protest if the constitution amendments do not go through.

 As we went to press Thursday, Prime Minister Dalal met coalition partners and then Madhesi leaders to push for polls. In a phone conversation, Indian Prime Minister Modi is said to have assured Dalal about New Delhi’s help to conduct elections. That may have been reassuring, but Dalal’s job is cut out trying to get the UML and the Madhesi on the same page.

 Here in the Tarai, Madhesi parties are still obstructing campaign rallies of the NC and UML, Arbind Singh, UML’s candidate for Deputy Mayor in Birganj, says: “Madhesi parties intend to drive us out of the Tarai. But their strategy will not work.” Last week, an NC rally was disrupted here. Lokesh Singh of the NC says: “Madhesi parties are preparing for elections internally, but they are also trying to sideline us.”

 Premdih Shekhar, the new unified Madhesi force, says amendments must come first: “Boomer the amendment, sooner the elections.”

 Sanjeev Sharma (Birganj)
Not Yet There

The proposed Raftiya Janata Party (RJP) and the Federal Alliance (FA) made a deal with the government last week over tabling an amendment in Parliament to pave the way for their participation in a two-phase local election in May-June. The alliance then suspended its protest campaign, did not waste time in registering with the Election Commission and applying for an election symbol. They are now on candidate selection spree for village and municipal councils. All this is positive, but we are not out of the woods yet. In Nepal we know it all over until it’s over. These are make-or-break times. After 10 years of war and 11 years of peace we are finally headed towards the first elections under the new inclusive Constitution. The quotas for women, Dalits and minorities in local councils mean that for the first time in Nepal history, the under-represented will be represented (see page 12).

Finally, this paves the way for the country to break free from the legacy of violence unleashed by the Maoists. When it looked that the conflict was going to be a stalemate, the comrades turned the class war into one for identity, ethnicity and region. Nepal was embroiled in this since 2006. Even if the abolition of the monarchy was indispensable in the new Constitution, one could argue whether a push for ethnicity or territory-based federalism and secessionism were necessary for that. The framers of the Constitution never bothered to understand that secessionism was secularly as well as godlessness by a majority of Nepalis. We could have saved ourselves a lot of heartache if we only translated it as "freedom of religion".

That is all the past. But it may be important to learn from these mistakes now that we have a breakthrough of sorts. Saturday’s agreement still has kinks. The UML, presaging the government on Wednesday to withdraw the amendment bill because of a provision on adding village councils in the Tarai to reflect the population, provisions on the election college and rules for naming provincial assemblies. The RJP and the FA reacted by threatening to resign their agitation. They now have misgivings about whether the government is willing, or capable, of tabling the promised "fast-track" motion for amendments. There is nothing in writing yet. Even so, there is no backing down despite the new deadlock. From here on, any future political disagreement should not be a zero-sum game to be thrashed out on the streets, but enlisted in Parliament through civilised politics.

The bill is in the government’s court. As the ruling coalition has the responsibility to address grievances through compromise — that would be a win-win-win for all parties. Prime Minister Oli must get a much-needed feature in his cap, the opposition would no longer be seen as a spoilsport, and the Madhes-based parties would rise above territorial and ethnic identity to be a national alliance.

Guest Editorial

Manish Jha

Madhesi elections

Madhesi MPs recently wrote to an online social media: “If you are a Madhesi or a Nepali, don’t confuse: understand what he was trying to get and resist. If you just regard me as Nepali you will not understand.”

Secessionism is the first casualty of conflict. Especially when the conflict is communal, sectarian or ethnic, it is polarised society, prompting people to see themselves as right and everyone else as wrong, but is ignores how frequently it is needed most. However, it takes courage to be a moderate when everybody is yelling. But you can be labelled a traitor, widow/mate or worse.

Recently spent a few days in the Tarai districts of Makawanpur, Chitwan and Kanchanpur. Living under the need in the plains about social ailments. I was asked to a torture why the Madhesi movements cannot be non-violent, like the People’s Movement of 2006 or Ghandi’s pursuits.

For one thing, there was a fight in 1929, long before independence. Today there is confusion about the demands and goal of the Madhes movement: Upendra Yadav and Ramakrishna Raut are not that different. I ran into one of my classmates who has a step in junction, and asked about his election. ‘We want to see a genuine election, we want to vote, it is possible and necessary,” he replied. Leaders in Kathmandu do not represent the aspirations of the plains people, he added.

In Ms. Jha, I heard the talk to the for every 5 people who are angry elections, there are 20 angry conditions for the municipal council. A young man in Jajarkot summed up it when asked what he wanted. “We want to be left alone and the work.”

It is to be sure, there are who want that the Madhesi people demand to amend the Constitution because elections must prevail, but across the plains there is a sense of alienation in the coming elections.

In the 2013 elections Madhesi leaders were punished for pursuing the politics of identity and rights, and seem now to have been cut off from the wall. They have decided to unite, shied the words "Madhesi" and "Tarai" from their names, opt for a more broad-based national charter, and agree to take part in local elections.

Manish Jha is the former editor of the English daily KathmanduPost.
DISCOVER THE USA WITH TURKISH AIRLINES
Survival strategy for a new era
Revisiting Leo E Rose’s book to analyse the need for a new kind of inclusive nation-building

The Constitution promulgated by the elected constituent assembly in 2015 with an overwhelming majority of more than 90 per cent after a decade of troubled politics was boycotted by the Madhes Andolan, protests against the Constitution and the blockade thereafter. Despite last week’s developments, a solution seems far from in sight. A Labour Party MP in the British Parliament recently filed a proposal urging the Nepali Government to be responsive to the demands of the Madhesi people, citing the Jharkhand protest in which five civilians were killed in a clash with police during a UML rally in March.

‘Humanitarian concern’ provides the legal basis for such international pressure tactics, which are often used as tools in the political games. Nepal has seen this throughout recent history, with the Indian blockade of 2015 just the most recent example. The British proposal, however, only helped reinforce the widespread notion among the hardliners that identity politics is a foreign tool to keep Nepal instable.

The story of Nepal is the story of an extraordinary survival. The book ‘Strategy for Survival’ (Leo E. Rose, 1973) relates how Nepal has been ‘beset by a seemingly irresistible array of “interested” outside parties, eager to assist, advise and manipulate’. Attempts to restrict ‘Nepal’s capacity for independent action’ are not new for Nepal, but ‘its rulers have themselves deployed a deft hand in defining end, at times, even circumventing those restrictions’. Rose says the reason Nepal was successful in surviving was because of its external policies and internal inclinations. There has been a broad consensus on the broader objectives and tactics suggesting that Nepal has mastered the survival skills of a buffer state. This is made possible by internal cohesion brought by a ‘cultural dynamic that seems to permeate all the articulate political, social, ethnic and regional entities in the state’.

Leaders like BP Koirala had struggled against the British in India and brought a fresh breath of democratic air into the political arena. BP himself was jailed for four years by the British. Educated in India, and of a Tamil family, he mostly spoke Hindi.

The lines between India and Nepal, culturally and politically, were blurred in many ways for these politicians, and that was exploited first by the Ranas and later by the king to question their loyalty.

Rose’s book was written in the 1960s, when King Mahendra had already sabotaged the democratic experiment and started re-engineering the idea of Nepal.

This re-imagination, which is now referred to as Mahendhrabadi Karyakranti, an almost derogatory tone, was based on common language, religion and dress. Although it was a continuation of the natural predisposition of the Nepali state since the time of integration, it evolved building on the need to be seen as different from the Indians.

Indirectly, Rose also has an explanation for this as he writes: ‘For the Nepalis, independent, democratic India was constituted as a far greater challenge, both politically and psychologically, than had the alien autocratic British Indian Polity. Nepal was thus forced to “continuously assert, and indeed exaggerate, their differences with Indians in order to justify in their own minds their country’s national existence”.

This geopolitical reality got Mahendra support from most of the Nepali public, including those who opposed his domestic policies and political system. BP Koirala’s disillusionment with India, differences with Nehru and later with Indira Gandhi, made him sceptical of India and accommodative towards the king. This naturally permitted down in Nepal Congress cadres. Events in Sikkim then further deepened the survival instinct and reinforced the idea that the only way Nepal could continue to exist was by being different from India.

Historically, Madhesi have been culturally excluded from the ‘psychological framework’ of ‘Nepalism’. There is therefore a historic necessity to initiate a process of inclusive ‘nation-building’. The definition of ‘nation’ in the Constitution of Nepal has already created an inclusive framework. Supportive measures in the form of reservations for marginalised groups and a unique model of federalization, whereby local-level deliberative democracy has the potential to revolutionize the relationship of communities with the state, have been put in place.

In this historic build-up, group relationships within the Nepali polity have changed dramatically after the removal of the monarchy. Now, politics is purely based on power equations. The assertiveness of different groups and the force behind them defines not only the character of the group but also its “soft power”.

In this scenario, the tools used for short-term gain may have long-term negative impact. The Madhesi Morcha’s efforts to strangle Kamalnath, into submission with India’s help through the blockade have turned moderate sympathisers into hardliners. The Madhes is not, and cannot be Nepal’s Kashmir. Any such tactic, which revives the deep-rooted notion of threat among the majority, will take the political course towards more confrontation. This will put pressure on both sides stronger and a solution unachievable.
Warwick Deacock, 90
Who lived life to the full and left a footprint in Nepal

Major Warwick Deacock’s direct bearing and bronzed craggy features evoke a British military background, his crooked nose that of a former sportsman. Following in his father's footsteps, he joined the Grenadier Guards, serving in 1958-1959 in Borneo and Brunei. He later moved to Nepal, where he has lived for over 50 years.

“So far so good” is a phrase that describes Lisa Choegyal, the young Nepali woman who has been selected to represent Nepal at the historic Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea. Despite the challenges she faces, she remains determined to achieve her dream of competing in the Games.

The Times
28 April - 4 May 2017

BIZ BRIEFS

So Far So Good
Lisa Choegyal

“Warwick Deacock, 90
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The Times
28 April - 4 May 2017
For his village was devastated by the earthquake two years ago. killing 15 of his neighbours, Bir Bahadur Tamang needed an engineer who could tell him about seismic-resistant designs. But like many other families in earthquake-affected districts, Tamang, the former chair of Satyadevi village of Blading district, had never met an engineer. Still, he got all the information he needed on building safer homes using salvaged material from Milijuli Nepali. a radio program syndicated through local FM radio stations.

Tamang had never met a journalist in his life either, but knew the names of most of the reporters on Milijuli by heart. Which is why earlier this month he was very happy to finally meet not just a journalist, but one whose voice he had often heard on his radio set.

“Not one ever came here; no engineer, no journalist. The only information we had was from the radio,” Tamang said. Soon, the earthquake survivor was himself being interviewed for the next episode of Milijuli, and his voice broadcast across Nepal through nearly 400 FM stations as well as streamed around the Nepali-speaking world through the internet.

For Milijuli broadcasters, Ravi Shankar (photographed, right) there was no former proof that her program has helped convert awareness about post-earthquake reconstruction into behaviour change — something that was previously just a theory she heard about in media school.

Radio programs like Milijuli have been filling the gap left by the lack of elected village leaders and making up for the absence of accountability in post-earthquake relief by spreading information about how to build safer, stronger homes, and by bringing the concerns of survivors to the attention of Kathmandu.

Sharada Bhusan of Kavre worked as a porter, earning Rs 300 a day. One evening she heard over Milijuli’s Katha Mala program that because of the shortage of brick-layers needed for reconstruction, women were being trained as masons.

She applied for training and today earns Rs 1,200 a day helping rebuild most of the 78 houses in her village that went down. With the money she has saved, she is planning to buy a scooter so she can commute to neighbouring villages to work on reconstruction there too.

Milijuli Nepal is produced by BBC Media Action, the BBC’s international development communication unit, which also broadcasts weekly debates called Sabha Sawal over radio and TV. Milijuli now has a listenership of over 2 million, and is relayed over 11 radio stations in the quake-affected districts.

The programs are driven by personal stories of survivors, and generally have a positive slant.

“We have found that personal stories are the most effective method of communicating,” explains Sabha, Karki of BBC Media Action. “It is information not for the survivors, but about them. We try not to preach, or talk down to them … this is what communications for development means. It is proof that radio works.”

Indeed, while other media outlets try to highlight problems, Milijuli deliberately looks for solutions. Listeners are surprised that most of the people featured are women, and how cheerful they sound despite the adversities they have faced in the past two years.

Rahwana Timilsina, program coordinator at Milijuli, says it was originally created as a radio show providing lifeline communication — broadcasting information that could actually save lives in the aftermath of the earthquake.

“Just like food, water, medicine and shelter, providing correct and timely information to the public is equally crucial during times of crisis,” explains Tiomilsina, “and there is an unanimous opinion that telling personal stories is the most effective format to spread information.”

This is something that Lal Maya Shrestha of Sindibas knows only too well. She says: “I feel guilty if I miss a single episode of Milijuli, and sometimes I listen to the same program over and over.”

nepalitimes.com

Social Media Action

Imitating nature

Nepal’s most modern printing facility, Jaqadamba Press, now makes natural colours come alive with its state-of-the-art equipment.
“New homes have to be safer”

In 2014, Ambassador Walton Alfonso Webson became permanent representative of the Caribbean island nation of Antigua and Barbuda to the United Nations. Earlier this month, as president of the executive board of UNICEF, he led a 28-member delegation of board members of six UN agencies to Nepal.

Travel is a central feature of the diplomat’s life. Prior to arriving in Kathmandu he visited South Africa and Lesotho, and once on the ground in Nepal he and his colleagues split into four groups, in nine days visiting nine districts. The fact-finding mission discussed priorities with women, children and youth, and local authorities.

Recovery and rebuilding from the 2015 earthquakes was a central theme, as Webson pointed out in a video chat with Nepali Times.

Excerpts:

Nepali Times: Overall, how would you assess recovery from the earthquake and the UN’s role in it?

Walton Alfonso Webson: I am sure there are still lots of complaints on the ground, because our human nature is we want to see things happening, and once things begin to happen you want to see them happen faster… We certainly heard great need for reconstruction so that people in the areas that were hit hardest can get access to water faster and more reliably.

We certainly know that there is need in terms of housing but we also saw the efforts that were being made to rebuild. There are two forms of reconstruction that one always has to take into consideration in a disaster: one is social reconstruction – people who are looking at rebuilding their lives… This social reconstruction is very important and United Nations programs are focusing a lot on that.

Then of course you have the physical reconstruction: buildings, bridges, homes, etc. There’s a lot of emphasis and efforts being put into the rebuilding of homes.

What role can the UN play in trying to accelerate the rebuilding?

We had very good meetings with representatives of the government: the prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, and with the National Reconstruction Authority. We did speak about the need for hastening and they emphasised, the NRA in particular, the need to rebuild homes… UN teams will continue to work with different groups and development partners because this is a process that is not done solely by any one body.

We believe that there will be a response but, again, this is a government-led initiative and the UN is supporting the government and will continue to urge the government to move things along as quickly as possible. But you also want to ensure that the new buildings, the new homes, are built within codes so that if a future earthquake comes – as is predicted there will be better stability and less loss of lives.

How will rumoured funding cuts from the Trump administration to agencies like UNFPA affect Nepal in particular?

Ground Reality: Ambassador Walton Alfonso Webson (second from left) gets a musical welcome at Bhumej Primary School in Surkhu village, Lalitpur.

The UN has a really good relationship with the United States government, which is a major partner of the UN. As you said, it’s rumours. There have been discussions about UNFPA, but nothing is yet approved. It should not affect Nepal’s work in any way at this stage… So I wouldn’t be worried. We are in the programs, at this moment, are not worried.

Marty Logan

Sensodyne

Do these cause sensitivity in your teeth?

“I recommend Sensodyne.”
- Dr. Satbir Golar, dentist practising in the UK.

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"New homes have to be safer"

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GROUND REALITY: Ambassador Walton Alfonso Webson (second from right) gets a musical welcome at Bhumej Primary School in Surkada village, Bajhang.

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*Sensodyne claims that 8 out of 10 users noted less sensitivity after using Sensodyne for 14 days.*

**For more information, visit Sensodyne.com**

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The contrast between the lethargic NRA and its can-do CEO couldn’t be more stark

OM ASTHA RAI
in DHULIKHAL

On Tuesday, as Kathmandu got ready to mark the second anniversary of the 25 April earthquake, the man leading the reconstruction campaign was on a long and bumpy 7-hour jeep ride to a village in Dolakha.

Just as the clock showed 11:56 AM Govind Rai Pokharel of the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) was meeting Dil Bahadur Siwakoti, 55, who was busy building his house.

Glancing at his wrist-watch, Pokharel asked: “This is exactly the moment when your house collapsed two years ago – what did you learn from that disaster?”

Siwakoti scratched his head, looked at his home. “That we must build strong houses so we will be safe in the next earthquake,” he replied.

Pakharel, dressed in a suit and blue tie, hadn’t disclosed his true identity, and looked like someone important. His eyes lit up as he threw another question: “People in radio, television and newspapers blame the government for not building houses, is that true?”

“It is our responsibility to rebuild our own houses, not the government’s. The government has given us Rs 300,000 and some guidelines, then it is up to us,” he said.

This was obviously what Pokharel wanted to hear. The government and the NRA that he helped set up in 2015 have been strongly criticized for not doing enough to help rebuild the 600,000 homes that were destroyed in the earthquakes. And here was a chance encounter with a villager who was not waiting for government, but rebuilding himself.

Back in Kathmandu, the international coverage of the anniversary was negative and on social media the NRA was facing blistering criticism, even ridicule. Amnesty International and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) slammed the NRA for “violating the human rights of survivors.” Whatever Pokharel said was going to sound defensive, so he had driven out to the mountains, disregarding numerous invitations to anniversary functions, to see things for himself.

Pakharel and his team spent 19 hours in the field on Tuesday, stepping along the road to meet villagers, talk to engineers, inspect newly-built houses and handing over second-installment cheques. Last week he had gone to Sindupalchok with the Midjidi Nepal radio team (see page 6) to spend a night in a tent with survivors to get a first-hand account of the obstacles to reconstruction.

Those who know Pokharel say that the German-trained engineer is a workaholic. He has not taken a day off since he was re-appointed as the NRA chief in January, reaching his office inside Singh Darbar at 7 am, eating a home-cooked lunch and often taking work back to his home late in the evenings.

As a boy in Pyuthan, Pokharel decided to become an engineer after watching his mother get lung infections from cooking in a smoky kitchen wood stove. He studied hard, got a scholarship to do engineering first in India and then in Germany.

After returning to Nepal, Pokharel first worked in a UNDP project in Myagdi and then headed the Alternatives Energy Promotion Centre (AEPIC) where colleagues credit him for pushing the goal of smoke-free stoves for all by 2017. Although that goal has not been met, fuel-efficient smokeless cookstoves are now commonplace in rural Nepal.

When the earthquake struck two years ago, Pokharel was Vice-
REBUILDING OURSELVES

On the way back to Kathmandu, as the Jhul lurched along the Jilu Highway, Pokharel received a call. The President of the National Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA) wanted to discuss his proposal to mobilise outbound migrant workers in reconstruction.

Pokharel sounded excited, and explained his idea. “There is a huge shortage of masoos that is also hampering reconstruction, we want to encourage migrant workers who are willing to fly out to earn some money and get trained, with the hope that some of them may decide to stay back.” Pokharel is finally back in Kathmandu at midnight, and by 9:45 am at the Radisson Hotel to attend a seminar on safe housing by the Japanese group, JICA.

It has been a long road for Govind Pokharel from his mother’s kitchen in Pyuthan to Dolakha, with many twists and turns along the way.

But he says: “The thing is to focus on your goals. No point complaining. Delays and interference are a given in Nepal, the question is what are you doing despite all that.”
Short story contest
Submit your story in English. Apply for Writing Nepal 2017: A Short Story Contest, organized by Jagran, in partnership with writer Kamal Singh and indie publisher, Red Avenue. Deadline: 15 August. For more information, facebook.com/writingnepal

GETAWAY

Kasara Resort
A luxurious retreat located in the lush setting of Chitwan National Park for those who value their privacy and prefer a more secluded stay. Kasara offers two private villas with private gardens. Chitwan (0144695771; 9844803720; kasarakrisnt.com

Shivapuri Heights Cottage
Treat yourself to a 50 minutes ayurvedic massage at Neeraj’s Spa, followed by a healthy lunch at the Cottage. Shivapuri Hills, Bahundanda, Kathmandu. Rs. 2500 per person, advance booking essential. Transport available on request or extra cost.

Buddha Maya Gardens
Add spice to your Travel in Kathmandu with a stay in probably the best hotel in the area. Lumbini. 71276922; 9815167307; info@buffamaya.com

Famous Farm
Wake up to the sounds of chirping birds and a fresh morning breeze waiting in through the camellia hedges. Khelo, 014465424; kheloworthence.com

Milla Guesthouse
If you enjoy the quiet, and admire a mix of old and new, this is the perfect place to stay. Not too far from the city, yet miles away. Bhotepas, 9815041437

Park Village Resort
Yoga, detox and Ayurveda treatment in a quiet corner of Kathmandu. Himalayan Peace and Wellness Centre, Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha, 014737236; people@hpek.com.np

Tiger Mountain Lodge
Situated 300m above Pokhara valley, this resort offers spectacular views of Machhapuchhre, Shivapuri, Annapurna and Manaslu. www.tigermountainlodges.com, 014462667; 9845958914

EVENTS

Mi Ku live
Top the beat of folk contemporary ensemble, Mi Ku. Enjoy their live performance as they face poetry with music.
28 August, 6 to 11 pm, Cafe Amala, Koshap Gali, (01) 5338086

1905,
Heritage boutique suites with garden dining. 1905 Suites and Restaurants is now open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Bookings open for four boutique suites with promotional rates and offers open 16 June.
Raghupati, Kathmandu. For more information, 9880374450

Hyatt Regency,
Enjoy different afternoon teas from May throughout July. Choose from a classic English experience and a signature Indochinese experience, complemented by afternoon tea or masala tea.
1 May to 31 July, 3.30 to 6 pm, Hyatt Regency Lobby Lounge, Kathmandu. (01) 5171234.
As 950 plus taxes

Kanta dAb dAb live,
Spend a musical evening with this celebrated percussionist and bass Trio. Enjoy as they entice you to groove with their fusion band.
26 August, 7.30 to 10.30 pm, Places Restaurant & Bar, South Campus: CGM, (01) 4249412

Jazz day,
Join artists from Germany, Spain, Italy and Brazil as well as local musicians to celebrate International Jazz Day. Attend also for live art, film screening and workshops.
30 April, 12 to 6 pm, Nagbhakta. For more information, www.kefajazz.com.np/3j2017

Meze by Roofcage,
Stop a specialist at one of Kathmandu’s most popular restaurants.
Mericravia Plaza, Darbar Marg 01 4223087

Gokarna Resort,
Choose from the wide variety of Lebanese shawarma, hyderabadi biryani, Tihar mans and many more. Every Saturday, Gokarna Forest Resort, Ramshy, 7.10 to 11 am, For more details: (01) 446132

Kathmandu Chorale,
Near Hanuman Dhoka direct a choir perform classics and pieces from the musical Sister Act. The choir will be performed by notable composers like Eric Whitacre, Hild Cluizel, and Thomas Tao.
4 May, 7.15 pm, JOI, Kathmandu. For more information: www.thekathmanduchorale.wordpress.com

Music while dining,
Dine out on a traditional Newari and Mahrastrian cuisine by chef Tirtha Jospor.
28 August, 7pm onwards, Prithvi Garden Restaurant, 223/19/15, Rs. 850

MUSIC

MISS MOTIVATION

KIRPA JOSHI

Either you decide to stay in the shallow end of the pool or you go out in the ocean.
Chinnu Tegala

Dieting tips:

Birds counting
Make a day out of bird watching and join part of the Urban Rural Bird Count Phase II, organized by Bird Conservation Nepal. Registration required.
1 to 5 May. For more information: (01) 4417805, 4402013

Monthly mela
BAC Mills, local products, food stalls, and a street-side garage sale; plus entertainment for the whole family at BAC’s monthly mela.
29 April, 1 to 6 pm, BAC Art Café, Pulchowk, 9815167714

Click away,
Have your photography skills with a 10 day workshop for beginners. Learn from professional artists and photographers.
6 to 15 May, 7 to 10 am, Orana, Omnapur Hospital Road, Rs 5,000, 9815172177/9815172178

Stand Up night,
Laugh out loud with stand-up comedians Shweta Basnet and Tyler McDonald.
28 August, 6 to 7.30 pm, Koi Mi Coffee, Hostelworld, 9863772572, Tickets: Rs. 1000
BEING FULFILLED

The entire sundek of the Garden restaurant at Soitesse Crowne Plaza has been transformed into a dhaba, the popular roadside eateries that dot the highways in India, for the annual Punjabi-flavoured Dhaba festival.

Visitors are greeted with the stage set straight out of Chandigarh: a mock garage with a cardboard truck that reads ‘Happy Singh Da Dhaba’, a paneer stall, posters of Bollywood Sidney, cooking smoke spiralling up and out of the stalls and tent names that remind you of Jallandhar. Punjabi music plays in the background.

The festival caters to all tastes: meat lovers, vegetarians and those among both groups with a sweet tooth. We scanned the stalls and decided to go for drinks first. Arranged in a pyramid format, on either were lassi, chaas (butter milk) and lichee juice.

The lassi and chaas were rich and frothy: the first a thick blend of curd and the other with a sharp taste, and both whet our appetites for the snacks. (Fresh seasonal juices are also available.)

Next: the food. We started with two varieties of Aloo Tikka, Bitter Gourd Tikka and Paneer Tikka. The crunchy Aloo Tikka, dipped in a green paste made from mint, green chili, raw mango and other spices, compensated for the bitterness of the sourd.

Having done the round of the veggies, we moved on to the carnivore carnival: Malai Lahori (16), Mutton Sheekh Kebab and Chicken Tikka. The meticulously prepared chicken (first soaked in spices then in curd) cooked in the tandoor was a delight. The first bite of the piping hot chicken was juicy and the spices seeped out.

The vegetarian spread had well-known Punjabi items like Chole Bhatura, Dahi Makhanai, Sarso da Saag, Paneer Lahubdar, Matka Aloo, and more. An ample variety of rotis, parathas and kulcha provided an alternative to rice. The savoury gravy paneer dish, flavoured with hints of cashews and spices, paired well with the deepfried bread (Chhole). The bhature’s taste, however, was overpowered by the black pepper.

A sumptuous range of dishes greeted meat lovers as well. Jeet Murg Kali Mirch (matbat), or Cheese Achari Korma (chicken) the variety of flavours and textures triggered the Pleasure Effect in us. Dipped in gravy, the subtle flavours of the Murg Kali Mirch (matbat) blended well with the no-nonsense biryani and accompanying raitas. The chicken was equally succulent, with the fish finishing a distant third. We are a long way from the sea here.

As they say in Punjab, by end of it we were "fulfilled" (or even, perhaps "jod up"). But there was still the dessert to sample. After a hearty meal of spicy snacks and mains, we were delighted to taste hot Jalebis and Rasamali, rounded off with a cup of chai.

As the guests shuffled and wobbled out, it seemed somehow appropriate that we were all humming snippets of Dalen Mehndi: that was the staple background music of the Soitesse Dhaba Night.

Smita Basnet
Years ago, as a senior in a (very) liberal arts college in the US, I found myself watching a days-long rerun of “The West Wing” (1999-2006) during Thanksgiving break. At the time, that peerless show was in its fifth season. All caught up at the end of the TV marathon, I realised I had learnt more about American politics and policy-making from this one show than I might have taking a few related classes. If you find this hard to believe, take some time to watch the show that really put Aaron Sorkin on the map: as the creator and writer of “The West Wing” the man revolutionised the way important political issues were portrayed onscreen.

Years later, a few attempts have been made to ape the success of this brilliant, idealistic, heart-warming show, and “Madam Secretary” (2014-present), now in its third season, though still a far cry from the luminance of The West Wing, comes closest to imitating the glowing ethos that made “The West Wing” such a heavy hitting, beloved drama.

Starring the superb Téa Leoni as the titular Secretary of State, the series is a well-written and odd new hybrid of politico-family drama, if one can say such a thing. Bess, or Elizabeth McCord (Leoni), is a former CIA analyst who used to work with the President, Conrad Dalton (Keith Carradine), when he headed the CIA. The mysterious death of Dalton’s former Secretary of State propels Bess into her current position.

Bess is a liberal pragmatist, often aided by her academic husband, Dr. Henry McCord (Tim Daly), a world-renowned bible scholar who also moonlights for the intelligence community on occasion. The duo, steered by their moral compass, make an exceptional team – professionally as well as personally – exemplifying one of the most likeable and convincing couples I’ve seen on television. Without being moralistic, “Madam Secretary” shows us what courage looks like in the face of impossible circumstances. It also highlights the power of communication, and how a well-worded, heartfelt apology or statement can defuse the most hideous of situations, domestically or professionally. As in “The West Wing”, the writing wields humour as a tool; Elizabeth McCord is both sharp and funny, her wit and self-deprecation help her through her job, her marriage, and the raising of her three teenage children, the oldest of whom Stephanie or “Stevie” (Wallis Currie-Wood) is a college dropout – to the horror of her scholarly parents.

There are hundreds of shows out there now, available to those fortunate enough to have access and a bit of time to kill. We all get caught up in TV binges, and while my moments with “The West Wing” were defining and nothing has come close to it since (well, maybe “Twin Peaks”), you could do much, much worse than the satisfying mellowness that defines “Madam Secretary”.

**MUST SEE**

Sophia Pande

**HERITAGE SIGHT:** Prativa Pande and Rohit Ranjikar of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust with US ambassador Alaina Teplitz at launch on Wednesday of a five-year campaign to restore Patan Darbar Square.

**SAFETY FIRST:** Japanese Ambassador Masashi Ogawa (right) with Krishna Bahadur Raut of the Home Ministry and Govind Pokharel of the National Reconstruction Authority at a disaster risk reduction seminar on Wednesday to mark the second anniversary of the earthquake.

**STRONG WOMEN:** Temporary police personnel recruited for the upcoming local elections receive training at the Jawalakhel football ground on Monday.

**REST IN PEACE:** Students gather to attend a candlelit vigil on Tuesday at Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu to mark the second anniversary of the devastating 2015 earthquake.

**MUMMY DEAREST:** A devotee pays homage to the deities at the Matatirtha Temple, Kathmandu during Matatirtha Aunsi on Wednesday.
Women, Dalits in local polls

Himlal Khabapatrika, 23-24 April

Kamala BK is a candidate for the Gurukot village council election in Surkhet. She has been a social activist, and says she is excited about joining local government after years of working with a non-government group.

Sita Devi BK is also standing as a ward council member, from Barahatal village. She also worked for a pro-government group and predicts that little will change if she enters government. "I will be doing what I have been doing, struggling for gender rights, by standing in elections."

Across Nepal, there are many women — most from minority groups like Dalits — who are going to have a chance at governing because of quotas for women candidates in local government units.

Nepal’s first election under the new Constitution mandates that municipality and village councils must have a woman in at least the post of chair or vice-chair. The councils themselves should have at least two women members, of which at least one must be from the Dalit community. In Surkhet alone, the five municipalities and 99 wards will have at least 207 women; 99 will have to be Dalit.

In the Tarai, too, there was already considerable enthusiasm for local elections even before the Madhes-based parties decided to unite and take part in the second phase of polling. The interest is especially palpable among Dalits and women.

Kala Devi Sab of Kathari village is from the NC and Devkala Yadav of Sunbheri is standing for ward chair from the UML. She says: “We are really excited. There is now a certainty that we will be represented in local government.”

Dalit women candidates from Morang (from top to bottom) Anita Tharu at the NC, Sangita Darji at the RPP, Kalyani Nepal of the Maoist Centre

ward council member of Kamal village of Jhapa district, from the RPP, and has already started campaigning. Darji had actually decided to go to the Gulf to work as a domestic helper, but abandoned the process after hearing that it would be possible to stand in local elections. Kalyani Nepal is also a Dalit from the same village. A member of the Maoist-Centre party came to her house to convince her to stand in the council election. She is not a member of the party and makes ends meet with a small tailoring shop, and motory her husband sends home from the Gulf.

Anita Tharu was also approached in her own house by a member of the NC who convinced her to run in elections. The quota for women and Dalits in local elections has put a lot of pressure on political parties to find candidates, but the fact that women outnumber men in rural areas has made that job a little easier. However, many of the candidates recruited are not members of any party.

Even though caste discrimination has been outlawed for more than 55 years, Dalits are still ostracized. But the local elections, with their quotas for Dalits and women, are expected to go a long way in removing the stigma.

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Dalit women candidates from Morang (from top to bottom) Anita Tharu of the NC, Sangita Darji of the RPP, Kalyani Nepal of the Maoist Centre
HIGH SCHOOLS

Education is the most neglected service in two of Nepal’s most neglected districts

PAWAN DHAKAL
in DOLPO

More than other groups in Nepal’s diverse ethnic fabric, the mountain communities of Upper Mustang and Dolpo are left out of the country’s social and political mainstream. These high and arid regions in the Himalayan rain shadow have been isolated from the rest of Nepal not just due to their remoteness, but because of lack of investment in health and education by faraway Kathmandu, poor infrastructure, and restricted and expensive tourism.

One of the most neglected among the neglected sectors is education. Schools here are run mostly by non-government groups, with minimal state involvement. Students do not get textbooks even by the end of the academic year, and those books first have to be bought by private groups and then carried by mules to remote villages.

Apart from the romanticisation of their ‘exotic’ and ‘authentic’ Tibetan lifestyle and the potential for trans-Himalayan tourism, communities here are rarely represented in the Nepali national psyche. There is a high rate of out-migration to the cities and abroad, and villagers have to rely mainly on private support for education, unlike other areas of Nepal.

Since Upper Mustang and Dolpo have low population densities, the settlements are sparse and students have to travel long distances to reach school. Although the districts fall within Nepal’s boundaries topographically, they belong to the Tibetan plateau, with a harsh yet stunning landscape at an average altitude of 3,600m.

The pan-Nepal problem of an overly standardised, often decontextualised and culturally mis-representative 10-year-old national curriculum is stark here than elsewhere. Poor school facilities and gaps in human resources exacerbate the problem.

In Mustang and Dolpo, children four and older are lined up at school assembly every morning, where they do ‘hands-up’, ‘hands-down’, and ‘stand-at-ease’ in front of the principal without really understanding what they mean. The students are then made to sing the national anthem in a language they cannot yet speak.

The need to control the students is evident in classrooms where children are lined up on uncomfortable benches to copy sentences from books in English, their third language. Most teachers are on contract, and unable to hold conversations in a language they are supposed to be teaching. Most cannot speak in the mother tongue of the students. Government teachers are largely unfamiliar with the curriculum, which was put together with European funding. They are unaware of learning objectives for each grade, and teach the way they were taught: reading from textbooks and privileging rote-learning and social conformity. They are unaware or incapable of using the curriculum to develop local content for regular subjects.

The district school

Jana Jyoti Community School, Ghilling, Upper Mustang

This school sits in pleasant green surroundings on the main trail from Jomsom to Lo Manthang. It goes up to Grade 6 and serves about 122 children from the town and surrounding areas. Situated at 3,600m, it is supported by Mani Aruna, a Nepali NGO started by a former resident of Ghilling to boost the future of children in the region. Apart from teaching Tibetan language and Buddhist philosophy, the school runs an apple orchard and a greenhouse to help defray costs and make it less dependent on private donations. With a hostel housing 60 students, Jana Jyoti has earned a reputation throughout Mustang for its success rate in school-leaving exams.

Two graduates are now government teachers at the school, one of whom is the head teacher. Another grad works as a nurse at the school, and also nursing the village’s health needs.

The view (above) of Annapurna I and Thorung Peak from Ghilling School in Mustang looking south.
Crystal Mountain School, Dho Tarap, Dolpo

This school runs up to Grade 7 and is operated by Vision Dolpa in collaboration with ActionAid. It was the first school in this remote and road-less district and its reputation continues to grow. With 200 students from four surrounding communities, it is situated in the scenic Annapurna Dolpa Valley.

Vision Dolpa also runs a local health post and the Snow Leopard Restaurant in Kathmandu, where students stay while attending Grades 8-12. The coordinator of Vision Dolpa and Crystal Mountain School is one of the school’s first graduates. Other graduates regularly volunteer at the school after their Grade 12 exams.

The school has good facilities, including a passive solar house that allows local teachers to conduct classes even in the harsh winters here.

SCHOoled IN NATURE: The dramatic scenery surrounding Crystal Mountain School in Dho Tarap, Dolpa (above) lets the local care for education in this remote and road-less district.

Students of Jana jaili Community School in Ghiling on a hike above their village (below, left).

system is locally irrelevant, culturally misrepresentative, actively discourages independent thinking, and barely imparts necessary life skills.

High mountain areas face specific challenges owing to their geography, climate, unique culture and customs. These districts are ‘Nepali’ when it comes to tourism promotions but are treated as ‘non-Nepali’ by the district authorities and teachers who cannot come to terms with communities that don’t fit their definitions of what being Nepali means.

Pawan Dhakal is a Dartmouth College Class of 2016 alum and a year-long Public Service Fellowship with two schools in Upper Mustang and Dolpa.
Snarling at traffic

A lot of traffic has flowed across the Bagmati since the last time we wrote about the traffic at the Bagmati Bridge. So it is time for another one of our regular Traffic Updates. It is now mandatory to carefully review these biannual reports in order to keep your driver’s license valid, and failure to read this column in its entirety and memorise the new traffic signs below will automatically result in your driving permit being declared null and void. Usage: Fingerprint. While all care has been taken to accurately reflect provisions in the Traffic Violence and Junентрailing Code Bagmati No 1927, the publisher is not responsible for any ordinary alterations in rules once they have been ratified by parliament, or adopted by actuation at the weekly meeting of the Rotary Club of Kathmandu.

The government has felt no stone unturned in embarking upon an anti-traffic campaign to ensure that vehicular movement is smooth during state visits by our president to Tokyo or the Taj Mahal president to Nepal (whichever comes first), during future SWG, IOBBEST, or Mt Everest Summits by declaring a down-to-dusk curfew. Roads user groups are alarmed that traffic rules will be strictly enforced during VIP movements when Ambulances and the free Brigade will have to give way to BenZee’s important personalities.

However, once the convoy with outsiders has passed, the city can go back to being its usual chaotic self, v/d. Buses can once more park on the middle of the road, motorists are allowed to cross the road via the overhyped bridges, trucks can spread all the smoke they like as long as they don’t blow their horns, pedestrians can walk as if they are jay, and the emboldment can make un Illegal U-turn on constitutional amendments.

New traffic signs have also been installed, and since it has been so long since we had them in Kathmandu drivers may need to brush up on what they mean. As a public service, the cool presents below new street signs so drivers, and pedestrians who haven’t yet been run over on zebra crossings, can use it as a tear sheet for easy reference during an emergency.