ROADBLOCK

In 2014-15, the Mugling-Narayangadh Highway claimed 19 lives. This year, 99 people have already been killed on this 48km section of the road.

The much-delayed road-widening has disturbed slopes weakened by the earthquake and rains. When it was finished in 1982,_heading east from Kathmandu it was a faster and more efficient transport route to the plains. It has not materialised 36 years after talking about it.

Like everything else in Nepal, the Mugling Highway is an example of poor governance and lack of accountability of those in high office. It is political failure that keeps Nepal stuck.

All three roads to Hetauda from Kathmandu need upgrading and widening. The Army is going to take three more years to finish the last track to Nigged, and the BP Highway is too narrow for buses and trucks.

Photo Feature page 8-9

ROAD SHOW

Go and see a ride down the Mugling highway and understand just how hard the journey can be on a very long road.

Water from the sun

Every small loan can make a huge difference to an impoverished farming family. A $6,000 loan from the People’s Relief Fund is a solar-powered irrigation pump to allow her to grow surplus food, improve nutrition of her children and send them to schools.

Find more page 12

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The Himalayan Thaw

Ever since the brief but fierce war between India and China in 1962, the world’s two most populous countries have observed an uneasy truce, keeping their border dispute in a deep freeze. The Himalayas is hosting up 55 years later, and the cause is not just global warming. When they met in Beijing in 1989, Deng Xiaoping and Rajiv Gandhi had an unwritten understanding to let the 3,000km Himalaya arc separate their spheres of influence. This pact has sustained numerous skirmishes along disputed borders in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh and Bhutan, the Delhi Lhasa’s presence in India, and the lingering distrust between the two nuclear nations. Until now.

There are now geo-strategic rumbles along the Sino-Indian border. China’s assertive posture in the South China Sea, and China’s Belt and Road Initiative has Beijing feeling increasingly encircled, relations with Burma and Singapore have soured somewhat, and there is volatility in the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea.

Beijing and New Delhi used to go out of their way not to irritate each other, but lately they are doing just the opposite. China has been preparing carefully for the post-Dalai Lama era, and could feel it even more keenly to keep the post-Buddhist Tibet. Modi’s India could feel the need to perform an occasional war dance for domestic purposes.

It is mystifying why the latest flashpoint had to be the disputed Doklam Plateau near the Bhutan-China-India tri-junction in the Chumbi Valley, which itself is anad India’s strategic Chicken Neck corridor. The timing of this spat soon after 10,000km away from a violent statehood agitation in Darjeeling is also intriguing. (See page 4-5). All this is a rude awakening for happy little Bhutan, the only neighboring country with which Beijing has no diplomatic ties.

Nepal cannot be unconcerned about tensions so close to their eastern flank. Those who are secretly delighted that Bhutan is getting caught up in this Clash of Titans may note that although Bhutan may depend on India for defence and foreign affairs, Nepali nationals are deployed by the Indian Army on the frontlines. As in 1962, thousands of Indian Gurkha soldiers could be killed if there was another Himalayan war. We are forced to re-think the anomalous state of affairs where nations of one country serve in the military of another, which is a far too of two of its own friendly neighbours.

India and China benefit from the fact that there is a 1,500km section of the Himalayas they don’t need to guard because Nepal is a buffer state. Nepal’s stability is in their interest. And if it is in Nepal’s national interest that this conflict does not escalate. The saurabh-exiting media on both sides is desisting. It has degenerated to the point where Indian journalists are resorting to counter-belligerent prose in China’s semi-official Global Times. Going by the tone of India and Chinese media content, war has already broken out.

New Delhi and Beijing need to put the Himalayas back into the deep freeze. Both countries have bigger things to worry about.

Nepal has shown satisfactory reduction in absolute poverty, and progress in social and economic indicators affecting poverty. However, the data need to be read with caution because of the impact of remittances and economic liberalization fueling the entrepreneurial class, which was less than two percent. Further reduction in poverty will be more difficult because the remaining poor are too small in a huge population with multiple disadvantages - vulnerability groups with little social and economic capital, living in remote areas. The aid formula of multilateral agencies financed quick impact programs (QUIPS) focused on visibility of immediate results won’t work anymore. They will raise more money and compete, depleting the already meagre resources with multiple disadvantages and vulnerable groups with little social and economic capital. The remaining poor are too small in a huge population with multiple disadvantages.

The Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF) is a sustainable community-driven enterprise in reducing poverty, especially for really poor households. The focus is on social mobilisation, small-scale rural infrastructure and employment generation. It has ensured the number living in absolute poverty, and also raised their quality of life by investing in social infrastructure and community enterprises.

The flip side is that the PAF is regarded as an unsustainable donor-driven program (the World Bank is influential). India has no capacity to scale up, and is occasionally corrupted by irregularities and elite capture, especially by the NGOs who facilitate community groups.

Most poverty reduction programs run by the government are supply-driven, heavily centralised and spend most of the budget on overheads. They are mere branding exercises of political parties, and rarely reach the real poor in remote areas. How local governments elected for the first time is 20 years ago still struggle, the problem remains same here. Universal cash transfers or smart targeted social security programs based on individualized unique identity could hold the key to poverty reduction. There needs to be coordination between agencies responsible for health, education, sanitation, rural infrastructure, financial inclusion and cooperatives. Elecet local governments need to extend support for employment generation by community organisations and back PAF, which has billions of rupees in revolving funds.

It is tough that both demand innovation, accountability, grassroots democracy and less greedy micromanagement in institutions. People will have demand for accountability for accessible and easy servers on the ground.

Guest editorial

Vidyardh Mallik

Leapfrogging poverty

Punjab has witnessed significant progress in the fight against poverty, especially in the rural areas. The state government has implemented various schemes and initiatives to improve the standard of living and reduce poverty. Some of these initiatives include:

1. The Punjab Rural Employment Guarantee Act (PREGA): This act provides guaranteed employment opportunities to rural youth, helping them earn a livelihood and overcome poverty.

2. The Punjab Land Utilization Act (PLUA): This act empowers the farmers to use their land more efficiently and effectively, thereby increasing their income and reducing poverty.

3. The Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) Scheme: This scheme provides financial assistance to farmers for the purchase of agricultural inputs, enabling them to increase their crop yields and incomes.

4. The Punjab Rural Housing Scheme (PRHS): This scheme provides financial assistance to farmers for the construction of houses, reducing the burden of housing expenses and improving their quality of life.

5. The Punjab Women’s Development Board (PWDB): This board provides financial assistance to women for the purchase of agricultural inputs, enabling them to increase their crop yields and incomes.

6. The Punjab Employment Guarantee Scheme (PEGS): This scheme provides guaranteed employment opportunities to rural youth, helping them earn a livelihood and overcome poverty.

These initiatives, along with the continuous efforts of the state government, have significantly reduced poverty in Punjab over the years. The state has witnessed a reduction in poverty rates, with a significant number of people being lifted out of poverty.
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Bhutan-Nepal bhai-bhai?

Thimphu and Kathmandu must begin exchanging notes for the sake of Himalayan stability

The Himalayan chain is on a geopolitical boil, with eruptions occurring in many places, and other parts ripe and ready. China and India are in confrontation on multiple fronts and levels, and the race is at a pitch not heard since the 1962 war.

Times have changed dramatically over the last half decade, with China’s pole-vaulting global ambitions sitting like leviathans on the northern flanks of the Himalayan chain. To the south, India is ruled by a prime minister who runs foreign affairs through a coterie rather than use the MEA superstructure, and whose Hindu-faced ultranationalism seems goad him further into the quicksand.

All of which is a recipe for instability and limited war, which will be disastrous for all who live to the north, south and within the Himalaya, be it the peoples of Tibet, the Ganga-Brahmaputra flats, or the mid-mountain region from Baltistan to Arunachal, including Bhutan and Nepal.

As the two independent countries of the region, regardless of their differing size and orientations, it is in the interest of Bhutan and Nepal to be in minimal contact to find ways to reverse the escalating belligerence. But such bilaterals’ collaboration faces three challenges;

1. Thimphu and Kathmandu have tended to remain apart for fear of displeasing New Delhi
2. Kathmandu’s poor diplomatic credibility due primarily to unceasing domestic political instability
3. The distance between the two countries because of the Lhotoshampa refugee crisis

While one cannot do much about the first and second points, on the last, the two capitals may want to patch up after a quarter-century of chill. This need for rapprochement is necessitated by what is happening across the Himalayan arc, starting with the events on the Doklam plateau, at the Bhutan-India-China trijunction. Beijing has also upped the ante on Arunachal even as New Delhi goes into overdrive on Indian suzerainty over the territory. In Ladakh’s Pangong Tso, India allows the prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile to fly his flag by the lakeside.

Bureaucracy is burning yet again with reports of live prototypes killed, and Sikms is reeling under a plaque blockade that has Pawon Chamling venting ire against Manama Banerjee. Kashmir Valley is once again imploding, even as terrorists ambush and kill Amarnath pilgrims. Pahalgam north-by-northwest, New Delhi is incensed by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which pushes through Pakistan-administered Kashmir claimed by India.

The war of words between Beijing and India has reached fever pitch, and as this is written the world waits to see who will blink first as the soldiers jostle at Doklam. Meanwhile, this tripartite facet-off is also of interest to Nepal because of the Kalapani sector and Lipu Lekh trijunction, both hanging fire all these years.

Amidst this frightening scenario, Thimphu and Kathmandu should be in deep consultation in order to protect their own interests and seek to avert conflict among the two Asian giants. And yet they have been apart since the early 1990s when the Thimphu government so crassly and efficiently implemented its depopulation project, of ridding itself of a major slice of its Nepali-speaking Lhotoshampa citizens. Nepal was saddled with more than 100,000 refugees, and bilaterals relations plummeted, with New Delhi (through art and omission) taking Lhotoshampa’s side. The refugees thankfully were given protection by UNHCR, and so their status was preserved for a full decade-and-a-half in the hot and humid camps of Jhapa and Morang.

But donor fatigue was beginning to set in, and UNHCR itself was getting restless. After 9/11, the American refugee intake superstructure went dry and Washington DC went in search of a docile yet sizeable group of refugees to take in, which was when the Lhotoshampa were discovered. The last decade has seen the steady emptying of the refugee camps in Nepal, with the bulk of the refugees (some enthusiastically, others in deep melancholy) now settled mostly in the US, with smaller numbers in Norway, Holland, Australia, Canada, UK, Denmark and New Zealand.

There are still around 10,000 refugees left in southeast Nepal, and while Thimphu seems to have weathered a crisis of its own making, the prolonged refugee problem will be forever a moral blot on the nation-state of Drak Yul.

The sticking point for now is Bhutan’s unwillingness to take back its citizens still remaining in the refugee camps, which it is morally bound to do. In the meantime, given the grave geopolitical issues arising, Kathmandu and Thimphu must agree to disagree on the origins and reality of the refugee issue and begin contact. Today, there is not even back-channel communication.

The initiative to revive bilateral relations should come from Kathmandu, whose political leaders seem to have forgotten that Bhutan exists. The same may be true for the political class of Thimphu. As they get in touch, at the very least they could be exchanging perspectives even as the elephant gnaws teeth and the dragon breathes fire.

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Squeezed in the Himalaya

Nepal and Bhutan find themselves in a tight spot as Sino-Indian tensions grow

SEAN SHOEMAKER

The confrontation between India and China over the strategic Doklam region of Bhutan has the potential to flare up into the most serious tension between the two Asian giants since their 1962 Himalayan war. The saber-rattling by officials and media on both sides show that a resolution to this stand-off is not imminent, causing anxiety to the two countries that are sandwiched between them: Bhutan and Nepal.

The India-China tension began in early June when China demarcated two old bunkers in Bhutan built by the Indian Army guaranteed there. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) then brought bulldozers to start constructing a road on the Doklam plateau toward its tri-junction of the borders of Bhutan, China and India.

This led to both countries deploying troops in the area, and a war of words and foreign policy and defense are nominally handled by New Delhi. “Both China and India are trying to posture Bhutan’s situation to their advantage, but history tells us that Bhutan has been better at handling China than India, in more ways than one,” Shuttar Internationa...
Being taken for a ride

Can elephants be domesticated? It is widely suggested that domestication occurs only after about a dozen generations of selectively managed captive breeding. This would take over 100 years, and even then you'd be left with a 3,000 kg animal that could injure or kill people and damage property easily in stressful situations. Restraint and control lead to a poor quality of life for the elephant.

But elephants in captivity are supposed to be good for conservation. It is a misconception and it increases incentives to capture elephants in the wild. People start thinking it’s better to have an elephant in captivity, as it can be used to generate profits, than in the wild where it may cause conflicts. To conserve elephants we need to better manage human-elephant conflict, understand the elephant's value in the wild for the eco-system, and step away from exploiting them in captivity.

But most tourists think captive elephants appear happy enough. The conditions captive elephants face may look idyllic to the casual visitor, but are a far cry from what elephants need. In the wild they would be living in large herds, constantly interacting with each other and building life-long ties, while roaming long distances and browsing a large range of plants and fruits. In captivity they are mostly kept in isolation, offered food with very limited variation and their independent movement is restricted. An intelligent animal like an elephant is psychologically affected by this.

What is wrong with riding and bathing elephants? Both activities rely on being able to control the elephant in situations that can quickly become stressful. Such control can only reliably be achieved through cruel training that leaves a mark on the elephant for all its life. The experience for the visitor is also very different: while elephant riding or bathing gives a short glimpse of an animal that is being controlled by a human, the alternative of observing elephants in the wild or in a sanctuary allows a better understanding of these magnificent animals and the need to protect them.

What has been the impact of your campaign in Nepal so far? We have seen wonderful progress in Nepal, also thanks to groups such as Elephant Aid International, which is developing large-scale elephant enclosures. Many tour operators that operate in Nepal have signed our elephant-friendly tourism pledge. They are now moving away from offering elephant rides and seek out more humane alternatives, such as offered by venues like Tiger Tops.

Can Nepal set an example? Time is up for offering elephant rides. To really protect elephants in captivity and in the wild we need to shift demand towards humane, observation-based alternatives. Nepal has a real opportunity here as it has comparatively few captive elephants. Local authorities, communities and the tourism industry could team up so that Nepal becomes the first country to completely end tourism elephant riding and an example for all of Asia and the world. The positive impact on the country's reputation would be immense.

Nepal recently passed an Animal Welfare Directive: how important is such legislation? Improved animal welfare legislation is crucial to help the shift to provide better treatment for captive elephants. Tourism-led incentives to improve conditions are important but this needs to be followed by such legislative changes that ensure conditions don’t fall back to how they were before.

I very much hope to see the times when elephant riding and performances have disappeared as tourist attractions and we are allowing elephants to be elephants, either in high-welfare sanctuaries that take care of existing captive elephants, or in the wild. Eventually this is where they belong: in the wild. Not in entertainment.
The road to a safer Kathmandu
A unique project to augment Nepal's fire-fighting capacity, while boosting tourism

KATE RYAN

Fire Brigade Chief Kishor Kumar Bhattacharji drives cautiously through the narrow streets of Bhaktapur that wear the scars of the 2015 earthquake. This donated Japanese fire truck has been in need of a spare part for seven years, and he does not expect a replacement any time soon.

"In order to serve the Valley, I need at least 50 trucks," says Bhattacharji. "Right now, we have five."

This November, the beleaguered fire brigade will triple its fleet with the help of 75 Hollywood actors, Nepal celebrities, political leaders, army generals and philanthropists from around the world. The international team will drive 10 American firefighting vehicles from Bhaktapur to Kathmandu.

The expedition is seven years in the making for Michael Kobold, the German watchmaker-mountaineer philanthropist behind the effort. After personal and international setbacks, the death of a friend and a border blockade, Kobold has all: the permits and a target date.

In the last month alone there have been two major fires in the valley: the Vet Cargo Factory in Bhaktapur and a fire in Gokarna in which 52 dairy cows perished. Gas leaks and electrical shortages are the two primary causes of fires in the Valley, says Bhattacharji. Fires occur more frequently after an earthquake, because pipes and electric wiring systems are damaged. While Kathmandu is still rebuilding, fire risk is high and evacuation routes are unreliable.

Kathmandu's population of 2.5 million requires 62 fire engines and 3,000 firefighters, but there are only 50 firefighters serving the Valley with 5 antiquated trucks. Their ladders only extend 10 meters, putting most of Kathmandu's new high-rises beyond their reach.

And while the dispatch time is less than two minutes, response time is never guaranteed. The trucks have no GPS system, and when they get lost Bhattacharji says he sticks his head out the window and waves down other drivers.

Kathmandu needs emergency resources, but it also needs tourists. Kobold hopes the celebrities driving the trucks will raise Nepal's profile, attract tourists with deeper pockets, boost the economy and create jobs that will discourage young Nepalis from heading abroad for work.

"We want people to know Nepal is open for business," Kobold said. "It's safe, beautiful and breathtaking."

Kobold originally partnered with former US Ambassador to Nepal Scott Delisi and his close friend, actor James Gandolfini, on the project. When Gandolfini died of a heart attack in 2013, Kobold put his passion project on hold for a year and a half. In 2015, he founded the Soarway Foundation with Delisi to focus on disaster preparedness in Nepal — and three weeks later the earthquake struck, killing nearly 9,000 people. Kobold threw himself into Soarway, sorting everything else, including his watch business, to the side.

"You can find ways to make customers happy," he said. "You can't delay helping Nepal."

Celebrity friends like actor Malcolm McDowell, and explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes called Kobold to volunteer for the fire truck expedition. But even as the logistics fall into place, politics took a turn for the worse. India's blockade came five months after the earthquake and lasted another five. It took Kobold 21 months of daily meetings to gain the necessary permits for the vehicles. Barring further complications, six fire engines, one ladder truck, one command vehicle and two Volvo track trucks will arrive in Kathmandu this autumn to be handed over to the municipality. Soarway is also designing a $2.5 million fire station for the capital.

Soarway will fly engineers to Kathmandu every six months for the next five years to inspect and service the donated vehicles, provide spare parts and train local mechanics. It will also bring firefighters and US Navy SEALs to train Nepal's fire corps.

As of now, Bhattacharji is the only professionally trained Nepali firefighter in the valley; his other colleagues simply learn on the job.

Kobold says this is a pilot project, and the impact of the first 10 vehicles will determine whether more donors join the effort to improve Nepal's Emergency Services Agency, "Nepal spells adventure," says Kobold, but sometimes adventure means danger. He hopes investment in emergency training and infrastructure will change that.
SANJEET SHARMA in CHITWAN
PHOTOS by BIKRAM RAI

When the 36km Mugling-Narayangad Highway was completed in 1998, after four years of Chinese engineers dynamiting sheer rock, it was regarded as an engineering feat. The highway sliced through the cliffs on the left bank of the Trisuli River, connecting Chitwan to the midhills of Nepal. A journey that used to take five days on foot was suddenly reduced to a 3-hour drive.

Buses and cargo trucks between Kathmandu and the rest of Nepal preferred this 220km dirt track via Mugling to the other serpentine roads through the mountains. But as traffic volume grew, it was clear that the narrow road either needed to be widened, or alternatives found.

There are now other routes connecting Kathmandu to the central and eastern plains, but the Sinduhi Highway is too narrow for trucks, and alternative roads to Hetauda via Kulekhani and the Bagmati corridor are delayed. The widening work on the Mugling road had just started in April 2015 when the earthquake struck. The work was further pushed back by the blockade, and only 35% of the World Bank-financed Rs 3 billion project to make it a 15m wide, double-lane highway has been completed so far.

This monsoon, slopes already weakened by the earthquake have failed repeatedly. More than 200 people have been killed in the past year alone. There are gigantic traffic jams, with horror stories of people taking 16 hours to get from Kathmandu to Bhaktapur. The highway has now been closed at night to prevent further accidents, as well as to expedite construction.

The most dangerous part of the highway is the first 5km after Mugling, where a rockfall on Wednesday took 19 hours to remove. “We have to be on emergency duty 24 hours with our rapid response team: we never know when the landslides will hit next,” says Chitwan SP Dipak Thapa. On 23 June, four policemen working to remove a previous rockfall here lost their lives when a landslide swept them down to the Trisuli.

Prashu Joshi of the civil contractor Shrestha Construction admits the reason for the frequent landslides is that the original design doesn’t have preventive measures to protect the slope and reduce landslide risk.

Project in-charge Chandra Narayan Yadav says the fragile rock structure of the Trisuli Gorge makes it difficult and expensive to have 100% protection from landslides, but he is confident the slopes will stabilize in the next few years.

UNBLOCKING

Highway of Death

The number of accidents, total fatalities and wounded on the 36km stretch of the Mugling-Narayangad Highway

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“The geology of these mountains is weak ... but in about two years the slopes will stabilise.”
Chandra Narayan Yadav
Project In-charge

“We have to be on emergency duty 24 hours with our rapid response team: we never know when the landslides will hit next.”
Dipak Thapa
Chitwan SP

SOUTHBOUND BUSES PLOW THROUGH EXCAVATORS REMOVED DEBRIS AT KALAYOLA

ONE OF MANY VEHICLE WRECKS BY THE ROADSIDE AT BUTKAMAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Accidents</th>
<th>Fatalities (wounded)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>15 (351)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-17</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>99 (401)</td>
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**Kathmandu kora,**

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https://www.facebook.com/kathmandukora/

**Life in colour.**

A photo exhibition showcasing the work of French Mexican videographer and photographer Susana San Juan Lopez. 26 June-17 July, Image Art, Patan.

([image](image-url))

**Hold my hand.**

Join the first session of the two-day ‘Hand in Hand’ Nepali Feminism Summer School, which will discuss the politics of Ndfs Feminism in Nepal and beyond. 22 July, 12:30-3:30 pm, Tatho Maya Kendra, Patan Babai. tdunshidimp@gmail.com

**Kids camp.**

Children 5-12 years old can join this five-day camp to enjoy music therapy, games, guitar workshops, yoga and meditation, wall climbing, photography and much more. 17-21 July and 23-27 July, 10am-2pm, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Kakani. (980) 5133454

**Open mic for Parkinson’s.**

Event dedicated to Parkinson’s; you can share your story or just be an audience member. 20 July, 11 am onwards. Match, Thamel. Rs 1,000 (Welcome drink and snacks included).

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Open-mic-for-Parkinsons/1519316010

**True stories project.**

An art exhibition to raise awareness about and against gender-based abuse, exploitation and human trafficking. 14-27 July, 10am-6pm, Patan Museum, Lalitpur. (981) 4270480

**Inviting submissions.**

Harry and submit documents for the 11th edition of Film Sathasvii to be held in Kathmandu, 25 November 2017. Deadline: 31 July

http://www.filmsathasvii.org/

**Bonaljir.**

Regular for three-weekend courses or 1.5 hour online classes every week and you’ll soon be sounding like a native French speaker. 22 July, Alliance Française de Kathmandu, Pulchowk, 9am-12pm. Rs 11,700 for 45 hours of classes. 7864708222

**Night light.**

Spend your Friday night listening to the best of the light band. 24 July, 6 pm, Hunger Ground Restaurant & Cafe, Darbar Marg, 9843157101

**Food and music.**

Enjoy a three-course meal and select a pint of beer while enjoying live music by Phayuthani Shrestha and Abhishek KC. 24 July, 7-10 pm, Empire Restaurant & Bar, Kapanedi Heights Road. 9811961812

**Friday night live.**

Sway to the rhythms of the Render band and spend your weekend with friends and family. 24 July, 6:30-10 pm, Lopelty Newmoon Cuisine, Frometlai. (01) 5204988

**Zephyrstone.**

The Nepali duo ‘Shining Stars’ will be taking the stage with their exceptional soundscapes of covers and original tracks. 24 July, Kathmandu. Koroto Lounge and Bar, Pippewas. Rs 1,000. (980) 2117748

**Open Mic for Parkinson’s.**

Join an event dedicated to Parkinson’s; you can share your story or just be an audience member. 20 July, 11 am onwards. Match, Thamel. Rs 1,000 (Welcome drink and snacks included).

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Open-mic-for-Parkinsons/1519316010

**Phatcowle.**

Carol Bass guitarist Rajar Shrestha perform electronic numbers during the KP launch of his new project Phatcowle. 25 July, 3.45 pm, KS MOCA, Gyaneshworhachi, Kathmandu. 9808151937

**Embers.**

An huge and easy place serving a blend of continental dishes and Nepali favourites.

etemers Cafe, Pulchowk. (984) 2344766, www.embersrestaurant.com

**Pauline’s Garden.**

A perfect place to enjoy the sunset and sip on a happy hour cocktail. Enjoy cocktails and get free on Thursdays. Basantapur. Annex Marg. (984) 411537

**Alice Restaurant.**

Step in for a spread of Thai, Chinese, Continental and Japanese cuisines. Gokhale, (01) 4423101, Darbar Marg. (01) 4423017

**Embassy.**

Away from the hustle-bustle of the streets, find here a variety of multi-cuisine dishes at a place ideal for business meets and casual rendezvous. Pancho’s, (01) 4425410

**La Bella Cafe.**

Italian cuisine in house your palette this weekend. Chobabai Marg. Instan, (980) 4780019

**Fresh Cup.**

This coffee culture cafe is the place for aromatic Americanas and mochas. Try the grilled chicken sandwich, among other selections. Komolba, Kathmandu, (980) 4220984

**Tasneem’s Kings Kitchen.**

A charming restaurant proposing the unique flavours of Rohra Muslim food. Jhomarkhu, 9810237077, (981) 2338352

**Taza.**

Middle Eastern restaurant featuring a Syrian chef. Offers free deliveries within Patan. The runners are instructor. Pulchowk. (984) 415972, 9808908177

**Café Déjà Vu.**

Spend an evening at this budget restaurant that offers more than six types of mimosas. Tip: try the cherry kurkure. Instan, (980) 4400829

**Milla Guesthouse.**

If you enjoy the quiet and serene mix of old and new, this is the perfect place to stay in Bhaktapur. Not far from the town it’s easy miles away. Bhaktapur. (981) 4184527

**Tiger Mountain Lodge.**

Situates 1,000 ft above Pokhara valley, the resort offers spectacular views of Machhapuchre, Dhaulagiri, Annapurna and Manaslu.

www.tigermountainlodge.com, (01) 424567, 9845843874

**Famous Farm.**

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**Mum’s Garden Resort.**

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Dhulikhel, (981) 303179, 9815109966

**Getaway.**

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Pharping, Kathmandu. www.nedyoonline.com

Balthali Village Resort.

A small hotel with a nice view of green, rice fields and Kave dorset with traditional arch houses. Balthali, Khok, 9811587318

Jhule Mountain Resort.

At 2,050m elevation, this eco-resort has a farm house stretching across hills endowed in fresh pines. Enjoy an organic homestay experience.

Siliguri-Nepalgunj National Park, Lophilpuri, 3-Pule, (01) 4572289

Dwarka’s Hotel.

A fine view of palatible hidden in the middle of the city. Start the day off with complimentary yoga classes in this award-winning hotel.

Bathpu, Kathmandu, (984) 4407770

**EVENTS**

**MUSIC**

**DINING**

**GETAWAY**
Chure denudation and floods

Himal Khabapatrik, 9-15 July

Every monsoon it is the same old story. The rains trigger landslides and floods, roads and bridges are washed off and villages in the plains get inundated. The media likes to call them ‘natural disasters’, they are indeed natural, but are disasters only because of man-made interventions. Urban encroachment into the floodplains of rivers, deforestation of the Chure, haphazard road excavation along slopes, growth and lack of priority for drainage, have turned what should be a predictable annual phenomenon beneficial for agriculture into a calamity.

Since April, 40 people have been killed in floods and landslides this year alone. Last year 257 people died, and more than 1,000 people have perished in the past five years. August is the worst month for monsoon-related deaths because by then the soil is saturated with the previous month of rain. Due to the early rains this year there are major landslides in July already. In fact, Batadi saw a deadly landslide in April which used to be unheard of. The Met Department has explained the cloudbursts as being part of a weather system that brought early rain. In other parts of the country the monsoon behaved erratically, after heavy pre-monsoon showers, the real rains started late and there haven’t been the prolonged light drizzle characteristic of monsoon precipitation. Such rain distributes rainfall more evenly, reducing landslides risk. Some scientists say this could be due to climate change. The other risk factor is Nepal’s topography where cloudbursts channel runoff down narrow valleys. The slopes of these young mountains are inherently unstable, and the most fragile are the Chure Hills which are made from sand and boulders with this topography. Once the vegetation goes on a Chure slope, the hills can be eroded very quickly by downcours. The hill is then swept downsteam to the Tarai, raising river beds and forcing them to frequently change course. Increase in logging, indiscriminate sand and boulder mining has meant that these delicate slopes have been made even more precarious.

The Chure makes up 12.5% of Nepal’s total area and is attributed from at least 19 to 33% of the country’s discharge. The Chure spillway is a flood diversion from the Saptari last week was the denudation and mining to the upstream Chure watershed. The other reason is inappropirate road and urban construction which have blocked natural drainage for these blocks in the monsoon. Eighty per cent of the total flow on Nepal’s rivers are derived from nonsaline rains in three months. Till a decade ago, the monsoon floods on Chure rivers were a boon for agriculture. Today they are a bane. Destruction of the Chure puts more than 10 million Nepali plain-dwelling and millions more in India at risk of floods. This is not a natural disaster, but a man-made environmental one.
When was the last time you watched a film where you didn’t know what the heck was going to happen? After Get Out (reviewed last week in this column), my answer is The Bad Batch, breakout Iranian American director Ana Lily Amirpour’s love story involving cannibals, released in theatres last month.

Amirpour made her name with 2014’s A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, an Iranian vampire film with oodles of style, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and immediately created enough of a buzz that it allowed her to write and direct The Bad Batch, starring model Suki Waterhouse and the likes of Keanu Reeves, Giovanni Ribisi, Diego Luna, and Jason Momoa in other significant roles.

Shot expertly by Lyle Vincent, with the cinematography playing a key role in creating the mood of the film, The Bad Batch begins with a young, seemingly clueless Arlen (Waterhouse) being tattooed on the neck and placed outside of a menacing looking wire fencing; she is joining the ‘Bad Batch’ a group of outcasts deemed unfit to live in society and expelled into the harsh desert to make their own way.

What happens next is gruesome, but hilariously so, when Arlen is captured by cannibals. It is her pluckiness and escape that really suck us into this weird little film, making us want to understand what motivates this odd heroine who lives by her own rules.

Amirpour’s script is patchy, her characters, aside from Arlen, and Mauzil Moradi (Momoa) are somewhat archetypal, somewhat self-insufficient, making for moments of puzzlement, and some eye-rolling. Fortunately, Waterhouse’s surprisingly strong performance keeps us with her as she shoots some cannibals, faces down a creepy cult hero, and falls in love with an interloper in the strangest of circumstances.

The love story is the main arc of the film, though it is not the only reason for watching it. It is far from a conventional tale, and while the chemistry between the leads is sparkling, the union is bizarre and intriguing, leaving us wondering what in goodness is gonna happen next.

Mainstream cinema is at a crossroads: English language films financed in the hundreds of millions by big studios can continue to be sequels and spin-offs of older material; Spider-Man is currently in its second reboot with Spider-Man: Homecoming (in theatres now) or risks can be taken on original screenplays, pushing the language of cinema into newer territories, and not just the throwbacks and remakes that we’ve seen over the past decade.

The Bad Batch is a fun, funny, imperfect film with moments of genius and lots of misses. You never know what turn it will take, and that in itself is a particular pleasure in these days of hackneyed formula. The key is to give the Amirpours of cinema a chance so that we can see more mind-expanding, crazy little films like this in the future instead of lugging ourselves to the theatre to see Spider-Man (as good as it might be) again and again and again.

MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

HAPPENINGS

MONEY TALKING: Nepal Rastra Bank Governor Chiranjibi Nepal speaks about a new monetary policy for the next fiscal year at the Radisson Hotel in Kathmandu on Sunday.

BIG GUNS: Chief of Army Staff General Rajendra Chhetri with the 10th Regiment Royal Artillery of the British Army on Wednesday. Chhetri is on a six day visit to UK at the invitation of the Chief of the General Staff General Sir Nicholas Patrick Carter.

POEMANDU: Students at a rally to celebrate the 100th Bhuna jayanti, the birth anniversary of Bhuna Bhakta Ashirya, at Ratnaparki on Thursday.

READY TO BOARD: Nepal Airlines CTO Umesh Chandra Rai and UNDP Nepal Country Director Renamot Meyer during the launch of new boarding passes that promote the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals.
Sun and water
Irrigating rain-fed farmlands will curb migration and cut poverty

“The solar pump allows me to grow vegetables and crops twice in a year, our income has risen and we no longer have to go to India,” says Hira who had leave the children behind.

Astutti Chaudhari is also doing much better after she was able to irrigate her vegetable farm with water from a solar pump. She has leased more land to grow chillies, seasonal beans and bitter gourd. “It was risky to depend on rainfall, and we had to go to India to work when the money ran out,” says Astutti, who now earns Rs70,000 a year from the farm.

Hira and Astutti are among 45 of the poorest households in Khola village of Dhankuta Sub-Metropolitan City near the Indian border who grow surplus food to sell in the market at Dhankuta. And the solution was a simple water pump running on free sunlight.

“Kailali’s subsistence farmers no longer have to wait for rainfall to grow crops, they grow enough to feed themselves and have savings,” says NabaKU KC of the PAF.

Kailali has one of the highest out-migration rates among Tarai districts, and the lack of young men has reduced agricultural production. The PAF’s solar pumps have returned many to the land; instead of earning cash in India, they are growing food at home.

Agriculture and food security expert Yamuna Shrestha explains: “The solution to food deficit and lack of jobs is irrigation. It’s as simple as that.”

Financial freedom on two wheels

When the government banned the bonded labour system known as kamruga in 2010, Man Bahadur Dangora turned a new leaf and started a workshop repair business. Today, he is a sought-after motorcycle mechanic in Sukhupal village of Kanchanpur, and an inspiration in his community.

“There was a time when I worked with a slave, today I am my own master,” says the 33-year-old, who took in Rs15,000 from the PAF to start his motorcycle repair and spare parts shop. The PAF has supported more than 32,000 community-based organisations in 38 districts with a total of Rs75 billion in revenue. As many as 146 such organisations in Kanchanpur, mostly targeted to former kamruga.

“It wasn’t easy at first, there was never enough money saved up to expand the business, but the PAF revolving fund give him the break he’d been looking for. He now earns enough to educate his two sisters and send his son to an English school. He tells us: ‘Who would have thought a kamruga’s children would ever go to school?’

When they used to run out of money, Hira Chaudhari and her husband would cross the border into India in search of work. They don’t have to anymore.

The family now grows surplus food thanks to a solar-powered irrigation pump that has freed them from dependence on the annual monsoon. They can eat vegetables that they grow year round, and the rest to pay school fees for their children, and even have savings left over.

Hira used to be a kamruga, but being freed from bonded labour did not free her from poverty. She used to earn just Rs20 a day in India. Today, her family makes Rs80,000 annually from the farm.

It has all been possible because of support from the Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF) for photovoltaic panels rigged to a water pump to irrigate their fields. The whole system costs Rs70,344 and is supported by PAF’s small scale infrastructure program.

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Remittance, rice and real estate

FADING GREEN: Sanjhina Regmi and her neighbours (above) plant paddy seedlings last week in Lekhnath, as Pokhara’s rapid urbanisation engulfs what used to be fertile fields that grew a rich diversity of rice varieties.

YUVARAJ SHRESTHA
in POKHARA

Lekhnath Municipality is a vivid example of how a remittance-based economy can wreck thriving agriculture in one of Nepal’s most fertile valleys.

When Sanjhiba Regmi got together with women from neighbouring households to plant paddy here last week, it was on a tiny waterlogged patch hemmed in by new buildings.

Regmi is planting rice even though her husband, Hari, who has been working in Dubai for two years, told her it doesn’t make sense to work so hard in the fields anymore: she should just buy rice in the market from the money he sends her.

But even though Sanjhiba feels tied to the land and enjoys growing food for the family, there are only women and older people to help in the fields.

Another effect of out-migration is that most families have invested savings from the money they earn abroad to build new houses on their
Rice self-sufficiency

Nepal is one of the most diverse countries for rice in the world, with paddy growing from the heights of the 3,000m Sinja Valley to the plains of Ilam, at 100m. However, many of the estimated 1,700 varieties of rice that have evolved to suit the country’s micro-climates and soils are now in danger of becoming extinct.

Scientists say this would worsen Nepal’s already precarious food security situation, and the country would be much more dependent on imported hybrids. Nepal’s rice varieties are also threatened by climate change and rapid urbanisation of fertile valleys, as well as the out-migration of young men (See story, left).

“The educated stay abroad, only us elderly farmers remain in the village. A lot of terraces are now fallow, they have turned into jungle,” says Surya Prasad Adhikari from Sundari Banda near Pokhara, who has been at the forefront of a farmer-driven effort to preserve the genetic diversity of rice seeds by cross-breeding rice varieties to make them more resilient.

“Local strains of rice are being abandoned not only because farmers have left, but also because some are attracted to higher yields of hybrid varieties. Local strains can better resist climate change, and if they are preserved maybe some farmers would even return to their land,” says Adhikari, who has worked closely for the Pokhara-based group, Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (Li-BIRD) that helps cooperatives practice sustainable agriculture.

“The farmers protect quality seeds so they can breed improved varieties, and planting them in turn protects the soil,” explains Li-BIRD’s plant breeder, Rajeev Dhakal.

Nepal has an annual rice deficit of about 1 million tons even during years with good monsoons. Rice production is averaging about 5 million tons because only 18% of the land is irrigated, and productivity is low. This year, only 40% of rice fields have been planted because of late monsoons and elections. However, hope may be at hand. Three irrigation projects that will divert water to huge tracts of the Tarai are about to launch in the central and western plains. This means farmers will be able to plant spring rice as well. New techniques like System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and cross-breeding by farmers like Adhikari have improved yields, and these techniques need to be scaled up.

SRI is now being practised in 12 districts and has doubled the yield in many places, while using half the amount of seedlings and much less water. SRI combined with mechanisation has boosted productivity in Tarai farms from an average of 3 tons/hecate to 5 tons/hectare at a lower cost. Power tillers, automatic paddy planters and harvesters are replacing manual farming even in the hills.

Says Rajendra Upadhyay at the Regional Directorate of Agriculture in Biramgarh and a strong proponent of SRI: “We need to grow more rice to achieve food security and need a new methodology for local seeds for higher yields. SRI is suitable to achieve that objective.”

Sean Shoemaker in Pokhara

PRICE OF RICE

Hear Surya Prasad Adhikari describe his life’s work to preserve the diversity of rice varieties in Pokhara Valley, which are in danger of becoming extinct, and how the out-migration of men has affected rice production in what used to be Nepal’s grain-basin.

nepaltimes.com

High breed: Women planting paddy at the 15th annual Paddy Festival on 29 June in Pokhara.
ELEVATE
YOUR EXPECTATIONS

A parliament of owls

The last time Lion Heart, a PM during the reign of Gyanendra the Great, expanded the council of ministers to have a jumbo cabinet. During his current tenure, Dheuba the IV is trying to break his own record and put together a dumbo cabinet. The wearing-in is on Sunday after PKD returns from BKK at the National Stadium since there is no other venue big enough for so many ministers. Just like there is a ‘parliament’ of owls, a ‘nest’ of toads, or a ‘murder’ of crows, the PMO has decided to call the expanded cabinet a ‘mob’ of mantras.

What is holding PM Dheuba back is the selection process, since the wrong person could cost the country dearly. The idea is not to appoint people who are sticklers for rules, and to avoid those who can take quick decisions. The best ministers are yes-men of various kingmakers and brokers, and since the chance of a minister making mistakes is so high, the strategy is to appoint politicians who cannot make any decisions. That way, nothing can go wrong because for anything to go wrong a decision has to be taken that is not right. We have an idiot-proof system of governance, our movers and shakers don’t move at all, and rarely shake.

But we agree with critics who have serious misgivings about the size of the proposed new cabinet. With 41 ministers, it’s just not big enough. The bigger the cabinet the bigger the multiplier on the economy: they will create new jobs, new bomb-proof limousines with outsiders have to be bought, helicopters have to be rented, and the kickbacks generated on purchases will all boost Nepal’s GDP per capita.

There is, however, a serious problem: we are running out of ministerial berths and need to give birth to new ones. Ideas:

- Ministry of Distortion & Extortion: One window office for misinformation and mis-appropriation.
- Ministry of Illegitimate Affairs: All kickbacks to be sanctioned by this ministry in interest of transparency.
- Ministry of Adultery: All plastic rice dealers register here first.
- Ministry of Physical Therapy and No Works: Simple arm-stretching exercises under the table for atrophied muscles caused by prolonged periods of inaction while not repairing roads.
- Ministry of Home: Minister works out of home to mess up elections and extend tenure of parliament.
- Ministry of Junkets and Aviation: Secretaries can cash frequent flier miles while in transit in Kathmandu between trips just before fiscal year ends. Chief Sec can go to the ADB without quitting govt.
- Deputy Prime Ministers without Portfolio: These posts are cunningly left vacant to accommodate new parties to build the numbers for constitutional amendments if, and when, they are going to happen.