The unshakeable

65 days, and counting: that is the cumulative time Govinda KC has survived without food and water during his 11 hunger strikes against six different governments in the past five years.

The main demand that KC raised in his first hunger strike in 2011 remains the same: enact a strong law and make sweeping reforms in medical education. Every government has given in to the 66-year-old crusader, but only to trick him into signing deals that are never implemented.

After KC’s fifth hunger strike, the Kedar Bhakta Mathema Commission was formed to shape the Nepal Medication Education Bill. The surgeon had to go on another fast-unto-death to force the government to table it.

The bill was finally registered in Parliament last year, but businessmen-cum-MPs have tried to water it down by registering as many as 276 amendments. If the bill is altered, it will perpetuate the commercialization of medical education that impacts the affordability and accessibility of health care in Nepal.

All MPs who have invested in for-profit medical colleges have the blessings of the top political leaders in all major parties. This is the reason KC has had to risk his life ever and again.

KC’s representatives and a government negotiation team had made no headway as of Thursday press time. He has survived up to 24 days in the past, but this time his health is deteriorating faster. Diloya Singha, a doctor monitoring KC, told Nepali Times on Thursday: “He may not last as long this time.”

TOO YOUNG TO MARRY

Nearly half of all marriages in Nepal are between couples under 18 years of age. Despite laws and a doubling of the female literacy rate, the average age of marriage is not rising. But child brides and grooms are now themselves spreading awareness against the practice.

BY SONIA AWALE

PAGE 8-9

World-wide waves

After 65 years of broadcasting, Gurkha Radio still links Nepal’s soldiers with families back home

BY SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

PAGE 7
Federalism in jeopardy

Two years after Nepal’s 2015 Constitution established federalism, the country is now choreographed to function as an amalgamation of the federal structure. The latest fault line is the way in which revenue will be shared among local, provincial and central governments.

In Nepal’s federal structure, power is assigned to three governments — local, provincial and central — each of which has autonomy to raise and spend revenue. However, the legislative framework for the generation of revenue was not put in place prior to local government elections, which has resulted in a confusing mixture of claims and counterclaims emerging from old and emergent power centres. Consequently, continued progress in successful implementation of the federal provisions of the 2015 Constitution is in jeopardy.

The Natural Resources and Fiscal Commission Bill and the Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfer Bill were tabled in parliament on July 7. These are crucial for the management of public finance in the federal structure, overseeing revenue distribution among the three governments. However, the bills do not provide for an increase in the share of national revenue collection, at the expense of local governments.

After strong public criticism, lawmakers are now trying to amend the Inter-Governmental Fiscal Transfer Bill, which will regulate the distribution of resources between local, provincial and central governments. Reducing local government’s share of the revenue generated from hydroelectricity power may seem insignificant in the context of the nation’s total income base. In 2016-17 revenues from hydroelectricity power and hydroelectricity revenue accounted for less than 0.9 per cent of total revenue collections. In the grand scheme of things, these royalties may not prove to be significant for local budgets, which are largely subsidized by central grants. What is significant in the way in which these latest developments demonstrate another burr put up by local forces to marshall the new status quo and derail attempts to share power beyond Kathmandu.

With successful local elections after two decades in the life of the country’s seven provinces, hopes are high that local governments will deliver on their mandates. However, it is to be seen whether local governments are able to raise their own revenue and shoulder their own budgets. Under the Constitution, the central government retains all major revenue sources such as income taxes and VAT. Provincial and local governments are assigned comparatively low-yielding revenue sources such as property and vehicle taxes. International government systems are required to be built from the ground up, and revenue-raising potential vary greatly from province to province. In practice, this is precisely what the central government has instructed local governments not to expect raise most of their own revenue. Gaps will need to be filled by intergovernmental fiscal transfers. This in itself is not a cause for alarm, but what should concern us is that political forces in Kathmandu are once again manipulating legislation to prevent the sharing of power.

Iain Payne is a Colombo Plan Nepal Fellow and Binayak Basnyat is a program associate at the Kathmandu Foundation. A longer version of this piece is in the InTheBlog; www.intheblog.org
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Unlearning politics

Handover of power to newly-elected local governments has been put on hold for too long, and that is not a good start

Right after they were elected, Nepal’s local governments have got sucked into a legal vacuum, exposing the ad hoc nature of the ruling system. The Self-governance Act hasn’t been enacted, heads of local bodies are mostly clueless about their roles.

The result of all this is that interpretations of the constitution are haphazard. To correct that, tabloid circulars are issued by ministries without homework. Even orientation sessions by ministries are misleading and self-contradictory.

This lack of accountability is creating real problems for local governments on the ground. There is now a very real danger that the apathy, fueled by the reluctance to devolve central power, might just kill the little hope for development after two decades of conflict and instability.

The elections were a source of optimism and excitement for the people after a long period of uncertainty. Early signs after voting proved that the optimism was justified. In contrast to the confusion at the centre, and past apathy at the local level, elected local governments finally promised stability, responsibility and proactive grassroots democracy.

Shriram Khanal of the non-profit Teach for Nepal explained to me that how much things have changed: “Dealing with government agencies has always been troublesome for organisations like ours. Responsiveness to groups like us is not good in Kathmandu. In contrast, local governments of late are reaching out to us to help them reform public schools.”

Apart from inserting trained graduates as fellows into the public school system, which Teach for Nepal has been doing in some districts for the last four years, the new heads of municipalities are also reaching out to the group about improving the quality of education.

When the local bodies took shape, many experts were sceptical. One of the major concerns was the threat of local elite capture of the resources in the new system. This, understandably, is a major concern for any drastic decentralisation effort. The shifting political setting and local autonomy are usually fertile ground for a new eco-system that reinforces the traditional community imperfections.

Regulating centralised corruption with decentralised corruption could in fact sabotage the whole democratic project.

Another grave concern of some of the skeptics was the lack of capacity at the local level to address the needs bestowed on local bodies by the Constitution.

“The hope, enthusiasm and political will is evident, but the capacity at the local level to make policies, to plan and implement projects, isn’t adequate to support that zeal,” Khanal says.

These are genuine concerns for any nation transitioning into a new system of governance. Our institutions are still weak and, often, we have experienced them crumbling under the weight of strong individuals and corrupt interest groups. Similarly, institutions building at the local level remains a big challenge.

Rather than streamlining the process of transition to enhance institution building, the ad hocism of rulers is making all these systemic challenges difficult to overcome for local governments. Too many things have been put on hold for too long, and that is not a good start.

Enhancing community-led projects, directly handled by local governments, and accountability mechanisms that develop into strong local institutions over time are the only ways to ensure that rapid capacity enhancement takes place in the towns and villages so that local strengthen do not abuse new powers.

It is probably time for the national leadership in Kathmandu to unlearn politics.

They must abandon the culture of rewarding inefficiency and pick up some of the commitment to nation building seen in many newly elected local leaders. To channel this passion, motivation and political will at the grassroots into effective local governance and enhance prosperity, we have to move much faster.
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Gaida Sahib

Andrew Laurie, Chitwan’s Rhino Man, did pioneering research into the endangered animals

W e thread our way through the thinning trees along an earthen trail back to Andrew Laurie’s research camp near Saunaha on the edge of Royal Chitwan National Park. Not more than a couple of tents and a wood hut, it’s Andrew’s base for three years whilst studying the behaviour of the greater one-horned rhinoceros for his Cambridge PhD.

Supported by renowned biologist George Schaller and the loan of a royal elephant, Andrew’s study will be hailed as groundbreaking research and the basis for decades of successful rhino management. Known throughout Chitwan as ‘Gaida Sahib’, his bare feet, solid ankles and pale hairy legs lead me with assured familiarity down the jungle track – I like following his sturdy smell and distinctive short-stripe gait. 

Birds call in the late afternoon and there are comforting scents of hot grass and animal urines, but my mind wanders as we trudge the distance. Andrew has confided that his Tharu friend, Sanchiri, is recently pledged in an arranged village marriage by her family. That morning I had seen them together at his camp, a tall striking girl, but perhaps too lucky and defiant for local taste. Together they speak Tharu, and Andrew has even learned her native coded dialects. Custom dictates that intimates never use each other’s given names, and I never heard Andrew utter hers.

“Quick,” he whispers, “get up that tree. A rhino is approaching.” I hear and smell nothing, but Gaida Sahib is assimilated into jungle rhythms and not one to be questioned. He helps me climb a strong sapling beside the path and sure enough, a large old male rhinoceros ambles around the corner. His body is marked with scars of ancient feuds, but to my relief he is interested only in his evening river drink – every year people are injured and even killed by rhinos. With a throaty laugh and shy smile, Andrew jumps down and leads me back to camp.

Accompanied by the rattle of the elephant’s chain and the clatter of night insects, we rest on his makeshift Saunaha veranda. Chitwan’s rhinos are laboriously recorded by name and distinguishing macks on index cards in those pre-computer days. Every blushed ear, damaged tail or nick in the crumpled grey skin is noted. He shows me details of the venerable individual that we have just encountered, and adds another sighting to the hand-written card.

Andrew reckons there are about 300 rhinos living in Chitwan in 1974, and he has discovered they feed on over 180 plant varieties but mainly on grass of which there are no less than 50 species. To combat threats of poaching and habitat loss, Andrew proposed the translocation of rhinos to other protected areas to spread their risk, a strategy that has successfully safeguarded Nepal’s population. With a team of Nepali colleagues, his work has underpinned today’s heralded rhino conservation status of almost-zero poaching.

We share a Khukri Ram and Coke and he explains how his Tharu love is doomed. “How can it ever work, Lisa? I have to be realistic. I must do what is best for her.” He sighs. “I don’t need to tell you how strongly I feel.”

When Sanchiri is married and has a baby, she is convinced that Andrew is part of the boy because of the large flecks of blue in his brown eyes. Andrew arranges help from visiting American doctors to treat the infant’s malformed hands, attributed by the villagers to a total eclipse of the moon.

One winter evening a year or so later we drink tea outside Tiger Tops lodge, gazing across the verdant mosaic of lawn, grasslands, hills and mountains. Andrew is packed, dressed and on his way home to write his thesis. “How did it go?” I turn to him. Reluctantly he admits his farewell was impossibly sad, their mutual longing unabated. “But I’m doing the right thing, aren’t I?”

Gaida Sahib divulged his difficulty adapting to Cambridge life after the Turai jungle. For months he preferred sleeping on the floor, and had to remember to wear shoes and not pee by the roadside. Andrew Laurie was destined for a fine doctorate and a distinguished wildlife career that still takes him all over the world. But he has never come back to Nepal.
Gurkha Radio’s first broadcast was in 1952, when the service was set up within Dharan Camp, one of the Gurkha recruiting centres in eastern Nepal. The first live broadcast from Kathmandu was in 1986. The British Army also brought out the magazine Parbato, written in Roman Nepali script, which is now published in English from Sandhurst.

“Gurkha Radio is a low-profile radio with a very specific target audience,” says Kathmandu news editor Daman Kheral. “We focus on the activities of the British Gurkha Camps in Lalitpur and Pokhara. The credibility of the service is high among Gurkha families. Its integrity has not been questioned in the last 65 years.”

Kheral joined Gurkha Radio after 25 years with BBC Nepali in London, and says his work hasn’t really changed: it is still mostly broadcasting news and current affairs.

Although his target audience is much smaller, he says the work is equally exciting because it is a close-knit and niche listenership. The only two challenges he faces are fulfilling listeners’ requests, because the station broadcasts from three different time zones, and enticing the younger generation to tune in.

Gurkha Radio averages 2.5 million connections from 165,000 unique devices in a month. Most listeners are in the UK, US, India, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Malaysia. The station’s most popular Nepali show is Pardeshi Ko Sandesh, where serving Gurkhas send messages to their family members and vice-versa. It’s followed by Kathmandu Ko Saugat and Swarmini Sangam.

Because families now prefer to keep in touch through Skype or Facebook, one would think that Gurkha Radio may soon become obsolete, but Kheral doesn’t agree: “The future of radio journalism is as bright as it was in the past. Radio will still remain the most popular medium in Nepal for years to come because of our topography, low literacy level and lack of access to the Net and its relatively high cost.”
SONIA AWALE

Kamal BK fell in love with 14-year-old Rita and eloped. Little over a year later, the teenager suffered a miscarriage after being rushed to hospital in Dhanush. Today, the couple have become activists to convince others like them not to marry young.

Last week, a video went viral on Facebook showing a girl in Kautaha being mercilessly beaten by male family members and for having an affair with a younger caste boy. The teenage girl did not have a relationship with the boy, but only because her parents had promised her in marriage to another family soon as she was born, a practice still prevalent in the Terai, known as garna.

Salma was 14 when she got married with a boy from her village in Suna. Two years later, her husband left her for another girl. Salma doesn’t know how to get help and spends her days with her young daughter in her parent’s home.

These cases offer examples of why Nepal has the third highest rate of child marriage in Asia. 48.5% of girls here get married before the age of 18, and, according to a Human Rights Watch report, 11% of boys. Despite a doubling of female literacy in the past 20 years, traditional norms and cultural practices persist in Nepal’s patriarchal society.

“Child marriage perpetuates poverty, increases school dropout and leads to early pregnancy that could risk both mother and child,” says Ramesh Gautam of World Vision Nepal, which takes a multi-dimensional focus to enhancing the capabilities of girls and the community.

Ending child marriage can also help increase family income. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report noted that individuals earn 10% more for each additional year they stay in school. When couples marry young they are unable to continue studying, which leads to limited livelihood options and affects their productivity.

“Education is the best way to reduce child marriage: it is important to find ways to keep girls in school. Nepal has high school enrollment, but also a high dropout rate among girls, who are 10 times more likely to drop out of school because of underdevelopment and obstetric fistulae because of their under-developed reproductive organs. Girls who marry early also face increased domestic violence and psychological trauma.

“The primary causes for both conditions are early marriage and early childbearing, both common in Nepal. Most girls do not know how to get help and are ostracized, forcing them to suffer throughout their life,” says Laxmi Basnet Pradhan of UNFPA.

Nepal outlawed child marriage in 1963, prohibiting it before the age of 20 for both girls and boys. But additional legislation is still needed to make the laws workable, including penalties for marrying too young. The government has set a target of ending underage marriage by 2030, and has drafted guiding principles to enforce the minimum age of marriage.

However, activists say they need to lobby for a separate, stronger law if the changes do not address every aspect of child marriage.

“Although the National Code criminalizes child marriage, there is no provision of punishment so that such practices will be discouraged from a legal point of view,” says Gautam. “It is not well defined and is very feeble in terms of severity of the crime. The law is not effective and the government needs to strongly address it.”

Besides stronger laws, Blahsukh says greater gender equality and equal opportunities for girls will help curb child marriage.

“It will take time to change traditions and attitudes but we need to show girls and their parents and communities that they can be something important and valuable in society, and provide them with role model and chances in life,” she added.

World Vision Nepal will be launching a five-year campaign against child marriage this month in collaboration with the government. Figures show that child marriage is not just a rural problem: 34% of marriages in cities are of couples below 18. Teenagers begin relationships on Facebook and if their parents disagree, they elope. There is also a sharp rise in child marriage in earthquake-affected areas.

The trend has made sex education and adolescent-friendly services essential, which is why the Ministry of Education is working with UNFPA to integrate information on sexuality into school textbooks.

“It is important to consider both forced and voluntary child marriage when combating it, and employ a multi-sectoral approach where adolescents, the community, private organizations and the government are all involved,” says Larina Shapita of Oxfam. “Laws against child marriage are in place, but periodic review and implementation are needed.”

MARRIYING WHEN YOUNG

World Vision Nepal and his parents talk about a child marriage and its consequences, while he wishes his parents, the parents of his new bride, and the livelihoods of his new bride.

FAR TOO YOUNG

Child brides and grooms convince peers they are too young to get married.
Not just a social problem, but an economic one

ELIZABETH HANNA SATOW

Child marriage is defined as marriage or union before the age of 18. The negative impact of child marriage on girls in particular is well documented. Compared to those who marry later, girls who marry before the age of 18 tend to become pregnant earlier, they suffer a higher number of complications during their pregnancy, and they have a higher maternal mortality rate than those who marry later. Child brides also have a high tendency to drop out of school upon getting married and a higher chance of experiencing domestic violence.

But the impact of child marriage goes far beyond individuals and their families. According to the report Economic Impacts of Child Marriage, published by the World Bank and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in June 2017, child marriage will cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030. Conversely, ending child marriage would have a large positive effect on the educational attainment of girls and their children, contribute to women having fewer children and having those children later in life, and increase women’s expected earnings and household welfare.

The analysis suggests that by 2030, gains in annual welfare from lower population growth could reach more than $500 billion annually. In Uganda, the benefit from reduced fertility would be equivalent to $2.6 billion, while in Nepal this would be almost $1 billion. Child marriage is an economic issue as well as a social one.

Though the prevalence of child marriage has decreased around the world, it remains high in many countries. Nepal is among the 10 countries in the world with the highest rate of child marriage and third highest in Asia, after Bangladesh and India. Over one-third of girls in Nepal (37%) marry before the age of 18 and 16% before the age of 15, according to UNICEF. A 2012 report by World Vision International Nepal, Save the Children and Plan International shows that the prevalence of child marriage varies significantly among Nepal’s many ethnic, religious and caste groups. The rate of child marriage is highest among marginalized and lower-caste communities.

The government has taken some good steps to reducing child marriage in Nepal, making it illegal in 1963. However, implementation and enforcement of protective policies need to be strengthened. Ending child marriage is a target under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.3 and 16.2 and the Nepal government has endorsed a National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nepal by 2030. This is a positive step, but much work needs yet to be done. An action plan to implement the strategy is due, and investment is required to bring about the necessary changes to end the practice in Nepal.

Ending child marriage cannot be done through legislation alone; it needs to be tackled at many different levels.

On 10 August, World Vision, in partnership with the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal (ACORAB), will launch a five-year campaign to empower children — working closely with government, civil society, the private sector and communities — to bring an end to child marriage in Nepal.

As we embark on this campaign, I invite you to join us in strengthening systems that protect children, raise awareness and challenge harmful practices so that the children of Nepal can look forward to a future where they can fulfil their potential and the potential of this country.

Elizabeth Hanna Satow is the National Director for World Vision International Nepal.
Layering The City,
Save the date to be a part of an exhibition of lithographs and woodcut prints by Bhuvana Dugar.
30 July-10 August, Siddhathna Art Gallery, Saber Motal Residency, (02) 5220607

Vocal workshop,
Register to learn singing techniques from renowned jazz vocalist Chandni Das Rani, hosted by Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory.
5-10 August, (07) 3027704
http://www.khajazz.com/wp-local-teacher-\donor-donors/

Obstacle race,
Be adventurous and test your strength at Nepal’s first obstacle race.
9 September, Bann, Godawari Football Ground, Rs. 1500, free for ultra-run.

Talks of philosophy,
Discussion on the paper ‘Against Time Buses’ by philosophers Preston Greene and Mheetan Sylkam, published by the University of Chicago Press.
8 August, 5:30-6:30, Peko Mondo, Lalitpur, (01) 5156360

Comicon in Nepal,
Fans of Marvel, DC, Anime, games and the comic genre are in for a treat. Participate in this event that will host international cosplay artists from Japan, Philippines and India.
9-September, 10am-6pm, Heritage Garden, Swayambh, (01) 5073906

Monsoon Sundays,
Food connoisseurs can relish a succulent barbeque with a choice of African, Arabic or Mediterranean specialities, along with access to the swimming pool.
23 July onwards; 12:30-3:30 pm, Rs. 999 per person. (47) 479080
www.katsfood.com/reservations@katsfood.com

Ventures Café,
Stay by for the best fusion menu and all local favourites and enjoy the breezy outdoor seating. Great venue for beer connoisseurs.
Boulevard, 9812720744

Mango Tree Lodge,
Culture walks, sailing in the Kailali, wildlife exploration, and jungle safari at Bardia National Park.
Bardia, Bardia, info@mangotreelodge.com

Gypsy Jazz,
Groove to the tunes of gypsy jazz with Nepali guitar maestro Ivan Manager.
11 August, 7:30pm onwards, Base Camp; Outdoor Lounge, Kathmandu, 8411226857

Central Kanta,
Warm up your weekend listening to a classical music performance by Nepali fusion trio Kanta Jana.
4 August, 7-10pm, Photos Restaurant & Bar, Sohph Chaur Merga, Thamel, (01) 4790413

Phatcowlee,
Catch bass guitarist Kun Thresha perform electronic numbers from the EP launched recently under his new project Phatcowlee.
4 August, 7pm, Base Camp; Outdoor Lounge, Jhoti Daha, 8411268577

Taste of the east,
Customise your taste buds with scrumptious dum sum prepared under the guidance of Chinese master chef Chin Lim R.
17-20 August, 3-5:30pm and 7-10:45pm, Bho Kusum, Sadar Chowk Franco, (01) 4739599, www.crownplayas.com/kathmandu

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.
Bagmati, K核准, 8006070465

Dan Ran,
The best Japanese food this side of the Bagmati. Try one of the bento boxes with a fresh lemonade.
Jhoti Daha, 5832102777

Trisara,
With dishes like flambeed prawns, crispy chicken and khas ojai, it would be folly to ignore its arias. Lalitpur, (01) 4011008

Cafe Dje Le Vu,
Spend an evening at this budget restaurant offering more than six types of settings. Try chicken karaik. Good music guaranteed.
Bhairali, (01) 4046829

Miss Motivation,
Kripa Joshi,
In life there is no real safety except for self-belief.

Atomic Blondie,
Opening in Kathmandu on 11 August.
As soon as it premiered in Los Angeles last week, this action movie was heralded as having sequel potential.
Based on the graphic novel ‘The Coldest City’, the movie is a look back at 1989’s Cold War Berlin. As the title character, Oscar winner Charlize Theron plays undercover-MI6 agent Lorraine Broughton, who travels to Berlin to monitor the murder of a fellow agent.

The Village Cafe,
Authentic Italian food that comes straight from the heart.
Pashupati Road, (01) 4020772

Barahi Jungle Lodge,
The first eco-jungle lodge of Chitwan directly owned by Chitwan National Park. Spa, bungalow guest rooms, individual and two-in-one private villas, outdoor dining with a private swimming pool.
Megaul, Chitwan, (01) 4092602
Pheri bhetaunla, Stewart

RUPA JOSHI

The one memory that sticks in my mind of Stewart McNab is of him climbing uphill to meet a group of women in Bhanepokhari village in Kaski, stopping to chat with every child and woman he met on the way with genuine interest, concern and empathy.

The former Nepal representative of UNICEF died at age 70 in Scotland last week, and it is in the outpouring of love and loss from those who knew, admired and were inspired by him that I rediscovered Stewart. They remember a former colleague, mentor, friend, his wit, good humour and a can-do approach to almost everything.

Stewart approached issues with clarity and a human touch, they remember. He was a fair, honourable, generous, caring, courageous, helpful, approachable, incredibly generous and fun-loving man who was great, not through grand gestures, owing rhetoric or a lofty position in the organisation, but through his warm humanity, hard work and unwavering commitment to getting things done for children.

He got the best out of people, tapping into every individual’s knowledge, experience, creativity and sensitivity, and getting everyone to work together. Stewart was the ultimate leader, who worked for the upliftment of children and women in all countries he served in, but most so in Nepal.

Stewart first came to Nepal in 1976, three years after UNICEF had set up a proper office in Kathmandu, as a Nutrition Officer. He then went on to head the Health and Nutrition section, and after leading the Bhutan office in the early 90s, was appointed Representative in Nepal in 1998. He spent a total of 14 years in Nepal, turning him into a Nepalese. This was where he started his family with his wife Di, where he had one of his two daughters, and where he also found a Nepali son. Even after leaving UNICEF, he continued to work through The Nepal Trust as adviser.

Stewart was instrumental in jumpstarting many innovative programs that focussed on empowering women, and giving a voice to children, and saw to adults. He helped plant the seed of decentralisation and local governance through community-based programs, believing that working with local governments would bring positive changes for Nepali children. Decentralised Planning for Children (DPc) became the bedrock of what has now evolved into Child Friendly Local Governance (CFLG) adopted as a national strategy by the Government in July 2011. The investment in human capital at the local level is paying off as village facilitators, community mobilisers, child club members, and members of women’s groups have been empowered, and have now become deputy mayors, parliamentarians, child rights activists and champions.

Stewart was a team builder, coach and motivator, and got people fired up, excited to do their very best for children. He never had to impose his ideas on the people, office or country—they came to fruition as he rallied his team and cut through the hierarchy.

In the UN’s Country Team he helped agency leaders to function as a team, taking them all to Ashham in 2000 to understand the local situation and improve coordination. The trip resulted in a single MoU signed by the various UN agencies with the Ashham DDC.

It was not an easy time to be Representative as Nepal was in the throes of an armed conflict. For Stewart there was only one side to take—that of the disadvantaged children and their families. Talking to Nepali Times in April 2002, he said: “Children and women suffer the most in conflicts ... when a water supply system is blown up, it is again women who have to fetch the water from somewhere up the hill.”

At the height of the conflict, when Mangilam was under siege, Stewart arranged to send a helicopter to rescue a UNICEF staff and other development workers stationed there. Staff security, safety and dignity were Stewart’s top priorities.

A highlander, Stewart loved travelling in the field, which always helped him to re-focus on the children that he cared so much about.

Stewart’s legacy lives on in Nepal not just in the programs and memories of his friends and colleagues, but also in the smiles of hundreds of children with cleft palates and club foots fixed through the Human Touch Fund. Initiated by Stewart, the Fund was made up by contributions of time and money from UNICEF Nepal staff. Pheri bhetaunla, Stewart.

Rupa Joshi, Chief of Communication at UNICEF Nepal, and created this from photos paid to Stewart McNab from friends across the world.
Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets

Don’t listen to what anyone says about Luc Besson’s latest and greatest sci-fi epic, just go watch it and decide for yourself. Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets is a joy for everyone who loves science fiction, and an essential addition to Besson’s oeuvre, which includes classics like The Big Blue (1988), Nikita (1990), Leon: The Professional (1994), Lucy (2014) and now this big-hearted, glorious, stunningly beautiful adventure that leaves the films based on Marvel and DC comics looking like they were made by unimaginative, heartless amateurs.

A wondrous imagination has always been at the core of Besson’s best films, and Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets represents perhaps the apogee of that extraordinary quality that has allowed Besson to stand apart from his contemporaries. The original source material for Valerian comes from a beloved French sci-fi comic series titled Valerian and Laureline but Besson resisted making a film based on these comics for years, realising the visual demands could not be met — until James Cameron unveiled his magnum opus Avatar in 2009 and Besson saw a way to bring these richly detailed comics set in a never before seen futuristic world to life on the big screen.

Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets must be seen in the cinema, and in 3D. From beginning to end the film will leave you open mouthed in astonishment and wondering why other mainstream films just don’t produce the same amount of joy. It is a visual treat, but also an example of just how big budget films can be mind-bogglingly gorgeous to look at, if the director actually knows what he is doing and can reign in the visual effects people when there is nothing to play with. Take Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 (reviewed previously in this column) from earlier this year as a perfect example: the film is fun and imaginative, but the ending is an overblown, nauseating plethora of visual effects gone wrong, with nothing of the delicate detail and attention that makes Valerian so riveting.

The main story of Valerian is pretty great too, the cast is filled with stars — Rihanna makes a jaw-dropping cameo — and the leads Valerian (Dane DeHaan) and Laureline (Cara Delevingne) are adorable and feisty enough to combat the heavy competition offered by the visuals.

The mission is, additionally, commendable, the villain believable, and the characters the duo meet are so vividly realised that you will fall in love with all three of them. The whole experience will leave you humming at the end: you will have been treated to a film like no other, and it will make you happy, content and yet yearning for more, your senses piqued after years of explosions that have left you numbed. You can then turn to all of Besson’s films while you wait for a sequel that may or may not come. Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets has not done well at the box office. I leave it up to you to figure out why.

MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

VOTES ON FIRE: Police on Tuesday burn ballot papers cast in Ward 19 of Bhaktapur Metropolitan City after the Supreme Court stayed the Election Commission (EC)’s decision to hold re-polling there. Re-elections will take place on Friday.

FAST FRIENDS: Ujjwala Thapa and Rabindra Mittal of the recently unified Bishkek Nepal Party participate in a rally in Kathmandu on Saturday to support Dr Govinda KC’s demand for reforms in medical education.

HEADSTART: Minister for Youth and Sports Rajendra Kumar KC on Tuesday inspects Dasharath Stadium in Kathmandu, the venue for the South Asian Games to be held in Nepal in 2019.

ON RECORD: Kanti Parajuli, chair of the 2016 Barbara Adams Investigative Journalism Award from Suresh Rana, Phurma (right) on Thursday.

MAKING WAVES: On return to Kathmandu on Monday from Budapest, Tasha Shrestha, who set a new national record in the women’s 100m breaststroke at the Swimming World Championships is greeted by Turkish Airlines Nepal Manager Abdullah Tuner Reche.
Manufacturing ministers

Rameshwar Bohara in Himal
Khabarpatra, 30 July-5 August

After sending nine cabinet ministers and four state ministers to join the Sher Bahadur Deuba government, the CPN (Maoist-Centre) is now selecting five more state ministers.

For a distant third party in Parliament, having 18 ministerial berths is an impressive achievement. But this pales in comparison to what the erstwhile revolutionary party has achieved after joining parliamentary politics – a bourgeois democracy they fought a bloody war to overthrow. In the 10 years after joining the peace process in November 2006, as many as 72 Maoist leaders have become ministers, 44 in cabinet and 28 as state ministers.

Some Maoist leaders have become ministers multiple times: Krishna Bahadur Mahara is a six-time minister. After being deputy prime minister and finance minister, even in the Deuba government he has a top post, as foreign minister. Girija Mani Pahare is now a four-time minister, having been named health minister when Deuba expanded his cabinet last week. Jamadar Sharma, Top Bahadur Rayamajhi and Pabhu Shah have become ministers three times each. Nine other Maoist leaders have become ministers twice and 30 leaders once.

There have been 10 governments in the last 16 years, and the Maoists have been left out only three times. Except when Madhav Kumar Nepal, Khila Raj Regmi and Sushil Koirala were Prime Ministers, the Maoists have always been in government – they led three governments and were part of four other ruling coalitions.

Political analyst Shyam Shrestha says: “Maoists have now become part of the very bourgeois system that they condemned. Their attitude and aspirations are not different from those of the old establishment parties.”

Condemned by the UML, whom the Maoists during the war denounced as lackeys, would often proclaim that they are not meant into politics to be ascetics, implying that their real aim is to grab power and earn money. Now that has become a favourite one-liner among Maoist leaders. Politics is a lucrative business, Shrestha, who is also a Maoist MP, says: “Maoist leaders are voying with each other for greed.”

Analyst Munniram Khanal, who quit the Maoists and is now a Central Committee member of the newly- unified Biplavahad Subha Party, says Maoist leaders no longer debate political agenda, and are just concerned about grabbing plum ministerial posts. “The Maoists have split not because of ideology but because the party command could not fulfill every leader’s aspirations”, he adds. “For example, Mohan Baidya would not have split at all if his Lieutenant, Dev Gurung, was made finance minister.”

Narendra Jung Patar, an analyst still affiliated with the CPN (Maoist-Centre), says: “In our party, there is an ongoing marathon to enter Singha Durbar. But except for one or two, no Maoist minister has done anything to be proud of.”

A Maoist leader sarcastically says: “In the Hatsuka convention, our party decided to form a manufacturing brigade. And sure enough, our party is now manufacturing ministers.”

“Have faith in me”
Kulman Ghising at www.setopati.com, 2 August

My aggressive campaign to avoid load-shedding for a second consecutive winter is facing obstacles at every step.
In a meeting with the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament this week, MPs ordered the termination of a contract awarded to a Chinese company for installing a 23MW solar plant in Triarl. The MPs also demanded an investigation against me, accusing the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) of not choosing the lowest bidder.

Awarding a contract is not just about choosing the lowest bidder: the history and capacity of the bidding company also needs to be taken into account. And this is what the NEA did when it chose Kisen Energy.

The contract process for this solar project began in April 2015, after the World Bank agreed to provide a loan of $65 billion. The bank itself disqualified three lowest bidders on technical grounds, and recommended the fourth lowest bidder. I had not been appointed Managing Director of the NEA at that time. The MN wanted to choose the second lowest bidder, arguing that its technical problems were “minor deviations”. But the WB did not agree.

When I became MD, the NEA sought my views. I suggested stopping the entire process, and beginning afresh. But the World Bank said there was no valid reason to terminate the process, and threatened to withhold the loan. So we went ahead with the fourth lowest bidder.

MPs need to understand that it is the World Bank that is investing in this project, and we cannot do anything without its approval. So why investigate me when I had virtually no role in choosing the contractor?

Cookies are crooks everywhere. But that is not right: you must have faith in those who are working hard, and delivering results. If you want sweeping reforms, you have to take risks. This is what we are doing. There might be some flaws in the process, but my intention is good. Supplying 24-hour electricity is not going to be easy this winter but I am confident we can do it. I have taken on the ambitious goal of ending load-shedding once and for all. If you don’t want me to import electricity from India, buy LEDs and install solar panels, how do you expect me to end load-shedding? If there is load-shedding this winter, everyone will blame Kulman – so why are they not supporting Kulman now?

I sometimes feel that everyone put the entire responsibility for ending load-shedding on me, but it is all of our responsibility.

What Govinda KC wants

Govinda KC is on a hunger strike again – his 11th in the past five years. This time, his bottom line is Parliament passing a bill on medical education. Negotiations between KC’s representatives in government and authorities have made no headway, even as his hunger strike reaches Day 10.

The drafting and tabling in Parliament of the Nepal Medical Education Bill was the outcome of multiple hunger strikes by KC, an orthopaedic surgeon determined to reform Nepal’s medical education sector. Some MPs who are directly or indirectly involved in lucrative medical colleges are trying to block the bill, or water down its content by registering amendments.

But the iron-willed crusader is not ready to give up just yet. He has floated 24 amendments to make the bill stronger.

KC is opposed to the bill’s definition of public education institutes. The bill recognises institutions run by the government, trusts or non-profit organisations as “public education institutes”. KC says all medical institutes should be categorised as either “government-run” or “private”. UML MP Rajendra Pandey, Naresh Kharel and Man Kumar Gautam have demanded removal of the word “non-profit”.

The bill envisages a Medical Education Commission, chaired by the Prime Minister and co-chaired by the education minister. KC says this commission should be independent, and not include a minister at all.

The bill also aims to bar colleges in Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur from starting new diploma courses in medicine, dentistry and nursing. As per the bill, the prerequisite for a medical program is a 300-bed hospital, for dental and nursing a 100-bed hospital is required. KC wants the bill to allow new medical, dental or nursing colleges only after running 300-bed and 100-bed hospitals for three consecutive years.

Most importantly, KC wants the government to not issue new letters of interest or renew old ones prior to the passing of the bill. Past governments had agreed to this demand, and KC wants the present government to honour those past pledges.

Govinda KC wants the bill to ensure one government medical college for every private medical college. He has also demanded that at least one government-run medical, dental and nursing college in every province, and prohibition of any private college before a government-run one is opened. He is also pushing for more scholarships from the government as well as private medical colleges.

Car: Prime Minister’s Instructions

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

Robin Sayam in, August 1 August

The country is being run by the mafia, and political leaders are just their proxy.”

Nepali Congress MP Shri Ram Gurung in Parliament on Wednesday, referring to recent episodes of corruption
Internal needs

KATE RYAN

When Pramesh Pradhan began volunteering for Change Nepal in 2003, trafficking to Kathmandu was on the rise. In the midst of the Maoist insurgency, he estimates one to three teens from Thamel housed a woman working in the entertainment industry.

“We found them ignorant. We found them vulnerable. We found them exploited multiple times a day,” remembers Pradhan. As a managing director he is now fully consumed by his work at Change Nepal. But no matter how hard he works, the problem of internal trafficking persists.

“A lot of focus has been to address the issues of migrant Nepalis going abroad, their lives being very unsafe,” says Pradhan. “But at the same time, tens of thousands of children and women are working in adult entertainment centres in our own areas. It is rampant.”

Change Nepal is one of dozens of non-profit working with women and children who are financially bound to employers, work in unsanitary conditions, are cut off from their families, physically abused and psychologically trapped. These organisations work independently and in coordination to empower victims, to offer alternative work, education, housing and financial aid. The results are impressive, but not long lasting.

“We integrate 20 girls in a month, and they’ll bring 30 more the next month,” says Pradhan. “We feel we are bagging our loads against the wall.”

Helen Sherpa, from World Education, says trafficking is like a sausage balloon: “If you put the pressure one place to stop traffickers, they pop up somewhere else. They are very quick to shift, whereas NGOs and government are very slow in comparison.”

Pradhan says that the government is too reliant on NGOs eager to address the problem and that it should be taking the lead. When a case of 10 children working in a brothel is uncovered, the government looks to groups like Change Nepal to be on the front lines.

Skills they can count on

Hilma Dahal (right) meets with a young woman who was earning Rs40,000 a month as a sex worker. But the woman’s clothes were ragged and her shoes were dirty.

“Though she made that much money, she had nothing,” Dahal, executive director of non-profit Sherpa’s Dashain, says. The woman had been taking over all her earnings to her boyfriend, who forced her to have sex with customers.

Until she found Dahal, it did not occur to the woman that she could save money and plan for the future — the lack of financial ownership and financial literacy common among women trapped in Nepal’s entertainment sector.

Financial literacy can be a path to freedom for trafficked women, and the key to prevention for those at risk of being sold as sex workers. Math skills are essential to learning market trades, and personal finance leads to economic independence and self-confidence.

Former trafficked women do well in Kathmandu once they gain basic business skills, says Helen Sherpa of World Education. “They’re quite entrepreneurial, they are survivors.”

For girls who have not been trafficked but are at risk, math skills are tools for alternative work. And when women are working, they are less likely to be injured by traffickers and tend to self-advocate for their rights, health and when they can.

Sumitra (pseudonym above) was helped by Mari Nepal when her mother was placed in a brothel. Now 18, she passed her SEE exam and works for Kobaril Watch Company, making high-end leather goods and saving for the future. She plans to return to school to study rural development and one day own a job for young women.

For now, she is able to provide for herself because of her math skills.

Kate Ryan
NEW LIFE: After her mother was rescued from a brothel, Sumitra was put in shelter by Maiti Nepal. Now she makes higher-tier goods (left). Prameesh Pradhan of Charge Nepal (above) says the number of internally trafficked girls is in the thousands.

“We wish the government said, ‘OK, there are 10 children, we have a plan. We have seen the reports. Let’s work’,” says Pradhan. “They have not owned this issue.”

Hira Dahal of Chhoi (pictured below), is a member of the Campaign for Rights, a coalition of non-profits that lobbies for improved laws and services for vulnerable women and children. The Supreme Court’s 2008 directive to protect the rights of women in the entertainment sector and the 2012 Minimum Standards for the Care of Trafficking Survivors are steps forward. Whether or not those directives are carried out is her concern.

Dahal says the slow and inconsistent implementation of laws is due to the patriarchal mindset of those in power. Because women are not kidnapped in the night and locked in a room, the prevailing theory is that they are in the industry of their free will. The psychological and financial chains that bind trafficked women are harder to see and understand.

“They are not treated as human beings,” Dahal says of the women she meets. “They were blamed for being trafficked, for trusting the people and leaving the house, for being infected with HIV, and for being prostitutes.”

Helen Shresta says the punishment for those who are prosecuted needs to match the lure to join the industry. She says each trafficked girl is worth around $24,000 for traffickers, brothel owners and landlords over two or three years.

Some officials have been supportive. The US Department of State named Superintendant Kiran Rajcharya a Trafficking in Persons Hero in 2016 for her investigation into organised crime involving women and children. At a panel hosted by the Fulbright Commission last week, Rajcharya noted the social stigma that keeps young women from seeking police help, and called for stronger relations between the public and private sectors and between public prosecutors and police.

Advocates say the government needs to ensure all police are trained to spot traffickers, to hold landlords of establishments pimping children responsible, and to ensure prevention and punishment are not just written into law but practised and legitimized. Until then, victims are not likely to seek justice.

Last year, Dahal surveyed 180 women to see why they were not willing to file cases against traffickers and employers. Women answered that they did not know where to file, who to file against and added that police and the law were not on their side.

Prameesh Pradhan sits back and sighs. He says there are so many NGOs working on this, they begin to compete with each other.

“We want to network and work together, but because of the government not playing the pivotal role, is it networking or not working?” he asks. “Without the ownership of the government, we’ll fail,” he says. “Certainly fall.”
A mayoral candidate in the last elections asked voters not to be worried about the condition of what are euphemistically referred to as “roads” in the capital because Kathmandu was soon going to have a monorail, an elevated highway from Tundikhel to Lagankhel, an underground rapid transit, and he was going to turn Kathmandu Metropolipal into a “smart city.” Not to be outdone, a rival candidate promised that Kathmandu would not just be smart, it would be a total genius with an IQ of not less than 150.

We must thank the four-time PM for making the clever move to instruct the PMO to instruct the Secretary at the Ministry of Metaphysical Planning and Highway Robbery to instruct the Department of Roads to instruct its contractor to instruct the sub-contractors to order the construction workers to patch the holes on the streets in 15 days. That chain of command was what the city needed to be street smart.

The military precision has meant that five meteorite impact craters in the newly paved roads in Pulchok were filled after the Primary Minister’s order was handed down in Chinese whispers to the repair crew. It is a dramatic illustration of the adage that two birds killed with one stone in the bush are worth more than a live one in the hand, that the five potholes were all filled with garbage and turned into speedbreakers overnight. Three of them have since reverted back to being potholes again with the onset of the monsoon rains. But, hey, look at the bright side: five minus three is two. That still leaves us with fewer potholes in Patan than previously.

The naysayers will of course point out that there are 2.3 million other ash-holes inside the Ring Road, but you can never please these negative nay-sayers.

While we are all waiting for the mayors to be more astute, there are a few things we citizens can do on our own to give us a head start when, and if, Kathmandu ever becomes a highly intelligent organism. The Valley’s mayors have already fulfilled their election pledge to turn the capital into a smart city by having:

Smart Phones: Mobiles so wise they relay your geo-location to intelligence agencies.

Smart Toilets: The Municipality has designated some potholes as outdoor loos where citizens can attend to calls from nature and openly defecate to help fill the cavities with compost.

Smart Car: Kathmandu Metropolitan City has deployed clever cars to serve as boozedrive islands as well as to eat plastic and keep Kathmandu clean and green.

Smart Pants: This Asian trait is contributing in its own way to make Kathmandu a smart city.

Smart Traffic Lights: These haven’t worked since the Japanese instilled them at major intersections 10 years ago, saving the government billions in electricity bills.

Smart Airport: An NPN cleaned up the toilets, but forgot the sweater in the immigration does that happen single women travelers.

Smart Parliament: Members in the Public Accounts Committee have found inexpensive new ways to punish Cool Man to ensure resumption of soul-shattering in winter.

Smart Ass: That’s me.

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