Flowering democracy

A s Nepal braces for its landmark provincial and parliamentary elections, the first under the new Constitution, Nepalis are faced with two choices: either keep grumbling about bad politicians or throw them out of power by electing better ones.

But even if people wish to go for the second option, there do not seem to be enough candidates in the fray who are known for their integrity. Most contestants fielded by the mainstream parties have either failed to deliver or are dubious characters charged with murder, robbery and money laundering. Businessmen, bankers and contractors with vested interests are also in the race.

There are 495 MPs — 165 for the federal Parliament and 330 for state assemblies — who will be directly elected in the two phases of parliamentary and provincial elections on 27 November and 6 December. Another 330 MPs — 110 for Parliament and 220 for state assemblies — will be nominated later for seats under proportional representation. Apart from the Upper House and self-governing local councils, the country will have 835 MPs under its federal republic set-up — much more than under the constitutional monarchy or in the ensuing decade of transition.

Despite the numbers, it is far from certain that people will find the representatives they are looking for. “Having more MPs does not mean more representation of people in governance,” says sociologist Chaitanya Mishra. “With the kind of candidates we have, it seems that most of our future MPs will not really be the authentic representatives of people.”

The alternative parties have fielded untested but genuine candidates, but Mishra says the Nepali electorate generally loves predictability, and tends to vote for those who can actually win. So what could have been a chance to elect accountable leaders has become just another way for crooks and criminals to gain legitimacy to carry on with their plunder for the next five years.

“It is a tragedy of our politics,” says analyst Surya Shrestha. “When political parties give legitimacy to the criminals and ill-gotten wealth of gangsters what can we hope for?”

Analyst Nilambor Acharya is not so independent, trusting on the wisdom of the people. “In a democracy, people reject the crooks even if they get tickets to contest elections. Even if a few of them are able to manipulate voters into electing them, they cannot corrupt the whole system.”

Om Achta Rai

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W hen political leaders are completely discredited, when their parties are ideologically and morally bankrupt, when they exploit people by telling them anything from them, they turn into dream factories.

That is exactly what has happened to Nepal's three-party cartel in the run up to forthcoming provincial and parliamentary elections. Their campaign manifestos are so hypocritical they are an inoculation that, at least out of touch with reality, by the way they don't even pay much in taxes, are just like a casino game; the way they have been benefiting from the last 27 years of governance failure and are still treating the Nepali people like sheep.

The election declarations of the main parties have been such lies that they may not have got out of proof of hallucination. The UML-Maoist left alliance says it will raise Nepal's per capita GDP from the current $790 to $5,000 within five years — a feat that would require an annual economic growth rate of 20%.

Not to be outdone, the Nepal Congress wants the economy to be worth $500 trillion in that period, which would have the economy to grow at 13%. Nepal’s sharpest annual growth rate over the past 27 years has been a mere 4%.

There is no harm in dreaming big, but even dreamers have to be realistic. Midnight ranthambhore’s New Force Party, which is struggling to convince the bigger parties to allow it to hang on to the tail, has only 26 seats in the parliament to entitle mass poverty in five years. When 500,000 young Nepalis enter the job market every year, and there are over 4 million working abroad, the NC seeks to provide a guaranteed job to all Nepalis during its tenure. The left alliance claims to be able to ensure at least one employed person in each household. These parties may as well promise to distribute cash handouts to all 29 million Nepalis.

Warning up to the subject, the left alliance wants to make the country self-sufficient in agriculture. The NC promises Nepal will not have to import vegetables within five years. Neither party has any concrete plans about how to go about doing this, and cannot explain why they didn’t do it in the past 27 years.

The promises about infrastructure are even more outlandish; as such party tries to outdo the other with wild ideas like east-west bullet trains, monorail, metro and transit for Kathmandu. The New Force even wants to connect Kathmandu to the rest of the country by rail.

The parties know that no one reads their manifestos, and even if they did no one would believe them anyway. It has become so customary for political parties to lie and not keep promises that they think this is absolutely normal.

Having no ideological differences, and because they have squandered the people’s trust by nominating each other and their gangsters, the election campaign has now degenerated into mud-slinging and personal attacks.

The so-called “left” alliance (made up of cronies corrupt state) and the so-called “centre” NC (crony capitalists) have conspired to such an extent that it is impossible to tell the differences between Nepali and Farmer Jones.

READERS’ EDITORIAL

JULIA THOMAS

Nepali Times readers talk about this week’s comment regularly with our content, current issues and other offerings.

A misty print column where headlines across Nepal’s newspapers are often homogenous, Nepali Times’ editorial stands apart with an approach that humanizes the news. On Saturday, it reported how recently elected Bedhel’s three-left leaders as squabbled beneath the sheets, while another front page story in August displayed small images of Covid-19’s condition with each passing day of his 33-day hunger strike. The other pieces, fact-based and real, is the news, and in actions that might otherwise become headlines wither with time.

I spent the past three months observing the production of Nepali Times, watching stories being carved and cut together on the page. Once examined how recently elected mayor in Chitwan, in particular a female mayor, even more affluent labour rights of food workers. Often breaks a story, Nepali Times often reaches historical analysis and deeper into easier as being an impromptu impression. The paper has evolved consistently over time, cutting word length to accommodate larger and wider visuals, taking up ideas storying, but also staying more rigid in its editorial perspectives. In this regard, in the primary leadership of Nepali Times has not changed, thus the ideas preserved in politically biased journals are maintained of the same flavour. The paper often takes a stance in favour of upheiling the status quo, and doesn’t necessarily avoid bringing radical change in current parties towards an understandable mind and current action. The paper hasn’t.

Left, about one article is lifted from the Nepal media and transplanted into English as a means of offering a different view. For an article that covers Nepal, and some parts of Nepali media, such as vdom, were also published in Nepal?

Presenting these stories in English allows the paper to reach a much wider super class, educated population concentrated in Kathmandu and abroad. However, these articles have not otherwise had such a major source of information on realities in Nepal outside of the main centre. Because older papers are not necessarily telling these stories, Nepali Times could perhaps fill a gap and expand its reach by translating a portion of its current Nepali.

As a platform that held human rights and advocacy for the democratic process close to their hearts, the paper could do more pieces that set a timeline and historical depth to its stories. Let’s see more accounts of less covered controversial issues, such as rioting after the earthquake or current dynamics in the faro after local election, from reporters in districts outside of Kathmandu.

Ramesh Shrestha

Beggars can choose not to beg

The consumption activity’s glass half-full view of the Nepal state in this new beginning of the year has the secret of much disappointment, making the most marvellous and consistent article sat all. Gaia’s quest to the Burlington and we know your opinion.

Laalst Saye

“Must popular on Twitter”

Most visited online page

Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @Nepali Times “We want change. We want this monarchy to do a job.” @Dharmendra_ @YoYoGang

Sarita Dang @SaritaDang “What’s your view about the Blackstone Group’s move to buy 40% of the Nepal Times?”

Chitru R. Pokharel @ChitruRPO “Do you think the Royal Nepal Army is a threat to Nepal’s democratic institutions?”

Adhikari Tushar M @AdhikariVT “It was the best of times... it was the worst of times.”

CARDAMOMS

Big fan of Nepali Times work, as always! I just writing about the story on cardamom in Nepal in Times of India. @SonaliAwale @NepaliTimes Nepal gets like an advertisement for CICMOD, where there are objections to its work and role in the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area. It would have been good to read some different (not necessarily negative) views from people not directly linked to the project like KCA management committee, women’s groups and other locals. Anyway, keep up the good work.

Raju Raj Acharya

Tours: 114

Enigmatic Expresso

Weekly visits full 4900

What’s new? - Week 49

Weekly visits six 4105

I’m always following the Nepal news. How are you doing?

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A Star Alliance Member
Still silently crying

People without faith in the state migrate for survival, the new Constitution must change that

The process of departure had already started, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th, with already large numbers of Nepalis in Lahore before the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-16. That war led to the formalization of Gurkha recruitment, which has continued in the British and Indian (Gorkha) regiments.

'The cry is still there,' Stiller wrote in 1976, 'will it be heard any more than it was during the silent years?' Forty years after he wrote the lines, one must conclude that the cry remains unheard.

And two centuries after citizens started arriving in northern Punjab in search of work, the exodus of 'labourers' continues. Citizens of hill and plain fan out to all remunerative positions all over north and peninsular India – as restaurant labour, agricultural workers, shovellers, road carriers and in road-building gangs.

With passports made easy to get after the 1990 political transition, the 'remittance economy' took off, and now Nepali migrant labour is found in the farthest reaches from Namibia to Nebraska. The largest numbers overseas, of course, are found in the Gulf and Malaysia. The poorest of all still go to India. This urge of migration is thus a continuing 'silent cry', the static and practical reaction of a populace confronted by an insensitive, inefficient state administration. There is no meaning in reaching back to the deep past, but we must question the Nepali state regarding its record in the modern era, starting 1950 when the Ranas were ousted and Kahindanda developed a political class and civil society – a polarity.

The finger can be pointed with the help of Kindness to the Ayesha, a film by Bengali-based documentary filmmaker Chhunsi Rathy, who over six months filmed Nepali migrants in the illegal coal-mining camps of Northeast India's Meghalaya state. The 'rice-holes mining' is carried out in suffocating tunnels deep in the womb of the earth, beneath the bucolic setting of rural Meghalaya. The rolling hills and dales are interspersed with square pits that go down 100-200 feet. Catching colonial-era, the miners then dig laterally through tiny tunnels. Reddy brings out the humanity of the migrants in the coal pits and camps. Bihari Rai is smothered in coal dust as he works in the darkness with head torch. Lying on his side, he strikes at the coal strata with his hammer and lassie.

When Bihari takes a break, washing the coal dust off his skin, he is a man transformed. Smartly dressed, he heads out to meet the mine owner in another camp, carrying his very own camera to create a poignant portrait gallery of life at the absolute margin. Bihari's ambition? 'I want to start a photographic beat they are also called squatters. More than 100,000 Nepali workers are employed in the mines, earning a pittance. The documentary ends with his descent into the pit, picking up hand exhibits. These coal migrants of Meghalaya all have Nepal or their reference point in terms of hopes and desires. For now, they are crying in silence, surviving as best they can, their pride intact, expectations and aspirations hardly abandoned.

Nepal's new Constitution has to be implemented so that this nation-state, established two-and-a-half centuries ago, can deliver the prosperity promised by the language. No more excuses.
Qatar Airways in Nepal: 20 years

Qatar Airways office in Kathmandu is Nepali; we have replaced all expats. There is close affinity between Nepal and Qatar and also between Nepalis and Qatar Airways.

Kathmandu is also important because 75% of our passengers are from Europe, the UK and USA, and want to travel to Nepal via Doha. The rest are Nepali workers, tourists and businessmen flying to Doha. Therefore, Qatar Airways is directly supporting Nepal’s tourism industry.

What are your plans for growth?
As part of Qatar Airways’ 20th anniversary celebration we are planning a seminar on Nepal’s Tourism this week with the participation of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, the Nepal Tourism Board and other stakeholders. We are also adding many new destinations, including Abu Dhabi (UAE), Auckland (New Zealand), Casablanca (Morocco), Cardiff, (United Kingdom), Chiang Mai and Vogas (Thailand), Chittagong (Bangladesh) and St. Petersburg (Russia). The airline has 369 new planes on order, including Airbus A380 and Boeing 787. This week, we completed the purchase of 8-6.1 of Cathay Pacific shares in the hope of diversifying our investment. Cathay Pacific is part of the One World network and has a very good reputation.

What aspects of tourism in Nepal do you hope to address in the seminar?
We see that Nepal is a very blessed country with hospitable people. But some things are missing here, including the ability to make the most out of whatever is available. Right now, we see huge potential in tourism through homestay programs, which could revolutionize the tourism industry and support women’s empowerment. The new generation of travelers wants to experience the natural environment and lifestyle that is more organic and closer to nature. Nepal also lags behind in transportation and connectivity, which hinders other development.

Will the limitations of the Kathmandu airport be one of the discussion topics?
Airports and airports go hand in hand; there is no doubt that we will talk about it. Qatar Airways is thankful to the government for the space it has created for us. However, we do feel that there is room for improvement. Every country in the world is redesigning and restructuring airports for quality service and experience, and that is not only because they are rich countries. There are opportunities for Nepal as well and we must explore them. Investors and better planners must be encouraged and convinced. We have been discussing this with CAAN, but in the end, it’s policy-makers who must act.

University of Coffee
Università del Caffè (The University of Coffee), Italy, inaugurated its branch at Silver Mountain School of Hotel Management on 6 November, where it will provide four complete courses for barista professionals. The Università del Caffe is the only coffee university in the world with 26 branches in various countries.

10 years of Etihad
Etihad Airways celebrated 10 years of scheduled flights between Abu Dhabi and Kathmandu at Hotel Annapurna on 8 November. The airline flew its first scheduled flights to and from Nepal in October 2007 starting with four flights a week, increasing to two flights a day in 2013.

Macro-economic figures
The IMF office in Nepal has published the latest macro-economic highlights. www. imf.org/external/np/exr/inf/APR. The figures show that Nepal’s remittances were at $3.8 billion in September, up 10% from last year. GDP growth was up to 5.5% in 2013-14. Inflation was 3.9%, and imports were up 14% and exports down by 5%. The trade deficit widened, but was kept in check because of remittances. GDP still shows the lowest in South Asia.

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Qatar hat trick
Qatar Airways Chief Executive Akbar Al Baker was awarded Aviation Executive of the Year by CAAN Centre for Aviation in Singapore, while the company was awarded Best Full Service Airline in West Asia at the Future Travel Experience Asia 2017. Doha’s Hamad International Airport was named Best Airport in West Asia at the event.

With the completion of its 20th year flying to Kathmandu, Qatar Airways has plans for expansion, the airline’s Nepal Country Manager, Jayaprakash Nair, tells Nepal Times.

Nepali Times How important a destination is Kathmandu in the Qatar Airways network? Jayaprakash Nair Kathmandu is very important in many ways and for various reasons. At present, Qatar has around 60,000 Nepalis out of a total population of 5.5 million, which is more than the number of Indians there. Qatar Airways itself has over 5,000 employees who are Nepali. Also, except for me, all staff at the Qatar Airways office in Kathmandu are Nepali; we have replaced all expats. There is close affinity between Nepal and Qatar and also between Nepalis and Qatar Airways. Kathmandu is also important because 75% of our passengers are from Europe, the UK and USA, and want to travel to Nepal via Doha. The rest are Nepali workers, tourists and businessmen flying to Doha. Therefore, Qatar Airways is directly supporting Nepal’s tourism industry.

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The Jasmine Revolution
The upcoming elections provide Nepali voters with a real chance for change.

At the Arab Spring picked up momentum in 2011, some activists in Nepal tried to engineer what they wanted to call the “Chanakya Movement” named after the Nepali word for jasmine. There were co-ops suggesting that Nepal was ripe for another revolution and why the youth of this country should overthrow obsolescent and incompetent leaders.

CONNECTING DOTS
Dinkar Nepal

There were limitations of the occupy movements, social media campaigns and even some street demos. But it could not pick up critical mass, and the dark forces of corruption, selfish brakhukarship and crookism just got stronger. After having suffered 10 years of war, it looked like Nepal did not have the appetite for another revolution.

The country was going through a nerve-wracking and prolonged political transition, with demands for ethnic-based federalism threatening to cleave the country. All Nepal wanted was an end to the instability and turmoil. We survived chaotic times, the collapse of the first Constituent Assembly, the election of the second CA, a devastating earthquake, the promulgation of the new Constitution that led to violence in the Tarai and the additional, unexpected ‘surcharge’ in the form of the 9th Indian Blockade.

Now, as we prepare to complete elections for three levels of government (local, provincial and national) under the new Constitution, the transition phase of Nepal’s politics is hopefully finally coming to an end. Nepalis are now getting ready to elect provincial and national assemblies on 26 November and 7 December.

Our vote should be used to transform the system, but do we have a real choice in the forthcoming elections? Nepal’s post-conflict politics has seen all pretenses of morality and ideological sanctity blown away, without any shame and regret. We have seen the Maoists forming a government with the Nepali Congress, collaborating in the local elections and now fighting each other again in the provincial and parliamentary elections. Voting for principles and ideology makes no sense anymore.

The present set of political parties has become a mockery of democratic institutions. Top leaders, most well past retirement age, ran them like family-owned enterprises. Their political organizations are supported by career politicians, people who have devoured their whole lives to crookism and patronage. Thus, democratic choice is rarely translated to good governance, even at the grassroots.

All that has to change now. With increasing literacy and a youth population exposed to social media, Nepal’s electoral demographics is changing rapidly, creating a shift in voting patterns. The strong showing of 21-year-old Ranjana Danihara in the Kathmandu mayoral race is a case in point.

Learning their lesson, Sujha and Birendra Nepal have united because the result of local elections in Kathmandu showed that together they might be able to create some real impact in Nepali politics. Although the new party has not been able to field candidates throughout the nation, there is a strong support base emerging if social media trends are any indication. A voter looks down and weeps when he met Babhina Mishra, who was campaigning for Sujha Birekeshile in Kathmandu, and the candidate has got huge approval after posting the meeting on his Facebook page. The party represents a true alternative to the tried, tested and failed parties and their leaders, giving voters new hope.

We want change. We want this monopoly of the dark forces to end. As a genuine alternative seems to be emerging slowly and steadily, making its presence known loud and clear, we have our fingers crossed that people will vote for change rather than for known non-performers. This might actually be the real Chanakya Movement that we have all been waiting for. And, it’s even better that this is a silent one.
The 2015 earthquake shook up Ani Choying Drolma, quite literally. She was thrown about a room of her 12-storey apartment in Kathmandu, forcing her to take stock of her life so far.

And what a life it has been. When Nepali Times profiled her in 2003, she was not yet the superstar nun that she is today. Her Buddhist mantra was just starting to become popular, she was beginning to build an international reputation, and she had not yet written her memoir, Singing for Freedom, which has now been translated into 16 languages.

Nearly 15 years on, Nepal’s famous Singing Nun has fulfilled most of her ambitions. She is at the pinnacle of her musical career, performing all over the world to raise money for her school for nuns in Pharping, for a kidney hospital and for many other charities. She is a household name in Nepal, and personifies what she drives past at the wheel of her black SUV.

“The earthquake woke me up. I realised I had too many possessions, too many attachments. I was travelling too much outside. I now want to journey inside and retreat into myself,” Ani Choying tells us in a candid interview this week before back-to-back concert trips to Beijing and California.

A health scare was also a warning to Ani Choying to detoxify and yearn for inner peace. Yes, even nuns seem to need such introspection. The past decade and a half has been a whirlwind of singing, writing, performing, and non-stop fundraising. Yet, she does have a sense of fulfillment about what she has achieved to bring spiritual well-being and tranquility to millions in Nepal and around the world with her songs.

It was the soothing combination of her mellifluous voice, the lyrics of poet Durga Lal Shrestha and the music of Nischal Basnet in her hit song Phlok Phlok Anka Ma that launched Ani Choying’s career. Sales of the album helped complete the Arya Tara nursery in Pharping. The song is famous not just in Nepal: it is being translated and sung in Hindi and German, and she has young fans singing it to her in Nepal, in Vietnam, Thailand and Switzerland.

“When I started, singing was just a hobby. I never imagined that any music would be all over the world,” says Ani Choying. During her concert tours, Nepal’s singing nun is approached by fans who tell her how her music has changed their lives. Like an American Muslim soldier who had served in Afghanistan and had such severe post-traumatic stress he could not sleep at night. One day while walking on a New York sidewalk, he heard the strains of such soothing music that he followed the sound to a Nepali handcraft shop. It was the Karmo Mantra from Ani Choying’s album.

He bought the CD, and told her on a recent visit that it has calmed him, and he is sleeping better.

At a dinner hosted by the owner of WuChin in Shanghai recently, a woman told Ani Choying she played her Karuna Mantra during a difficult delivery and “had the pain go away”. After almost every concert, fans mob Ani Choying to tell her stories of how her music helps them cope with the stress of modern life: women tell her how the music has made it easier to deal with a messy divorce, and in Nepal she has heard there are countless stories of how much Phlok Phlok Anka Ma has changed young people’s outlook towards life.

Ever since her Coke Studio concert with AR Rahman, Ani Choying’s popularity in India has grown, and fans recognise her at airports when she travels there. Now, Bollywood has taken notice and Ani Choying is organizing the Songs of the Himalayas concert in Kathmandu on 19 November with stars like Shantanu Moitra, classical vocalist Kaushiki Chakraborty, flautist Ashwin Srinivasan and sitarist Puruaaytri Chatterjee flying in to Kathmandu pre-bon to help Ani with her Aranya health centre.

She says: “I feel blessed that Bollywood has taken an interest and willing to help, and I am truly excited about being on stage with them.”

Kunda Dixit

Songs of the Himalayas with Ani Choying Drolma and Shantanu Moitra

Nepali Times Studio, 19 November Kaushik Nath Gah Times home delivery: +977 9801141261
OM ASTHA RAI and SEULKI LEE in SEOUL

South Korea lures Nepali migrants with better salaries, but treats them like bonded labourers

When Nina Limbu, 34, was preparing to go to work in South Korea after passing her Korean language test, everyone told her to be ready for the ‘3Ks’: dirty, dangerous and demanding jobs.

During her pre-departure orientation in Kathmandu last year, when she asked about working hours for migrant workers, a government official rudely told her: “If you think money grows on trees in Korea, you better stay here.”

Among all the advice she received before leaving, the need to keep her head down and tail was the most useful. She knew Nepali migrant workers earned more in South Korea (double what Nepal’s prime minister earns) not because of their skills but their hard work.

No one told Limbu to be prepared to face abuse and exploitation from her Korean employers, nor that she would be treated like an indentured labourer.

On a small vegetable farm on the outskirts of Seoul, she worked 10 hours a day, with an hour off for lunch. She got two days off a month, but would often have to work even on those days, without being paid overtime.

Limbu put up with all this exploitation, but she also faced mental harassment that slowly eroded her self-esteem. “I was prepared to work hard, but I was not prepared to swallow verbal abuse,” she told us. “My employer constantly shouted at me, and even manhandled me sometimes.”

Limbu made up her mind to leave her employer without his approval three weeks ago. It was an offence that could have led to her deportation. But she lodged a complaint after her employer sent her to work on someone else’s farm, which she says was a violation of the contract.

Limbu is now waiting for the dipping of a South Korean job Centre, which is responsible for hearing grievances of migrant workers. Meanwhile, she is staying at a shelter with five other Nepali female migrant workers exploited by their employers. These are dozens of other unemployed Nepali migrants there, staring at an uncertain future.

Many Nepali workers in South Korea complain of verbal and physical abuse, exploitation and harassment. Some manage to escape from the clutches of cruel employers, others are trapped, forced to work in terrible conditions.

On 7 August, Keshab Shrestha, 27, was found hanged inside the dormitory of a factory in Chungju, where he had been working for the past year. He left a hanging suicide note, saying that he was sick and his employer did not allow him to return home for treatment.

Shrestha’s suicide, extensively covered by the Korean media, highlighted the exploitation of migrants as well as the epidemic of suicide among Nepali workers here. Four other Nepalis have killed themselves since August, and 40 have committed suicide since Korea began to hire unskilled Nepali workers under its Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2008.

As in Malaysia and the Gulf, there is also an alarming number of people who have died sudden deaths. As many as 19 young Nepali migrants, who were certified to be healthy last before they left for South Korea, have died mysteriously in their sleep.

Gajendra Rai, president of the Migrant Workers Trade Union (MWTU) in Seoul, says most problems arise from a Korean labour law governing the EPS.

“The international community criticises Gulf countries for adopting the Kafala system, but South Korea’s EPS law has the same provisions,” he says. Just like the Kafala system, the EPS law allows Korean employers to treat migrant workers like slaves.”

Under the EPS law, migrant workers cannot leave their employers and join new jobs even if they face abuse and exploitation. There are conditions under which they can leave their employers, but there are no legal protections for employers.

For example, migrants can begin new jobs if police confirm that they have been beaten up by their employers. “But police need to see blood, bruises and cuts on the bodies, which are not always there, or already healed by the time the workers decide to seek justice,” Rai says. “And Korean police trust Korean employers, not migrant workers from poor countries.”

Despite all this, thousands of young Nepali men and women queue up for the Korean language test every year - passing of which is the first of several prerequisites for going to work in Korea. Since Nepal and South Korea signed the EPS agreement in 2007, as many as 46,983 Nepalis have flown to South Korea to work in manufacturing and agriculture.

Even without skills and experience, they can earn much more here than fellow Nepalis in Malaysia and the Gulf. South Korea increases basic salary to US$1,350 from $1,250 from next year.

“But if migrant workers do not have the freedom to choose employers and jobs, they become slaves,” Rai says. “And that is actually what Nepali migrant workers have become.”

He criticises Nepali politicians and top bureaucrats for not strongly raising these issues with the Korean Government. He urges Nepal to scrap the EPS and negotiate a better work permit system that would enable Nepali migrants to choose jobs and bargain for higher salaries and better facilities.

Baburam Khattadwa, director of the EPS office under the Department of Foreign Employment in Kathmandu, admits there are flaws in the system. But he claims that the Korean agreement is still the best deal going since unscrupulous labour recruiters cannot swindle migrant workers as they do those going to the Gulf or Malaysia.
Nepalis in Korea

46,963
Nepalis have worked in South Korea under the EPS since 2008

36,342
in manufacturing

522
in fisheries & services

10,099
in agriculture

8,490
Nepalis have returned home

137 FATALITIES

Source: Human Resource Development Department, South Korea

Upper hand

South Korea has given the upper hand to its own clients while designing the Employment Permit System (EPS). It means that if migrant workers are allowed to change jobs, they will start demanding higher pay and better working conditions, which will be a threat to local Korean workers.

Kim, director general at the Nepali office of South Korea’s human resource department, says that if migrant workers are allowed to change employers at will, it will be unfair to employers.

“From the perspective of employers,” he told Nepal Times, “an employer recruits unskilled and inexperienced workers, and spends a lot of time and energy in training them. Now if these workers go to work for others, will it not be a huge loss for their original employer?”

He adds, “We do not want Nepali workers to work in South Korea all their productive life. We want them to return home with savings and skills to start their own enterprises in Nepal.”

Kim admits that some Korean employers might have abused the EPS law to exploit workers, but he says the government is always trying to improve the system.

To be sure, South Korea has legally recognized the trade union rights of migrant workers, which was hailed as an important step towards protecting them.

Says Sujit Rai, who worked in Korea and is now teaching the Korean language in Kathmandu: “No Gulf country or Malaysia has allowed migrant workers to form trade unions, and struggle for their rights. But that is not enough. Until they get the freedom to choose and quit jobs, they will remain slaves.”

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Nepalis in Korea

46,963
Nepalis have worked in South Korea under the EPS since 2008

36,342
in manufacturing

522
in fisheries & services

10,099
in agriculture

8,490
Nepalis have returned home

137 FATALITIES

Source: Human Resource Development Department, South Korea

Upper hand

South Korea has given the upper hand to its own clients while designing the Employment Permit System (EPS). It means that if migrant workers are allowed to change jobs, they will start demanding higher pay and better working conditions, which will be a threat to local Korean workers.

Kim, director general at the Nepali office of South Korea’s human resource department, says that if migrant workers are allowed to change employers at will, it will be unfair to employers.

“From the perspective of employers,” he told Nepal Times, “an employer recruits unskilled and inexperienced workers, and spends a lot of time and energy in training them. Now if these workers go to work for others, will it not be a huge loss for their original employer?”

He adds, “We do not want Nepali workers to work in South Korea all their productive life. We want them to return home with savings and skills to start their own enterprises in Nepal.”

Kim admits that some Korean employers might have abused the EPS law to exploit workers, but he says the government is always trying to improve the system.

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Tradition subverted, An exhibition that explores identity and gender identification while engaging viewers in a dialogue about urbanisation and exile, by artists Elina Tamirrak and Anu Changar.
12 October - 3 December, 11am - 6pm, Kala Mandir, Wachowali Road, Lahore, (051) 5366699

Ride, interact, enjoy. Take part in a spurt rally to promote eco-friendly cycling habit. The event is conducted by the men’s club, Dinesh, on 17 November. 7:45 am onwards, Sports live, D. J. Road, Jinnah Market, Lahore, (042) 36719172, amincoaching017@gmail.com

Women’s walkathon. Participate in a walk and talk program where established female entrepreneurs can portray their business stories and aspiring businessmen can learn from their experiences. 18 November, 10 am, starting point: Latif Malla, Johar Town, (042) # 36719172, amincoaching017@gmail.com

Power, politics and war. Save the date for the state exhibition of paintings and drawings by Mooina Gung, on 7 November. 11am-8pm, Siddiqa Art Gallery, Badar Mohiuddin Road, (051) 4783486, 051 4319190

Sting dance. Embark the rhythm of the Sting era by joining dance sessions with Spanish vocalist Maria Laps on every Friday and Saturday.
Every Friday, Makhi, Jinnah Market, 6:30 pm, Every Saturday, Nitin Kang, 6:30 pm, (042) 34715354, 36719172, rydelpak.com pk

3 November, 10 am, Rashid Hotel, Statue Square, Kompah, Rs 10,000 (includes dinner and meet and greet with artists), Rs 5,000, Rs 2,000 and Rs 600 (dancing). (092) 36714129

Lokhara Chulo. Nepali dulch, Nepali Kuma, Swiss Roel, Italian Roel, Thai green curry. Take your pick. (042) 34715354, 36719172

Bubblt brunch. Enjoy your mid-day musical Brunch with friends and family for only Rs 1,750 per person (net). The amazing Shiraz courtesies and gifts won’t let you leave with empty tummy.
Every Saturday, 11am to 2pm, Sherwood Club and Club Mahindra, Shangri-La Hotel, Lahore, (042) 34715354, 36719172

Ventures Cafe. Step by for the best kusian menu and all local favourites and enjoy the breezy outdoor seating. A great venue for beer connoisseurs.
Bawar, (042) 36713004, Cantpot, (042) 34715354, 36719172

Prazaa. A new pick in town. 16th November weekend to enjoy the best International food.
Bawar, (042) 36713004, Cantpot, (042) 34715354, 36719172

Kasara Resort. A lavish resort located in the stunning Lahore National Park, for those who value their privacy and prefer a more secluded stay. Kasara offers two private villas with their own pools.
Choa Saidan Shah, (042) 34715354, 36719172, kasararesort.com

Hotel Mystic Mountain. Plan a weekend trip to this newly-opened resort located bounded in the Trends of Nagra Industrial Estate. (042) 36715354, 36719172

Landmark Forest Park. Foxy trendy resort offering floral packages. Choa Saidan Shah, (042) 36715354, 36719172

Gakarna Forest Resort. A paradise that relaxes your brain and encourages meditation, just a 20-minute drive from Choa Saidan Shah.
Gakarna, (042) 36715354, 36719172, gakarnaforest.com

Shivapuri Heights Cottage. Walk and sit around Basban Katha to escape the hassle of the city. Enjoy some quiet family time or a manager or day to stay overnight at the cottage. Advanced booking recommended. Basban Katha, (042) 36715354, 36719172, shivapuricottage.com

Mum’s Garden Resort. Head to Choa Saidan Shah for a peaceful and contribute stay in beautifully-designed cottages surrounded by lush green garden with great views of Pawa Lake and the Apsara Hills. Lohiwal, Lahore, (042) 36714998, www.mumsgardenresort.com

Based on the book, Shakti K Batala, the music taken you back to Neelam’s bhoonr. The story revives around a social role being an ultra-soft underground group and is being for the death of an innocent girl during an ambush. Directed by Sameer Bhatia, produced by Nath Kumar Gausing, the main stars Shyamal Rani, Miranam Babu, Ram Babu and Sharad Gausing.
Opens in Kothmir, on 2 November

Create what you seek but cannot find.
Kripa Joshi
Kripa Joshi
Our Pick
Our Pick
Open in Kothmir, on 2 November

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Create what you seek but cannot find.
Kripa Joshi
We Pick
We Pick
We Pick
In perfect harmony

Nearly 50 years after he first came to Nepal and later made Bhaktapur his home, Austrian architect and conservationist Götz Hagemüller has brought out a memoir, *A Picture Book of My Life*, actually two volumes that he calls an "illustrated autobiography.

Hagemüller started with his earliest childhood during WWII when the family was evacuated from Vienna to the safety of the Alps. The children sketched and had fun making Kiki Tikis. That interest in art and exploration seems to have hooked the young Hagemüller, who became a cultural nomad, traveling from Tashkent to Kathmandu inspired by indigenous cultures with sophisticated craft and sense of design.

In Volume 1, we get a visual tour of Hagemüller's travels through Africa and Southeast Asia and his work in the German-supported urban renewal project in Bhaktapur. Volume 2 zooms in on his other reconstruction work like Patan Museum, The Garden of Dreams and Chyasuli Mandap. The pages are sprinkled with photographs of Hagemüller with children and friends on holidays and trips. This gives the book the feel of an intimate Facebook album.

Hagemüller first came to Nepal in 1968 ("I was too old to be a hippie") as a UN consultant, and returned here to work with Nida Gutachow and Saphalya Amatya on a master plan for Kathmandu Valley's heritage conservation. It must grieve Hagemüller to see cultural and architectural treasures crumbling before his eyes, but he doesn't show it. How much of the old kingdom could have been preserved if only Nepal's politicians had followed that masterplan.

The book is also a critique of development and "sof" and bow foreign assistance exports a westernized, economic model in which the recipient often has no choice.

He is comfortable enough with Austrian government support for Kathmandu's conservation because it helps preserve what is best in its architecture and culture before it's all gone. Hagemüller recounts the chronicles of Tycho Jasmait priest Johannes Groebner, who travelled across Tibet to Kathmandu in 1660 and presented the king with a telescope. The King pored through it and was shocked to see the army of the enemy kingdom of Bhaktapur so close. Legend has it, he ordered his generals to launch an immediate attack. telescopes seem to be a recurring theme: when the Cappuccino monk Cassiano da Moresco came to Bhaktapur in the 17th century he gifted a telescope to King Rana's Mall on behalf of the Pope. Much later, the book cites a head of the German-Nepal Friendship Society being asked by Kathmandu Airport customs to pay a 150% duty on a telescope he had brought as a gift for King Birendra. Hagemüller writes that he is less worried about preserving the lines to Christianity than the wholesale "conversion" of Nepal to Western values and a consumerist culture.

Hagemüller's first book, "Kathmandu Valley's Heritage", included an addendum on how to build a new, sustainable plan to generate revenues for monuments upkeep. "I had to pioneer a whole new strategy that took me beyond the normal role of an architect," he writes. Patan Museum, The Garden of Dreams, and indeed the old town of Bhaktapur itself, are today models of proper management and preservation of heritage sites.

Hagemüller also weighs in on the debate around what can be considered authentic restoration of monuments like Chyasuli. It is not a matter of fundamentalism, writing: "It is not about the materials used in construction, it is about its history and design. The skills of the Newar craftsmen are authentic... rebuilding a part of what has been lost will have the stamp of the time: you shouldn't mistake something new as original." The book has details of many restoration projects including the 117th century Chyasuli Mandap, which had been lying in ruins since its destruction in the 1934 earthquake and was restored by Hagemüller's team based on early drawings (the left, right). Hagemüller has lived with his wife Lutzmilla Hamburger in a restored palace called Kadoth in his beloved Bhaktapur. It is a living example for the descendants of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation of how one can have beauty and harmony in perfect harmony.

Kunda Dixit

A Picture Book of My Life
Volumes 1 & 2
by Götz Hagemüller
2017

The memoir will be launched on 11 November at Tagore Museum, which was designed by Hagemüller's computerist and contemporary Carl Prutschi in 1973 and restored in 2013.
Thor: Ragnarok

There is nothing much to be said about the Marvel films these days, aside from whether it’s good and worth your time or bad and not worth your time, money and the increasingly self-interested cinema goers in Kathmandu theatres.

The seventeenth film in the Marvel universe and the third installation of the Thor series, Thor: Ragnarok is worth seeing even while it is not quite as good as The Guardian of the Galaxy (2014), which was so shockingly good (funny, entertaining and thoroughly original) that director James Gunn became a hero for a time among nerd movie goers — until the inevitable next instalment, which was fine but not as great as the first one.

Taika Waititi’s first attempt at a big studio film follows in the footsteps of Guardians of the Galaxy. Waititi, an indie director from New Zealand whose successes have come from the most irreverent of films such as the hilarious What We Do in the Shadows (2014) — a vampire spoof, pulls off a rather astonishing feat by taking a fairly formulaic Marvel film and making it side-splittingly funny at times.

Unfortunately, he does have to pay attention to the film’s care high stakes — all the gods are dead and there is no Asgard to save, as usual, one may as well fall asleep in the last twenty minutes — so irrelevant is the ending.

Ragnarok deals with the end of Asgard, the storied home of Thor (the lovable Chris Hemsworth) and his mischievous, malvolent brother Loki (good old Tom Hiddleston). As we move towards this rather tragic ending we experience a number of astonishing, self-indulgent nonsensical plot points scripted by people who clearly want to outdo the previous films. These are lavished by Writiti’s humour, Hemsworth’s excellent, slightly racist delivery, a few hilarious cameos (including Waititi’s humour, the appearance of the great Benedict Cumberbatch in his most recent character of Dr. Strange, and the introduction of the lovely, tough Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie, one of Asgard’s famed female warriors.

The inception of the bad girl in this film, Hela (played by Cate Blanchett who sometimes gets it right and sometimes doesn’t), is the main plot spoiler and so I will leave you to wonder where she comes from and why she is so very wicked. While you ponder, there also a few old faces that appear along the way to help us along, with the ever-very Mark Ruffalo reprising his role as Dr. Bruce Banner aka The Hulk and the charismatic Idris Elba as Heimdall — the keeper of the Bifrost bridge that allows Thor and his sidekicks to gallivant across the universe.

Since Thor: Ragnarok is not made for 3D and has already recovered more than double its $200 million budget to date, I advise waiting to watch this film comfortably at home without having to brave the girls in the bathroom during interval who are busy taking selfies in the floor-length mirror, and the people who chat freely during the film in normal voices as if the cinemas were their own living rooms instead of a communal space for all.

HAPpENINGS

POLICING THE POLLS: Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba arrives in Janakpur on Wednesday for a security meeting ahead of the elections on 25 November.

JOINT MANIFESTO: Pragya Kumari Dakal (left) of the Maoist Centre (Maoist) and KP Oli of the UML during the launch of their joint election manifesto in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

TOP DOC: Indian film journalist and media entrepreneur Sapli Kumar presents the Best Documentary Award to the directors of Sar — A Tale of Melodies, Tashir Mactara and Sarneek Kaur, during the closing ceremony of Film South Asia on Sunday. Sar's hard was awarded by Japna Pratha, directed by Jitendra Kham.

TURNING 20: Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Nanda Saran Ram Sewa Gurung along with Qutar Airways staff and the travel agents at Baghpati for the 20th anniversary celebration of the airline’s service to Kathmandu.
Ever since she was married at 14, Bashama Kala Thapa has either been preparing to give birth or recovering from delivery. Today, she is 61, and in June gave birth to her 16th child. She looks much older than her age, has only 7 surviving children; 9 other babies were either stillborn or died soon after. Her husband Jhalan Thapa says: “We did not know how to control births.”

Like three-fourths of Nepal’s rural women, Bashama Kala suffers from anemia, and she is so malnourished she is too weak to give birth safely. Her family’s crop yield barely lasts three months, and her husband works as a porter to feed the family.

Arma Budha, 43, nearly died while giving birth to her 16th baby at the Bajura district hospital in Kolti recently. It was her first delivery at a health facility. We asked her husband Payan Budha if the others were born at home. “No,” he replies matter of factly, “some were born in the jungle.” Only nine of their children are still living.

Girls in the far-western district of Bajura are still getting married young, and they become mothers even before they are mature enough. Their lives are spent giving birth to babies, one after another.

Shruti Regmi, deputy mayor of Budhanilkantha municipality of Bajura, says the district is full of women who have given birth to dozens of children. “Most are above 40 and they are still having babies,” she says.

Child and infant mortality rates here are some of the highest in Nepal, as is the maternal mortality rate. Nearly half the children born die before they reach five. Even if they survive, they are stunted or wasted due to lack of nutrition.

Kalari Budha, who lives in Himal village of Bajura, sent some of her 14 children to school, but could not afford to keep them there for long. They now work in Kolli, selling herbs they collect in the forest.

After her fifth child, Kalari began to feel pain in her uterus. It got unbearable sometimes, but she says she does not have money to seek medical treatment. Many women here suffer from uterine prolapse, but only some of them have had treatment.

Rup Chandras Biswakarma of the district health office explains that uterine prolapse is common because women become mothers early, give birth to too many children and are themselves anemic and undernourished.

Pamuya Rokaya, 42, “Of the 14 children I gave birth to, 4 were stillborn. A 4-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old sun died. I now have 8 children left. I did not have sufficient food to eat during pregnancy and after childbirth. It is very difficult to raise so many children, as my husband does not earn enough.

Delma Gurung, 35, “I gave birth to 11 children. I did not have enough food or warm clothes after delivery, and I had to work soon after childbirth. I had no idea about family planning. I am now facing a lot of medical problems, but I have never been to a health post.

Maga Gurung, 50, “I gave birth to 18 children, but only 8 of them are alive. The deliveries were excruciatingly painful. Even today, I am unable to stand or sit upright for long. I delivered all my children at home, and I am now suffering from back pain and uterus problems.

Bishama Gurung, 32, “I gave birth to 15 children, but only 8 are alive. Some of my children were born when I was on my way home. I hid a lot, and did not have enough to eat. I had to endure this pain over and again. I gave birth to a daughter while coming down from a mountain. I presumed she was dead and threw her into a nearby bush. Three hours later, my sister in law heard her crying and brought her home. She is now in eighth grade.

Women of Steel

Meet the mothers of Bajura who have given birth to up to 16 children each, in this video by the Centre for Investigative Journalism.

Kusha Chadara, 60, “I gave birth to 12 babies, only 6 are alive. I was forced to spend weeks in a cowshed after each delivery and became sick due to the freezing cold. There were no health posts in those days. I worked as a labourer to educate my children; they are in grades 12, 13 and 10 now. It is hard.

Panti Chadara, 60, “I gave birth to 15 children. Lack of food and warm clothes was a common problem. I bled excessively sometimes, but there was no medical treatment. I had to live in a cowshed after each delivery. We neither had contraceptives nor hospitals then.”

Stay FIT, feel YOUNG.
A national health insurance

Expensive medical care is driving Nepalis into poverty, and it is doubtful if a new insurance plan will make it more affordable

SONIA AWALE

16-year-old Deepa Rai needed a stent to treat her hypertension. But her retired Army father could not afford the treatment. He borrowed money and sold the family van in Tribhuvan University hospital in Kathmandu to clear her infection. She died during treatment earlier this year at age 22. The family is left with only 1,000 Nepali rupees in debt.

Puneet Shailaja spent all his savings for a kidney transplant in India 10 years ago. But his insurance policy offered nothing and he had to pay 8,000 Nepali rupees to the transplant surgeons to buy the transplant drug.

Bijay Bhattarai, 42, walked with his father for several days from their remote village to Bayapala Hospital in Kathmandu to see his mother. He borrowed 70,000 Nepali rupees from relatives to pay for her treatment, but she still died of cancer.

Sudha Mahaprajapati’s mother suffered a heart attack because of kidney failure. Then her husband was diagnosed with diabetes. Their family has been forced to sell their property in Katmandu to pay for treatment, and Sudha is now working as a cleaner so her parents can afford their hospital bills.

Conchita Ghorai brought her father home three days after her cancer surgery in Kathmandu. She couldn’t afford the hospital bill and the government’s special service neither. She died in hospital with a bill of 25,000 Nepali rupees.

A Nepali’s disease burden shifts from preventable infections to non- communicable diseases (NCDs) like heart and lung ailments, cancers, kidney and liver failures, which have become the major causes of death in Nepal. The government has launched several programs to tackle NCDs, but the progress has been slow.

Recent studies show that NCDs impact the poor more, as they did not have sufficient nutrition and care at birth and as they grew up. “The poor are affected more, not less, by chronic diseases if you consider their ability to pay,” explains health economist Bishnu Prasad Shrestha.

With more than half of total healthcare spending in Nepal paid directly by patients, medical costs are a major component of a family’s expenses. Prolonged treatment in the city, the rent and travel cost, and private hospital bills can take money away from higher education and force family members to migrate for work abroad.

Says Mark Arnold of Possible, which manages government hospitals in Achham and Dolakha: “We need to find ways to pay for healthcare, and try to develop a model that doesn’t drive the poorest people deeper into poverty.”

Last month, Parliament passed the National Health Insurance Act under which a family of five is entitled to 50,000 Nepali rupees per year for medical attention after paying a premium of 1,500 Nepali rupees. The act was rushed through by Health Minister Gagan Thapa before he stepped down, and will at first be implemented in 36 districts.

The Act makes health insurance mandatory, and there will be a budget for a health safety net. However, most medical experts Nepali Times spoke to said that although the law is a positive first step, it is insufficient to address the healthcare needs of Nepal.

“An act first looks more like an election sweetener: it is a token gesture that does not foresee the confusion of whether the premium will be affordable,” says Kumar Bhutwal, an Australian-based health economist who helped design health insurance in Nepal. “Health services have to be completely free at the point of need.”

Insurance in rural Nepal also has to factor in the need for follow-up care. Experts have

Lessons from the NHS

BIKASH GAUCHAN

Despite providing universal health care and treating all patients equally, the British National Health Service (NHS) is much ridiculed within the UK for delays and shabby treatment. However, as one of the oldest and largest publicly-funded health care systems in the world, it can be an example for Nepal as we start implementing our own national health insurance scheme.

Besides free medical care for all its citizens, the NHS provides emergency services and treatment for infectious diseases to visitors free of cost. On a visit last month to attend the national conference of the RCGP (Royal College of General Practitioners) in Liverpool, doctors from various parts of the world got to learn about Britain’s experience with a national health scheme.

As expected, there was a lot of concern about how such a scheme would affect the NHS in terms of funding, human resources, medical legislation and research. It was time of stock-taking as the British medical establishment lauded the egalitarian nature of the NHS, while the usual concerns were raised about understaffing, resource constraints, long waiting time for patients, and a complicated referral system.

For the Nepalis in Britain, the NHS is an invaluable service they say they wish they had back home. Kuma Kumari Rai was a resident in Dharmasala and is now stationed at the British Army base in Oxford, and he is most impressed with the computerisation of patient records.

“One of the best things about the NHS is its electronic record keeping mechanism which maintains health details of each citizen electronically,” he says. “It stores the medical history of each person visiting the clinic and shares with specialists if necessary.”

As a GP at the Bayapala Hospital in Kathmandu, I have seen how electronic record-keeping can directly help patients, and can also ensure insurance coverage for treatment and follow-up care in rural Nepal. Like the NHS, this can also level the playing field and provide equality in clinical care.

Rural Nepal faces the challenge of retaining qualified health care workers in district hospitals. Building a robust clinical team of doctors, nurses, midwives, community medical assistants and health assistants (CMAs) is necessary address the shortfall in health workers.

The UK has no challenges in medical care which the NHS is trying to address. Catherine Williams, a nurse at the Easton and Seabank Medical Centre lent them at the Liverpool meeting: “Unemployment, alcohol, an ageing population and financial instability are all contributing to an increase in mental illnesses. The NHS has to take these into account,” she said.

Nepal’s health policy makers can learn from the NHS about its founding principles. Like publicly-funded patient-centred high quality care free at the point of delivery and the General Practitioner (GP) based health care system. The fact that each and every UK citizen has access to health care as a fundamental human right is something to learn from.

Nepal’s challenges are access to health care in far-flung mountainous terrains. There has to be comprehensive community health care integrated with a hospital at every local level. Ensuring the availability of essential health services led by a GP round-the-clock at local hospitals is key to improving medical care in Nepal.
scheme is not as easy as it looks

Health for all?

The new national health insurance scheme is probably the most talked about topic at the moment, second only to the upcoming parliamentary and federal elections. Since Parliament passed the Act last month, there has been excitement and confusion in equal measure.

As per the Act, all the citizens must enrol under which a family of five will be entitled to Rs16,000 for medical attention per year. There is a premium of Rs600 per person with a total of Rs2,500 in a year. Every extra family member is charged Rs250 per year, who will then be able to claim another Rs1,000. The insurance won’t cover transportation or lodging costs. However, there is subsidy on the premium for the poor, disabled and elderly, says Gunamal Lehani of the Social Health Security Development Committee. A family identified as impoverished, poor and marginalised will get 100%, 75% and 50% discounts respectively.

The government will also cover some of the cost for impoverished patients requiring treatment for heart or kidney diseases, cancer, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, Sickle cell anemia, head and spinal injury. The scheme is known as Bipasa Nagraj Kosh, and patients need an official letter attesting to their weak economic status. The new policy has also introduced a provider payment split, and the insurer will manage reimbursement both to private and public facilities. Unlike in the past, the board of the Insurance Board will be nominated by the cabinet and will be independent from the Ministry of Health.

In the article he co-wrote with Anil Aryal and Duncan Mac, published in the journal Health Affairs last week, former health minister Gagan Thapa who is the architect of the scheme says: ‘Nepal will have to innovate on delivery of longitudinal care across the lifetimes of citizens in both homes and communities… leveraging our rich history of community-based, preventive care delivery.’

suggested it may be much more effective for the government to raise funding for rural hospitals so they have the staff and equipment to take care of 60% of cases for free. Mingma Norbu Sherpa, who till recently served at the district hospital in Salleri in Solu Khumbu, says insurance payments for healthcare will be a bit like reimbursement for earthquake damage insufficient.

“It will be cheaper for the government to invest in free healthcare in its district hospitals than to cover insurance costs,” says Sherpa. “Patients can also get free healthcare at home while an insurance scheme will drive them to Kathmandu and benefit private hospitals. National health insurance looks like an idea hatched by insurance companies and bankers: healthcare providers were not consulted.”

Possible’s public-private partnership, which provides free rural health care through the government system, is a model that may end up being cheaper than national health insurance. Its electronic health record system, where caregivers have patient’s data on tablets for home treatment and followups, may be more suited to Nepal’s terrain and socio-economic condition. Every expense is recorded in Possible’s digital system, leaving no room for malpractice and allowing seamless reimbursement for different models of healthcare providers. Even if the government goes for national insurance coverage, such connectivity-driven data would be useful.

Govinda KC, the crossing physician who has been on multiple high-profile hunger strikes to demand affordable health care for all Nepalis, and this week gave another ultimatum to the government, also has doubts about the new scheme. “It remains to be seen if the health insurance will benefit Nepalis or leave some gaps for people to manipulate it,” he told Nepali Times.

As the country gears up for upcoming parliamentary and provincial elections, there is a significant risk of a lack of ownership and confusion between different levels of government in the health sector over their roles and responsibilities in the insurance system.

“If we have the right kind of devolution of authority and resources, local government units will be proactive and accountable, and thereby more effective in prevention, treatment and rehabilitation,” says Bhawwak Koirala, National Health Insurance Development Committee. “A family identified as impoverished, poor and marginalized will get 100%, 75% and 50% discounts respectively.

Names of some of the patients have been changed.

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Standing tall

Since it had nothing better to do, GÖme has gone and set up a Task Force to determine the exact height of Mt Everest. Why on earth would the government want to do that? What if the new measurement showed that the essence of the mountain was actually much shorter, and it was no longer the highest point on the planet? Worse, what if while ge-locating Mt Everest they found that recent earthquakes had pushed the summit northwards into Chinese airspace? Whatever the Task Force finds out, it should never be made public. Imagine the disaster it would make on our territorial integrity, sovereignty and gastroenterology as a nation.

Most Nepalis think Mt Everest is in Nepal because that is what we are taught in school. Here, I will let you in on a closely guarded secret, if you promise not to blurt it out to anyone: the test books are wrong. Actually only the south face of Everest is in Nepal if we are not making this up and the East, North and West faces of the mountain are all in China. But, ahah, no one should ever know, as don’t go around leaking that information. We should never let the cat out of the bag, especially at a time when our national ego is so fragile. Imagine the ignominy and shame. How could we allow our heads high again among the community of nations? I can already hear the jokes: “Money, they’ve shrunk Everest!”

And what will become of all the enterprises that are named after Mt Everest if the mountain is no longer “Highest Mountain in the World”? What will the proud owners of Mt Everest Restaurant and Bar (shudder: “Get High Here!”)? Everest Bank will be forced to change its slogan (“Our Interest Rates Are Highest”). Everest Hotel can no longer proudly say that it is “Nepal’s Top Hotel” and will have to merge with Summit Hotel, Everest Nursing Home (“I Won’t Let You Ever Rest”) will have to convert to a dancing host, Mt Everest Mono Shop (“Dumplings Without Oxygen”) may have to rename itself and Mt Chyangkuhlang Monsoos Pvt Ltd. Everest Corrugated Zinc Sheets can no longer have the tagline “The Roof of the World.” Mt Everest Brand Rabari Flipflops will have to change its motto (“If I’m the First To Summit in Our Chappal’s”) into “Standing Tall in Our Durbar’s.”

Good thing Everest Herald folded, otherwise it would have to be renamed Ex-Everest Herald. And Nepal Tourism Board will have to destroy all its new posters depicting the mountain, and print new ones with the slogan: “Nepal, The Land of Everest, We Were Great Once.” I don’t know about you but, this matter of Mt Everest being knocked off its pedestal is giving me sleepless nights. On a matter as serious as this, the whole nation should be having sleepless nights. Wake up, yes, you thieves in the driver’s seat. It is an unthinkably, nuitoutaisbien scenario. And what I want to know is why GÖme had to be such a smart act and just before elections announce this geodesic survey that could be potentially disastrous for our national morale.

As if we didn’t have enough problems already.

It is therefore in our national interest to come up with a cunning plan to sabotage the expedition and ensure that GÖme’s (which in Tibetan means ‘Goddess Mother of the Earth’) and Nélamath (which in Nepali means “The Painful One Behind the White One with the Flat Top”) is Third from Right if You Are Looking Counter clockwise) remains the tallest mountain in the world and within Nepali territory. And for that the Bureau of Standards and Metrology should forthwith:

1. Make it mandatory for every expedition climbing Mt Everest from next spring onwards to require members of the summit team (including Sherpas) to carry at least 10kg of rocks to deposit at the top. If we do that, according to my back-of-the-envelope calculation, we can restore 3m to Mt Everest in the next fiscal year.

2. All Cleanup Expeditions that used to bring trash back from the South Col and dump it on the banks of the Sagarmati, will henceforth be required to take it on to the summit and deposit it there instead. Given the amount of garbage lying about, the goal of raising Mt Everest to 8,900m in the current Five Year Plan is attainable.

3. Tectonic plates are like a see-saw. You press one side down and the other side goes up. By moving all 29 million Nepalis to the vicinity of Kathmandu, we can make the entire country tilt, thus pushing Mt Everest up by at least 10m.

4. If all these ideas are too much trouble, let’s just bribe the Survey Committee to cook the book.

The Ass