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Man Bahadur Gurung, a UML candidate for the Province 4 assembly, campaigning on Wednesday in Sikles of Kaski District.

NIM DUTTA SUBEDI/RS

## Flowering democracy

As 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 825 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 kinds 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 Shyam Shrestha. “When political parties give legitimacy to the crimes and ill-

gotten wealth of gangsters what can we hope for?”

Analyst Nilamber Acharya is not so despondent, 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 Astha Rai**



**DREAM ON**  
**EDITORIAL**  
**PAGE 2**

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DREAM ON

When political leaders are completely discredited, when their parties are ideologically and morally bankrupt, when people have stopped expecting 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 hyperbolic they are an indication that, a) they are out of touch with reality, b) they don't care what people think because they have other means to garner votes, c) they have learnt nothing from the last 27 years of governance failure and are still treating the Nepali people like sheep.

The election declarations of the main parties would be hilarious if they were not proof of hallucination. The UML-Maoist left alliance says it will raise Nepal's per capita GDP from the current \$760 to \$5,000 within five years – a feat that would require an annual economic growth rate of 20%.

Not to be outdone, the Nepali Congress wants the economy to be worth Rs50 trillion in the same period, which would require the economy to grow at 13%. Nepal's sharpest annual growth rate over the past 27 years has been a mere 7%.

There is no harm in dreaming big, but even dreams have to be realistic. Baburam Bhattarai's New Force Party, which is struggling to convince the bigger parties to allow it to hang on to their coat-tails, wants to eradicate mass poverty in five years. When 500,000 young Nepalis enter the job market every year, and there are over 4 million

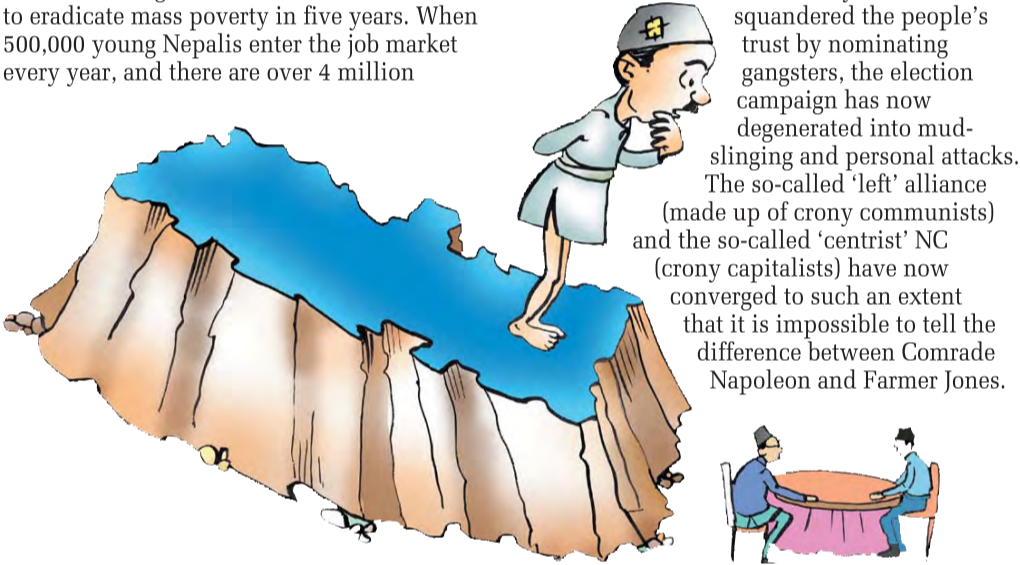
working abroad, the NC vows to provide a guaranteed job to all Nepalis during its tenure. The left alliance claims to be able to ensure at least one employed person in each household. These parties may as well promise to distribute cash handouts to all 29 million Nepalis.

Warming up to the subject, the left alliance wants to make the country self-sufficient in meat, poultry and dairy products, while 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 each party tries to outdo the other with wild ideas like east-west bullet trains, monorails, metros and trams for Kathmandu. The New Force even wants to connect Kathmandu to the bast of Mt Everest with cable cars, and build eight new international airports in five years. (Pokhara's international airport has not got started after 30 years.) If elected, all three parties vow to start digging for uranium, drilling for crude oil and mining iron ore.

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 gangsters, the election campaign has now degenerated into mud-slinging and personal attacks. The so-called 'left' alliance (made up of crony communists) and the so-called 'centrist' NC (crony capitalists) have now converged to such an extent that it is impossible to tell the difference between Comrade Napoleon and Farmer Jones.



READERS' EDITORIAL  
JULIA THOMAS

Nepali Times invites readers to this space to comment regularly on its content, correct inaccuracies and offer suggestions.

Amidst a print culture where headlines across Nepal's newspapers are often homogenous, *Nepali Times* storytelling stands apart with an approach that humanises its subjects. In the 13 October issue, a rosy-tinted cartoon entitled 'Bed fellows' paints three leftist leaders as snuggled beneath the sheets, while another front-page story in August displayed small images of Govinda KC's condition with each passing day of his 23-day hunger strike. These put faces, caricatured and real, to the news, and to actions that might otherwise become headlines ridden with party acronyms.

I spent the past three months observing the production of *Nepali Times*, watching stories unfold and come together on the page. Other pieces examined how recently-elected mayors in Chitwan, in particular a female mayor, more efficiently allocated relief funds or floods. Rather than break a story, *Nepali Times* often provides historical analysis and digs deeper into context, with an emphasis on impact.

The paper has evolved consistently over time, cutting word length to accommodate large and vivid visuals, taking up video storytelling, but has also stayed more rigid in its editorial voice than most other newspapers. The primary leadership of *Nepali Times* has not changed, thus the ideas presented in politically focused articles carry much of the same flavour. The paper often takes a stance in favour of upholding the status quo, and doesn't necessarily advocate for more radical change even if its content points towards an undeniable need for action and the current lack thereof.

Each week, at least one article is lifted from the Nepali media and translated into English as a means of offering a different voice. But what if this process was reversed, and some portions of *Nepali Times'* media, such as videos, were

also published in Nepali?

Presenting these stories in English allows the paper to reach a more upper-class, educated population concentrated in Kathmandu and abroad that might not otherwise have such a major source of information on realities in Nepal outside of the major centres. Because other papers are not necessarily telling these stories, *Nepali Times* could perhaps fill a gap and expand its reach by translating a portion of its content in Nepali.

As a platform that holds human justice and advocacy for the democratic process close to its heart, the paper could do more pieces that set a timeline and historical depth to its stories. Let's see more accounts of less consistently addressed issues, such as rebuilding after the earthquake or current dynamics in the Tarai after local elections, from reporters in districts outside of Kathmandu. Rather than editorialising or towing over familiar topics, let's see more lived perspectives from local reporters from areas or backgrounds that are often not addressed explicitly or consistently in the mainstream media.

*Nepali Times* does offer space for testimonial and first-person perspectives in its longer features and columns, and continuing to experiment with different forms and evolution over time is its strength. With its growing digital presence, there is room to reach further to new audiences and mix up format and vision.

Articulating change is the essence of news. So, *Nepali Times* should publish by the same standards, by taking a step back to re-evaluate the thinking that shapes its perspectives.

*Julia Thomas is a 2017 recipient of the Watson Fellowship and spent four months in Nepal.*

Times.com

ONLINE PACKAGES



SONGS OF LIFE

Catch Ani Choying Drolma in conversation with Kunda Dixit in a new episode of *Nepali Times* Studio. Nepal's famous Singing Nun talks about her upcoming concert with Indian musicians and her hit ballad, *Phulko Ankha Ma*, being translated into Hindi. (Read her profile on page 7.)



IN PERFECT HARMONY

Austrian architect and conservationist Götz Hagmüller writes a memoir about his work preserving Kathmandu Valley's heritage monuments. Go online for visual selections from the pages of his memoir, *A Picture Book of My Life*. Read the review of this two-volume illustrated autobiography on page 11.

1/2 FULL

Interesting! This new column gives off a very bloggy, optimistic vibe ('Beggars can choose not to beg', Anil Chitrakar, #882). Will be keeping an eye out for next week's installment to catch onto Mr Chitrakar's insights and writing style better. He has touched upon a rather wide range of subjects this time, and the 'glass half full' motto is something I've always believed. As the famous quote goes, 'in spite of everything, life is not without hope...' Glad *Nepali Times* has always been about fighting the cynicism. :)

Saniaa

I am not sure how to classify Nepal in terms of wealth: rich or poor. The fundamental problem in Nepal is the lack of political leadership. The other problem is that all development works have remained Kathmandu-centric because of which other parts of the country is devoid of development opportunities, which inadvertently also promoted inflow of people to the capital in search of opportunities. Nepal desperately needs new breed of politicians!

Ramesh Shrestha

Changing the way we think is the first step. We have to stop feeling sorry for ourselves and blaming others for our situation. Expecting others to solve our problems has to change so we are responsible to resolve our own problems. Your effort is much appreciated. Keep up the good work.

Raju Raj Acharya

CARDAMOMS

Big fan of *Nepali Times* work, as always. Just writing about the story on cardamom in Taplejung ('The kingdom of cardamom', by Sonia Awale #882). It reads like an advertorial for ICIMOD, when there are objections to their 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.

Simon Matthews

WHAT'S TRENDING



The kingdom of cardamom

by Sonia Awale  
Our coverage of cardamom farmers in Taplejung adapting to volatile market prices and climate change was widely shared and watched on social media. Visit nepalitimes.com to take a video trip to the kingdom of cardamom and find out more about cardamom drinks and fashion.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Beggars can choose not to beg

by Anil Chitrakar  
The conservation activist's glass-half-full view of the Nepali state in his new fortnightly column was the source of much discussion, making it the most read and commented article last week. Go online to read the feedback and let us know your opinion.

Most popular on Twitter

Most visited online page

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QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @nepalitimes  
"We want change. We want this monopoly of the dark forces to end"  
@DinkarNepal bit.ly/2zAGkgq

Sita Gaundel @sitagaundel2035  
Yeh! our votes should change the face of nation! but unfortunately what is happening???

Nepali Times @nepalitimes  
Johan Reinhard, an Explorer-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society gets the Hillary Medal. http://bit.ly/2Ai6L7F

Chhabi R. Pokhrel @crpophrel  
Great news! Johan is in Peru now. A great and humble man

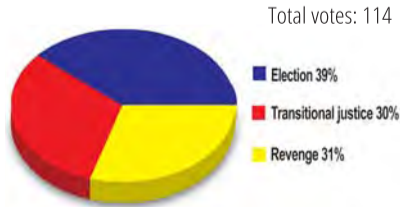
Nepali Times @nepalitimes  
"Nepal is not poor, it is just poorly managed," says Anil Chitrakar in his new fortnightly column 1/2 Full.

Adarsha Tuladhar @Am49T  
But at the cost of self respect.... sad but it has become a bad habit

Times

Weekly Internet Poll #883

Q. Why was Bal Krishna Dhungel arrested?



Weekly Internet Poll #884  
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Are you planning to enrol in the new national health insurance scheme?

Nepali Times

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER



20  
YEARS

# Still silently crying

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

Ludwig Stiller SJ wrote in *The Silent Cry* (Sahayogi, 1976) on how Nepalis were pauperised in the aftermath of empire-building attempts following unification. The people were taxed beyond survival and sustainability, and so the process of out-migration began. When the going got tough, the people got going.



The process of departure had already started as the 18th century gave way to the 19th, with already large numbers of Nepalis in Lahore before the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-16. That war led to the formalisation 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 line, one must conclude that the cry remains unheard. And two centuries after citizens started arriving in northern Punjab



Nishant Rai engaged in 'rat-hole' mining at the head of the pit. Suraj Rai (right)



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 coal seams, the miners then dig laterally through tiny tunnels.

Reddy brings out the humanity of the migrants in the coal pits and camps. Nishant 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 pickaxe, shovels the material to fill the low cart that he pulls along, thereafter drags

it out to the mouth of the tunnel, transfers the load to a *doko* basket, and makes the long and hard climb to the top. Then it is back down into the pit.

When Nishant takes a break, washing the coal dust off his skin, he is a man transformed. Smartly dressed, he heads out to meet the miners in other camps, carrying his hobby camera to create a poignant portrait gallery of life at the absolute margin. Nishant's ambition? "I want to start a photographic studio in Nepal, later to make films, and to marry the lady of my dreams."

Subba used to sing and act in Nepal, but finds himself in the same pit at Nishant. He looks out over the beautiful landscape. Expertly strumming his guitar, he sings Danny Denzongpa: "*Chiso, chiso hawa ma, yo man tesai baralinchha.*"

He is old and wrinkled, does not remember his age, nor his name – they just call him 'Baje'. He has ended up in Meghalaya after decades spent around the Northeast, tending fields, woodcutting and doing all kinds of hard labour. His arms are nearly useless now, so Baje stands like a sentinel above Nishant's and Subba's pit, his job reduced to counting the carts.

Suraj Rai, 11, wants to study English but his pride and his sense of responsibility has him leaving school and returning to the mine – the documentary ends with his descent into the pit, pickaxe in hand.

These coal migrants of Meghalaya all have Nepal as 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-half centuries ago, can deliver the prosperity promised by the landscape. No more excuses. 🇳🇵

*The documentary Fireflies in the Abyss received the Unicef Award for Best Film on Children's/Social Issues at the recently concluded Film Southasia Festival of Documentaries 2017.*

in search of work, the exodus of 'lahures' continues. Citizens of hill and plain fan out to fill menial positions all over north and peninsular India – as restaurant labour, agricultural workers, chowkidars, load 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 saga of migration is thus a continuing 'silent cry', the stoic 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 Kathmandu developed a political class and civil society – a polity.

The finger can be pointed with the help of *Fireflies in the Abyss*, a film by Bangalore-based documentary filmmaker Chandrasekhar Reddy, who over six months filmed Nepali migrants in the illegal coal-mining camps of Northeast India's Meghalaya state. The 'rat-hole mining' is carried



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## NEPAL WHEREVER YOU ARE.





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 *Nepali 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 600,000 Nepalis out of a total population of 2.5 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

# Qatar Airways in Nepal: 20 years

Airways office in Kathmandu are Nepalis: 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 Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Accra (Ghana), Canberra (Australia), Cardiff, (United Kingdom), Chiang Mai and Utapao (Thailand), Chittagong (Bangladesh) and St. Petersburg (Russia). The airline has 369 new planes on order, including Airbus 380s and Boeing 787s. This week, we completed the purchase of 9.61% of Cathay Pacific shares in the hope of diversifying our investment. Cathy 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?**  
You see, 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 I see huge potential in tourism through homestay programs, which could revolutionise the tourism industry and support women's empowerment. The new generation of travelers wants to experience unique food, culture 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?**  
Airlines and airport 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.

## prabhu Bank BIZ BRIEFS

### Macro-economic figures

The IMF office in Nepal has released the latest macro-economic highlights: [www.imf.org/en/Countries/ResRep/NPL](http://www.imf.org/en/Countries/ResRep/NPL). The figures show that Nepal's remittances were at \$586 million in September, up 3% from last year. GDP growth went up to 7.5% in 2017-17. Inflation was 3.4%, and imports were up 11% and exports down by 5%. The trade deficit widened, but was kept in check because of remittances. FDI inflows remain the lowest in South Asia.

### Turkish united for wildlife

Turkish Airlines has signed the United for Wildlife Buckingham Palace Declaration (UFW) pledging zero-tolerance regarding the illegal wildlife trade. UFW was on the agenda of the IATA Annual General Meeting in Cancun

last June, and has been signed by 41 airlines. The declaration hopes to stop the illegal wildlife trade as well as increasing passenger awareness about wildlife trafficking.

### 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.

### 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 Caffè is the only coffee university in the world with 28 branches in various countries.

### Qatar hat trick

Qatar Airways Chief Executive Akbar Al Baker was awarded Aviation Executive of the Year by CAPA 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.





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# The Jasmine Revolution

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

As the Arab Spring picked up momentum in 2011, some activists in Nepal tried to engineer what they wanted to call the 'Chameli Movement' named after the Nepali word for jasmine.

There were op-eds suggesting that Nepal was ripe for another revolution and why the youth of this country should overthrow obsolete and incompetent leaders.



**CONNECTING DOTS**  
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There were imitations 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 brinkmanship and cronyism just got stronger. After having suffered 10 years of war, it looked like Nepalis did not have the appetite for another revolution.

The country was going through a nerve-racking and prolonged political transition, with demands for ethnicity-based federalism threatening to cleave the country. All Nepalis wanted was an end to the instability and turmoil. We survived chaotic times, the failure 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 Great Indian Blockade.

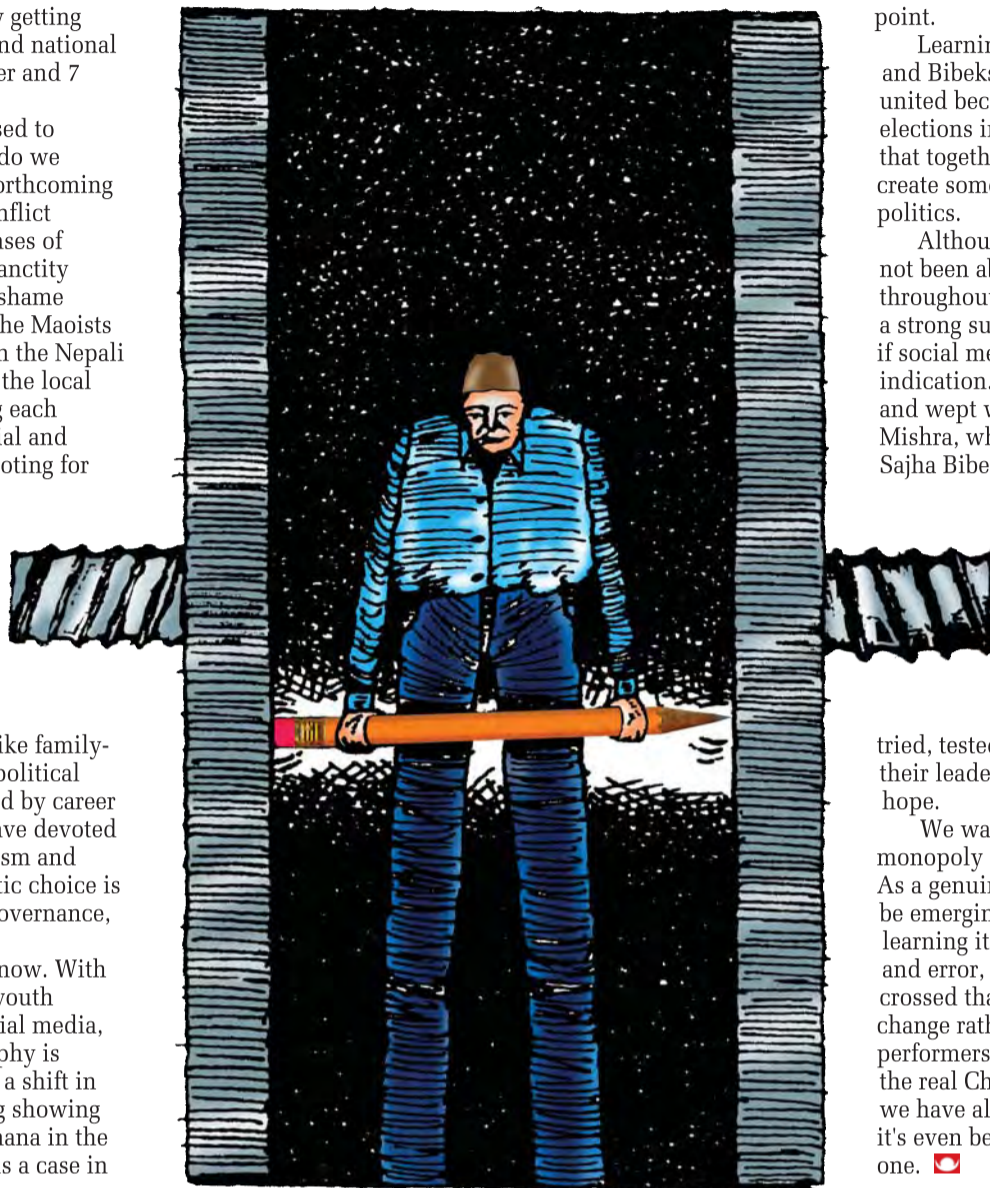
Now, as we prepare to complete elections for three levels of government (local, provincial and national) under the new Constitution, the transition phase of Nepal's politics is hopefully finally coming

to an end. Nepalis are now getting ready to elect provincial and national assemblies on 26 November and 7 December.

Our votes 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, run them like family-owned enterprises. Their political organisations are supported by career politicians, people who have devoted their whole lives to cronyism 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 demography is changing rapidly, creating a shift in voting patterns. The strong showing of 21-year-old Ranju Darshana in the Kathmandu mayoral race is a case in



point.

Learning their lesson, Sajha and Bibeksheel Nepali 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 broke down and wept when he met Rabin Mishra, who was campaigning for Sajha Bibeksheel 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, learning its lessons through trial and error, we have our fingers crossed that people will vote for change rather than for known non-performers. This might actually be the real Chameli Movement that we have all been waiting for. And, it's even better that this is a silent one. 🇳🇵

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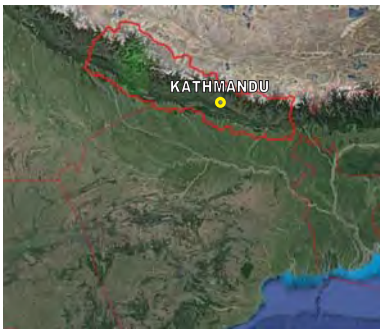
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As long as the wind direction is steadily from the west-northwest we can keep that pollution haze that has enveloped northern India away. It is seriously hazardous: up to 30 times higher than the WHO standard for airborne particles. The pollution is blowing into the western and central hills. Luckily for Kathmandu Valley the wind direction is from west-northwest. The weekend looks mostly sunny and pleasant, and as long as the wind direction does not change it should be bright.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
23° 9°	24° 9°	24° 9°

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# Ani's song

The 2015 earthquake shook up Ani Choying Drolma, quite literally. She was thrown about a room of her 12-storey apartment in Bansbari, 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 mantras were 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 14 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 passersby wave as she drives past at the wheel of her sleek silver 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 wellbeing 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 Nhoo Bajracharya in her hit song *Phulko Ankha Ma* that launched Ani Choying's career. Sales of the album helped her complete the Arya Tara nunnery 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 Nepali in Vietnam, Thailand and Switzerland.

"When I started, singing was just a hobby: I never imagined that my 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 handicraft shop. It was the Karuna 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 WeChat in Shanghai recently, a woman told Ani Choying she played her Karuna Mantra during a difficult delivery and "half the pain went 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 *Phulko Ankha* has changed young peoples' 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 organising the Songs of the Himalayas concert in Kathmandu on 19 November with stars like Shantanu Moitra, classical vocalist Kaushiki Chakraborty, flutist Ashwin Srinivasan and sitarist Purbayan Chatterjee flying in to Kathmandu pro bono to help Ani with her Arogya health centre.

She says: "I feel blessed that Bollywood composers are interested and willing to help, and I am really excited about being on stage with them."

**Kunda Dixit**

## Songs of the Himalayas

with Ani Choying Drolma and Shantanu Moitra  
6PM Sunday, 19 November  
Rastriya Nach Ghar  
Tickets home delivery: +977 9801141261

SONGS OF LIFE

Ani Choying Drolma in conversation with Kunda Dixit in the Nepali Times Studio.  
[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

BIKRAM RAI

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# KOREA KAFALA

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



**OM ASTHA RAI** and  
**SEULKI LEE** in SEOUL

When Nira 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 ‘3Ds’: dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs.

During her pre-departure orientation in Kathmandu last year, when she asked about working hours for migrant workers, a government officer 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 toil was the most useless. 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 decision 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. There 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 who are trapped escape by taking their own lives.

On 7 August, Keshab Shrestha, 27, was found hanging inside the dormitory of a factory in Chungju, where he had been working for the past year. He left a damning 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



GOPEN RAI

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 39 young Nepali migrants, who were certified to be healthy just before they left for South Korea, have died mysteriously in their sleep.

Udaya Rai, president of the Migrant Workers Trade Union (MTU) 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 end their contracts up to three times, but there are handy legal loopholes 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 ever 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 46,963 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 Khatiwada, 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 Korea agreement is still the best deal going since unscrupulous labour recruiters cannot swindle migrant workers as they do to those going to the Gulf or Malaysia.

**DARK TIMES:**

Nira Limbu (*right*), who recently escaped her abusive employer, consults Udaya Rai (*left*) of the Migrant Workers Trade Union about her uncertain future, in Dongdaemun in Seoul last week.

One of the 12,000 Nepalis who passed this year's Korean language test undergoes a health check in Patan Hospital this week (*below*).



SEULKI LEE

# 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



SOURCE: HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT, SOUTH KOREA

## 137 FATALITIES

## 40

suicides since 2008

## 39

sudden deaths in sleep

## 58

industrial/road accidents, murder and other reasons

SOURCE: NEPAL EMBASSY, MIGRANT WORKERS TRADE UNION



OMASTHA RAI

# Upper hand

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

Ku Wook Kim (*pictured above*), director general of the Nepal office of South Korea's human resource department, says that if migrant workers are allowed to change their employers at will, it will be unfair to employers.

"Think from the perspective of employers," he told *Nepali Times*. "An employer receives 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 this system.

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

Says Bajra 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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Tulsipur : 082-562575

# EVENTS



## Dogs' day out

Give you dog a chance to socialise with their four-legged pals and yourself an opportunity to share stories on raising your best friend. Includes a ramp show with dogs and owners.  
*11 November, 12pm onwards, Around the Corner, Bansbari, Rs 1,500 (includes lunch box and beverage for dog and dog owner), 9861631197, atc.restaurant2016@gmail.com*

## Ride, interact, enjoy

Take part in a cycle rally organised to promote the eco-friendly cycling habit. The ticket includes a t-shirt, lunch and medal.  
*11 November, Starting point: Tinkune, Rs300, Rs700 (those who don't have bikes), 9861611973, 9866781517, https://goo.gl/forms/nEJ3ginkZ9Gb5tFL2*

## Women's walkathon,

Participate in a walk and talk program where established female entrepreneurs can promote their business ideas and aspiring businesswomen can learn from their experiences.  
*18 November, 8am, starting point: Labim Mall, Rs450, ravi@urbangirl.me 9804217227*



## Power, politics and war

Save the date for the solo exhibition of paintings and drawings by Mann Gurung.  
*8-27 November, 11am-5pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, (01) 4218048, (01) 4433930*

## Tradition subverted,

An exhibition that explores self-identity and gender identification while engaging viewers in a dialogue about urbanisation and ecology, by artists Erina Tamrakar and Asha Dangol.  
*13 October-3 December, 11am- 10:30pm, Yala Mandala, Kwalkhu Road, Lalitpur, (01) 5536690*



## Swing dance

Embrace the rhythm of the Swing era by joining dance sessions with Spanish instructor Maria Lopez every Friday and Monday.  
*Every Friday, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, 6-8pm, Every Monday, Nriya Aangan, 6- 8pm, (01) 5013554, 9813556945, info@katjazz.com.np*



## Line,

The 1967 absurdist, one-act-play 'Line' by Israel Horovitz, directed in Nepal by Akanchha Karki, is premiering in Kathmandu.  
*2-19 November, 5:30pm, Shilpee Theatre, Battispatali, 9840175035*

## Ekadeshma,

Pick your favourite film from the list of 99 short movies at the Ekadeshma International Short Film Festival, 2017. The three-day event includes movies from 43 different countries and a panel discussion.  
*16-19 November, QFX Kumari, Kamalpokhari, (01) 4442220, 9860909882*

# MUSIC



## Live with Rohit,

Book your seats to watch Rohit John Chettri and THE BAND perform live.  
*17 November, 7:30pm onwards, Sports hive bar & lounge, Jhamsikhel, 9841320007*

## Tattwa live,

Make your weekend memorable at Shambala Garden with a taste of barbeque and live performances by Tattwa Band, just Rs2,000 per person (net).  
*Every Friday, Shambala Garden, Hotel Shangri-La, (01) 4412999*



## Songs of the Himalayas,

A musical treat featuring the Singing Nun, Ani Choying Drolma, and Bollywood music director Shantanu Moitra. (See page 7)  
*19 November, 6pm, Raastriya Naach Ghar, Kantipath, Rs10,000 (includes dinner and meet and greet with artists), Rs5,000, Rs3,000 and Rs2,000 (Balcony), 9801141261*



## Acoustic Bee Numb,

Your favorite singer Bee Numb is back with his great acoustic musical performance. Book your seats.  
*10 November, 6:30pm onwards, Bikalpa Art Café & Bar, Pulchowk, 9851147776, bikalpabistro@gmail.com*

## OUR PICK



Opens in Kathmandu on 10 November

Based on the book *Smriti Ka Dobharu*, the movie takes you back to Nepal's Maoist conflict. The story revolves around a rebel who belongs to an ultra-leftish underground group and is blamed for the death of an innocent girl during an ambush. Directed by Samten Bhutia and produced by Satish Kumar Gautam, the movie stars Dayahang Rai, Maniram Pokharel and Ram Babu Gurung.

# DINING



## Ventures Café,

Stop by for the best fusion menu and all local favourites and enjoy the breezy outdoor seating. A great venue for beer connoisseurs.  
*Baluwatar, 9851228014 Lazimpat, (01) 4410463*

## Prazada,

A new pick in town. Visit this weekend to enjoy good food and draft beer.  
*Baluwatar, 9801120222*



## Bubbly brunch,

Book your seats and enjoy Saturday brunch with friends and family for only Rs1500 per person (net). The amazing shawarma and pasta won't let you down.  
*Every Saturday, 11am to 3pm, Shambala Garden and Club Sundhara, Shangri-La Hotel*

## Lhakpa's Chulo

Nepali dal-bhat, Newari khaja, Swiss Rösti, Italian risotto and Thai green curry. Take your pick.  
*Jhamsikhel, (01) 5542986*

## 1905,

Heritage boutique suites with garden dining, 1905 Suites and Restaurants is now open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.  
*Nagpokhari, Naxal, For more information: 9860374450*



## Saya Hello Café,

Relish a wide range of Korean and Italian dishes this weekend. Tip: try the Valley's best chef's special salad and fish sizzler.  
*Boudha, (01) 4916218*

# GETAWAY



## Kasara Resort,

A luxury resort located in the lush setting outside Chitwan National Park. For those who value their privacy and prefer a more secluded stay, Kasara offers two private villas with their own pools.  
*Chitwan (01) 4437571 / 4438570, kasararesort.com*

## Hotel Mystic Mountain,

Plan a weekend trip to this newly-opened exquisite resort located in the forests of Nagarkot Hill.  
*Nagarkot, (01) 4426646*

## Landmark Forest Park,

Eco-friendly resort offering safari packages.  
*Chitwan, (056) 580311, 9851059096*



## Gokarna Forest Resort,

A numinous paradise that relaxes your breathing and encourages meditation, just a 20-minute drive from Kathmandu.  
*Gokarna, (01) 4451212, info@gokarna.net*

## Shivapuri Heights Cottage,

Book for a walk and lunch around Budanilkantha to escape the hustle of the city. Enjoy some quiet family time or a massage or opt to stay overnight at this cottage. Advanced booking recommended.  
*Budanilkantha, 9841371927/9802012245, info@shivapuricottage.com*

## Mum's Garden Resort

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## MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



## AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 3 - 9 November

301 – 500 Hazardous							
201 – 300 Very Unhealthy							
151 – 200 Unhealthy							
101 – 150 Unhealthy for sensitive groups							
50 – 100 Moderate							
0 – 50 Good							
	FRIDAY Nov 3	SATURDAY Nov 4	SUNDAY Nov 5	MONDAY Nov 6	TUESDAY Nov 7	WEDNESDAY Nov 8	THURSDAY Nov 9

Nepali Times and the US Embassy in Nepal have started collaborating on this weekly graph of air pollution in Kathmandu based on measurements from monitoring stations in Maharajganj and Phora Darbar. This week's Air Quality Index values have stayed consistently in the red 'Unhealthy' band. Even though prevailing winds have not yet brought in the toxic smog that has enveloped New Delhi this week up to the Himalaya, Kathmandu Valley appears to be stewing in its own mucky air. The graph represent concentrations near the city centre of small, airborne particulate matter of 2.5 microns or less mostly contained in vehicular emissions and most harmful to human health.  
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>



# In perfect harmony

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

Hagmüller starts with his early childhood during WWII when the family was evacuated from Vienna to the safety of the Alps. The children sketched and had fun making Kon Tiki rafts. That interest in art and exploration seems to have hooked the young Hagmüller, who became a cultural nomad, travelling from Timbuktu to Kathmandu inspired by indigenous cultures with sophisticated craft and sense of design.

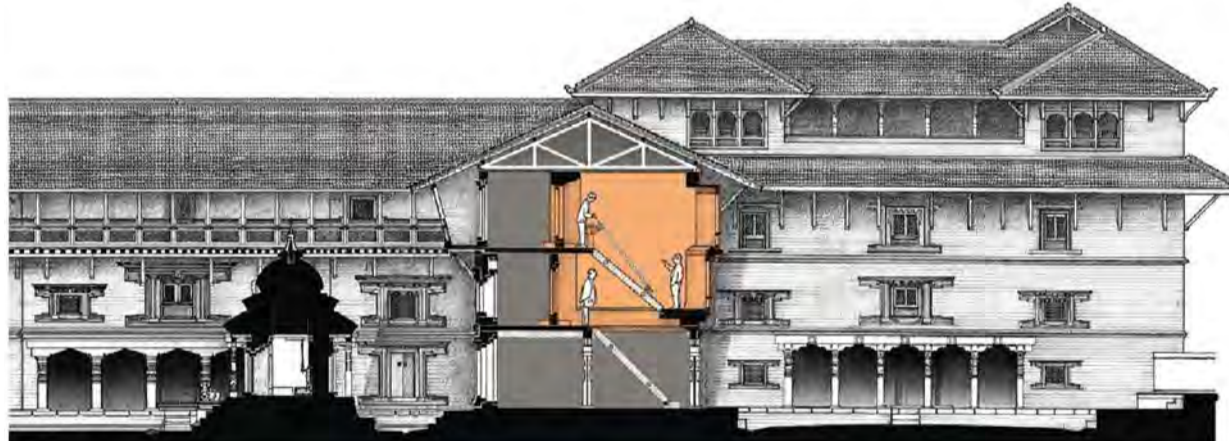
In Volume 1, we get a visual tour of Hagmüller's travels through Africa and Southeast Asia and his work in the German-supported urban renewal project in Bhaktapur. Volume 2 zooms in on his other reconstruction work like Patan Museum, The Garden of Dreams and Chyaslin Mandap. The pages are sprinkled with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

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

The book is also a critique of 'development' and 'aid' and how foreign assistance exports a worldview and economic model in which the recipient often has no choice.



ALL PHOTOS: FROM A PICTURE BOOK OF MY LIFE



## ROLE MODELS:

(Top to bottom):

Bhaktapur Durbar Square with the unique eight-pointed Chyaslin Mandap in the centre in 1855 (top left). The structure collapsed in the 1934 earthquake and was lying in ruins. It was rebuilt after German Chancellor Helmut Kohl supported its reconstruction during his 1987 visit to Nepal. Götz Hagmüller and Niels Gutschow used historical drawings to restore the temple using concealed steel support, which became controversial. But the Chyaslin Mandap survived the 2015 earthquake, while the Vatsala temple on the right went down (top, right).

The Patan Museum was (above, centre) restored over 15 years and completed in 1997 under the direction of Götz Hagmüller, who did not just restore and redesign the space but also put in place an in-built sustainability plan so revenue could be ploughed into its upkeep. The formula has worked well for the past two decades, and has been replicated at the Garden of Dreams at Kaiser Mahal. Hagmüller's architectural drawing (above) of the Patan Darbar Northeast Wing showing how the original façade was integrated into the museum space. Patan Museum has been described as the best museum in South Asia.

He is comfortable enough with Austrian government support for Kathmandu's conservation because it helps preserve what is best in its art, architecture and culture before

it's all gone.

Hagmüller recounts the chronicles of Tyrolean Jesuit priest Johannes Grueber, who travelled across Tibet to Kathmandu in

1660 and presented the king with a telescope. The king peered through it and was shocked to see the army of the enemy kingdom of Bhaktapur so close. Legend has it,

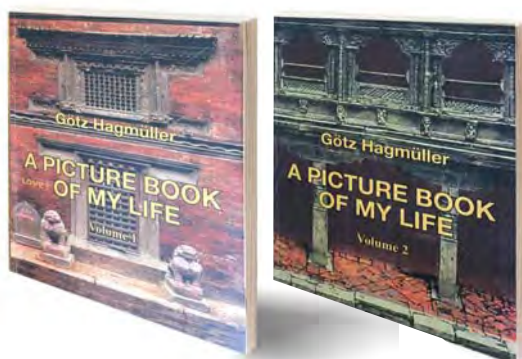
he ordered his generals to launch an immediate attack. Telescopes seem to be a recurring theme: when the Cappucine monk Cassiano da Macerata came to Bhaktapur in the 17th century he gifted a telescope to King Ranajit Malla on behalf of the Pope. Much later, the book cites a head of the German-Nepal Friendship Society being asked by Kathmandu Airport customs to pay a 150% duty on a telescope he had brought as a gift for King Birendra. Hagmüller writes that he is less worried about proselytisation to Christianity than the wholesale 'conversion' of Nepalis to Western values and a consumerist culture.

Hagmüller's didn't just help preserve Kathmandu Valley's heritage, he included an in-built sustainability plan to generate revenue 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 maintenance of heritage sites.

Hagmüller also weighs in on the debate around what can be considered authentic restoration of monuments like Chyaslin. He is not a fundamentalist, 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 17th century Chyaslin Mandap, which had been lying in ruins since its destruction in the 1934 earthquake and was restored by Hagmüller's team based on early drawings (top left, right). Hagmüller has lived with his wife Ludmilla Hungerhuber in a restored pilgrim's courtyard called Kuthu Math in his beloved Bhaktapur. It is a living example for the descendants of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation of how home and heritage can exist in perfect harmony. 🇳🇵

**Kunda Dixit**



## A Picture Book of My Life

Volumes 1 & 2

by Götz Hagmüller

2017

The memoir will be launched on 10 November at Taragaon Museum, which was designed by Hagmüller's compatriot and contemporary Carl Pruscha in 1973, and restored in 2013.



Go online for a multimedia package containing more images of monument restoration in Kathmandu.

[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)



# 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 goes 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 Guardians 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 tired movie-goers – until the inevitable next installment, 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 (in this case) bad girl-good guys complex and so, 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 loveable Chris Hemsworth) and his mischievous, malevolent 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 leavened by Waititi's humour, Hemsworth's excellent, slightly rueful delivery, a few hilarious cameos (including Waititi's), 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-wry Mark Ruffalo reprising his role as Dr. Bruce Banner aka *The Hulk* and the charismatic Idris Elba as Heimdall – the keeper of the Bifröst 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 \$180 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 cinema were their own living room instead of a communal space for all.



Watch trailer online

[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

## HAPPENINGS



RSS

**POLICING THE POLLS:** Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba arrives in Janakpur on Wednesday for a security meeting ahead of the elections on 26 November.



BIKRAM RAI

**JOINT MANIFESTO:** Pushpa Kamal Dahal (left) of the Maoist (Centre) and KP Oli of the UML during the launch of their joint election manifesto in Kathmandu on Tuesday.



KATH HARU

**TOP DOC:** Indian tv journalist and media educator Sashi Kumar presents the Best Documentary Award to the directors of *Soz – A Ballad of Maladies*, Tushar Madhav and Sarvnik Kaur, during the closing ceremony of Film South Asia on Sunday. *Soz* shared the award with *Demons in Paradise*, directed by Jude Ratnam.



QATAR AIRWAYS

**TURNING 20:** Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Jitendra Narayan Dev (centre) along with Qatar Airways staff and top travel agents at Boudha for the 20th anniversary celebration of the airline's service to Kathmandu.



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# Baby factory

PRAKASH SINGH  
in BAJURA

Ever since she was married at 14, Bishna Kala Thapa has either been preparing to give birth or recovering from delivery. Today, she is 41, 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 Jaidhan Thapa says: “We did not know how to control births.”

Like three-fourths of Nepal’s rural women, Bishna Kala suffers from anaemia, 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 ask 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.

Shristi Regmi, deputy mayor of Budinanda 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.

Kalsari Budha, who lives in Himali 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 Kolti, selling herbs they collect in the forest.

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

Rup Chandra Biswokarma of the district health office explains that uterus prolapse is common because women become mothers early, give birth to too many children and are themselves anaemic and undernourished.

*(Centre for Investigative Journalism)*



**Pampha Rokaya, 42,**  
“Of the 14 children I gave birth to, 4 were stillborn. A 4-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son 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.



**Muga Giri, 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.

**Bishna Gurung, 52,**  
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 bled 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.



**Dolma 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.



**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 I 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, 11 and 10 now. It is hard.



**Pantu Chadara, 60,**  
I gave birth to 11 children. Lack of food and warm clothes was a common problem. I bled excessively sometimes, but there was no medical treatment. And I had to live in a cowshed after each delivery. We neither had contraceptives nor hospitals then.



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

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NEPAL'S NO.1 BRANDED HONEY

# 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 stem cell transplant to treat her lymphoma. But her retired Army father could not afford the treatment. He borrowed money and sold the family ancestral land in Sunsari, but Deepa died during treatment earlier this year at age 22. The family is Rs700,000 in debt.

Hira Lal Shakya spent all his savings for a kidney transplant in India 10 years ago. But his kidney failed again and he sold his house, handicraft shop and motorcycle to pay for a new operation. Although the 52-year-old has recovered, his livelihood has not.

Binu Bhattarai, 14, walked with her father for several days from their remote village to Bayalpata Hospital in Achham to treat her intra-abdominal abscess. She was referred to a hospital in Nepalganj. Her father borrowed Rs100,000 from relatives to pay for treatment, but still he ran out of money and had to terminate her care. Binu has recovered now, but her father is deeply in debt.

Sarita Maharjan's mother suffered a heart attack followed by kidney failure. Then her father was diagnosed with liver failure. Sarita donated part of her liver to her father, but her mother's biweekly dialysis has bankrupted the family. They sold part of their prime property in Kathmandu to pay for treatment, and Sarita is now working overtime so her parents can afford their hospital bills.

Ganesh of Gorkha brought his father home after nine days in Patan Hospital with suspected bowel obstruction, but he still needs surgery. A simple emergency admission has already cost him Rs67,000 in a government-run community hospital even before he starts treatment.



As Nepal's disease burden shifts from preventable infections to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like heart and lung ailments, cancers, kidney and liver failures, treatment is bankrupting families and making them heavily indebted.

New world-class hospitals have opened in the cities, but these are largely unaffordable to a majority of patients. To make matters worse, rural government hospitals lack essential staff and equipment to deal with a growing epidemic of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and respiratory illnesses.

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 also consider their ability to pay," explains cardiologist Bhagwan Koirala. "Even better off families have been known to fall below the poverty line if a member is injured or has chronic illness."

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 Arnoldy 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 patients deeper into poverty."

Last month, Parliament passed the National Health Insurance Act under which a family of five is entitled to Rs50,000 per year for medical attention after paying a premium of Rs2,500 per year. The act was pushed hard 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 Nepalis.

"At first glance it looks more like an election sweetener: it is a token gesture that does not foresee the confusion of whether the Rs50,000 will go to underfunded government hospitals or expensive private ones," says Kumud Dhital, an Australia-based heart transplant surgeon who helps medical charities 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 followup care. Experts have

## Lessons from the NHS

BIKASH GAUCHAN

Despite providing universal health care and treating all patients equally Britain's National Health Service (NHS) is much ridiculed within the UK for delays and sloppy treatment. However, as one of the oldest and largest publicly-funded health care systems in the world, it can be 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 of 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 Brexit 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 Nepali diaspora in Britain, the NHS is an invaluable service they say they wish they had back home. Kamal Kumar Rai was a resident in Dharan 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 Bayalpata Hospital in Achham, I have seen how electronic record-keeping can directly help patients, and can also ensure insurance coverage for treatment and followup 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, mid-wives, community medical assistants and health assistants (HAs) is necessary address the shortfall in health workers.

The UK has new challenges in medical care which the NHS is trying to address. Catriona Williams, a nurse at the Earlston and Seabank Medical Centre listed 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 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 terrain. 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. 🇳🇵



Bikash Gauchan is the Medical Director of Bayalpata Hospital in Achham. [bikash@possiblehealth.org](mailto:bikash@possiblehealth.org)

# scheme is not as easy as it looks



PHOTOS: SONIAAWALE



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 followup, 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. Even if the government goes for national insurance coverage, such connectivity-driven data would be useful.

Govinda KC, the crusading 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 his 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 Bhagwan Koirala. "National health insurance is a start. There will be challenges but we can only move ahead."

*Names of some of the patients have been changed.*

## 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 Rs50,000 for medical attention per year. There is a premium of Rs500 per person with a total of Rs2,500 in a year. Every extra family member is charged Rs425 per year, who will then be able to claim another Rs10,000. The insurance won't cover transportation or lodging costs.

However, there is subsidy on the premium for the poor, disabled and elderly, says Gunaraj Lohani 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 anaemia, head and spinal injury. The scheme is known as *Bipanna Nagarik Kosh*, and patients need an official letter attesting to their weak economic status.

The new policy has also introduced a payer-provider split, and the insurer will manage reimbursement both to private and public facilities. Unlike in the past, the head 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 Amit Aryal and Duncan Maru 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.'



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# Standing tall

Since it had nothing better to do, GONe has gone and set up a Task Force to determine the exact height of Mt Everest. Why on earth would the grumblement want to do that? What if the new measurement showed that the mountain is actually much shorter, and it is no longer the highest point on the planet? Worse, what if while geo-locating Mt Everest they found that recent earthquakes have pushed the summit northwards into Chinese air space? Whatever the Task Force finds out, it should never be made public. Imagine the dent 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

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 there in the driver’s seat. It is an unthinkable, nightmarish scenario. And what I want to know is why GONe had to be such a smart ass 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.



secret, if you promise not to blurt it out to anyone: the text books are wrong. Actually only the south face of Everest is in Nepal (I am not making this up) and the East, North and West faces of the mountain are all in China. But, shhh, no one should ever know, so 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 hold our heads high again among the community of nations? I can already hear the jokes: “Honey, they’ve shrunk Everest!”

And what will become of all the enterprises that are named after Mt Everest if the mountain is no longer Numero Uno? What will the proud owners of **Mt Everest Restaurant and Bar** (credo: ‘Get High Here’) do? **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** (‘We Won’t Let You Ever Rest’) will have to convert to a dance bar. **Mt Everest Momo Shop** (Slogan: ‘Dumplings Without Oxygen’) may have to rename itself Mt Ghyachungkang Momochas Pvt Ltd. **Everest Corrugated Zinc Sheets** can no longer have the tagline ‘The Roof of the World’. **Mt Everest Brand Rubber Flipflops** will have to change its motto (‘Be the First To Summit in Our Chappals’). Good thing **Everest Herald** folded,

It is therefore in our national interest to come up with a cunning plan to sabotage the expedition and ensure that Qomolungma (which in Tibetan means ‘Goddess Mother of the Earth’) and Sagarmatha (which in Nepali means ‘The Pointy One Behind the White One with the Flat Top That 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 Bagmati, 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 9,000m 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 Jaleswor, 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.



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