Show stopper

When the Left Alliance won a nearly two-thirds majority in the parliamentary and provincial elections on a stability platform, everyone thought the transfer of power would be smooth sailing.

Two weeks after the final phase of elections, the NC, voted out by the people, clings to power, while the Left Alliance is struggling to form the new government.

UML Chair K P Oli, widely believed to be the next prime minister, is fighting it out with caretaker Sher Bahadur Deuba over how to form the Upper House. This is delaying the change of guard.

Anticipating that the NC would have no presence in the Upper House, the Deuba government had passed an ordinance to elect the National Assembly (NA) through single transferable voting (STV) – a system that ensures all national parties' representation in proportion to their strength.

The Left Alliance wants to thwart this ordinance and pass a new one under its own government: a majority system that would enable the two largest communist parties to sweep the Upper House.

The stand-off continues, not only because the two political rivals refuse to back down, but also because the President and the Election Commission (EC) are in a fix.

The Left Alliance has urged President Bidya Bhandari to not pass the STV ordinance, and is also putting pressure on the EC to publish the final poll results so it can form the new government.

The EC has refused to publish final results before the NA election, arguing that it needs to know first how many women will get into the Upper House. If women do not make up at least 33%, the EC needs to compensate for the shortfall by forcing parties to nominate more than a third of women to the Lower House.

“A government that has lost the public mandate must make way for the new one sooner than later,” says Election Commissioner Ila Sharma.

“But we cannot act against the Constitution, which requires us to form the Upper House first,” she says.

Meanwhile, lawyers are divided by party loyalty, prolonging the confusion.

Constitutional expert Nurya Dhungel says: “The EC has missed the Constitution, which does not stop it from publishing the final results before the Upper House. The new government can and needs to be formed at the earliest.”

However, this deadlock ends, Nepal is once again reminded of the bitter truth: politics here is never linear.

STATE OF CONFUSION

EDITORIAL PAGE 2

Return to Mainapokhari

Nari Maya Raffe and her baby survived a deadly blast 11 years ago in which her husband was killed.

Singer Amrit Gurung revisits the day’s tragedy at a family-owned hotel that’s now a bustling hotel.

PAGE 8–9

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20 YEARS
STATE OF CONFUSION

Democracy comes with a warning label: it has to be handled with care. If always work in progress, it is prone to abuses and demands prolonged rethinking.

The 2017 elections were a case in point: a lot of proven non-performers got voted out and some crooked men re-elected by employing their old tricks. Party stalwarts suffered shock defeats, and some aspirants worked the vote banks to be re-elected. The alternative anti-corruption parties started from zero to garner sizable votes, but not enough to win seats or become national parties.

It has been six months since the mayors, village chiefs and ward committees were elected. By now we should have started seeing some improvements in living conditions. Yet, the old weir are weirs; the cities are still dirt bowls; the highways are death traps and earthquake reconstruction hasn’t picked up.

In Far-Western Nepal, as our story on page 13 shows, wrangling between local governments and district administrations over budgets is actually costing lives. Another report on page 14 reveals how local governments have started issuing groundwater, as squatters across the country dry up due to over-extraction.

Kathmandu’s newly-elected mayor is a disgrace of the 161 tasks he grandly vowed to complete in his first 100 days, but he has not even carried out one. On the contrary, Mayor Bidur Sundar Shyakya of the UML has deceased heritage sites like Kathmandu and Rani Pokhari (see page 11).

Who would have thought that the new mayor would emulate the living traditions of the Valley, and work to actively destroy them? The only tradition Shyakya seems to uphold is incompetence, greed and corruption, which have become the hallmarks of Nepali politics. The mayor has let his voters down, with his priorities appearing to be acquiring a gargantuan SUV, a plush office and the other material trappings of his position.

Shyakya promised to rid the Kathmandu Valley of air pollution and traffic jams and remove the menace from the streets. He also made other sweeping promises, like opening subsidised restaurants for the poor and a parking mall. But he has not even delivered on basic promises.

The situation in the capital is constantly in the danger zone, and this week it was in the ‘Dangerous’ purple band most days, as we show in the weekly chart based on measurements from monitoring stations in the city centre (see page 5).

On July 4, when Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba had ordered all local authorities to expedite the fixing streets, Shakya’s team was nowhere to be seen. Time is indeed running out, demanding that concrete steps in repair during the monsoon season be wasted. The rain stopped four months ago, yet nothing has been done.

The problem is not that problems still exist, but that Mayor Shyakya has set in motion any coherent strategy to deal with them. He seems to think the historic Rani Pokhari can be converted into a commercial centre. Rana-era buildings should be torn down and replaced by concrete blocks and that he can build underground parking and office towers, instead of making Kathmandu more habitable and preserving its priceless past.

With the Left Alliance doing victory roles, we can expect the mayor to be even more supercilious and bald-faced decisions. Prime Minister in-waiting KP Oli is Shakya’s godfather, and we dread to think what the next five years will mean for Kathmandu.

Meanwhile, more honest and accountable mayors and village chiefs across the country have been in legal limbo as the political parties try to hang on to their decision-making and revenue control power. Things are even more messy because of the confusion over the jurisdiction and division of powers of the new provincial governments.

Add to all this the constant post-election national politics in which what remains of the defeated Communist Party’s Alliance is playing sure loser, while the tripartite Left Alliance thinks it can do anything it likes. The President has been caught in the middle of this tug-of-war with her UML allies, attempting to make the NC a Switzerland of barter deals. There is a dilemma because the ordinance has such legal holes they can easily be challenged in the courts.

It is a chicken-and-egg situation where comes first: the Upper House of Parliament or when Prime Minister Deuba is going to hang up to Oli?

In a democracy, people are sometimes swayed by populism to make mistakes and elect despots. In Kathmandu, people made a blunder by electing an incompetent mayor, who is loyal and accountable only to his party boss. Even elsewhere in the country, where people voted for stability as the medicine in prosperity, there are already early signs of disillusionment because nothing seems to have changed.

ONLINE PACKAGES

WHATS TRENDING

Cranes replace cranes in Buddha’s birthplace

by Onno van der Beek

A proposal to turn luxury hotels inside Lumbini’s core area has flared up a major policy and dispute on the status of the Buddha’s birthplace in Nepal. Can online tourism save the place of pilgrimage, which created a walk of faith with a video, and watch how this march is taking a walk or a leisurely stroll to save the Sano cranes that have been here since the Buddha’s birth?

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most popular on Twitter

Most commented

Mustang’s prehistoric rock paintings

by Savitri Joshi

Recently discovered cave paintings in the eastern part of Mustang may be the oldest rock paintings in Nepal and even the country’s oldest. It is possible to visit the rock paintings this week.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepal Times (@nepaltimes)
The new Rukum district claims that 30% of the members of ethnic groups in Rukum have to be Nepali. However, only 27% of the women are women – 27%. https://twitter.com/#!/nepaltimes/statuses/343525427997853376

Sudhansu Joshi (@joshi_sudhansu)
We should just recreate “The Pathway of Nepal” because some of the poet have not met the Constitution.

Nepal Times (@nepaltimes)
A proposal to build luxury hotels inside Lumbini Core has flared up a major policy and dispute on the status of the Buddha’s birthplace in Nepal. Can online tourism save the place of pilgrimage, which created a walk of faith with a video, and watch how this march is taking a walk or a leisurely stroll to save the Sano cranes that have been here since the Buddha’s birth?

Nepal Times (@nepaltimes)
Nepal Times (@nepaltimes)
Mars

Chaos and instability

Mark my words: we’re nosediving further into chaos hindering our power to bring back power to the notorious Maoist and UML coalition. (Tell the bull to bail out, Santa Claus Maha, 8577), I don’t think we’ll settle into prosperity yet. The 2017 election result was the stupidest thing since King Gyendendra gave up the throne.

Savant Acharya

HEARTY CONGRATULATIONS

Happy 46th, Kathmandu Charola. (“The Kathmandu Charola turns 46: Lucia De Vries, 8577). Nice to read the history. I sang with you in 1996 and 1997, and now sing with a choir in Australia.”

Bill Pigott

Cranes replace cranes in Buddha’s birthplace

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Bill Pigott

Mars
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Rising from the ashes

If the Nepali Congress doesn’t overhaul its leadership, it will soon be extinct

After being ravaged by the Left Alliance’s recent elections, the Nepali Congress is fighting tooth and nail to cling on to a few seats in the 39-member Upper House.

The new Constitution has accepted a bicameral system with a mix of HVT and proportional system of representation for the Lower House, and purely proportional elections through the heads and deputies of local bodies, and members of provincial assemblies for the Upper House.

But the Constitution is not explicit on the process for the Upper House, and that ambiguity has created a post-election deadlock. Tweaking the rules may actually lead to a difference of about eight seats for the two main alliances in Nepali politics. There may be only two units the Nepali Congress ends up with in the Upper House.

If the majoritarian voting system is followed, as demanded by the Left Alliance, the NC will have no representation at all in the Upper House. A stable government with a strong mandate is a desirable outcome, but an opposition as weak as this is bad news for our democracy.

In politics, like in war, trends roll after a major defeat. Or at least, they are supposed to. An organisation then regains vitality to hit back to fight another day. Which is why the NC, young, true, Gagan Thapa, has demanded a special convention of the party, a call supported by many.

But even after the devastating results, party president and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba seems to be in no mood to go...“The responsibility of a loss of such magnitude cannot be put only on the party president,” said Deuba on social media after the election results were declared.

“Each and every member of the party is responsible for this loss. There is no question of change of leadership,” he said.

Even if Deuba is removed through a special convention, there is a real danger that the quest for change of leadership will go in the wrong direction. There is already a call for holding a general convention for leadership among the members of the party.

The Grand Old Party of Nepal was formed in India in 1950 by BP Koirala after merging the Nepal National Congress with the Nepali Democratic Congress. He remained in charge of the party for 25 years. His brothers, Malika and Girija, were at the helm for 4 and 14 years respectively. Cousin Sudhir Koirala took over after Girija’s death and presided for 9 years.

In the 7-year history of the NC, the Koiralas have been in charge for more than 40 years. Even now, if the change of guard really happens, there is a likelihood that the present general secretary, Shashank Koirala (97-year-old son), will claim the leadership. Another aspirant is Sujata Koirala (Girija’s daughter).

A dynastic succession at this stage will make the party even weaker. Although dynastic leaders like Gagan Thapa are still reluctant to claim leadership, many supporters feel it is time for leaders like him to take bigger responsibilities. With the benefit of hindsight, some have even gone to the extent of predicting that had Thapa been promoted as prime ministerial material, and time voters could have voted for the NC in the recent polls.

More than half of Nepal’s population is under 25, and in the next election in five years more than 20% of voters will be new. This is a huge chunk of the electorate, and because they will be a lot young they will look for fresh, youthful leaders. This is why the NC needs to rejuvenate.

Analysing the voting pattern in the three sets of elections this year gives an indication of what is in store in 2022. The ‘social judgment’ has voted for stability at the centre, while voting was for individuals at the local level. Successive elections since the end of the conflict have proved that Nepal has an ongoing swing vote constituency.

Lal Bahadur Kandel, the UN insider popular for his harried fragility, defeated Shekhar Koirala on the home turf of the Koiralas. This should also prove that a dynastic succession will send the wrong message to Nepal’s youth. The Congress needs new hope, and hope can move mountains.
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TASTING NOTES

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FAMILY

Singleton of Glen Ord 15 Year Old
Singleton of Glen Ord 18 Year Old
Dancing to freedom

Nepal’s last two remaining dancing bears are rescued from owners

Nepal and their owners at 8pm on a foggy winter night Tuesday on the outskirts of Gaur. They had been on the run for four days, travelling 160km across the eastern Terai from Subhrupur of Sitakunda District.

With the use of sophisticated cell-phone tracking by the Central Investigation Bureau and information from animal welfare activists, the Raunakat police in Gaur were able to contact the bears’ owners, before moving in to make the arrests this week.

The Jane Goodall Institute Nepal provided crucial ground intelligence on which the local authorities in Simara could act. Two trackers from the foundation had been following the bear owners from Simara, providing evidence of bear owners’ involvement in the illegal trade of bears.

Captivating the trust of the owners, the trackers were able to obtain video footage of the dancing bears maintaining close contact with family members and the owners themselves.

Rangela, a 16-year-old male, and Shridevi, 17, were fed a diet of milk and rice two times a day. They were controlled by the nose with a piece of rope while the owners carried sticks to keep the bears in check. Poached in the wild in India as cubs, the bears had their canine teeth removed, and suffered trauma and injuries throughout their lives because of harsh training methods.

Dancing bears are forced to perform in front of crowds, standing on their hind legs and swaying left and right. The pace of the dance is controlled by tension on the rope through their roses.

Performing bears were banned in India in 1973, and in Nepal a year later. Rescued bears in India are often sent to sanctuaries in Agra and Ranthambore. At the Gaur police station after being rescued, the bears showed visible signs of stress and aggression, coughing, pacing and scratching their paws. “They are clearly upset: pacing up and down, making noises and jumping on benches,” said Neil D’Cruz of World Animal Protection (WAP), an expert on captive cloth bears who has rehabilitated bears in India.

“It’s really tough, watching the condition of the bears. The only positive note is that very soon the bears will be off to somewhere where they can live their rest of the lives happily,” he added.

Nepal’s National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 banned the possession of cloth bears for dancing, but also on the fringes of society in Nepal and India the illegal practice continued because law enforcement turned a blind eye.

Any bears caught with cloth bears faces a Rs50,000 fine and Rs40,000 bail upon arrest, but in this case the bear owners cooperated with the authorities and were released. Rangela and Shridevi were taken to Parsa National Park, where they will be temporarily housed.

The two are believed to be the last dancing bears in captivity in Nepal. Said Police Superintendent Yagya Bishek Pokharel in Gaur: “This is not a deliberate, organized crime, but rather the remnant of a practice that has been going on even though it was criminalised over 40 years ago.”

BEAR RESCUE

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A dying practice

A long the porous, Tarai border between Nepal and India, owners of illegal dancing bears have been dodging the police over since the practice was banned in 1973. Yet on both sides of the border, circus bears have been performing, moving from the cities to the hinterland.

Over the years income from bear dancing fell, and some animal owners abandoned their ancestral profession while a few heldouts remained. The organised practice of bear dancing faded out in India in 2009, and in Nepal this week (see story, left).

Under cover of the impenetrable Tarai fog Saturday morning, four bear owners left their home village of Sukhpalpur in Siraha District and rode Rangoli and Srivendi onto a public bus on the East-West highway. They had been using performing bears as a source of income for generations.

Contacted by animal welfare activists from the Jane Goodall Institute, who were offering a friendly handover of the bears in return for compensation, the suspicious owners decided instead to flee westwards with the bears.

Mohamed Sahib, Mohamed Moez and Mohamed Alaa Khan, aged 13-21, belong to one of the last families in Nepal to have dancing bears as a source of income. The Khan family are Madari Pathan people, and are closely related to the Kalander bear-keepers of North India.

As usual the men and older men of the Khan clan are sharecroppers near the town of Lahar, the younger men never settled, living a nomadic, hand-to-mouth lifestyle unchanged since the 14th century, taking the bears from town to town.

“We only work with bears, it is passed down from my grandfather,” says Nizwan Khan, a brother of the detained bear owners, who says people pay him Rs10 to see the animals, but some tourists give him up to Rs$100.

Year-round, the bear owners travelled throughout the Tarai, between Mochi and Sirgaji, sometimes even hitch-hiking to Pokhara. As recently as 10 years ago it was socially acceptable to see bear-dancing on the side of highways, but the practice began dying out. Bear dancing was the Khan’s only stable source of income but now even it is gone.

Ownership of the bears was more than a source of income, it also provided a sense of pride. Mohamed Sahib was weeping as the bears were led away at the Gaur police station. “Will you look after the bears?” he pleaded with the police. “Please be kind to them.”

Despite the pain and confinement, the bears have been a large part of the owners’ lives. They have been companions, pets, and a major part of the Madari’s reputation as travelling entertainers. With generations of bears passed down from father to son, and as brutal and barbaric as the practice may seem, it is their heritage.

“What do we eat and how do we eat now? All of our earnings are gone,” said 13-year-old Alaa, who had been following his brothers’ footsteps and would have been a future bear owner himself.

“Consecrating bears from their owners is like telling a touring rock star to part with his favourite guitar,” says airport bear expert Neil D’Vreeze of World Animal Protection, who was involved in this week’s rescue.

Mamj Goodall of the Jane Goodall Institute Nepal pulled Alaa aside and told him that the consecration of the bears may be “the best thing to happen” to a boy of his age.

Gautam told us: “This is not the future he should be in school, learning and being exposed to new things, and choose his own path.”

According to Gautam: “It’s not about separating particular groups from their livelihoods, but making them realise they have many other options that do not involve inflicting pain and cruelty.”

The Jane Goodall Institute has rehabilitated two of the bear owners as legitimate bear carers at Panna National Park. They will earn Rs 700 a day until the bears are permanently resettled.

Ryan Hong Cheng

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Coming full circle

Nani Maiya and baby survived a Maoist attack 13 years ago in which her hus-
ketly survived when 14 people including her father died in a Maoist attack on a bus in Subhapokhari, Dhakal on Sunday.

SONG OF LOSS AND HOPE: Krishna Naiya with her 21-year-old
girlfriend SonaNaiya lays on a picture of the Cattle trade Voice taken by Nepal workers after the family was
escorted from Mahinapasobar by helicopter on 9 May, 2004 after the firefight.

Rajesh K.C.'s photograph of Nani Maiya after a
filing on 2005. Right: Nani Maiya and Sona after the attack. (Mainpokhari) in 2007 (middle, right). Rajen Madarmadh's photograph of Nani
Maiya and Sona (middle). Nani Maiya and Sona were killed in a Maoist attack on a bus in Subhapokhari, Dhakal on Sunday.

ARMTL GURUNG

I relived Dhakal last week to meet Nani Maiya Kaffe and her daughter Sona, about whom I had composed a song that told the story of a tragic event during the conflict.

Sona, just 20 days old, was travelling with her parents in a bus from Jiri to Kathmandu on 9 May 2004. When they reached Mainpokhari, Sona suddenly stopped at a Maoist roadblock. Soldiers in civvies were travelling in the bus, and fearing they would be found out, started shooting at the Maoists. The firefight was brief, but at the end of it at least 15 people were killed, 7 of them civilian passengers. The family of English teacher Subedar Kaffe, his mother Krishna Naiya, wife Nani Maiya and baby Sona, were trapped inside the bus.

As bullet ricocheted all around, Nani Maiya pushed Sona under the seat in the driver's cabin and ducted. When the shooting finally stopped, Nani Maiya, herself wounded, found her daughter. But her husband Subedar was lying lifeless in a pool of blood. The Maoist insurgency was at its peak, and our Nepal Youth band was in Birgunj on a Peace Concert Tour that week when I came across Nani Maiya's poignant story in Kantipur, written by Rajendra Manadhar with a photograph by Gopal Chitrakar of Sona in her grandmother's lap at Chhauani Hospital. My promotor Kumar Krishna Shrestha and Arpan Sharma of Nepa-laya immediately tracked down Nani Maiya and we drove to Dhakal. The trip was risky because the highway had many Army and Police checkpoints, and between them there was no government presence.

As we approached Mules, we passed the Hotel Resort, run by Mohan Khatt who was backed to death by the Maoists in 2002. The charismatic retired major was popular in the area for building schools and health posts, but the Maoists suspected he was a spy. We passed the van, burnt and abandoned in Mules. We then picked up Rajendra Manadhar in Charikot and drove down to the Tamang Kosi and up the other side to Mainpokhari. There were still blood stains on the asphalt where the firefight took place. Such was the fear that no one wanted to speak to us, but a group of children innocently told us all the details. They took us to see the bullet-ridden bus, which still had bits of abandoned clothing. Once I got back, I collected my thoughts and started composing and recording the 25 minutes folk-rock ballad that was released as the title track of the album Gunabana. In 2005, we performed this song as one opening set in concert in Nepal and abroad in the year that followed. Audiences were visibly moved because it was a vivid musical portrayal of the tragic reality of Nepal at the time.

I met Nani Maiya and Sona for the first time in 2005 in Charikot, during our Sundar Shanta Nepal Peace Concert Tour. Ever since, whenever in Dhakal I have made it a point to see them, including during the inauguration of nepa-laya's A People War Photo Exhibition tour in 2007. Rajesh K.C.'s portrait of Nani Maiya breastfeeding two-month-old Sona was included in the book on which the exhibition was based. Kumar and I offered to sponsor Sona's education in a boarding school in Kathmandu, but Nani Maiya was reluctant to let her daughter go. We then arranged for her to accompany her daughter to school and work and live in the same school. She refused this offer as well.

Last week, Kumar and I travelled to Charikot to meet Nani Maiya and hand over the financial
e at Mainapokhari

band was killed. This week she had to congratulate the Maoist in-charge who won the election.

support we had promised her. Sona is now a bright 13-year-old in Grade 6. Nani Maiya is still a teacher. She said she regretted not taking up our offer to work in the city. “Kathmandu may be dirty and crowded, but it would have been far safer than the village,” she said.

We wondered why she said the village was not safe but then learnt that the Maoist guerrilla commander at the time of the Matia Pokhara encounter, Comrade Bishal, had just been elected to the provincial assembly. After the election results came out, the winners of the Left Alliance organised a victory rally in the village. Nani Maiya was asked to congratulate the victorious candidates. She garlanded Parvati Guran and Pachupati Chaulagain of the UML but when it was the turn of Comrade Bishal her hands shook and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“For a moment I was overcome with emotion, and I fainted.” Nani Maiya recalled. “I finally put the garland on him, and couldn’t believe how I brought myself to congratulate a person whose party was responsible for my husband’s death. I hope we never have to see another war; I don’t wish it on anyone to experience what I went through.”

We passed Mude again on the drive back to Kathmandu. The Horse Shoe Resort looked run down, but the surrounding scenery is still as stunning as when Major Mahan Khati and Sibendra Kafle lived among those mountains.
Christmas Goodies

Christmas Adventure,
Combining a scenic drive along the Tump Truck Rise and have an adventurous Christmas this year. Too for the arts and craft stall, food, music, games bags and many more.
29/30 December. (Kathmandu, Annapurna Bazaar, Thamel. (01) 4446375)

Online Food Fest,
Gather your foodie friends to play various online games on Facebook and Instagram and win exciting prizes and discount coupons. It’s part of the Facebook Online Food Festival, where foodies from 35 different restaurants are delivered for free of charge.

Hyatt Hampers,
An elegant custom-made Christmas hamper full of festive treats and hand-purchased confections is available for takeaways at The Lobby Lounge. Daily. 5% Off Hyatt Regency, Boudha. (01) 5177254

Local Mini Market,
Take a stroll around the stalls of local vendors at the mini market. Find new handmade products, handcrafted goods and organic foods that make unique Nepali-made gifts perfect for your loved ones.
21/22 December. 10am-8pm. The Lodhi Project, Nepal, Boudha. (888) 777 0152

Sculpture Exhibition,
A collection of 22 statuesque, Amulya Thapa's, by Shyam Kishore Shrestha, presents realistic expressions of motherhood, war, natural disasters, feelings, and many more. Mahabodhi, Prabhat and Amulya Thapa are some of the sculptures that will wavers visitors in awe.
22 - 23 December. Nepal Art Council, Baborita

Secret Santa,
Parshwa locally made gifts worth Rs. 800 at the KJC Christmas market and join the Secret Santa give away gifts. Registration is compulsory by 26th December.
21 December. 10am onwards, Melhak Bar, Jomolstolo. (01) 4702354, 9811355045. info@kjc.bar

Royal Fusion,
Experience fusion music performed by one of the best guitarists of Nepal, Anil Shrestha. And the Band, followed by a special dinner with a Turkish Berkshire.
24 - 26 December. 5 - 10pm. Oasis Multi Cuisine Restaurant, Royal Chateau Boutique Hotel, Siddhartha Thumbar Marg. (01) 4800030/4800057/4800058

Acoustic gig,
Singer Ratan Nepal and pianist Ayub Shankar will be playing some great acoustic numbers.
29 December, 7 - 10pm, Dock Cafe and Bar, Jomolstolo, Nepal, 888 111 997

Fairfield by Marriott,
Due into the Christmas spirit with a carving station of roast turkey and cranberry sauce or pork loin, while growing to a live performance.
24 December. 6PM. Fairfield, Mall Road, Thamel. (01) 4757580. For reservations: (01) 4757599

Temple Tree Resort and Spa,
For those looking for a special Christmas celebration. Pamper yourself with a massage, facial and suppers. It will be hard to leave once you enter.
Gauthte, Liselade, (06) 45868

Christmas Unplugged Away with Karmin on the desk is all set to keep you moving with good music.
Accompanied by Naza online from Takai, you can enjoy the CD at Rs. 300.
24 December, 7 - 11pm, Annapurna Bar, Thamel. (01) 466 1077

Hyatt Regency,
Kicking your year with The Carribean Rocker at the Hyatt for a lovely Christmas dinner accompanied by a glass of mulled wine or a brandy with family.
Hyatt Regency, Boudha. (01) 5177254

Pauline’s Garden
Mood melodriven chestnuts, grilled salmon steak and morel & white risotto with a parrer platters, a special menu with live piano for Christmas Eve.
Anand Mag, Babarkas, 7pm onwards, for reservations: 9827475526/9842573785

Gokarna Resort
A lawn buffet and unlimited glass of mulled wine awaits you on Christmas Day at The Courtyard. Room-wise, for more details; (01) 445 1212

Shrangi-Lai
A musical dinner on the eve or a brunch the other day, the chosen years for Christmas. A piece of slideshow, don’t miss out on the traditional turkey dinner with pies and pudding.
24 - 26 December, The Last Hope Hotel, Laxmi Marg, Rampur, 2290 333, on person (charge), for reservation: (01) 447 2999

The Last Resort,
You can make your Christmas adventures by dining, Bungee or Swing jump over the Bhairab Khola river 165 meters below on the mountain Bali to the Thami bazaar, Manidhaka, Shree, Thamel. (01) 447 2352

Park Village,
For those who are looking to escape the hustle bustle of the city. Spend a night at this hotel and enjoy a scenic package this Christmas.
25 December, 11 am - 5 pm (Bounce Trampoline), 2, 2nd floor (ticket of tour). (01) 445 7580

GETAWAY
OUR PICK
Rupakot Resort,
Make your reservations to celebrate this year’s Christmas in nature’s lap. The package at Rs. 8,625 (net per person) for Nebi’s only, includes three meals. The offer is valid till 31 December.
Rupakot, Pokhara. 9856303283

Hotel Mystic Mountain,
Plan a Christmas trip to this newly opened exquisite resort located in the forest of Nagarparkar. (071) 665 9546

Fairfield Marriot,
Avail a package up to Rs. 1,690 (night) and Rs. 1,000 (couples) to make this Christmas meaningful.
Fairfield Marriot, Trident, Sattal, Thamel. (01) 417 1999

Jumanji’s Welcome in the Jungle.
This action movie by Columbia Pictures is based on the lives of four high school kids and their discovery of an old action game — Jumanji. In the movie directed by Jake Kasdan, the kids are driven into the game’s jungle setting and take up the adult avatars. To win the game, they have to go make an adventurous journey in the Jungle and discover what Alan Parish did 20 years ago in the original Jumanji movie.

Jumanji’s Welcome in the Jungle on 29 December.

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GETAWAY

CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

On Queen’s pond

(Above) An image of Rani Pokhari from the German publication “Die Berliner Königlichen Habsburg’s Der Prinz von Wieden und Preussen nach Indien in den Jahren 1844 bis 1846” (“The journey of His Royal Highness Prince Waldemar of Prussia to India in the years 1844 to 1846.”

KMC is currently building a concrete wall and an amphitheatre on the south side of Rani Pokhari’s left. Heritage experts say this will decrease the size of the pond by 20%.

SAHINA SHRESTHA

It was 11.30 one morning this week as people started filing into the sixth-floor office of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) in Bagh Darbar. The new mayor had not arrived yet, and the waiting crowd soon overflowed into the corridors.

Among them was conservation advocate Alok Tuladhar and heritage architect Sudheer Tiwari, with a dozen or so young activists. The group wanted to lodge a protest about the much-delayed and controversial reconstruction of the historic Rani Pokhari, where a contractor had started building a concrete wall.

“I don’t know if it is worthwhile meeting him, but last time we got some results,” says Tuladhar, referring to a citizen-led protest to stop the use of cement in the reconstruction of Bagmatiawor Temple in the middle of Rani Pokhari last year.

It was on the first anniversary of the earthquake a year ago that President Bidya Bhandari launched the National Reconstruction Campaign from Rani Pokhari, amidst much fanfare. The KMC started rebuilding the temple in the middle of the pond but had to stop after a public outcry over the use of cement. The Department of Archaeology has since taken responsibility for the temple, while the KMC is responsible for the pond and its periphery.

While the activists waited for the mayor, a kilometre away workers were busy pouring concrete into the perimeter of the dry pond. The activists wanted to exercise their right to information to inspect the designs and to push for the temple and pond to be restored using the original design, traditional technology and materials.

“One year ago, we had protested the use of concrete and other modern materials in the reconstruction of the Bagmatiawor temple and it was eventually stopped. But only the temple was taken as a heritage site and not the pond,” says Tiwari.

The KMC’s “beautification” project around the pond this year was “the conception of a modern and modernist” Rani Pokhari, complete with a fountain, a park and coffee shop. This violates Nepal’s Ancient Monument Preservation Act which says historic sites over 100 years old have to be preserved in their original form.

The KMC has already scrapped off the impervious black clay soil that prevented the water from seeping out of the pond, and is building a concrete retaining wall. The first phase involves beautification and building toilets: the pond will be filled in the second phase.

Back at KMC there was still no sign of the mayor, so the activists spoke to engineer Uttar Kumar Regmi, who was in a combative mood. “The construction is a part of protection and conservation so that the pond lasts for a long time,” he says. “Cement has been used before and a musical fountain was added during the SAARC Summit, how come you were not protesting then?”

The activists eventually met the mayor at the City Hall and one hour later, Mayor Bidyasundar Shakya finally meets them. The activists lay out their case, saying KMC is not showing any commitment to respect the Valley’s cultural heritage, and Rani Pokhari is just the latest example.

Shakya looks defiant. After listening to the activists, he replies: “There are more than 149 such projects going on in the city, I am not aware of the details of this one. But we need to do more than what our ancestors did.”

The mayor’s plan is to turn religious sites into tourist destinations by modernising the facilities. He assures the activists that he will take up the case with locals and experts.

As the activists group gets up to leave, what Mayor Shakya says next gives them little hope: “But Rani Pokhari will need a coffee shop. We will build it.”
It’s not easy to write about a film that you really like, mainly because the task of reviewing, in my mind, should not include savaging the hard work of others (unlike there is a clear ethical issue at hand), but to give an insight into the motivations behind why something was made, and, if it went wrong, how or why.

Star Wars: The Last Jedi

To compensate for the above overly lofty paragraph, I will go on to say that the latest Star Wars film is categorically pretty awesome, and hard to dislike, unless, as can sometimes happen, you’ve reached the theatre in a foul mood, and had a very bad day to boot. My personal experience in the cinema here was one of the best I’ve ever had, that too, with a full theatre; the fans were wildly enthusiastic, but not obnoxious, clapping and cheering with the iconic opening title sequence that is now so essential to the Star Wars films.

Two and a half hours fly by with jokes, homages, great action sequences that are designed as set pieces but sewn organic to the film that they fit right in, and a few very memorable new characters, including Laura Dern as Vice Admiral Amilyn Holdo (Resistance NOT empire), who elevates this already rather good film to the realm of the truly great.

These new Star Wars films were rebooted when Disney bought the rights to Lucasfilm, and while there was initial trepidation, the three films released so far — the first of a new trilogy, Star Wars: The Force Awakens (2015), and Star Wars: Rogue One (2016) have been very good, with this second installment of a planned trilogy being the best so far.

Directed by the talented, original Rian Johnson, who made the distinctive Brick (2005) and Looper (2012), this film gains a certain holistic universe through his sure, innovative direction, including a renewed attention to the meaning of ‘The Force’, a marvelous visualization potential never really developed after the first trilogy.

There is also a welcome goofy inclusion of the Unicorns, flocks that made the Star Wars universe so endearing, mellow, and, hilarious. After all, Chewbacca (Joonas Suotamo, taking over from Peter Mayhew), R2D2 (Jimmy Vee) and the Ewoks are all terribly hammy, but what would the Star Wars films be without the little legging birds on Luke Skywalker’s (played by the now formidable Mark Hamill) craggy island and the curious, gorgeous, crystal bismuth that take a final stand with the rebels on a bleak but beautiful planet full of salt flats.

There is character development here, with both Rey (Daisy Ridley) and Kylo Ren, aka Ben Skywalker (Adam Driver) giving performances that send chills down the spine, a trait shared by all the good Star Wars films. To say more would be to give too much away.

The performances here are deeply moving, made particularly so by the death of Carrie Fisher, who played Princess Leia and lustily takes on the mantle of General Organa in this film. Every other film seems to celebrate her life and mourn her passing, and so it should be in a series of films made great by such an individual performance, one that will haunt us for decades to come.

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MULTI-DIMENSIONAL STUDY: Swarnim Wagle, Vice-chair of the National Planning Commission, launches Nepal’s first National Multi-dimensional Poverty Index Survey in Kathmandu on Wednesday which showed absolute poverty is down to 26.7%.

BETTER PREPAREDNESS: Lalitpur Mayor Chitababu Maharjan (left) and Chief Representative of USAID Nepal, Jun Sakaruma (centre) by the foundation stone on Friday for Caura Dam Rehabilitation Project in Lalitpur.

70 YEARS: US Ambassador to Nepal, Alaina B Teplitz, and Nepal’s former ambassador to the US Shanker P Sharma, answer audience questions during a discussion on the US-Nepal Bilateral Relationship: The Next 70 Years and Beyond, in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

FOCUS: Bhairawa Gudikanks Take on the Kathmandu Kings 11 in an Everest Premier League (EPL) Twenty20 cricket match in Kirtipur on Wednesday.

COMRADES-IN-ARMS: Chairman of the CPN-UML, KP Oli (right) congratulates his colleague Madhav Kumar Nepal at a program to felicitate victors in provincial and parliamentary elections from the Left Alliance in Kathmandu on Wednesday.
Health on hold

The central government handed over responsibility for health posts, primary health centres, community health units, urban health centres and ayurvedic centres to local governments on 26 August, and now sends funds to local governments to operate these facilities. But many municipalities and village councils have failed to procure drugs and medical equipment. Rana Bhandari, for instance, went to the Rohil Health Post in Bajura with fever, but there were no medicines. He had to trek three hours to Kawiwa Bazar and buy them from a private druggist. Gangaram Luxar was taken to Koli Primary Health Centre with high fever, but had to return without treatment. Sharma JK took his 10-year-old son to Bumbrei health post with severe diarrhoea but there was no medicine.

Deputy Mayo Shristi Dogma of Buthananda Municipality in Bajura admits that health centres have been without drugs due to their inability to plan on time. “The municipality has no staff, and and provincial governments are yet to be formed. Yet, problems multiply, with the result that people in remote hill districts must walk for hours to private hospitals to buy basic drugs, paying high prices for medicines that used to be available at public health facilities free of cost. Following complaints, the health ministry on 18 September directed the local governments, DHOs and health centres to make necessary drugs and health equipment available, ordering federal units to immediately create stock of 70 essential drugs for free distribution.

But local governments in Bajura and Baitadi have not followed these instructions. “Stocks have run out. We need money for fresh purchases but the local governments do not release funds,” said Baitadi DHO’s Awasthi. Daud says both the local governments and DHOs are responsible for supply management until the provincial governments take shape, and stressed that the government has already released the necessary funds. Health facilities in Bajura are now relying on medicines donated by non-government organisations like Pho Nepal.

Public Health Officer Ramesh Kumar of DHO Bajura said solar health schemes had been affected since the health Ministry had not released the budget. For example, the Rs400 allowance for regular check-ups for pregnant women, Rs1,500 to encourage women to deliver in health facilities and Nyenso Johns warm clothes initiative, have been withheld. Said Kumar: “We try to use our internal resources as far as possible, but they cannot be given to everyone this way.”

Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nepal
Kathmandu Valley’s water table is falling fast as demand for water empties aquifers

SONA AWALE

Every morning, Kathmandu Valley’s neighbourhoods wake up to the sound of clanging jars as people queue up for water. That is the visible manifestation of the worsening water crisis, but beneath the city there is another invisible emergency: the water table is falling at up to 1m per year because of over-extraction.

The Valley used to be a lake bed, and the only source of water here was what falls as rain and seeps underground. The soil beneath our feet is a giant sponge, and it is going dry because more water is being pumped out than is naturally replenished.

Kathmandu’s 3.5 million people need 366 million litres of water per day; half of that is met through groundwater extraction. This is causing the water table to fall an average of 60cm per year, exposing the Valley to droughts like none before, drying forests and contamination. Users also have to drill deeper every year, and need more energy to pump the water up.

“We have been measuring the water table every month for the last 20 years, and there is no doubt it is falling sharply everywhere,” says hydro-geologist Surendra Raj Shrestha at the Ground Water Resource Development Board.

He says if groundwater depletion continues at the present rate, Kathmandu could face the kind of land subsidence seen in Bangkok and Mexico City. The remaining underground water will also have an increased concentration of ammonia, nitrates, iron and arsenic, making it unsuitable for human consumption.

The bowl-shaped Kathmandu Valley was naturally designed for groundwater storage. Every monsoon, most of the rain falling on the hills and the Valley floor percolated down into the shallow layers, while deeper aquifers collected geological water over millions of years. Kathmandu’s hospitals, hotels and factories are now extracting this ‘fossil’ water.

The geological formation of Katmandu means the soil on the northern and southern edges of the valley floor is most permeable. The soil under Kathmandu and Patan, where the demand for well water is highest, however, is made of clay, which does not allow water to seep down.

The problem is that the northern and southern suburbs of the Valley are getting heavily built up, and quarries and sand mining have reduced groundwater recharge. At the same time, heavier rainfall due to changes in the precipitation patterns means water cannot seep into the ground and drains off.

“We are extracting excessively from the ground, and human activity has reduced natural recharge. The solution is to replenish groundwater: it is foolish to let it drain away,” explains Padma Sundar Joshi of UN Habitat. “We have to aggressively promote rainwater harvesting and the new local governments should make it mandatory for households and public buildings to recharge groundwater.”

Tylie McMahon of Smart Paani, which advises customers on water management, adds: “Recharging won’t only replenish groundwater, it is also a cheaper way to manage waste water and control pollution.”

The most reliable study of Kathmandu’s ground water was done by Japanese aid agency JICA as far back as 1996. The Kathmandu Valley Water Supply Management Board is now updating it with a census of shallow and deep tube wells so it can fix the extraction rate and better regulate pumping.

At present, institutions and service sectors with deep tube wells pay a license fee of Rs20,000 per year. But many large hotels and industries extract unlimited water free of cost.

Anjil Khanal, a hydro-geologist at the board, says the study is the first step in identifying aquifers, determining the exact extraction and recharge rates, and the proportion of groundwater that is fossil water.

He adds: “It is true that groundwater is depleting in some places. But Kathmandu has a heterogeneous geology, so an observation of a place can’t be extrapolated for the entire Valley. The building codes need to take inputs from the groundwater recharge study.”

The new mayors’ offices in the Valley now have an important role in coordinating zoning laws, urban planning, road construction and groundwater regulation. For instance, construction needs to be minimised in areas of the Valley that are important for recharging aquifiers and households, schools, hotels and factories need to have mandatory rainwater collection and recharge systems.

However, with the Melamchi Project coming online in 2019, complacency has set in: many Kathmandu residents now believe that there will no longer be a water shortage, and are unwilling to invest in things like rainwater harvesting, says Achala Kamal of Smart Paani.

Hydrologists say the situation in cities like Bhaktapur and Tansen and the Terai towns are much worse because extraction for outstrips natural recharges.

Sud Paswan of water conservation group Best Paani says it is unfair to spread the centralized pipe-water system that has failed Nepal. She advises prioritising rainwater harvesting for a consistent supply of water.

“Melamchi will never be enough for everyone and we will still have to collect rainwater and use the unused portion to recharge groundwater,” explained watershed expert Meghbaru Upadhyay.

“Groundwater isn’t just for pumping out, it is a vital part of the Valley’s ecology. We have to maintain it so people have access to water in the coming decades.”
Transboundary aquifers

Just like rivers do not respect national boundaries, the Terai’s vast groundwater aquifers span the ground beneath Nepal and India. Over-extraction by farmers in India who get subsidised diesel and electricity for irrigation pumps (above) is affecting the groundwater table in the Nepal-Terai as well. “Groundwater depletion in the Terai is alarming,” says watershed expert Mukulak Chandrashekar. “India is drawing out so much that even our water table is falling at a much higher rate than can be replenished naturally.”

The Terai aquifers are naturally recharged by monsoons every year, but deforestation and quarrying in the Terai mean that rains do not reach the ground but wash off into isolated rivers. Surendra Shrestha of the Ground Water Resource Development Board in Kathmandu says although aquifer depletion in the Terai is not as rampant as in the Valley, it is extensive and directly linked with mining of sand and boulders from streams and rivers. When streams dry up, there is also less recharge of groundwater.

Extraction of sand and gravel (commonly for export to India) is therefore lowering the water bed in India.

Topping it up

Recharging groundwater is a bit like topping up your mobile phone. There are three simple ways:

1. Recharge Pit
   A pit test will determine the best location for a recharge pit to infiltrate rainwater into the ground. The pit should be porous enough, and the pit should have a stone base so it doesn’t overflow.

2. Recharge well
   Rainwater is first trapped, settled and filtered through sand and gravel. Households or institutions can use the water, and the overflow goes into a well lined with perforated concrete rings to let the water slowly seep out from the sides.

3. Boring recharge
   The same pipe that is used to pump up groundwater can also be used to send collected rainwater and surface runoff back underground after some basic filtration.
ERRATUM

It is our duty, as journalists, to adhere to the truth as far as humanly possible. But, new and then, we make mistakes. Who doesn’t? And when we do, it is part of our job. A public apology is the first step in correcting our mistake and learning from it so we can move on to make even greater ones in future. Such is life.

Since this is a mistake of record, we have broken all world records rectifying our error by promptly publishing an erratum like the following.

- A typographical error crept into an article last week about Astrapon being developed as an international humour centre. Sorry for that funny mistake. In reality, the city is turning into an international humour centre.
- A caption in the Entertainment section of our online edition misidentified a new entry in New Delhi as the Winding Restaurant and Bar – it is in fact the Revolutionary Restaurant and Bar (of the MNSSP). The error is regretted.
- We apologise to the OMC’s Common Market for the major national crisis triggered by our headline on the Sports Page of yesterday’s edition, ‘Nepal Thrashed badly’. The report was actually about Nepal’s soccer team being beaten 6-0 by Oman in the Asian qualifiers.
- An op-ed by Paul Chiang (‘Little love given the impression that the world has ended’) in the three-page story under the headline ‘We will, you know, if we don’t when we decide to terminate the world’ was originally written by Paul Seger, read out by a speaker at a conference.
- Due to confusion in the newsroom, the prime minister was incorrectly identified in yesterday’s editorial as Sher Bahadur Chhetri. The present premier is actually Jhutu Koirala. We apologise to both prime ministers.
- Several readers were outraged after trying out the weight loss formula in the ‘Merry diet’ column last week. ‘This Nepali and Losing Weight’ 2014 tip and water, the ensuing diarrhea will guarantee you will lose 10 kg in one week or you money back. You were not supposed to take that literally. Silly. Any inconvenience regretted.
- Due to a lack of checking error, our Daily Deadline yesterday announced the deaths of Mr Mark Twain. The report was exaggerated.