What federalism?

A decade after Nepal was declared a federal republic, most Nepalis still do not know what federalism means and how it will work.

This is one of the most startling revelations from the latest Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey, which has been conducted almost yearly since 2004. The 3,012 respondents interviewed last week in 36 districts were selected to reflect Nepal’s demographic and geographical diversity. Of them, 41% chose the option ‘have no idea’ about federalism. An additional 13% replied ‘don’t know’, increasing the combined figure of those who were unaware to 54%.

Disaggregated from the literacy levels of respondents, the responses showed that even the educated did not understand federalism. While 73% of respondents who could read or write said they didn’t understand the concept, 56% of the literate/educated were also uncertain.

Even in Province 2, the base of two Madhes-centric federalist parties that have been waging a struggle for regional autonomy, 59% of respondents said they had no idea what federalism was supposed to do. Ignorance about the concept is at comparable levels in the Terai, hills and mountains. In the various development regions and across caste/ethnic groups.

Only 9% of respondents understood federalism as the ‘best form of decentralisation’. The option ‘a system where people govern themselves’ got 14%, ‘public service delivery at the doorstep’ was chosen by 7% and ‘equitable development’ was the option of 10%. In all, 40% of respondents seemed to have some basic idea about the concept.

Since Nepal adopted federalism in May 2008, this new form of governance has been a divisive topic – deadlocking the first constituent assembly over whether it should be defined and named along ethnic lines, by dividing the country north-south, or whether the entire Terai should be one province. Even after the main political parties came to agreement on federalism, fringe parties and some opinion makers have been sceptical about its viability.

This survey result is surprising also because of its timing, coming as it does when federalism has finally taken shape after a decade of tumultuous transition. The federal Parliament and state assemblies were recently elected, while municipal and village councils have been functioning for seven months.

Do most Nepalis really not understand federalism, or is it just their disenchantment with an expensive system under which 900 MNs and up to 130 ministers will be enjoying the perks of new offices? Sociologist Pilarami Mishra thinks survey respondents may have heard of federalism, but don’t really understand what it means for them.

“Federalism has been just an agenda for politicians and activists, but neither its supporters nor its detractors have explained why it is important to people,” reasons Mishra.

Political analyst Sudendra Lahiri, in Janakpur, agrees: “The same urban-centric group of opinion makers has always been at the centre of Nepal’s federalism debate, and ordinary people were never included.”

Om Astha Rai

Great Expectations
Editorial
Page 2

How to do it 41%
Don’t know 32%
Not different from previous system 4%
Best form of decentralisation 9%
People can govern themselves 9%
Seven counties at district 7%
Equitable development 11%
Don’t want to say 9%

Q8A: An từent teacher reviewing a lesson plan in last period for the students. From a recent survey, 21%
GREAT EXPECTATIONS

T he annual HIMALPAKAD media opinion survey has once more shown that the Nepali public can be disenchanted with the political cartel and the cast of characters that have been at the helm for most of the past 28 years, but they have not lost hope of reforming them and making democracy work. This dichotomy is evident in the answers to most of the 43 questions posed to 3,853 respondents across the country last week, on subjects ranging from migration, economy, elections, local governments and federalism to citizenship.

One of the most glaring — and for us surprising — results was that more than half of Nepalis seem either not to know what federalism is, or do not care. (See page 7)

That is quite an indictment of the ruling class, which after a decade is still unable to demonstrate to citizens that they are serious about devolution of political power away from Kathmandu. But even though most Nepalis may be ignorant of federalism, they are already reaping the benefits of the new constitution to reduce inequality, exclusion and social injustices.

In answer to another question, 43% of respondents said government service delivery had already improved in the seven months after elected municipal and village councils took over local governments. And even the sceptics thought the new mayors and village heads were no worse with apathetic government employees.

In Provinces 6 and 2, the poorest regions of Nepal according to the recent inter-censal Poverty index (MPI) report by the National Planning Commission, people feel government service delivery has been more effective after local elections. In Province 6, which includes the most inaccessible and remote districts in the country’s northwestern mountains, 62% of respondents said mayors and village chiefs have been delivering services quickly and effectively, while in Province 2, which has better access but has always felt alienated from Kathmandu, nearly half the respondents said services provided by local governments had improved.

Nepalis may be disillusioned, but they have always been strongly in favour of stronger and more resourceful local governments. This view is even more closely reflected in the present survey. People want municipalities and village councils to deliver services in a quick and hassle-free manner. They don’t want elected representatives demanding bribes. They hope for more job creation, development and economic growth.

The new municipal and village councils elected under the federal system have more rights than the previous VDCs, which were dissolved in 2006. The new Constitution has given these local councils 22 exclusive rights — among them, they can pass their own laws, resolve property disputes and collect taxes.

But 93% of respondents doubt if local councils have the capacity to exercise all these constitutional rights. An additional 10% were even more cynical, saying mayors and village chiefs do not even know what their job is. Asked what the solution would be, respondents’ overwhelming answer was to empower local governments, not to reduce their roles and responsibilities.

The lambdack Dubcha cabinet on Wednesday decided to increase the earthquake compensation to Rs 94,000,000 and reduce the elderly pension age to 60. However the survey showed that most people did not approve of populist moves like these.

Past HIMALPAKAD media opinion surveys have revealed widespread disenchantment with political leaders, and many respondents opting for ‘none of the above’ or ‘won’t vote’ when asked to name their favourite party. Even so, 70% voted in the three tiers of elections last year proved most of them did cast ballots.

In fact, the current survey showed a much lower level of cynicism than the last one — even though 28% didn’t want to disclose who they voted for. There is also an almost direct correlation between the popularity of political parties in the surveys and the results of direct elections held on November 13, December, indicating the accuracy of the poll results.

The Instrona Public Opinion Survey 2018 was carried out in collaboration with Internews Nepal, a more complete report of the result will be online at www.republican.com from Sunday, and in the print edition on 1st February.

GUN SALUTE

What are you allergic to?

Last week’s coverage of the epidemic of pulsating audio allergies in Kathmandu this winter, was almost on every street corner and in every local government. It’s a job well done to get the general population and local government leaders to realize the serious nature of the situation.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most popular on Twitter

Guns into malls

Anshuman Kamal

The Nepal Army permanent or demolish a future 30-year-old hotel and replace it with a shopping complex was our most read story. The newspaper’s ground-breaking and just-in-time reporting, there has been no reaction from the Army.

Most visited online page

The past foretold

Rajesh Thapa

The Nepal Army has not explained any of its reports apart from its internal use, and that it can’t release the people’s reports. The report in the paper is the first to be tested in the world’s first, and may be the first to be tested in the world’s first.

Most commented

Q. Why do you think municipal and village councils are delivering quick and hassle-free services?

A. Nepal may be disillusioned, but they have always been strongly in favour of stronger and more resourceful local governments. This view is even more clearly reflected in the present survey. People want municipalities and village councils to deliver services in a quick and hassle-free manner. They don’t want elected representatives demanding bribes. They hope for more job creation, development and economic growth.

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The capacity for development

Many Nepalis abroad can do just about anything: the ones who stay back are often labelled ‘incapable’

The debate about ‘Foreign Aid’ continues as we try to analyse if overseas assistance has indeed helped Nepal, or if it has made the country weaker.

A development cooperation report published by the Ministry of Finance says Nepal received US$1.4 billion in foreign aid last fiscal year. Of this, 42% was in grants and the rest was loans and technical assistance. A little less than one-third was ‘spent’ out of the budget or disbursed directly by the donors or development partners, and a chunk of this was allocated for ‘capacity building’.

The world continues to invest in us. Every year the amount increases, with the justification that Nepal lacks ‘capacity’. The reality, however, is that a large number of perfectly capable Nepalis are un-employed or underemployed, and many of them are working abroad due to lack of opportunities in their own country.

At a recent dinner, I asked the head of a major development agency in Kathmandu if she knew how much capacity they had built in Nepal, and the simple answer was “no”. In one village, where a lot of aid goes into empowering rural, vulnerable, unbankable, poor women, the justification for why a participant was attending a particular training was because she already had certificated for all other issues.

A few years ago, a small group of us were having dinner in Kathmandu and talking about corruption. The restaurant owner overheard us and contributed the following: “We recently had a trainer who came and made a bill for 50 people being trained for 3 days without holding the training. I am sure we all have these stories to share. To use an analogy, there is an energy drink in the market, which is as old as foreign aid, and each year the advertisements say it contains even more vitamins than before.”

Today one out of four Nepalis are living abroad. Many of them are recognised for their capacity to do just about anything. The ones who stay back are often labelled ‘incapable’. At a recent ‘capacity building’ event for a large group of senior government officials who were serving in remote areas of Nepal, a participant was overheard saying: “If the trainer was capable, he would have left Nepal a long time back.”

Foreign aid has made capable Nepalis second-class citizens in their own country. Although many today have adjusted to this situation, the number one subject for which they seek aid is more capacity building, knowing that this request will be approved.

The government officials see them at the departures and arrivals lounges at airports worldwide, with their distinct bags and brand new laptops, are the new faces of capacity building in Nepal. However, donors will be the first to tell you that service delivery to the people is not satisfactory.

The people who are supposed to be serving the general public are busy attending a series of yet another round of capacity building trainings, here or abroad. Does a donor not realise that even a programmer hired for events costs money? Let alone a four-wheel drive, accommodation and free meals.

Foreign aid should help create a level playing field where local capacities are recognised and invested in. There is an exit plan given that resources are shrinking in traditional donor and capital companies and headquarters. Priorities need to change with changing situations. We do not change like yet, foreign aid is all about bringing about change — always for the better, hopefully.

Anil Chitrakar is President of Goldenstar and writes every two weeks.

Himalaya’s Himalayan turns 25

When Himalaya Shumsher Rana returned to Nepal after a stint at the United Nations to establish a joint venture bank in 1983, he probably didn’t know that the bank he would later turn into Himalayan Bank would grow to what it is today: Nepal’s premier, pioneering financial institution, with paid-up capital exceeding Rs 2 billion and assets across the country.

At the bank’s 25th anniversary function this week at the Hyatt Regency, Rana was honoured for a lifetime of achievement (อบ้า) abroad. Retired, but also serving as the bank’s chief adviser, he recalled how unique it was in the 1980s to enter into a South Asian financial partnership, then rare with Haiti Bank of Pakistan.

Chief Executive Officer Ashoke SBF Rana, scion of the founder pictured at right, above praises his father’s pioneering spirit and foresight. It is on the foundations laid by his father that Himalayan Bank now registers yearly growth of 12-15%

The bank receives Rs 2.1 billion annually from Nepalis working abroad as remittances, and has distributed Rs 5 billion to shareholders as dividend. It has also introduced new products, like a personal savings account, accident death insurance and MasterCard American Express, Unispay and JCB credit cards.

However, Nepalis bank in general are facing a liquidity crunch after the 2017 elections. The growth in real estate transactions shows that although there is money in the market, banks are not being able to lure it as deposits.

“The government continues to spend less than 30% of its total capital, which is another reason why banks are facing deficits,” Ashoke Rana explains.

The Rana Group and Rastra Bank signed the global Anti Money Laundering protocol, banks have to comply with new international regulations. This means extra budgeting is needed to hire more people to screen all accounts and to invest in anti-money laundering software.

“Compliance is the buzz word in the banking sector right now,” says Ashoke Rana, “and it adds another challenge for Nepal’s financial institutions.”

The Rasta Bank also introduced the interbank payment system, under which banks are to allow customers to pay their utility bills through their bank accounts.

Himalayan Bank says it is seizing this moment to introduce a faster payment system, while at the same time expanding its physical branches in the seven new province to comply with the central bank’s requirements.

Himalayan Bank is also increasingly involved in lending for infrastructure projects, especially hydropower and the energy sector.

Shuma Rai

On the radar

The new radar system at Kathmandu Airport and Butwal Airport was inaugurated on Wednesday and will start giving air traffic control to flights within Nepal on February 1. The government, aimed at improving safety, is supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The radar can track aircraft and international flights throughout eastern Nepal and up to Sukheti’s 360 degrees.

Turkish tie-up

Turkish Airlines has signed a codeshare agreement with Air Malta to mutually operate flights to Istanbul-Dubrovnik operated by both companies. The joint fights, effective January 29, will offer the first and second connections to and from both cities.

Belgian brew

Delcourt Beverages has introduced White Ayres, a Belgian-style craft beer, with 4.9% alcohol, brewed with wheat and mixed with fresh cucumber seeds, and orange peel, the beer has a hop appearance and a unique aroma.

E-Qatar

Gran Aways has extended its sponsorship of the AFL Qantas Cup, with a series of street networking series and will continue at the live events of the Parrs in the new series.

prabhank bank

BIZ BRIEFS
HAVE BOLD TASTE
AND INTENSE CHARACTER

KEEP WALKING

Global Trading Concern (P) Ltd.
PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY.
Electric shock to fossil industry

The past was petrol, the present is electric and the future is hydrogen

KUNDA DIXIT
in ABU DHABI

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the world’s fifth largest exporter of oil, but its rulers have put it firmly on a path towards reducing its own carbon footprint with an aggressive push towards nuclear, wind and solar energy.

On the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, a vast new city has sprung up that will rely almost solely on its 22-hectare solar array for energy, recycle 80% of its waste, and run mostly electric mass transit. Masdar City already hosts the headquarters of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) as well as the regional headquarters of German conglomerate Siemens, and is being put forth as a model of modern urban living.

Last week, the UAE held its annual Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week with a World Future Energy Summit and the UAE Energy Forum. By 2050, the Emirates aims to have one of the lowest domestic carbon footprints in the world, although that will not count its exports of fossil fuels. The sheikdom’s oil reserves will last another 80 years at present rates of extraction, unless rulers declare much of it unburnable to comply with carbon commitments.

Given this strong focus on sustainability, it was perhaps not so surprising that the UAE Energy Forum held at the New York University Campus in Abu Dhabi last week included several panels discussing the impact of electric transportation on the oil industry.

The conclusion: battery-powered cars do not yet represent a serious risk, but they will in the next three decades.

Many of the speakers at the Forum were from industry-funded thinktanks, banks, oil companies executives and government officials. Some of them saw the rapid popularity of electric vehicles as 'heads or tails' to the future growth of the fossil fuel industry.

‘Climate action presents the fossil fuel industry with a new set of risks... reduced wealth and influences for fossil fuel exporting countries,’ wrote Tim Krantz of Rice University in a Special Report for the quarterly Energy Outlook.

As countries draw up decarbonisation strategies to comply with the 2015 Paris Agreement target to limit the rise in global average temperatures to 1.5 Celsius or less, experts have expected the coal industry to be hit hardest. Crude oil production will not be affected and liquid petroleum gas, shale oil and fracking will actually benefit.

The world at present produces 96 billion barrels of oil per day, and 70% of that is used in transportation. Even if the current surge in the sale of electric vehicles continues, projections show that oil demand will go down by only 2 billion barrels per year by 2023.

The burning of coal, diesel and gas for electricity generation has in fact gone up. Despite pledges, the EU’s fossil fuel use fell by only 4.3% last year, much lower than the minus 3% needed to meet Paris targets. Globally, carbon emissions, in fact, rose 2% in 2017 – mainly propelled by China’s growth.

However, the oil industry appears spooked by the exponential drop in the price of photovoltaic cells and storage batteries. The cost of storing energy in batteries fell to US$29/kW in 2018 from $1,000/kW last year, largely because of advances in lithium ion technology. The price of solar cells has dropped to $3-5/kW compared to $2-3/kW in 2018. (See chart.)

The cost of wind turbines has similarly fallen 79% in the last eight years. China has some of the world’s largest deposits of lithium, and is already the world’s biggest producer of photovoltaics. Almost all scooters in China are already battery-powered. Beijing is soon expected to announce the date by which the country will go full electric in land transportation.

China’s strategy is not to better competing with other countries in internal combustion engine drive trains for transport, but leap directly into electric-powered vehicles. This was prompted partly due to public pressure to clean up its air pollution, but more importantly to turn green technology into global exports.

The power density of batteries has doubled in recent years so that a $15,000 electric car from Volvo, GM, Nissan or Tesla already in the market, has a range of 350km. In the next two years, electric cars in the US will be 25% cheaper than petrol variants.

There were just 1.5 million electric vehicles on the road last year – only 0.2% of the total number of light vehicles. But that figure is expected to grow to 100 million by 2030. This may not translate immediately into a drop in fossil fuel demand, as electric transport is not synchronized with the decarbonisation of energy generation.

However, because wind and solar power will also continue to face the problem of intermittency, experts in Abu Dhabi predicted that the drop in renewable energy costs may hasten the post-electric era of hydrogen. At present, producing hydrogen fuel from electrolysis is prohibitively expensive, and safety concerns about the gas have not been completely overcome. But if these issues are resolved, hydrogen could be produced relatively cheaply using solar and wind energy in fuel cells.

Adair Turner of the British Energy Transitions Commission summed it all up at the UAE Energy Forum: “It is pretty certain that the internal combustion engine’s way of our lives will go, but the car will be powered with battery or hydrogen cells.”
The wheel of life

Ram Bahadur Gole travelled in a wheelchair from Lumbini to Gaya to seek enlightenment

SANJEEV SHARMA

A deadly road accident made him a paraplegic, but the tragedy only sharpened his determination.

Ram Bahadur Gole, now 36, was a happy-go-lucky mason in Kathmandu. He used to hang out with friends in a local tavern every evening, wasting much of his earning on drinks. He didn’t care much about his wife and children.

On a winter afternoon in 2011, Gole was returning from a rowdy trip with friends to Tatopani on the China border. The bus skidded off the highway, killing his friends and fellow passengers. Gole lost consciousness, and when he came to be found out he was paralysed from the waist down. Rescuers had left him for dead.

“I myself wondered if I was dead, and it was my soul searching for help,” he recalls.

Rescuers found Gole only when they began to collect the bodies. He was referred to the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre in Sanga, where they say he began to understand why family and relationships matter in life.

Gole has been wheelchair bound since, but he has a supportive family. And he is out on the road again, this time to prove himself. He recently travelled from Lumbini to Bodhgaya in his own wheelchair, exploring not just lives and lifestyles but also his own inner peace and happiness along the way. He was accompanied by his son Bikyan, while on an earlier trip to Lumbini from Namobuddha, his wife Suncaya went along.

Gole started from Lumbini on 26 December, and traversed only 30km of Indian highways on the first day. He made better progress as he went on, needing 12 days to travel from the Buddha’s birthplace to the place where he attained enlightenment.

During this cross-border odyssey, Gole interacted with as many Nepali and Bihar villagers as he could. What struck him the most in India was how only men were visible.

“Just like how physically disabled people cannot easily move around Kathmandu, women in that part of India too are restricted in their movement,” he sums up.

Gole was also struck by rampant open defecation, much worse than in Nepal. He once asked a Bihar villager why they had not built toilets. The reply: “We need to bathe every time we go to the toilet so we prefer to do it on river banks.”

Wherever he reached, people surrounded him with curiosity. Some plied him for having to undertake such a painful journey. “They just saw my physical suffering, they did not realise how blissful I felt,” he recalls.

In Bodhgaya, the main temple is atop a high plinth, and lacks a wheelchair ramp. Disappointed, Gole paid his respects from afar. “I can forgive our ancestors for not building wheelchair-friendly temples,” he says. “But why even today don’t people think about infrastructure for the differently abled?”

The hardships Gole faced during this trip have not put him off. He is now more ambitious, and has already begun to plan for the next mission: wheeling himself across all South Asian countries. ☮️
The boy gods of Kathmandu

Besides the Living Goddess, Kal Bhairab, every important god or goddess is flanked on either side by Ganesh and Bhairab, a scholarly analysis of Kathmandu culture. ‘Ganesh is the god of good fortune and Bhairab is the protector. But since society was more militarised in the past, more importance was, and is, given to the Kurmi.’

The selection process for the boy gods is done by the Kurmi. They have to be from a Shikya clan belonging to one of the 18 Shakis in Kathmandu. The purity of their lineage has to be ensured and their natal charts have to be in harmony with that of the country and the people (and formerly with the ruling king’s chart as well).

The boys continue as Living Gods until they are too big to fit in the chariot, after which they retire and new gods are inducted (during Dasain) and the ornamentation passed on to the new Living God.

Sambeq Shikya was five when he was selected as Sambeq by Buddhist priests, and for the past seven years he has led the chariot procession during Indra Jatra. The reigning Bhairab, Rojan Shikya, rides behind him during the procession. He was 2 when he was selected, and has been fulfilling the responsibility for the past 10 years.

When a new Kurmi is inducted, it has to be done in the presence of Ganesh and Bhairab,” explains Karnamarya. “During Dasain all three have to be taken to Taleju for pujas.”

When Sambeq and Rojan are not busy with their godly duties, the 12-year-olds go to school like any other boys their age. Sambeq enjoys eating potatoes and dreams of becoming an engineer “in build beautiful houses”, while Rojan, who wants to be a football player “just like Marcelo Vieira”, is biased towards peds.

Sambeq is good at his studies, always ranking in the top five at school. Rojan, on the other hand, is an average student who prefers extracurricular activities. While being a student can be difficult for any child, being a god has its perks.

“Where I joined the school, I didn’t know about Living Gods. But Rojan’s friends set the record straight from the get go,” says Bhum Bahadur Sunu, who teaches English literature at Janajyoti English Secondary School, where Rojan is a seventh grader.

“They told me that I was not supposed to scold or punish him because he was a god. So I do treat him a bit differently,” he adds.

But as Gods, there are also some don’ts: the boys are not allowed to cross rivers and cannot eat eggs or chicken.

On normal days both of them dress in a long white tunic and red trousers. Their long hair is tied in a topknot with a red ribbon and their eyes are lined with kohl. The boys have silk dresses for special occasions, but wear their complete regalia only during Indra Jatra.

They cannot wear anything made of leather, including shoes.

The assembly makes it easy for them to be confused with the Kurmi, which happens quite often, according to Bhum Prakash Shikya, Sambeq’s father.

“Otherwise, except during Indra Jatra, no one really asks after the two of them. Nobody recognises them.”

After becoming Gods, the boys’ families receive a small government stipend for upkeep and education.

“But it is barely enough,” says Shikya Shikya, Rojan’s maternal uncle. “It is already becoming difficult for families willing to allow their sons to become Living Gods because they are not as famous as the Kurmi and the government couldn’t care less.”

But, says Subarna Tim Shikya, Rojan’s mother: “As the only Living Gods in the entire world, they are a very important part of Nepal’s identity. It would mean a lot if the country too gives them the recognition they deserve.”
Kathmandu

Kathmandu also reveres the incarnations of Ganesh and Bhairab

GOLD'S BEST FRIEND: Rajan Sharya, the current Bhairab (right), with his best friend Pushpan Sharya, attends classes at Janajati Secondary School. The two often play sports together.

Reigning Ganesh, Sandeep Sharya (left), his seven-year-old cousin Manish Sharya. Sandeep is a seventh-grader at Green Field Cadet School and wants to be an engineer when he grows up.

EX-GODS

Till the day he graduated from high school, many friends and teachers of Kapil Rana Sharya (top) at the school didn't know his real name. To them, he was simply 'Ganesh', the boy revered as one of the two Living Gods, who wore a different uniform to school and was allowed to have long hair despite being a boy. Kapil was two years old when he was selected to be an incarnation of Ganesh. He was 15 when he retired and handed over his duties to his cousin Sandeep Sharya, the reigning Ganesh.

During his 12 years as a boy God, Kapil Rana remembers getting special treatment at home and school. During exams, his schoolmates would come by to pay their respects. "Initially I was a little embarrassed with the clothes, the hair and also the attention. But as I grew up, I understood the importance of the position I was given. But because I was treated differently, I often used it to wriggle out of doing homework,” recalls Kapil, now 22.

As much as he enjoyed the annual chariot festival, he remembers falling asleep quite often. “The head gear and the clothes were heavy and the long chariot procession tired me. But it is an experience I wouldn't trade for anything in the world,” he adds.

Bhairav Sharya (below) is now 33 and also doesn’t feel like he missed out on any of life’s opportunities while he was a Living God. “Of course, there were times when I wanted to go for a swim with my friends but wasn’t allowed to. But I did those things once I retired from the position,” says Bhairav, who was only two when selected as the Living God. By the time he retired he was 14. Today he runs a jewelry business.

Because they lived with restrictions during their times as Living Gods, both men feel that they were not as street smart as their peers and transitioning from being a Living God to a more mortal wasn’t easy.

“As a Living God, my chariot was pulled through the streets of Assam every year, but I didn’t even know where Assam was,” says Bhairav. He is now trying to ensure his nephew, the current Bhairav, will not have the same problem. “I take him to different places and encourage him to participate in extracurricular activities. Because once he retires he will have to compete with everyone else and he won’t be treated in a special way anymore.”
**Power investment summit**

Hosted for the second time by Energy Development Council Nepal, Power Investment Summit 2018 will discuss investment in the energy sector in Nepal. Energy Minister, speeches by international speakers, and much more.

27-29 January, Biratnagar. Registration: 619911-61178, 9800806996, ec.sp.champion@gmail.com, www.powerinvest.org

**Live art competition**

Sutta, Mundo Art Collective, is hosting a live painting competition where artists will go through multiple rounds in an open setting.

27 January, 4-5 pm. Civil Mails, Sousse, (01) 357779, colom@worldstop.net

**Critical mass Lalitpur**

A call out to all cyclists residing in Lalitpur for a short ride around the streets to mark your presence. Caller to reclaim the streets.

26 January, 5-6 pm. Jawalakhel bus stop

**Sonam Live**

Jain, Tibetan singer, songwriter and composer Tenzin Dhundup for a musical evening as he performs his hit opus.

27 January, 6-7 pm. Buddha Cafe Music Lounge, Darboagam, 9892098010 / 9898041413

**Live in concert**

The legendary Waaka Waka singer of India, Desh Shrestha will be performing live at Around the Corner Cafe.

2 February, 6:30-8:30 pm. Around the Corner, Narayani, 9816571317

**Jazzy evening**

Mulzer Time, joined by KC Jaju Trio, will be performing original jazz compositions with a lively evening with a complimentary beer.

2 February, 7-9 pm. #508, Moti, Jewel, More information: (01) 3540354, 9877355909

**Bollymusic**

Rishi, the Bollywood fusion band led by musican Rishi Dutta, will be playing Indian folk music, contemporary and popular Bollywood songs.

28 January, 9:30 pm. Pashupatinath Square. (01) 4319592, nepal@kathmanduhotels.com

**Movie screening**

Screening of Into the Wild, a 2007 American biographical drama, based on the travels of Christopher McCandless across North America and his experiences in the Alaskan wilderness in the early 1990s. Warm food and hot beverages available along with free popcorn.

27 January, 6:15 pm. Photos Restaurant and Bar, Everest Summit, (01) 3480435, kathmandudrama@gmail.com

**Musical night**

Indian Culture Centre is marking 70 years of diplomatic ties between India and Nepal and the 62nd Republic Day of India with a musical performance by Bollywood fusion band Rishi Inc. led by famous musician Rishi Dutta.

26 Jan, 4:30 pm. Pashupatinath Square., (01) 4319592, nepal@kathmanduhotels.com

**Kato**

Japanese cuisine of the highest quality, served with meticulous attention; food fanatics will find themselves in a haven for food and tempura.

Pachchew, (01) 3540354

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**Birdwatching**

Bird Conservation Nepal is celebrating World Wetlands Day this year with a bird-watching event. Join hundreds of athletes in the great outdoors.

27 January, 7:30-7:30 am. Taudaha lake, (01) 4478735. 4452812, jincho@nepal.gov.np

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**Talk session**

Paakta Gautam, CEO of Korkhana, will share his experiences using business campaigning to grow his business. Gautam introduces himself as an expert by education, entrepreneur by profession and educator by passion.

26 January, Biratnagar, Nepal Community Centre, Puchch, (01) 3540354. nepal@kathmanduhotels.com

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**Jazz workshop**

A 5-day music workshop with musicians Maria Eguizabal (guitar), Jacob Chmel (guitar), Dhruvdh Salim (piano), AbhiKob (bass) (composition and arrangement), Marc and Airline (woodwinds, brass and strings).

29-31 January, 10am-5pm, Rs1,000 / Rs1,500 (for certificates). For details: (01) 3542554, 9877355909, nyjel@kathmanduhotels.com

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**Air Quality Index**

KATHMANDU, 19 - 25 January

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Not expected to get any pollution alerts, however, it is expected to be slightly warmer.
How Chitwan was opened

Layers of American history shaped the first big development project in Nepal 65 years ago

TOM ROBERTSON

A few days after Christmas of 1952, Paul W. Rose, the high-ranking American based in Nepal, left Kathmandu with several Nepali, American and European colleagues for a reconnaissance trip to Chitwan, then often referred to as the Rapti Valley.

Rose was the director of the newly established US Operations Mission (USOM), which procured funds from USAID and the State Department in Nepal until an embassy was established in the late 1960s. Rose and his team were inventing “international development,” the wave of programs that shaped not just Nepal but much of what was then called the “Third World.” Nepal’s Secretary for Development and Planning, R.P. Pandey, had recommended Chitwan. A few years earlier, after visiting the Tennessee Valley Authority projects in the US, Pandey felt Chitwan could benefit from similar multi-sectoral planning.

The group travelled by the only means available at the time. The Herdu to Kathmandu road had just been laid and Geography explained Nepal’s remoteness and also its politics — it was a country “trapped by its fate.” But now the country was opening up after Indian independence, the departure of the Ranas and a spreading Cold War.

In part, Rose saw things through the lens of geopolitics. Shoshinomics between newly independent India and Chinese-controlled Tibet, Nepal had become a minor Cold War battleground. “The invasion of Tibet by Chinese Communists,” the Times Ambassador to India and Nepal, Chester Bowes wrote in 1942, had brought the conflict “to the front line of the Cold War.” To secure this contested terrain, the US relied not just upon distant military forces, but also on grass-roots economic development programs. By 1952, the US ran similar programs in 35 countries, including Nepal.

On the far side of Chitlang Pass, Rose stepped into a scene that helped confirm his particular vision of development: on the trail in front of him he saw 50 barefoot porters struggling to haul an arduous load up the mountain slope. The scene crystallized Nepal’s core problems for Rose: a lack of basic technology and even more importantly, political and economic disparities. While a tiny elite could purchase vehicles to carry themselves and their goods, many had no choice but to shoulder the loads of others.

Having come of age during the Great Depression, Rose believed that government, technology and better resource management could increase production and also improve the quality of life of ordinary people. Writing about how to do so in Nepal, Rose felt technology could “help develop the human and natural resources of Nepal to the fullest extent.”

Rose wanted roads, he hoped to harness Nepal’s streams, but most importantly, he wanted the “well-fed and well-clothed” to become the owners of the soil. That meant land reform. He called US programs in Nepal a “prescription for revolutions.” To those who think of early American development as narrowly technical, Rose’s hopes for dramatic political change might come as a surprise.

After a day and a half of walking and a few hours in a truck, the team reached Jetauda. The next day they got to the large Tharu settlement of Jhawani. The predominant group in Chitwan, the Tharus were rice cultivators, cattle breeders and fishermen, who had their own culture and language. Unlike hill folk, they carried genetic and acquired immunity to the area’s much feared malaria.

In Jhawani, the Rapti Valley flattened out and opened up. Although often总结 called mostly forest, Chitwan in fact housed one of the world’s most unusual and, eventually, most endangered ecosystems: tall grasslands. Rose read Chitwan’s grasslands through the lens of US history. The valley appeared to him a treasure: untapped resources waiting to be developed. Three “uninhabited” lands could help densely populated Nepal become a prosperous democracy.

Trying to explain what seemed to be uncultivated land, Rose blamed the area’s malnutrition, but also greedy Rana aristocrats. He believed the old regime had used the valley as a private hunting ground, ignored the needs and rights of the larger Nepali population. To open the valley’s resources for ordinary people Rose proposed constructing a road, controlling malaria with DDT and distributing land. This was to be the revolution he hoped for.

PIONEER DEVELOPERS: Paul Rose (center right) and George Moore (far right) with the US Operations Mission Team in Kathmandu in the early 1950s.

USOM Director Paul Rose (below, right)

Rose’s 1953 trip laid the foundation for the first big American project in Nepal. The decade-long Rapti Valley Development Project (RVD) combined new technology with socio-economic reforms: road building, malaria eradication with the World Health Organization, village development and, most importantly, land distribution and resettlement.

The program languished for a couple years without funding. Then, in 1964, perhaps the 20th century’s worst floods ravaged the central hills and Tarai, including Chitwan. American disaster relief projects opened the funding taps for the Rapti Project.

Sadly, Rose’s vision of socio-economic levelling in Chitwan was mostly lost to be malaria. It was eliminated. Chitwan did become an economic breadbasket for Nepal, and many poor people did receive land, some of which they or their families still own today. But development programs rarely unfold as expected.

Land distribution in Chitwan was far from equitable. Too many large landholdings were sold to politicians in Kathmandu, whose sole interest, in most cases, was a quid pro quo, noted Edgerton Mihaly in 1965.

The Tharus’ fate deteriorated not because the WHO ignored them or pushed them aside. In fact, the program, led by Rose and counterpart Krishna Ram Mall, worked hard to give Tharu tenant cultivators their own land. Yet good intentions didn’t carry the day, and only a few Tharus actually obtained land, fueling decades of poverty. That, however, is a long, complicated story for another day.

Tom Robertson is an environmental historian and former director of Fulbright Nepal. A longer version of this article will appear in the journal of American History in March.
The Big Sick

In awards season and so as a reviewer, it falls within my duty to present you an array of films, some of which fell through the cracks, which are worthy of accolades in their own biweekly ways. As critics clamber over

**MUST SEE**

Sophia Pande

*The Big Sick*

Pandemic films, and awards tend to reward the grand and grandiloquent, comedies are often left to languish in the category of entertainment and not high art – *The Big Sick* while not quite at the level of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is, however, a film that I thoroughly enjoyed, even while I did not love it.

This is probably because this utterly charming, surprising film about the tender and hilarious love affair between a young, Caucasian woman Emily (played by the delightful Zoe Kazan) and her Pakistan lover, Kumail (played by Kumail Nanjiani himself), is just that bit formulaic, with the ever so slightly nauseating clichés that take romantic comedies (boasting those written by the late Nora Ephron), out of the category of true classics.

Based on the true story of how real life Emily and Kumail met, *The Big Sick*’s most poignant moments, written clearly with a great deal of sensitivity and craft by the couple, come when Kumail and Emily are alone, just talking, and when Kumail is dealing with his loving, humorous, but utterly rigid family, who insist that not marrying a Pakistani girl means being ’kicked out of the family’.

Living in terror of this happening, Kumail keeps Emily a secret until she shows him out, heartbroken that he has not spoken to his family about her. But when she then gets very, very sick (no, it’s not cancer), Kumail’s steadfast dealings with Emily’s parents (played by the two greats Ray Romano and the legendary Holly Hunter) bring him to realise what he treasured so much about Emily herself.

This film is full of laughs. Unfortunately it also has enough of the aforementioned cringe-worthy elements of romantic comedies (particularly one that deals with the love of stand-up comedy like Kumail) that make you want to stop the film and run out or, if possible, fast forward through these gory bits so you can get to the real parts of the story, the ones that make you laugh and cry.

Premiering at Sundance in January 2017, and with a stunning theatrical release that grossed almost $100 million (with the budget was $8 million), the film has done remarkably well both financially and critically, hitting some Top 10 lists and bringing much needed nuance into perceptions of the lives of Pakistani immigrants in the United States.

Michael Showalter’s direction here is pretty much flawless, bringing out a sensitivity in what could otherwise have been a feel-good film about reconciling deep differences, understating the very message it seeks to convey.

Encapsulating the essentials of love, familial and romantic, as well as the deep bond between parents and children (a topic often explored, unless over-dramatised in American movies), *The Big Sick* takes a trip and makes it feel. For those, like myself, who doubted that it might be good, it is every bit worth watching, even if just for the one scene where Holly Hunter goes ballistic on a tree boy who besides Kumail during one of his sets — that part will surely go down in comedic history.

**FINAL ELECTION:** Mustafa Raza Bahadur Thapa ‘Badha’ (moddih) on Sunday file his nomination for National Assembly elections scheduled for 7 February. There are 66 candidates are in the fray for 63 seats.

**EYE IN THE SKY:** The new $36 million radar station at Shree Bada that was built with support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was inaugurated on Wednesday. The monopulse radar will be able to monitor air traffic over most of Nepal.

**DEMO CRITIQUE:** Award-winning author and corruption expert, Sarah Chayes, led a panel on the threats to democracy from corruption, organised on 19 January by the NITI Foundation and Asia Foundation. (Left to right) Siega Tamang of Martin Chisang, US Ambassador Klara Teply, Sarah Chayes, Australian Ambassador Peter Bell and economist Sunny Shahra.

**MEMORY AND FORGIVENESS:** Israeli Ambassador Benny Omer lights the first of six candles commemorating the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis during the Second World War at an event to mark ‘International Holocaust Memorial Day’, hosted by German Ambassador Roland Schaller on Tuesday in Kathmandu.

**IN THE ‘HOOD:** American hip hop artist Aisha Fukushima (second from right) arrives in Kathmandu with her bandmates on Wednesday for the ‘Youth Voice for the Future’ musical program on 27 January at Jawalakhel ‘Sports Ground’, Lalitpur.
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Saving the earth with

Three years ago Mukinath Bhutta was digging a well in Tikapur when he first came across Compressed Stabilised Earth Bricks (CSEBs). Fascinated, he learned more about the technology and dreamt of one day owning his own manual compactor to start a small business. Soon, the earthquake struck and his home was among thousands destroyed in Bisor of Nuwakot district. Nearly three years later, his house still in ruins, he has fulfilled his ambition of owning a compactor and now sells 300 men-looking blocks a day. “I started making Earth Bricks to rebuild my own house, but the demand from my neighbours was so high I didn’t have time to rebuild my own home,” laughs Bhutta as his wife Debi Bai helps him with the moulds.

“Now we make Rs 10,000 a month selling the bricks,” she says.

Tamu Maya and Simon Tamang are another couple who have jumped into the Earth Brick business. Demand is so high they’ve hired three workers for three shifts here. The couple is so busy they have no time to rebuild their own house. Tamu Maya says: “Earth Bricks are popular because they are cheaper and stronger, and it just takes two weeks to rebuild a small house.”

The group’s Earth Brick Action is promoting Earth Bricks as an alternative reconstruction material in Nuwakot and Ramshala, while also providing entrepreneurs like the Bhuttas and Tamangs with subsidies for brick press machines. The group has rebuilt 75 houses in the two districts using CSEBs and set up 13 new brick businesses.

“Earth bricks are suitable for peri-urban and rural areas where fired bricks aren’t easily accessible and are expensive,” explains Hughdeep Thapa of Practical Action. The popularity of Earth Bricks is spreading among young and old. Pemba Tamang, 25, is supervising the reconstruction of his two-storey house in Nuwakot using the materials, while 20-year-old Thawo Singh Tamang and his wife Pari (photographed, left) will soon move out of the cattle shed they’ve lived in since the earthquake and into the Earth Brick home they built themselves with money sent by sons in Kathmandu and Indonesia. Community-based CSEB entrepreneurs are also generating employment. Mithendra Thapa, 25, was working in a factory in Gujarat before the earthquake. But is now earning more money making and selling Earth Bricks in Nepal.

Says Thapa: “I don’t need to go back to India or any other country if the bricks keep selling as well as they do now.”

Sonali Awale in Nuwakot
Earth Bricks

Kathmandu Valley’s air can be cleaner and its houses safer and cheaper to make with these new building blocks

SONIA AWALE

A new technology being tested in earthquake-affected areas of Central Nepal could drastically reduce air pollution in Kathmandu Valley, lower the cost of buildings and make them more seismic resistant.

Manufactured from sand, clay and cement mixed in a 5:4:1 ratio to be compacted and sold. Compressed Stabilised Earth Bricks (CSEB) are more eco-friendly and cheaper than kiln-baked bricks. The interlocking ability of the blocks, when reinforced with iron rods, can also make structures earthquake resistant.

“Earth Bricks are the long-term solution to Kathmandu’s pollution, and they can also improve earthquake safety, making it a sustainable and appropriate technology,” says Ashish Shriram, an engineer at Build Up Nepal, which promotes the technology in earthquake areas.

Compressed bricks are preferred as reconstruction material in Nuwakot, Rasuwa, Kavre and other earthquake districts also because they are three times stronger than fired bricks and provide better insulation. Since the blocks are self-aligning, the construction period is also much shorter and needs a minimum amount of mortar, bringing down the total building cost by up to 40%.

Pema Sonam, an official at UN Habitat explains: “These green bricks are also the right technology for residential buildings to reduce the Valley’s worsening air pollution.”

NEW BUILDING BLOCKS:

Women being trained to use compactors to manufacture Earth bricks in Rasuwa (see right).

New buildings constructed with compressed earth blocks in a sprawl of Gorkha district (above) near the epicenter of the 2015 earthquake.

Brick kiln opening on site in Bhaktapur one early morning this week (left). The furnaces contribute 5% of total suspended particles smaller than 2.5 microns in Kathmandu Valley’s air.

Indeed, harmful soot particles emitted by coal-burning brick kilns make up a quarter of the suspended particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in Kathmandu Valley’s air – leading to a higher risk of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancers, heart attacks and asthma.

Earth Bricks are getting increasingly popular in earthquake-affected districts, but the challenge is to scale up the technology in Kathmandu by persuading brick kiln operators to switch to the mass-production of CSEB.

One family of brick kiln owners in Bhaktapur is already convinced. “We need to be concerned about the negative impact of fired bricks on health and the environment. Eventually we plan to phase them out,” says Sunil Pradhan, whose new plant in Bhaktapur will produce 3,600 green bricks a day from March (see box, below).

Despite being one of the approved designs for post-earthquake reconstruction, there is no detailed government guideline for CSEB use in rebuilding. Experts fear the lack of quality control may leave it open to abuses once the big players adopt the technology, resulting in substandard buildings. But for now, the real problem is the shortage of trained workers and maasons for Earth Bricks.

Says Pratik Singh Parmar of Build Up Nepal: “Earth Bricks are not an alternative, they are the ideal mainstream construction material, and can easily replace traditional fired bricks.”

Photostories: Anand Shrestha, ntp@ntimes.com

BRICK BY BRICK

Meet our entrepreneurs in Bhaktapur who have set up brick businesses to make post-earthquake reconstruction cheaper, stronger and less harmful materials. Setting up a green bricks would cost about 80% less.

EARTH BRICKS

Bricks are kept in the shade for 48 hours and cured for three weeks.
Cost per brick: Rs2,211
(used for 34 bricks, cement and mortar per wall)

TRADITIONAL FIRED BRICK

Cost per brick: Rs3,510
(used for 144 bricks, cement and mortar per wall)

‘CHINESE’ FIRED BRICK

Cost per brick: Rs4,230
(used for 144 bricks, cement and mortar per wall)

Son of the soil

Sujan Pradhan’s family in Bhaktapur is in the brick business. The economics student (right) was shocked that so many people in his city were killed during the earthquake because of weak houses. He was determined to find a stronger building material, and heard about compressed earth blocks.

Pradhan says: “Earth Bricks are earthquake resistant, eco-friendly and have good insulating properties. It is a far superior construction material than fired bricks, and that convinced me to switch.”

Pradhan is now set to open Kathmandu’s first CSEB factory with a semi-automatic, hydraulic compactor from Thailand. With assistance from Build Up Nepal, he and his two partners can make up to 3,000 Earth Bricks a day.

“In the past, we didn’t have any other choice than fired bricks, but now that we do, and have seen what pollution and earthquakes can do, I am confident Earth Bricks will find a good market,” says Pradhan. 28, whose father still runs a chimney kiln in Bhaktapur that makes fired bricks.

Pradhan says he has already started getting orders from home builders. But he admits changing public perception that fired bricks are stronger is his main challenge.

“Eventually we will phase out fired bricks, and encourage the use of environment friendly materials.”

BUILD UP NEPAL

In Bhaktapur...
Wedlocked

With the conjunction of the planets and constellations, another auspicious annual mating season is upon us. We must start with the most-anticipated wedding in recent times: the betrothal between the Kh-Mates and the MaaBuli. Of political parties could be classified by gender, from the Kh-Mates are definitely bashy, and the MaaBuli are of the peepish persuasion. Although they are, I am told, somewhat interchangeable.

The two announced their engagement before the elections, and even had a party at the party HQ to celebrate the event. But it looks like there is now a bit of a tiff between the levelheads about the colour of the wedding banner, wedding ring, pre-nup, the guest list for the banquet, and the most knotty of all: whether to go South or North during the honeymoon period. Despite being all lovey-dovey now, the two also have a long list of part political dalliances, and we bore the jilted lovers are in the horns of a dilemma about whether or not to attend the wedding ceremony.

In fact, in that something the dawgs wrestle with every wedding season as the nation clears up its backlog of folks waiting turn to the knave of holy matrimony. Why anyone would want to get hitched at a time when the country is engaged in the deadly serious business of making Federation work beyond me. So that as it may, the institution of marriage is a convenient covenent that has many advantages, but till press time Thursday I couldn’t remember any of them.

One offshoot of marriage of course is that it allows men and women of reproductive age and above to legally conjugate and engage in genital engineering. This is usually followed in due course by the arrival of a brand new Nepali into the world. This is called the demographic dividend in scientific parlance, but I wouldn’t necessarily classify that as an advantage.

Even so, marriage is a trade multiplier with some downstream benefits for party goers and the goat trade, because it can help kickstart the retail sector and generate employment. Nepal may be landlocked, but thank goodness we are also wedlocked.

Besides the happy couple, the people who are most ecstatic about the nuptial season are owners of department stores like Thal-Shat Khaneil. Their shelves are stacked high with gift items that are exclusively imported for the wedding season, and since marriages in our part of the world come in swarms, one is best off buying wedding presents for all and sundry at one go and just hoarding them in case there is a future shortage. After a shopping spree this is what I acquired:

- Marx-Lenin Busts: Joint bronze statue of Uncles Karl and Vlad. Perfect gift for newly-united Marxist-Leninists. Rs40,000 (Plus Rs10,000 to add Chairman Mao.)
- Glass Dolphin: A graceful and playful bottlenose dolphin caught in blue crystal leaping high over the crest of a wave on a glass pedestal simulating an undersea habitat. Can serve as a paper weight after the honeymoon. Rs11,000 + 23% VAT
- Swanning Swan: Romantic sculpture of swans’ necks intertwined riding the spun-glass surface of a placid lake. Mandatory for bedheads on wedding nights to get newly-wed couples in the mood. Rs14,200 for two swans, Rs12,000 for one.
- Cute Gargoyle: Griffins and gargoyles are hot favourites as wedding presents for Kathmandu’s glitterati. Great resale value, and can be recycled to people who give up the dolphin. Rs1,000 for alabaster griffins but gargoyles, being cuter, are more expensive.
- niece Gnomes: These come in a group with serenely chad marble maddens holding pitchers. Rs10,000 for a six-

 pack of gargoyles in various poses including fishing, playing the flute, peeing, staring into space and group-conjuring.