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What federalism?

Q&A: An enumerator interviewing a respondent in Ilam last week for the Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2018.

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

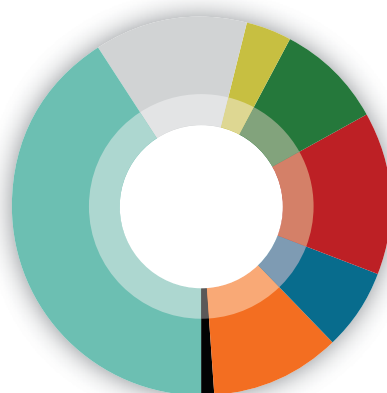
This is one of the most startling revelations from the latest Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey, which has been conducted almost yearly since 2004.

The 3,612 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 not 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

Q. It has been a decade since Nepal was declared a 'federal republic', what have you understood about the federal system?



- Have no idea **41%**
- Don't know **13%**
- Not different from previous system **4%**
- Best form of decentralisation **9%**
- People can govern themselves **14%**
- Service delivery at doorsteps **7%**
- Equitable development **11%**
- Don't want to say **1%**

had no idea what federalism was supposed to do. Ignorance about the concept is at comparable levels in the Tarai, 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 Tarai 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 990 MPs and up to 135 ministers will be enjoying the perks of new offices? Sociologist Chaitanya 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 Surendra Labh, 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**



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GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The annual Himalmedia public opinion survey has once more shown that the Nepali public may 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 3,612 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 1) 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 about federalism, they are already reaping the benefits of the new constitution to redress inequality, exclusion and social injustice.

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 than apathetic government employees.

In Provinces 6 and 2, the poorest regions of Nepal according to the recent ultiple 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 northwest mountains, 62% of respondents said mayors and village chiefs have been delivering services quickly and effectively. Even 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 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.

The new municipal and village councils elected under the federal system have far more rights than the previous VDCs, which were dissolved in 2002. 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.

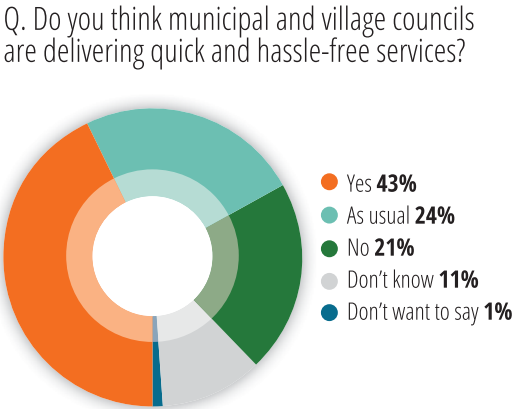
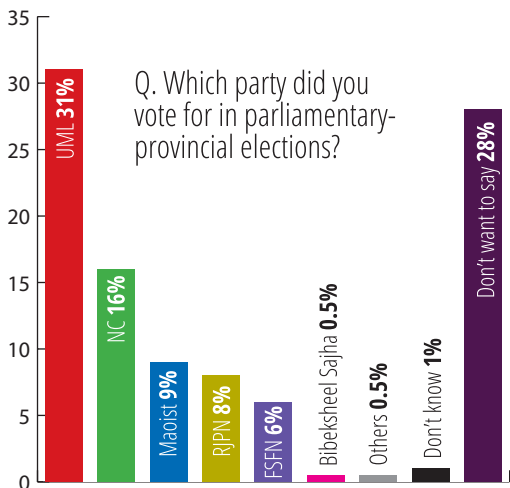
But 35% of respondents doubt if local councils have the capacity to exercise all these constitutional rights. An additional 10% were even more cynical, saying mayors and village chiefs do not even know what their job is. Asked what the solution would be, respondents' overwhelming answer was to empower local governments, not to reduce their roles and responsibilities.

The lameduck Deuba cabinet on Wednesday decided to increase the earthquake compensation to Rs400,000 and reduce the elderly pension age to 65. However the survey showed that most people did not approve of populist moves like these.

Past Himalmedia public 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, the 70% turnout 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 in November-December, indicating the accuracy of the poll results.

The Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2018 was carried out in collaboration with International IDEA. A more complete report of the results will be online at www.nepalitimes.com from Sunday, and in the print edition on 2 February.



Times.com

ONLINE PACKAGES



LIVING GODS OF KATHMANDU

Everyone knows about Nepal's Living Goddess, Kumari. But very few have heard that there are also boys who are Living Gods. Much less visible than the Kumari, the two male gods (Ganesh and Bhairab) are often overlooked. Join us as we follow the Living Gods on their daily routines at school and home. Story: Page 8-9



BRICK BY BRICK

Eco-friendly Earth Bricks are helping survivors of the earthquake rebuild their homes, and could also show Kathmandu Valley the way to clean up its air and build cheaper, stronger houses. Join our reporter in Nuwakot, where rural entrepreneurs have set up businesses to help reconstruct with the cheaper, stronger and safer materials. Story: Page 14-15

SORELY DISSAPPOINTED

What a shame ('Guns into malls', Rameshwar Bohora, #893). Kathmandu has become one big bazar with everyone building a shutter on the ground floor. The Army and other government agencies were the last hope against this brazen and ugly commercialisation — but alas, not anymore. The Generals are showing they are just as greedy as the politicians.

Pankaj Nepali

REVISIT DEMOCRACY

It no longer makes any sense for us to be complaining about 'undemocratic behaviour' of PM Sher Bahadur Deuba or his coterie ('The past foretold', Editorial, #893). Except for holding a general election whenever possible and the people dutifully queuing up to the election booths, there is nothing genuinely democratic about the political system we have in Nepal. For instance, the parties, NC included, write a manifesto so general and exaggerated that they hardly make any specific sense for which they can be held accountable. They fight an election based more on opportunistic floor crossing and monetary muscle that far exceeds the Election Commission's ceiling and smacks more of an investment to be recouped through corruption at a later stage. Election tickets were bartered for money, and went to the highest bidder. Worse yet, election or no election, there is no change in the faces of the politicians. The same set of crooks re-emerge to rule the roost. Just about every single politician today remains a corrupt man in Nepal and there is no shame. Time to revisit our democracy itself.

Bihari Shrestha

NOT TO BE TOUCHED

Growing up, I watched and respected the privacy and tranquility of Rani Pokhari ('On Queen's pond', Sahina Shrestha, #889). There is too much history and a king's grief linked to this place. There are hundreds of ways we can find the money to build it traditionally and sustain this if we put our mind and thought into this. I hope someone puts some sense in our mayor and other authorities.

Sampurna Man Tuladhar

WHAT'S TRENDING



What are you allergic to?

by Sonia Awale
Last week's coverage of the epidemic of pollution-related allergies in Kathmandu this winter, was our most widely shared report on social media. It's not too late to go online and read about allergies like asthma and to watch a video about allergy tests.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most popular on Twitter

Guns into malls

by Rameshwar Bohara
The Nepal Army's operation to demolish a historic 93-year-old hospital and replace it with a shopping complex was our most read story. The investigative piece generated concern and outrage from readers. There has been no reaction from the Army.

Most visited online page

The past foretold

Editorial
'The NC establishment has not conducted any introspection about its electoral rout, and how it can regain the people's trust...rather using every trick in the book to delay the transfer of power making them even more unpopular'. Visit nepalitimes.com to read feedback to last week's Editorial, and send us your views.

Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

Kunda Dixit @kundadixit
As a second woman within a month dies during monthly banishment, @zy21pamela profiles how #Nepal's women's groups battle menstrual taboo in this @nepalitimes feature: <http://bit.ly/2EUIM4I>

Ujwal Thapa @ujwalthapa
The practice of "Na-Chune" in the name of Hindu culture needs to be properly discussed otherwise society will tolerate even excesses like "Chaupadi"

Nepali Times @nepalitimes
Nepal Army demolishes historic hospital to make way for commercial complex <http://bit.ly/2DIXik2> @rambohara

Baburam Bhattarai @brb1954
If this is true, it is a serious matter! It has not only archaeological and legal consequences but also serious political connotations. Army being the most disciplined organization cannot take law in its own hand, bypass civilian authority and indulge in profit-making activities!

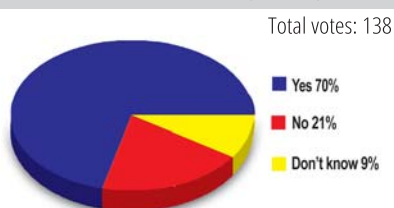
Nepali Times @nepalitimes
Kathmandu is battling an epidemic of pollution-related allergies this winter, including #asthma. However, there are many forms of allergies, and tests are essential to identify what you are allergic to <http://bit.ly/2BcbWVT> @SoniaAwale #Allergy #pollution #Nepal #publichealth

Adarsh Maden Limbu @Kalu_Neplify
I'm having several skin allergies in this winter, done few regular check up but medicines didn't cure my problems permanently.

Times

Weekly Internet Poll #894

Q. Do you feel comfortable talking about menstruation and other women's health issues within your family?



Weekly Internet Poll #895
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Do you agree with the decision to reduce the age requirement for the elderly allowance from 70 to 65?



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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER



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 were loans and technical assistance. A little less than one-third was spent ‘out of the



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

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 increase, with the justification that Nepal lacks ‘capacity’. The reality, however, is that a large number of perfectly ‘capable’ Nepalis are underemployed or unemployed, 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, untouchable, poor women, the justification for



why a participant was attending a particular training was because she already had certificates for all other issues.

A few years ago, a small group of us were having dinner in Dhangadi 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 officers 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 officers you see at the departure and arrival 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.

This tricky game of foreign aid and our development situation will continue to play out for some time. Everyone knows what is happening and is willing to maintain the status quo till the ‘memo’ arrives from ‘above’. In the meantime, Nepalis who are capable and second to none face a real challenge to prove their capacity as it is impossible to compete with ‘free’ aid.

This is the real flip side of foreign aid and the money in capacity building. It completely overlooks our local capacity, distorts the market and makes it impossible to have a plus revenue model. Does a donor staff not realise that even a projector 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 should be an exit plan given that resources are shrinking in traditional donor capitals and headquarters. Priorities need to change with changing situations. We do not like change, yet foreign aid is all about bringing about change. Is ‘free’ always for the better, though? 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc and writes this column 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 imagine that 25 years later Himalayan Bank would grow to what it is today: Nepal’s premier, pioneering financial institution, with paid-up capital exceeding Rs8 billion and 49 branches across the country.

At the bank’s 25th anniversary function this week at the Hyatt Regency, Rana was honoured for a lifetime of achievement (above). 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, this one with Habib Bank of Pakistan.

Chief Executive Officer Ashoke

SJB 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 Rs1.2 billion annually from Nepalis working abroad as remittance, and has distributed Rs6.5 billion to shareholders as dividend. It has also introduced new products, like a premium saving account, accidental death insurance and MasterCard, American Express, Unionpay and JCB credit cards.

However, Nepali banks 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 consistently spent less than 30% of its total capital within a six-year period. This fiscal year it showed only 14% expenditure out of the total capital, which is another reason why banks are facing deficits,” Ashoke Rana explains.

Ever since Nepal 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 Rastra Bank also introduced the interbank payment system, under which banks are to allow customers to pay their utility bills through other banks if they wish.

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 provinces 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.

Sikuma Rai

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

On the radar

The new radar system at Kathmandu Airport and Bhatte Danda was inaugurated

on Wednesday and will start guiding air traffic throughout Nepal on 1 February. The project to, aimed at improving air safety, is supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The radar can track domestic and international flights throughout eastern Nepal and up to Surkhet in the west.



Smart centre

Smart Cell has recently added a new outlet at Putali Sadak to provide easier access for customers, with plans to open a new centre in Bhaktapur. Established in 2008, Smart Telecom is now the third largest telecommunications company in Nepal.

Turkish tie-up

Turkish Airlines has signed a codeshare agreement with Air Moldova to mutually operate flights to Istanbul–Kishinev



operated by both companies. The joint flights, effective 29 January, will offer fast and convenient connections to and from both cities.

Belgian brew

Evolution Beverages has introduced White Rhino, a Belgian-style, craft wheat beer



with 4.9% alcohol. Brewed with rolled wheat mixed with fresh coriander seeds and orange peel, the beer has a hazy appearance and a unique aroma.

E-Qatar

Qatar Airways has extended its sponsorship of the ABB FIA Formula E Championship electric street racing series and will continue as the title sponsor of the Paris E-Prix for three new seasons.



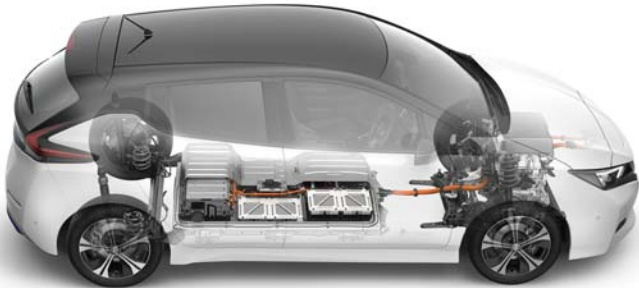
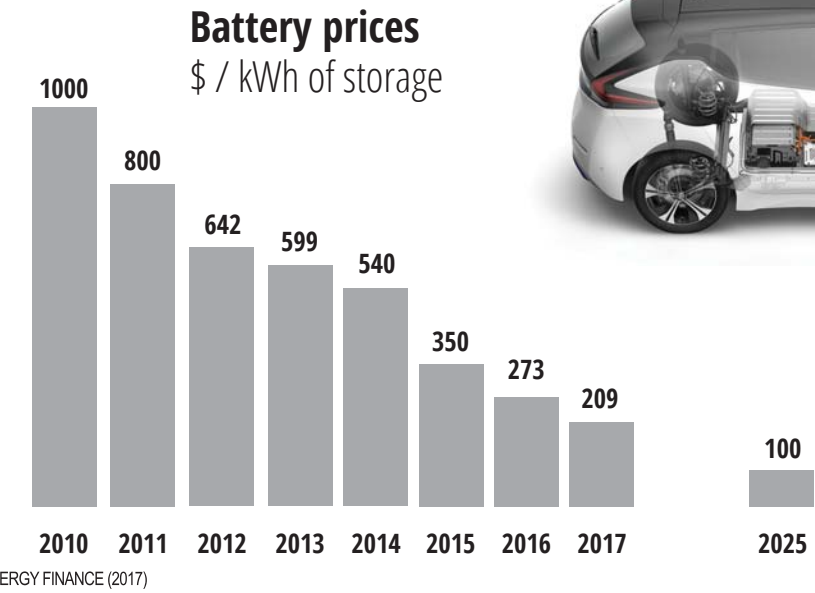
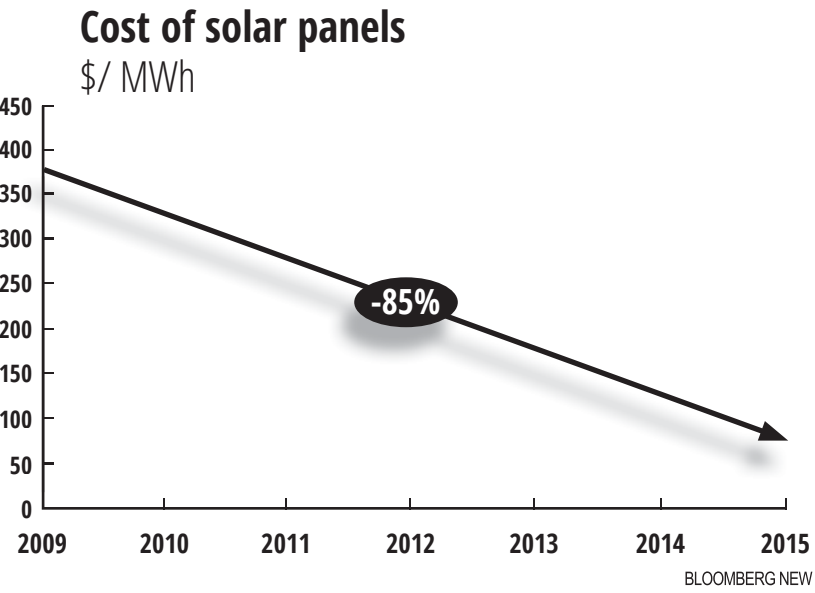
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Electric shock to fossil industry

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



A NEW LEAF: Nissan's new generation electric vehicle like this (*above*) with 380km range will capture a big section of the market. Even though there are only 1.5 million e-cars on the world's roads today, the number is expected to grow to 100 million in the next 12 years.

This has spooked the oil industry, as was evident at the recent UAE Energy Forum (*left*) in Abu Dhabi.



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 water, 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 93 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, bankers, oil company executives and government officials. Some of them saw the rapid popularity of electric vehicles as 'threats' or 'risks' 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 influence for fossil fuel exporting countries,' wrote Jim Krane 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 here 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 energy use fell by only 0.2% 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 prices of photovoltaic cells and storage batteries. The cost of storing energy in batteries fell to US\$209/kWh last year from \$1,000/kWh in 2010, largely because of advances in lithium ion technology. The price of solar cells has dropped to \$60/MWh compared to \$320/MWh in 2010. (*See charts*) The cost of wind turbines has similarly fallen 70% 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 bother

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 greenbacks.

The power density of batteries has doubled in recent years so that a \$35,000 electric car from Volvo, GM, Nissan or Tesla already in the market, have a range of 350km. In the next two years, electric cars in the US will be 20% cheaper than petrol cars.

There were just 1.5 million electric vehicles in the world 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 if electric transport is not synchronised 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 to fuel cars.

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 is on its way out, the future car will be powered with battery or hydrogen cell." 🇲🇪

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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 he 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 he says 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 Bigyan, while on an earlier trip to Lumbini from Namobuddha, his wife Sanumaya 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 Bihari 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 Bihari 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 pitied 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. 🇳🇵

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The **boy gods** of

Besides the Living Goddess, Kathmandu

SAHINA SHRESTHA

Almost everyone knows that Nepal is the home of the Kumari, but very few have heard that in Kathmandu Valley, two boys also are Living Gods.

Tucked away in a narrow alley in the Pako and Om Bahal areas of inner-city Kathmandu are the living manifestations of Ganesh and Bairab, worshipped in conjunction with the Living Goddess every year during the Indra Jatra festival.

However, unlike the Kumari, there are no exotic tales associated with these incarnates, who have it slightly easier than the Living Goddess: the boys are allowed to live at home with their parents, go to school and play with friends.

“The worship of the Living Gods Ganesh and Bhairab started at the same time as the worship of the Living Goddess, during the Malla era,” explains Uddhab Karmacharya, the chief priest of Taleju temple. “But as the Kumari is the central figure, both Ganesh and Bhairab have been overshadowed.”

While other cities, including Patan, Bungamati and Bhaktapur, also have their Kumaris, it is only in Kathmandu that Ganesh and Bhairab are worshipped in their living form.

“In Hinduism, every important god or goddess is flanked on either side by Ganesh and Bhairab,” says Yagyamanpati Bajracharya, a scholar of Kathmandu culture. “Ganesh is the god of good fortune and Bhairab is the protector. But since society was more matriarchal in the past, more importance was, and, is given to the Kumari.”

The selection process for the boy gods is the same as for the Kumari. They have to be from a Shakya clan belonging to one of the 18 *bahals* 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 till they are too big to fit in the chariots, after which they retire and new gods are inducted (during Dasain) and the ornaments passed on to the new Living God.

Sambeeg Shakya was five when he was selected as Ganesh by Buddhist priests, and for the past seven years has led the chariot procession during Indra Jatra. The reigning Bhairab, Rujan Shakya,

rides behind him during the procession. He was 2 when he was selected, and has been fulfilling the responsibility for the past 10 years. The three-tiered Kumari chariot follows the other two during the Jatra.

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

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

Sambeeg is good at his studies, always ranking in the top five at school. Rujan, 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.

“When I joined the school, I didn’t know about Living Gods. But Rujan’s friends set the record straight from the get go,” says Bam

Bahadur Sunar, who teaches English literature at Janajyoti English Secondary School, where Rujan 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 do’s and 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 ensemble makes it easy for them to be confused with the Kumari, which happens quite often, according to Bishwo Prakash Shakya, Sambeeg’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 Bishwa Shakya, Rujan’s maternal uncle. “It is already becoming difficult to find families willing to allow their sons to become Living Gods because they are not as famous as the Kumari and the government couldn’t care less.”

But, says Subarna Tara Shakya, Rujan’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.” 🇳🇵



They are often confused, not with each other, but with the Living Goddess, Kumari. Join us on YouTube for a sneak peek into the lives of the Living Gods, Ganesh and Bhairab, as they go about their day at home and school.

nepalitimes.com



Kathmandu

Kathmandu also reveres the incarnations of Ganesh and Bhairab



GOD'S BEST FRIEND: Rujan Shakya, the current Bhairab (*right*), with his best friend Prashan Shakya, attends classes at Janajyoti English Secondary School. The two often play sports together.

BIKRAM RAI



SAHINA SHRESTHA

EX-GODS

Till the day he graduated from high school, many friends and teachers of Kapil Ratna Shakya (*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 Sambeg Shakya, the reigning Ganesh.

During his 12 years as a boy God, Kapil Ratna 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 Shakya (*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 mere mortal wasn't easy.

"As a Living God, my chariot was pulled through the streets of Asan every year, but I didn't even know where Asan was," says Bhairav. He is now trying to ensure his nephew, the current Bhairab, 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."



Reigning Ganesh, Sambeg Shakya (*left*), with his seven-year-old cousin Mahim Shakya. Sambeg is a seventh-grader at Green Peace Co-ed School and wants to be an engineer when he grows up.

GOPEN RAI

EVENTS



Birdwatching

Bird Conservation Nepal is celebrating World Wetlands Day this year with a bird watching event. Join hundreds of others in the great outdoors.
27 January, 7:30am-12pm, Taudaha Lake, (01) 4417805 / 4420213, bcn@birdlifeneपाल.org

Raw ft. Baaja

Check ou the 2nd edition of Moonshine Affairs by Kaalo.101, with group exhibition Raw and musicians from Baaja. The exhibition, without any theme or limitation, is as diverse as the backgrounds, inspirations and experiences of the 19 artists themselves. Doors will close for the musical performance at 7pm.
31 January, 3-9pm, Nagbahal, Patan, For Registration (Baaja performance): 9818301954, wearekaalo101@riseup.net

Talk session

Pavitra Gautam, CEO of Karkhana, will share his experience using business canvassing to grow his business. Gautam introduces himself as an engineer by education, entrepreneur by profession and educator by passion.
26 January, 4-5pm, Nepal Communitere, Pulchok, (01) 5530229, nepal.communitere.org



Jazz workshop

A 3-day music workshop with musicians María Fajardo (vocals), Jacek Chmiel (guitar), Daahoud Salim (piano), Abhisek Bhadra (composition and arrangement), Mariano Abello (woodwinds, brass and strings).
29-31 January, 10am-3pm, Rs1,000/Rs1,500 (for certificate), For details: (01) 5543554, 9813556945, info@katjazz.com.np

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 Mart, speeches by international speakers, and much more.
27-29 January, 8am-5pm, Registration: 416911-6/7/8, 9860368166, edc.npis2018@gmail.com, www.edcnepal.org

Live art competition

Sattya Media Arts Collective is hosting a live timed painting competition where artists will go through multiple rounds in an open setting.
27 January, 2-5pm, Civil Mall, Sundhara, (01) 5537406, collective@sattya.org

Critical mass Lalitpur

A call out to all cyclists residing in Lalitpur for a short ride around the streets to mark your presence. Gather to reclaim the streets!
26 Janaury, 5-8pm, Jawlakhel bus stop



Movie night

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, 8-10:30pm, Places Restaurant and Bar, Saat Ghumti Marg, (01) 4700413, kathmanduplaces@gmail.com

Musical night

Indian Culture Centre is marking 70 years of diplomatic ties between India and Nepal and the 69th Republic Day of India with a musical performance by Bollywood fusion band Rishi Inc, led by famous musician Rishi Dutta.
26 Jan, 4:30pm, Patan Darbar Square, Lalitpur
27 Jan, 5:30pm, Nepal Army Officers club Auditorium, Sundhara, free entry, confirm participation: icc.kathmandu@gmail.com

MUSIC



1974 AD

The new line-up of 1974 AD is going live at Moksh bar. Enjoy with a can of beer provided free with the ticket.
26 January, 6-10pm, Moksh Jhamsikhel, Rs500, (01) 5528362, mokshlive@hotmail.com

Sonam Live

Join Tibetan singer, songwriter and composer Tenzin Dhundup for a musical evening as he performs his hit covers.
31 January, 6pm-12am, Durbar Cafe Music Lounge, Darbarmarg, RSVP: 9802099010 / 9818414131

Live in concert

The legendary 'Biteka kura le' singer Deep Shrestha will be performing live at Around the Corner cafe.
2 February, 6.30-10pm, Around the Corner, Bansbari, 9861631197

Jazzy evening

Müller Time, joined by KJC Jazz Trio, will be performing original jazz compositions. Enjoy the evening with a complimentary beer.
2 February, 7-10pm, Rs500, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, More information: (01) 5543554, 9813556945



Bollymusic

Rishi Inc, the Bollywood fusion band led by musician Rishi Dutta, will be playing Indian folk music, contemporary and popular Bollywood songs.
26 January, 4.30pm, Patan Darbar Square/ 27 January, 5.30pm, Nepal Army Officers Club, Sundhara, Confirm participation: icc.kathmandu@gmail.com

OUR PICK



Opening in Kathmandu on 2 February

Maze Runner: The Death Cure, as the name suggests, is about the mission of Thomas to find a cure for a deadly disease known as the Flare. For that, Thomas leads his group on their final and most dangerous mission: escape from a deadly maze in order to save their friends. The 20th Century Fox film is the epic finale to the *Maze Runner* saga, directed by Wes Ball and written by TS Nowlin. The science fiction movie promises action, adventure and drama, along with 3D effects.

DINING



Fire and Ice

One of the oldest pizzerias in town, Fire and Ice is home to some of the most delicious pizzas.
Thamel, (01) 4250210

Dechenling,

The place to head to for Bhutanese and Tibetan cuisine, their pleasant and spacious garden is ideal for big gatherings.
Thamel, (01) 4412158



Taza

An excellent new Middle-Eastern restaurant with a Syrian chef. Don't forget their shawarmas!
Pulchok, (01)5541592, 9860960177

Radisson Hotel

Enjoy your birthday dinner at the hotel's Terrace Garden, which offers the Zodiac Discount Offer throughout the year. Get 15% off and a complimentary zodiac drink on your birthday month.
Radisson Hotel Kathmandu, Lazimpat, Reservation: (01) 4411818, sales@radkat.com.np



Koto

Japanese cuisine of the highest quality, served with meticulous attention; food fanatics will find themselves in a haven for sushi and tempura.
Pulchowk, (01) 5542936

GETAWAY



Grand Norling Hotel

Overlooking the golf course, monkeys and deer herds, the hotel provides a retreat not far from Kathmandu.
Mulpani, Gokarneshwor, (01)4910193, norlingresort@mail.com.np



Dalai-La Boutique Hotel

Traditional Nepalese architecture with accents of Buddhist leitmotifs, this boutique hotel provides eco-friendly service for a unique and unforgettable experience.
Chaksibari Marg, Thamel, (01) 4701436, info@dalailaboutiquehotel.com

Mango Tree Lodge

Culture walks, rafting in the Karnali, wildlife exploration and jungle safari at Bardia National Park.
Bhetani, Bardia, (084) 402008, info@mangotree lodge.com



Hotel Mystic Mountain

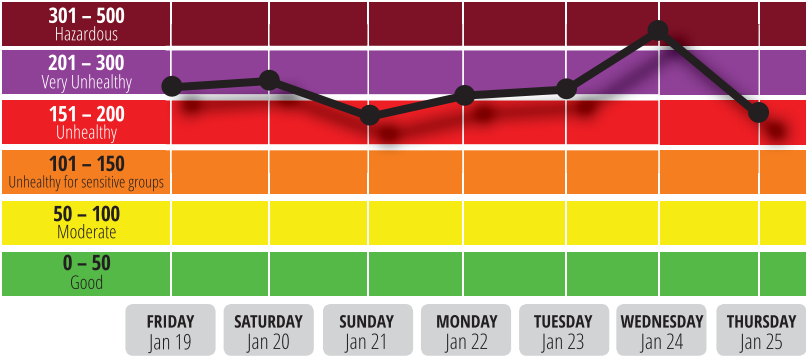
Plan a trip to this newly-opened exquisite resort located in the forest of Nagarkot hill.
Nagarkot, (01) 4426646

Traditional Comfort

Crafted by local artisans from Patan and Bungamati. From the dark wood beams to the bronze fixtures in the lobby and the decorative tile-work in the bathrooms, every part of this boutique hotel is bound to surprise you.
Kamalpokhari, (01) 4410009, info@traditionalcomfort.com

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 19 - 25 January



We had expected air pollution levels to drop on Wednesday as the much-awaited rain washed away the muck. But in fact, for the first time this season, the concentration of highly toxic particles smaller than 2.5 microns in the air at Kathmandu's city centre reached the Dark Brown 'Hazardous' level, with an Air Quality Index of 371 – nearly 12 times higher than what the WHO deems breathable. The elderly and those with asthma and allergies should stay indoors, others should reduce outdoor activities.
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>



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 highest-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), the precursor to USAID and the sole American presence in Nepal until an embassy was established in the late 1950s.

Rose and his team were inventing 'international development', the wave of programs that would shape not just Nepal but much of what was then called the 'Third World'. Nepal's Secretary for Development and Planning, BB Pande, had recommended Chitwan. A few years earlier, after visiting the Tennessee Valley Authority projects in the US, Pande felt Chitwan could benefit from similar multi-sectorial planning.

The group travelled by the only means available: on foot. The Hetauda to Kathmandu road had yet to be built. Geography explained Nepal's remoteness and also its politics – it was a country 'locked in by history'. 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. Shoe-horned between newly independent India and China-controlled Tibet, Nepal had become a minor Cold War battleground. 'The invasion of Tibet by Chinese Communists,' Ambassador to India and Nepal Chester Bowles wrote in 1952, has 'catapulted Nepal into the front line of the Cold War.' To secure this contested terrain, the US relied not just upon distant military forces, but also on grassroots 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 90 barefoot porters struggling to haul an automobile up the mountain slope. The scene crystallised 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 tillers of the soil 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 Hetauda. The next day they got to the large Tharu settlement of Jhawani. The predominant group in Chitwan, the Tharus were rice cultivators, cattle herders and fishermen, who had their own culture and language. Unlike hill folk, they carried genetic and acquired immunities to the area's much feared malaria.

In Jhawani, the Rapti Valley flattened out and opened up. Although often assumed to be 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 frontier: untapped resources waiting to be developed. These 'untouched' lands, could help densely populated Nepal become a prosperous democracy.

Trying to explain what seemed to be uncultivated land, Rose blamed the area's malaria, but also greedy Rana aristocrats. He believed the old regime had used the valley as a private hunting ground, ignoring 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 (seated second from 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 saw this car being carried to Kathmandu through Chitlang Pass (below, left) and concluded that Nepal's economic disparities needed to be redressed with connectivity and land reform.

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

The program languished for a couple years without funding. Then, in 1954, 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 leveling in Chitwan was mostly not to be. Malaria 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 quick return,' noted Eugene Mihaly in 1965.

The Tharus' fate deteriorated not because the RVDP ignored them or pushed them aside. In fact, the program, led by Rose and counterpart Krishna Bam Malla, 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, fuelling decades of poverty. That, however, is a long, complicated story for another day. 🇳🇵

Tom Robertson is an environmental historian and Executive Director of Fulbright Nepal. A longer version of this article will appear in the Journal of American History in March.



PHOTOS COURTESY: GEORGE MOORE





The Big Sick

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



MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

‘serious’ films, and awards tend to reward the grand and grandiose, 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 *Dr Strangelove* (1964) is, however, a film that I thoroughly enjoyed, even while I did not love it.

This is probably because this utterly charming, disconcerting film about the tender and hilarious love affair between a young, Caucasian woman Emily (played by the delightful Zoe Kazan) and

her Pakistani lover, Kumail (played by Kumail Nanjiani himself) is just that bit formulaic, with the ever so slightly nauseating clichés that take romantic comedies (barring 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 shoves 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 lives of stand-up comedians like Kumail) that make you want to stop the film and run out, or, if possible, fast-forward through these grisly 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 US\$56 million (the budget was \$5 million), the film has done enormously 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, undermining 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 ignored, unless over-dramatised in American movies), *The Big Sick* takes a trope and makes it real. 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 frat-boy who heckles Kumail during one of his sets – that part will surely go down in comedic history.



Watch trailer online

nepalitimes.com

HAPPENINGS



RSS

FINAL ELECTION: Maoist leader Ram Bahadur Thapa ‘Badal’ (*middle*) on Sunday files his nomination for National Assembly elections scheduled for 7 February. There are 66 candidates are in the fray for 43 seats.



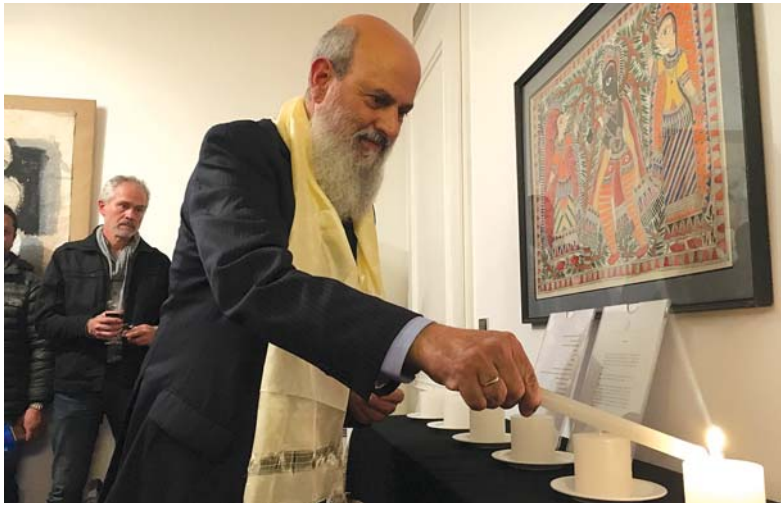
GOPEN RAI

EYE IN THE SKY: The new Rs906 million radar station at Bhatte Danda 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.



NITI FOUNDATION

DEMOCRACY DISCUSSION: 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*) Seira Tamang of Martin Chautari, US Ambassador Alaina Teplitz, Sarah Chayes, Australian Ambassador Peter Budd and economist Sujeev Shakya.



KUNDA DIXIT

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 Schäfer on Tuesday in Kathmandu.



RSS

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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Aiming for an 'ecology of scale'

Three years ago Muktinath Bhatta was digging a well in Bhaktapur 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 Bidur 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 interlocking 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 Bhatta as his wife Debaki helps him with the moulds.

"As farmers we had little savings, but now we easily make Rs60,000 a month selling the blocks," 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 their plant here. The couple is so busy they have no time to rebuild her 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 Practical Action is promoting Earth Bricks as an alternative reconstruction material in Nuwakot and Rasuwa, while also providing entrepreneurs like the Bhattas



and Tamangs with subsidies for brick press machines. The group has rebuilt 75 houses in the two districts using CSEBs and set up 19 new brick businesses.

"Earth bricks are suitable for peri-urban and rural areas where fired bricks aren't

easily accessible and are expensive: these blocks can be easily made locally," explains Yugdeep 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 Deurali using the materials, while 70-year-old Thawa Singh Tamang and his wife Poti (pictured, left) will soon move out of the cattle shed they have 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 enterprises are also generating employment. Mahendra Thapa, 29, 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."

Sonia 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



BUILD UP NEPAL



NEW BUILDING BLOCKS:

Women being trained to use compactors to manufacture Earth Bricks in Rasuwa (*far left*).

New buildings constructed with compressed earth blocks in Laprak of Gorkha district (*above*) near the epicentre of the 2015 earthquake.

Brick kilns spewing out smoke in Bhaktapur one early morning this week (*left*). The furnaces contribute 25% of toxic suspended particles smaller than 2.5 microns in Kathmandu Valley's air.

SONIA AWALE

in BHAKTAPUR

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 Aashish Shrivasta, 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%.

Padma Sundar Joshi at UN Habitat explains: "These green bricks are also the right technology for residential buildings to reduce the Valley's worsening air pollution."

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 kilns to switch to the mass-production of CSEB.

One family of brick kiln owners in Bhaktapur is already convinced. "We need to be conscious about the negative impact of fired bricks on health and the environment: eventually we plan to phase them out," says Suraj Pradhan, whose new plant in Bhaktapur will produce 3,000 green bricks a day from March (*see box, below*).

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

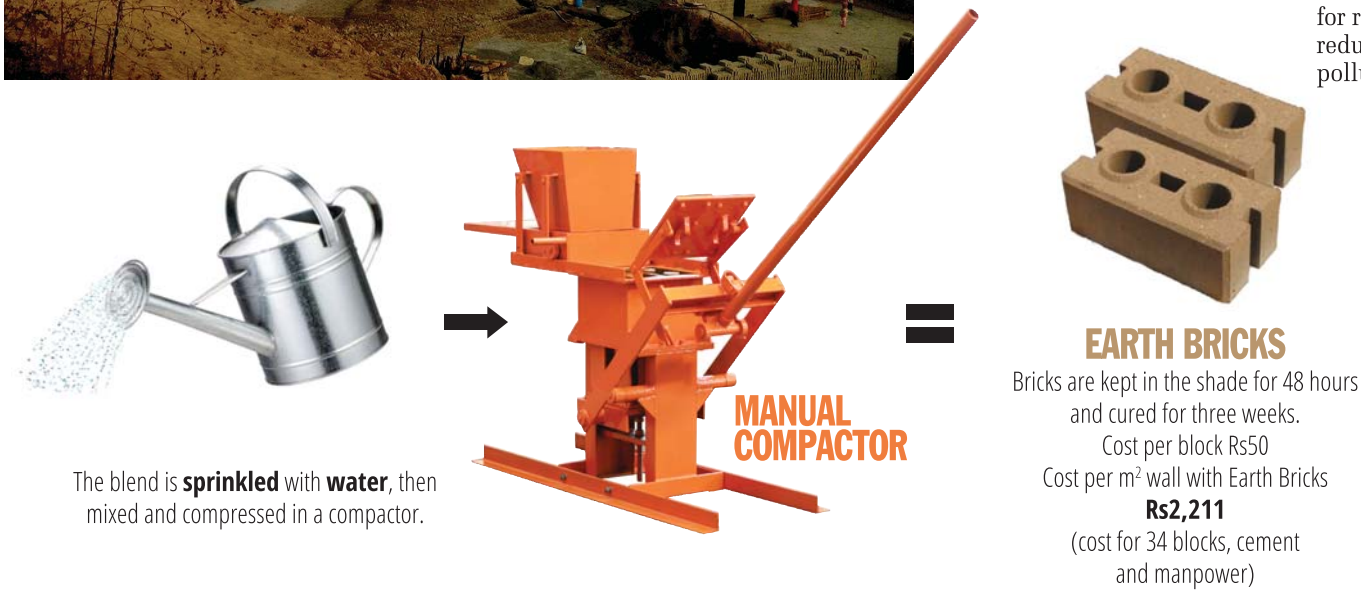
Says Pratik Singh Parmar of Build Up Nepal: "Earth Bricks are not an alternative, they are the ideal mainstream construction material, and can easily replace traditional fired bricks." 🇳🇵

BRICK BY BRICK



Meet rural entrepreneurs in Nuwakot who have set up Earth Brick businesses to improve post-quake reconstruction with cheaper, stronger and locally made materials. Switching to green bricks would help clean up Kathmandu's air.

nepalitimes.com



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."



PHOTOS: SONIA AWALE



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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 Eh-Maley and the Mao-Budi. (If political parties could be classified by gender, then the Eh-Maleys are definitely *bhaley*, and the Maumau are of the *pothi* persuasion. Although they are, I am told, sometimes 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 lovebirds 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 past electoral dalliances, and we hear the jilted lovers are in the horns of a conundrum about whether or not to attend the wedding ceremony and, if they do, what present to give their ex-es.

In fact, that is something the Ass struggles with every wedding season as the nation clears up its backlog of folks waiting their turn to tie the knots 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 Federalism work is beyond me. Be that as it may, the institution of marriage is a convenient covenant 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 palaces 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 Dal-Bhat Bhateni. 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 figurine of Uncles Karl



and Vlad. Perfect gift for newly-unified 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 tableau. Can serve as a paper weight after the honeymoon.
Rs13,000 + 13% VAT



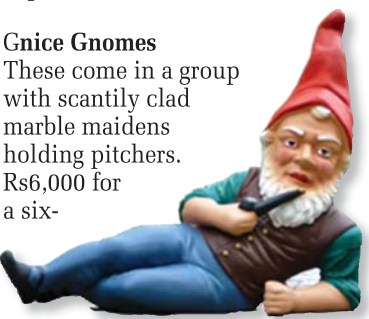
Swooning Swan
Romantic sculpture of swans' necks intertwined riding the spun-glass surface of a placid lake. Mandatory for bedsteads on wedding nights to get newly-wed couples in the mood. As marriage matures, it can also serve as a projectile.
Rs14,200 for two swans, Rs12,000 for one.



Cute Gargoyles
Griffins and gargoyles are hot favourites as wedding presents for Kathmandu's glitterati. Great resale value, and can be recycled to people who give you dolphins. Rs5,000 for alabaster griffins but gargoyles, being cuter, are more expensive.



Gnice Gnomes
These come in a group with scantily clad marble maidens holding pitchers. Rs6,000 for a six-



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



The Ass

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