Power to the periphery

Sonia Awale

In 2017, the newly-formed Shivaligot Municipality elected Damaiya Pun as mayor. She took the revolutionary step of moving the headquarters to Mumu village to make it better accessible to the region’s indigenous and Drift populations.

In the past five years, villagers have seen improvements in health, education and jobs, thanks to political devolution gained through Nepal’s new federal structure. Pun is looking forward to face-to-face local elections on 18 May, and the chance to serve five more years.

This is what federalism means in practice: letting under-served communities take charge. Shivaligot Municipality is also a reminder to the squabbling political classes in Jawalakhel, Katmandu, some of whom have prematurely declared federalism dead without even letting it prove its worth.

Excitement about local elections is already palpable across rural Nepal, but a cynical and pessimistic political class in the national capital does not want to let go of power and resources. In fact, despite a federal Constitution, political decision-making is more centralised than ever before.

“Federalism is the sum total of everything we Nepal have gone through. From various governing structures to the Maoist conflict, the Madhes Movement and everything in between,” explains Khem Vish Devkota, recently elected to the National Assembly.

“Federalism stands for stability, development and devolution and we had high expectations, expecting quick results,” he adds. “In some ways we have succeeded, people don’t have to rely on Kathmandu for everything. But the centre is still involved in everything from hydroelectric plants to ruling vassal towers.”

The 2015 Constitution devolved rights to local and sub-national governments, but the necessary laws were not in place until after elections. This meant a confusing translation regarding jurisdiction which threatened to undermine past gains in areas like community forestry, public health and education.

“Coordination between the governments, vertical and horizontal, is a pillar of federalism and so is functional decentralisation,” says Balram Paudel who headed the Local Bodies Restructuring Commission. “Our laws are riddled with lack of clarity in some places and elsewhere there is a problem of overlapping functions for different levels of government.”

Federalism, therefore, is still work in progress and this year’s series of elections will hopefully result in greater devolution. One of the reasons it got a bad name is that it also decentralised corruption. Of the 753 local governments, one-third have elected chair and mayors who are businessmen who have awarded themselves seed-planting, road-building and quarrying contracts.

Which is why upcoming local elections are even more important – to reward elected municipal governments who have worked for the people with another five-year term and reject those who did not.

This might also be a time to question the purpose of retaining a parallel power structure of Chief District Officers. Its job of issuing citizenship papers and passports allows this unelected office of centralized bureaucrats to wield extraordinary power over ordinary people.

“We have made some headway in formulating laws and regulations, now we must bring it into practice, improving staffing for service delivery at local levels and promoting better coordination between and within levels by activating intergovernmental relations,” says Pandel.

Just as democracy is only as effective as politics, federalism too will only function if it truly hands over power to the periphery – with support from the central leaders who see devolution as a precursor to development.

Says Khem Vish Devkota: “Citizens should be placed at the centre of all decision making. This can be done only by nurturing and strengthening federal practice.”

Inside

Tailor-made flames

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The ground reality of landlessness

The first popularly elected government led by B.P. Koirala enacted the Birha Abolition Act in 1959 that required landlords formerly educated tenants to pay full tax. Frustrated landlords opposed the move, and it became one of the reasons why King Mahendra ousted Koirala in a coup d’etat on 12 December 1960. In 1962, the government declared the abolition of all land reform would ensure that all Nepalis possessed the right to own land and would reflect the Communist’s view. But in justifying his coup, Mahendra declared that Nepal’s first democratically elected government had been overthrown because it had “failed to work in the interest of the people.”

More than six decades later, BP’s Nepali Congress that espoused social democracy is leading a governing coalition. She Bahadur Deuba, who once led the party’s student union, is prime minister for the fifth time.

guilty of making false promises. The Maoists made land to the tiller and just land distribution a major point in their platform to gain support, but they never kept the promise. Disputes over land made up one-third of all cases to Nepal’s courts of justice.

Various factors have changed the dynamics of land today. While educated Nepalis do not want to farm, and migration is increasing, enabling arable land furnish resources for the market in today’s urbanized society, political will shows a trend exponentially (pages 10-11).

This unorganized and uncontrolled buying and selling of land has once again concentrated ownership in the hands of the powerful, who have given phenomenally higher prices as property values escalate. This is why we have the force of the Bahunwara real estate scandal that troubled the mightiest in the land, while our quarter of the country’s population is landless.

The Gorkha empire’s expansion in the 18th century was financed by land revenues. Generals and soldiers were granted ownership of portions of land in proportion to their rank. The Birta system may have been replaced decades ago, but it is still intact in other forms, through landlords, traders and brokers ownership most property.

Real estate today is booming business, and a major source of revenue for the state from taxes. However, it is not productive when real estate speculation becomes a mainstream of the economy.

It does not create jobs, and it exacerbates inequality.

Private property rights legitimizes past injustices that paralyze our large swatches of the country to the privileged. It perpetuates inequality, laying the seeds for future conflicts.

To be sure, distributing land to the landless alone does not solve their problem, nor does it erase historical discrimination. Self-respect comes from belonging to the land, giving owners a sense of purpose and responsibility (see page 6). It is a start. But it should be without any condition, it cannot be a publicity stunt, or play to pack up vote banks. If we aim to safeguard the gains of the 2017 Constitution and build the pillars of the federal democratic state from the ground up, we must pick up where BP Koirala left off 20 years ago.

Gobar Gin

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Wretched Development

In the height of the Marxist movement has decreased, every single person, young and old, is asking for distribution of the land and the development to all. The peasant’s life is in a desperate condition. The Communist Party of Nepal is on the right track to find the solution of the problem, which is why the local elections are very important. It is a must to clean up the government.

Extract from a piece by a local on 8th February 2002, 20 years ago.

"Dellomatic Caesar" in charge of turning into just another local Moslems with the help of experts, the movement toward local autonomy to local bodies is only a way of achieving the causes of the Maoist movement to go to a victory under due caution of the Maoist forces.

failing the magnet that lack of success due to a factor known to the UNHRC.

Development expenditure has taken a direct hit. The government has not been able to increase, financial support in order to further reform and rejuvenate the economy. Due to the crisis at all.

The financial data and the Nepali Bank (NBD) show better than anyone else that the state economy is in crisis, and it is a true reflection of government’s condition.

The government has not been able to provide a budgetary plan, even now. The political opposition has been increasing the pressure and the government.

The Minister for State Services, Revenue and Finance, Mr. Basnet resigns over the issue of tax evasion figures and public accountability.

Akhil Sapkota, student of the Kaski-based university, breaks the silence of the Kaski University. Without press, there will be no development, and without development, no reforms. For the underlying reason was for the people to speak out.

From archive materials of Nepal Times of the past 20 years, see search: www.nepaltimes.com

WHAT’S TWEETING

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most popular on Twitter

Diaspora Diaries 1

In this new feature, we provide a platform for Nepalis living abroad to share their experiences and stories. The goal is to capture the diversity of experiences and stories from around the world.

Most visited online page

QUOTE

"Malai Baje" in Samaj Sajyata by Deepak Gajurel

Nepali language under a pressure of a pandemic finally comes out of the situation in a new way. Let us cover for the most vivid thoughts of a language and culture of Nepali people.

"Malai Baje" is a traditional festival celebrated by Nepalis to mark the beginning of the new year.

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TIME TO MEET AGAIN:
LONDON

Have a healthy journey with all precautions taken down to the smallest detail for your in-flight safety.

TURKISH AIRLINES
Turkish design award
Turkish Airlines has been presented the ‘Airline With The Best Design’ award in Europe at TheDesignAir Awards 2021. The carrier has been recognised for its young fleet equipped with latest technology, facilities at Istanbul airport and its in-flight designs.

Nissan Magnite
Nissan India recently expanded its range of Magnite sporting a 1.0L engine, including Nissan following domestic auto market growth. Magnite is the first global product in the Nissan NEXT plan and more than 4,000 cars have been produced despite the ongoing pandemic and semiconductor shortage.

Indian aid declines
India provided emergency medical supplies to Nepal. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman this week has limited aid to Nepal to 14.27 billion, down from 851.87 billion last year. India and Nepal also signed an agreement on Tuesday to build a bridge over the Mahakali river joining Bhitarkanika in Nepal and Una in Uttarakhand in India.

Nepalis moving from mountains to plains
There is much more than meets the eye in the preliminary results of Nepal’s 2021 census

The number of Nepalis residing in Kathmandu Metropolitan is the highest, seen to have decreased from 1.1 million in 2011 to 0.8 million.

With 14 level elections, Nepal has recognised the importance of voting from home,” says Basnet. “Since local levels have representation, there is no need for people to remain in Kathmandu.

The rising costs of land and real estate have increased living costs, and entire families have settled abroad, contributing to Kathmandu Valley’s decreasing population.

The number of Nepalis moving overseas for business and activities, like those seeking permanent residence abroad, are also concentrated in cities within the Bagmati province, says Basnet. The Covid-19 pandemic is also a factor in the movement of people out of densely populated Kathmandu in the last two years for safety reasons.

If the overall population and numbers living abroad are underestimated due to other influences like average annual growth rate, Kathmandu Valley’s population, and even more so of the country’s ‘youth bulge’ could be considerably underestimated.

As far as methodology is concerned, there is room for doubt as to whether enumerators were able to reach every household in the country’s smallest districts.

There were many instances of householders refusing to give accurate information about family members because of fears that it would be used for tax collection.

In the results released in January, the data shows that 465 more earthquake-related scientific procedure is conducted, there is little knowledge of how much underestimation took place for in order to conduct a post-enumeration survey.”

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MCC risks split in Nepal’s ruling coalition

Geopolitical pressure from Beijing against American infrastructure grant threatens governing partnership

A much-delayed $4.6 billion dollar US government project to upgrade Nepal’s infrastructure threatens to split Nepal’s governing coalition, amidst indications that the Chinese have intensified lobbying to oppose it. Prime Minister Deuba of the Nepali Congress (NC), coalition partner Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP), as well as the main opposition UML, support the project. But it is opposed by the Maoist Centre (MC) and the United Socialist.

The strain within the coalition intensified after Deuba got wind that Parliament Speaker Agu Sapkota postponed a sitting of the House on Sunday that was to discuss the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project. After a meeting of the five coalition partners on Saturday failed to agree on getting the MCC ratified by Parliament, Sapkota called off a scheduled House sitting at the bidding of his Maoist party.

Deuba was so put off that he threatened to withdraw Speaker Sapkota, and has hinted that he will push through the MCC even if it means a split in the coalition.

China’s Ambassador to Nepal Hong Yanqiao has been meeting coalition leaders in the past months to lobby against the MCC, the latest was a one-on-one with the UML’s K.P. Oli on 22 December.

Then on Saturday, just after the inconclusive coalition meeting, the Maoist Centre’s Pushpa Kamal Dahal held an hour-long high-level virtual meeting with Song Tao of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In November, CPC officials had been active in lobbying against the American project. The deputy head of the International Department of the CPC Chen Zhao had even called the UML General Secretary Pushpa Dahal on 13 December to try to convince his party’s pro-MCC stance. Zhao also spoke to Madhu Kumar Nepal of the Unified Socialist who assured him that he would not let the MCC be ratified.

Speaker Sapkota has been known to be close to Beijing, and has made no secret of his opposition to the MCC. His predecessor Krishna Bahadur Mahara, also a close confidant to Dahal, was also publically anti-MCC before he was removed from office in 2019 after allegations of nepotism.

China’s is the MCC is an American geo-strategic countermove to its own Belt Road Initiative (BRI), Wang Yiwei of Renmin University in Beijing in an op-ed in October called the MCC “American ploy”. Besides geopolitics, the MCC has also become a factor in Nepal’s domestic politics as political parties try to position themselves for upcoming local government elections in May and federal polls later this year.

Deuba managed to convince Dahal and Nepal to lift their opposition to holding local elections on time in exchange for keeping the coalition in an electoral alliance. On Wednesday, he met them again to try to save both the MCC and the alliance. But it looks more and more like an either, or.

The Maoists and the Unified Socialists both say they will back the MCC only “with amendments” to the contract that they say undermines Nepal’s sovereignty.

For its part, the UML has obstructed Parliament for the past six months, accusing Speaker Sapkota of allowing a breakaway group to keep their seats. Deuba appears to be losing his partnership with coalition partners. It takes personal responsibility for having signed the MCC agreement during his previous tenure five years ago, and bears loss of credibility for Nepal from international partners if the agreement is not realigned.

Sources said that at Thursday’s meeting, Deuba actually brought up the possibility of the coalition splitting if the MCC is not passed. Deuba is gambling that an electoral alliance with the coalition is important for the Maoists and the Unified Socialist, both of which have been weakened by their split with the UML.

The UML itself is now playing coy, and K.P Oli wants to use the MCC as a battering ram to split the coalition. Deuba is determined to push the MCC to Parliament even if it means getting UML support, since the NC and JSP alone do not have the numbers to kill it. Oli was a strong backer of the MCC when he was prime minister till July last year, and it was his practice party colleagues Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhu Kumar Nepal who used the MCC to bring him down. Ultimately, this led to their Nepal Communist Party to split into the MC and the UML, and Nepal itself breaking off to form the Unified Socialists.

Having been so vehemently opposed to MCC, Dahal and Nepal now cannot do a U-turn on the project. They also have to contend with the Chinese breathing down their necks.

One of the more vocal proponents of the MCC has been former Maoist ideologue and erstwhile prime minister Baburam Bhattarai who fell out with Dahal and is now with the JSP.

But Oli, who also has a PhD in urban planning, tweeted on Monday: “The MCC is a trial by fire for Nepal’s political parties, mainly the Communists. First, we will try to balance the US and India and China or be beholden to one of them? Second, if we do not want American support, what will we do with aid from the WB, IMF or ADB? If an American grant in untouchable, how about aid from India, China or others?”

The $500 million project was signed in 2017 when Prime Minister Deuba led a coalition that also had the Maoists as a partner in government. The Americans have denied that the project has any military component, saying Nepal qualified for it and there are no strings attached.

Increasingly important with delays in Nepal and irritated with what it sees as Chinese obstruction, the Americans have sent a slew of high officials to Nepal in the past six months. They warned Nepal that project approval is time-bound.

The project will expand Nepal’s electricity transmission lines to distribute power, as well as export surplus to India. Nepal is expected to increase generation capacity to 5,000MW by 2025. The project also has a component to boost economic growth through improvements in highway connectivity in Central Nepal.

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here for good with
Clouds lift below Dhaulagiri
Far away from cynical and pessimistic Kathmandu, federalism brings hope to a remote Nepal village

Joy Stephens in Myagdi

At first glance, 66-year-old Bal Bir Bhowmik looks like millions of other Nepalis – a poor and illiterate subsistence farmer. There is nothing in his clothes, his one-room house, and the way he sits in his courtyard, to indicate what an extraordinary life he has lived.

Yet, he has been born with a different name, or in a different country, he might now be a celebrity on the speaker circuit, a successful business tycoon, or someone may have made a movie about his life.

I am meeting him to discuss how to get some benefits from tourism trickling down to his village of Lantuk in Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality amidst the craggy mountains of Central Nepal. We live in the shadow of Dhaulagiri, but tourists don't come here,” Bal Bir explains, in a soft and dignified voice. “Several people in our village are licensed trekking guides, but they can’t find employment. A few go to Jomsom and hang around the airstrip for pawning work, but the competition is intense and they are paid a pittance. So they are forced to go abroad as migrant workers.”

We chat in the verandah of his house, from the ridge above there is a vista of snow-capped peaks of the Dhaulagiri Range, and the serrated outlines on forested ridges fading away one after another into lighter shades of blue in the distant haze. “I’ve done a lot of guiding myself,” he admits modestly. Bal Bir is no ordinary guide, but a savior for mountainering expeditions in the Himalayas. But like most Nepalis, he is master of understatement and plays down his accomplishments.

As the head of high altitude porters, his job was to get expedition supplies to Base Camp and from there to the higher camps. He describes how, in the days before roads where the trek to base camps could take two weeks or more, he would be responsible for over a hundred porters and their loads. It was a major logistical and financial responsibility.

Pulling the stories out of Bal Bir is like extracting teeth. He is not one to blow his own trumpet. Slowly, I learn that he has been to the top of all 14 eightiers, he has climbed K2, the peak in the world’s highest peak, and he is the first in Nepal to complete the Seven Summits.

He has climbed majestic Churen Himal, visible from above his village to the northwest on the border with Dolpa. There, he was once caught in an avalanche and badly injured. He had to be stretchered seven days to Pokhara (no helicopter rescue in those days) and spent three months in hospital.

As the stories go on... I learn that Bal Bir has even been to the United States, spending six months there at the invitation of an American climber. The highlight of his trip was not cruising down the interstate highways, but rock climbing in Wyoming.

Why is this man, who should be a national treasure for having accomplished so much, helped so many, facing a poverty-stricken retirement in a poverty-stricken village up in the mountains? Why has he not been able to capitalize on his skills and experience?

While there may be many contributory factors, the biggest stumbling block is that Bal Bir was born into a poor Dalit family in western Nepal where society is still conservative and caste-based discrimination is entrenched, despite people being more educated.

Growing up, Bal Bir learned about his people’s place in society, the rule he had to follow for being from an ‘untouchable’ caste. To be successful in business requires not only capital, financial capital, and self-esteem, are close to zero. For centuries of Nepal’s feudal past, it has been a hopeless situation. Things should have changed after 1990 when Nepal restored democracy, and the country became a constitutional monarchy. Things should have changed after the Maoists waged a war to liberate the downtrodden, and Dalits picked up the gun to join the militia, many sacrificing their lives to end the injustice to their people. But nothing changed.

Now, a new wave of uncertainty has broken through the clouds in Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality. What democracy and an armed struggle has not been able to achieve is beginning to happen with political devolution through Nepal’s new federal constitution.

After elections to all three levels of government in 2017, the new federal system is flexing its muscles and showing how it can sweep away the cobwebs of old power networks. People from under-served communities have begun to take charge.

The very first decision taken...
Post-pandemic Lulung

When the virus took over, the entire community had to adapt to the new normal. People had to change their lifestyles and adapt to the new ways of living. The local government had to take swift action to control the spread of the virus. They began to implement strict quarantine measures, and people were encouraged to stay home.

This led to a decrease in the number of tourists visiting the village. The local economy suffered as a result, but the community was able to adapt and find new ways to earn a living. The local government provided financial aid to help with the transition.

Despite the challenges, the community remained strong. They continued to work together to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone. The pandemic became a time of growth and resilience for the village of Lulung.
Events

Thangka Painting Exhibition
Kagyu Samye Dzong's esteemed Heritage of Thangka Exhibition will feature two Thangka collections. Don’t miss the exhibition.
17 February, 5pm onwards, Samye Dzong Monastery and Phuntsok Monastery

Physiotherapy
WAC’s Physiotherapy Health & Fitness Centre has a weekend and check out their free physiotherapy services. Call for more details.
5 February, 10am-4pm, WAC Health, (01) 5233187

Aerial Yoga
Sign up for an Aerial yoga with the beginner classes from a certified instructor. Call for more details.
The Pum, Thamel, (01) 5001297

Connect (IN)
Participate in the third international entrepreneurship conclave and meet Nepali and Indian startups, entrepreneurs, investors and venture capitalists. Call to register.
9-10 February, Samye Dzong, (01) 5276363

SDG Workshop
Attend the one-day Sustainable Development Goals workshop co-funded by the European Union.
4 February, 9am onwards, WAC Kathmandu

Online Archives

Children’s Digital Library
Visit the International Children’s Digital Library archives. The library has access to children’s books from all over the world.

Audio Bites
Audio Bites by Shutter Corp. offers a discussion with Nepali public figures on socio-cultural topics including mental health, motherhood, social media, the environment and more. Find the podcast on YouTube.

Arkadium
Home to live art games of all types.

Arkadium
from puzzles to memory-based. Go to the Arkadium website to get started.

Poem-a-Day
Punya Baski Subbarayala to the daily poetry series, featuring unpublished works of some of today’s most talented poets.

Tasty
The Tasty website has it all. Search, watch and cook any recipe from the hundreds featured in the platform and enjoy a perfectly cooked dinner this weekend.

Blenders
This mikhael bar offers the yummiest flavors in its cute mousse-like glasses, leaving you wanting for more.
5:30pm-2:30am, City Centre, Army Road, (01) 5400006

Dining

thakpa’s Chulo
thakpa’s Chulo offers a variety of Continental and Nepali cuisine. Pick anything from the Swiss Holpi and spinach to cheese momos.
Phanauti, (01) 5400006

Sam’s One Tree Cafe
Sam’s One Tree Cafe has mouthwatering appetizers, perfect atmosphere and a big tree. Tables are definitely a must-see here.
Open 8am, Dine in Mon-Fri, (01) 6353616

La Dolce Vita
Serving since 1996, La Dolce Vita serves plaster, steak, pasta and other appetizing Italian food.
Thamel, (01) 4100012

Getaway

Hotel Annapurna View
Located at an altitude of 1550m, the hotel offers the picturesque scene of the Annapurna and the Poon Hill. Sarangkot, Pokhara, (01) 500000

Kasara Resort
For those seeking a luxurious, comfortable stay in the lush natural setting of the heart of Chinese National Park, Guests can indulge in activities from cycling to wildlife viewing.
Pokhara, Chitwan, (01) 5301996

Grand Norfin Hotel
Retreat to the quiet, serene environment of Gokarna with a stay of the Grand Norfin which offers magnanimous views of Gaur Shankar, golf course and bird watching.
Galchhe, (01) 4917193

Hotel Heritage Bhaktapur
Immense in the historic city boutique hotel surrounded by the rich art and architecture of the old town. Don’t miss out on their scrumptious Nepal cuisine.
Sagyabding, Bhaktapur, (01) 5617128

Pataleban Vineyard Resort
Pataleban Resort, surrounded by the green hills and vineyard, is the perfect getaway. Guests can go for a hike and try the wine made from the vineyards.
Chisapani, (01) 4706367

Weekend Weather

Air Quality Index

Kathmandu

Kathmandu

About Town

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Land ownership gives former slaves self-respect

Former bonded labourers in west Nepal build homes, raise income and find dignity

Unnat Chaub窗帘 in Kailali

After living most of his life as a bonded labourer, Jagat Daguara Tharu is building a home on a plot of land that he can finally call his own. Having started a successful nursery, the former landless family is now financially independent.

Jagat, 57, was born into a life of indentured servitude to the parents who were bonded labourers at the house of a local zamindar landlord. This traditional system of modern-day slavery known as the kamayya system was widespread in Nepal’s western plains until it was abolished twenty years ago.

The young Jagat grew up working all day long looking after the zamindar’s livestock at the edge of the forest. At age 12, he was sent to a neighbour’s household to slave away for three years before returning to his original ‘owner’ Shyamal Chandchaur.

He got married, had a family of his own, but continued working for the landlord with four other brothers who were all also bonded labourers. With no income or property of their own, they had no way of freezing themselves from a life of slavery.

But in 1979, when the Nepal Pranwara Company started distributing land to landless squatters, Jagat’s father filled in an application. Three years later, the family received a 0.3 hectare plot in Kailali. It was a start.

“We made a small hut but we did not have enough to eat so I remained a kamayya for a few more years,” says Jagat but he had already started looking at how to put the land to the best use.

In 2006, he joined the District Forest Office to work in its nursery with a salary of Rs 1,500 a month. Two years later, he was contracted to set up a new nursery for the office. There, for every sapling, he used to get Rs 2 and his monthly income rose to Rs 25,000.

For the next 13 years, he worked at the Kailali District Forest Office, sent his son to a school with his earnings and even bought a piece of land to set up his own nursery.

Jagat now gets four batches of seeds every year and makes up to Rs 150,000 selling the seedlings. In 2018, he bought a motorcycle with the money he made from selling the seeds.

“When you have your own land, you reap all the benefits of your labour too, the result of my hard work is mine alone unlike when you slave away at someone else’s farm,” says Jagat, who has managed to send a son to Romania for work, and bought another plot where he is finally building a home of his own.

In July 2000, the Nepal government abolished the kamayya system and liberated some 32,000 bonded labourers from districts in the western plains including Dang, Banke, Bardia, Kailali and Kanchipur.

Many of the former bonded labourers now have land in their own name thanks to state sponsored land distribution. With better access to education and healthcare, their lifestyle has also improved.

Ramkumari Chaudhari, 45, was also born into a bonded labourer family near Dhangadi. Her parents married her off when she was young to a man who was also forced into a life of indentured servitude.

Ramkumari with her husband Sanjay managed to sharecrop on land from the zamindar for vegetable farming. But when the landowner saw their success, he nullified the agreement and decided to farm himself.

“If you want to make something of yourself in this country and be independent, you need a land of your own,” says Ramkumari, and the couple has managed to buy a small plot for their farm with a government grant.

What started as a small business with two pigs has now expanded into a large swine farm spread in 0.2 hectares of land which earns them Rs 40,000 a month.

Ramkumari also runs a profitable vegetable farm on the side so the pigs get to eat the excess vegetables and the farm benefits from fertiliser from the sty.

“We just had a hut before, but now we have a nice house. We have also bought a tractor for our farm,” says Ramkumari. “We no longer face the kind of hardships and mistreatment we did when we were kamayya, we work without a worry. And the best thing is that your hard work earns you money.”

Ramkumari and Sanjay can now afford to send their two sons to college, but the fact that many other neighbourhood children have not been able to continue their study worries her. They risk falling back to leading a life of indentured servitude, she points out.

Radha Chaudhary, 36, of Dhangadi municipality is also building her own house. Her husband Navraj was a bonded labour from birth in Rasipur of Bardia and came to this town after being freed.

But when the family did not receive any land, Navraj and Radha worked odd jobs to support their family. Navraj trained hard and is now a much sought-after mason.

The government finally gave them a tiny plot of land near Dhangadi bazar, a prime location where they plan to build their house and rest out the rest. “Our place is close to the market, which means better access to education, health facilities and jobs, we couldn’t be happier,” says Radha.

In the two decades since they were freed, many former kamayyas have found their feet. This is a success story of how former slaves have struggled to find independence, dignity and self-respect. But there are still some families who have fallen between the cracks.

With the new federal system, the rehabilitation of kamayya was handed over to the local governments and many families found the paperwork too confusing and complicated and faced confusion and delays.

There are 8,990 freed kamayya families in the Kailali district, and most of them have been rehabilitated. But some 380 families are still waiting despite having an ID and land ownership documents.
The urban property value bubble is artificial, and could spell an economic crisis if it bursts

- Ramesh Kumar

- A two-bedroom 185 sq.m flat in an apartment block in Metabari is on sale for Rs 3.3 million. An average Nepali civil servant who earns Rs 36,000 a month would need 20 years worth of salary to be able to afford it.
- Just to buy a plot of land to build a small house in the same locality of Lalitpur costs Rs 6 million, for which the civil servant would have to pay a lump sum worth 37 years of regular payment.
- A small plot of land by the highway bought 10 years ago in Bhaktapur is worth an astounding 7,000% more today. Even considering the devalued nature of the Nepali rupee, that is sky-high appreciation.
- A property in Kathmandu’s prime Dharahara area recently sold for Rs 800 million (US$9.60 million) per 13 sq.m. This is one of the highest real estate values in the world.
- A house with land that was bought for Rs 5 million in T Parsee six years ago sold for Rs 800 million recently.

Nepal Rastra Bank report this year shows that land value in Nepal is increasing at 27% a year, doubling real estate value every 3.3 years. This is despite average salaries in Nepal increasing by only 7.2% per year. Property value appreciation is even higher in other urban areas of Nepal, especially in Mustang, Province and the Terai towns of Far West Province. The price of real estate is doubling every two to three years here because of the soaring demand for land due to migration to the cities, plains and valleys from the mountain districts.

There was a prediction that Kathmandu’s property values would decline after the 2015 earthquake, but the opposite has happened. Despite the government valuation for the property being much lower, land transactions are taking place arbitrarily, with no scientific basis for real value, or linked to productivity.

Economists say there are many factors driving this real estate bubble in Nepal. Kathmandu Valley's urbanisation pressure increased after the 2015 earthquake, with a loss of 70% of the total urban population from outside. Fuelled by remittance income, this influx led directly to a steep rise in land prices. Adding to this is the unregulated land development by the banking sector which fuelled land transactions—leading directly to speculation.

This tempted people to convert cash into land investments—leading to the indiscriminate 'plotting' of prime agricultural land in urban centres. Even the Nepali Army is turning its property in Kirtipur into a housing colony. Banks are in on this unregulated real estate speculation. They have distributed loans worth Rs 8.5 billion, which is a full 11% of all their entire portfolio. More than 16% of overdraft facilities also mostly go for real estate transactions. Two-thirds of all loans have property as collateral. Even loans given for agriculture are diverted to property market. In the past three years, there has been a 60% increase in loans for agriculture projects, but neither farm production nor productivity has gone up.

In fact, one of the reasons for the liquidity crisis in the banking sector is that companies exploit natural resources for profit, but people and nature lose out.

Nepal's planners are proud that the country is now self-sufficient in cement. Domestic production has expanded to meet demand that has skyrocketed since the 2015 earthquake. The boom is seen in any drive along Nepal’s highways - the view of every other house is painted in glaring signs of various cement companies. The sector is so lucrative that two Chinese companies, Haima and Yangshuo, are among the biggest investors.

As recently as 45 years ago there was only one cement factory, Himal Cement on the outskirts of Kathmandu. There are now some 72 plants operating across Nepal that can produce 15 million tonnes of cement a year.

Together, 21 of these factories with mining capacity extract 12 million tonnes of limestone from 40 quarries in the country. There is so much limestone in these mountains that geologists estimate there is enough to sustain cement production in Nepal for another 100 years at least. However, Nepal’s cement boom is coming at enormous environmental and social cost. Investors and shareholders have gotten richer while the land and people poorer. Unregulated quarrying, lack of safeguards, and overexploitation have led to sweating forests and landslides, as well as air, water and soil pollution.

Fifty years ago a Parliament minister proudly said that Nepal needed more smokestacks to develop. Today, Dhanush Chhaupadi Thapa of the Nepal Cement Manufacturers Association echoes the same mindset.

"We cannot overlook the benefits, including employment opportunities, provided by the cement industry," says Thapa. "We will limit our possibilities if we constantly bring up environmental protection."

The government would like to think that the cement industry is helping the economy boom and earn revenue. While it is true that domestic production has reduced the need to import, what local and national governments get in terms of royalty fees is small change compared to the enormous environmental cost.

Nepal’s cement companies pay only Rs 60 in royalty fees for each tonne of limestone compared to Rs 140 across the border in India. Yet the market price of cement is twice as high in Nepal as in India.

In the past eight years, the government has collected only Rs 2.26 billion in royalty fees from cement industries. On the other hand, the yearly turnover and profit from the industry, says Thapa, amounts to Rs 150 billion.

For example, Sarbatcon Cement extracted 371,000 tonnes of limestone from its...
real estate prices

sector today is due to over-lending for land loans. These loans are not invested in productive sectors, they do not create jobs, or contribute to the economy. They just create cash, creating nothing but capital gains for those for whom gambling in real estate is a full-time occupation. The end result is that it has distorted Nepal’s economy and created a vicious cycle, with the damper that the artificial bubble could burst at any time. Former Finance Minister Ram Punster Khati says most governments regulate the property market to make housing affordable to citizens, and manage urbanisation. “As the banks are now about giving out loans for land, property prices can be kept in check,” Khatri says.

The unrealistic price of land has impacted on the government’s infrastructure plans, the real estate sector investment in hydropower, and other projects. Whereas International Airport cost only Rs7 billion to build, but the government had to pay out Rs233.86 billion just in acquiring land for the project. Twenty years ago, during his second tenure as prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba got Parliament to amend a government law lowering the threshold for land ownership, and also stipulate that land should be used for more than one of the designated purposes. The law has properly implemented, and to date the government does not own a unified database of land ownership in the country.

The real estate bubble is so lucrative that most companies that have gone bankrupt because of failing businesses have managed to stay afloat because of the increase in the value of the property they own. Nepal has been growing at an average of 7% a year for the past two decades, but this is not reflected in manufacturing or production.

“Unless we stop this vicious cycle and stop real estate speculation that is supposed to go into the productive sector, the bubble in Nepal’s economy is going to burst sooner or later,” says economist Dilli Raj Khanal.

The new rich from property speculation is fuelling an impotent boom so that Nepal’s hard currency reserves have fallen to levels where they can pay for one month’s worth of imports. This, in turn, has increased the income gap between the poorest and richest Nepalis.

One of the reasons for the real estate bubble is the tax on land transactions in Nepal is so low. In fact, if a land is sold within five years of being bought, the seller only has to pay 0.5% of the capital gain tax to the government. If the land is sold after five years, the tax is only 2.5%

The tendency is to undermine the officials to undervalue the rate at which property is sold, so as to reduce the taxable amount.

Raising the tax rate for real estate transactions will immediately discourage property speculators, reduce the number of transactions, and put a check on the increase in land prices,” admits Gunakar Bhatta of Nepal Sastra Bank.

The reason property transactions have not gone down despite the increase in the property prices is that Nepal’s economy is mainly based on the agrochemical sector. Many unscrupulous businesses are cashing in on a weak state to get rich quick and investing their ill-gotten wealth by laundering it through real estate.

Says economic professor Achyut Wagle: “Real estate has become the ideal vehicle for laundering land. Selling and selling property is that passed down from one generation to another.”

In his previous tenure as prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba allowed Gopal Dahi to lift a ban on fragmenting of agricultural land for housing purposes. A lot of money is said to have changed hands, but the bill allowing the law to be passed. When K P Oli was prime minister, his Land Management Minister Pradeep Kumar Aryal lifted the ban on agriculture land into housing colonies, if a local government does not approve property sales even where the property is in local hands.

The standard operating procedure at the land tax office is to overcharge these transactions and look through only after money exchanges hands under the table.

Most economists agree that tightening the process through which a housing building can be sold, and that the bubble can be reduced. Nepal’s Economic Forum suggests that buying houses directly from the person a living in should be taxed heavily. It has another idea: that the private sector should only sell property that is passed down from one generation to another.

Another measure would be to bring real estate transactions into the tax net. How can it be that a person buying an expensive house through hard work pays 36% income tax, while profit from selling property is only 3.3%? Nepal’s chartered accountant Sushnil Dixit.

There is an argument that only sales through banks can deter undervaluation. The government should also be involved in building and establishing affordable housing for the poor. The Constitution establishes the right of all citizens for decent housing, and it is up to the government to fulfill that pledge.

But at what cost?

query in Palpa district in the fiscal year 2020/2021. The company earned a profit of Rs2.17 billion, but paid royalty fees worth only Rs9.82 million — a mere 0.8% of its earnings.

Similarly, Shiva cement distributed Rs 8.5 billion 24% of its total profit to shareholders in the fiscal year 2020/2021, but the company paid Rs6.9 million to royalty to the government. Thapar at the Cement Manufacturers’ Association counsels, says raising the royalty for limestone extraction only make cement costlier for builders.

Nepal’s cement per capita cement consumption is 30 kg, higher than India (11.9 kg), but much less than China (3.7 kg) and even Bhutan (7.3 kg). At the present rate of growth of domestic cement demand could reach 29.8 million tonnes by 2025.

This means an unmonitored cement industry would end up not just affecting ground water, disturb fragile mountain slopes to create landfills, but also increase Nepal’s carbon footprint at a time when the country has committed to net zero emissions by 2050.

Mahendra Pandey of Dobhans in Palpa, knows all too well what a cement quarry in the neighbourhood can do to agriculture. “Everyone talks about the benefits of the cement industry, but no one cares about how it affects us farmers here,” says Pandey, who has to deal with the impact on groundwater supply, soil and air pollution from the nearby Subarotab cement plant. “The government is no help, it does not care about what people here on the ground face.

It is not that the government is unaware. All new cement factories are expected to create an environment impact assessment (EIA), but this can be easily circumvented, while report after report submitted to the government have been warning about the need for harm reduction in the cement industry.

In a 2021 survey conducted by Nepal Ramco Bank, 92% of respondents said that cement industries caused air, water, noise, and solid pollution in their communities, severely impacting their livelihoods.

Last month, the CAAA started legal proceedings against 9 cement companies, three directors and staff of the Department of Mines and Geology. They are alleged to have colluded to allow more limestone extraction than permitted, for housing environmental norms, and evading royalty fees.

It took two decades of relentless activism for the government to close down viral cement factory in Chhalbar which has affected the health of Kathmandu Valley’s population. But that was because it was the capital.

Since then, the government has allowed to private cement factories to operate in Sindhupalchowk which is situated in a narrow Valley that traps suspended particles. Local living near mining sites in Palpa and Bung have long opposed the operation of cement factories in the districts due to increased pollution in the area. Residents in Mahawang have also held protests against the limestone mining sponsored by Shivalik Cement, citing environmental pollution.

In fact, not even World Heritage Sites like Lumbini are protected: there are now a dozen cement factories within 15-km radius from the birthplace of the Buddha (Nepal tourist, Jeet)

With no government monitoring of the limestone being extracted, and royalty fees are determined based on false numbers, the companies themselves.

Cement factories transport limestone in overloaded tipper trucks despite quarry to factory, destroying road surfaces. Ironically, the same factory is that is supposed to be in the backbone of infrastructure is ending up damaging the country’s arthritic highways.

In a recent paper in the Journal of Development Innovation, authors Birendra Sapkota and Kumar Khadka link soil erosion to poor management and monitoring of limestone excavation practices.

In 2018, Asian Development Bank, one of the largest cement companies in Nepal, obtained the IEA approval in 2017 after the project was already half-completed. Kusum Cement Industry was up and running in 2019 without IEA approval, concerns over which were even raised in Parliament.

Moreover, in May 2021, the Ministry of Forests and Environment made amendments to the Environmental Protection Regulations 2020 such that development projects will now be allowed to use up to 25 hectares of forest land after conducting only a preliminary environmental assessment. Permission for additional works will be provided for all projects requiring more than five hectares.

Meanwhile, even as Nepal living and working in some of these cement sites and cement industries bear the brunt of resulting environmental and health crises, they receive few financial benefits.

“Stone, gravel and sand mining are controlled by a handful of companies who reap the financial benefits while the locals incur damages to their livelihood and the environment,” says former finance secretary Ramkesh Meshal.

“Many of these sales only through banks can deter undervaluation. The government should be involved in building and establishing affordable housing for the poor. The Constitution establishes the right of all citizens for decent housing, and it is up to the government to fulfill this pledge.”
10 reasons to leave Nepal

However much we love our country Nepal, there comes a time when we have to take the bull by its horns or, as they say in the migration sector, hoist ourselves up by our own petard.

Since space is limited this week due to commercial encumbrance, it’s not wise to mention the bane of corruption, nepotism, nepotism, nepotism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoism, nepoist

1. Nepal’s population has crossed 29 million, our food and fuel imports are rising exponentially, foreign exchange reserves can only pay for 6 months of imports. It is therefore every Nepali’s patriotic duty to do his/ her bit part not to be a further burden on the Motherland. The last one to leave please turn off the light.
2. This is the year with elections for all three levels of government. So, let us vote with our feet.
3. The latest Corruption Perception Index released by Transparency International shows that Nepal’s ranking is stuck at #177 in the list of countries deemed to be most corrupt. This means that despite ample opportunities for maintenance during the Covid-19 crisis, and utmost efforts by the country’s bureaucrats, politicians, industrialists to foster a culture of bribery, Nepal is still exactly where it was last year in the Corruption Index, while aggressive neighbours like Bangladesh and Afghanistan have become more corrupt by leaps and bounds. There is no future in a country that cannot even make its way to the top of the corruption rankings.
4. Ten years ago, Nepal’s top economists had confidently predicted that by the end of the decade Nepal would be a “failed state”. We have failed to achieve that goal. Instead, Nepal is preparing to graduate to Middle Income Status by 2025. If we cannot even reach the goal of being a failed state, it is futile to waste time banging around to wait for it to happen.
5. The government is making it impossible for illegal sand miners, limestone quarry contractors, cement tycoons and water dealers to earn a decent living and fatten our wealth. We are not even allowed to adulterate honey anymore. How can we live in a country that does not respect risk-taking and entrepreneurship to make someone else’s money and run?
6. There are no more idle left to steal anymore, so why stay?
7. There is too much petty corruption, but not enough grand larceny, profiteering and breach of trust on large infrastructure projects to make it worthwhile to do business in Nepal anymore.
8. The new Media Code of Ethics does not even allow journalists to accept envelopes during free lunches.
9. Go where there is enough water for a nice long hot bath.
10. If you gotta go, you gotta go.