NEPALI Times
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PTI



T-shirt diplomacy

Buoyed by the royal treatment he received in New Delhi early this month, a triumphant-looking Pushpa Kamal Dahal immediately jetted off to Beijing. The prime minister-in-waiting was keen to show he had the blessings of Nepal's giant neighbours.

However, the 'co-pilot' of the Nepal Communist Party government did not get the same importance from China as he received in India.

Despite not holding any executive or constitutional post, Dahal in Delhi was accorded the kind of lavish welcome heads of government get on official state visits: a meeting with Prime Minister Modi and other top leaders, and a banquet. The only thing missing was a guard of honour.

"Last time when I was in Delhi as PM, I just had a 20-minute talk with Indian PM Narendra Modi," Dahal boasted last week after his India trip, "this time, not only did he spend one-and-half hour with me, but he also walked me to my car!"

No such fanfare in Beijing. Neither Chinese President Xi Jinping nor Premier Li Keqiang had time for Dahal. At his port of entry in Guangzhou, Dahal was welcomed by a Chinese deputy minister wearing a polo T-shirt.

In diplomatese, the Chinese message was: "You are India's pick, not ours."

A Kathmandu-based foreign affairs expert says Dahal's lukewarm welcome in China clearly signaled what lay in store for him. "Delhi projected Dahal as the PM-in-waiting, and the future party leader. But Beijing is not in favour of his plan to dethrone Prime Minister Oli halfway through his five-year term."

For months, even as PM Oli came under blistering attack for failing to deliver good governance, Dahal rarely defended the government. He kept mum even when former comrade-at-arms Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa allowed police to botch an investigation into the Nirmala Panta rape-murder case and shoot protesters demanding justice. When Thapa later barred ex-child soldier Lenin Bista from traveling abroad, Dahal was conspicuously silent. In an interview, Dahal actually expressed his dissatisfaction at the government's performance, suggesting that he might have to "step in".

Dahal's India visit appears to have been part of a plan to unseat PM Oli, and analysts say he has secured India's backing. Suspicious, Oli also sent a salvo to India: instructing the Nepal Army to not participate in a joint military drill of BIMSTEC countries proposed by Modi. He also pushed through a transit deal with Beijing.

Beijing's rebuff seems to have sucked the wind out of Dahal's sails for the time being. Now, he is likely to try to allow domestic disenchantment with the government to grow to a tipping point.

Om Astha Rai

SOUTH TO NORTH: India's lavish welcome for PM-in-waiting Pushpa Kamal Dahal (*above*) was in sharp contrast to the lukewarm treatment in Beijing a week later.



MEGALOMANIA + KLEPTOMANIA

Nepal needs to urgently upgrade its aviation gateway. Year after year, Kathmandu's airport has had the dubious distinction of being voted among the top ten worst in the world. Cosmetic improvements have been made lately, but the country's only international airport is plagued with mismanagement and is a known den for smugglers, traffickers and extortionists.

A $100 million ADB-funded project to increase the airport's capacity has been mired in corruption. Even the modest first phase to expand the present terminal is five years behind schedule because of a dispute between the Spanish contractor and the government.

The only runway is a wreck, operations are frequently halted at peak hour to patch potholes, leading to delays and cancellations. Despite such shoddy and inadequate infrastructure, Kathmandu has the highest landing and ground handling fees in the world, and the most expensive aviation fuel.

Increase in traffic has led to monstrous congestion at both the arrival and departure concourses. Matters become much worse in winter when poor visibility due to proximity to a highly polluted urban core delays flights. Planes are put on hold in the air for hours.

The pressure on Kathmandu was supposed to ease with the construction of two other international airports at Bhairawa and Pokhara. Bhairawa is supposed to serve as a direct gateway to Lumbini, and will have a new terminal building and longer runway to accommodate larger jets. But the $70 million ADB project is delayed because the sub-contractors were conmen. It will now be completed in 2020.

The saga of Pokhara's new international airport spans four decades. It finally got a go-ahead with a loan from China Exim Bank, but the final inflated price tag of $305 million is suspicously high, and has a whiff of kickbacks in high places.

All these delays have convinced many in government and business of the urgent need of a mega airport in Nijgad in the plains 75km south of Kathmandu. (*See story on page 14-15*) A detailed design by the Korean Landmark Worldwide company envisages two parallel runways 3,600m long, world-class terminal building, aprons, hangars and even an adjoining aeropolis. Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari calls it a "game changer".

Up to 2.4 million trees would be cut to accommodate the 80 sq km airport. London's Heathrow is only 12.14 sq km. Most of the site is covered in dense jungle, the last remaining primary forest in the eastern Tarai and an important corridor for wildlife migration. The government has promised to plant 25 trees for every one cut, and resettle the 7,000 people who will be displaced, but few believe that.

Although the ecological rationale has caught the people's attention, the much more convincing argument against Nijgad is actually economic. As a *Nepali Times* investigation in June showed, there are serious questions about the viability of such a gargantuan airport.

The hub-and-spoke model in international aviation is now obsolete with the rise of a new generation of ultra-long range airliners which can fly point-to-point nonstop for up to 20 hours. Instead of putting all our eggs in one basket with an expensive, over-sized airport, it makes much more economic sense to decentralise and improve Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bhairawa and upgrade Biratnagar or Dhangadi to international airports as passenger demand grows.

And why should the government be in such a tearing hurry to chop down 250,000 trees right away for a project that has not even been finalised, investors have not shown any interest yet (and it is doubtful they ever will)? For a soft state with such high levels of corruption, impunity, mismanagement and poor record of implementation, Nijgad is not just a white elephant, it will be a white dinosaur.

Although the ecological argument against Nijgad is known, the real reason against the $6.7billion project is actually economic.

Just to put it in perspective: Nijgad is 12 times more expensive than the mammoth Melamchi Project that is 20 years behind schedule, and its total cost represents half of Nepal's annual budget.

Another story in this edition (*page 8-9*) on the helicopter rescue scam that threatens to undermine Nepal's tourism industry is symptomatic of just how deep the rot is. Insurance fraud by powerful businesses enjoying political protection does not give us much confidence that a $6.7 million project will ever take off.

In fact, Nijgad is now looking more and more like a logging concession than an airport project. Megalomania and kleptomania make a lethal combination.



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

After he was elected in 2008, the former Maoist supremo 'Prachanda' Pushpa Kamal Dahal became Prime Minister and made a trip to New Delhi. He showed his pragmatic side by charming the Indians and telling them what they wanted to hear. Nepali Times columnist Prashant Jha wrote this in his column 'Plain Speaking' for the issue #418 of 19-25 September 2008:

NEW DELHI -- Nepal's prime minister was a celebrity in Delhi this week. From armchair revolutionaries to national politicians to the policy elite, everyone wanted to have a glimpse of a rebel leader who is now the head of government. In a smart suit and tie, Pushpa Kamal Dahal was at his charming best. The common theme in all his speeches was: "Trust me." And judging from the reaction, the message hit home.

He donned his free market hat, taking a business-dominated 50-member delegation and assuring representatives of Indian joint ventures in Nepal of security. He told Indian business what it needed to hear: private sector is at the heart of growth, Nepal will set up special economic zones, government is only a facilitator, we want investment.



Times.com

ONLINE PACKAGES



E-COMMERCIAL

Watch a video about how e-commerce is about to turn Nepal's retail sector upside down. From fashion products, consumer items, vegetables, and ordering food, it is all on the net. Listen to bankers and online shopping start-ups talk about the vast potential for growth, and the challenges ahead. *Story: page 4-5.*



CONCRETE JUNGLE

The Tarai used to be a dense jungle till 70 years ago, when it was cleared to make way for Nepal's rice basket. Today, the forests and the fields are both giving way to a concrete jungle. And now, the proposed Nijgad airport will mean felling 80 sq km of primeval jungle, the last remaining forest in the eastern Tarai. Coverage on *page 2, 14-15.*

Nepali Times YouTube

For more videos on health, environment, culture, heritage and Nepali politics, subscribe to the Nepali Times YouTube Channel.

ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES

Much of the success of Ethiopian Airlines comes from doing the important maintenance on most of the other airline jets in Africa ('What can Nepal learn from Ethiopia?', Kunda Dixit, #927). Is Nepal in a position to maintain the jets of most of the other airlines in Asia?

Jim Marshall

■ We are led by people who cannot see beyond their noses. That is why there is no vision. All credit for Ethiopian Airlines' success goes to Emperor Haile Selassie for having set up a world class carrier. He inculcated a sense of dignity among Ethiopians to grow up as honest, patriotic and duty bound citizens.

Ananta Armugam

■ Granting autonomy and power of decision-making without political interference is the key to the success of Ethiopian Airlines.

Anish Pandey

■ Here everything is linked with honest and ethical management as long as we have sick minded people at management nothing can be done!

Subhash Singh

■ Another great story from *Nepali Times* with a human touch. Thank you.

Zhang Haizhou

■ Here is a corollary: what has Ethiopia learned from Nepal? The former Minister of Health of Ethiopia and current Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Dr. Tedros Adhanom once said that Ethiopia had emulated Nepal's successful experience with our 50,000+ Female Community Health Volunteers and introduced a similar scheme in Ethiopia. As a result, like Nepal, Ethiopia was able to significantly reduce maternal and child mortality and promote primary health care. This success, in part, propelled Tedros to go on and head the WHO.

Kul Chandra Gautam

WHAT'S TRENDING



What can Nepal learn from Ethiopia?

by *Kunda Dixit*

Pradeep Shrestha is a Nepali pilot flying for Ethiopian Airlines. This profile of the captain and his insights into the ingredients that went into making Ethiopian such a success story was the most popular story last week, and one of the most read stories in recent times. Visit nepalitimes.com for the report and to join the debate.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most visited online page

Most commented

Inventing a new enemy

by *Om Astha Rai*

This analysis explored the authoritarian anti-Western shift in Nepal and how it could be influenced by China and lately India, increasing intolerance towards criticism was widely shared on social media. Go online to see how government policies are changing, influenced by xenophobia and ultra-nationalism.

Most popular on Twitter

QUOTE TWEETS

Kunda Dixit @kunda Dixit
#Nepal made dramatic improvements in literacy and school enrollment over the past 20 years.
But the same cannot be said for the quality of education.
@musingmagic reports in @nepalitimes:

Rajeeb Lal Satyal @RajeebLalSatyal
Because teaching has not yet become a respectable, sufficiently paid profession occupied by real qualified and passionate people yet.

Nepali Times @Nepalitimes
Nepalis have always identified with democracy, freedom of expression and tolerance, which are seen as 'Western'. But Nepal's Communist rulers are aligning more with the values and the politics of control in China, and lately India.

Amy Aung Myat Bhaddamanika @AungmyatAmy
This is the way the people and the rulers are.

Nepali Times @nepalitimes
#POLL How confident are you that the people who raped and murdered Nirmala Panta will be found by the police?

Deepti Gurung @DeeptiGurung1
I so wish I could vote for 'confident'. But what can I do? When I am helpless I listen to my conscience. And my conscience says I have no confidence in 'confidence' anymore!

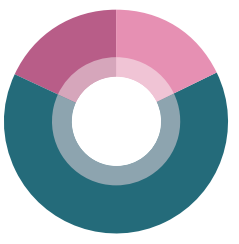
Nepali Times @nepalitimes
Prachanda rarely comes to the defence of his government, and the PM is irked by his passiveness. Analysts say Prachanda is letting people's dissatisfaction grow to a tipping point, so he can make his move.

Nima Mani @Banachung
Boomerang unification!

Weekly Internet Poll #928

Q. How confident are you that the people who raped and murdered Nirmala Panta will be found by the police?

Total votes: 201



Weekly Internet Poll #929
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Do you think the government's investigation into trekking scams will hold guilty parties to account?

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Associate Editor: **Om Astha Rai** | Design: **Kiran Maharjan**
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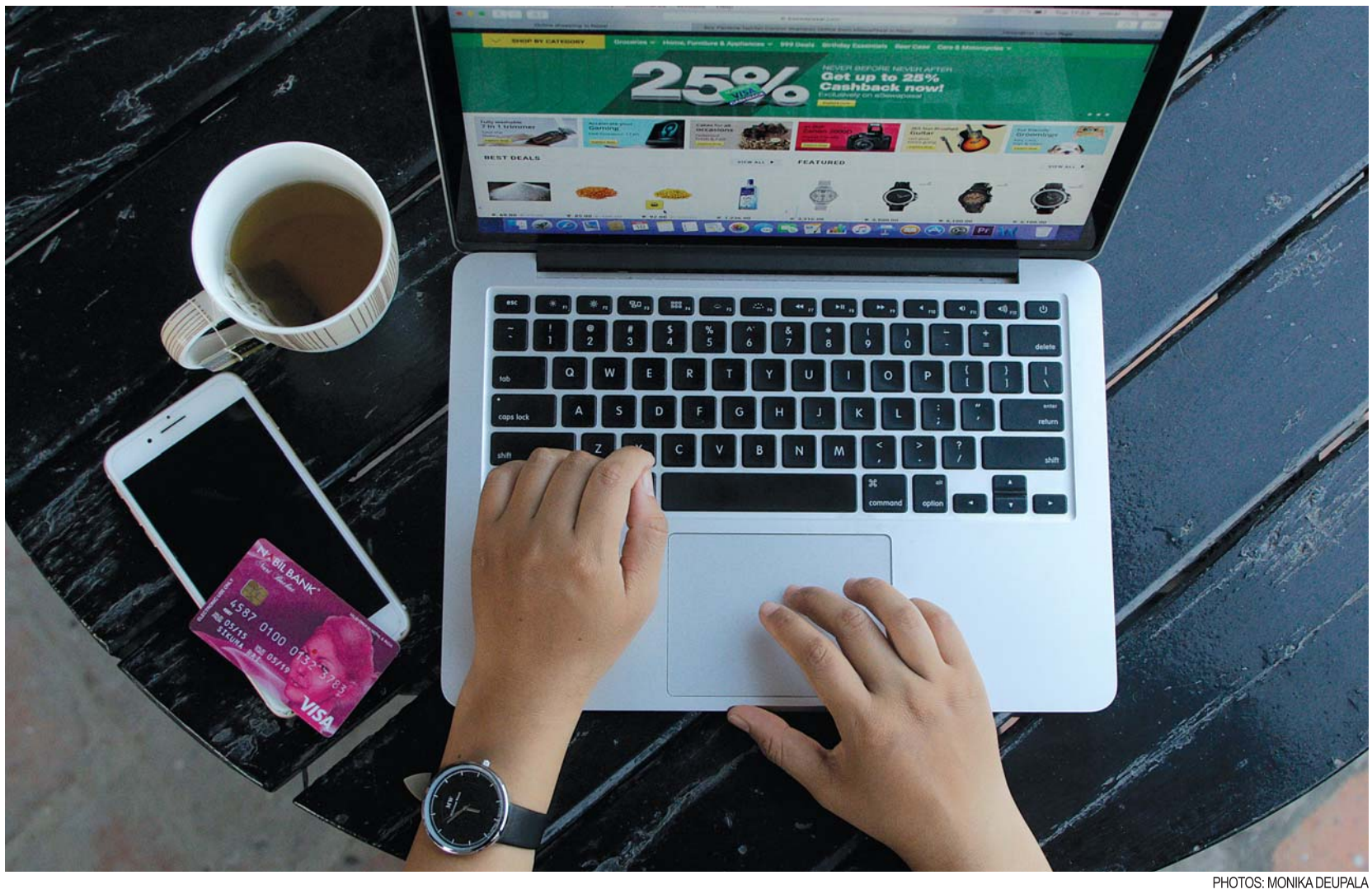
Nepal's budding e-commerce

"Our competition is not with each other, but with cash."

Sikuma Rai



PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

It is noon at the nerve centre of Daraz Nepal in Naxal, and the place is humming like a bee hive. Orders are constantly coming in online, and deliveries going out. No one has time to talk.

Across town at eSewaPasal in Kupondole, the scene is relatively more relaxed, but only because it is 2pm and most of the day's online orders have already been shipped.

Daraz Nepal and eSewePasal are two of a swarm of new e-commerce companies that are poised to turn Nepal's retail market on its head. After Alibaba acquired the Pakistani online site Daraz, and BhatBhateniOnline merged with Nepal's leading mobile-wallet company eSewa, an e-commerce wave is sweeping urban Nepal.

"Compared to our past operation as BhatBhateniOnline, we now have exponential growth within just half a month of functioning as eSewaPasal," explains CEO Manish Shrestha. "We are therefore expanding our inventory from 15,000 to 60,000 items by December."

eSewaPasal has made online payment accessible with options for credit/debit/prepaid cards, eSewa and PayPal for international payment. Customer confidence in digital payment got a boost after Nepal Rasta Bank licensed online payment companies -- eSewa, IME Digital Solution and Prabhu Technology -- and allowed 28 banks mobile and internet banking.

Currently, there are 1 million eSewa customers and nearly 5 million mobile banking clients all over the country, and these numbers are expected to rise with increasing mobile internet use, and the proliferation of smartphones.

"E-commerce, like any other business, is driven by its ecosystem. At the moment, the growth is just organic, and to increase the pace we need greater awareness and trust in internet payment," explains Roshan Lamichhane of eSewa, taking the experience of Amazon India which uses mass media, not just social networking sites, to create great first impressions and to advertise their deals and offers to attract customers.

"Here too, businesses should also advertise on how to navigate through the online sites so that people do not get lost in the maze

Buon Appetito



PHOTOS: SIKUMA RAI

For the last few months, hotels of Kathmandu have been abuzz with food festivals featuring Indian and South Asian cuisine. For those whose palates are jaded with exotic spice-laden fare, Hotel Shangri-La is offering an Italian Food Festival to keep our indulgence simple.

Not that Italian cuisine is bland, but the Mediterranean menu brings us items that carry their own natural flavours, skipping the embellishment of borrowed condiments.

Italian food at the festival is straightforward and unpretentious: a four-course lunch or dinner with two options each. Incorporating popular and authentic Italian recipes from all over the country, the food fest is a celebration of ingredients, using local rainbow trout, buffalo cheese and chicken. But there are also choice cuts from Parma to give it the authentic aura.



"The Italian diet is world renowned for its precise balance of meat, good fat in extra virgin olive oil, seafood, and lots of fresh vegetables, grains and pulses; dressed with aromatic herbs, and washed down with typical dry wine. It is a perfect way to transition from summer to autumn," explains Shangri-La's Executive Chef Raj Kumar Adhikari, who upgraded his Italian kitchen skills at the Al Fresco Italian Restaurant in Dubai.

Although limited, the menu at the festa involves everything we know of Italian gastronomy: from mozzarella and tomato salad to risotto and truffle soup, gnocchi and ravioli to tiramisu and panna cotta. Chef Adhikari and his team have tried to prepare styles of cuisines from the country's many diverse regions.

Among all the dishes, however, there is one that is rare find in Kathmandu: the pizza calzone di carne. A folded pizza stuffed with prawns, chicken or pepperoni, onion, capsicum, tomato sauce and mozzarella. It is perfect for those who do not like sharing their slices.

Artichokes are also a distinctive feature of Italian cuisine, and have been specially imported from Italy to prepare some Cajun-Italian fusion, in the form of a grilled-prawn dish. The flower-like vegetable is used to prepare a base sauce for the appetizer, and is a perfect start for a completely creamy, cheesy and aromatic endeavour.

Sikuma Rai

18-30 September, 12-3:30pm (lunch), 7-10pm (dinner), Lost Horizon Café, Shangri-La Hotel, Lazimpat, Rs2,500, (01) 4412999 extension: 7508/ 7520

Prabhu Bank BIZ BRIEFS

A fresher look

In celebration of its 85 years, Turkish Airlines has unveiled a fresh look, with new uniforms specially designed for its cabin crew. Inspired by many classic



elements of Turkish culture, the new uniforms incorporate traditional artistic patterns, shapes and colors that symbolise Turkey. The uniforms will begin to be used following the opening of the Istanbul New Airport.

Credit for energy

The World Bank has approved its first Nepal Energy Sector Development Policy Credit of $100 million to strengthen finances and operations of Nepal's energy sector. With Nepal Electricity Authority as the sole off-taker, the loan will contribute to establishing a regulatory framework that is transparent, autonomous, and accountable.

Hindu Kush network

Five South Asian countries -- Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan -- agreed to launch a Hindu Kush Himalaya Glaciers and Mountain Economy Network to develop joint strategies to counteract climate change and pollution, and to boost mountain economies.

Taking off

Yeti Airlines added a third ATR72-500



aircraft to its fleet on Tuesday. With the addition of new aircraft, Yeti Airlines will expand its ATR72 operations to Bhadrapur and Pokhara replacing its BAe Jetstreams.

Qatar revival

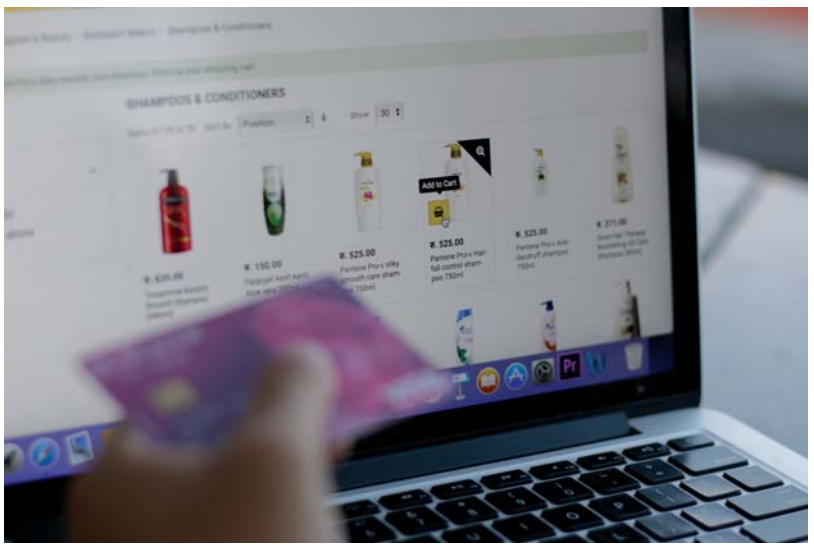
Following the most challenging year in its 20-year history, with the ongoing blockade



by neighbours, Qatar Airways says it is on way to recovery. Revenue and other operating income grew by 7.22%, with capacity growth of 9.96%. Cargo revenue also grew at 34.40% against cargo capacity growth of 13.95% annually.

Prabhu Bank

ecosystem



of products," Lamichhane adds.

Most online sites today rely on cash payment on delivery, but it is limited by poor infrastructure and lack of street addresses. The delivery person rides through traffic on a scooter and has to call numerous times for directions before finally finding the house.

Online payment by credit or debit card would streamline e-commerce, but it has never really taken off in Nepal. Digital shopping still being a niche market limited to main cities, means banks are not yet excited about extending their services.

"For most customers, e-banking is mainly necessary for paying utility bills, top-up and recharge and that does not require credit cards," says Ritesh Lamichhane of Bank of Kathmandu.

Banks introduced credit cards, but there making a loss because of the low rate of e-banking. Says Govinda Gurung of Civil Bank: "It is like a gold necklace, you buy it at huge expense but can only show it off on special occasions."

International online purchases by credit card are also hindered by Nepal Rastra Bank's regulations on cross-border payments due to money laundering concerns, and the danger of credit card fraud. Another obstacle is the requirement by international card companies, like Visa, for Nepali banks to have a large asset base as collateral, as well the country's absence of an online payment culture.

The vacuum left by credit card payment is filled by online payment through mobile phones. Companies are working to use Nepal's growing mobile penetration rate to push safe transactions through mobiles with two-factor authentication. Again, there is no universal mobile payment system through a consortium of banks yet, and most online shopping sites have their own payment app.

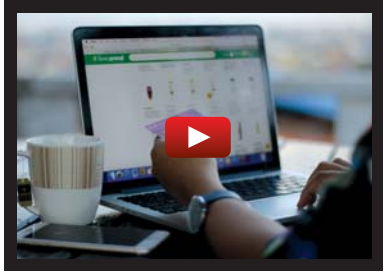
Still, the exponential growth in companies, like the motorcycle ride-sharing company Tootle, shows that there is a huge pent-up demand and a wide variety of trading activities that could make the online switch.

E-commerce businesses are not waiting for the banking sector to improve digital transactions – they are already busy delivering orders inside and outside of Kathmandu. Daraz Nepal, for instance, is busy adapting Alibaba's tools to facilitate online shopping in Nepal.

It wants to increase customer engagement with more than 80,000 products by getting brick-and-mortar merchants and retailers to sell online.

Says Daniel Shrestha of IME Pay: "There has to be broader collaboration among the service providers. Our competition is not with each other, but with cash."

E-COMMERCIAL



Watch a video about how e-commerce is about to turn Nepal's retail sector on its head. Fashion products, consumer items, vegetables, and ordering food -- it is all on the net. Listen to bankers and online shopping start-ups talk about the vast potential for growth, and the challenges ahead.

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Guiding Nepal's tourism industry

Bhaktapur and Patan have begun training guides to prepare for a new influx of tourists

How does the tourism industry intersect with local governments in a federal state? Patan and Bhaktapur have shown the way by their municipalities working with Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM) to meet the demand for tour groups in various languages.



½ FULL
Anil Chitrakar

There is a changing demand for guides who can help visitors understand the history and culture of the places they visit in Kathmandu Valley, largely because the source countries are different that previously. Today, there is a need for guides who are fluent in Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, or Russian.

Nepal wants to attract 2 million tourists in the next two years, and all the emphasis has been on the hardware: airports, hotels and highways. How about software, like training for the hospitality industry?

Guide training will not just meet demand from visitors, but also create jobs closer to home for young Nepalis, who may otherwise be tempted to migrate. But, as good as the intentions behind this initiative may be, it will take some time to build a system where local tour guides and tourists will have a mutually-beneficial and trusting relationship.



Local tourism committees and the municipalities in Bhaktapur and Patan are trying to work out the fee structures, bookings, ratings, uniforms and ID cards. Guides not only need to be well-versed in the history and cultures of Kathmandu Valley towns, but they also have to know how to improvise and go off-script.

During a training session last week at Bhaktapur Darbar Square, the big bell began to ring at 8am. The trainees were asked what the ringing signified, a question any good tourist would have. The answer: the bell was ringing for morning prayers at Taleju Temple. While locals knew the answer, the guides had to be trained to anticipate such questions.

Vocabulary can be a limiting factor for tour guides too, especially while speaking out of their mother tongues. While being trained in the iconography of the Narasimha, the guides all knew the items Vishnu held in his four arms, however translating them into English or Mandarin was another thing entirely.

Developing their own personalised thesaurus, these tour guides will be expanding their vocab over coming years. This is also a good time to introduce Malcolm Gladwell's '10,000 hour rule' to hasty young Nepalis in a hurry to succeed. It will take trainees 10,000 figurative hours of hard work if they want to become outstanding tour guides.

Providing context to the visitors was another challenge for the trainees. How much background is ideal, without overwhelming visitors? What was happening in their own country during the heydays of the kingdom of Bhaktapur? Why are the tourists' countries wealthy, while Nepal slipped into poverty and feudalism? What were the key events that changed the history of the world and Nepal in particular? Guides need a much broader general knowledge than a singular understanding of one place.

To become a great tour guide one also needs to know about the current relevance of the monuments, spaces and cultural events. Why were we able to give continuity to some festivals, while others struggled to exist? Why, for example, did we stop maintaining water sources at the Valley rim every 12 years as we used to? Was it because we got piped drinking water, did new buildings block channels, or was there something else?

History is generally considered to be a boring list of kings and their reigns. Unfortunately, it is no longer a popular subject, only one student enrolled in history at Tribhuvan University last year. Therefore, bringing a historical city to life is not as easy as it seems. But it can be done.

If we are to truly benefit from sightseeing tourism, we need guides who have the breadth of knowledge to explain our heritage to the world. This will result in tourists who spend more, buy that extra souvenir, eat well, and sleep in bed and breakfasts, will add Nepal to their bucket lists and they will leave with stories to tell.

Many will come back, so long as the tour guides can provide some context. Not only will educating guides provide employment and incomes for Nepali families, it will also boost the country's economy and spread a positive image worldwide.

***Anil Chitrakar** is President of Siddharthinc*





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The southwest monsoon was retreating gracefully, when out of the blue we get this enormous tropical depression spinning out of the Bay of Bengal, seen at this satellite radar composite on Thursday afternoon (*left*). It is not a cyclone, but has enough oomph and moisture in it to bring the rains roaring back. Eastern Nepal will feel the brunt of it, but the Valley will start getting some rain on Friday, and passing storms into Saturday.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
24° 18°	25° 17°	26° 17°



An electric trolley for Goma



Kanak Mani Dixit



If you can find time, do go to Jorpati to visit Goma Dulal who is soon getting an electric trolley to help her move about.

I first met Goma 16 years ago, when the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre was being established at the Khagendra Nabajiban Kendra precincts in Jorpati. Capable of speaking, but motionless other than the ability to move her hands, Goma was resident of the next-door facility known as the Ryder Cheshire Homes, which housed differently-abled people.

Goma was always there to provide encouragement and good cheer to our fledgling organisation, which she and others began referring to simply as 'Spinal'. After about five years the centre moved to Kavre, but Goma has always followed our progress keenly.

She was born in 1968, the second of five siblings, the eldest being a brother. When she was about 10, Goma began experiencing difficulty standing or walking. Her mobility worsened progressively, but the hospital only gave palliative care. Her elbow and knee joints started swelling, and before long Goma was confined to bed.

It was only in 1990 that orthopedic surgeon Ashok Banskota diagnosed Goma's condition as Multiple Rheumatoid Arthritis, where there is no prevention, nor cure, only 'management'.

Banskota lobbied and found Goma residency at the Ryder Cheshire Homes, where she has lived for two decades. As the disease progressed relentlessly, Goma was moved from wheelchair to 'wheel-bed', a kind of trolley meant for those who cannot move. All these years, she relies on others for bodily care, to be wheeled in and out, and to be fed.

Goma's mother has been gone now for a decade, her father died five years ago. Since then, contact with her brother and sisters has been sporadic, and limited to phone conversations which require a friend to secure her cellphone on the pillow, to Goma's ear.

Her body is hard as rock, the limbs little more than bone and skin. And yet, there is a shine in Goma's eyes and a sweetness in her tongue. Her refuge is music on the radio.

One of Goma's most prized moments was the concert by Amrit Gurung and his folk-rock band Nepathya at the Khagendra Nabajiban Kendra compound. Goma looks forward to Fridays to hear the singer and lyricist Kumar Poudel, who volunteers his time to entertain the residents. "I would die if I did not have music in my life," she says.

The last four decades have weakened Goma considerably, and the one-size-fits-all treatment of residents does not do justice to her growing needs, including a specialised diet. But what has bothered her most is her decreasing mobility even in her manual trolley: "I have to shout for someone to move me, and it is frustrating that help is not always available."

A year ago, Goma asked her friends from 'Spinal' in Kavre to get her a *bijuli* trolley with a joystick control. "I am tired of asking help to be moved in and out," she told them. They ordered an electrical trolley, with battery, motor and steering from India, and it has now cleared customs, undergoing tests, and will soon be in Goma's hands.

Goma prizes her moments with visitors. She likes making new friends and learning new things. Her spirits are high, even as her body gets weaker. Do visit Goma Dulal in Jorpati. She will be wheeling herself out in her newly acquired *bijuli gadi* to greet you.



NEPALI TIMES buzz
21 - 27 SEPTEMBER 2018 #928

Heli rescue fraud tarnishes Nepal's image



By tarring everyone with same brush, the government's investigations may have magnified damage

Robert Skinner

Widespread international coverage of an insurance scam in Nepal that involves some helicopter companies, private hospitals and trekking agencies has hurt the country's image abroad, and impacted an industry just recovering from the 2015 earthquake.

Nepal's government, in responding to an AFP exposé of malpractice earlier this year, may have made things worse with a slapdash report that accuses everyone of being in on the scam.

There is evidence that some trek organisers, hospitals and helicopter companies in Nepal connived to create fake medevacs of trekkers, or sometimes deliberately made hikers sick, so that they could collect and share insurance compensation.

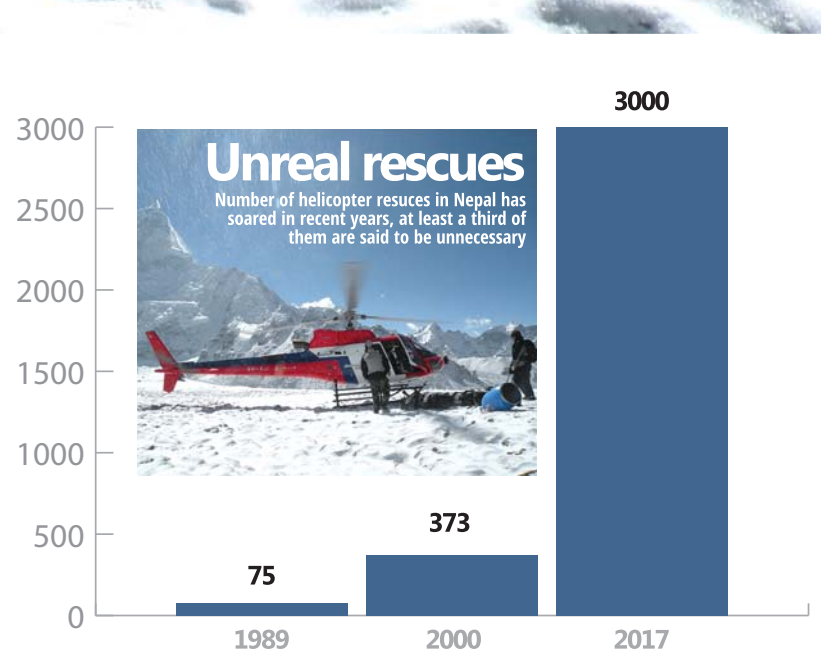
Insurance watchdog Traveller Assist claimed its own investigations showed that 35% of the 1,600 helicopter rescues in Nepal this year were fraudulent, costing up to $4 million. The company said it had intercepted and stopped 160 of the claims. The cost was serious enough for some international travel insurers to give the Nepal government till September to do something about it.

Reacting to the ultimatum, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation formed a fact-finding committee last month to investigate how insurance companies had been defrauded with fake medical bills and fake rescues, with kickbacks sometimes being shared with trekkers who pretended to be sick.

Only four pages of the aforementioned report were leaked to the media, naming 13 companies allegedly involved in the scam, including three helicopter operators, four hospitals and eight trekking agencies. It went so far as to make the impractical suggestion that only the Nepal Army conduct helicopter mountain rescues.

"The investigation itself needs to be investigated, the findings were as fake as the scams that were probed," stated Rajendra Bahadur Singh of the Airline Operators Association of Nepal. He added that airlines were never asked about the questionnaires they filled out or data provided about their rescues. "What kind of investigation was this, without any follow up, only conclusions based on assumptions?" Singh asked.

There is speculation the investigation was conducted to target selected companies while letting the real culprits off the hook. A trekking company founder *Nepali Times* spoke with feared the process had tarnished companies



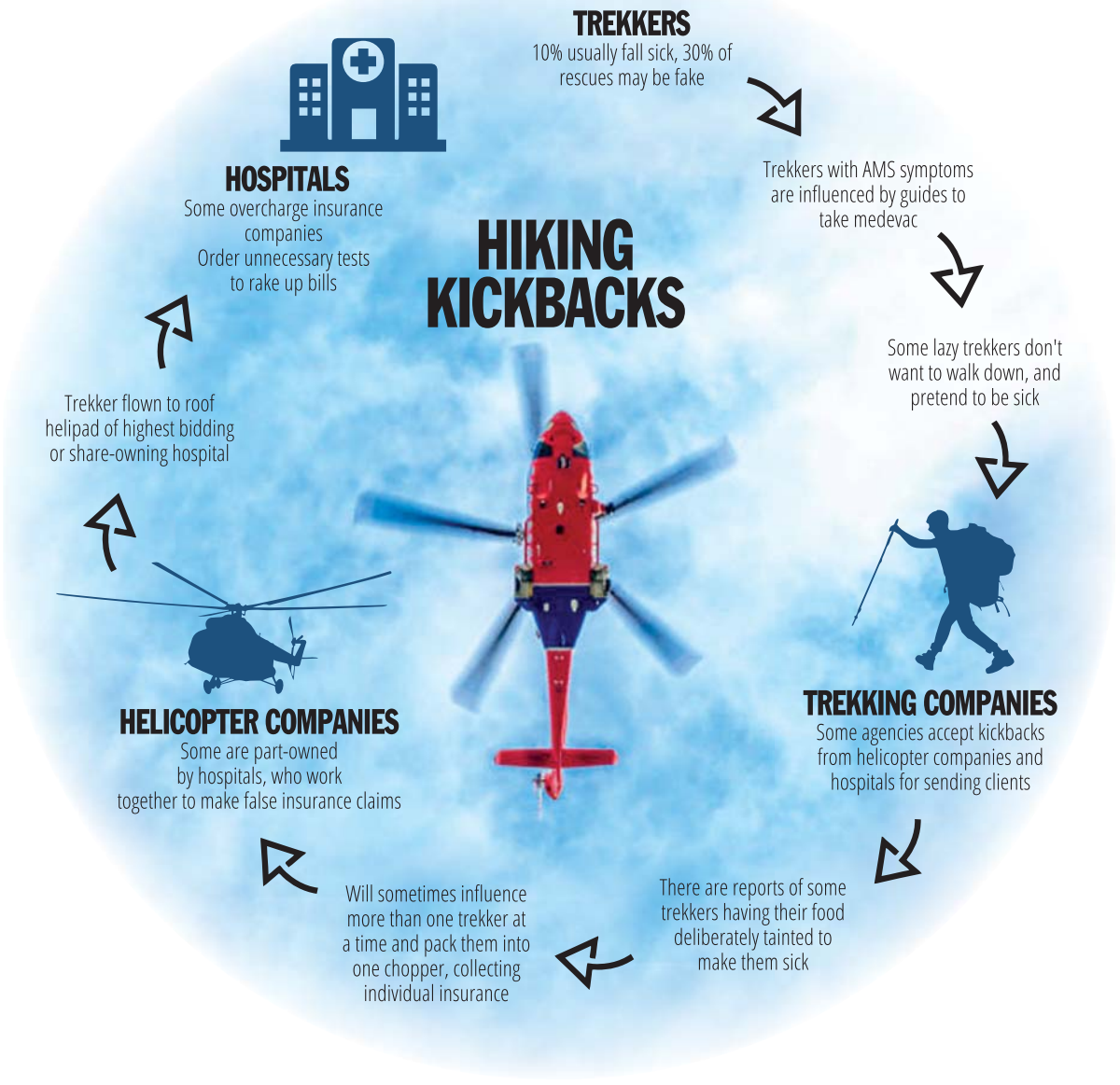
Frequent fliers

Here are some ways unnecessary helicopter rescues are organised for fake insurance claims:

1. Trekkers too lazy to walk back the same way down pretend to be sick, and with active connivance of their trekking agency, order a helicopter 'rescue'.
2. Trekkers with mild symptoms of altitude sickness are persuaded or pressured to be choppered out to Kathmandu.
3. Unscrupulous trekking groups contaminate food, or force group to climb faster than recommended so they get sick.
4. Hospitals offer kickbacks to trekking groups and lodges which fly patients to them. Some hospitals own shares in helicopter companies and vice-versa.
5. Overcharging for helicopter rescues.
6. Hospitals ordering unnecessary tests so billing is heftier.



PHOTOS: RESPONSIBLE ADVENTURES



which are not after kickbacks as guilty, while influential people with political protection would walk free.

Ethical trekking outfits, transparently-run hospitals and helicopter companies that follow rules appear to have all been lumped together with the fraudsters.

"The rot goes right to the top, so they will make a few examples of the small fries, while the big fish will keep doing what they were doing," the source said.

One of the hospitals named in the committee report is CIWEC Hospital which mainly treats expats and tourists in its clinics in Kathmandu and Pokhara. Medical director Prativa Pandey hosted a media briefing recently to clarify her hospital's stand.

"All we have done is take care of patients who come to us or who are sent to us by insurance companies, Nepal should be proud of its helicopter rescue pilots who put their own lives at risk to save lives," Pandey said.

Pilots and their machines are working at their performance extremes in the topography and high altitude of the Himalaya. Last week, Capt Nischal KC, a veteran of many daring mountain rescues, was killed with five others when his chopper hit a forested mountainside in Nuwakot.

Pandey said the report has implicated parties, sullying hospitals like hers, with the mainstream media labelling everyone guilty without due process. Releasing only parts of the report, implicating certain companies and hospitals and not being consistent with facts, was a trial by media "based on assumptions and predjudice".

Rajendra Bahadur Singh, also managing director of Mountain Helicopters, agrees: "Those companies listed in the report have had their names tainted, who will take the blame and compensate them?"

The negative publicity has already led to some cancellations by trekking groups booked for the autumn season.

It is not just the companies but Nepal's international image that has been smeared. Trekking agencies in Pokhara say they have been getting cancellations from groups already booked for the autumn season.

How to commit insurance fraud

More than 10% of the 900,000 visitors to Nepal last year went trekking. With such a large number on the move, altitude sickness, infections and accidental falls are frequent. Since trekking routes are usually remote, hikers in genuine emergencies are evacuated by helicopters to Kathmandu. Nepal has an advanced rescue network.

Most rescued trekkers are really sick. But it is often difficult to determine whether hikers suffering from Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) will get better by descending or if they need to be medevaced. Since there is room to fudge it, greed and competition has brought together some private helicopter companies and hospitals to cheat with false claims.

In 1989, there were 75 rescues per 100,000 trekking permits. By 2000 the number had soared to 373 per 100,000. In the past year, there were 3,000 rescues per 100,000 trekkers. (*See graph*)

"From a medical point of view, the most challenging aspect of helicopter rescues is confirming the need for rescue after the person is back in Kathmandu ... the rescue may have been totally legitimate, and yet the patient may have improved dramatically since the moment the rescue was requested," wrote Prativa Pandey in 2013, in a prescient article for for the Himalayan Rescue Association magazine."Financial reward for requesting a helicopter rescue could certainly be an added incentive."

Pandey is a physician at CIWEC, which treats many sick tourists, and says the threshold for heli-evacuation has decreased substantially since domestic aviation was commercialised. Before 1990, all rescues were performed by Royal Nepal Army.

Studies have shown that there has not been an increase in the proportion of trekkers suffering from AMS, but the numbers of rescues of trekkers with altitude sickeness has soared. Most symptoms can be alleviated by descent, while more serious pulmonary or cerebral oedema require emergency rescue.

However, a *Nepali Times* investigation showed that there are trek leaders who insist on a chopper rescue at the slightest complaint of headache or nausea. Some helicopter companies are partly owned by private hospitals in Kathmandu, and the fake insurance claims are shared, and kickbacks offered.

One trekking agent who helicoptered a genuinely sick client from Khumbu to a well-known private hospital in Kathmandu last year was taken aside and offered an envelope containing Rs150,000 in cash – he was told it was his 'commission' for bringing the patient.

This spring, a trekking group leader on Island Peak ordered a helicopter from Kathmandu to evacuate a sick trekker. The pilot brought along 10kg of unsolicited chicken as goodwill payment for the rescue. Trekking groups say such 'bribes' are standard operating procedure.

There are horror stories about some trekking guides deliberately making clients sick by contaminating their food. But there are also lazy trekkers who do not want to walk back, so pretend to be sick and are helicoptered out with the active connivance of their agency. Stiff competition, undercutting in the tourism business, and the slim margins for helicopter companies, has made insurance scams too tempting for some to resist.

Private hospitals offering kickbacks to helicopter companies is just an extension of their standard practice of paying ambulance drivers who bring patients to the emergency.

There have been many heroic rescues in the Nepal Himalaya. Airlines have invested in high performance helicopters that can make rescues up to 6,500m. Many hikers and mountaineers would have died if the option were not there. During the 2015 earthquake, 140 climbers were rescued from above the Khumbu Icefall on Mt Everest. In 2010 three Spaniards were winched up by long-line at 6,950m on Annapurna IV.

Such necessary rescues are now in jeopardy because of a few unscrupulous operators. The government, which should regulate the business, has botched its investigation by implicating everyone, but punishing no one.



EVENTS



Yen Yaa festival

The largest and most colourful street festival of the Valley unfolds with various rituals and performances, mapped out and scheduled by an independent group. More information can be found online in About Town section.

17-28 September, Around Kathmandu Valley, alinatamrakar@gmail.com

Amalgam 2018

Amalgam will highlight ceramic arts, paintings, prints, mixed media works and sculptures from 42 artists. Also learn ceramic raku techniques with Master Artist Gopal Kalapremi.

21-28 September (ceramic workshop: 8-9 September), 12-5pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, (01) 4433930

HUB opening

Celebrate the opening of Karma Coffee Nepal and Socialtours' new branch in Thamel, now both under one roof. Join in for experiential interactions, music, speciality coffee, food, handcraft, inspiration and travel experiences -- the list of programmes is very long.

21-23 September, 2pm (Friday)- 3pm (Sunday), HUB, Thamel, 9801123401



Rediscover Patan

A three-hour heritage walk by Dilendra Shretha and Pravin Chitrakar for aficionados of fine art, to discover the untold stories of Patan and the roles of locals in administering a fledgling city.

22 September, 8-11am, 23 September, 10am-12pm, The Golden Temple, Patan, Rs1,000, 9813611476, 9841226428

BFA Exhibition Project

Kathmandu University's Fine Arts Department's 2014 class present their final bachelor's projects at BFA Exhibition Project 2018. From paintings to music posters, calligraphy to creative school bags, this batch has something unique to offer.

21-28 September, 11am-6pm, Nepal Art Council Gallery, Babar Mahal, (01) 4220735

Indra Jatra celebration

Celebrate one of the most exciting and revered festivals of the Newari community as they replicate the Jatra, chariot procession, Kumari Puja and Lakhe dances. The traditional BBQ dinner and Newari liquor *Thowo* and *Aila* complete the evening's revelry.

24 September, 6:30pm onward, The Dwarika's Hotel, Battisputali, (01) 4479488/ 9851176121



Swing night

Bounce and hop to the beats of swing, straight from the 30's and 40's. It's all about jazz and lindy hop and making new dance partners.

25 September, 6-8pm, Bikalpa Art Cafe & Bar, Pulchok, 9851147776,

KTM Mini Maker Fair

A two-day gathering of global innovators involved in solving social challenges. Booths, speaker sessions, and interactive workshops, movers and shakers can come together to ideate and co-create for sectors such as health, education, environment and humanitarianism.

22-23 Septmber, 9am-8pm, Nepal Communitere, Pulchok, (01) 5530229

Pani Muhan circuit hike

Register by 3pm on Friday for a 5-6 hour, 18km hike to Pani Muhan, Bishnu Dwar and back.

22 September, 6:40am, meet at: Bhrikuti Mandap Exhibition Hall, Rs500-1,500 Duration : 5 - 6 Hours

Step in for more varieties at

LIFE STYLE DESIGN & DECOR

NEW Arrivals



Show Room: SRD Building New Plaza, Putalisadak, Tel:4425402

MUSIC



Galat Nirnaya launch

The famous funky band of Kathmandu, Kta Haru, invites everyone to join as they launch their first album Galat Nirnaya. The band has already released few singles on YouTube and music lovers cannot get enough of it.

25 September, 5:30pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, 9823306918

Posterkidd

Have an electrifying day with a deep and bass-fueled performace from Posterkidd.

21 September, 12pm onwards, Base Camp: Outdoor Lifestyle, Arun Thapa Chok, Jhamsikhel, 9841226397

Bass Day

The third edition of Bass Day Nepal will boast performances from amazing bass players from Nepal such as Bass Clinic by Marcus Dengate, and a presentation on 'Bass, a musical tool' by Rizu Tuladhar.

22 September, 3pm onwards, Shisha Lounge and Bar, Thamel, Rs200



Indie night

Phosphenes launches its EP 'Know this time' along with drum and bass performances. Baaja and Ankit Shrestha will be sharing the stage to create an indie musical night.

22 September, 6pm onwards, Club 25 hours, Tangal, Rs500, 9801057602, tickets available at: Evoke Cafe & Bistro, Jhamsikhel

Liquid Inspiration

An acoustic session by Ashesh Bhattachan and Ashish P. Pradhan of Liquid Inspiration. Join the duo for a relaxed vibe.

21 September, 7pm-12am, Evoke Cafe and Bistro, Jhamsikhel, 9851111051

OUR PICK



Opens in Kathmandu on 21 September

This rom-com has been generating a lot of buzz for many reasons. One is the sumptuous visuals of UK, which promises a treat to the eyes. Another is the on screen debut of choreographer turned director Renasha Bantawa Rai, and actor Dhiraj Magar, a vlogger and youtube star. Both Magar and female lead Samragyee RL Shah channel Korean looks and style popular among Nepali youngsters today. The movie explores the lives of Nepalis living outside Nepal, and the difficult choices they need to make.

DINING



Japanese Noodle Kitchen

JNK offers a fresh, fast, uncomplicated Japanese dining experience at an affordable price, with a focus on soup or dry noodles.

Nakhu Dobato, Ringroad, wedged between On the Grill and Kwality Food Café

Arniko Room

Enjoy a three-course set 'Executive Lunch' at Hotel Annapurna's Chinese restaurant. There's an array of soups, main courses and desserts to choose from.

Sunday to Friday, 12-3 pm, Hotel Annapurna, Darbar Marg, Rs1,500 (single), (01) 4221711

Durbar Restaurant

Get the palacial feel of high-end dining at this multi-cuisine restaurant. Dine inside or sit outside, facing the beautiful courtyard.

6am-10pm, Gokarna Forest Resort, Thali, (01) 4451212

Le Trio

With vintage-esque posters lining the walls and rustic wooden tables, this place makes it feel like you've stepped into a 1960s Parisian café. The menu is very much local in taste, however. Try the grilled chicken cheese burger for a happy lunch.

Jhamsikhel, (01) 5521674



Kakori

This north Indian restaurant offers various specific cuisines, from Punjabi and Kashmiri to Awadhi and Rajasthani. Don't forget the popular Nepali delicacies either.

7-10:45pm for dinner, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Tahachal, for reservation: (01) 4273999

Prazada

Enjoy Prazada's selection of chilled draught beers in its lush garden with sumptuous food and special pizzas, accompanied by relaxing music.

Baluwatar, (01) 4410473

GETAWAY



Rupakot Resort

Get pampered in the lap of luxury, with stunning views of the Annapurnas.

Maidan-6, Rupakot, Kaski, (61) 622660, (01) 4004687

Club Himalaya

This is the place for amazing mountain views and refreshing weekend escapes; special packages available for Nepalis and expatriates.

Nagarkot, (01) 4410432



The Last Resort

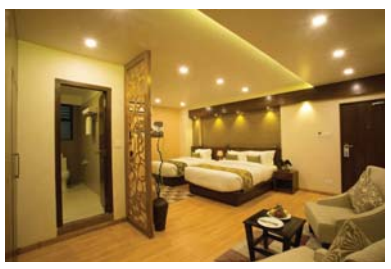
Bungy jump, tandem swing, or white water rafting -- take an adventurous trip to Bhote Koshi River near the Tibetan border.

Bhotekoshi, Sindhupalchok, (01) 4700525

Pataleban Vineyard Resort

This eco-resort ,with great views, jungle walks, and picnics, will help rejuvenate you from your tedious daily routine.

Chisapani, Kathmandu, (01) 4316377, 9841679364



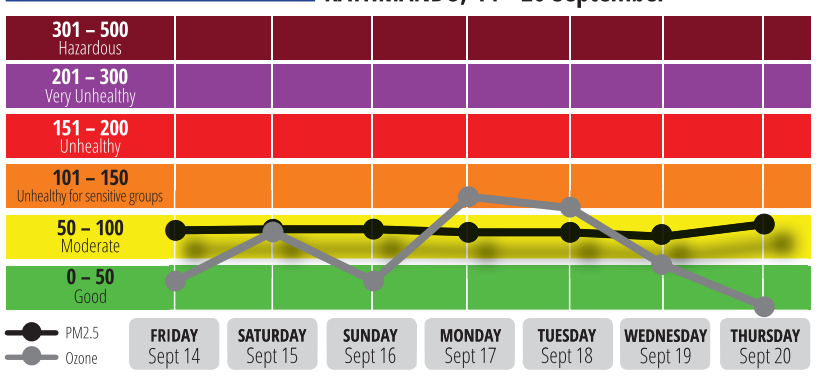
Yatri Suites and Spa

Pamper yourself with relaxing spa treatments, such as full body massage, body scrubs, sauna and steam.

Amrit Marg, Thamel, Rs5,999, Reservation: 9802063086

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 14 - 20 September



As the rains tapered off, there were two days this week in which the daily average for ozone was in the Orange 'Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups' band. Considering how far back from the road and with how much greenery the U.S. Embassy monitoring station is located, at Phora Durbar, this is quite alarming. Ozone is an unstable gas formed when the carbon monoxide and nitrous oxides in motorcycle exhausts react with the air. Such a high concentration of this tracer gas means the gaseous pollution in the city core is high, even before monsoon's end. PM 2.5 concentrations are also edging up, but are still in the yellow 'Moderate' band. Go to *Nepali Times* online for hourly AQI measurements.

https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/

Federalism's birth pangs, or death rattle?

Navigating the sub-national landscape a year after the 2017 elections

Ashray Bikram Pande and **Namit Wagley**

May 2017 was a milestone in Nepal's transition from a unitary system to a federal state, but a year since locally elected representatives took office, the process of devolution to sub-national governments has been slow. New administrative requirements have created confusion over the roles and responsibilities in the three tiers of government.

Despite this, elected local governments remain determined to govern while managing public expectations to deliver campaign commitments. How well local leaders negotiate and handle pressures of unmet expectations will impact the political ecology of this transition, either leading to a favourable outcome or running the risk of failure.

While the constitutional mandate is clear, competing roles and the absence of consistent political will have caused uncertainties to persist. Mechanisms designed to settle disputes between layers of government have not yet been fully utilised, leaving room for bitter contestation.

The continuation of this policy and structural vacuum means that chief ministers, mayors and ward chiefs use decentralisation to negotiate for more power, while lacking knowledge and capacity to govern effectively.

Conversely, the exercise of legislative powers at the sub-national level has led to a backlash, delimiting the actual authority given to local governments. The series of federal directives sent to elected local governments discouraging drafting of local legislation is proof of this.

Meanwhile, priorities and needs have begun to expand and multiply, signaling an end to the honeymoon period for elected representatives. Local governments are now under increasing pressure to administer their responsibilities and provide essential services to constituents.

Coalitions within local executives have fostered democratic practices in local governments in some areas. In others, conflict and collusion have plagued the system, chipping away at the quality of service delivery. There are conflicts of interest, nepotism, arbitrary decision-making and misappropriations of grants. There is an ongoing struggle to exercise autonomy as local governments attempt to establish new lines of power.

A clear example is the recent controversy over the tax increase by provincial and local governments, which want to assert their powers defined in Schedule 8 of the Constitution to raise revenue. With the current budget allocations insufficient to meet the mandate to govern, elected representatives are looking to other avenues.

The taxes have created an uproar in the private sector, however, which is concerned about double taxation and misuse of power. Tax hikes ultimately affect the public, which has to bear the additional costs of goods and services. Although the Federal Parliament has directed the government to look into tax increases, the National Natural Resources Fiscal Commission (NNRFC) is yet to be formally established.

Nonetheless, Nepal's first federal budget 2018-2019, presented in May, represents a significant departure in budgeting and planning processes carried out under the previous unitary system. This important policy instrument illustrates priorities of the elected government and the decisions taken to fulfill constitutional responsibilities.

More importantly, it now includes resource allocations to sub-national governments. For the first time, local assemblies took part in the formulation of budgeting and planning needs.

Other important markers of progress include the completion of the Organisation & Management (O&M) Survey to recommend the necessary requirements of Federal and Provincial government civil service needs. The O&M survey for local governments is ongoing and once finished, it will establish organisation structures and staffing needs for local governments not yet fully functional. However, to what extent this will restructure the bureaucracy to adopt a bottom-up approach to service the three-tiered federation remains to be seen.

The merger of the UCPN and UML marked a significant milestone in political restructuring and consolidation of power across three levels of government. The realignment of political positions and interests signals a shift towards adaptation to a new architecture of a federal republic. Despite this, the current structure still exhibits and reinforces a patronage culture reminiscent of a unitary state.

While a strong national majority government does provide significant benefits in terms of stability and decision-making power, the results of devolution will depend on the transformation of political parties. Institutional growth and reform are a prerequisite if there is to be a departure from the traditional decentralisation of the 1990s. This is critical to re-engineer accountability channels that were previously centralised and hierarchical.

Elected representatives heading judicial committees are trying to meet the high expectations of their constituents on one hand, while navigating the complexities of deciding on a just result amid competing economic, social, political and legal forces on the other. This raises fears that the poor and marginalised will continue to be ostracised, politicisation and corruption will continue to persist, and access to justice will continue to be difficult.

Having an elected representation in a federal system after two decades is a real opportunity to deepen and institutionalise democratic practice in the 753 local governments. Institutional arrangements between the multi-tiered forms of government will determine the relationships, which will have to endure as power struggles define the boundaries of shared rule and self-rule. State and non-state actors, which have little history of cooperation, and who are suspicious of each other, must forge new ways of working together.

Ashray Pande *and* ***Namit Wagley*** *are Program Officers at the Asia Foundation in Kathmandu.*





PHOTOS: KISHOR PRADHAN

Grassroots democracy is delivering development

Across Nepal, rural municipalities are being forced to be accountable

Kishor Pradhan

In the three decades after 1960 when political parties were banned, there were Village Panchayats. After the democratic changes in 1990, they were called Village Development Committees (VDCs) of which there were nearly 4,000 all over the country. In the new Constitution, VDCs have been merged into 460 Rural Municipalities (*Gaunpalika*).

Whatever the name they go by, elected village councils in Nepal have been at the grassroots of democracy and development. After last year's elections, the new municipalities are asserting themselves.

Dhan Bahadur Thapa Magar is 87, and old enough to remember the time he was elected to head the Village Panchayat of Chure village of Kailali in Province 7. He says: "There is now a lot more development budget than in the past. Combined with local surplus budget, villages can speed up their own development provided the budget is not misused."

VDCs used to get annual grants of Rs2 million for development from Kathmandu. Today, rural municipalities get up to Rs200 million and it includes three types of budgets provided by the central and provincial governments: conditional, lump-sum and matching funds. If the development budget of three former VDCs combined was Rs 6million, as a single rural municipality, it would now gets up to five times more.

"In my Gaupalika, in the last fiscal year, the total budget received was about Rs300 million. Of this, one third went into overheads," says Hem Raj Joshi, Chief Administrative Office of Chure village. "The rest was development budget, and the municipality could not spend the conditional budget because it could not come up with specific projects."

The main challenge for village councils has been the lack of capacity for participatory development planning as demanded by constituents. Additionally, the inability to spend the allocated conditional development budget has made it difficult to allocate resources for health, education, energy, or for women or marginalised groups.

"In my village, I set aside money for women's income generation activities last fiscal year, and informed the women to make use of it by coming up with a project proposal, but did not get a single proposal," says Urmila Thami KC of the Jugu Village. She is vice chair of Gaurishankar rural municipality in Dolakha district.

The question now is: are local governments really equipped to deliver development?

"The people have to be active and make the local authorities accountable, and development will definitely happen," says Dhan Bahadur Thapa Magar, the former Village Panchayat head.

In remote Bajhang district in western Nepal, there are still rural municipalities like Saipal where the nearest road head is two days walk away. On a recent flight from Dhangadi to Kathmandu, the chair of Saipal Rajendra Dhami said proudly: "With the development budget we got last fiscal year, we built two micro-hydros of 22 kilowatts, each which has electrified two wards in the municipality. We promised it to the people, and we delivered."

In the first fiscal year 2017/18 since rural municipality councils were elected, an estimated 90% of the budget has been spent on infrastructure, mainly roads. There have been media reports of the roads being the result of misuse of funds and corruption, but it is also true that people want roads and there is pressure on elected officials to deliver.

"As farmers in remote gaupalika, we need roads and irrigation first," says Jogendra Thakur in Sarlahi district of Province 2. Indeed, a road to Dalit communities in the village opened up the area to development and provided access to market. It is better than distributing a goat or sewing machine.

Several generations of Nepalis have been made guinea pigs to test out development fads by donors, experts, scholars, NGOs and INGOS. Yet, after more than 60 years, there was still no clear path to development.

Under federalism, however, locally elected officials have found a way to give citizens a voice in spelling out their priorities directly to elected officials. Finally, they can identify and demand the kind of development they need, and force elected officials to be accountable and deliver on promises.

VILLAGE LIFE: Sunkosi Gaunpalika (*above, left*) is housed in a pre-fab building by the BP Highway, after many houses were damaged in the 2015 earthquake. The rural municpality also has excavators to maintain and build roads.

A farmer group in Jugu village of Dolakha meets to discuss large snails that are destroying their vegetable crop.



PRADEEP RAJ ONTA / RSS

TOP SALUTE: President Bidya Bhandari inspects a Nepal Army display at Tundikhel to mark Constitution Day on Wednesday.



WORLD BANK

MONEY TALK: Finance Minister Yuba Raj Khatiwada delivered the keynote speech at the South Asia Workshop on Fiscal Policy in Kathmandu on Tuesday.



LENIN BISTA / TWITTER

MAJOR MINOR: Former Maoist child soldier Lenin Bista, who was prevented from flying out for an international conference two weeks ago by the Home Ministry, with British Ambassador to Nepal Richard Morris, and head of the political section William Danny on Monday.



SIKUMA RAI

TOP GUN: Turkish Airlines was awarded top-selling travel and cargo agencies of 2017 during an event at Chandragiri Hills last week. Osho Travels was named best agent.



BRITISH COLLEGE

CLASS OF 2018: The British College held its fourth graduation ceremony at the Hyatt Regency in Kathmandu where 225 students were awarded degrees.

Once upon a time



MONIKA DEUPALA

After staging many plays by foreign writers, Mandala Theatre has forayed into an original Nepali folktale, with a sharp contemporary socio-political message.

Jalini is a short story in Dhruba Satya Pariyar's book *Kairan* that was shortlisted for this year's Madan Puraskar, and adapted by the author and director Dahayang Rai into a play that is a satire with a message of inclusion.

An arrogant king wants to stand out in history, and is told he will do so only if his daughter makes a sketch of him. He imprisons her in a palace so that she can see no other man.

The folktale of Rapunzel springs to mind. Even Buddha was confined to his palace so that he could not see the sufferings of the world. But, as expected, the unseen holds the most fascination, which is what happens to Jalini.

Jalini's story attempts to trace how the imprisonment of women in homes leads to their subjugation and secondary place in society. It is not just Jalini's body that is confined, but her heart and mind as well. And this just to satisfy the whims of a king unhinged with power. Jalini is not just a princess but a symbol of womanhood, and you will have to go watch the play if you want to find out if she finally breaks out of her confinement.

The stage is taken up by a powerfully choreographed movement of the kingdom's good citizens labouring to construct a palace for Jalini. A woman named Jaljala (so named perhaps to remind us of the mountain in Rukum that became a symbol of the Maoist revolution) speaks out boldly against tyranny, and the plot thickens as Jalini is brought to confront a world she had never seen.

The king's attempts to force the people to do his bidding as he ignores their hardships is reminiscent of despotic regimes today. He takes pride in how he has decorated the walls of his palace with pictures of his long-suffering subjects, and thinks that passes for doing something to uplift them. This is obviously a satire on the tokenism and lips service to inclusion in present day Nepal.

The play entertains even as it subtly draws the audience to think about caste and gender discrimination. The music changes from dramatic to romantic and fantastic, depending on the scenes, adding an audio element to the stagecraft. There are loose ends: some mysteries are not solved even till the end, and there is a distracting scene of a prime minister who does not have a major role in the plot.

Bijay Baral as the king deserves special mention for his perfect comic timing. Dayahang Rai, the film actor who began his career in theatre has come back a full circle to the stage. He tries not to make this love story with a political message too preachy or predictable, and he largely succeeds in giving Pariyar's fairy tale a hopeful and optimistic tint in a darkly cynical world.

Sewa Bhattarai

5:30 PM everyday except Monday
Mandala Theater
Until Oct 7
Phone: 01-6924269













ALL PHOTOS: IMPACT PRODUCTIONS

Pulling the Kumari around

What it feels like to take the living goddess on IndraJatra

The Indra Jatra festival that includes the chariot procession on 24 September holds great national symbolism. The deities, Kumari, Ganesh, and Bhairab, being pulled around town in separate chariots with the country's political leadership there to pay their respects is the highlight of the weeklong festival. This year, they will be doing so from the recently restored balcony of the neo-classical Gaddi Baithak building overlooking the square.

Traditionally, the chariot was only pulled by men. Although there is a special day when Patan's Machindranath chariot is pulled by women, it was not until 2012 that Mohan Krishna Dangol, the late adviser to the Indra Jatra Management Committee, proposed women as chariot pullers. There was widespread support for the idea.



HERITAGE LIVE!

Since then, the Kumari's chariot has been pulled by women on Nanicha Yaa — the last day of the festival. All three chariots have been pulled by women in subsequent years, sometimes with a hundred women participating.

Months after the 2015 earthquake, chariot pulling was challenging because many of the houses along the narrow alleys were supported by timber beams. The Committee had to put a lot of work into planning and clearing the route.

It was a honour for many women to be pulling the chariots of the protector deities so soon after the disaster. Some of the women blew whistles from the front of the chariots to clear the way through the throngs of people. Pulling the Kumari is the greatest honour, but the women have to be extra careful since it is a larger chariot. The main chariot also has to stop often because local devotees in every neighbourhood want to pay their respects to the living goddess.

Matina Shakya, the Kumari who stepped down in 2017, had previous experiences of sitting inside the chariot while this year's Kumari will be less familiar to it. Even after they step down from being the living goddess, they are treated with high respect when they go to school and sit for examinations. Many still bow as they pass Matina Shakya's home in Itumbahal, and glance up to the balcony to catch a glimpse of her. She can often be seen walking around the neighbourhood, and even though people recognise her, many do not talk to her out of reverence.

There are also signs of changing times during the festival. Many chariot pullers these days wear t-shirts and baseball caps. Participants inside the pulukisi (elephant) costume find time to check their smartphones. The little Ganesh swings his feet clad in red socks, and attendants operate small battery operated fans.

Police and male volunteers are also a part of the chariot procession to guard against rowdy men, and help navigate the chariots. The volunteers are there to also ensure the women pullers do not get dehydrated. Near the Sweta Bhairab shrine, the procession makes a stop for festival goers to take a holy sip from a straw in the deity's mouth as a blessing. Despite the sea of men, the women chariot pullers were allowed to go first to take the drink last year.

Jui Shrestha



Economy & ecology of Nijgad airport

Preserving native forest has dominated debate over Nepal's fourth international airport, it should be about economic viability

Om Astha Rai

The government's determination to clear-fell a large swathe of eastern Nepal's last remaining hardwood forest for the proposed Nijgad Airport has been met with outrage on the social mediasphere.

But there has been no debate over the viability of a fourth international airport: if it is even required, or if investors will be interested in such a huge project.

The government says it will start turning a profit from day one, and propel Nepal into the future, but there are serious doubts.

After a Korean firm, Landmark International, designed the new airport city ten years ago, there has not been a business plan or a detailed project report. Yet, the government is in a desperate hurry to start clearing the forests.

The government is yet to inform the Parliament about how it will manage to secure the $6.7 billion (more than half of this year's national budget) to build the ambitious project in a country where even constructing a city street takes decades.

Tourism and Aviation Minister Rabindra Adhikari (*pictured, right*) has been the prime mover of the project, and has said only 250,000 trees will be cut in the $1 billion first phase, which will use up only 1,800 hectares of the forest.

But Landmark's proposal puts the total project cost beyond $8 billion if inflation is taken into account, and the 80 sq km aeropolis would be six times bigger than Heathrow and result in the felling of 2.4 million trees. It would have a capacity to handle 60 million passengers a year.

Ex-Emirates pilot PJ Shah is a self-proclaimed lobbyist for Nijgad. He told *Nepali Times*: "This will be our safest, most efficient and profitable international airport."

The two parallel east-west runways with state-of-the-art precision approach would make the airport much easier to fly in and out of. There would be no congestion, and it would be big enough to handle traffic growth well into the future. When the 72 km Kathmandu-Tarai expressway



BIKRAM RAI

East-west city

Nepal's Tarai is turning into one endless elongated metropolis

Mukesh Pokhrel

The narrow strip of plains that used to be a dense jungle till 70 years ago was cleared to resettle mountain farmers and turn it into Nepal's rice basket. Today, it has become an east-west swathe of asphalt and concrete with neither paddy fields nor forests.

Major junctions along the East -West Highway have merged with the border cities to the south to form big joint metropolises like Atariya-Dhangadi, Kohalpur-Nepalganj, Butwal-Bhairawa Simara-Birganj, Bardibas-Janakpur, or Dharan-Itahari-Biratnagar.

From these hubs, urban expansion is also taking place east-west and to the north. It is only a question of time before the present East-West Highway will be a long street running through one big city that covers the entire Nepal Tarai.

"Haphazard settlements have replaced what, till recently, used to be forests and farmlands all along the highway," says economist Dilli Raj Khanal. He warns that Nepal will face an alarming future if agriculture is in decline in both the mountains because of outmigration, and in the plains because of urbanisation.

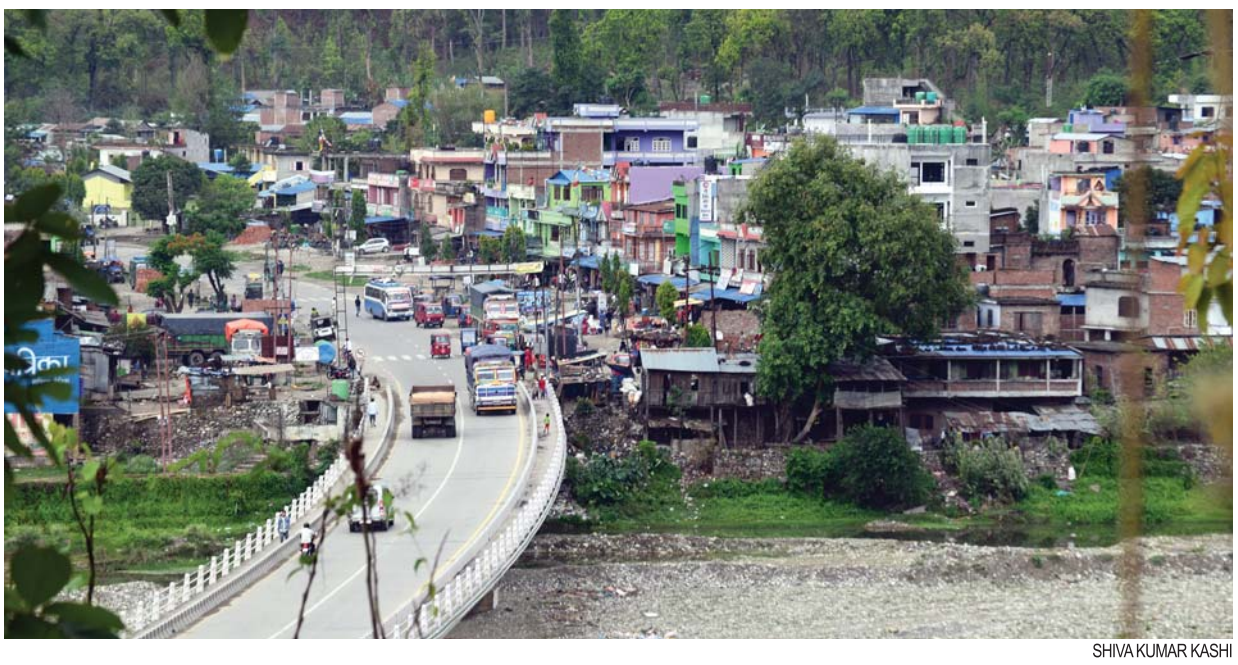
On a recent trip across the Tarai, from Jhapa to Kanchanpur, the signs were ominous. In Bara, there is no forest left except for the Parsa National Park, and the farms along the roads are gone too. Chitwan Valley, except for its national park and the thinning Barandabhar wildlife corridor, is just one big city. From Narayangad to Kawasoti, and from Butwal to Dang, there are mostly houses on both sides of the road. From Patlaiya to Nijgad, the only remaining forest may soon be converted into a new international airport. The further east you go along the Tarai, the more houses, and less trees you see.

All this has had a major impact on the East-West Highway that serves as the country's main transportation artery. It is impossible to drive faster than 40 km/h because of settlements on both sides. The number of highway accidents have shot up, and vehicles killed 80 wild animals in the past year.

Resettlement of farmers in the Tarai began after malaria was eradicated through a US-supported DDT spraying program in the 1960s. King Mahendra then launched a transmigration scheme to resettle mountain villagers in the Tarai, giving away land in the cleared forests.

After the East-West Highway was built, migration picked up. Today, de-population of the mountain valleys has been accompanied by over-population of the Tarai, at great cost to the environment and agriculture.

Urban expansion northwards from highway towns has put pressure on the Chure forests, already ravaged by quarries



SHIVA KUMAR KASHI



LAXMAN NEUPANE



PLAIN SPEAKING: (*Top*) The village of Manahari has now expanded along the highway, engulfing other towns to become a city. This trend is turning forests and farms along the entire Nepal Tarai into one long city.

(Below, left) Atariya in Kailali is at the crossroads between the mountain highways going north, and the East-West Highway. The junction has now become a suburb of Dhangadi.

(Below, right) Shumsherganj in Banke is growing so fast, it will soon merge with Kohalpur and Nepalganj into one big metropolis.

REACHING UP: Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari points at the Korean-made design of the proposed Nijgad Airport in his office.

Adhikari has been the prime mover of the $6.7 billion airport, which critics say is economically unviable and ecologically disastrous.

is completed, the travel time by road to the capital will be one hour.

"All these factors make Nijgad the perfect site for a large international airport," Shah says. "Where else would we find such an ideal place?"

To be sure, Kathmandu airport is too congested, and is choking Nepal's economy. There is limited room for expansion, the terrain is tricky and does not allow for large jets. Ex-pilot Dorji Tsering Sherpa says: "We need Nijgad because Kathmandu airport cannot drive our economy any longer."

To justify the need of Nijgad Airport, politicians point to the growing volume of international passengers served by Kathmandu. But what if the growth in international traffic actually goes down due to the drop of migrant workers? Malaysia and Qatar are already demanding fewer workers than in the past.

Last year, only 354,000 migrant workers flew out of Kathmandu, down from 500,000 in 2015. Already, Air Asia is pulling out its daily widebody Kuala Lumpur flights. Nepal is adding two international airports in the next two years, in Bhairawa and Pokhara, to serve up to 2.5 million passengers annually.

These would reduce the burden on Kathmandu where an expansion plan would allow 6 million passengers a year.

If Kathmandu airport's traffic is reduced by half, where will the Nijgad Airport find the 60 million passengers it needs to sustain itself? In June, Tourism minister Adhikari told *Nepali Times* that 90% international passengers landing in and flying out of Nijgad will use it only as a transit: "People from other countries of this region will use it as a transit hub to and from Europe and the US."

Aviation experts find that preposterous. Transit airports with hub-and-spoke functions are fast becoming obsolete as international aviation moves to point-to-point connectivity with advanced long-range airliners like the Boeing 777-8, the Boeing 787-9 and the Airbus A350ULR, which are able to fly up to 20 hours non-stop.

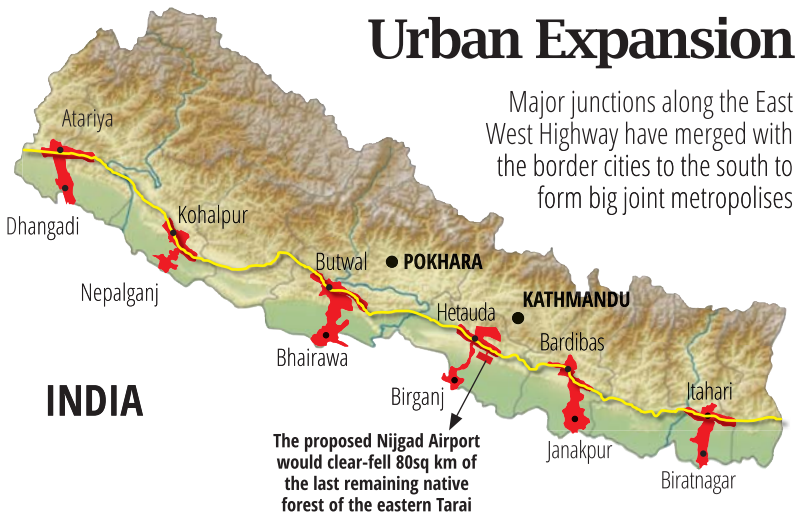
And there is an issue of air space. Nijgad is 22 km north of the Indian border, which means a lot of coordination for terminal maneuvering will be need corodination with Indian air traffic control for arrivals and departures. Nepal and India are both members of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), which theoretically obliges Delhi to accommodate Nepal's needs.

Critics say that given how projects like Melamchi have taken decades to be completed, and how Nepal's civil aviation authorities cannot even maintain the one runway in Kathmandu, and considering the high level of corruption and lack of transparency in government dealings, such a mega-project would be a disaster for the country.

Instead of allowing Nepal's economy to take off, they say it may actually tie future generations into a debt trap.

Urban Expansion

Major junctions along the East West Highway have merged with the border cities to the south to form big joint metropolises



mining sand and boulders to be smuggled into India. This has increased siltation of the seasonal rivers that drain to the Tarai and India, triggering flashfloods that have inundated towns, destroyed farmlands, and washed away highway bridges.

Deforestation of the fragile Chure has also lowered the water table which was already in steep decline because of over-extraction for agriculture. Water shortage combined with shrinking arable land has already had a devastating impact on Nepal's agricultural production.

Mayor Bidur Karki of Bardibas tells us wryly: "Nepalis are migrating to work in the Arabian desert in droves. They don't have to anymore, there is a desert right here." In his town, 70% of the wells have gone dry. Pumps that used to strike the water table at a depth of 10m, now have to drill deeper than 50m.

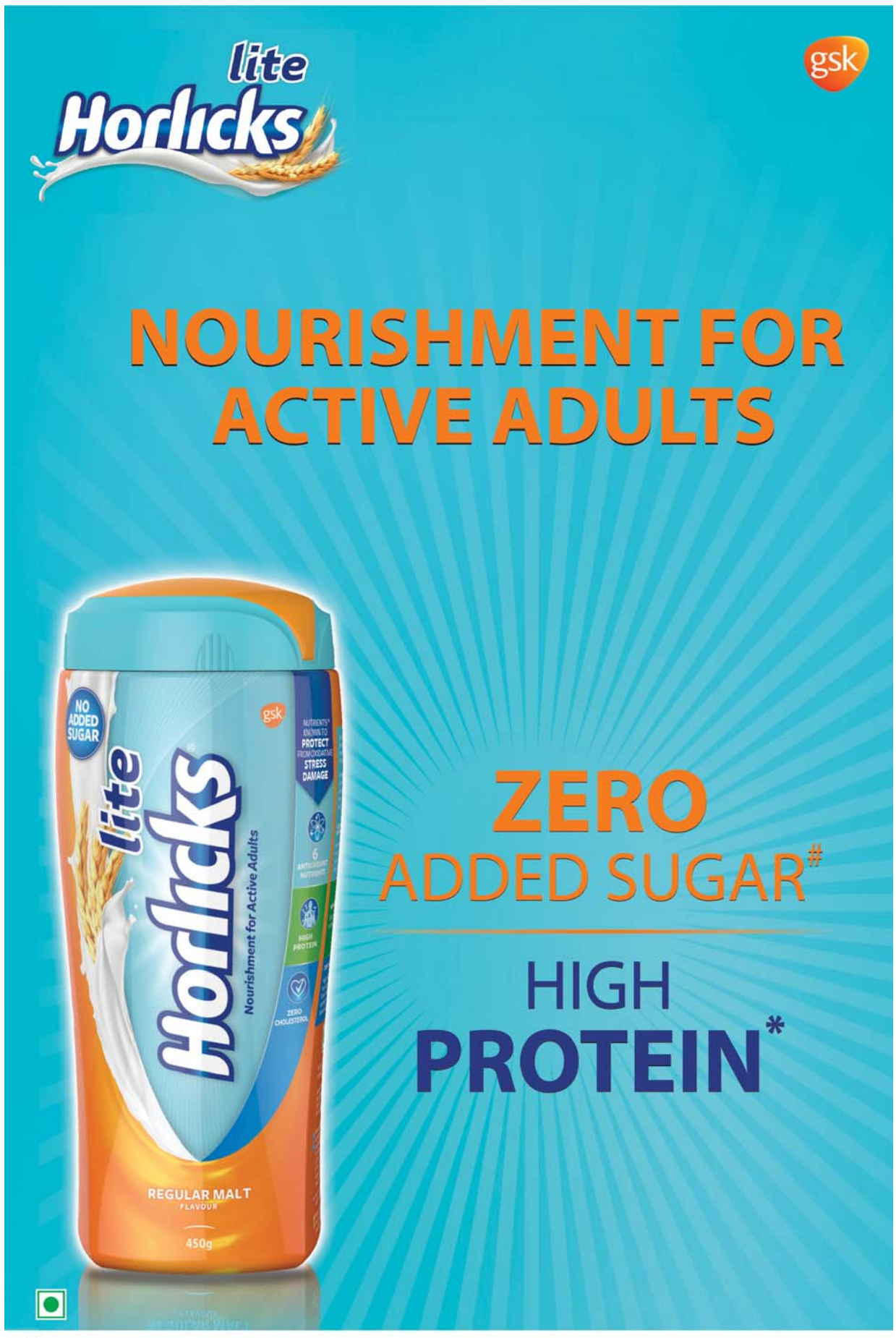
Girendra Kumar Jha is the District Health Officer in Jaleswor, a border town in the eastern Tarai. He says: "I tour the villages to talk about washing hands, and the villagers ridicule me saying first give us water, then come to talk about hygiene."

The diminishing ground water has affected wildlife populations, even inside nature reserves. Most waterholes inside Chitwan National Park that used to have water even in the dry season have been going dry, forcing tigers, rhinos and their prey to migrate. But even that migration is becoming more difficult because forests set aside as wildlife corridors are thinning due to encroachment.

"The jungles of Lothar in Makwanpur used to be famous for rhinos till 20 years ago," explains Shantaraj Gyawali of Hario Ban Nepal, "now you can only find them south of Sauraha in Chitwan because the watering holes have all dried up."

Sunachuri in Makwanpur is a scenic town at the base of the Mahabharat Hills. Chandra Shrestha's family migrated here when he was boy 50 years ago. Back then, he remembers, there were just a few wooden huts. There was thick jungle all the way to the next village of Manahari, 9km away.

Shrestha, now 77, says: "Today, Sunachuri and Manahari have merged into one town. Migration turned into a flood after the East-West Highway was built. And it is getting more crowded."



*Sucrose. #As per Codex Guidlines. Lite Horlicks is a nourishing beverage to be consumed as part of a daily diet. Lite Horlicks contains Acesulfame Potassium. Not recommended for children. Contains artificial sweetner and for calorie conscious.

२०७५ साल भदौ १ गते लागू भएको देवानी तथा फौजदारी संहितामा रहेका मुख्य व्यवस्थाहरु

- अपराध अनुसन्धान तथा अदालती काम कारबाहीमा कुनै व्यक्ति वा साक्षीलाई बुझ्न श्रव्य दृश्य सम्वाद (भिडियो कन्फरेन्स) को प्रयोग गर्न सकिने,
- समाचार पत्र वा विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट म्याद तामेल गर्न सकिने,
- अठार वर्ष उमेर नपुगेको बालबालिकालाई नाबालिग मानिने,
- भुठ्ठा उजुरी दिएमा सजाय हुने तथा क्षतिपूर्ति तिर्नु पर्ने ।

नेपाल सरकार
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



NEPAL WHEREVER YOU ARE.
Times.com

It's a zoo out there

It is befitting for a land where the Lord of the Animals is the patron deity that we have a prime minister who frequently invokes the names of creatures great and small. During the Blockade, the primordial minister alluded to agitators as 'house flies' (*Musca domestica*). He once called those demonstrating outside Singha (*Panthera leo*) Darbar as 'monkeys' (*Macaca mulatta*).

The prime minister calls his home district Super Jhapa because it has a 'tiger' (*Panthera tigris*) economy. And while describing Nepal's unique tourist attractions, he once said ' rhinos' (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) were found nowhere else in the world. Then, last week he urged his party leaders to unleash themselves on dissidents like 'hornets' (*Vespa mandarina*). Yesterday he warned foreigners (*Firanghi khaire*) not to treat Nepalis like guinea pigs (*Cavia porcellus*).

The country's prime minister so often citing the animal kingdom (even though we are now a republic) helps draw attention to Nepal's zoological diversity. In case he is running out of animals that deserve special mention, it is our patriotic duty to offer the following suggestions:

White Elephant
Can be used when describing national pride projects like mammoth (*Mammuthus primigenius*) airports and other edifice complexes that the country cannot afford.

Snake Pit
If there is an accurate zoological simile to describe the venomous reptiles that populate the government, this could be it.



Wild Bore
In an emergency, the prime minister can call on these swines who escaped from the Ministry of Jungles to give speeches from the podium.

Mountain Guerrillas
Endangered simians who still believe in a pheasant revolution are now the prime minister's coalition partners.

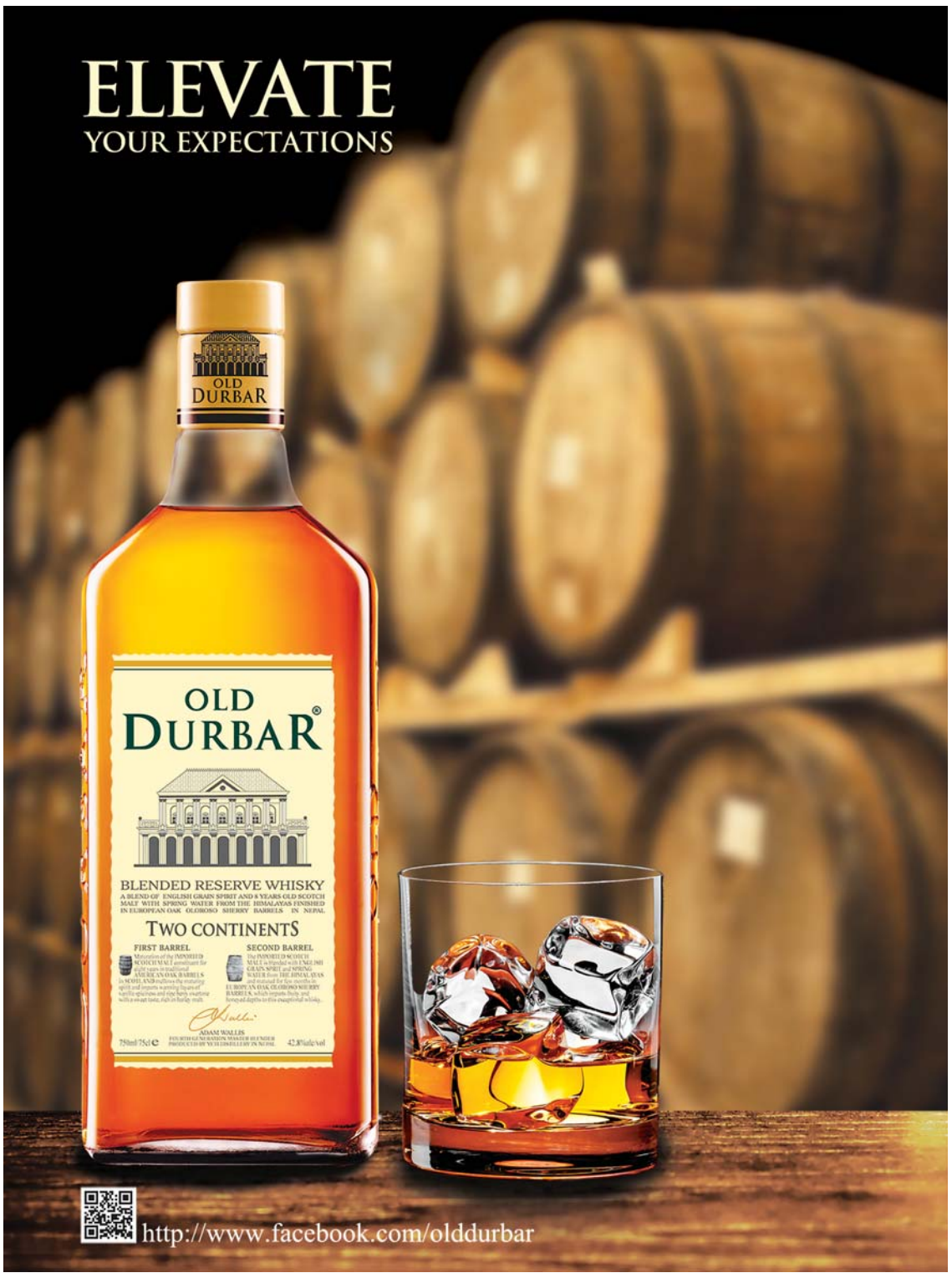
Wolf in Sheep's Clothing
These carnivores can be invoked when describing party apartchiks.

Sloth Bear
Known for lazing around in the fourth estate, these animals are often seen licking the behinds of Wild Bores and scratching each other's backs.



The Ass

The Ass
The donkey (*Equus asinus*) would be more than happy to lend his name for any important purpose in the national interest.







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