Wait and watch

Despite the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question on everyone’s mind is why Nepal has officially had only one infected person so far. According to public-health experts, the answer is that we have not tested enough people yet. Even patients with flu symptoms have been tested away from the Infectious Disease Hospital in Tolu, because test kits are in short supply.

“Because the case load is increasing in India, with which we have an open border, we have to be vigilant, and we need to test more suspected cases,” admits Tolu Hospital chief Anup Bista. His hospital’s single PCR machine can only test 500 patients a week, and after the first positive case, all others have tested negative.

Public-health experts say it will be premature to call Nepal coronavirus-free unless vulnerable groups are all tested, as has been done in South Korea.

“You cannot pronounce Nepal coronavirus-free if you just test 500 people,” says Birendra Demawal of the Nepal Medical Council.

So far this month, the Teaching Hospital in Maharajgunj has admitted just two patients above age 60 with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). But they have not been tested for COVID-19. In the past month, Bir Hospital has recorded the deaths of 22 elderly patients due to various causes, which is about the monthly average this time of year, and some have died in the past two weeks.

In Kaveri’s Dhulikhel Hospital, there have been no deaths from pneumonia of elderly patients in the past month. Four patients above 65 at Grande Hospital suffering from lung infections tested negative for COVID-19, but there have been a few patients who died of acute flu, of which there is an outbreak in India.

“Since there has not been a big jump in fatalities of elderly patients in hospitals, we can conclude that COVID-19 has not yet spread widely,” says Rajendra Kaji of Dhulikhel Hospital. “But you can never be absolutely sure unless you test more people. And the public needs to take precautions.”

The government has restricted movement to stop community transmission, and banned all flights to and from Europe, West Asia, Korea and Japan, including for transit passengers. Flights to Thailand, Singapore, Bhutan, China and India will still operate.

Ramu Sapkota

NEPALIS QUARANTINED IN QATAR

PAGE 12-13

Publisher’s Note

An public weekly is a key link worldwide and within Nepal due to its COVID-19 pandemic. Now it has decided to reduce publication of the print edition of Nepal Times until the situation becomes more normal.

Please join the 20,000 weekly readers to the online edition, and be the part of the most popular digital edition that provides you with the latest and important news 24x7 with all the regular columns, videos and multimedia packages.

Those who will continue to print the weekly times will be delivered to their addresses in a printing house. In addition, PDF files of the pages will be uploaded to the digital weekly.

If you do not want to miss the amazing news from the Nepal Times, email your email address to instructors@qatarnews.com if you are interested in the subscription to our newsletter.

For more details, please visit our website, and we will deliver it to you digitally every Tuesday morning.

NEPAL TIMES

#1002 20 - 26 March 2020 16 pages Rs 50

CLEARANCE SALE

UP TO

40% OFF

ON

PRINCESS & SUE DO DESK

EFFECTIVE FROM


SHOWROOMS

LAMZIKAR: 01 4419308

JAWALAKHEL: 01 5444270

www.indiafurniture.com.np

Local and Italian Roasted Coffee and Home Delivery

whatsapp: 9811032042

Whales: 9811032041

 Divine Wine

CREATE YOUR OWN ENVIRONMENT

Making your home a perfect place to live in

For Trade Inquiry: Ph: 41 484324 | Mob: 9811511111

WATER DISPENSER

www.happycare.com.np | Call: 9811520024

MADHUKAR-XI Like Simple Reliable

Affordable

Thunpa X - Like Simple Reliable

Satellite Mobile Phones

BOOK NOW, PAY LATER

Take advantage of our flexible payment options by booking your next journey online at qatarairways.com and paying for your flight in person within 24 hours of making your reservation.

Simply choose your preferred form of payment and then proceed to make your purchase at our Qatar Airways sales office.

qatarairways.com | Call +974 4440067

Contact our Qatar Airways sales office or your preferred travel agency.

Terms and conditions apply. Please review at the time of booking.
This is a test
DISCOVER MORE: USA

with the airline that flies to more countries than any other
Global thinking and local action on COVID-19

The biggest lesson of COVID-19 is that individuals and nations cannot protect only themselves: we are all in this together.

Globalisation is credited with raising over two billion of the world’s people out of poverty. The money to pay for all the fancy houses, mobile phones and traffic jams in Nepal is directly traceable to the fact that Nepalis can find work all over the world.

But globalisation is a double-edged sword. It is also responsible for growing inequality, supply chains that ignore environmental costs, and an increased worldwide mobility that makes people vulnerable to pandemics. Global challenges require global solutions. COVID-19, the climate emergency, and human trafficking cannot be addressed unless we think and act globally. Unfortunately, the costs and benefits of globalisation are not equitably distributed and hence in times of crisis, the response has been to fall back on nationalism, to point fingers, or to turn our backs on the problem.

With its own COVID-19 pandemic stabilising, Beijing decided to send a team and an aeroplane full of equipment to help out Italy. We need to see more cooperation and support like this, instead of ostracising entire continents as some countries have tried to do.

The virus must be stopped while simultaneously minimising the impact on national and global economies. This is tricky. Any attempt to control the spread of the disease adversely affects the market, which in turn is needed to supply lifesaving drugs, test kits, masks, medical suits, and disinfectants. How do we do one and stop the other? Does the world need two independent systems?

Further, in a globalised world our response to the same pandemic is different in different countries. What worked in China may not work in the UK. The Indian approach seems to be very different from the Trump approach. It would be good to see leaders talking to each other more so that the general public at least gets a coherent message.

When businesses make profits, they give themselves dividends. But when COVID-19 plunges them into the red, governments are supposed to step up and bail them out with money from taxpayers. What percentage of profits and the taxes they pay needs to be diverted to building resilience and a response mechanism by the time the next global crisis hits?

It is not enough to say, “I pay taxes and now it is someone else’s problem.” Corruption, over-dependence on foreign aid and indifference always come around to bite us. Being resilient means having the ability to bounce back quickly to the same state we were when the crisis began. What are the lessons we have learned from the earthquake and Indian blockade in 2015, and now from this pandemic? Right now it does not look like we are capable of learning.

In a globalised world, the media has much more leverage than global agencies do. CNN declared the pandemic before the WHO did. And COVID-19 seems to discriminate between agnese between rich and poor. Global finance agencies and governments suddenly found themselves loosing their purses because the virus did not spare the rich, celebrities or heads of governments and health ministers. These agencies need to do a bit of soul searching as to why diseases that kill the poor cannot be sufficiently funded.

The global marketplace is where competitively produced goods and services are bought and sold. When we face a pandemic, should a country like India be allowed to ban export of life-saving drugs to Nepal? And why is the Nepal government not giving alcohol to health workers who need medical masks and sell them on the black market? How about coming down hard on those hoarding food?

Hand-washing has worked in Nepal for containing typhoid and other infections long before COVID-19 came into existence. The pandemic may actually help make hand-washing a habit.

The world may be globalised, but we need to think locally and keep ourselves safe, as well as ensure the safety of those around us. The biggest lesson of COVID-19 is that individuals and nations cannot protect only themselves, that we are all in this together.

---

Ncell

Ncell launched its ‘Get 100 Days on Pay’ campaign on 1 March. Under this campaign, validity of the Ncell SIM will get a 10% bonus for every minute upon receiving international calls from anywhere in the world. The offer applies for three months.

Everest Bank

As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility, Everest Bank donated a cheque to Feed the Needy Nepal Foundation. To continue to support for the innovative rural education scheme that aims to make rural education accessible and raise the quality of instruction.

NIC Asia

NIC Asia has signed an agreement with Hotelier Nepal’s Regency Hotels and Golok Resort to provide a 15% discount to the hotel’s customers and employees on services provided by the hotel and resort. The discount services are applicable for one year, and NIC Asia’s customers can also get

---

Nepal Investment Bank Limited

Nepal Investment Bank Limited has expanded its network with the inauguration of its 17th extension counter at Dangduli in the Dang District. The bank is yet to open as a full-fledged extension counter to cater to the local demands.

---

Prabhu Bank

Prabhu Bank has expanded its network by opening a new branch with the inauguration of its 17th extension counter at Kalighat in the Chitwan District. The bank is yet to open as a full-fledged extension counter to cater to the local demands.
What is novel about the novel coronavirus?

Everything you want to know about COVID-19 and the threat it poses to Nepal

I

I n 2013, while writing a weekly health column for this paper, I explored the potential for MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome) to spread among Nepalis working with camels in the Gulf states. Despite all the dire predictions of how that coronavirus could be brought back to Nepal and spread in the population, it is still a mystery why there was no MERS outbreak here. Viruses do have their own predilections.

This time, although Nepal has officially had only one person diagnosed with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) who later recovered, it is utterly foolhardy to think that we can escape this pandemic. In Italy, there were only four cases on 20 February, but by those days later that number had soared to 400. This virulence is what is new about this novel coronavirus.

Even if Nepal does not have a surge of cases now, there is every likelihood that we will have to deal with an outbreak next winter. In addition, how COVID-19 will interact with a summer dengue outbreak like that seen last year in Kathmandu is anyone’s guess. It is important to be prepared with preventive aspects.

Masks for the general public are more for self-susceptibility than anything else. People who are coughing and have symptoms should wear masks. But widespread use of masks for the general public may only deplete the limited supply of masks where they are actually needed in hospitals. The most important prevention is washing hands properly with soap and water five to six times per day and avoiding touching the face. Keeping a reasonable distance from one another is also important. The elderly need to be especially careful.

One of the most crucial helpful decisions that the Chinese government took in December 2019 after the novel coronavirus struck Wuhan was to quickly share the molecular structure of the virus (its genomic sequence) with the world. This made it possible for drug manufacturing companies like Moderna, a biotechnology company based in the US, to start working on a vaccine. The first human trial against COVID-19 will start later this month. This is incredibly fast because in earlier times, it would take at least six years before a vaccine was developed. Although an effective vaccine is the best defence against COVID-19, what can be done for prevention in Nepal here and now is more important.

First, the good news. It is now well known that about 80% of COVID-19 victims will have mild symptoms not requiring hospital admission. Of the rest, 15% will be severe and 5% may be critical, possibly requiring ventilators in an intensive care unit. Even if only 0.5% of patients from South Asia’s population of 1.8 billion suffer a fatality, it is easy to imagine the tragic scale of this potential emergency.

The Wuhan data from Chinese doctors also revealed that it was the elderly (mostly male) that took the brunt of the disease and that children were not symptomatic, even though they may be infected by the virus. The Indian case also showed that about 1% of patients who suffer from COVID-19 die. That is the stark difference between COVID-19 and other causes of influenza where the death rate is only 0.1%. That is, COVID-19 kills ten times more people, and they are mostly above 60 years of age. Although 1% may sound small, actual numbers will be numbing when large populations are infected.

Besides vaccines, there are also drug studies going on to fight COVID-19. One such medicine is called Kaletra, commonly used for HIV patients. Many other drug trials (including the antimalarial drug chloroquine) are underway.

The incubation period (the time from infection to symptoms) was also studied in Wuhan and forms the basis of the quarantine period of 14 days. The average period is five days but incubation may continue for up to 12 days. To be on the safe side, a two-week quarantine is recommended, after which it is unlikely that symptoms will manifest.

Unlike some western countries, China, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea practiced widespread contact-tracing to control the disease. If someone was diagnosed with COVID-19, health professionals took a detailed history of who they contact (including family and friends) were, and followed up to see if they developed symptoms. Contact tracing helped stem the spread of the disease in these countries.

Contact tracing is supposed to be the cornerstone in the control of tuberculosis (TB, which is rampant in Nepal). TB, like COVID-19, is also spread by respiratory secretions. But, unfortunately, contact tracing followed by and TB treatment where necessary is seldom implemented in the control of tuberculosis in our part of the world. If we had implemented it, Nepal would be in a much better position to inhibit the spread of COVID-19 and its effect.

Finally, on a philosophical note, COVID-19 may have a spiritual lesson regarding embracing uncertainty in our lives after we have done our best. Even God, the Kabinda notes, said “I hope it works” before he pressed the button to create world.

Buddha Basnyat is a clinical researcher at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences, Patan Hospital.

Ncell
Nepali students abroad in

As universities close due to COVID-19, students from Nepal face uncertainty about their future

Sanghamitra Subba

When Pradhyot Pandey took a semester off from his second year of undergraduate studies at Asia Pacific University (APU) in Japan in August 2019 to come to Nepal for an internship, he had planned to return to campus in late March. But as the COVID-19 pandemic exploded across the globe and Japan became one of the first countries outside of China to have multiple confirmed cases of the virus, Pandey has been unable to return to APU or receive clarity from the university about what to expect.

“I was in the process of having my visa renewed when the virus spread in Japan,” Pandey told Nepal Times in Kathmandu. “Both the immigration department in Japan and the university have halted the process and I am not sure when it will be approved.”

Pandey is in Nepal but other Nepal students are stranded abroad. Asked to return home, they face uncertainty regarding their academic futures. If they cannot return to Nepal, they also have difficulty finding accommodations.

But after Friday night, Nepal students will find it difficult even to return home, as the government has banned all travel from the EU and West Asia to the west and Malaysia, South Korea and Japan in the east, including passengers transiting in those countries. This means that effective midnight 29 March, all flights to Kathmandu will be cancelled except those from Singapore, Thailand and Nepal’s two neighbours India and China.

Subana Ranjita, a Chevening Scholar at the University of Essex in the UK, was not able to come home to Nepal due to a clause in her scholarship that prevents her from leaving Britain for more than one month.

“I was panicking watching the whole situation unfold. At times like this when anyone is vulnerable, you want to be in your own country, in the comfort of your own home,” says Ranjita. “Even though the university is communicating with its students, it is difficult when we cannot get any substantial assistance from them at a time like this.”

Ranjita is thankful that she receives a monthly stipend through her scholarship so many of her peers are on loans and work service jobs to pay their university fees.

Across the Atlantic in the United States, a national emergency has been declared and students of many nationalities have packed their bags and headed home. But some Nepalis cannot afford the ticket home, and also find rent expensive outside of their campuses, which are now closed.

Not everyone is as lucky as Ishan Mainali, a junior at Hamilton College in New York, who was able to return to Nepal immediately as the university paid for his ticket and allowed him to keep his belongings on campus.

“I am lucky that my college provided the assistance that they did at this time,” says Mainali. “I know that others are in more difficult situations so I do feel blessed.”

A Facebook post from Mainali’s trip in which he shares his observations of Nepali migrant workers coming in from Qatar without health inspections has been widely circulated on social media. Like most of the Nepali students who recently flew in, Mainali is self-isolating himself for two weeks.

Ang Sona Sherpa, a first-year undergraduate student at Harvard University in Massachusetts, also received support from his university’s administration even though their response was delayed.

“I frantically thought sending everyone home was the best course of action that the university could have taken in this...
pandemic limbo

A Florentine quarantine

A Nepali student in Italy shares what life is like under lockdown

Aaltura Lama was set to graduate from high school in 2015 when the earthquake hit Nepal. Now, exactly five years later, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused her college in Florence to shut down as Italy has entered complete lockdown.

“I’ve accepted the fact that I’m not destined for a cap-and-gown ceremony. My friends in Italy were fervently planning a very Italian graduation for me, laurel wreath, crown and everything,” an erstwhile student Lama told Nepali Times over email. “I don’t think graduation and I mix very well.”

When the Italian government announced a country-wide quarantine, Lama along with most residents did not have much time to react. She could not decide whether to stay or to go back home to Nepal.

“I am quite ashamed that I took the situation so lightly in the beginning and brushed it off as a simple flu,” Lama adds. “It was shocking to see how everything happened so quickly.”

Luckily, most classes are online so Lama’s studies are not badly affected. But her job as a part-time bartender is suspended since all bars and restaurants in Italy have been ordered closed.

Under lockdown, Lama felt restless at first. But now that more than a week has passed, she is getting into the schedule of doing freelance work, devoting time to her art, planning photo shoots, checking up on books and TV shows and practicing her Spanish and Italian.

In the evenings, Lama joins her neighbors as they play music and sing from their balconies. The roar of the silence has amazed the Nepali student, who says it has boosted her morale during a very trying time. She too blasted ‘Nessun Dorma’ by Pavarotti and ‘Libiamo ne’isti calici’ from the Italian opera ‘La Traviata’ from her window one evening this week.

Lama says it is a shock to see the streets of this historic town, usually bustling with people, so empty as they are. As someone who has lived in the city for four years she says Florence isn’t the same without the tourists throngs.

She adds: “But as we’re staying here, tuti andhi bane, and I truly believe it.”

Sangeetha Subba

NEHTA RAJHANDARI

A Florentine quarantine

A Nepali student in Italy shares what life is like under lockdown

Aaltura Lama was set to graduate from high school in 2015 when the earthquake hit Nepal. Now, exactly five years later, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused her college in Florence to shut down as Italy has entered complete lockdown.

“I’ve accepted the fact that I’m not destined for a cap-and-gown ceremony. My friends in Italy were fervently planning a very Italian graduation for me, laurel wreath, crown and everything,” an erstwhile student Lama told Nepali Times over email. “I don’t think graduation and I mix very well.”

When the Italian government announced a country-wide quarantine, Lama along with most residents did not have much time to react. She could not decide whether to stay or to go back home to Nepal.

“I am quite ashamed that I took the situation so lightly in the beginning and brushed it off as a simple flu,” Lama adds. “It was shocking to see how everything happened so quickly.”

Luckily, most classes are online so Lama’s studies are not badly affected. But her job as a part-time bartender is suspended since all bars and restaurants in Italy have been ordered closed.

Under lockdown, Lama felt restless at first. But now that more than a week has passed, she is getting into the schedule of doing freelance work, devoting time to her art, planning photo shoots, checking up on books and TV shows and practicing her Spanish and Italian.

In the evenings, Lama joins her neighbors as they play music and sing from their balconies. The roar of the silence has amazed the Nepali student, who says it has boosted her morale during a very trying time. She too blasted ‘Nessun Dorma’ by Pavarotti and ‘Libiamo ne’isti calici’ from the Italian opera ‘La Traviata’ from her window one evening this week.

Lama says it is a shock to see the streets of this historic town, usually bustling with people, so empty as they are. As someone who has lived in the city for four years she says Florence isn’t the same without the tourists throngs.

She adds: “But as we’re staying here, tuti andhi bane, and I truly believe it.”

Sangeetha Subba

NEHTA RAJHANDARI

A Florentine quarantine

A Nepali student in Italy shares what life is like under lockdown

Aaltura Lama was set to graduate from high school in 2015 when the earthquake hit Nepal. Now, exactly five years later, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused her college in Florence to shut down as Italy has entered complete lockdown.

“I’ve accepted the fact that I’m not destined for a cap-and-gown ceremony. My friends in Italy were fervently planning a very Italian graduation for me, laurel wreath, crown and everything,” an erstwhile student Lama told Nepali Times over email. “I don’t think graduation and I mix very well.”

When the Italian government announced a country-wide quarantine, Lama along with most residents did not have much time to react. She could not decide whether to stay or to go back home to Nepal.

“I am quite ashamed that I took the situation so lightly in the beginning and brushed it off as a simple flu,” Lama adds. “It was shocking to see how everything happened so quickly.”

Luckily, most classes are online so Lama’s studies are not badly affected. But her job as a part-time bartender is suspended since all bars and restaurants in Italy have been ordered closed.

Under lockdown, Lama felt restless at first. But now that more than a week has passed, she is getting into the schedule of doing freelance work, devoting time to her art, planning photo shoots, checking up on books and TV shows and practicing her Spanish and Italian.

In the evenings, Lama joins her neighbors as they play music and sing from their balconies. The roar of the silence has amazed the Nepali student, who says it has boosted her morale during a very trying time. She too blasted ‘Nessun Dorma’ by Pavarotti and ‘Libiamo ne’isti calici’ from the Italian opera ‘La Traviata’ from her window one evening this week.

Lama says it is a shock to see the streets of this historic town, usually bustling with people, so empty as they are. As someone who has lived in the city for four years she says Florence isn’t the same without the tourists throngs.

She adds: “But as we’re staying here, tuti andhi bane, and I truly believe it.”

Sangeetha Subba

NEHTA RAJHANDARI

A Florentine quarantine

A Nepali student in Italy shares what life is like under lockdown

Aaltura Lama was set to graduate from high school in 2015 when the earthquake hit Nepal. Now, exactly five years later, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused her college in Florence to shut down as Italy has entered complete lockdown.

“I’ve accepted the fact that I’m not destined for a cap-and-gown ceremony. My friends in Italy were fervently planning a very Italian graduation for me, laurel wreath, crown and everything,” an erstwhile student Lama told Nepali Times over email. “I don’t think graduation and I mix very well.”

When the Italian government announced a country-wide quarantine, Lama along with most residents did not have much time to react. She could not decide whether to stay or to go back home to Nepal.

“I am quite ashamed that I took the situation so lightly in the beginning and brushed it off as a simple flu,” Lama adds. “It was shocking to see how everything happened so quickly.”

Luckily, most classes are online so Lama’s studies are not badly affected. But her job as a part-time bartender is suspended since all bars and restaurants in Italy have been ordered closed.

Under lockdown, Lama felt restless at first. But now that more than a week has passed, she is getting into the schedule of doing freelance work, devoting time to her art, planning photo shoots, checking up on books and TV shows and practicing her Spanish and Italian.

In the evenings, Lama joins her neighbors as they play music and sing from their balconies. The roar of the silence has amazed the Nepali student, who says it has boosted her morale during a very trying time. She too blasted ‘Nessun Dorma’ by Pavarotti and ‘Libiamo ne’isti calici’ from the Italian opera ‘La Traviata’ from her window one evening this week.

Lama says it is a shock to see the streets of this historic town, usually bustling with people, so empty as they are. As someone who has lived in the city for four years she says Florence isn’t the same without the tourists throngs.

She adds: “But as we’re staying here, tuti andhi bane, and I truly believe it.”

Sangeetha Subba

NEHTA RAJHANDARI

A Florentine quarantine

A Nepali student in Italy shares what life is like under lockdown

Aaltura Lama was set to graduate from high school in 2015 when the earthquake hit Nepal. Now, exactly five years later, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused her college in Florence to shut down as Italy has entered complete lockdown.

“I’ve accepted the fact that I’m not destined for a cap-and-gown ceremony. My friends in Italy were fervently planning a very Italian graduation for me, laurel wreath, crown and everything,” an erstwhile student Lama told Nepali Times over email. “I don’t think graduation and I mix very well.”

When the Italian government announced a country-wide quarantine, Lama along with most residents did not have much time to react. She could not decide whether to stay or to go back home to Nepal.

“I am quite ashamed that I took the situation so lightly in the beginning and brushed it off as a simple flu,” Lama adds. “It was shocking to see how everything happened so quickly.”

Luckily, most classes are online so Lama’s studies are not badly affected. But her job as a part-time bartender is suspended since all bars and restaurants in Italy have been ordered closed.

Under lockdown, Lama felt restless at first. But now that more than a week has passed, she is getting into the schedule of doing freelance work, devoting time to her art, planning photo shoots, checking up on books and TV shows and practicing her Spanish and Italian.

In the evenings, Lama joins her neighbors as they play music and sing from their balconies. The roar of the silence has amazed the Nepali student, who says it has boosted her morale during a very trying time. She too blasted ‘Nessun Dorma’ by Pavarotti and ‘Libiamo ne’isti calici’ from the Italian opera ‘La Traviata’ from her window one evening this week.

Lama says it is a shock to see the streets of this historic town, usually bustling with people, so empty as they are. As someone who has lived in the city for four years she says Florence isn’t the same without the tourists throngs.

She adds: “But as we’re staying here, tuti andhi bane, and I truly believe it.”

Sangeetha Subba

NEHTA RAJHANDARI
It’s yarsa

A holy valley in eastern Nepal

mid-July can account for between 65% and 70% of a picker’s annual income. But the profits can be both a blessing and a curse.

The additional income helps pay for food, education and support for aging parents, and donations to local monasteries. But the harvest season also brings an influx of tens of thousands of people each spring to Nepal’s fragile alpine ecosystem in a stampede that looks like a gold rush.

Whole hillside of slow-growing juniper are cut each year for fuel in Dolpo and Tibet, and there has been an increase in wildlife poaching, litter and garbage, and free-range deforestation. There has also been an increase in alcohol and drug consumption, conspicuous consumption, the loss of traditional cultural values, violence, and even occasional murders.

But here in the Barun Valley the impact of the yarsa season is more benign due to closer engagement of the local community. The Barun is a bayal, a sacred valley blessed by Guru Rinpoche in the 8th century as a refuge for the faithful in times of stress. The landscape is dominated by the spectacular rock face of Shiva Danda, where three caves look like the eyes and nose of Lord Shiva. Each summer, pilgrims undertake the difficult and dangerous rock climb to the caves. There is also a peninsula of the holy glacial lake near Mt Makalu base camp. The main difference between

YARSA-NOMICS

Yarsa gumba has been used by the Chinese for hundreds of years to treat a variety of illnesses, and its more recent reputation as an aphrodisiac has added greatly to its marketability. Western Chinese also use it in soups and tea as a status symbol when serving favored guests.

Yarsa gumba, translated from the Tibetan as ‘summer grass winter worm’, carries the scientific name Ophiocordyceps suminica. It is one of the most valuable medicinal fungi in the world and grows in Himalayan valleys above 4,000m from western India to Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan.

There are more than 200 species of Cordyceps (short for Ophiocordyceps) fungus worldwide, and in Nepal they parasitize the bodies of greenish-brown larvae that live on the roots of alpine wildflowers found high up in summer yaks pastures.

Once contact with the larva is made, the fungus remains dormant for about four years, after which it begins to slowly consume the larva’s innards, leaving behind a shell that looks like a mummified caterpillar. The little mummy larva then slowly shifts its body to point upward toward the surface, after which a black ‘stromata’ grows from its forehead and emerges as a fruitful body 6cm long. It takes sharp eyes to find these pointed, black, spine-like mushrooms, and young children, with their keen eyesight and low proximity to the ground, are by far the most successful collectors.

The stromata is ever-so-carefully pulled upward using forefinger and thumb to reveal the entire yarsa gumba body, which is then cleaned, dried, and stored in cloth bags.

According to anthropologist Geoff Childs, the introduction of yarsa gumba harvesting since legalised by the Nepali
-picking time
prepares for the yarsa gumba harvesting season

The yarsa harvesting season in the Barun and in western Nepal is unique. While much of the yarsa in Dolpo are on rolling high-altitude meadows, in the Barun the fungus grows upon precipitous slopes where thousands of metres to the valley below.

Conversations with Makalu Barun National Park officials, lodge owners, yarsa middlemen and harvesters showed that there are about 3,000 people who come to collect the fungus every spring. Unlike in other regions in Nepal, they do not leave behind much trash, carry in their own foodstuffs, and can't remember any violence.

Sherpa families from Tashigong have been camping and harvesting yarsa for years. Young men from Sedoš get up at 5 a.m. in tents in the valley and hike up 1,500 to the meadows each morning to pick yarsa. The harvest is an important source of income.

The main reason for the peaceful, non-competitive atmosphere is that the value and quality of yarsa in the Makalu Barun region is not as high as that from Tibet or Dolpo. In 2018, a kilogram of Makalu yarsa fetched only $4,800 from the local middleman, as compared to $13,100 for the famously large, yellowish, and pungent smelling Dolpo yarsa.

Furthermore, instead of representing up to 90% of a family’s income as it does in Dolpo, yarsa harvests here yield the same income as yogurt, mixing livestock, lodge management or work at Makalu Base Camp that paid $20 per day. With the collapse of trekking this season, however, there could be more pressure.

In the Barun Valley, yarsa has been just one more source of income in an already diversified economy. Income from yarsa has just been worth fighting over. More importantly, villagers, the Buffer Zone Council, and the local government have developed a system to manage yarsa that is fair and equitable.

As a result, the stunningly beautiful but fragile Barun Valley ecosystem remains largely undisturbed and intact.

Yarsa gumba merchandise

Products containing yarsa gumba extracts have become increasingly popular due to the fungus’ purported health benefits. Yarsa is known by some as the 'Himalayan Viagra', and many commercial products that make use of it emphasise anti-aging and libido-inducing qualities. In China yarsa is even added to whiskey and cigarettes.

Yu Chun Mei Greaves is a China-made skin cream (above, left) that claims to fight skin-aging and eliminate wrinkles, black spots and pigments. The day-and-night cream claims to be made from 100% natural ingredients and is sold in various countries in Asia.

Probable the most widely found product to use yarsa gumba extract is tea made from the fungus, of which the varieties are many (above, right). Manufacturers of the tea claim that it treats fatigue, sickness, kidney diseases and low sex drive.

Some bars in Kathmandu serve tea infused with yarsa gumba, which gives the spirit a tangy aroma that competes with the smell of the alcohol. A manufacturer in Nepal even markets yarsa gumba capsules as a ‘health supplement’.

Government in 2001 has contributed to social economic and environmental transformations across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan region...then any development scheme could envision.

Alison C. Byers, PhD is a mountain geographer at the Institute for Arctic and Alpine Research, (INSTAAR) University of Colorado at Boulder. In the mid-1990s, she worked as a ranger in the newly formed Makalu-Barun National Park. Her recent paper on yarsa gumba harvesting in the Barun Valley is published in the journal Vegetation (v. 38, number 2).

A small group of fungi in a cluster at left. Yarsa gumba eggling being collected by yarsa hunters.
SELF-ISOLATION

Watch movies, listen to interesting podcasts, and catch up on your reading while you stay home.

Suggested books to read:

**The Anarchist**
William Burroughs' take on the history of the East India Company and how it became a ruthless administrator of a colonial empire that built British power across South Asia.

At 125, Aligars Book House, Thamel
(01) 4271540

**Unlocking the Vajra**
Susan Shiva’s second book explores how Nepal can take advantage of its location between India and China as they are set to become the world’s leading economies by 2020.

At 860, Aligars Book House, Thamel
(01) 4271540

**Kumar Prashnahanu**
Durga Khan’s debut anthropology novel offers 13 stark stories in Nepali.

At 865, Patan Bask Book Shop, Patan Durbar
(01) 595306

Movies you may have missed:

**The Sixth Sense**
Mia’s (Huntington) story of a psychic, helps a young boy (also played by Huntingdon), who acts as a medium of communication between the living and the dead. Starred Bruce Willis. 20 March 17:45pm, Ovation

**Saving Private Ryan**
During the Normandy invasion of World War II, Capt. Miller (Tom Hanks) is assigned with finding Private Ryan, James Ryan, whose three brothers have already been killed in the war. Starred Tom Hanks.

27 March, 8:00pm, Asia

**Monsters Inc.**
In this animated film, the lives of best friends Sulley and Mike, scare company at Monsters, Inc. are disrupted when a human girl enters their world. You’d wish you have loved this movie.

25 March, 2:25pm, Asia

Suggested Podcast:

**Boju Bajai**
Listen to Bharat C. Rai and his talk about everything from weddings to social media to the most pressing social issues in Nepal. Find Boju Bajai on SoundCloud.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

There is plenty of fun to be had away from large groups of people. Take up gardening or go for hikes in the hills.

**Nagarjun Hill**
Hike the forested Nagarjun hill from Balaju. Take in spectacular views of the Ganehi Hill mountains and Kathmandu Valley. Balaju to Nagarjun, 4km.

**Climb Phulchoki**
Take the Phulchoki trail to the 7,280ft summit for an astounding panoramic view of Kathmandu Valley below. Phulchoki is also a butterfly sanctuary.

Godown to Phulchoki, 10km.

**Walk to Pashupati**
Early morning, and evenings, are the best time to take a walk to Pashupati from anywhere in the city. Get exercise, earn karma points.

**Bird Watching**
Whether you are an amateur or seasoned birder, take comfort in watching birds in the great bird-watching forests on the rim of the valley. Phulchoki and the Shrawasti-Nagarjun National Park are perfect. Just grab your binoculars and go.

**Hike to Kakani**
Take a hike through forests to Kakani. Stop for lunch at picnic spots along the way. Be careful not to miss Kathmandu to Kakani, 20km.

CONTAINMENT

Maintain your physical and mental health by sticking to your daily self-care routine or taking up new pastimes.

**Yoga**
Roll out your yoga mats at home, and stay home and relaxed. Beginners, do not be deterred by the novice imitations or complicated advanced poses and start with something simple. You can find some helpful tutorials online.

**Work out**
Can’t go to the gym? Improvise and work out at home. If you’re thinking of starting a new exercise regimen, take help from videos on YouTube.

**Gardening**
Take advantage of the arrival of spring by planting flowers in your garden. Or buy some pots in your room and bring the garden inside.

**Take up knitting**
Now that you have lots of free time, why not try your hand at knitting? Maybe you can make a scarf or two to stay cozy next winter.

**Meditate**
Relax your mind and body by finding a comfortable quiet place within your house, sitting yourself down, and meditating. There is no success if failure here and every attempt is a victory.

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

KIRPA JOSHI

Our world is connected. The melting of polar ice caps flood lands, and coastal cities at other places on the globe. Deforestation and fires in the Amazon rainforest impact the water cycle and the oxygen supply of the entire planet. The whole world is thinking as one right now, trying to contain the virus. We should remain united in solving our shared environmental crisis.

Our Pick

Birded in 2001, Contagion is American action thriller directed by Steven Soderbergh. With a COVID-19 theme, it echoes in global pandemics, the fear of panic, and the invisible, and the role that technology plays in this pandemic’s spread. The ensemble cast includes Matt Damon, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Laurence Fishburne, and Kate Winslet.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 13 - 19 March

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

KIRPA JOSHI

Our world is connected. The melting of polar ice caps flood lands, and coastal cities at other places on the globe. Deforestation and fires in the Amazon rainforest impact the water cycle and the oxygen supply of the entire planet. The whole world is thinking as one right now, trying to contain the virus. We should remain united in solving our shared environmental crisis.

Our Pick

Birded in 2001, Contagion is American action thriller directed by Steven Soderbergh. With a COVID-19 theme, it echoes in global pandemics, the fear of panic, and the invisible, and the role that technology plays in this pandemic’s spread. The ensemble cast includes Matt Damon, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Laurence Fishburne, and Kate Winslet.
As a child, Pragati Rai was called ‘tough’ because she never had her way, always worked hard, and was the first girl to learn to read and write. She was later nicknamed ‘Prachy’ because she was a born writer. Her mother, Lekhakri Swami, was a beloved poet and teacher. Pragati knew that writing was her calling from a very young age.

Last year, she published her second novel, 'Bride of Jyotiba'. She is currently working on a third book titled 'Lightroom Conversation'. This book is a collection of her thoughts and compositions about her life as a writer. Pragati is very excited about the book and is looking forward to its release.

The book will cover various aspects of her life as a writer, including her struggles, successes, and personal experiences. She hopes that it will inspire other aspiring writers to pursue their passion and never give up on their dreams.

In conclusion, Pragati’s life has been full of ups and downs, but she has always persevered and remained true to her craft. Her passion for writing has never wavered, and she continues to inspire others with her stories and words. She is an incredible writer and a true testament to the power of words.

If you are interested in learning more about Pragati and her work, please visit her website or follow her on social media. You can also purchase her books on Amazon or at local bookstores. Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed this glimpse into the life of a truly remarkable writer.
Nepalis quarantined

The impact of COVID-19 goes far beyond just labour migration

Upasana Khadka

Qatar is the most popular overseas destination for Nepali workers, and because of this, the Gulf state’s strict measures to stop the spread of coronavirus has had a direct impact on Nepal’s economy.

On 9 March, Qatar banned the entry of nationals from 14 countries including Nepal, and at least 2,000 Nepali workers in the country have been quarantined. The restriction has also affected Nepal’s economic activities beyond labour migration.

Kajyan Ghimire’s company Al Saman used to export three consignments of agricultural produce by air to Doha every week, but that business has ground to a halt since the ban on passengers and cargo.

“We had just received an order for 5,000 kg of strawberries from Qatar, and had secured them from a farm in Kakani, but the order was cancelled,” Ghimire says. The company also exported vegetables and even gundruk, which is in high demand from Nepalis in the Gulf state.

Ghimire had also just started exporting Nepali bottled water from Rasuwa to Qatar, and sent 480 specially packaged bottles for test marketing in Doha to compete with Russian and other brands. However, the COVID-19 scare has put an end to that experiment as well.

Ghimire was part of a 40-member team of government officials, entrepreneurs and farmers set to take part in the AgroExpo 2020 trade fair in Doha on 18-22 March, but the fair has been called off.

“Such ups and downs are to be expected in any business, and I try not to lose sleep over this as it is beyond my control, but let’s hope we can resume exports,” says Ghimire, who credits Qatar’s ambassador to Nepal Yourself Bin Mohamed for getting Nepali exporters to diversify their product range.

Only Qatar Airways still flies the Kathmandu-Doha route after Nepal Airlines and Himalaya Airlines both suspended operations between the two capitals given the travel ban. Qatar airways is still carrying transit passengers via Doha to and from Kathmandu and Europe/North America.

Ghimire’s son Saman, who is based in Qatar and manages the business there, returned to Nepal.

Aspire 5

Exceptional Performance

Latest Intel 10th Gen Processor
Available on Aspire 5

MERCANTILE

Mercantile Office Systems Pvt. Ltd.
Hitt Pokhara, Durbar Marg, Kathmandu.
Phone No.: 977-1-444 0772, 444 9220

For Genuine Product
Check Mercantile Sticker
Malaysia movement control

Travel of migrant workers, tourists and business traits between Malaysia and Nepal has ground to a halt after the Malaysian government announced a nationwide movement control order from 18 to 31 March and Nepal banned all flights between Kathmandu and Kuala Lumpur from the night of 20 March. This was in response to a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, of which two thirds were linked to a religious gathering. The number of cases has now reached 473, but the nationalities of the infected have not been revealed.

“We used to handle up to 300 tour packages to Malaysia from India, Philippines and Nepal. Everyone has cancelled and there are no new bookings. How will I pay staff salary and rent?” asks Raju Sharma, a Malaysia-based Nepali tour operator.

The Kota aya neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur (right) that used to be crammed with migrant workers has now become like a ghost town, Sharma said over the phone. There are at least 20 Nepali restaurants in Kota aya, which have now switched to home delivery.

Despite disruptions, Malaysia is a popular destination for Nepali workers and the country hosts 380,000 documented Nepalis – the second highest migrant population there after Indonesians. Most have jobs in manufacturing, which has also been hit by disruptions to the global supply chain.

The Nepal-Malaysia migrant corridor was starting to recover from a ban imposed as the Nepali government tried to reduce the number of workers to pay to. The ban was lifted over a year in September 2019, and there was optimism about the future, which has now been dashed by the pandemic.

A bilateral agreement stressing equality of treatment – that Nepali workers should enjoy the same benefits as locals in Malaysia – do in their terms of employment. In a way, the COVID-19 outbreak levelled the playing field since visa does not distinguish between locals and foreigners. Attempts to contain the virus have not distinguished between nationalities.

Migrant workers are, however, more vulnerable because of their cramped living quarters, the nature of their work and unequal access to health care. As a part of its COVID-19 rescue package, the Malaysian government has guaranteed RM600 ($135) for workers without pay for a maximum of six months, but it is not clear if this will apply to foreign workers impacted by COVID-19.

Nepali workers at the glove-manufacturing company WPF had been similarly out of work for a month after the US banned imports of the gloves for human rights violations last year, but had still received a basic salary.

One Nepali worker at WPF told us by phone: “I am not certain about the future. For now, I will stay in my house for the next two weeks and have been told that I will get paid a basic salary.”

But WPF is a big employer, and other migrant workers may not be so lucky. Workers at hotels and airlines have been forced to take unpaid leave. Not all Nepali workers will be staying home in isolation during the lockdowns. As the only foreign workers allowed to work as security guards in Malaysia, thousands of them are expected to continue working long hours.

“We have made sure that guards have masks and hand sanitisers,” says Santosh Karki, who works in the security business, “but uncertainty about how long we will be able to supply those necessities is worrying.”

Nepali workers overseas have benefited from the health infrastructure of destination countries during this crisis, but as economies tumble, it is likely that many will experience mental stress, job losses and unpaid salaries when they return.

Nepali workers will also be returning to much more rudimentary health surveillance and medical care back home. The Foreign Employment Welfare Fund, which was designed for just such an emergency as the COVID-19 fallout.

Upasana Khadka
Rebuilding five years after

A new Disaster Management Authority has taken over to prepare for the next big earthquake

Alisha Sijapati

On 15 March, a magnitude 7 earthquake struck Lamjung near Pokhara. The National Seismological Centre said this was not an aftershock of the 2013 earthquake, but a main shock. Although the tremor was largely unnoticed elsewhere in Nepal, for seismologists it was a grim reminder of tectonic forces beneath western Nepal that are on a hair trigger.

There is no accurate way of predicting an earthquake, but scientists can determine the ‘seismic gap’ in a region where a megaseismic has not taken place for some time, and determine the probability of it happening.

For instance, western Nepal has not experienced an earthquake of more than 8 on the Richter scale since 1255, an event that created the debris field from a cataclysmic flood on which the city of Pokhara now stands, and killed one third of the population of Kathmandu Valley including King Abhaya Mall. Seismologists say another major earthquake in the region between Pokhara and Dadeldhura is long overdue.

“There has been no major earthquake in western Nepal for 600 years. There is a lot of stress accumulation and the energy will have to be released at some point,” warns Bhuwan Narayan Shrestha of the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET). The far west of Nepal, and indeed the whole country, is ill-equipped to handle another earthquake, and especially a disaster on such a massive scale. But preparing for it will be the responsibility of the newly-formed National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) set up after the 2013 earthquake.

The NRA has got mixed reviews for its reconstruction work in the 14 districts in Central Nepal that were affected by the 2015 disaster. Critics say it bungled the disbursement of the Rs 300,000 reconstruction grant through conflicting criteria, and that houses built with the compensation money did not meet acceptable standards.

But NRA’s defenders say the agency was a victim of political wrangling, especially given the government change following the start of the Indian blockade in late 2015. The agency got Rs 1 billion, etc.
Disaster Management Authority tackles its first disaster: COVID-19

The National Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Authority (DMMA) was formed in January 2020 to deal with floods and earthquakes. But it was immediately plunged headlong into a disaster no one could have predicted: the coronavirus pandemic.

Though it is under-staffed and not yet fully functional – its office too as yet only half furnished – the DMMA has been thrown off the deep end as it works to create an emergency response plan involving various agencies of the government.

“Currently, we are working on scenario-based planning, and our role is to coordinate with other departments and assist them with an emergency response,” says Anil Pokhrel, CEO of the Authority.

The DMMA has been getting advice and other assistance from the World Health Organization (WHO) to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. After not taking the epidemic seriously at first, the high-level committee chaired by Defence Minister Ishwor Pokhrel this week banned all air travel from Europe and West Asia to Nepal, postponed the high school exams, and banned gatherings of more than 25 people.

Pokhrel: “It is good news that in Nepal the virus still has not caused great turmoil and because of that we have had time to learn the do’s and don’ts by looking at other countries. I think we are now ready to fight the virus.”