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MONIKA DEUPALA

## Wait and watch

Despite global the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question on everyone's minds 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 turned away from the Infectious Disease Hospital in Teku, 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 Teku Hospital chief Anup Bastola. 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 by just testing 500 people," says Biswa Dawadi of the Nepal Medical Council.

So far this month, the Teaching Hospital in Maharjanj 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 none have died in the past two weeks.

In Kavre'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 swine 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 Koju 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

As public mobility is curtailed worldwide and within Nepal due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Himalmedia has decided to cease publication of the print edition of *Nepali Times* until the situation becomes more normal.

Please join the 120,000 weekly visitors to the online edition from all over the world on [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com). You will be joining a cohort of which half are women and most are in the 25-34 age group. During the crisis, the popular digital edition of this newspaper will have additional daily content as well as the regular columns, videos and multimedia packages.

Those with paid subscriptions to the weekly hardcopy edition will have extra issues added to their subscriptions once printing resumes. In addition, PDF files of the pages will be uploaded to the Digital Himalaya archive.

If you do not want to miss the amazing layout of the *Nepali Times*' print edition, send your email address to [editors@nepalitimes.com](mailto:editors@nepalitimes.com) or type it into the 'Subscribe to Our Newsletter' box on our website, and we will deliver it to you digitally every Friday morning.



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GOING PLACES TOGETHER



# This is a test

By now the novel coronavirus pandemic has affected every corner of the globe. If it has not brought disease, it has at least brought the fear of infection. Cities, and indeed entire countries, are in lockdown. Fortress Europe has raised its walls higher. Airlines are grounded. Nepal has banned trunk international routes from March 20 midnight. Even countries with excellent public health facilities and emergency preparedness plans are overwhelmed.

Nepal is now so closely intertwined with globalisation through migration, tourism and trade that its already-fragile economy has been badly impacted even before a full-blown health emergency hits. Ironically, less-developed countries seem to have a built-in resilience that comes from being crisis-prone -- since they are lower down on the economic ladder, they have a shorter distance to fall.



BIKRAM RAI

Despite Nepal's surprisingly dramatic improvements in mother-child survival over the past two decades, the public health system here is in crisis. State-of-the-art modern hospitals in the city, while reducing the need for Nepalis to go abroad for treatment, are out of reach of a majority of the population. Government health facilities are more affordable, but for the most part medical care there is not up to the mark.

Nepalis are still afflicted by easily preventable water-borne diseases like typhoid and diarrhoea, vector-borne infections like malaria, encephalitis and dengue, and illnesses like tuberculosis and acute respiratory infections that spread through breathing. Great inroads have been made in reducing the impact of communicable diseases in the past decades through awareness programs, vaccinations and safer drinking water, but children in remoter parts of Nepal are still dying of simple infections.

On top of this, urbanising Nepal now has the added burden of non-communicable afflictions like diabetes, cardio-vascular ailments and renal disease. As families move from the districts to the cities, changes in diet and more-sedentary ways of life have given rise to an epidemic of lifestyle-related diseases. This is compounded by genetic susceptibility among South Asians for

**Effective public health measures have never been the government's forte, which is why it is scary to think what would happen if the pandemic spread in Nepal.**

diabetes and heart disease.

For example, a study by the BPKIHS in Dharan showed that while the national average for Type 2 diabetes prevalence is 8.1% of the total population, the incidence in Dharan was 14%, while it was only 1% in Taplejung. The prime minister's own second kidney transplant this month showed that ignoring risk factors and not diagnosing non-communicable diseases can lead to a huge health burden for families and the state. A small percentage of Nepalis have health insurance, so many middle-income families fall below the poverty line due to medical expenses. Many Nepali migrant workers have been forced to seek jobs abroad to pay back debts incurred during hospitalisation of family members.

Last summer's explosion of dengue in Kathmandu Valley was blamed on climate change. But it was actually a perfect storm of crowded and squalid living conditions, poor drainage, greater mobility of people, and a particularly wet monsoon. None of these factors have been addressed, so we are staring at a recurrence of dengue this year even while we cope with a possible COVID-19 outbreak.

Public health has not been a national priority for successive governments in Nepal. What commitment exists has only been on paper and has not really translated into accessible and affordable healthcare for the general public. Governance failure has contributed to this state of affairs, but there is also the virus of corruption that has afflicted the entire government healthcare system. A politico-business nexus has also infected medical education, putting it out of reach of deserving poorer students.

Into this mix, we now have the coronavirus scare. Officially, Nepal has just one case, in which the patient recovered and has been discharged. The government has tested about 500 people, and all results have been negative. Experts have confirmed that the tests are credible, and proper protocols are in place. But not enough tests have been conducted to determine if there are more people out there with the virus.

At \$75 per test, the kits are expensive. This is where international help would be needed, and if the case rate rises the country will also need help with containment and mitigation. Nepal has been lucky so far in that there is no indication of community transmission yet. But our luck could turn any day.



## 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In a front-page piece ten years ago, Nepali Times of 19-25 March Issue #494, covered the passing away of Girija Prasad Koirala. The obituary paid tribute to his commitment to democracy, but also remembered his flawed governance and perpetual quest for power. An excerpt:

Girija Prasad Koirala, freedom fighter, five-time prime minister and the architect of Nepal's peace process, has died at age 86 at the home of his daughter and deputy prime minister, Sujata Koirala.

Throughout his rollercoaster career, Koirala proved himself to be a wily politician and a tenacious defender of democracy who stood up to authoritarians on both the left and right of Nepal's political spectrum. But the Nepali Congress president was also considered a manipulative leader who sidelined all rivals within his party and, paradoxically, was blamed for the erosion of the gains of the 1990 Jana Andolan.

## ONLINE PACKAGES



YARSA 101

Yarsa gumba is the parasitised and mummified body of the ghost moth larva, and one of the most valuable medicinal fungi in the world. Read and watch a video about the prized herb that has augmented incomes of Himalayan communities in Nepal. Story: page 8-9



PRAGATI RAI

Watch writer Pragati Rai in conversation with Muna Gurung as the two discuss the process of building a novel, how to tell women's stories to reluctant audiences, the importance of humour in writing, and why it is necessary for women to write their own stories and be their own writers. Story: page 11

### ROAD ACCIDENTS

Corona is scary ('The other global pandemic: road fatalities', Surendra Phuyal, #1002). But corruption is more dangerous. This disease destroys the mind, community and the nation. It is sad that corruption is so prevalent that 2,800 deaths on our roads is like a joke.

Gyurme Dondup

■ The dread about a viral infection is not how many get infected or are killed. It's the fear that it can spread at all. Replace the virus with a deadly one and we're done.

Sudip Umesh Bajagain

■ It's no wonder there are so many fatalities. It's not just the infrastructure, driving rules are not enforced well. There needs to be serious attention given to all aspects of this crisis.

Diana Morimoto

■ This is a prominent virus in highway: drivers. No vaccine has yet been discovered in our country to counter it.

Muni Raj Upadhyaya

### WINE TIME

I love Momos. It would be interesting to know what wine goes well with them.

Diana Fielding

■ I love my wine too! Definitely my recommendation would be Pinot Noir (if you like red wine) and New Zealand sauvignon blanc (if you like nice chilled white wine).

Prem Devkota

### VIRAL FEAR

I believe in Pashupatinath and if it is a part of a superstition in the view of an educated sheep then I am superstitious ('Fear goes viral,' Editorial, #1001). And in terms of sanitisation if this article is saying that our poor sanitisation made us immune to viruses like COVID-19 then its better to be less sanitised than being more sanitised and making our immune system weak.

Pukar Upreti

■ The Nepali 'Pashupatinath Vaccine' is omnipotent and works against all adversities - from Corona and Earthquakes - to Political instability and Systemic incompetence. Get your dose of the vaccine asap

Rai Sarju

### ECONOMY & COVID-19

All about the economic effect of COVID-19 in Nepal ('Nepal's economy, already weak, takes direct hit, Sanghamitra Subba, #1001). Sure to shift so many things all at once. All we need is to learn how to cope with the changing and testing time. But, humanity first!

Jimmy Lama

## WHAT'S TRENDING



### The other global pandemic: road fatalities

by Surendra Phuyal  
Nearly 2,800 people were killed on Nepal's roads last year. No data is available for the number of people who suffer such accidents, but thousands are injured seriously enough to be disabled for life. Yet, this pandemic of road accidents gets much less media attention than COVID-19. Go online at [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com) to read the full report.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

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### Nepal's economy, already weak, takes direct hit

by Sanghamitra Subba  
Although a full-blown health crisis has not yet occurred in Nepal, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the country's migration and tourism-based economy. Read the report, join the discussion.

Most popular on Twitter



### Fear goes viral

Editorial  
The Coronavirus pandemic is causing economies to grind to halt, misinformation and panic to spread like wildfire, and increased the burden of problems on developing nations like Nepal. But there have been some positive outcomes from the epidemic. Find out what they are.

Most visited online page

## QUOTE TWEETS

**Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes  
Nepal's new Davos man is social activist Pradip Pariyar. He has surprisingly, but deservedly, found a place on the list for his contribution to social inclusion and peace-building involving Nepal's youth. @omastharai talks to the new global leader

**slotinthinking** @slotinthinking  
Happy to know Pradip's work has been recognized !

**Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes  
In this week's column Made in Nepal by @NewarNaresh, designer @MishuShrestha shares what it takes to create a Nepali fashion brand for the global market. #sustainablefashion #MadeInNepal #Nepal

**CeeLangeveldt** @Cee\_Langie8852  
What a wonderful cover and proud to be part of your journey Mishu. Being part of @SevenScof journey for us it has been an honour to have you. Celebrating Nepal and inspiring women

**Mishu Shrestha** @MishuShrestha  
Thank you @NepaliTimes and @NewarNaresh!



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# 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.



**½ FULL**  
Anil Chitrakar

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.



MONIKA DEUPALA

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 Italian

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 as 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 age groups, but not between rich and poor. Global finance agencies and governments suddenly found themselves loosening 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 going after shopkeepers who hoard medical masks and sell them on the black market? How about coming down hard on those hoarding fuel?

Hand-washing has worked in Nepal for containing typhoid and other infections long before COVID-19 came along. The epidemic 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 nation states cannot protect only themselves, that we are all in this together.

**Anil Chitrakar** is President of Siddharthinc and writes this exclusive fortnightly column ½ Full for Nepali Times


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**Ncell**  
Ncell launched its 'Call Aayo Paisa Payo' campaign on 11 March. Under this customer loyalty scheme, Ncell users will get a 2-rupee bonus for every minute upon receiving international calls from anywhere within the world. The offer applies for three months.

**Everest Bank**  
As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility on education, Everest Bank handed over a cheque to Teach For Nepal



to continue its support for the innovative rural education scheme that aims to make it more egalitarian and raise the quality of instruction.

**NICAsia**  
NIC Asia has signed an MoU with Hyatt Regency Hotels and Gokarna Forest Resort to provide a 15% discount for the bank'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

 up to 30% discounts on transactions with more than 2,400 department stores, hospitals, hotels, and restaurants affiliated with the bank across the country.

**Tesla Diagnostic Clinic**  
The newly-opened Tesla Diagnostic Clinic located in the heart of Kathmandu officially launched its medical test services on 18



March. On the occasion of its inauguration, the Clinic has offered a 25% discount on all services along with a 50% discount on Health Packages.

**Nepal Investment Bank**  
Nepal Investment Bank Limited has expanded its operation with the inauguration of its 17th extension counter at Duwakot in the Changunarayan Municipality. Duwakot will run as a full-fledged extension counter to cater to the local demand.



 **prabhu BANK**



# What is novel about the novel coronavirus?

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

In 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.



**DHANYANTARI**  
Buddha Basnyat

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 may escape this pandemic. In Italy, there were only four cases on 20 February, but by three 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-assurance 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



BIKRAM RAI

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 crucially 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 on 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 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 findings also showed that about 1% of

patients who suffer from COVID-19 die.

This 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 old. 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 their contacts (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 anti-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 when it does strike.

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 Kabala notes, said "I hope it works" before he pressed the button to create the world. 🇳🇵

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

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# Nepali students abroad in

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



PRADYOT PANDEY



SUBUNA BASNET

Sanghamitra Subba

When Pradyot 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 *Nepali 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 Nepali 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, Nepali students will find it difficult even to return home, as the government has banned all travel from the EU and West Asia in the west and Malaysia, South Korea and Japan in the east, including passengers transiting in those countries. This means that effective midnight

20 March, all flights to Kathmandu will be cancelled except those from Singapore, Thailand and Nepal’s two neighbours India and China.

Subuna Basnet, 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 Basnet. “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.”

Basnet is thankful that she receives a monthly stipend through her scholarship as 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.



ISHAN MAINALI

“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 Sonam 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 frankly thought sending everyone home was the best course of action that the university could have taken in this



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# pandemic limbo



NIRUPAN KARKI

situation given the need of social distancing,” Sherpa told *Nepali Times* from the US. “The stakes are just too high as it is literal life and death for so many vulnerable individuals in the society.”

Nirupan Karki is a third-year law student at NALSAR University of Law in Hyderabad in India. On 14 March the Government of Telangana issued a directive for all educational institutions to shut down by the end of this month. NALSAR asked all Indian students to leave campus within 48 hours and made an exception for foreign nationals, allowing them to stay but under strict quarantine.

Karki quickly booked an expensive flight back to Nepal to avoid being stuck at the university, and arrived home this week. But during the two days in between the government directive and his flight, Karki was in a state of panic.

“The whole situation has left me deeply uncertain as I have a lot of unanswered questions,” Karki says. “Mostly I am worried about my studies as the semester has come to an abrupt halt. We have online classes for the remainder of the semester, but I am unaware about the mode of examination, which is a major grading criteria in our campus.”

Many Nepalis studying in China returned home in late January as the country sought to curb the spread of COVID-19. The Nepal government even sent a plane to evacuate 182 students from Hubei Province on 16 February.

Nishtha Rajbhandari is a high-school senior at United World College in Changshu, China. As the pandemic spread rapidly around China, she was asked along with other international students to leave the country.

Rajbhandari says, “It is heartbreaking that I lost an entire semester, that too the last one of high school. There are a lot of emotions, and I don’t think anyone has been able to process them at the moment.”

Rajbhandari says her class was looking forward to planning for their last semester together. But she adds: “I am just grateful the situation in China is getting better and every person I know is safe, and I hope the whole situation settles soon and things get back to normal again.”



NISHTHA RAJBHANDARI

## A Florentine quarantine

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

Aashna 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,” art 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, catching up on books and TV shows and practicing her Spanish and Italian.

In the evenings, Lama joins her neighbours as they play music and sing from their balconies. The mass showing of solidarity 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’lieti 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, as 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 saying here, *tutto andrà bene*, and I truly believe it.”

**Sanghamitra Subba**



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Alton C Byers  
in the Barun Valley

The yarsa gumba harvesting season this year coincides with the coronavirus scare, and as rumours spread about its supposed medicinal properties, there could be a run on the over-extracted Himalayan fungus this year.

Furthermore, with the spring trekking season wiped out by the COVID-19 scare, local people dependent on tourism income will now have to fall back on income from a fungus that fetches high prices across the Himalaya in China.

The highest-quality yarsa can fetch up to \$70,000 per kg in China, and its collection each mid-May to



Mt Makalu (8,485m) towers over the sacred Seto Pokhari glacial lake.



Young yarsa harvesters comb the slopes high above the Barun River.

TSERING SHERPA

# It's yarsa

## A holy valley in eastern Nepal p

mid-July can account for between 65% and 100% 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 hillsides 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 defecation. There has also been an increase in alcohol and drug consumption, conspicuous consumerism, 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 beyul, 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 pigmented cliff at Riphuk which pilgrims believe is a painting of a snow leopard by Guru Rinpoche. Ama Buchung is a rock massif in the shape of a pregnant woman, known for granting the gift of children to the devout. There is also the sacred Seto Pokhari glacial lake near Mt Makalu base camp.

The main difference between



Yangle Kharka in the Makalu-Barun National Park with Shiva Danda at centre. The yarsa gumba harvesting slopes are located below the highest ridges in the foreground.

# 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. Wealthy 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 sinensis*. 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 parasitise the bodies of ghost-moth larva that live on the roots of alpine wildflowers found high up in summer yak 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 insides, 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 fruiting body 4cm long.

It takes sharp eyes to find these pointed, black, stem-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 Nepal



Gyananthus incanus, an alpine wildflower whose roots host the *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* fungus.



The telltale stromata that signals the presence of a yarsa gumba below the ground.



The larva of the ghost moth caterpillar.



# -picking time

## prepares for the yarsa gumba harvesting season

the yarsa harvesting season in the Barun and in western Nepal is terrain. While much of the yarsa in Dolpo are on rolling high-altitude meadows, in the Barun the fungus grows upon precipitous slopes dropping thousands of metres to the valleys 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 here every spring. Unlike in other regions in Nepal, they do not leave behind much trash, carry in their own fuelwood, and cannot remember any violence.



Sherpa families from Tashigaon have been camping and harvesting yarsa here for years. Young men from Seduwa sleep in teahouses in the Valley and hike up 1,500m to the meadows each morning to pick yarsa. There are laughing school children on holiday, and everyone seems to have a good time.

The main reason for the peaceful, non-competitive atmosphere is that the quality and value of yarsa in the Makalu-Barun region is not as high as that from Tibet or Dolpo. In 2016, a kilogram of Makalu yarsa fetched only \$4,800 from the local middleman, as compared to \$21,120 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 portering, raising 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 not been worth fighting over. More importantly, villagers, the Buffer Zone Council, and the local government have developed a system to manage yarsa harvests 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 to some by the nickname ‘Himalayan viagra’, and most 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 Cordyceps is a China-made skin cream (*above, left*) that claims to fight skin-ageing and eliminate wrinkles, black spots and pimples. The day-and-night cream claims to be made from 100% natural ingredients and is sold in various countries in Asia.

Probably 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 teas claim that they treat fatigue, sickness, kidney disease and low sex drive.

Some bars in Kathmandu serve aged aila 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.’



ALL PHOTOS: ALTON BYERS

Government in 2001 has ‘...contributed to [more] economic and environmental transformations across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan region...than any development scheme could envision’.

**Alton C Byers**, PhD is a mountain geographer at the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research, (INSTAAR) University of Colorado at Boulder. In the mid-1990s, he worked as co-manager of the newly formed Makalu-Barun National Park. His recent paper on yarsa gumba harvesting in the Barun Valley is published in the journal Himalaya (v. 39, number 2)



A freshly dug yarsa gumba in a cross-section of soil.



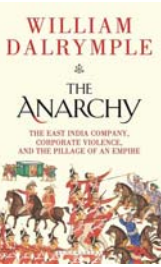
Yarsa gumba collection being offered for sale to middlemen.



SELF-ISOLATION

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

Suggested books to read:



**The Anarchy**  
William Dalrymple's tome 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.

Rs1120, Pilgrims Book House, Thamel  
(01) 4221546

Unleashing the Vajra

Sujeev Shaky'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 2050.

Rs960, Pilgrims Book House, Thamel  
(01) 4221546

Kumari Prashnaharu

Durga Karki's debut anthology novel offers 13 short stories in Nepali.

Rs425, Patan Book Shop, Patan Dhoka  
(01) 5555256

Movies you may have missed:

The Sixth Sense

Malcolm Crowe, a child psychologist, helps a young boy who acts as a medium of communication between the living and the dead. Starring Bruce Willis.  
20 March 11:45pm, Cinemax



Saving Private Ryan

During the Normandy invasion of World War II, Captain John Miller is assigned with finding Private James Ryan, whose three brothers have already been killed in the war. Starring Tom Hanks.  
23 March, 9:25pm, HBO

Monsters Inc.

In this animated film, the lives of best friends Sulley and Mike, scarers working at Monsters, Inc, are disrupted when a human girl enters their world. Your kids will love this movie.

25 March, 2:55pm, HBO

Suggested Podcast:



Boju Bajai

Listen to Bhrikuti Rai and Itisha Giri talk about everything from weddings to social media to the most pressing social issues in Nepal. Find Boju Bajai on SoundCloud.



Bored Games:

Put social media aside and have fun the old fashioned way. Spend time with your family's children and bond over classic board games like Ludo and Scrabble, or teach them some Uno tricks.

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 Hike

Hike the forested Nagarjun hill from Balaju. Take in spectacular views of the Ganesh Himal mountains and Kathmandu Valley. Balaju to Nagarjun, 5km

Climb Phulchoki

Take the Phulchoki trail to the hill's 2,780m summit for an astounding panorama of the mountains and of Kathmandu Valley below. Phulchoki is also a butterfly sanctuary.  
Godavari to Phulchoki, 19km



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 Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park are perfect. Just grab your binocs 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 litter!  
Kathmandu to Kakani, 25km

CONTAINMENT

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



Meditate

Relax your mind and body by finding a relatively quiet place within your house, sitting yourself down, and meditating. There is no success or failure here and every attempt is valuable.



Yoga

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

Work out

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

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.



Gardening

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



This has been quite a cold spring, with maximum temperatures still hovering in the low 20s, about 5 degrees below normal. Those waiting for summery weekend will be disappointed. We have a westerly disturbance advancing from the southwest that will bring cloud cover and some more rain and snow over the mountains. Saturday the weather will clear a bit to give way to another mainly cloudy Sunday with chances of passing snow flurries in the higher elevations. Mornings and nights will continue to be chilly.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
22° 9°	23° 10°	19° 10°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 13 - 19 March



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
March 13	March 14	March 15	March 16	March 17	March 18	March 19

Worldwide, with the reduction of transportation and the decrease in economic activity, there has been a marked drop in all air pollution indices: carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, as well as methane and Nox. In Kathmandu, too, we are beginning to see the effect on the Air Quality Index, although the daily average was still in the Red 'Unhealthy' Zone all week. The government's new directives on movement and the shortage of petrol and diesel may well improve air quality during rush hour next week.  
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



Our world is connected. The melting of polar ice caps floods islands 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 as united in solving our shared environmental crisis.



OUR PICK

Released in 2011, *Contagion* is an American action thriller film directed by Steven Soderbergh. With COVID-19 declared as a global pandemic, the movie is perhaps more relevant to 2020. The plot revolves around the spread of a virus transmitted by fomites. It also showcases attempts made by medical researchers and public health officials to identify and contain the disease, the loss of social order, and the introduction of a vaccine to halt the pandemic's spread. The ensemble cast includes Marion Cotillard, Matt Damon, Laurence Fishburne, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Kate Winslet.

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने

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नेपाल सरकार

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# Pragati Rai: Her own writer

As a child, Pragati Rai was called *fattyauri*, someone who would not stop talking. Born in 1977, Pragati grew up in Khotang along with a younger sister and four brothers. Although she is widely known for her first novel, *Lekhakh Ki Swasni* (The Writer's Wife, 2014), Pragati burst onto the Nepali literary scene with a slim collection of powerful poems called *Badi Bigyapti* (Badi



**LIGHTROOM CONVERSATION**  
Muna Gurung

Press Release, 2009), written after she had witnessed naked Badi women protest outside Singha Durbar demanding their right to citizenship in 2007. In the titular poem, Pragati writes:

*My name is naked  
My people are naked  
Where I stand, there  
the ground is seen as naked, today  
I have been made into a promiscuous woman, sir!  
I cannot cover my shame with  
the sari of democracy  
Peering into the empty vessel that is your  
assurance,  
I cannot wait for the road to freedom  
Listen to the word of someone who has been  
made naked for generations, or—  
Listen to the dangerous decision of this disgusting  
name:  
If you do not want to make me like you, sir  
I will most certainly make you like me.*

Last year, she published her second novel, *Birseko Mrityu* (Forgotten Death, 2019), and has just completed writing her third novel, *Thakra* (Stake), which is forthcoming later this year. I started this month's Lightroom Conversation with Pragati Rai by asking her about the process of building a novel.

**Pragati Rai:** It's like making a child swallow medicine. The medicine is bitter, so you will have to put some sugar in it. You have to trick that child into consuming something they never wanted in the first place, but that we all know is very good for them. That is how I wrote *Lekhakh Ki Swasni*. At first, I was writing this novel called Saya, and it was just a long stiff lecture on 'women's issues', and how men and the state ought to behave. I guarantee you that no one wants to read a novel like that, least of all, men.

**Muna Gurung:** So you made it sugary. Yes, with *Lekhakh Ki Swasni*, readers think they are reading a story about a writer and his family drama, but what they do not realise is that they have gone through an entire book and in the process, they have actually read and closely experienced the pain of being the wife of a writer. *Lekhakh Ki Swasni* was actually a short story I wrote while waiting for my husband to come home for dinner. He said he was on his way but hours went by and he never showed up.

**He is also a writer?** Yes, he is an established and award-winning writer. But we live separately now. He is with someone else. People keep thinking that the novel is about our life together but it is not.

**How did you meet?** I was fourteen and my friend took me to his house. His village was just over the hill from mine. He was in ninth grade and deeply heartbroken. The girl he had fallen in love with had just been married off to some lahure. My husband was inconsolable and spiraling into depression. His family thought this

was the best time to find him a wife. My friend was his mother's niece and she had apparently told my mother-in-law about me and how I like to write poems. My mother-in-law explained to me that theirs was a family of writers and if I ever wanted to get into writing, they had all the connections. She also said I could venture into music, education, art... I agreed to marry her son, and so I stayed put.

**You said in an interview elsewhere that many people would not know who Pragati Rai is, but that they would know *Lekhakh Ki Swasni*. It is ironic now knowing that your husband also writes.**

I was always known as my husband, the writer's wife. Even when I wrote a good poem, my name hardly came forth. They all thought he wrote my poems for me. Or if I spoke at an event, he would receive a call at home from one of his 'boys', who would say to him: Oh, Pragati spoke well today. You've done a good job schooling her. And the worst was this one time when I saw a short

with another profession -- but my husband never once questioned that decision. I appreciated his openness.

**It maybe also because you tell the story with humour. I laughed out loud in so many of the scenes.** I realised early on that humour can make difficult situations a little easier. So in making my first novel, I spent a lot of time carefully weighing out the serious scenes against the humorous ones and deciding where and how to place them so that my readers would follow along and do what I want them to do. (Laughs).

**Who are your readers?** I wrote for women, but I quickly realised that the problem is that not enough women read. So what is the point of writing for women when our audience is clearly male? Women in Nepal have written for decades but the reason we still struggle to be heard and seen is because we are writing for women, which makes it easier for male readers to snooze. If we write for



MONIKA DEUPALA

review of *Badi Bigyapti* in a national daily, and I was surprised to see they had quoted me when I did not remember being interviewed. Later, my husband tells me that the newspaper had called and he had spoken to them.

**That is terrible.** I was furious.

**How else was it like to be one of the two writers in a marriage?** Maybe people think that writer couples spend their days writing together in some blissful reverie. None of that is true! (Laughs). If two people in a family are in the same field, there is bound to be some sort of competition, it is only natural. I would share an idea with my husband and find that a part of it has somehow made it into his book, and vice versa. Some days I would want him to listen to my stories, but he would be busy trying to share his with me. Writers are obsessive people. But you know, when you are with a writer, you can say something using minimal words and trust that the other is able to extract, elaborate and expand as needed. Writers are also more open than other kinds of people, I think. When we separated, my husband told me honestly about his lover. Plus, this was not the first time he had strayed in our marriage. I always knew about his affairs because he would tell me, or write about them. Many male readers have also asked me why I did not make the writer husband character in my first novel a politician, or someone

men in the manner that pleases them, then our stories become heavily edited, and ultimately incomplete.

**What about stories about women that men have written?** Women must write their own stories, men can try, but it will be incomplete. For instance, I remember reading Abhi Subedi's powerful article once where he writes about replacing the concept and language of maiti ghar with that of afno ghar. It is a beautiful idea because why must we call our husband's home our home, or afno ghar, and the place and family we were born into and grew up in and around our maiti? But what Subedi never brings up in the article is the importance then, on a policy level, for women to be able to claim that space as indeed, afno ghar. Where is it in our law? What kinds of property rights does a daughter have in her father's home? Changing a word is a good start, but it is not the end of a larger problem.

**I also found the way you write about Numa's desire as a sexual being very refreshing. I love that she lifts lines out of her husband's unpublished book and sends it to Prabhakar in a flirty text. You don't always beat around the bush with some lofty metaphor, you write clearly and unapologetically.** (Smiles). I wanted my readers to know that women, too, have desires. I especially wanted my male readers to know that they are always

replaceable in a woman's life. Many of my male friends who have read the novel do not like the character of Prabhakar. I think they see themselves as the husband character and Prabhakar as Numa's boyfriend, and therefore a threat. The novel I just finished, *Thakra*, is actually a sequel to *Lekhakh Ki Swasni*, so we will follow the same characters in a different future. My male readers urged me to get rid of Prabhakar in the third novel. But I assure you, he is going nowhere. In fact, there is a scene where Numa is told by her father-in-law that since she cannot give them a grandson, that it only makes sense for her husband to remarry. Numa is hurt by this and she gets drunk with Prabhakar one evening. Some readers, I know, are not going to like that. (Laughs).

**How long did it take for you to write your last novel?** Two years—I have not worked for money in those two years. I am deep in debt, so I must begin to work again now that the novel is done. It took me 7-8 years to write *Lekhakh Ki Swasni* because I was working then at a school first as a teacher and then later in the exam department, typing up papers. I had a computer where I worked and I had created a folder for my novel, and I would steal some time everyday to write it. My colleagues soon found out and complained to my boss. He began to bring me large piles of random papers to type, just to keep me busy, I think. Every hour, he would walk in and ask if I was done. In another universe, I would have just put my head down and said, No sir, not yet. But instead, I would snap at him with Do you think I'm a photocopying machine? (Laughs). I was incorrigible. They even made me sign a sheet of paper that said, 'I will not write during work again.' But the very next day, I wrote.

**So you finished your first novel while working there?** No—later, someone deleted the folder and I lost everything. I had to write it all over again. We had a computer at home, but there was something electrifying about stealing time to write at work. When I came home, I never wanted to write. (Laughs). Just when the school was about to kick me out, I left for Korea to work with my new novel in a pen drive.

**When was this?** 2010. We were struggling financially. I felt like it would be a good idea to go abroad and make quick money. My husband wanted to join me, but his writing career was taking off and I knew that going to Korea would ruin it--all that effort for nothing. So he stayed back with our two sons, who were already in their late teens, early 20s by then. In Korea, I had to do manual labour in the agricultural sector. My roommate was a woman from Myagdi and super strong. She would work all day and be fine at night, whereas I would have all sorts of joint and muscle ache. There was a computer in our room, but she was always using it to chat with her husband. I never got a chance to sit at it. I remember complaining to Sudha Tripathi didi that I was not able to write because I didn't have a computer. She clicked her tongue and said, Why don't you just sit on the floor and write on a notebook with your hand? Why do you need a computer to write? I took her advice. Eventually, my employer kicked me out of work because I was spending my nights writing and he would see my light was on all night; and in the afternoon I was unable to work. For three months, I stayed back in Korea, unemployed trying to finish my novel. Everyone was scolding me. When I think about all

the things I went through to write this novel...it is a lot.

**What happened after you finished writing the book?** I experienced the deepest kind of satisfaction—that I had arrived on this earth and left a small signature.

**A signature, that's a powerful image. Men have proper names but their wives are just their names plus a *ni*. So, Gopal's wife is Gopalni.** I say it in my poem, *Rukh* (Tree), how our great-grandmothers gave up their lives in the name of tradition, and when it was time for our mothers, they gave up their names, it was a price they paid to uphold their traditions, any tradition. We keep following in each others' footsteps, one generation of women after another. We may alter things here and there, but unless we uproot that tradition, nothing will change.

*Lightroom Conversation is a monthly page in Nepali Times on interesting figures in Nepal's literary scene. Muna Gurung is a writer, educator and translator based in Kathmandu. www.munagurung.com*

## The Basket by Pragati Rai

After she gets the basket,  
the little girl forgets everything else  
She forgets food, forgets her mother  
After she gets the basket,  
she forgets her mother's lap—  
A mother has no right over a daughter  
who has left her lap.

The little girl has a basket to fill,  
she forgets everything else

When she places a flower in the basket,  
she likes the moon better,  
When she replaces the flower with the  
moon,  
she likes the stars more...  
And even more than the stars, she  
begins to like  
the wind, water, butterfly, cloud and  
what else—

She has only one basket,  
but she has so many things to keep in it  
She keeps one thing in the basket, takes  
it out for another  
Keeps, takes, keeps, takes, and suddenly  
evening sets in  
The little girl begins to cry, the basket is  
empty

Seeing the basket as life,  
The little girl's mother begins to cry with  
her  
In the midst of trying to fulfill each  
desire,  
life remains empty.

And so—  
In between her sobs,  
The mother tells the little girl:  
Fill the basket with one thing  
the rest, keep as memories that fill your  
heart.

*translated by Muna Gurung*



Watch writer Pragati Rai in conversation with Muna Gurung about the process of building a novel, how to tell women's stories to reluctant audiences, the importance of humour in writing, and why it is necessary for women to write their own stories and be their own writers.





MoFA

**VIRTUAL SAARC SUMMIT:** Prime Minister K P Oli at a video conference of SAARC leaders on Sunday to discuss a plan to combat COVID-19 in South Asia.



HIMAL KHABARPATRIKA

**EL NORTE:** North Korean Ambassador to Nepal Jo Young Men meets Parliament Speaker Agni Sapkota on 17 March.



UK AMBASSADOR TO NEPAL

**WOMEN POWER:** UK Ambassador to Nepal Nicola Politt and the recently appointed Law Minister Shivamaya Tumbahangphe met on 14 March. The two women leaders spoke about transitional justice, citizenship rights and policies.



TWITTER

**ENVOY AND THE CHIEF:** Nepal Army Chief Purna Chandra Thapa and Indian Ambassador to Nepal Vinay Mohan Kwatra meet on 17 March in Kathmandu.

Upasana Khadka

**Q**atar is the most popular overseas destination for Nepali workers, and because of that 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.

Kalyan 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 sourced 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 Evian 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 Agriteq 2020

# Nepalis quarantined

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



KALYAN GHIMIRE

**HIMALAYAN PRODUCE:** Efforts to export Himalayan spring water from Rasuwa and strawberries from Kakani have been stopped by the COVID-19 restrictions. A flight ban between Doha and Kathmandu has affected Nepali workers in Qatar.

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

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 Yousuf Bin Mohamed for getting Nepali exporters to diversify their product range.



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# in Qatar



PATTABI RAMAN

earlier this week. “I did not want to be trapped in Qatar as business is down, likely till the end of April, so I managed to get out before the flights got canceled,” he says.

The Qatar Government’s travel ban and Nepal’s decision to stop issuing labour permits to all destinations including Qatar has put thousands of Nepalis in Qatar as well as in Nepal in limbo. Some 40,000 Nepali individuals who were set to go to Qatar to start employment are stuck in Kathmandu. An unknown number of workers in Nepal on vacation from Qatar are also stranded here, with concerns about their visas or work permits expiring.

There are 401 COVID-19 cases in Qatar with four recoveries. On Wednesday 238 new cases were identified. This was related to quarantined expat workers but details on nationalities have not been revealed.

COVID-19 has not distinguished between nationals and expats, political leaders and those at the lower rungs of the ladder or between rich and poor. But workers in camps neither have the luxury of social distancing nor the opportunity to work from home.

“There is definitely a sense of fear among workers,” says Mahesh Nepal, who has been working in Qatar for five years. “There is increased surveillance in the labour camps, and all workers have to undergo tests before and after work each day. Mobility has been restricted and authorities, including emergency response teams, are on call at all times.”

Migrant workers have benefited from the strong health infrastructure and containment efforts in Korea, Malaysia and the Gulf that together host about 1.5 million Nepalis.

The consequences of the coronavirus pandemic goes beyond health to Nepal’s economy. As the top destination for Nepali workers in 2018/19, Qatar is important for Nepal’s remittance-based economy. Doha is also an important aerial gateway for tourist traffic and the Nepali diaspora, and any further flight curtailments will have consequences for Nepal beyond migration.

The Saudi and UAE blockade of Qatar for the past two years has actually helped the country become more self-reliant and bolstered its capacity to deal with the epidemic. In addition, Qatar has announced a \$23 billion stimulus package to help the private sector weather the crisis.

Says Mahesh Nepal: “The impact of the pandemic on the Qatar economy could have been worse due to external disruptions on supply chains or imports.”

## Malaysia movement control

Travel of migrant workers, tourists and businessmen 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 673, but the nationalities of the infected have not been revealed.

“We used to handle up to 200 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 Kotaraya 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 Kotaraya, which have now switched to providing 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 in the global supply chain.

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

A bilateral agreement stressed ‘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 the virus 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 WRP 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 WRP told us by phone: “I am not certain about the future. For now, I will stay in my hostel for the next two weeks and have been told that I will get paid a



SANTOSH KARKI

**PANIC BUYING:** Malaysians rushed to stock up on food after the government announced restrictions on movement for the public this week. The Kotaraya neighbourhood which is usually crowded with migrant workers, wears a deserted look on Tuesday.

basic salary.”

But WRP is a big employer, and other migrant workers may not be as 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 lockdown. 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 these necessities is worrisome.”

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 Board is sitting on billions of rupees from the unused Foreign Employment Welfare Fund, which was designed for just such an emergency as the COVID-19 fallout.

**Upasana Khadka**

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# 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 5 earthquake struck Lumle near Pokhara. The National Seismological Centre said this was not an aftershock of the 2015 earthquake, but a main shock. Although the tremor went 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 megaquake 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 Malla. Seismologists say another major earthquake in the region between Pokhara and Dadelhura 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 Surya 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 Natural Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Authority which is supposed to take over from the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) set up after the 2015 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 Rs300,000 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 Rs4.1 billion,





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# 2015 quake



BIKRAM RAI

At a conference in January, the NRA faced criticism for creating 'model villages' in haste, neglecting marginalised groups and not giving enough priority to heritage reconstruction in Kathmandu Valley.

"We were supposed to give the survivors cash in hand but we wanted it to be as transparent as possible and opted for the banking system, which delayed the reconstruction process," Gyewali added. "But thankfully we have completed distributing all three tranches and we have signed agreements with most beneficiaries." Most have received the first tranche, while 82% got the second, and 70% have collected the third installment of their housing grants. (*Charts online.*)

"Our number one priority was to provide shelter to those who have lost their homes, second to rebuild health and educational institutions and third cultural heritage restoration, but having said that all these components are important to us," Gyewali added.

NRA data shows that nearly 500,000 private houses have so far been rebuilt, which is over 60% of those damaged or destroyed. Another 190,000 or so are under construction. The NRA has also reconstructed 360 of 415 damaged public buildings, and half of the health facilities impacted by the earthquake have been rebuilt. Nearly 80% of schools have been restored.

According to the NRA's Gyewali, the authority plans to complete at least the construction of private housing before the end of its tenure in December 2020.

"By the time the NRA winds down in December, we will finish most of the reconstruction. We want to ensure the quality of work we deliver and focus on earthquake-resistant buildings, keeping in mind future earthquakes," said Gyewali.

Whatever is not finished, and also the task of preparing a disaster-management plan for a future western Nepal quake, will be the work of the National Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Authority (DMA). Anil Pokhrel has been appointed CEO of the Authority, which falls under the Home Ministry (*see box*).

The DMA will be tasked with coordinating between all ministries and departments and developing emergency guidelines to reduce risk from all types of disasters, from floods and earthquakes to viral epidemics. Recognising the special risk of a megaquake in western Nepal, the Authority is working with municipalities in Provinces 5 and 6 on preparedness.

Explained Pokhrel: "We cannot avoid the danger, but we can prepare ourselves by spreading awareness and making the best of efforts to manage exposure and vulnerability in those regions." 🇳🇵

which it spent first on rescue, relief and emergency operations, and later on reconstruction with a focus on private housing, public buildings, health facilities and schools.

Even critics of the government admit that despite the politicisation of the NRA and initial delays due to the frequent change in its leadership, it has managed to catch up with reconstruction work and has achieved more than what Pakistan and India have after earthquakes there.

The first head of the NRA was the UML-appointee Sushil Gyewali, who was replaced by Nepali Congress-backed Govinda Raj Pokharel. Gyewali was reappointed in 2018 after Prime Minister Oli assumed office.

"Despite the lack of budget and political interruptions, the NRA has made its best effort to do a better job at reconstruction and at least provide shelter to those who have lost their homes in the 2015 earthquake," Gyewali told *Nepali Times* in an interview.

However, the agency has been criticised for approving residence construction that does not meet basic living requirements, and for its handling of the public grievances.

## Disaster Management Authority tackles its first disaster: COVID-19

The National Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Authority (DMA) 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 DMA 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 DMA has been getting advice and other assistance from the World Health Organisation (WHO) to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. After not taking the epidemic seriously at first, the high-level committee chaired by Defence Minister Ishwar 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.

Said 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."

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# Ass wipes

**WARNING: This column contains flash photography and scatological references which some readers may find so outrageous that it may lead to incontinence.**

OK, you asked for it. Now that we have those legal niceties out of the way, there is no way you can sue my Ass off as we can embark on the matter at hand, which is that since the world is coming to an end anyway, all civilised people have to stock up on toilet paper fast before stocks run out, so that we do not as a society descend into barbarism.

Historians say that the invention of papyrus by the ancient Egyptians 4,000 years ago marked the genesis of the highly refined practice of scraping one's backside, rather than the primitive method humans had been using heretofore of rinsing the orifice in question.

Many in Nepal were surprised by videos of panic buying of toilet paper, and shoppers actually engaging in hand-to-hand combat to hoard the prized rolls. The clip was from Down Under, butt it will be safe to say that the clandestine practice of ass swiping has been a distinguishing feature of the Age of Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment, and has been emulated all over the world with Commodification during the Colonial Era.

The invention of the Water Closet (WC) may have been a small step for man, but it was a giant leap for mankind as it turned Western Civilisation (WC) into an open-defecation free zone.

The outhouse became an inhouse. In other words, the loo became an indoor arena and, as befitting an

activity that is practiced within the confines of one's home, the vulgar action of hosing down the posterior thankfully went out of vogue in polite company. People switched to using paper. And not just any paper, but the newspaper of record.

Of course, there are still shithole countries out there where bad hombres squat and squirt after a dump. Some Turd World nations still insist on keeping outhouses where crap falls through a hole in the floor onto a compost heap, and is periodically emptied for the disgusting practice of fertilising the vegetable patch. That is soooo gross, compared to portable chamber pots that introduced good hygiene to Victorian England.

However, although Nepal itself was never colonised, we have adopted many features of these modern technologies without bothering to be toilet trained. We never really had our shit together.

Take Singha Darbar. Ministers sit on the throne to empty their bowels, but after that have nothing to expunge their hind quarters with. No sprinklers, no toilet paper, but they don't give a shit. They just have a gut feeling everything will be all right.

The Army is working on a top-secret germ warfare biological weapon in our military arsenal and urinal which is so classified that even the prime minister does not know about it. Which, I admit, is not saying much.



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