PANDEMIC PANGS

If there was no COVID-19 epidemic, what would be on the international news lineup this week? Before the pandemic spread, the world was grappling with the climate emergency, bushfires in Australia, and melting icecaps. Populist leaders in democracies across the world were trying to curb media freedom and manipulate the social web through troll armies and hate accounts.

The coronavirus has given these elected despots the perfect excuse to expand surveillance, extend control over information, squeeze the mass media, and muzzle emergency powers. Already in dire straits before the pandemic, the mass media in countries around the world have sunk deeper into financial crisis - just at a time when the role of journalists in spreading awareness, providing accurate information and countering rumours is more needed than ever before.

The pandemic is an accelerant that sharpens existing contradictions, widens socio-economic inequality, and aggravates authoritarian tendencies even in supposedly democratic states. At a time when the international community should be working together, geopolitics is straining relationships.

Nepal, too, has suffered a major outbreak, although the possibility of a new COVID-19 cluster cannot be ruled out. What should really worry our government is a post-pandemic economic collapse and the ensuing social unrest and instability. Nepal has lost its two main sources of income remittances and tourism. And while a drop in oil prices may give breathing space, joblessness will grow. It will be easy for public frustration to boil over. Outrage was already high over corruption in high places and post-pandemic, but news this week of a political-business nexus trying to fish-out faulty test kits at top six times the cost has raised the anger level. Powerful middlemen pulled the plug on a portal that reported on this scam. Even a pandemic does not seem to have tempered the greed; and stopped a blatant attempt to muzzle the public’s right to know. Instead of insuring the thousands of Nepali workers stranded in India and the Gulf, politicians and their business partners seem intent on raking it in.

Every disaster is an opportunity for rulers of a country. The COVID-19 pandemic is a chance for this two-thirds majority government to show that it can act decisively to protect citizens.

Will it grab this window of opportunity?
Nepal’s New Normal

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The COVID-19 pandemic is like a nightmare that we wish we could suddenly wake up from, realizing that it was just a dream. Or like one of those apocalyptic Hollywood movies in which a threat we had never heard of is revealed to be the real threat to humanity from apocalypse.

However, the coronavirus outbreak had not happened. What would we be talking about now? The US elections and the deepening polarization of America, the climate emergency and how northern Europe just went through one of its warmest winters in history. The non-stop tragedies of the Syria and Yemen wars. And here in Nepal, we would be rebuilding the same old power struggle within the ruling NCP between an pillars prime minister and his rivals.

Epidemiologists and public health experts are divided about just how long it will take for the pandemic to peak, and how severe that will be for the region to get back to a new normal. Some say COVID-19’s success in spreading so far so rapidly will doom us if it continues as such.

Either way, this strand of RNA, which is not exactly ‘alive’ in the technical sense, has ravaged the international society. The World Bank said this week the pandemic was causing ‘unprecedented’ global shock, which could bring growth to a halt and ‘incur sustainable poverty’ across Asia. Even while governments battle the scourge, and try to compensate the impact with extended lockdowns, quarantines and mass testing, they are already thinking about the aftermath, and the even greater threat of economic collapse. The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that just how fragile global systems are, and how certain we took for granted can suddenly vaporize, and how unprepared nations are in working together in a time of global emergency. Reluctance to act, and delays in prevention have cost the lives of thousands of lives. And it is not even over yet.

Governments are already trying to recover from their previous failures by blaming each other and the virus. There will be a tendency to increase surveillance, expand control on information and the mass media, and misuse emergency powers. The pandemic is an exacerbation that sharpened existing contradictions within countries, in geopolitics, and aggravates authoritarian tendencies already present in countries with elected despots.

The post-pandemic economic collapse and its political impact is something that should concern us here in Nepal. Falling oil prices may provide some relief. But a drop in remittances from Nepali workers abroad and the termination of tourism for the rest of 2020 will push the country precariously at the best of times, off the edge.

Even if Nepal may not have suffered as severely as developed countries, the virus is an economy that is going to take a body blow. For a public that is already disillusioned with incompetent rulers, fed up with corruption in the purchase of COVID-19 test kits and protective gear; outraged about Nepali workers not being allowed back into their own country, the economic hardships and joblessness following the epidemic can cause anger to boil over into violent social unrest and threaten political stability. The temptation for politicians then will be to resort to nationalization, dissemination, xenophobia, or religious extremism.

Nepal’s COVID-19 Control High-Level Task Force has taken some bold decisions by being the first country in South Asia to announce a lockdown, and sacrificing tourism and migrant worker mobility to contain the country from the pandemic. But the task force has also been hasty and a lack of sensitivity — especially in dealing with rich countries from India and in providing an effective safety net for those hit hard by the prolonged shutdown.

Every disease is an opportunity for the rulers of a country, especially those that been found wanting in the past, to show that they can act decisively to protect and provide for citizens. To cushion the blow, and not be seen as confounding crises and continuing with corruption as usual.

Nepal squandered the opportunity to pause COVID-19 in 2020 and launch an idea job-creation campaign at home for national reconstruction. We wasted a chance to use the Indian blockade to diversify trade and reduce our reliance on imported petroleum. What will it be this time?

Every crisis comes with an opportunity for the rulers of a country to demonstrate that they can act decisively to protect and provide for citizens.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

10 years ago this week Civil was the column (first column) work for the thriving business of Nepal's media. Nepal Weekly is the official media. Our weekly times. Nepali Times #1893

The print media has been under the hammer in the developed world. But here in Nepal it’s alive and kicking. Publishers may not be happy with advertising rates, but editors have to come up with a strategy to get the readers to dig deeper into the news in order to save the survival of the publication. The success of the print media can partly be attributed to the sense of urgency that people have to get the latest news, not just to keep up with the times. The same success of the print media can partly be attributed to the kind of link politics and rules that make it hard to supply newspapers from the political arena and political activism.

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Countries cooperating to find COVID-19 cure

Nepal should be involved in the WHO’s ‘Solidarity Trial’ for a novel coronavirus antidote

Regardless of how this disease continues to play out this northern hemisphere summer, we in Nepal and elsewhere will still be dealing with it for the rest of 2020. All models predict there will be ‘hills and valleys’ outbreaks as the epidemic peaks and falls. Widespread testing, hand washing, physical distancing and masks in certain situations will certainly make a difference together with lockdowns of the kind we are going through.

An effective vaccine will be the game-changer, but it is still at least a year away if we are lucky. In the meantime, a potent drug therapy against this disease would be most welcome.

In China, Italy, France, USA, the UK and other countries are doing drug trials even as they deal with the onslaught of the disease. Once the disease is established, there is no other way but to do proper drug trials to treat the disease.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has come up with an innovative idea of carrying out what it calls a public health emergency “Solidarity” trial—an international, randomised trial of hospitalised patients with COVID-19.

This is ground breaking because rich and poor countries will be involved in the study, and crucially, it is being carried out in the midst of the pandemic. There was a time when studies like these would be considered after the dust settled.

Difficult as it may be, the pandemic is the best time to find a treatment so that more people can benefit. Large sample sizes are needed for conclusions from such a study to be robust and reliable. Findings from a trial using 100 patients will be less certain than a study which employs 1,000.

Norway, South Africa, Argentina, and some others have already signed up for the study which has just begun. The WHO is inviting many countries to participate in Solidarity trials so that the results can be generalised and trustworthy.

Because the study is being carried out “in the heat of the battle” WHO has kept the study very simple. The trial procedures are greatly simplified, and no paperwork is required. Once the institution has obtained national approval and informed consent from the patient, electronic data entry takes a few minutes.

These modern studies using electronic data entry versus paperwork are really not new in countries in South Asia including Nepal which have taken part in state-of-the-art collaborative studies before.

This WHO COVID-19 trial has four drug arms—Remdesivir, Kalix (an anti-HIV drug), interferon and Kafutza, and Chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine. All patients will receive the standard of care in their country, and in addition will be randomised to one of the arms.

These drugs are not new and have been used against various viral and parasitical diseases in the past. For example, chloroquine has been used for many decades against malaria. Doctors will be familiar with these repurposed drugs and their side-effects which sometimes can be worse than the treatment. Hence the importance of a robust drug trial.

The final outcomes to determine which is the best choice. If any, among these four arms have also been kept clear-cut: number of deaths, ventilator use, and number of days in hospital.

Because this is a WHO-led practical study focusing on helping resource-limited settings, it is important that countries in South Asia including Nepal be involved. Funding may not necessarily be a problem. Many countries in South Asia can at least be randomised to chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine which are not expensive to see if this drug works against COVID-19 or not.

President Trump said he “felt good” about hydroxychloroquine, but this needs scientific backing which does not exist yet. The published French study that concluded usefulness of chloroquine had a very small sample size, did not report clinical outcomes and was not randomised to be scientifically sound.

Similarly the Chinese study using Kafutza, recently reported in the New England Journal of Medicine also had shortcomings. Hence the need for a larger sample size which the WHO’s Solidarity trial is poised to do.

In Nepal, the best placed institution to help carry out such an important study with potentially multiple hospitals involved is the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC), a revered 36-year-old institution.

True, Nepal has only four COVID-19 patients in hospitals right now, but the possibility of this number growing exponentially soon cannot easily be dismissed. It is best to get the practical research system in place, especially because the WHO will welcome the move, and may help with the process so that we may be better able to help our patients with useful, and not harmful, drugs.

It will also give NHRC a chance to help nurture the talent of a young Nepali researcher to help drive this study in Nepal, coordinating with the different hospitals. This is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Buddha Basnyat is a clinical researcher at Forsyth Academy of Health Sciences and a frequent health commentator for Nepal Times.

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Common sense is uncommon in fighting COVID-19
Communication is the first line of defence against a communicable disease

The whole world is now using the same tool that we used every year, everywhere, will understand in the same way: pandemic, lockdown, self-isolation, quarantine. Flatten the curve, exponential spread, COVID-19. In a country with low adult literacy rates, really poor health infrastructure, Nepal needs to be careful with these terms and how we explain it to the public. Although the country’s economy is ruined, Nepal’s health system was relatively less affected. Once this pandemic dies out, as it will one day, we have a chance to rethink development, revamp our economic development model and update the school curriculum to make it relevant, timely and useful to both the student and society at large to deal with future health crises.

How soon should our young be learning about pandemics and epidemics? Nepal has lived through an armed conflict, became a republic, written a new constitution, survived an earthquake and Indian economic blockade—all within a generation. We have restructured the state, and now we are coping with a global pandemic. That is a lot of content for a whole set of new text books. High school history books in Nepal still do not mention the war. Now, we really have to work on how development, environment and health issues are taught in our schools so that the students grow up to be able to respond individually and collectively to future crises.

Education is the key to preparedness. We also cannot end up in a situation where people know, but do nothing because students just regurgitated memorised passages in exams. We need to create an education system that focuses on action, results and impact. This will be challenging for the facts are changing rapidly, and knowledge itself comes with an expiry date.

The bigger challenge is to change people’s behaviour based on the information they receive, and the education they have had. Policymen do not need to beat people walking on the streets, they need to be able to stop them, explain what a lockdown is, and the costs and benefits of compliance to society.

Lockdowns are crude, they bring societal inequities to the fore. They are the virus target the vulnerable, the measure used to control it by enforcing a lockdown also disproportionately impact on the poor, elderly or those far from home. In a situation where people do not trust the government and black marketers are politically protected, we cannot blame a public that is skeptical of government moves.

What is the use of buying insurance only to be told that it does not cover COVID-19 in the fine print? How is anyone supposed to know? Government and students of economics, there should be a chapter on how to deal with unprecedented global disasters like pandemics? Businesses in Europe and North America show profit, give shareholders their dividends, and then are government subsidies to buy back stock to keep share prices high. Is this the service multilateral and bilateral agencies give us? If it is, we really need to rewrite our economic text books.

The pandemic is a real teacher if we are willing to learn. How do we explain to our students why the US stock exchange rose over 6% on the day 3.3 million eligible citizens filed for unemployment benefit and the number of Covid-19 infections kept rising? How do hospitals choose which patients to treat and which ones can be left to die because there are shortages of equipment and medicines?

We shall also need the best minds working on the experiences of other countries so we know what works and what does not in a federal political system like the United States. The pandemic is unfolding in real time on our TV screens and in our minds, and the challenge is to stay ahead of the curve—for which communicating with the public is key.

The fact that we are teaching pandemics how to avoid lockdowns in 2020 does not speak a whole lot about where are we and where we need to be. Nepal has been through a lot and have paid a heavy toll for not being prepared for disasters, for being poorly governed, and for not depending on foreign aid. Experience and education should provide us the common sense to be prepared to calculate. After all, common sense is not very common.

Anil Chitrakar, President of South Africa and writes for Nepal Times.

Lockdown and the surge in domestic violence
Staying home during coronavirus curfew confines Nepali women with their abusers

Sneefa Pradhan Tuladhar

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ger

ular singer and song writer Samridhhi Rai tweeted this at 4:05 in the morning on Thursday March 26. With the surge in COVID-19 cases around the world, there is evidence of a global spike in domestic violence as well. One week into the nationwide lockdown, Nepal has not spared.

Many women now find themselves forced to be confined and isolated with domestic abusers. China, which has enforced the most stringent quarantine so far, saw no official figures for domestic violence cases triple to February. The situation is social distancing, which is one of the best strategies to combat the virus, directly exposes women to domestic violence.

Although there may not be a big increase in the violence during lockdown because of COVID-19, the existing cases can turn more extreme since the abuser and the victim are forced to stay together in the same space by going to work or staying at a friend’s place.

It becomes more difficult because victims are not able to receive proper resources and support. Health care professionals are focused on aiding the coronavirus patients and catering to the overflowed in hospitals, so those facing violence in the home are unable to reach out and seek medical help or therapy.

Even non-profits are finding it difficult to receive the call for help as the world is engulfed in the pandemic. The CEO of YWCA USA America, Vivian Gaskin, in a video interview with Nowshara said that as the number of COVID-19 related domestic violence cases has already overwhelmed the system. Non-profits will also find it difficult to fundraise and sustain themselves because of the economic recession.

COVID-19 has also brought job uncertainty for many women as the unemployment rate rises in Nepal and elsewhere. Many women, who had to struggle to get the jobs they had are now going to lose them.

Finding a job is much tougher for women than it is for men and many women are more vulnerable to losing their jobs, and will find it hard to get back into the workforce. Once her movement is restricted, a woman finds herself more dependent and obliged to stay in an abusive relationship to sustain her family.

Abusive relationships are a form of control and power which is gained by keeping the victim in the relationship because of the children, or economic status. In Nepal, there was already a growing epidemic of violence against women before the pandemic. In fact, domestic violence is the biggest source of injury for women in Nepal with half the women in recent survey saying they had experienced some form of violence.

In Nepal, where women have just started to become independent and entered a male-dominated workforce with jobs like driving or foreign employment, the COVID-19 scare could take away these new opportunities and force them back into the home arena. Nepal’s nationwide lockdown has been extended by another week. It is therefore vital for victims of domestic abuse to seek help now when the systems have not been overwhelmed.

Public health experts say there are more infected people than the five diagnosed in Nepal so far, and the number may well increase as the lockdown forces officials to enforce the lockdown even more strictly.

This could increase the number of domestic violence cases as well. There are 24/7 hotlines for Nagrik 999 and online support networks, but more are needed in the provinces. Organisations like RUNOD (Rural Women’s Network Nepal) need support.

But perhaps the most immediate help can be from people who can support and check up on neighbours. If there is a known case of domestic violence in the neighbourhood, the witness is advised to visit the family and provide support by talking, or giving information about the help lines. The coronavirus may have limited our movement, but does not have to limit our interactions.
Lockdown limbo in no man’s land

From the Indian side, he can see his village, but Nepal will not allow him home

Deepak Kharel

Hindu Singh Mahata, 46, had gone to Uttarakhand state in India to see a relative who was not well. But while he was there, the Indian government suddenly announced its three-week nationwide lockdown with just four hours notice on 27 March. Public transport stopped, Mahata’s money ran out, and he had nowhere to stay. With some relatives, he walked for three straight days up to the Mahakali River across from Nepal’s Darchula district — only to find that Nepal was not allowing him to enter his own country.

Mahata and his friends have been caught out by the banks of the river on the Indian side, they are hungry. “We are also angry, Mahata can clearly see his village in Nepal and looks out to it from time to time, missing his wife and two children. “I might die without ever seeing them,” he sighs.

There are about 800 other Nepali workers from India who have been stranded on the other side of the border. At the daily briefings of the Ministry of Health in Kathmandu on Monday, the spokesman the Nepalese government had no plans to bring the stranded Nepalis in. “They should stay where they are, and try to make the best of the situation. We will be trying to arrange food and lodging in cooperation with the Indian authorities,” the spokesman said.

When he got a call from a correspondent in Kathmandu, Mahata was at first hopeful, but quickly realized that his own government was not going to help him get back to his family.

“Sir, please help us return to our homes, we do not want to die here, we want to die in our own country,” Mahata said. “The Indians tell us they are willing to let us cross, but they are rude and mistrust us.”

In the meantime, photos and videos (courtesy of journalist Narmada Karki in Darchula) of young men risking their lives to enter Nepal have gone viral on social media. Ramesh Bista of Darchula and Baldev’s sister, Urmila Diam, swam across the fast-flowing Mahakali River. But they were arrested by Nepal’s police and sent to quarantine.

Most of the stranded are Nepali seasonal workers in various cities of Uttarakhand state in India, others were there for studies or medical treatment. With both Nepal and India locked down for another 1-2 weeks, the Nepalis will have to wait more before they will be allowed back to their families.

Meanwhile, Indian nationals working in various parts of Nepal have also been prevented from entering India, and Sastra Seema Bal (SSB) border police fired into the air at the Roxaul checkpoint on Monday to stop them. They had arrived in Birgunj from various parts of Nepal, and were trying to walk across the Friendship Bridge at the Nepal-India border.

“The government of Nepal should respect the Constitution and its international obligations,” says advocate Madhav Kumar Baisnet. His writ petition, filed with advocate Mema Khadka, calls for authorities to allow the return of citizens who have been denied entry since before the country went into lockdown one week ago.

On 23 March, the Supreme Court refused the petition’s call to order the government to open the doors to Nepalis abroad who wish to return. A second hearing has been scheduled for 6 April. In an interview, Baisnet points out that Article 45 of the Constitution guarantees that citizens will not be exiled and argues that the current situation is “exile-like treatment”.

According to Niraj Thapaliya, director of Amnesty International Nepal: “The government has a duty and responsibility under international law to ensure the rights of its citizens, wherever they are.”

Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali said in an interview with RSS on Monday: “We have not made any plans to repatriate any students or workers from abroad. It is not the right away, and it is not safe for them to travel at the present time.”

Indeed, Baisnet was asked to appear before the Supreme Court hearing if it was a good idea to repatriate Nepalis when the country has so few resources to handle the virus. “Unanswer, which country has the medicine and all the resources needed to deal with COVID-19? None of them is prepared,” he said.

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PM2.5

Kathmandu
Thomas Bell’s free-flowing prose is a key feature of his book, and it is a good read. Bell is a skilled historian and a skilled storyteller. A very good read. Bell

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Severance
The satirical science fiction novel by Ling Mu follows Constance Chen, an unlikely CEO, as he deals with the death of his twin sister, a businesswoman. A highly entertaining read that explores themes of loss, grief, and the nature of leadership.

Going places together - qatarairways.com

A dramatic low pressure area dominates the country until April 1, with widespread rainfall bringing relief to the parched landscapes. Kathmandu will be the warmest place in the country over the weekend, with the maximum at night in the lower regions. The heat may return to some cool upcountry areas over the mountains with sustained thunderstorm spells. The sunny weather will also shift to the north.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KIRPA JOSHI

SAVOUR NATURE

While we crave nature, spring is arriving in many parts of the world. Let’s take this time to appreciate nature and enjoy being outside our windows and in our gardens. Flowers and trees are blossoming forth in a myriad of colors, birds are singing, bees are flying and butterflies are flitting. And as we breathe in the cleaner air let us make our resolve to live in harmony with nature.

OECOPICK

With nearly three billion people under lockdown worldwide, many animals suddenly find their homes empty, leading to a decrease in pollution and a rise in biodiversity. In this program, we interview with experts and see the positive impact of these changes. Our pick of the week is the documentary ‘Hachi: A Dog’s Tale’.

The Truth
An anthology fiction podcast that features intriguing short stories exploring themes of love, loss, and mystery. Each episode adds a new twist to the plot, making it a gripping listen.

Audio Notes
Audio Notes by Shutterstock offers discussions with Nepali public figures on social issues including mental health, education, social media, the environment and more. Find Audio Notes on YouTube.

CONTAINMENT

The Mortified Podcast
A storytelling series where adults share the embarrassing stories they created as kids in front of total strangers. Find Mortified on Apple.

Longform
Longform features weekly behind-the-scenes interviews with non-fiction writers, including how journalists get started and brought major stories to the public.

Kathmandu
Thomas Bell’s free-flowing prose is a key feature of his book, and it is a good read. Bell is a skilled historian and a skilled storyteller. A very good read. Bell

Finding Nemo
Alien an essay is captured in the Great Barrier Reef and taken to Sydney, a slightly down trodden sets out on a journey to bring him home. Watch with your kids.

3/30, 2pm, HBO

The Hunt for Red October
In November 1984, the Soviet Union’s best submarine Captain in their new sub, sublimates and defects, the U.S. CIA analyst Jack Ryan thinks the commander of the submarine is planning to defect, and he only has hours to prove it.

4/4, 2pm, HBO

Grease
In this iconic musical film, good girl Sandy and greaser Danny, who had an unforgettable summer romance, discover they are now in the same high school. Will they be able to rekindle their romance despite their differences?

4/10, 10pm, Netflix

Madagascar
A group of animals who have spent all their life in a New York zoo end up in the jungles of Madagascar and struggle to adjust to living in the wild. In this animated kids’ movie.

4/30, 2pm, HBO

Lore
Lore is an examination of dark historical tales that explores the majestic narratives, true events, and unusual places that fill the pages of history.

The Truth
An anthology fiction podcast that features intriguing short stories exploring themes of love, loss, and mystery. Each episode adds a new twist to the plot, making it a gripping listen.

Vijaya Shankar
Vijaya Shankar is the most widely-read and respected Nepali writer of our time, known for his captivating stories and unique perspective on life and nature. In this program, we feature a selection of his work, exploring various themes and highlighting the beauty of the natural world.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

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Alien an essay is captured in the Great Barrier Reef and taken to Sydney, a slightly down trodden sets out on a journey to bring him home. Watch with your kids.

3/30, 2pm, HBO

The Hunt for Red October
In November 1984, the Soviet Union’s best submarine Captain in their new sub, sublimates and defects, the U.S. CIA analyst Jack Ryan thinks the commander of the submarine is planning to defect, and he only has hours to prove it.

4/4, 2pm, HBO

Grease
In this iconic musical film, good girl Sandy and greaser Danny, who had an unforgettable summer romance, discover they are now in the same high school. Will they be able to rekindle their romance despite their differences?

4/10, 10pm, Netflix

Madagascar
A group of animals who have spent all their life in a New York zoo end up in the jungles of Madagascar and struggle to adjust to living in the wild. In this animated kids’ movie.

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Lore
Lore is an examination of dark historical tales that explores the majestic narratives, true events, and unusual places that fill the pages of history.

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An anthology fiction podcast that features intriguing short stories exploring themes of love, loss, and mystery. Each episode adds a new twist to the plot, making it a gripping listen.

Vijaya Shankar
Vijaya Shankar is the most widely-read and respected Nepali writer of our time, known for his captivating stories and unique perspective on life and nature. In this program, we feature a selection of his work, exploring various themes and highlighting the beauty of the natural world.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KIRPA JOSHI

SAVOUR NATURE

With nearly three billion people under lockdown worldwide, many animals suddenly find their homes empty, leading to a decrease in pollution and a rise in biodiversity. In this program, we interview with experts and see the positive impact of these changes. Our pick of the week is the documentary ‘Hachi: A Dog’s Tale’.

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8 ways to keep well during a lockdown

Marcie Chen
in Shanghai

I have been alone in my apartment ever since lockdown was announced in China on 23 January. At first, it was a roller coaster of emotions: fear, panic, anger, gratitude, anxiety, loneliness. But now there is peace and calm. What I have learned from my two months in lockdown could help others around the world who have themselves entered self-quarantine:

1. Give yourself permission to be a human being

When the coronavirus first struck China and the country went into lockdown and dead rose alarmingly, I entered a deep panic. Afraid of drowning in my emotions, I forced myself to stay calm. I allowed myself to embrace my feelings and let them follow their natural course. I felt much lighter. You do not have to be strong all the time. You can be sad and have your bad moments. I had never been so happy to be alive and have freedom at the same time.

2. Focus on what you can do and let go of what you cannot

At first I felt helpless. Medical workers were risking their lives fighting the coronavirus and I felt guilty for being safe and sound indoors and not contributing like they were. I blamed myself for not doing enough and drew myself into a worse state of health both mentally and physically.

3. Practice social-media distancing

At first, I spent hours reading updates on social media. This made me very anxious. Lately, I started ‘social-media distancing’—checking my phone only at certain times during the day and focusing instead on being present in the moment. This shift brought me so much peace and it did the same for friends of mine who also made this choice. You cannot expect to consume a large portion of anxious news and still feel at peace at the end of the day.

4. Be here now

The most important lesson I learned during my ten-day Vipassana meditation course in Nepal was that the only thing that is guaranteed in life is change. If we want to be at peace, we must make friends with change. This means being willing to be in the present moment. Instead of pining for the days when we could go out freely, be completely present in the moment that is happening right now, and be open to what it brings. Mindfulness teaches that the most important thing is now and the most important thing to do is to be in the present moment. We can nurture this ability by practicing meditation.

5. Nurture your relationship with whoever you are with now

During quarantine, you may be ‘stuck’ with only a few people, be they parents, grandparents, children, partner, housemate or, as in my case, yourself. This is a time to connect deeply and nurture your relationship with those people. In the busy modern lives we have lived, each of us has always had our own agenda to follow, our own personal ambitions to fulfill. Spending time with our families does not tend to be a priority. The coronavirus has brought us the unexpected gift of precious time with people dear to us. It is the relationships that enrich our lives.

6. Stay connected

Modern life has trained us to live in isolation, encouraged us to compete rather than collaborate, to be independent rather than interdependent, to be individualistic rather than community-minded. The coronavirus has taught us the opposite. We have learned from our Stay Connected

7. Slow down and reflect

We operate in hyper mode; get up, get dressed, commute, grab a coffee, work all day and come back home tired, having had little time to connect with ourselves and our families. The coronavirus made us stop and see how we had lost ourselves in the busy-ness. With everything at a standstill, people returned to being human beings. No longer on autopilot, I too was able to live more consciously, to make more deliberate choices.

8. Exercise regularly

Staying physically active is important to maintaining mental and emotional health. My daily yoga routine grounds me, gives me clarity, and keeps me happy. If you do not already have an exercise or yoga practice, there are many free resources online to get you started.

Marcie Chen is a business professional based in Shanghai.

Illustrations by Karen Lowe
Returnees may be taking coronavirus

Mukesh Pokhrel and Ramu Sapkota

A week before Nepal declared a nationwide lockdown to prevent imported COVID-19 cases, close to half a million Nepali migrant workers from India crossed the border into the country without any screening.

Another 1.5 million people left Kathmandu Valley for their home districts as the government announced that all long-distance buses would stop plying after 6 AM on 17 March.

Tens of thousands of Nepali workers driven out of their jobs in India are now trekking across the border in India—prevented from returning to their own country as the government has not issued guidelines where to quarantine them.

Dandhula police records show that 128,022 people entered Nepal before the border was sealed, there are now hundreds camping out on the banks of the Mahakali River (see page 35). Health desks at border checkposts were equipped only with thermometers.

"It is easier to track people travelling by air, since they are fewer and the airport has the equipment for thermal screening," says Sher Bahadur Pun, infectious disease specialist at the Kathmandu Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu. "Local governments should not waste any time to track down such individuals and place them under quarantine immediately." But that is easier said than done. The government has not even been able to carry out contact tracing of the four Nepalis who flew into Kathmandu from the Gulf and Europe in March who have tested positive for coronavirus. Local governments in rural Nepal have no record of people who have come home, and are just starting to collect information of recent returnees.

"If anyone is infected here, it is going to be a disaster. All we have are thermometers," says Pushpa Giri, mayor of the Budhanilkantha municipality in Bajasa, one of the remoter districts in northeastern Nepal.

Four individuals who returned to Sunchhahar from India recently have been placed in isolation.

Of the 46 people who arrived in Bajasa from Mahendranagar after the lockdown, 14 are currently in quarantine at the district headquarters in Martadi. Adda vice-chair of the Sunchhahar Rural Municipality in Rapla Pahwa Ghati Magar: "So far no one has shown any symptoms, but if anyone did, we do not even have test kits."

The mountainous districts of western Nepal are considered to be the most vulnerable because every family has at least one worker in India who has now returned. It was also western Nepal which was worst hit in the country by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s as migrant workers brought the disease home and spread it to their wives.

Mahanide Bahadur Shah, chair of the Baraast Rural Municipality in Lujekot admits that they failed to keep records of people returning from India because they did not initially take the pandemic seriously. Many migrant workers who entered Nepal through the Gaithachaur checkpoint before it was closed are from Bajasa, Doli, Balad and Dadeldhura districts. Historically neglected by the central government in Kathmandu, western Nepal has suffered from chronic food shortages and epidemics. People from the region make up the highest number of returnees. Even though only one case of the novel coronavirus has been confirmed in the region and is in hospital in Dhankuta, public

Enlisting female health volunteers to
health experts say the virus is out there.

“Hundreds of thousands of people have returned to western Nepal from Mahanama, Delhi and Bilasik, which are the hardest-hit COVID-19 states in India. This one case in Dhamak is the only tip of the iceberg,” says Bishakha Ghoshal of Bayauda Hospital in Achham.

Bayauda has set up a fever clinic, and 10 isolation beds have been added. The hospital has a stock of 20 personal protection equipment, and is producing masks locally for staff. Municipalities, district police offices and hospitals are all on red alert for a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in the region.

Bishakha Ghoshal says: “We have a few ventilators in the entire western Nepal, and a limited stock of oxygen. We are not able to do anything if the situation is to turn for worse.”

Back in Kathmandu, Bishakha Ghoshal, Aiko, Chairperson at the Toko hospital, says the returns might have already had extensive interaction with their family members, hence need to be isolated and placed under home quarantine.

“Even if only one person is infected, who may or may not have a symptom, there is a high chance that the pandemic will spread across the village where there is a lack of safety measures. If the people and service providers are not aware that they need to visit the doctors even if they have a slight fever,” Pun says.

Among of the general public, there is now a sense of panic, and migrant returnees are being stigmatized, turning villagers against each other. Even people who die of other causes are rumoured to have died of the coronavirus. Public health experts want greater public awareness, physical distancing and expanding of the area for limited testing for COVID-19.

Dr. Pun: “If the coronavirus has entered the country unchecked through the border, then we could have a ticking time bomb in our hands.”

fight COVID-19

SUPERWOMEN: Female community health workers have been credited with progress in infant and maternal survival in Nepal. They could form a critical link in containing coronavirus.

rely on Female Community Health Volunteers to collect information through local governments. The government says apps are useful to identify those who have travelled in the same flights or buses as Nepal workers and students returning from abroad.

So far, the five Nepalis who have tested positive for COVID-19 have all returned from abroad. Former WHO public health expert Nilu Thapa agrees that Nepal’s grassroots female health volunteers have proven to be effective in vaccination campaigns and awareness about prevention measures. “They could easily be used to collect information on returnees and provide them to the center,” Thapa says.

Community volunteers have proved to be vital in reaching remote villages out of reach of even health posts, and mobilizing this nationwide network of more than 70,000 women would provide accurate and real-time information on newcomers in the village.

“Female health volunteers, nurses, midwives, are at the ward level and they know exactly who is coming and going, and if they see someone with coronavirus symptoms, they can send the information up the system,” Sheria explains. This has been done before. Female volunteers administering Vitamin A drops to children in the villages nationwide would send data to Kathmandu through mobile phones. They can do the same for COVID-19, but they first need to be given personal protective equipment.

“The volunteers would have all the information about where a suspected infected person lives, where they travel from and to whom they have come in contact with, this vital information in contact tracing,” says former director of the Health Services Department Georgina Arbelos. Female Community Health Volunteers have been credited with dramatically reducing Nepal’s child and infant mortality rates, and also in the rubella, mumps and polio vaccination campaigns, contraception awareness, nutrition and Vitamin A programs.

Sahis Bhattaran, a member of the Female Community Health Volunteers rights Protection Committee, “At a time of a pandemic like this, we are ready to provide the state all the help we can.”

Poverty – the real pandemic

A time of writing as on 21 March there were 30,435 confirmed cases of COVID-19 around the world, and 1,006 deaths in just three months, the speed of spread and the size of population and geography affected is unprecedented in human history, after it spread from Wuhan in December.

Nepal was actually only the fifth country to report its first case of COVID-19 in a student who came from Wuhan. Even thought only five positive cases have been found in Nepal so far, there are one of them recovered, Nepal was the first country in South Asia to declare a lockdown on March 12.

There are surely more infected people out there, but for some reason there has not been a major outburst with large numbers of infectees and widespread people crisscrossing our hospitals, like happened elsewhere.

However, for a small country like Nepal, the problem is currently not of numbers. The hospital says it has only one volunteer or a doctor who is currently taking care of all the patients.

A 41-year-old woman was admitted to Bayauda Hospital last week after contacting both her mother and father. After a full while traveling to Kathmandu, the mother said she was going to give her second-year school examination. The tests were postponed at the last moment because of COVID-19.

A 4-year-old boy was admitted with a fractured femur after taking a fall from his skateboard. The boy’s mother said he will need to be treated. The doctors say that it takes time for the hospital.
Home health care during a lockdown
Caregivers struggle to balance home patient’s needs with looking after their own families

Alisha Sijapati

Even before the two-week lockdown, more and more Nepali families with elderly relatives hired nursing care at home. Several companies had started up as demand from the Nepali diaspora added to the need for home caregivers. The COVID-19 lockdown had accelerated this trend.

Srijana Paudel, 23 (right) a certified nurse has been looking after a bed-ridden elderly woman in Lalitpur for more than six months. But on 20 March, when Prime Minister K P Oli went on television to announce a nationwide lockdown from six AM the next morning, she was in a fix.

While hospital workers and ambulances are allowed on the roads, many nurses taking care of elderly or sick family members could not commute to and from their own homes anymore. So, Paudel has been forced to stay over at her patient’s home for the past ten days, without being able to take care of her own family.

“I feel had not being able to return to my home and be with my family, but looking after someone more vulnerable is my duty as a nurse and I will make my best effort to provide them,” Paudel says. “I would make me feel more guilty if I stayed home. I have become close with my patient’s family, so that helps.”

There are over 200 nurses and caregivers like Srijana Paudel from various home care services in Kathmandu working in private residences of elderly patients.

Seniors and patients with pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease are more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the novel coronavirus, making the need for home caregivers even more critical.

Rupa Joshi of Bug Bazar has two elderly relatives to look after in her household: a 108-year-old grandmother-in-law and a mother-in-law who is 90. Both require special assistance.

“We had been on self-quarantine even before the lockdown to protect elderly family members and reduce the risk of contamination,” says Joshi who has asked her mother-in-law’s caregiver to stay with her own family until the lockdown is lifted to avoid contamination. Another caregiver has been asked to live-in so she does not catch the virus during her commute.

“Our caregivers are like family members now, and in this difficult situation we have to help them and accommodate their needs too,” Joshi adds.

While some home care services had drawn up a contingency plan two weeks before the lockdown, other health providers have had to change their schedules overnight to cater to patients since the shutdown.

At Palan based health care service Medilink, Susmita Khanal has been working non-stop from her home to cater to her clients and also address the needs of her caregivers who look after older patients.

“We know COVID-19 and the lockdown was inevitable, but I wish we had more time to buy equipment and medicines and plan effectively,” Khanal said over the phone.

Home care had already become a trend in Nepal even before the pandemic scare as family members worked fulltime, and there was no one to take care of elderly relatives. The job has become even more challenging and necessary during the lockdown.

Rojini Dhakal was a resident nurse in Pakistan, and returned to Kathmandu in 2009 to start a health service provider, Health at Home. Although his clients need services now more than ever, he says the economic downturn may affect the ability of families to hire services like his.

“We have clients from all backgrounds, but since most of them work on monthly salaries we can foresee many clients cancelling their contracts in the next couple of months,” says Dhakal.

““We fear a slump,” Dhakal’s Health at Home. Susmita Khanal’s Medilink have put off expansion plans in their businesses. However, their central focus continues to be in giving best possible service to existing patients during the lockdown, and communicating virtually with caregivers and nurses on preventing the virus from infecting the elderly.

While most caregivers and nurses are trapped in the homes where they work, the service providers have managed to get limited transport permits to pick and drop some staff who have families to take care in their own homes.

Like Rupa Rai, 22, a nurse at Medilink Health Care who finally got back to her own family after being trapped in her patient’s house for nine days. She says: “I didn’t bring spare clothes, but now I am more prepared mentally for an extended lockdown.”

TATA MOTORS

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