

Playing politics in a pandemic

KP Oli is now halfway through his term as prime minister. With almost a two-thirds majority, there was much hope that he would show the kind of statesmanship needed to fulfil his election promise of stabilising politics to focus on raising living standards.

The people believed him, and gave his party an overwhelming mandate. But the NCP predictably fell into the same rut as governments since 1990 — tainted by cronyism, corruption, poor governance and an utter disregard for the poor and weak sections of Nepali society.

Although Nepal has so far, quite luckily and inexplicably, escaped the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has exposed the structural imbalance and inequality in Nepali society. Poor state management and political failure have been the hallmarks of previous governments, but this virus has brought it up to the surface like nothing before.

extra-constitutional measures to cover up their deficiencies.

The Oli administration is guilty of both. The pre-coronavirus legislations on media control hang like a sword over the heads of journalists. The prime minister himself accused reporters this week of exaggerating the plight of tens of thousands trapped by the lockdown. He has accused the media of having a political agenda in exposing his secretariat's nexus with businesses profiteering in procurement contracts of medical equipment from China.

Even before the pandemic, disillusionment was running high. The Oli government was wracked by one scandal a week — the real estate heist in Baluwatar, the access given to Yeti Holdings over former royal property, the security printing press deal in which Oli's trusted Information Minister was caught on tape negotiating a \$6 million kickback. And now, the blanket coverage in the media of people left hungry, tired and cashless by the

lockdown has exposed the communist government's lack of sensitivity to the proletariat.

Physically weakened by his second kidney transplant, politically isolated within his own party, the beleaguered prime minister made a surprise move on Monday by getting the Cabinet to pass two ordinances, one of which will make it easier to legally split a political party. This sent a shock wave through the NCP, brought howls of

protest from coalition partners and the opposition, and a wave of outrage from commentators and social media.

Indeed, the timing was all wrong. Why was Oli in such a tearing hurry to allow political parties to split, when the country, and the world, is

going through one of its worst crisis in recent times? This was the time to focus on figuring out a post-COVID-19 exit strategy, and getting the economy cranked up again. For this, the country needs all political parties to row in the same direction.

What the ordinance proves is that for the prime minister, his own political longevity is more important than the country's ability to survive the pandemic and its economic fallout. His goal is still to prevent his arch-nemesis Pushpa Kamal Dahal from succeeding him as prime minister for which he is trying to thwart a possible no-confidence vote against him by holding up the threat of splitting the party.

But what the move exposed is a wholesale disregard for democratic norms, constitutionalism, and an undermining of an elected parliament. This will force the country into prolonged instability. And instead of making him stronger, the move has weakened Prime Minister Oli.



PMO

It is not just Nepal, around the world the pandemic has exposed governance failure and poor leadership. Some analysts maintain that authoritarian states have been able to better control the spread of the disease, while democracies have floundered.

But for every China there is an India, and for every New Zealand there is an Iran. Just like the virus does not respect national boundaries, it does not seem to care about ideology either. In this war, what is important is the health strategy of the state, how strictly isolation is enforced and for how long. The virus does not care if it is a totalitarian government that does it or a democratic one.

Governments are also faced with a stark choice: protect the health of citizens or save the economy. The economy cannot be saved unless you make it safe for citizens first, but some governments have quite openly tried to keep businesses going. This is where politics gets tangled with the pandemic.

Some democratic countries are using the disease as an excuse to stifle dissent, squeeze the media and abuse emergency powers. Other elected governments which have failed to manage the epidemic effectively, or have shown a disregard for the vulnerable, resort to

Why is Oli in such a tearing hurry to allow political parties to split, when the country is going through its worst crisis in recent times?

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In the issue #499 of Nepali Times, 10 years ago, Prashant Jha wrote in his Plain Speaking weekly column a piece titled 'Blustering reality' analysing the rigid ways of politics and governance of the Maoists. 'Those who dismiss Maoist threats should know they usually do what they say they will.' Excerpts:

Over the past ten months, the Maoists have fluctuated a lot but throughout, they have been consistent about three things — we will not cooperate with Madhav Nepal; the next government should be under our leadership, and we will hit the streets to achieve our goal. The present stalemate persists because the Maoists have not budged.

There is a simple lesson here— take Maoist rhetoric seriously. They do not operate using the same strategies and tactics as other 'normal' liberal democratic parties, and usually end up doing what they say they will.



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ONLINE PACKAGES



HOME SCHOOLING

Following COVID-19 lockdown, the Secondary School Examination was postponed indefinitely, but Bhaktapur District has started to televise lessons so students at home during the lockdown can revise their curriculum. Watch this video in our YouTube channel and see how effective the technique is.

STAYING BACK IN NEPAL

Makes us feel happy that foreigners feel safer in Nepal than home ('Many foreigners stay put in Nepal', Sonia Awale and Marty Logan, #1006). Thanks Nepali times for such positive news.

Rajesh Katunje

■ Good to see the proof that Nepalis choose to live in harmony, stay resilient and keep away from the blame game. Tourists are feeling at home and welcome. Humanity comes before any race or religion and hope it will continue to grow throughout the world.

Anj Rai

■ Many have lived here for several years. Others are realising it's more responsible to stay and not risk exposure and become a carrier while traveling home. Staying put is responsible. No one is vacationing, sheltering in place is challenging any where in the world.

Cat Smith

■ I'm so happy that I live here and even during these times we can do so much for others. And we still have toilet paper.

Magda Jung

NEPAL AIRLINES

The Nepal Airlines flight ban will not be lifted in time of crisis ('EU blacklist limits Nepal Airlines ferry flights', Raju Banskota, nepalitimes.com). However, NAC should conduct rescue flights where it is allowed to fly and use that as evidence when trying to lift the ban later. The recent flight to Brisbane was a good example.

Ludo Van Vooren

■ The EU has made a reasonable request to Nepal to improve the safety standards. So I think it's only professional that the EU sticks to its demands and not make any exceptions because 'they do fly out to other countries'.

Linda Ris

■ Well what do you expect with such poor safety record. Not to mention tragic and preventable crashes after crashes.

Eema Budha

CYBER HACKS

The burgeoning issue of data security and its vulnerability forces us to ask critical question and act upon it ('Thank you, Satan', Sakar Pudasaini and Prayush Bijukchhe, nepalitimes.com). And ignoring this could see serious consequences.

Sachet Manandhar

WILDFLOWERS APP

That app looks great! Who knows when I'll be near Everest again ('Wildflower app celebrates Nepal's flora', #1006). But hopefully I'll be in the Himalaya again one day. Just to be on the safe side, I went ahead and got the app.

Jasmine Star

■ It's good for beginners to identify genus level probably than species level.

Neera Joshi Pradhan

CLIMATE CRISIS

It is such a worry, makes me feel bad about flying to Nepal ('Human face of a Himalayan climate crisis', Rastraraj Bhandari, #1005). But on the other hand tourism is an important income ... Ke game?

Inka Gurung

■ There is always danger of generalising effects of climate change. There are various levels of vulnerable households. After COVID-19, the level of vulnerability will depend on what actions are taken now.

Rebecca

WHAT'S TRENDING



Many foreigners stay put in Nepal

by Sonia Awale and Marty Logan

A month into the lockdown, foreign embassies in Kathmandu are still trying to fly home the last of their remaining nationals, but many expatriates have chosen to stay back and wait out the pandemic. Find out why in this most read story of the week at nepalitimes.com

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most visited online page

Commercially Important People

Editorial

The Nepal government needs to be ready with transport and quarantine facilities if its workers overseas are suddenly sent home en masse. It's time we treated Nepali migrant workers like the heroes they are.

Most popular on Twitter



EU blacklist limits Nepal Airlines ferry flights

by Raju Banskota

Nepal Airlines has been prevented from carrying out rescue flights for European and North American tourists stranded in Kathmandu by the lockdown, and one reason is that the carrier is still on a EU no-fly list. Join the online discussion on air safety in Nepal.

Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
EDITORIAL
Why is PM Oli in such a tearing hurry to allow political parties to split, when the country is going through its worst crises in recent times?

@ShyamalShrestha
Isn't it high time we bid goodbye to the democratic circus of the past three decades and rethink about returning to a guided democracy model, when there was no compromise on the country's sovereignty and unity, and discipline was the order of the day.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Government has often described Nepali migrant workers as 'true heroes' for sending money home that props up the #economy. It's time we treated them like the heroes they are. They are #Nepal's real Commercially Important People, not the tax-dodging tycoons.

pramod acharya @ENT_GODFATHER
Nepal Government will see these migrant workers only as a source of money until their votes becomes decisive in the elections. There are more than 6.5 million labourers whose voice is not heard because they can't vote. We need a system that allows them to vote.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Public health experts fear that #Nepal's overcrowded #prisons, already #hotbeds for infectious diseases like tuberculosis, typhoid and influenza, could become a public health hazard due to the ease of spread of #COVID19. Read report by @PokharellPrabhas

Navaz Kotwal @navazkotwal
Detaining authorities around the world who have not yet taken measures to prevent and mitigate the effects of #COVID19 inside places of detention should do so immediately to protect the health of detainees, staff and wider society.

Feeding 1,000 a day in Kathmandu

Quiet heroism feeds the hungry during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nepal

The web of wrinkles are etched deep into the soft bronzed face, a lifetime of gritty wind and harsh realities on the Tibetan plateau, smiling out of the phone screen. Brightly painted furniture frame her long plaited hair in a dimly lit room in Kham, a distant eastern province of Tibet on the far side of the Himalaya.



Her son, Geshe Sonam Wangchen, beams back with delight, adjusts his dusty maroon monk's robes and waves the phone in excitement, returning joyous Losar messages as he bears his mother aloft on the small monitor through the sprawling family home on the northern rim of the Kathmandu Valley.

"Hey guys, say hello to your aunt in Tibet!" My sons Sangjay and Rinchen, dressed in festive brocade-trimmed raw-silk shirts, are bent over the low sitting room table behind towers of chips playing poker with their uncles and cousins – cards are dispensed with a flourish, intense conspiratorial concentration and whispers erupt into laughter as the tension releases at the end of each round.

Their grey-haired father and uncles are dressed more plainly in warm adventure gear and down waistcoats. Through the sliding glass doors, the light is fading pink. Engraved silver bowls laden with meat, nuts and dried fruit glow at their elbows. 'Tashidelek and Happy New Year,' they call to their cousin's phone.

Although only a couple of months ago, that afternoon seems like another era, BC (Before Corona). We have always regarded our nephew Sonam Wangchen as something of an unlikely hero, with flashes of saintliness. Ever since he returned in robes as Geshe after years of study for his advanced Buddhism degree at the transplanted Sera monastery on the steaming plains of Mysore, his life has been devoted to helping others in Nepal.

No fuss, he just sees the need, hops on his battered scooter, and gets on with alleviating suffering in this imperfect world. The fourth son of my husband's elder sister, he lived in the Tibet Children's Village in Dharmasala before running away to become a monk. Serving as a translator for Sera's leaders, Sonam Wangchen was known as Gelung for his selfless vows and aura of focussed compassion, attracting the admiration of donors who followed him and his tireless work



PICS: LISA CHOEGYAL

HELPING HANDS: (top to bottom) Geshe Sonam Wangchen in a scooter helmet distributing meals this week in Boudhanath.

Geshe Sonam Wangchen (left) with my son Rinchen (right) and the three children he sponsors, Rosemary, Kusum, and Binod in 2019.



to Kathmandu.

For expediency on the job, Sonam Wangchen rearranges his robes with a utilitarian claret tee-shirt and red quilted jacket, topped with a bike helmet. Just like he used to hitch up his skirts to play a mean game of football with my boys in the garden during family gatherings.

As a kid Sangjay collected money from college friends to assist the heroin detox centre in a modest Budhanilkantha house, and Rinchen saved pocket money

to educate young children who had found shelter with him. After one visit I was haunted by an old man with a suppurating leg in a brace who had found refuge there, abandoned by his family.

The scope of Sonam Wangchen's work received a boost after the 2015 earthquakes when the quiet heroism of his Hope and Challenge NGO attracted ongoing support from donors inspired to make a difference though his hands-on achievements – mainly philanthropic individuals from

COVID-19

around Asia, India and Nepal. His resolve never faltered, his grave, unflinching grin never far behind the sorrow.

Today, several expanded rehab centres offer drug and alcohol addiction treatment and counselling for inmates. From a humble rented room

in Boudhanath, Geshe Sonam Wangchen and his NGO team provide drug prevention guidance in the Valley's schools, medical advice and spiritual therapy. They run shelters for vulnerable aged people, and homes for children in need of protection and schooling.

For many years one of their most effective and appreciated activities has been feeding the homeless and disabled, every day, around Boudhanath and Swayambhunath. Soon after lockdown last month, I called Geshe-la to see what was needed in these troubled times – I imagine him impatiently fumbling amidst his dishevelled robes for the phone.

"Hello Auntie" I wish he wouldn't call me that, but his cheerful voice always makes me smile. "More food for the people who can't find work," was his immediate reply.

The meal distribution stations operating on the streets of Boudhanath and Swayambhunath are overwhelmed with growing numbers of men, women and children turning up every day. They are not only handing out cooked meals, never turning anyone away, but also trying to provide care packages to sustain families – rice, *dal* and cooking oil.

An email to Nepal-centric friends produced heart-warming results from both home and abroad – many relieved to contribute tangible assistance and to overcome our collective helplessness under these current constraints. Last night Sonam Wangchen called to thank me and the boys for generating extra funds, and sent a load of photos and videos of the suitably masked, socially-distanced, and hand-washing food lines. At dusk, our local hero was still busy.

"Whoever wants to come they can come. It used to be homeless people for lunch, but now so many daily workers are hungry as they have no job – it is very difficult. Many people are coming – we have to keep cooking from early morning to late evening. We are feeding over 1,000 people every day." 🇳🇵

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ON THE OCCASION OF 19TH ANNIVERSARY, SUBISU PRESENTS

Will politicians pass the COVID-19 test?

Just like the 2015 earthquake, COVID-19 is an exam for leaders to prove their worth

It is the fifth anniversary of the big earthquake that shook us all on 25 April 2015. The rebuilding process has been slow, but contrary to public perception it has been steady.



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

Many first-time visitors to Kathmandu are quite impressed with the recovery, and often ask me where all the damage is. It is also noteworthy that in the last five years since the disaster, we promulgated a new Constitution, survived a Blockade, held elections to all three levels of government, and we hoped that with political stability there would be development.

Infrastructure, energy, health, tourism and education sectors were finally getting the attention they needed. World class school buildings and health facilities have come up across the earthquake affected areas. Women have been trained in masonry and carpentry, information technology applications have spread across Nepal's remote locations.

Traditional artisans have done us all proud by reviving the craft and skills to restore our monuments. The restoration of Boudhanath set the pace and the rest followed. The flow of resources assured us that Nepal still has many friends all over the world.

But just as we were getting over the aftermath of the upheavals of the past five year, we have been hit by an unforeseen and unprecedented disaster. Once again, we are confronting some of the challenges we overcame after the earthquake.

The pandemic has exposed societal inequities, state inaction, lack of transparency. We still do not know who the poor are in this



BIKRAM RAI



country. We tout poverty numbers and percentages all the time, but is that true picture? Who are the most vulnerable, and how do we help them?

We are bombarded by heart-wrenching videos of families who have run out of cash and

food on the long march home from Kathmandu. These are the underserved: they were in Kathmandu because of state's inability to provide rural jobs, and they are victims of state apathy after the lockdown. The meagre belongings on their backs, and being forced to walk hundreds of kilometers in flipflops are symbolic of the state of governance.

When the earthquake hit Nepal, we did not have elected local governments and identifying the

poor and vulnerable took time. We started to define them, but now we may have to redefine vulnerability. This time it is frontline health workers, food and medicine store keepers, taxi and bus drivers, who are most vulnerable. Even a month after they returned, there is stigmatisation against migrant workers who have come back from abroad.

Then there is the catch-all phrase: capacity building. In the 1980s, the Hetauda cloth factory did well in Nepal and the

neighbourhood with high quality textile products. Then, like in other spheres of national life, a combination due to of political interference, mismanagement, low productivity and inability to compete, the factory closed.

In the post-earthquake and post-COVID economy, why not revive the Hetauda factory to produce cloth for the army and police and design it to produce masks and PPE? In an earthquake, it makes tents, and soon in the monsoon it can produce rafts and rain gear.

COVID-19

The new normal is where a textile factory needs to quickly become a PPE and mask maker. How do we train the staff, and what kind of skills will workers need? In the next cold wave this winter, we will need sleeping bags and jackets.

Pharmaceutical companies in Nepal have to gear up to acquire the license to produce a vaccine or drugs for COVID-19. Which companies have the capability? Capacity building has a whole new meaning in the post-pandemic, post-earthquake, and during the climate induced disaster-prone Nepal.

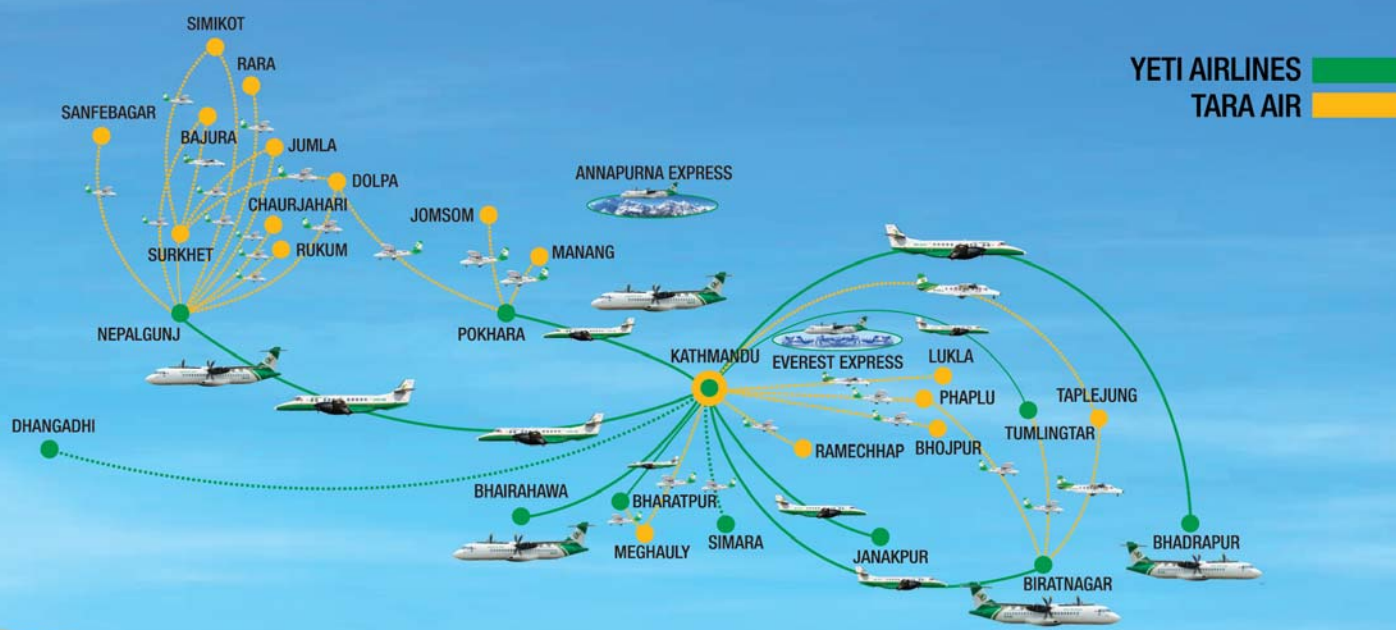
Another aspect of capacity is related to leadership at the centre, the provinces and local governments. Leadership, we have seen, is about who can keep millions of people to stay the course, lay out clear plans and communicate clear instructions at times of crisis.

It is about trust, transparency and accountability. The next election is less than three years away, that would be the perfect time to reward the do-ers. The earthquake was a great teacher, and COVID-19 is an exam for those who want to rule over us. Can they pass the test?

Anil Chitrakar writes this fortnightly column 1/2 Full in Nepali Times, and is President of Siddharthinc

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PAUL JEFFREY

Reviewing lessons of the 2015 Nepal Earthquake

Despite weaknesses, Nepal did not do too badly in picking itself up in the past 5 years

Govind Raj Pokharel

The earthquake struck at 11:56 on 25 April 2015, just as 50 young people were donating blood inside Kasthmandap. Eleven of those who were trying to save the lives of others lost theirs.

Nepalis faced panic for few hours, but soon, families, communities and the nation came together in the time of great need. Some of those lessons are relevant five years later, as we face another disaster of the pandemic.

There was no call from the government to help affected people, Nepalis rose spontaneously and voluntarily – just like they are now helping the thousands who are trekking for days from Kathmandu to reach their homes in a lockdown, without anyone asking them to.

Nepal's diaspora also came up with generous help for the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction phases. Nepal's culture of community-based organisations like *guthi*, cooperatives, mother's groups are the foundations of our social cohesiveness.

Reconstruction activities revived the traditional labour barter system in many rural areas. The task of rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction was led by the government with financial, material, knowledge and moral support of countries near and far, multilateral institutions, private sector, and many non-profits.

The mammoth job was coordinated in the beginning by the government and the National Planning Commission (NPC) prepared a Post Disaster Need Assessment (PDNA) report with support from 500 national and international experts.

The National Reconstruction Authority

(NRA) later led Reconstruction activities. Ministries and departments had to learn to work together in a more integrated way to manage rescue, relief and reconstruction and to support each other. The level of synchronisation needed has set a base for managing future disasters.

Nepal faces many types of disasters and has also learnt from the experience of India, China and Pakistan which also suffered deadly earthquakes. The Gujarat owner-build model for reconstruction proved valuable for Nepal, especially in home reconstruction.

The government provides technical services and grants in an installment basis, and the survivors take leadership to build own house. Nepal's own lessons learnt can now be replicated and adapted in other countries.

The 2015 earthquake provided experience to community-based organisations, local governments and national level policy makers. The NPC, departments and ministries, which lead the rescue, rehabilitation and reconstruction, now have precious institutional memory.

If a coordinating leadership emerges during the aftermath of a disaster, our institutions inside government and outside proved that they can deliver services with upgraded knowledge and capacity.

The experience gained by engineers, planners, masons, workers in the heritage sector will also be valuable. Many women contractors emerged from the reconstruction process, as women entered professions they were not in before, including masonry and carpentry.

We now have very good stock of skillsets required for similar reconstruction, and also

in transferring knowledge about retrofitting buildings in other parts of the country.

Another important achievement after the disaster was that a system was created that can now be regular part of business of our bureaucratic machinery. Building Codes have been upgraded and implemented in urban centres. Planning criteria for local governments and real estate have been introduced.

Structure analysis of any proposed building now has to ensure seismic resistance from not just earthquakes nearby but also bigger ones in the region. This spillover effect is ultimately helping Nepali in not-affected areas to have resilient public as well as private infrastructure.

The earthquake was an opportunity to revive traditional woodcraft and temple architecture, public buildings and even homes built in the traditional style – all this will help revive tourism into the future.

Whether in relief packages in kind or government grants, poorer families received more than better off households. Tens of thousands of households who did not have bank accounts now have access to the banking system. The NRA also decided that landless and people living in disaster prone areas are entitled to have additional grants to buy land nearby in safer areas. The property also had to be registered in the names of both the husband and wife. Similarly, marginalised communities, single women, the elderly were allowed to receive additional grant through non-governmental organisations to support rebuilding.

To be sure, there were a lot of things that could have gone better, faster, smoother. The 'integrated settlement' for rural areas, which

could have reduced public expenditure for water supply, rural access road, electricity supply system, for example, could not be implemented. This was because we adopted the owner build model for private housing.

Affected communities were given this option with some incentives in land planning and registration cost and funding for public infrastructure. However, because of social and other reasons very few people opted for integrated settlements.

Although policy decision not to lease any government and semi-government institution's land to private parties was taken, the management of more open areas for city dwellers was not initiated during reconstruction.

Traditional architecture could not be preserved in private homes and public buildings. Designs that followed traditional styles and training for masons were completely ignored, as people opted for reinforced concrete frames.

People lost not only lives and homes but also livelihoods. There was too much focus on physical reconstruction and not enough on getting people back on their feet by engaging small and medium enterprises.

Despite all these weaknesses, the pace of reconstruction in Nepal is satisfactory, compared to other countries in the region that have suffered disasters on a similar scale. The experience and opportunities have been used to move the country towards a more resilient path. 🇳🇵



Govind Raj Pokharel, PhD, was the first head of the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) in 2015.





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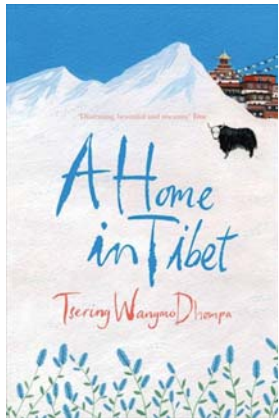
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Available in: 

SELF-ISOLATION

Suggested Books:



A Home in Tibet

The first Tibetan poetess to be published in English, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's memoir about travelling to her mother's Tibetan homeland and connecting with her roots transcends the barriers of language, space, and time.



A Beginning at the End

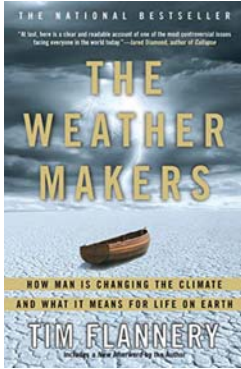
How do you start over after the end of the world? Mike Chen's post-apocalyptic science fiction fantasy follows the survivors of a plague that has wiped out several billion across the world.

A Clockwork Orange

Anthony Burgess' 1962 dystopian satirical black comedy is set in a near-future society rampant with youth violence and features the violent exploits of teenager Alex and his friends, and the state authorities intent on reforming them.

Down History's Narrow Lanes

Desmond Doig and Dubby Bhagat capture Kathmandu Valley's vibrant culture and traditions with Doig's exquisite line drawings of the Valley's temples, bahals and stupas, and Bhagat's fairy-tale-like language describing the Valley's history and myths.



The Weather Makers

Embraced and endorsed by policy makers, scientists, writers and energy industry executives from around the world, Tim Flannery's 2005 account of global warming and climate change contributed in bringing the topic to prominence.

QUARANTINE

Suggested Movies on the Dish:



Beauty and the Beast

In this retelling of the classic fairy-tale, a selfish Prince is cursed to become a monster for the rest of his life, unless he learns to fall in love. Watch with your kids.
24 April, 6:45pm, HBO

Jurassic Park

A pragmatic paleontologist visiting an almost complete theme park is tasked with protecting a couple of kids after a power failure causes the park's cloned dinosaurs to run loose.
25 April, 9:10am, HBO



Teen Spirit

Violet, a shy teenager dreams of escaping her small town and pursuing her passion to sing with the help of an unlikely mentor.
26 April, 12:05pm, HBO

Shot in the Heart

The story of a man coming to terms with the sins and secrets of his notorious brother and, in the process, exploring the legacy of violence in his own family.
27 April, 1:45pm, Cinemax

American Gangster

Inspired by true events, this partly biographical film follows an outcast New York City cop charged with bringing down Harlem drug lord Frank Lucas.
29 April, 8:55am, Cinemax

Overlord

A small group of American soldiers find horror behind enemy lines on the eve of D-Day.
30 April, 8:45pm, HBO



Molly's Game

The true story of Molly Bloom, an Olympic-class skier who ran the world's most exclusive high-stakes poker game and became an FBI target.
28 April, 7:45am, HBO

CONTAINMENT

Podcasts we like:



Myths and Legends

Sourced from folklore and retold for modern ears, Myths and Legends features stories from lores that have shaped cultures throughout history.

Intercepted

The people behind The Intercept's reporting and commentary discuss the crucial global issues of our time: national security, civil liberties, foreign policy, and criminal justice.

Heavyweight

Humorist Jonathan Goldstein helps people try to resolve a moment from their past that they wish they could change.



Invisibilia

A study of human behaviour, Invisibilia fuses narrative storytelling about the unseeable forces that shape our ideas, beliefs, and assumptions with science that will make you see your own life differently.



Binge Mode

Episodes of this pop-culture podcast produced by The Ringer give detailed recaps of your favourite television shows, films, or other piece of media.

APPROPRIATE APPS

Yummly

Yummly has millions of recipes to offer, which you can judge before trying by checking out how it scores on a user-run five-star rating system. Users are also able to know the calories and time it takes to prep and cook the dish.



Tasty

If there was one app that was made for millennial chefs, it's Tasty. Brought to you by BuzzFeed, Tasty is a reflection of its mother brand with creative content, vibrant look, attractive imagery and quick 'n easy how-to videos.

Cookpad

An app full of easy homemade recipes that inspires home chefs to experiment with food and share recipes with others around the world. Relying on user-generated content, Cookpad feels like a social network for culinary enthusiasts.

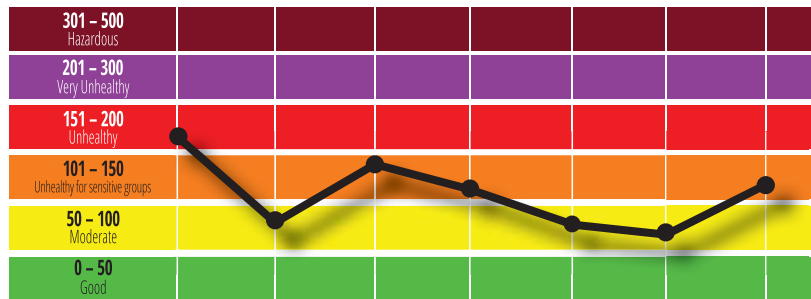


There has been some quite unusual pre-monsoonal precipitation the past week, with some 25mm of rain in Kathmandu Valley and maximum temperature at least 6 degrees below normal. This trend will continue into the weekend and next week with regular afternoon cloud buildup with thunderstorm activity, and snow down to 4,000m. Maximum temperature will remain in the low 20s in Kathmandu.



AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 17 - 23 April



Thanks to unusual pre-monsoon showers and the continued shutdown last week, the average daily air quality index improved after the pall of smoke from wildfires last week. The daily average concentration of particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in the city centre dropped sufficiently to bring the AQI to yellow 'Moderate' and orange 'Unhealthy for sensitive groups' zones most days this past week. However, open garbage burning kept air quality poor during morning hours. For live hour-by-hour AQI readings, go to [www.nepalitimes.com](https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/)
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



This week marks the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day. This environmental movement that started in 1970 highlights the importance of a clean, healthy and thriving planet. It is all the more relevant today given the current climate and ecological crisis. Every day is Earth Day and every person has an impact on the earth and others who live here. We make a difference by the choices we make, big and small, every day.

OUR PICK



Free to watch on YouTube, and released on Earth Day on Wednesday: Michael Moore presents *Planet of the Humans*, a documentary that dares to say what no one else will. This film is the wake-up call to the reality we are afraid to face: that in the midst of a human-caused extinction event, the environmental movement's answer is to push for techno-fixes and band-aids. It's too little, too late.

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

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A tale of two disasters

On the fifth anniversary of the 2015 earthquake, Nepali workers overseas describe how this pandemic is on a much bigger scale

Upasana Khadka

Although overshadowed by the coronavirus crisis, on 25 April Nepal will mark five years since the earthquake in 2015 that took nearly 9,000 lives.

Many migrant families lost members and property when the earthquake hit. Five years later, they are once more trying to cope with an upheaval that has jolted not just Nepal, but the whole world.

A Nepali worker in Dubai compares the two disasters: "Back then I was worried about the next shake, now it is about the next case. Five years ago, I was worried about the safety of my family in Lamjung, this time they are worried about my health."

So far, nearly 1,135 Nepalis abroad have tested positive for the virus and at least 28 have died. Among overseas contract workers, 48 Nepalis in Bahrain have tested positive, 15 in Kuwait, 18 in UAE and 1 in Malaysia. Four of those infected in the UAE have recovered, while one Nepali woman died.

When the earthquake struck in 2015, the world rushed to help. As efforts were made to ramp up to help Nepalis, an informal safety net stood strong for migrant families: remittances.



Migrant workers in countries unaffected by that disaster could rely on their most prized asset, their labour to help families back home pull through either via remittances or by returning to lend a helping hand. The Migration Development Brief of the World Bank showed that remittances rose by 20.4% in 2015, while average returns jumped by five times to 4,000 per day.

During this pandemic, however, many migrants are themselves vulnerable to the virus and the economic downturn caused by it. COVID-19 cases are on the rise in the Gulf and Malaysia. Many workers are on the verge of losing their jobs or having hours cut, and unlike last time, returning home is not an option.

Oil prices have crashed and reached the lowest levels in two



A child in front of a house in Kathmandu decimated by the earthquake.

UPASANA KHADKA

decades, hitting Gulf economies hard. Disruptions in international mobility and supply chains, local economic slowdown, delay of construction projects and cancellation of large scale events have all impacted on Nepali workers.

While workers have been assured basic salaries despite the lockdown, others are being asked to take unpaid leave, or are in danger of losing their jobs. A sense of panic has spread among migrant communities already dealing with the fear of being infected.

A Nepali security guard working in Malaysia told me over the phone this week that he had opted to stay home: "I could have earned more, but I thought who will provide for my family if something happens to me?"

He was in Chitwan when the earthquake hit in 2015. "The earthquake struck, it destroyed then it left. This disease is slow and uncertain. We cannot be with our families back home for each other. In fact, we are threats to each other and I keep reminding my family to stay home at all costs."

Indeed, while both have been covariate shocks, the response during the earthquake allowed for a more social and collective response to ensure everyone had an indoor to go to, while COVID-19 has forced us all indoors. With this crisis, the whole world is in uncharted territory.

As the caseloads rise in destination countries for Nepali

migrants, there is uncertainty and distress among workers and their families. Social safety nets are required more than ever because the informal support networks that the poorest rely on during times of distress, whether at home or abroad, are all affected by COVID-19.

One quarantined worker in Qatar whose family is in Kapilbastu puts it like this: "I am more worried about my family than myself. Anything can happen anytime and I am in constant fear." Whether during earthquake or COVID-19, migrant workers are gripped by a

deep longing for home during times of disasters.

In 2015, Nepalis came together to raise funds for those affected back home. A Nepali in Qatar who is in the non-resident Nepali organisation remembers providing support to relief efforts in the districts, and contributing to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund.

"We raised money to help workers who had lost family members or homes, and employer and colleagues also provided support," he recalls. This time, it is difficult to lend any support due to

restricted mobility, lack of fungible funding, and the need to be frugal. But there are examples of Nepalis helping Nepalis – for example in Ajman in the UAE, Nepalis provide free food to fellow Nepalis displaced by COVID-19.

With informal support networks also affected, the Nepal government needs to make bold steps targeting the poorest. It has launched a relief package to cushion the impact of COVID-19 that includes a mixture of food aid, waiver for one month's rent and school fees, discounts in utility bills and support for contribution to the social security fund, among others.

COVID-19

Whether this help will reach the most vulnerable internal migrants and their evolving needs will depend on its proper implementation. Similarly, some overseas Nepali workers face the prospect of being sent home to a country not adequately prepared to transport them back, and without enough quarantine facilities. The government and its embassies need to ensure that at least their basic food and lodging needs are sufficiently covered.

A Nepali who works as a ground handler has seen flights airlifting foreigners from Nepal land at Doha airport. He wonders when he will be similarly repatriated. His work is relatively safe, but other Nepali friends have riskier jobs as cabin cleaners or work in customer service with whom he shares his room.

Over the phone, his voice sounds worried: "Ideally, I would like to go home. I can always earn in the future. But if I don't live, how will I earn?" 🇳🇵



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Five years after avalanche,

Minutes before noon on 25 April 2015, the earth rattled and shook. But then another thunderous sound approached from above. A whole section of the icefield below the summit of Mt Langtang Lirung had been shaken loose by the quake, and it fell on the glacier below, bulldozing it over a cliff to the village below.

Langtang was obliterated and buried. A shock wave preceded the avalanche and blew everything away to the other side of the valley where trees lay flattened as if hit by a nuclear explosion. Nearly 300 people were killed in the disaster, half of them Langtangpa.



The survivors were airlifted to the Yellow Gumba monastery in Kathmandu, and some of them got trekking guide and lodge management training at the Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hospitality Management and the women were trained in baking and making hand-knitted woollen products. On the fifth anniversary of the disaster this week, *Nepali Times* caught up with some of the survivors of the disaster. 🇳🇵



NEW LIFE: The Dorje Bakery and Coffee Shop in Kyanjin Gumba before the avalanche in 2015 (*above*), and being rebuilt after the earthquake (*below*).



Lhakpa Tamang Jangba

I never thought I would be a baker. Once, when I was with my father in Kathmandu for his medical checkup, he said he wanted to start a bakery in Langtang. I bought him all the equipment, but a few days later he died. I wanted to turn his unfulfilled dream into reality and learnt to bake.

Initially, the Internet recipes I relied on failed. A trekker in my lodge even said: "This is the most horrible chocolate cake I have ever tasted." But I kept trying. Another guest helped me bake properly, and brew coffee.

When the earthquake hit, I was having coffee at the lodge. The guests ran out. Then I heard the roar of the avalanche coming down from Langtang Lirung. I saw my kitchen collapse in front of my eyes, and the hotel crumbled. We hid in a corner, and watched this huge cloud of snow and dust cover Kyanjin Gumba. It was hard to breathe.

The avalanche stopped, but rocks kept falling. People were crying. The helicopters finally came, we evacuated injured tourists and neighbours. I was rescued on the fourth day, and when I met my family who was in Kathmandu, we held each other and cried. We had become homeless refugees in our own country.

But a young Langtangpa in Kathmandu started a reconstruction committee in a Swayambhu monastery where the head Lama gave us permission to stay as long as we needed. We focused on fundraising because we knew that the government's Rs300,000 grant would not go far.

It has been five years, and my Dorje Bakery Café and Coffee Center named after my late father has been rebuilt. We had revived tourism, and life was going back to normal when this virus happened. It has destroyed our livelihood once again. We do not know when this will end, but we survived the earthquake and we will overcome this crisis too. There will be more earthquakes and disasters, but future generations need to know how we did not give up hope even when everything was destroyed.

Born again after the

National paralympian Ramesh Khatri rediscovers his purpose in life after surviving the 2015 earthquake



ON WHEELS:

Ramesh Khatri rediscovered mobility after getting a wheelchair, and being helped by a nurse to use his prosthetic legs.



Ramesh Khatri

I cannot believe that it has been five years since I laid in that darkness, underneath eight floors of a hotel in Gongabu, my legs trapped under a concrete beam.

I forced myself to remain conscious, that was the only way I could raise an alarm for rescuers. They finally came 24 hours later. I could hear them call from what seemed very far away. I was transferred to Teaching Hospital, where I would wake up three days later to realise that I had lost both my legs.

I ran away to Kathmandu at age 16 with the hope of providing a better life for my family back in Dailekh. My father and his

father before that were seasonal migrant workers in India. I spent my childhood going back and forth between Nepal and India.

Elder sons are held in high regard in our society, they are expected to be the income earners to take care of the family. I felt responsible about looking after my ageing parents, and was determined to give my brothers and sisters a good education.

My first job was to wash dishes at the hotel, but soon I learnt how to cook. I did not go back to Dailekh for two years, but was packing to return that very day. I had bought my bus ticket, but fate had other plans.

There are no words to describe the pain and suffering of those two months in the hospital. Even after

being discharged, every day was a struggle. I had to constantly fight to regain the life I had lost.

But I was resolute about achieving something in life. I had lost my limbs, but my determination was very much intact. With the love, care and affection showered by my sisters Jasmin and Puja *Didi*, and strengthened by support of friends, doctors and nurses, I began to see my goal in life with more clarity.

I was taken care of at the Bal Poshan Sanstha, who helped and supported me physically, emotionally and with my physiotherapy. I was constantly encouraged by Sunita Rimal, who runs the organisation, who used to tell me: "Look at all the people who have disabilities just like you. Look at all the things that they can do.

You can do them, too."

My physiotherapy continued with Humanity and Inclusion Nepal, which trained me to use my new prosthetic legs. After transferring to the Nepal Health Equipment Development Foundation (NHEDF) where I was looked after by its manager, Samrat Basnet, I began visiting the Rastriya Apanga Kosh, where I would practice more physiotherapy. But the Blockade made it difficult to commute to my physiotherapy lessons, so I familiarised myself with using a wheelchair. It was dangerous, I could have been hit by cars, but I persevered because I needed to get my leg muscles working again.

To my delight, with the help of Devina Bulot, Pawan Tuladhar,

and Pawan Pradhan, I started taking classes at Navajivan Madhyamik Vidyalaya. I could not believe that within a year of the earthquake, I had the opportunity to study again.

After winning the 'Differently-abled Idol' prize by showcasing my dancing talent, I received much media attention. This encouraged me to then pursue my real passion: swimming. I began training at NSCIA, and won a competition, receiving the medal from President Bidya Devi Bhandari herself. By December of 2016, I had qualified as a national player through the national para-swimming association and went to Japan for training.

I then participated in the 2018 Asian Para Games in Jakarta after raising money required to attend from well-wishers. I competed in the 50m freestyle swimming category logging 46.49 seconds, and this got me a training opportunity in Korea, and I attended the Dream Program 2020. The 2019 London World Championships was one of many competitions that I was not able to represent Nepal because of financial shortcomings, despite my qualification.

I now share a room with a differently-abled friend named Dibas Pariyar. Since the lockdown started a month ago, life has been difficult. We are short of supplies, but cook and eat together from what Dibas can collect from various charities.

The lockdown is necessary, but has made life difficult for everyone – especially for people like us. But after being through so much, I feel this is just another hurdle that life has put along the way for me to overcome and become stronger. 🇳🇵

Langtang is locked down



Tsering Choephel Lama

When the earthquake struck, I was living in Swayambhu. We spent a few nights in an empty field because of the aftershocks, but my mind was in Langtang. My village had been wiped off the map by a huge avalanche triggered by the earthquake. I was in shock.

After the Langtangpa were airlifted to Kathmandu we moved to the Yellow Gumba where I volunteered in the camp -- helping to keep it clean, cooking and taking care of those who had been injured. The Langtangpa were not used to the heat, and my fear was they would fall sick. We therefore tried to keep the camp as clean as possible.

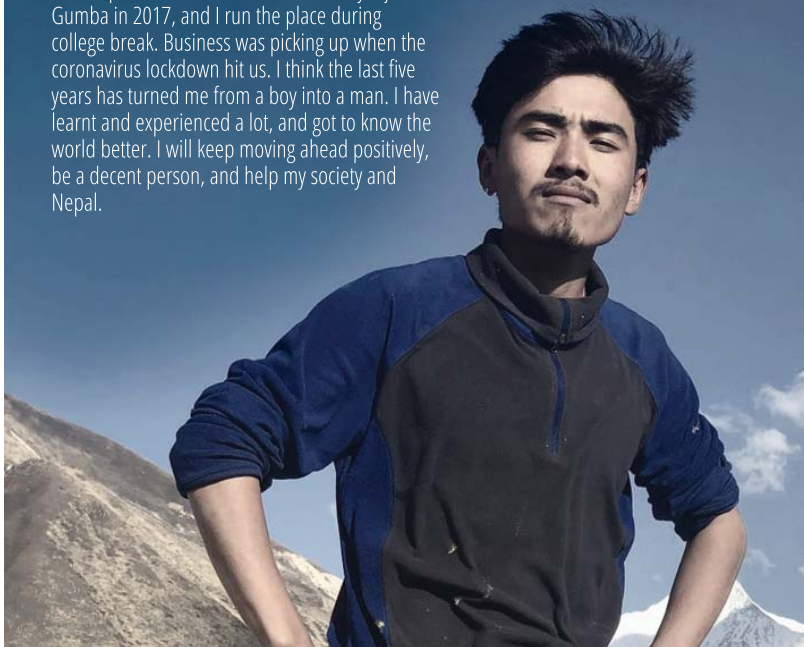
Some of the volunteers advised me to go to the United States to study, and that is where I am now. Life in America is very different, I am now a biomedicine undergrad. At the moment school is closed because of the COVID-19, but I want to finish my studies and work in the medical field so I can be useful for my people in Langtang.

Tsering Jangbu Changnyempa

When the earthquake struck, I was doing my +2 college in Kathmandu. My final board exam got shifted because of the earthquake, and I stayed at the shelter in Yellow Gumba.

I got my guide license during my stay at the monastery and enrolled in a Bachelor in Travel and Tourism Management. I worked with an organisation called Langtang 7221, and travelled to Italy to raise funds for Langtang and tell Italians about Nepal. Apart from several fundraising dinners, I also took a two week pizza-making course.

I opened Sunrise Guest House in Kyanjin Gumba in 2017, and I run the place during college break. Business was picking up when the coronavirus lockdown hit us. I think the last five years has turned me from a boy into a man. I have learnt and experienced a lot, and got to know the world better. I will keep moving ahead positively, be a decent person, and help my society and Nepal.



Kartok Lama

Five years after the earthquake, we had finally started a new life, tourism was gradually picking up again. We had planned to commemorate the 5th anniversary this week with blessings from His Holiness Kyabje Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche, but it had to be postponed due to COVID-19. We had great hopes for Visit Nepal 2020, but the lockdown has wrecked tourism once again in Langtang. This uncertainty has most of us deeply worried.

The village is not the same as before the earthquake, and will never be. But we have preserved our culture and some of us have gone back to farming, and livestock rearing for the cheese factory.

The earthquake destroyed the oldest monastery in Langtang, but it was rebuilt after two years with support from the Japanese, and two other shrines are being reconstructed. Restarting our new life in Langtang was difficult. The virus has made it tougher. But we did not lose hope then, and we will not lose hope now.

earthquake

Pemba's story

Ramesh Khatri and Pemba Lama (*pictured below*) had been friends for over four years, working in hotels near the bus park in Gongabu. Saturday morning of 25 April 2015 was like any other. Ramesh and Pemba were about to have lunch when the building started shaking violently.

Pemba, quick on his feet, managed to run a few steps towards the exit. Ramesh did not make it. The eight storey building came crashing down on everyone. Pemba was trapped in a crouching position and rescued after five hours, unhurt. Ramesh had his legs trapped, which had to be amputated after his rescue.

"I guess I have just about managed these past five years," Pemba says over Facebook Messenger. He went to India to find work, returned and worked again in the Gongabu area.

He is now learning to play the guitar, and practicing some rock lyrics through YouTube. During the

lockdown he is helping his friends in a guest house. He got bored in Kathmandu, and tried to walk back to his home village in Nuwakot, but lost his way and had to come back.

Pemba adds: "I would really like to meet the policeman who rescued me five years ago, and thank him. I have not thought about the future. I will take what fate has in store for me."

Upasana Khadka



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Post-pandemic mental health epidemic

The prolonged lockdown and its economic impact could exacerbate Nepal’s hidden mental health crisis

Sonia Awale

The number of Nepalis suffering from mental health issues is increasing with the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown, and the lack of treatment and counselling means the country may be facing an epidemic of psychosocial disorders.

Mental health is a hidden pre-existing crisis in Nepal because of social stigma, with a survey three years ago showing that a shocking 37% of the population suffered from some form of mental health problem.

But a new survey this month shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown to contain the contagion has exacerbated the problem, with a quarter of those surveyed saying they felt restless, fearful, anxious, worried all the time.

42% suffered from at least one kind of psychosocial problem, and 26% from two or more. At least 15% of respondents admitted they had taken to alcohol and substance abuse.

Over 1,500 Nepalis participated in the survey by Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) Nepal and Sharecast Initiative during the lockdown, which has now lasted a month.

“The fact that 25% of those surveyed admitted to experiencing constant psychosocial problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant finding,” said Kamal Gautam, psychologist at TPO Nepal. He explained that problems were more frequent among women, students stressed about postponed exams, people whose businesses are impacted by the lockdown, and daily-wage earners.

The findings could be a warning about an impending epidemic of psychiatric problems as the lockdown and its impact is felt across society. In fact, mental healthcare providers say they are already seeing more patients with depression and anxiety disorder, as well as more severe psychoses.

A 21-year-old boy was recently admitted to Patan Hospital for psychotic breakdown after he started throwing things around his house,



GOPEN RAU/NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

and screaming that everyone was going to die from the coronavirus. Also last week, a girl who had taken to excessive cannabis use during the lockdown was brought in due to serious side effects.

“A lot of people are suffering silently, unable to come to us due to the lockdown and it is very likely many do not recognise the symptoms of mental disorder,” said Rabi Shakya, professor of psychiatry at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences. “It is normal to be worried during the time of a pandemic, and most people can cope with it. But some experience persistent symptoms of mental health disorder, and prolonged stress can also lead to self-harm.”

Alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism adds to existing mental and physiological problems, as well as lead to an increase in

domestic abuse. Alcohol relapse is among the most common cases during the lockdown at Patan Hospital.

For mental health counsellors this is a vivid reminder of the mental health crisis following the earthquake five years ago this week. A survey of earthquake-affected districts of Rasuwa, Nuwakot and Makwanpur by TPO Nepal in 2017 showed that nearly 40% of respondents suffered from depression and anxiety for a year-and-half after the earthquake. Another 22% said they had suicidal thoughts, and a quarter had taken to drinking heavily.

“We are going to see a huge surge in mental health cases once the lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic is over. We have to get our limited facilities prepared to handle the situation,” Shakya predicted.

Mita Rana, a clinical psychologist at Teaching Hospital agreed that service providers will be overwhelmed with old and new patients if the lockdown is extended. She said many of her patients with pre-existing mental health disorders have not been able to come for follow-up consultations or get medications.

“During a time of a disaster or an epidemic, anxiety disorder, phobia, obsessive compulsive tendencies and depressive thoughts are more likely to be triggered in mentally-ill people and aggravate their condition,” Rana explained.

COVID-19

Although children tend to be generally spared by the virus, they quite easily pick up anxiety from their parents and relatives. Health care providers, migrant workers and their families are among the most vulnerable to mental health breakdowns because they often face stigma and discrimination from neighbours and relatives.

Mental health care providers including hospitals, clinics and non-profits have started a tele-mental health program during the lockdown. TPO Nepal alone has responded to 126 calls in the last three weeks through a toll-free number. Others have set up social media platforms, and 24/7-consultation services.

Nepal’s second confirmed coronavirus patient Prasiddhi Shrestha, wrote in her blog this week following a successful recovery: ‘One thing I have grown to realise in this process is that often times we disregard the mental health part of the virus. Symptoms like shortness of breath are largely capable of exacerbating one’s anxiety as well as the ignorance the public may show towards them.’

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