Physical distancing

Even as the country is in the throes of the COVID-19 crisis, the power struggle between Prime Minister Oli and his opponents within the ruling Nepal Communist Party is reaching a climax, with some in the party’s 9-member secretariat calling on him to step down.

The prime minister, three former prime ministers opposed to him and other secretariat members were mocked and maintained physical distancing at separate tables during the meeting on Wednesday phubu, above. But it was the political distance between them that was more perceptible.

Sources present said the assemblage size was 5-4 against Oli, as the prime minister desperately tried to win two critical members, Bam Dev Gautam and Madhav Kumar Nepal, to his side.

Speaking first at the meeting, Pushpa Kamal Dahal directly demanded that Oli step down from prime ministership, accusing him of trying to split the party. This was expected, since Dahal and Oli have no love lost for each other, and have long dwelled for prime ministership.

But what came next shocked observers, a source said, and changed the tone of the meeting. Speaking next, Oli said that after the coronavirus crisis was over, he would step down and offer the prime ministership to Bam Dev Gautam. To make this possible, he said Gautam could be nominated to the Upper House, or be made to win a by-election to be an MP.

Gautam has been home minister several times in previous UML governments, and has long been angling for prime ministership, even after he lost his parliamentary seat in the 2017 election. By putting forward Gautam’s name as successor, Oli was not just trying to distract attention from matter at hand, but also to get a secretariat member on his side.

The tactic appears to have worked because Gautam was mollified, and muted his criticism of Oli.

Further, to appease another vocal critic, Oli also proposed that Nepal be made the third NCP chair. However, Nepal was not taking the bait. Political analysts said this was vintage Oli, who revives in intrigue and divide-and-rule. The secretariat meeting was adjourned on Saturday, giving both sides more time to win over wild cards Nepal and Gautam.

So far, Oli has his Defence Minister Ishwor Pokharel, Home Minister Ram Baburam Thapa, trusted aide Bishnu Pandey on his side. Dahal has former prime minister Pushpa Kamal and Nabin Bhattarai Shrestha supporting him.

This was the first secretariat meeting after Oli got the Cabinet to pass and the President to endorse two controversial ordinances, which he had to retract last week after an uproar within the party.

NCP watchers say the wily Oli may have thought he pulled a fast one, but it will not be so easy to get Bam Dev Gautam to succeed him.

With the NCP in-fighting distracting the nation’s attention away from the coronavirus lockdown and the impending economic crisis, 10 prominent civil society members issued a statement on Wednesday, calling for unity.

Their statement said: "The power struggle within the ruling NCP is not just an internal matter. It has direct implication on the country’s long-term national interest. We appeal to all political sides to desist from disturbing the country’s stability and to work together during this time of national crisis."
Lockdown Crackdown

In many countries across the world, especially with the rise of keeping democracy and freedom, the coronavirus pandemic has become a cover for suppression and control. Lockdowns are an excuse for crackdowns.

Fast as a quantum curious freedom movement on a global scale, the virus has been used to clamp down on the freedom of expression. To be sure, the trend started long before the coronavirus, as governments used the free media and free elections to stoke populism and get themselves elected. Once there, they began dismantling the very institutions of democracy that propelled them to power.

We have seen the same in our immediate neighborhood, in the Philippines. Just a few years ago, the rise of the right of the far east in Hungary and other European countries, in all the countries, the scenario of falsehoods now the ones who are using the pretext of fake news to mute critics.

Here in Nepal, there has been a dangerous drift toward intolerance of criticism of the government, which is especially true in the last few years in our immediate neighborhood, in the Philippines, the United States, and the rise of the far east in Hungary and other European countries.

What some of these provisions are being applied to critics of the government, but selectively, so that they seem to affect the same person of the same nation where the nation-wide lockdowns have gotten different punishments.

Some who have been tracked down by Facebook posts on social media have been arrested in their homes. Others, like friends or family members of the arrested or those who were arrested, have been charged with sedition or threats. The government has arrested those who were arrested.

On World Press Freedom Day on 2 May lets prevent control of the pandemic from being controlled.

ONLINE PACKAGES

WHATS TRENDING

How Nepal should plan Lockdown

How Nepal should plan Lockdown

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The courage and endurance of the Langtang people

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10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

By Nepal Times 10 years ago, this week. Among the thousands of people killed in the earthquake, thousands more were injured and 21,000 people were displaced. A new public opinion survey shows that most Nepalis think the current crop of leaders can lead the country to prosperity and peace.

The most dramatic finding of this year’s nationwide health and public opinion survey is that 70% of Nepalis believe that the political system in Kathmandu and 14% in the park, with the rest still in a state of shock.

Beginning of the year 2019, Nepal was ranked among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of corruption, while the political system was ranked among the worst in the world.

Nepal Times

As of March 31, 2020, a total of 7,500 earthquake victims were evacuated from the affected areas to Mount Everest Base Camp, while a total of 10,000 people were treated in the affected areas.

Nepal Times

A total of 7,500 earthquake victims were treated in the affected areas.

Nepal Times

Days ago, in one of the last major earthquakes in Nepal, the epicenter was in Mount Everest Base Camp.

Nepal Times

A total of 7,500 earthquake victims were treated in the affected areas.

Nepal Times

A total of 7,500 earthquake victims were treated in the affected areas.

Nepal Times

A total of 7,500 earthquake victims were treated in the affected areas.

Nepal Times
How Nepal should plan to exit lockdown

Safely restarting agriculture, industry and supply chains to spur economic revival

Ramesh Kumar

With the COVID-19 lockdown officially ending on 7 May, the government is expected to extend it but announce a partial easing of restrictions with strict guidelines on movement. Although Nepal was the first South Asian country to clamp a stay-at-home order on 24 March, movement for essential services has been allowed. However, with the number of confirmed cases still relatively low, there is pressure on the government to balance saving lives with saving livelihoods.

“A lockdown does not mean the country should be handicapped; there should be a benchmark to stop the infection from spreading, but allow industrial and construction activity in areas where no infections have been detected,” says economist Biswo Poudel. Even if the lockdown is lifted, Nepal is headed for a serious economic contraction, with the growth rate estimated to fall to less than 3% from the projected 7% in the coming fiscal year. Most hydropower and infrastructure projects have been indefinitely suspended, there is already a reduction on remittances and revenue collection, tourism has been wiped out, and livelihoods compromised.

Another economist Manikul Shrestha agrees: “The impact of a prolonged lockdown on the economy will be devastating, the government should immediately start thinking about a restricted re-opening of industries and infrastructure projects maintaining a balance between public health and economic revival.” He adds that this would result in jobs and production, which in turn will raise market demand for goods and services, and set the stage for an overall economic upturn.

With food production hampered by an inability to access markets and raw materials and produce lying waste in the fields, economists like former Finance Secretary Rameshwar Khanal have encouraged the government to create an investment-friendly environment by reducing interest rates and promoting capital investment and expenditure. Khanal believes that the government must pull all stops to ensure that the circular flow of money supply takes its normal course, as the World Bank estimate that the economy may take up to three years to return to pre-lockdown levels.

“It is possible to revive the economy by reducing interest rates on the formal sector. Lower interest rates would reduce the cost of finance and allow businesses to restore their balance sheets,” Khanal explains. Despite the current situation, construction on Melamchi Drinking Water, Upper Tama Kosi and Bhairav and Pokhara airports have continued under supervised conditions, and food deposits have remained functional.

Biswo Poudel urges the government to consider write-offs of loans of less than Rs1 million so as to allow small and medium scale enterprises to reconcile their balance sheets and keep employees on the payroll. He says this would not cost the government a lot, and would help kickstart economic activity.

However, Finance Minister Yubraj Khatiwada has not been very receptive to the idea of rescuing the private sector. The finance ministry has always been more focused on the macro-economy, worried about protecting its revenue base, and its ability to leverage foreign loans.

Other analysts see the current crisis as a springboard to remake and reorient Nepal’s economy, fix defects in the government machinery and plug loopholes. “We must re-assess the country’s political economy over the past 50 years not just the present policies,” says economist Keshav Acharya. “We must be more far-sighted, have a vision for the future. This pandemic has shown us where the problem areas are. It is an opportunity.”

Economists interviewed for this analysis agree that the model should be to encourage a massive investment in infrastructure, even if it means taking loans, in order to immediately create jobs, increase spending and propel the country on a sustainable economic trajectory. They have been dire warnings about food insecurity if the government does not prioritise agriculture during the lockdown.

Farmers must also not be obstructed from taking produce to market. The World Food Programme has warned that many districts in western Nepal are already suffering food shortages, and Nepal has only enough food stock to last three months. In such a case, the already import-reliant Nepal has to implement strategies that uplift agriculture, possibly by encouraging young men and women who have returned to their home villages from abroad or travelled back from cities to farm. If the government can help with fertiliser, seeds and farming equipment the crisis could be an opportunity to make Nepal self-sufficient in food production.

Even before the global pandemic, half of Nepal’s population fell into the lower-middle income category, with 18 per cent below the poverty line. This demographic is particularly at risk from food shortages. A loss of livelihoods in the low-wage workforce and in the tourism, construction and trade sectors also pushes more below the poverty line. Despite the government’s announcement of a relief package for vulnerable citizens, the lack of information and data at the local level means identifying who constitutes the ‘vulnerable’ is difficult. “Even if there is a relief package for the poorest, it will be too meager and short-term if the lockdown continues for much longer,” says Keshav Acharya. “The responsibility to protect and cushion citizens from the impact of the crisis rests on the government. This needs commitment and bold measures from political leadership.”
Big story of smallpox

Recurring epidemics shaped the course of history in the Subcontinent in unexpected ways

When we think of Nepal’s history, it is imprinted with the tales of its ancient kings and the bravery of its warriors. But what about the stories of smallpox, a disease that shaped the course of history in the Subcontinent?

The smallpox virus, which was eradicated globally in 1980, was once a deadly disease. In the 18th century, it was known as the “King of Diseases” due to its high mortality rate. Smallpox had a devastating impact on Nepal, just as it did on other regions around the world.

In the mid-1700s, smallpox epidemic hit Kathmandu, and a block of 1,000 people died within a week. This was the first recorded epidemic of smallpox in Nepal. The virus spread rapidly, and thousands of people fell ill and died.

The symptoms of smallpox were severe, with fever, rash, and sometimes fatal kidney failure. The mortality rate was high, and those who survived were often left with scarring and disfigurement.

Despite the severity of the disease, smallpox had a lasting impact on the history of Nepal. It led to the death of many people, including several members of the royal family. The disease also caused widespread fear and panic, which led to social and political instability.

In the 18th century, the British East India Company established a presence in Nepal, and smallpox played a role in shaping the country’s political landscape. The disease was used as a tool of propaganda by the British, who sought to legitimate their rule in the region.

Today, smallpox is no longer a threat, thanks to the global effort to eradicate the disease. But the lessons of the past can still be applied to today’s public health challenges. The fight against smallpox demonstrates the power of international cooperation and the importance of global health initiatives.

In conclusion, smallpox was a disease that shaped the course of history in the Subcontinent. It is a reminder of the power of epidemic diseases to reshape societies and influence political landscapes. As we look to the future, it is important to continue working towards the eradication of all infectious diseases, so that the world can be free from the fear and suffering that they cause.
Symptoms did not show during the virus’s two-week incubation period. Those infected felt fine, and some even traveled, taking the disease with them, although they were not yet contagious. But after two weeks, the first of smallpox’s horrific symptoms — intense fever, often with splitting headaches, body aches, and vomiting. Children often broke into convulsions.

After a couple days, the patient might feel better for a day or two, and even retain normal life. But by this point contagious, they risked passing along the infection. Then came a red rash, first at the feet, then up the legs, and spreading to the torso and face.

In Nepal, as in much of north India, people thought of smallpox in religious terms, as a visitation by the goddess Sita, “the cool one.” This understanding of disease came with its own remedy: Smallpox was conceptualized, historian Arnold writes, “not as a disease but rather as a form of divine possession, and the burning fever and prostration that marked her entry into the body demanded ritual rather than therapeutic responses.”

Smallpox showed respect and homage to Sita with the proper prayers and offerings. “Oh Mother Sita,” 19th century Nepal was used to sing, “do not afflict us! Deliver the people, we beg you a thousand times!”

Just as in India, the smallpox virus periodically ravaged Nepal, causing tremendous suffering, killing many, and leaving behind scarring and blindness. It affected all levels of society, even Nepal’s royal family on several occasions in the 19th century.

In 1797, smallpox spread in the Kathmandu Valley which was still recovering from Tirthivi Narayan Shah’s conquest a decade earlier. Kathmandu’s population lived and worked on streets that one British visitor described as “excessively narrow, and nearly as filthy as those of Benares.”

The outbreak terrified King Rana Bahadur Shah who had a baby son, Girvan. To protect his son, Rana Bahadur ordered all the children of the Valley at risk of the disease removed, all the way across the Tama Kosi in the east or the Manasun in the west.

Evidence of what transpired is hard to come by. But a traditional benediction sung by smallpox survivors, called “Sita maari Maa,” the song addressed to “Mother Sita,” the smallpox goddess. “Oh Mother Sita, the first line goes, “behold this woman who has seen you fall.” Surrounded by soldiers, the children were driven out of the city.

The song describes the difficulties faced by the families while in forced exile. “They led them away, carrying one child on the back, child under the arm and dragging along a third child.” The families marched to Tama Kosi after a week. “Here, a child dies. Unable to perform the proper death rituals, the devastated parents throw the body into the river.”

One of the lasting legacies of the event is that Sita maari Maa song appears to use the tragic exile of families to symbolize the mistrustment and dislike Nepal faced since the takeover of the Valley by the Shah regime in the 1770s. Observers this month have noted that it speaks to the hardship faced by many Nepali migrant laboratories, forced from their regular work, now providing one account, lockdown, trying to return to village homes.

Two years later, in 1799, Kanwati, Rana Bahadur’s favorite wife, left the palace and came down with smallpox, igniting a series of events that reshaped court politics. Seeing his wife gravely ill, Rana Bahadur dedicated himself to prayer and fast, and even abdicated the throne in favor of his two-year-old son.

Kanwati died, though, and Rana Bahadur, distraught, desecrates and destroys the Sita maari Maa. Rana Bahadur is forced into exile in India, taking along with him a young Biramani Thapa. He returns to power in 1804, but is killed in 1806, opening the door for the Thapa to become one of the most important rulers in Nepal’s early history.

Smallpox broke out again in 1816, and again shaped the power struggles in Nepal’s tumultuous Darbar. Biramani Thapa still held power, but King Girvan, now 21, was a clear threat.

The virus appeared first in the west of the country but found its way to Kathmandu by July. Fear soon gripped the palace. King Girvan had not contracted the disease as a child. He also had young children. The Dhurbar officials requested vaccinations from the British, who had been trying to spread the new practice in India for over a decade.

At mid-century, Jang Bahadur Rana, the Kathmandu-based British doctor Henry Oldfield noted, held ‘great faith’ in vaccination and had his children and other royal children vaccinated, but did little else. In 1820s, Britishman Percival Landon noted that “Vaccination is not compulsory but it is a free to those who choose to avail themselves.”

Several reasons explain why Nepal did not use vaccination. Some Nepalis and Tanka groups disliked the vaccine. But a far greater problem was that the Rana governments did little to make it widely available or to promote it.

In contrast, by the early 20th century, the British campaign to spread vaccination in India had found its legs. Millions of ordinary Indians in Madras and other parts of the country started getting vaccinations.

Nepalis who studied or traveled in India and those who served in the British Army noticed how little health service the Rana regime provided their countryside. The Rana’s lack of concern about the people’s health and welfare helped fuel the great movement to drive them from power.

After the 1941 revolution, successive Nepali governments tried to set up a modern health care system. In the late 1940s and 1950s, they began vaccinating against smallpox. They launched a campaign in 1959 with the help of the WHO and the UN.

A smallpox campaign for the Kathmandu Valley was launched in 1963 and became a nationwide eradication program in 1966. After terminating Nepal for certain smallpox cases and sometimes changing their politics, smallpox was finally eradicated from Nepal in 1975.
The Lighthouse Kathmandu

Well known figures in Nepali tourism industry share their expertise and provide perspective on the future of Nepal’s travel industry. Lighthouse virtual gatherings on tourism every Monday.

4 May - 9.30am

Gutmatu sessions

Pride: Nepal brings it to your Gutmatu sessions, where you can listen to Nepali artists making their mark on Nepal music scene from the comfort of your own home. Head to their Facebook page for details.

Online poetry competition

Unleash your inner poet and send your poems in to Sahilja Lellus. Check out their Facebook page for more details.

Katha Ghera

Some Katha Ghera episodes are now on their YouTube channel. Watch Jane, Mithila, and Dolya talk, the Nepali interpretation of The Gosh Tree.

The Story Yellers

Celebrating April as ‘The Human Month’. The Story Yellers are making hilarious and heartwarming stories from Nepal’s in the entertainment industry. Head over to their Facebook page for more details.

Martin Chautari

Watch Martin Chautari discuss sessions on topics ranging from feminism to marketing to Nepali infrastructure. Sessions available on the Martin Chautari Facebook page.

Wok Up

Enjoy mouth-watering Thai cuisine from the comfort of home. Place your order through Foodmandu.

Dalle

Order your favourite meal through Foodmandu or Dalle. For every order from Dalle purchased using eSwala, a meal will be provided to somebody who needs it.

Bajeko Sekuwa

Bajeko Sekuwa is offering free delivery services on ready-to-eat as well as frozen food. Head over to their Facebook page for their menu.

Casa Mexicana

Casa Mexicana is open to fill your craving for delicious Mexican food. Order through Foodmandu. Services available only through the Lalitpur branch.

Alsoft

Send the best of Alok Karmacharya Thami from the comfort of your home.

Choice your favourites from the home delivery special menu on their Facebook page.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

The rise of fast fashion has greatly increased pollution and waste. Clothes we make quickly and throw away are polluting our planet and we want a change. With us in lockdown many of us have continuously created a new fashion habit. This would be a great time to start thinking and wearing our clothes so we can keep them out of landfill and reduce the amount of clothes we use over time. Here’s a list of clothes we use over time. Take this pause in our lives to help us differentiate between what we need and what we want.

OUR PICK

Finding: A British reality-drama television series created and written by Thea Walzer Bridge is about a young woman living in London. The 12 episodes, two-season story starts Waller-Bridge as the Finding, along with Sanjeev Bhaskar, Olivia Colman and Andrew Scott. A comedy of self-discovery, finding a perfect job to balance work and life, self-imposed guilt during social distancing.
Back-to-School season goes remote

Platforms to help make classrooms make the digital transformation

It is that time of the year when many children would be gearing up to join a new pre-school. But 2020 is different. Teachers are busy at home, meetings and principals are struggling with their IT teams to set up digital classrooms before fresh batches begin classes this week.

However, simulating a real classroom environment requires more complex channels built for teachers and students to interact and enjoy a virtual school. Which platform is the one best suited to K-12 schools in Nepal? Let’s find out.

Google Classroom

Available as an app for phones and tablets, as well as a web app on Google Chrome, Google Classroom is the go-to online space for schools in Nepal for two solid reasons:

Google’s product is completely free, while other virtual learning platforms charge per institution or per student.

It is intuitive and easy to learn, especially for teachers who are new to remote learning, who can upload assignments, get into virtual video-based lessons, and mark submitted homework without technical training.

Google Classroom’s biggest advantage is that Google has a wide set of productivity products that work in sync to help teachers lead and facilitate virtual classrooms. With Hangouts for video delivery of lessons and Google Forms to help create simple quizzes to test learners, Classroom seamlessly connects with other Google products to help get tasks done efficiently.

One teacher sharing a list of weekly assignments at once, makes the work flow easier to manage for parents and kids alike. Schools will have to arrive at solutions on their own – something no tutorial will teach them.

Edmodo

Ideal for kindergarten and primary schools, Edmodo is a user-friendly, attractive platform, easy for both Windows and Mac users. The design and interface remind people of social media platforms that they are already familiar with, but the functionality is tailor-made for online learning purposes.

Keeping in mind that schools are increasingly shifting online to kickstart new academic sessions, Edmodo offers a Distance Learning Toolkit that works as a set of free resources to give educators a place to start and help them make better decisions.

Edmodo is already popular with prominent elementary schools in America, primarily because it equips teachers with a super organised space, stores all their data on cloud and offers real-time updates that help maintain quick interaction, much like in real life.

The platform calls itself a ‘social learning network’ where teachers can share notes, assign homework, interact with their students, launch class discussions, administer online tests, measure student progress, and much more. It allows both recorded screencasts as well as live streaming, so that teachers can choose to pre-plan and prepare classwork for students to complete at their own pace, or deliver live video lessons.

Moreover, schools willing to pay for the premium version of the platform are privy to a unique gamification tactic that introduces badges as a way of motivating students to stay on top. Edmodo gets brownie points for involving parents in the learning process.

Schoology

A super secure and safe platform available as an app on both iOS and Android, and also accessible on the web.

Schoology comes with an in-built classroom management suite that offers tools like online attendance, a grade book, a digital space for teachers to post assignments, quiz and test creation and publishing capabilities and various virtual tools to supplement or replace a physical classroom environment.

To help schools suddenly forced to go remote, Schoology offers free course-specific and public resources that assist teachers in lesson planning.

A solid platform harnesses the power of automation, and Schoology is no different. Assignments graded by the teacher automatically feed into the grade book roster, thus reducing the extra workload for the teacher.

Schoology’s layout imitates Facebook to some extent, so, like Facebook, it’s easy for users of all ages to navigate. Schoology gives traditional schools a fresh opportunity to transform the way they teach, not just in terms of channel but also approach, with an open and engaging online learning atmosphere where dialogue is encouraged.

The secret to running successful virtual classrooms seems to be flexibility, and Schoology checks the box fairly well.

Teachers can create an access code for parents to monitor the progress of their children as well as check out what they are currently learning in school.

Other apps that schools and colleges may explore: Blackboard Learn, Canvas, Camtasia and Moodle.
Khokhana and Bungamati strive to save heritage

The 2015 earthquake forced the twin towns to balance tradition with modernity as they rebuild

Prabhan Pokharel

Earthquakes wreck lives, and destroy towns. And when they are rebuilt, nothing is the same again.

Five years after the ancient Newa towns of Khokhana and Bungamati were nearly turned to the ground in the 2015 earthquake, amidst new concrete piles are still piles of bricks of collapsed buildings.

Because most of the temples and homes collapsed and reinforced concrete buildings survived, there is a belief in Kathmandu Valley that cement is stronger and will withstand the next quake. Khokhana and Bungamati wards tried to protect the urban ambience of the town by lesting guidelines about how even homes rebuilt with concrete houses should have brick facades, tile roofs and reflect traditional design elements.

Also, these guidelines have rarely been followed. The gradual destruction of the traditional silhouettes of Kathmandu Valley began long before the earthquake, but the disaster hastened the process. Pressure of urbanisation, the demand for rental rooms, and a quest for safety have forced families to build box-like concrete high rises.

Ironically, the town that preserved the alignment of the Kathmandu-Tarai easyway construction because it destroyed the town’s heritage, has not been able to preserve the traditional architecture that gave Bungamati its uniqueness.

5 YEARS
25 APRIL 2015

“The rebuilding guidelines say houses should be made in traditional style with sloped tile roof and should not be more than 15 metre high,” explained Krishna Gopal Maharjan, senior engineer at Bungamati’s word office. “If a house is made without following the guidelines we do not issue the construction completion certificate. But the rule has been flouted.”

There is pressure from local families to rebuild damaged or destroyed homes in any way they see fit, since it is their property.

“People have ignored the word’s guidelines because they think it is impractical. They believe a three-story house cannot accommodate the whole family hence they tend to build a four-story or even a five-story house,” says Jay Krishna Maharjan.

“The most contentious issue seems to be the height limitation. In both Khokhana and Bungamati, a majority of the homes that have been rebuilt has traditional brick facades, but they say limiting homes to two floors is unrealistic. “At first they were even unwilling to use bricks in outside walls, but at least they agreed to that,” says Chandra Shobha Danegel, social mobiliser at Khokhana’s word office who admits that the height limit has been difficult to enforce.

To be sure, a house with traditional design is costlier to build than a cement house, and this is why many of the families have not even started rebuilding even five years after the earthquake.

The house of 77-year-old Arwa Maya Maharjan was completely destroyed by the earthquake, and she has been living in her relative’s house for the past five years. She says: “Those who have money build houses, we do not have enough money to build a house, let alone a house in the traditional style.”

The government’s Rs900,000 grant does not pay for a even a room, and this is why rubble from the five years ago still lies strewn across both towns. Those who can afford it, have built gleaming 9-6 storey buildings that dwarf nearby shanties.

“People who have money are building homes, people without money cannot build them. It is just the way it is”, says Gyan Bahadur Maharjan, 81, in a tone of resignation as he heaved in the sun in front of his family’s new house.

Asahaku Shikya, 64, whose house in Bungamati was damaged in 2015 agrees that the guidelines are too rigid, and shikya admits that saving the culture is important, a safe shelter is more important, indeed, it seems the older generation of these twin towns have made peace with the fact that the towns of their childhood can never be brought back.

Shikya says: “As I have a family of five sons, each son would need at least one flat for himself, and on top of that if I do not build a house the older mother the house goes up to six floors. How can accommodate such family in a three-story house?”

Bungamati also lost its most important temple, the shrine of Rato Machhindra temple. For 12 years the chariot of Lord Vishnu is carried around the shrine. On one occasion, the chariot is taken from Bungamati itself, an event that draws devotees from all over the Valley.

This year, the chariot festival has been so slow to just stitching worshiping at the shrine.

Restoration of the temple was given to a construction company with the financial support from the Sanatan government. But after delays, the contract was dismissed by the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) which then handed over the project to a local committee.

It Bahadur Maharjan, 74, of Khokhana remembers growing up as a little boy. “Things were simpler then, he says, houses had thatch roofs. There was always the smell of mustard from the town famous for its oil press. He says: “The word ‘corn’ doesn’t mean much to them, but they know what it means anymore. We are trying to save our culture, but if you look around, there is nothing left to save.”

Indeed, the transformation of the architectural grammar of a town seems to change everything: the fortress-like, the open and the closed, the craftsmanship, and the lifestyle of these inhabitants.

Suresh Suraj Shrestha at Department of Archaeology says that to reverse a change in a town, loses its identity. Khokhana no longer remains Khokhana.”

Mixing old with new

The 2015 earthquake destroyed a story house’s ancestral home, he decided to build back better. He wanted not just a home, but a source of income as well.

A time when his neighbour were moving away from traditional occupations and homes after the earthquake, Dangol saw an opportunity in going back to Newa culture, craftsmanship and create his building area a traditional homestay that would give visitors an authentic experience. Indeed, until the occasional lookouts destroyed business, Dangol was providing tourists with local food in a traditional restaurant in the restored home, which means a job for local youths and produt.

I raised 70% of the traditional materials from the house that was brought down by the earthquake,” says Dangol, adding that if others in Khokhana were to follow the same mode they would not just augment family income, but also protect the town’s heritage.

Indeed, despite the destruction and the changes of the past five years, Khokhana still retains its old world charm with a pervasive smell of the mustard oil presses, women spinning cotton and weaving carpets in a sloshing ghar.
Turning a shrine into a temple of learning

Alisha Sijapati

On 25 April 2015, when a 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal, aside from lives lost and homes destroyed, there was great damage to the temples and monuments of Kathmandu Valley.

Today, five years later, many have been rebuilt, some of them adhering even more to the original design. But there are others which are only now being rebuilt like the 1,300 year old Kathmandu and other shrines, with reconstruction further delayed by the COVID-19 lockdown.

One of the most unique monuments under reconstruction is the Kal Mochan Temple and Madalav Temple in Trisupan. Having been built relatively recently in 1818, the temple is also unique because it is a tribute to a Shah queen, Lalita Triputa Sundari, but built in the style of the Malla period.

The temple has been under renovation for the Kathmandu University Department of Music after signing a 21-year agreement with the Nepal Sahitya Parishad that manages heritage activities and the Department of Archaeology.

The elegant, tall temple is located by the banks of Bagmati, and was in the process of being retrofitted when the 2015 earthquake struck, damaging the structure and the surrounding area. But a self-styled musical instrument museum occupying the north wing of the temple courtyard has been refusing to vacate despite losing its case against Kathmandu University.

Lachan Rijal heads the Department of Music at Kathmandu University and is optimistic that the project on schedule.

“We have to finish the project in 3 years; otherwise, we will run out of money. But we are patient, and will wait it out,” Rijal adds.

Rohit Ranjikar of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust is a consultant architect for the Tripurasundari Temple project and brings with him vast experience from the renovation work in Patan. “The temple had fallen into disuse for a long time, there were squatters living in it, and the monument suffered from lack of maintenance and supervision,” Ranjikar says.

“The Department of Music coming on board will mean a new beginning in preserving this unique heritage.”

Indeed, the renovation stays true to the original architecture of the complex, but has completely remodelled the inside of the temple for use as classrooms and for musical performances. The UNESCO Department of Music started out in Bhaktapur and expects to move into the new premises later this year.

Artisans from Bhaktapur are busy replacing wooden columns that have been damaged by copying the carvings from the intact ones. The metal roof has had to be repaired, and the pinnacle is gleaming in the sun after being cleaned and dusted, possibly for the first time in the 202 years since it was built.

The Tripurasundari restoration has given added meaning to post-earthquake revival by turning a shrine into a temple of learning.

Monumental damage

Although Bhaktapur and Patan have made much progress in renovation of temples, monuments, and shrines, Kathmandu has not shown the same level of commitment.

Being the capital, Kathmandu has had to deal with foreign countries competing to rebuild various parts of the old city. Even though Nepal has rebuilt its monuments itself after disastrous earthquakes only 100 years ago, governments since 2015 have not been able to agree. The Humantipur Shiva Palace is being rebuilt by the Chinese, the Siddhi Lakshmi was renovated by the United States, the Japanese are renovating a section of the Nasal Chowk, and there has been bickering over the site that the municipality was reconstructing the Kathmandu Durbar (already run by Ram Pokhari). The dispute arose between heritage preservationists and the city government which wanted to save concrete and depart from the original style and design. The government has finally been granted the right, and both sites are now being rebuilt.

Darbar Square, where more than 60 people were killed five years ago, was also being done in a controversy about how to rebuild it. It was finally decided to keep the base of the tower that remains as a monument to the earthquake, and build another identical tower next to it.

In July 2015, UNESCO issued a statement at dropping two construction projects from Sadakpur Durbar Square, the Jagannath and Gopeshwor temples, following threats from the Swiss and Japanese embassies.

Sushil Sreedhar, head of Nepal Reconstruction Authority, agrees that there have been delays in Kathmandu and feels that lack of coordination between various government entities.

He adds, “It is true that the authority has prorogued many times, and heritage reconstruction has suffered, and the lockdown has pushed the completion further.”
How COVID-19 puts us to the test

First-hand account of taking the coronavirus test after returning to Nepal during a pandemic

One week into my US tour, Europe was being ravaged by COVID-19, and America had hesitantly begun to come out of denial about the pandemic. President Trump announced a ban on non-Americans flying to the United States. Europeans already there were scrambling to get out.

Our nine-member group from the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan had been briefed at the Environment Protection Agency in Washington DC, and had arrived in New Orleans to meet activists who worked on relief after Hurricane Katrina. There were reports of an outbreak in California where we were headed next. Amidst we might be stranded by flight bans, the organizers decided to send us home. Soon, I was on a 24-hour journey from New Orleans to Kathmandu, via London and Delhi. Along the way the airlines let my checked luggage in Heathrow, and I have given up hope of ever getting it back.

Since landing in Kathmandu in mid-March, one of the last regular flights, I have been in self-quarantine. As a health and environment reporter at Nepal Times, I have been covering the pandemic from home, connecting to our virtual classroom on Zoom. I did not have any symptoms during that time, but because we have elderly family members, I continued a strict isolation, obsessively sanitising everything I touch, wearing a mask even when I have locked myself in my room.

When we got a call on Monday from the Municipality to come for testing, I was relieved because it meant that the government’s contact tracing system was working. Local governments were tracking everyone in Lalitpur who had come back from abroad in the past month. I never scared for myself, but for others in the family since the virus is so infectious. I extensively researched Rapid Diagnostic Test (RDT), Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) and what they entailed.

That Tuesday morning, I took a few steps out of my house for the first time in a month. Everything still looked and smelled the same, except the streets were deserted. We decided to walk to the Lalungkhi testing centre, and on the way I had to lie my shoulder twice. Each time, I had sanitised myself after I was done. I had turned into a certified germaphobe.

We avoided the main roads, and it was hot – Kathmandu had gone from winter to summer in the month I spent in self-isolation indoors. Buildings on the road to Langakhel advertised ‘Study in Australia’ and ‘Learn Korean Language’ looked deserted, except for a few people peaking out of the windows.

Irritated, the test for mass testing was placed right beside the temple where the idol of Machhindranath is bathed in milk before it is placed in the chariot for its annual festival. If it was not for the lockdown, just about how they would be preparing the temple for the idols.

Police were outside the tent telling people coming up for tests to maintain a safe distance. The media was present in force, in reflective green outfits taking photos and videos of theineedtobeing tested, giving me a taste of what it feels like to be on the other side.

All of us in the queue were masked. Some even sported surgical gloves and sunglasses. Few were jackets and hoodies. The person behind me was busy making calls to get his relative to also come for the test.

Under the tent, there were puddles from the morning rains and flies were buzzing around nearby. They were all reminders that we already had a problem of unsanitary conditions spreading disease before this new infection came around.

It was my turn next. I was given sanitizer to apply on my hands. Two medical officers in PPEs asked my name, age, address, country I returned from and when I had flown in. Interestingly, a municipality official at the desk already knew my particulars and replied before I could. She was the person who had called my house that morning.

We had been reporting on how despite the lockdown, Nepal was lagging behind in testing, but I was impressed with the coordination and the thoroughness of how it was being done. Local governments from the ward to municipality were being proactive in house-to-house contact tracing for new arrivals and symptoms. Someone was doing their homework, and that was reassuring.

A lab technician drew a drop of blood from my finger, and gave me a cotton ball with disinfectant. That was it. Small kits with blood drops were neatly arranged in multiple rows and columns, mine was placed next to them. So, this was a RDT, and not a PCR which would mean collecting an oral and nasopharyngeal swab sample.

The test came later that day – all of us in Langakhel had tested negative. My blood did not carry the virus, which meant I had not been exposed to the virus.

At home, I am still not taking any chances. I will continue to self-isolate until a nationwide lockdown. As for my parents, this is the first time they are happy that I had a test.

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