TABLE TALK

Why did India choose now to open what it knows would be a can of worms with Nepal on Lipu Lekh? Why did its Army chief drag China in? Is there a connection between this and tensions flaring along India’s own border with China?

While the official Indian statement reiterated that the disputed region is its territory and rejected Nepal’s map, it also said it was hopeful that Nepal would create the environment to resolve the dispute through talks.

However, the Indian media has taken a much more critical line, reminiscent of high-decibel TV talk shows about Pakistan. It has been pushing the narrative that tiny Nepal would not dare stand up to India like this without Chinese backing.

Indian commentators have played up Chinese and Indian eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations in the Pangong Tso region in Ladakh, concluding that the dispute at the Nepal tri-junction is also somehow part of this new Chinese offensive.

What Indian editorialsizing has failed to notice is that there is unprecedented reassessment in Kathmandu against China, too, for not backing Nepal’s position on the Lipu Lekh controversy, with op-eds and cartoons in the media openly ridiculing Beijing for being complicit.

India is using the China card possibly to divert domestic attention away from an economic crisis made worse by the coronavirus lockdown. Dragging China into the Lipu Lekh row also helps India deflect criticism that it is again bullying a tiny neighbour. After India produced its map in November, Prime Minister Oli kept Nepal’s new map under wraps, hoping for negotiations. It was only after the row was inaugurated that the war of the maps flared up.

By denouncing K P Oli, India provided unexpected relief to an embattled prime minister, defusing calls for his immediate resignation from a rival faction within the NCP, and even got the opposition NC to support the government. The row has also allowed Oli once more to play the nationalism card to the hilt.

Because of proximity and asymmetry with India, Nepal’s only recourse is negotiation, and the first step is to create a conducive environment for it by de-escalating the rhetoric.

The Nepal Communist Party had been pushing to fast-track a Constitution amendment to change the national seal to represent Nepal’s external boundary. But better sense has prevailed, and the amendment proposal was removed at the last moment from Parliament’s schedule on 27 May.

In the background to all this is the larger battle within India between Prime Minister Modi’s Hindutva agenda and the secular-left forces. Some of the fallout of that confrontation is being felt in Communitarian Nepal as well.

Both governments would do well to spend more time to unpack their lockdown ravaged economies, and rescue millions of jobless citizens moving within and between their territories.

Kiran Nepal

REDUCE HARM

EDITOIAL

PAGE 2
Reduce harm

The low coronavirus case load in Nepal in March and April was largely due to the country being relatively isolated. The lockdown and ban on flights did help slow the spread of the virus. But now returning Nepali workers were stopped at the border, as crowded makeshift quarantine centres became incubators for the disease. As the floods are finally opening, mass migrations and hungry people are rushing home without proper testing, some taking the infection with them.

Thousands of workers who trudged across India for days and weeks were blocked at the Nepal border for weeks, and have now been stopped by Karnali Province. The authorities have suffered a setback of the outskirts of Kathmandu are pregnant mothers, children and families without food and water.

What started out as a health crisis has turned into an economic disaster and a humanitarian emergency. Returnees stopped at the Indian border till two weeks ago, are now being stopped at the provincial boundaries.

The lockdown is now causing human suffering and hardship on a far greater scale than the disease was supposed to stop. It exposes the government’s complacency and squandering of the lead time provided by the lockdown to prepare for the exodus.

As shown by the government’s failures and promises formally read to Parliament by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in 15 May and the Appropriations Bill, the government has done little more than cut and paste from previous budgets.

The lockdown means that we wait for agriculture and tourism to pick up, prevent the virus from spreading, and keep people healthy by reducing air pollution.

Inevitably, Nepal is no longer just dealing with imported cases, but with community spreading. And what started out as a health crisis has turned into an economic disaster and a humanitarian emergency. Returnees stopped at the Indian border till two weeks ago, are now being stopped at the provincial boundaries.

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Kathmandu’s road ahead post-COVID-19

What the future of mobility should be like in Nepal after the end of mobility restrictions

Bhushan Tuladhar

Seven rows of private cars squatted to fit in a four-lane road in Kathmandu as the city partially opened its lockdown two weeks ago. Social media erupted in horror at this shocking scene (picture).

Unfortunately, once the lockdown starts being lifted, this may be the future of mobility in our cities. Unless we dare to think and act differently.

Bikes, bikes and buses are the key to make a city clean, efficient and accessible for all residents. But it is likely that people will be inclined towards choosing the perceived safety of their private cars or motorcycles instead. “The government is said to be considering opening up the streets for only private cars for fear that buses will increase the risk of contagion.”

Many cities around the world have, however, taken a different approach to mobility – one that ensures that people can practice physical distancing while walking and cycling. Mayor Sadiq Khan says: “London’s road to recovery cannot be clogged with cars.” The UK government is investing £2 billion to promote walking and cycling.

New Zealand became the first country to fund municipalities to invest in pop-up bike lanes and widen sidewalks, also known as “tactical urbanism” to reclaim the space given to cars. In France, the government will pay cyclists up to €360 for repairs so bicycles will be ready for post-lockdown rides. Paris has added 800km of bicycle lanes. Paris plans to expand Lime’s bicycle lane network from 145km to 800km in 150 days.

Some 200 cities around the world are taking space away from cars and giving it to people by investing in temporary or permanent walkways and cycle lanes.

Kathmandu was traditionally designed for pedestrians. With increased motorisation, the space previously occupied by people have been taken over by cars and motorcycles. Courtyards in the core city area turned into parking lots, streets were widened to reduce congestion but without sufficient space for walking or cycling.

The four-lane Tribhuvan-Teko road was converted to six lanes by encroaching on the footpath. When Ring Road was widened all right new lanes were given to cars, although the original agreement mentioned bicycle lanes on both sides.

This car-centric development has resulted into an increase in vehicle traffic as well as unsafe streets, mainly for pedestrians and cyclists. Although 40% of the trips in Kathmandu are on foot, pedestrian safety is often ignored. Almost half of the traffic fatalities in Kathmandu are pedestrians.

The transport system in Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal need to be people-centric rather than car-centric. The COVID-19 lockdown has just made this need even more urgent.

Kathmandu’s first Masterplan – Physical Development Plan Kathmandu Valley, 1969 mentions: Vehicle traffic in the city cores of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhadgaon, must be prohibited: That was 50 years ago, and no one listened then, and no one bothers now.

In the past few years Kathmandu and Lalitpur municipalities have taken some initiatives to promote walking and cycling. But the approach has been piecemeal, the pace slow, and response from the public lukewarm. In fact, when the City Planning Commission of Kathmandu discussed pedestrianizing core areas many local businesses opposed the idea. Experiences from around the world, including Mit Road in Gangtok to Times Square in New York, show that shops benefit when streets are given to people.

The COVID-19 lockdown now provides an opportunity for Kathmandu and Lalitpur to set aside increased space for walking or cycling. Restricting vehicles in areas like New Road and Thamel will allow physical distancing, enhance local businesses and improve air quality.

Municipalities will need to immediately engage with local stakeholders and roll out plans before the cars take over the streets again. This pandemic also provides an opportunity for long overdue restructuring of public transport – making it more reliable, safe and attractive to all users through route restructuring, bus fleet improvement, operational efficiency and digitisation of information and fare collection.

While private bus operators are needed, the role of government should also be clearly defined. It needs to also invest in the public transport system and work closely with the private operators to make it efficient and sustainable. All private bus operators are facing heavy losses and possibly bankruptcies, so the government needs to not just rescue them but also transform their functions.

This may be the best time to get green as well. The National Electricity Authority says there is excess electricity in the national grid, and hydropower may have to be ‘spilled’, particularly at night. What better way to utilise this energy than store it in batteries for use in public transport instead of dirty diesel.

Said Tuladhar, an environmental Voluntary Director of Surya Transport, "This is the first time a transport sector, be it private or public, will deal with heavy losses and need to think about the future.”
Nepal is too big for ad hocism

This reality show is as real as it gets, and we better get new systems in place

A country of 30 million is not small. A country that cannot spend 70% of its development budget on itself is poor.
Nepal is big enough to need systems in place and use them to manage the country. It cannot muddle through ad hocism, and especially during a crisis like the one we are going through now.

½ FULL
Anil Chitrakar

As we begin to emerge hopefully soon from the impact of the lockdown, we must shun the practices and habits that have characterised governance in Nepal: the attitude of ‘I care for you, after me, whatever happens to you’. Meritocracy will have to replace nepotism, goal orientation has to replace fatulism, and we have to do yesterday what could have been done tomorrow if anything is going to change for the better in Nepal. If Nepal does not get ventilators from those employed abroad in the post-COVID-19 era, how will we pay for the country’s healthcare? What if the country goes to war?

No matter who one is in power, there is an underlying belief that being in power means the freedom to make ad hoc decisions. The godkings and oligarch rulers made decisions on a whim, and those bad habits seem to have been inherited by our federal, republican democratic strongmen.

Once in power, they do not like to put systems in place because that will mean decisions have to be consultative, accountable and transparent. The problem with making ad hoc decisions is that they may offer short-term benefits, but do get into trouble at some point or other in future. How many times can you use the excuse that you did not know what was going on?

In a country with seven provincial and 783 locally elected governments, systems have to be in place if people are to feel the impact of Nepal’s political evolution. At least in the last seven decades - all of what were those changes for if not to improve governance, service delivery and spur development?
The COVID-19 crisis is a watershed moment. It offers Nepal a unique chance to digitise government services that will do away with ad hocism and corruption that comes from human to human contact. You cannot grease a palm if it is virtual, and wrongdoers leave digital footprints. Making transactions cashless and physical distancing could be the best ways to fight corruption in Nepal. If we can introduce contact tracing and ensure it is meticulously enforced, we could make fighting crime and corruption very useful by products of this pandemic.
The global pandemic has offered Nepal and the whole world a chance to re-imagine and re-build the health sector. The lockdown meant to be a strategy to buy time for the government, health professionals and related businesses to ramp up capacity and ability to respond. Those include everything from the manufacture and distribution of masks and PPE to developing tests and vaccines.

In Nepal, the pandemic has felt more like a paid holiday for many. There was no attempt by the government, development partners or professionals to convince and bring the sectors together to use this opportunity for the future. Health for all, research and development, supply chain management, training, upgradation of hospitals and health facilities, formulating pharmacies... so much could have been done. But it is still not too late.

We have a whole generation of people who have grown up watching Hollywood movies where Superman and Wonder Woman track down the bad guys making lethal viruses, killing them and destroying their labs in the nick of time. What we have not seen is a movie which picks up after the virus has been contained, and society has to chart a new path of revival, learning from the mistakes of the past.

Watching a movie passively knowing that there will be a happy ending is one thing, but today we are individually all players in the unfolding plot and it could very well be the next scenario, or horror. This reality show is as real as it gets. Lives and livelihoods are being lost, and the virus is quick to penetrate when it detects weak leadership, denial, or a lack of systems. We in Nepal must use this opportunity to address inequality and discrimination. It is a chance to clean up Mt Everest, dredge Phewa Lake, prevent sewage from flowing into the Bagmati, repair trails and trail bridges, upgrade the sewage major monsoon forests in the Kathmandu Valley, Janakpur and Lumbini.

Citizens across Nepal need to create dedicated sidewalks for pedestrians and bicycle lanes, make sure that Nepal’s transport systems serve to clean hydroelectricity. Nepal has no oil and we need to plan for energy security by reminding ourselves how many times India has cut off our petroleum supply in recent history.

Once again, the government may not take the lead here because it does not have the systems in place. We have to collectively step up as a people. Time ticks on us to move away from sound bites and photos ops. After all, the first fatality in Nepal attributed to COVID-19 required young volunteers from Thakhtapur to quietly step up and enable the cremation.

Anil Chitrakar
President of Vishesh

e-Sewa remittance

e-Sewa in collaboration with the Malaysian company iKash has launched a wallet to wallet remittance service between migrant workers in Malaysia and their families back home in Nepal. Workers in Malaysia can now transfer money from their iKash wallet to the e-Sewa wallet, or to any Nepal bank account. The digital wallet company had previously launched a similar remittance service between users in Japan and Nepal.

NIBL Capital

NIBL Ace Capital has launched two new advisory products for clients under their Corporate Key Accounts Business Assessment and Impact Analysis and Stamp up and Capital Funding.

CREATION and Coca-Cola

CREATION and The Coca-Cola Foundation announced a joint initiative, (Emergency Relief Project (ERP)), aiming to create awareness as well as provide safety gears and relief materials to 5000 waste management workers and their families to be safe against COVID-19. The project is part of the Coca-Cola Foundation’s initial pledge of $40 million towards the fight against the coronavirus. The relief program will extend to municipalities across Kathmandu, Kirtipur, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Chitwan, Saptari and Sindh.
NASA images track changes in Nepal
Anthropologists and data scientists combine fieldwork with satellite imagery to map risk

High resolution satellite imagery of the Himalaya show details as small as livestock grazing in a field. But what they cannot tell you is how communities on the ground are changing because of natural disasters, political upheavals, or migration. Which is why NASA is supporting a group of anthropologists and geographers to use its images from space of Dolakha in Nepal and other areas of the Himalayas to track these changes so that local governments can plan land use and new infrastructure.

Researchers will use remote sensing data of the region 80km northeast of Kathmandu that was hit by two big earthquakes in 2015 to look into not just the changes in topography and vegetation, but also the impact on the movement of people and how livelihoods have changed with time.

"Satellite images do not show how trade routes change, or the demographic impact of political instability, so what we are trying to do is combine top-down big data with bottom-up ethnographic research for a more nuanced understanding of the changes taking place on the ground," explains Mack Turin and Sara Khoshidian, both anthropologists at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

Turin and Khoshidian were both involved in the ethnographic study of the Tamang people in Dolakha, and say the project will help uncover the "social history" of the district that is known well using remote sensing data over time. The Tamu Kor valley is at high risk due to the danger from the Yos Ridge glacier lake in the Bholingtal.

The NASA project will be a collaboration between UBC and Yale Himalaya Initiative and will also explore the transformation of Namche Bazaar in Nepal, which is a major trade and travel hub in the Khumbu region.

The study will also help bridge the knowledge gap between well-studied changes in the urbanisation patterns of big cities in the Himalayan region and the less-known effects on land use in smaller towns.

Nepal is one of the most densely populated mountain areas of the world, and is vulnerable to the impact of climate change, earthquakes, landslides and floods, conflict, political instability as well as the coping with changes brought about by infrastructure development, tourism and out-migration.

The project team made a field visit to Dolakha earlier this year, but follow-up fieldwork has been delayed because of the coronavirus lockdown. Using satellite Images, remote sensing experts, geographers, economists and anthropologists are tracking land use change in areas like Dolakha.

The district was already feeling the effect of climate change on agriculture, as seen huge investment in hydropower and highways in the past decade, and was at the epicentre of the 12 May 2013 aftershocks of magnitude 7.9 that followed the main 7.8 earthquake a month earlier.

"In a nutshell, our preliminary results show that development in the region is highly dynamic and not linear. Urban development is not an end, but a process," says Karen Seto of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and principal investigator of the project.

Combining satellite mapping and on-the-ground research, the group found that human settlements in the Himalayas have seen many cycles of infrastructure development due to factors like disasters, political instability or economic policy.

Seto says although we know more about the big cities, there is not enough data on which towns in Nepal are growing and how fast, and where the vulnerable groups in society are living, especially after the 2015 earthquake.

The population of Himalayan towns and cities has doubled in the past 40 years, and out migration from rural areas has left farms fallow, and reduced pressure on forests. This demographic shift has had measurable ecological implications with expansion of urban centres along highways, new roads have caused rapid development, adding to the risk.

With the lockdown into its third month in Nepal, there is already significant impact of the return of young migrant workers back to their villages and the drop in tourism on the semi-urban communities in the Himalayan hinterland.

Researchers will be using NASA’s Landsat images at 2.5m resolution as well as recently de-classified military spy satellite images from the 1980s. On the ground, economists and social scientists will collect data on health, education, migration and the impact of political changes on the communities.

Says Seto: "The findings will help local governments understand the changes taking place so they can plan safer urban development less vulnerable to earthquakes, landslides, fires. After all, disasters in the Himalayas are not a question of if, but when."
GLOBAL FILM FESTIVAL
20 film festivals have joined together to stream movies free on YouTube as the ‘We Are One: A Global Film Festival’. Featuring content curated by the Berlin, Cannes, Venice, Sundance, Toronto and Venice film festivals, among others.

NASA SPACE APPS COVID-19 CHALLENGE
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Tony Hagen Grant
Entries for the Tony Hagen Foundation Film Grants, which awards $150,000 support to three young Nepali documentary filmmakers for KNMT, are now open to accept concept papers. Visit the KNMT website for details. Deadline: 10 July

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American Literature Library
The American Literature Library has a collection of all 108 of the greatest classic short stories, and also hundreds of classic novels free for readers to enjoy.

Art Exhibitions
Talking Shop, Mareena Mufumbwe, Heman Schall of Arch+Design’s first exhibition focusing on contemporary international art and artists, presents printmaking from Pakistani, Tibetan Buddhist iconography to investigate the deity forms found in sacred and secular traditions and world religious art.

CRASH COURSE
A channel started by authors/educators John Green and Hank Green, all Vlogaboomer Farm, Crash Course is a one-stop destination for educational material. Watch tons of awesome videos in one channel, from organic chemistry to literature to mythology.

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1 June onwards

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Mt Everest deserted on anniversary of 1st climb

The lone expedition on the world’s highest mountain this year summited on 28 May

David Durkan

Any other year, the month of May would see big crowds on Mt Everest as climbers waded a weather window to climb the world’s highest mountain. But this year, the COVID-19 lockdown means the mountain is deserted. The lone Chinese survey expedition from the north side put climbers on the summit on 28 May, after being delayed due to Cyclone Amphan. It will remeasure the mountain’s exact height.

This week is the 67th anniversary of the first ascent of Mt Everest on 29 May 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay of a British expedition led by John Hunt. Many say the mountain is getting a much needed rest this year from the impact of commercial expeditions and climate change.

The southern flanks of what was known as Peak XV when it was discovered to be the world’s highest point, lie in Nepal’s Kanchenjunga region, while its northern and eastern slopes sweep down to the Tibetan plateau.

Everest is a western imperialist and masculine label, named after the surveyor General of India George Everest. In Tibet she is referred to as Chomolungma, The Mother Goddess of the Earth, the Snows, the Sky, the Winds.

Tenzing Norgay’s mother called her “The Great Hen” (protection her chicks below her wings), Nepal’s eminent historian, the late Baburam Acharya, penned the Nepal: name Sagarmatha, meaning The Bow of the Earth touching heaven.

The peak itself is a magnificent pyramid of metamorphosed limestone and sedimentary rock at the top, covered by snow and ice. Her foundations were laid deep below a primal-sea. Giant plates of rock moved below the waves at the speed human fingernails grow until they rose 38 million years ago to form the Subcontinent, and the Himalaya.

Up to 1810 the world’s highest peaks were thought to be in the Andes. That year W S Woolf proved everyone wrong, having calculated summits in the Himalaya to be in excess of 7,900m. By now the British had initiated the mapping of India, and in 1847 of Nepal.

Colonial British was Paradigm that the Czar of Russia was setting his eyes on the jewel in its crown, India. This resulted in the shameful British invasion of Tibet, the reason for which was similar to the American invasion of Iraq because it supposedly had weapons of mass destruction.

The British, too, only found a few old Russian hunting rifles in Tibet.

Captain G C Rawling of the Youngusband expedition viewed the North Ridge of Everest from 100km away, and felt it might provide a feasible route to the summit. Plans were made, but World War I stepped in. In 1921 the Tibetans granted permission for the British to climb the mountain. They attempted numerous times, until Tibet closed its borders, a decision based on a horoscope reading warning the Dalai Lama of tourists seeking gold in the Home of the Gods. Luckily for mountaineers, in 1949/50 Nepal removed its restrictions, and the British quickly fielded two reconnaissance expeditions. However, it was the Swiss who made the first serious attempt in 1952. Their Sherpa team of 12 was led by Tenzing who had added Norgay to his name. They ascended the Khumbu Ice Fall, entered the elusive Western Cwm, climbed the Lhotse Glacier and traversed to the South Col just under 8400m.

Raymond Lambert and Tenzing spent a hard night (melting ice over a candle) and next day were only able to gain a further 250m before descending. The Swiss returned later that year, but again were sadly unsuccessful.

Both the North and the South Poles had been reached, the French had climbed Annapurna, and the Swiss had nearly succeeded on Everest. The race had become political and nationalistic, and the British were desperate, considering Everest ‘their mountain’.

12 February 1953, Colonel Hunt and his party set sail from Britain for India, from where they flew to Nepal. They recruited 350 porters to carry their equipment to Tengboche Monastery (3,950m). Here they spent 2 weeks acclimatising and preparing – then to establish a string of camps up the route the Swiss had opened the year before.

They crawled out of the tent, connected up the oxygen apparatus and set off for the early morning light. Hillary’s feet ice cold, Tenzing led, they then changed places. The snow suddenly gave away without warning, very unnerving. They reached the South Summit at 09.00. Before them lay the virgin ridge that led to the summit, a daunting sight: huge overhanging masses of snow and ice, with giant drops on each side.

They had four and a half hours of oxygen left, with deep breaths they stepped into the void. One slip could see them plunging into the mountain space. Hillary noted, ‘I jammed my way into this crack, then kicking backwards with my crampons, I sank their spikes deep into the frozen snow and levered myself off the ground ... with a freight train the cornice would remain attached to the rock.’

It held. They passed the now disappeared Hillary Step, then plucked up the steep ridge to reach the summit at 11.30. Tenzing recalls, ‘...my mountain did not seem to me to be a лишний шаг – dead easy, but warm, friendly and living.’

The British Mount Everest Expedition was successful, with Hillary and Tenzing reaching the summit on 29 May, 1953.

“The Swiss understood us better”

Mountaineer David Durkin witnessed Tenzing Norgay in May 1953, a year before he died. Many years later was set on the record of Everest first, Tenzing and Edward Hilkey felt it be too unreasonable as an expedition in a joint the summit was ever the point, but the best of the knowledge never came, “But they fell on the face”.

David Durkin. Many say you and Hillary lived after Everest. Tenzing: ‘My friends, I have heard the tale. That people think because you climbed one mountain, that you became friends and a strange in my way of thinking. Friendship builds up over time, with deeper understanding or in a higher, even Everest. The British and Germans never treated us Sherpas very well. They were from the upper class, with milk and bananas, mountain. They treated us as peasants. In Kathmandu, the fact is we lived in the mountains, were treated as such. The British and Germans never treated us Sherpas very well. We were from the upper class, with milk and bananas. We treated us as peasants. In Kathmandu, the fact is we lived in the mountains, were treated as such.”

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David Durkin. “The Swiss understood us better.”
Journey to the mountain

Text by Claire Burkert
Photographs by Thomas Kelly

Climbing our last mile of a long day, we pass a rock painted with an image of the great Buddhist master, Padmasambhava. A white peak of the Shingi Himal appears, lit by late light. We enter a village gateway, bright green fields spread out before us, with clusters of tall trees in spring leaf, monasteries, and stone houses beyond. A cheerful man in bare feet greets us and1
1inches us to his home. His name is Dorje and he belongs to the royal family of Pem. Our intuition that this village named Pem is a treasured place within a bayul, a hidden valley, is confirmed when we chat with our host that evening. It is believed that Padmasambhava, who introduced Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century, hid many valleys called bayuls throughout the Himalayan region and provided such forces as snowstorms and mist to protect them. These treasured and peaceful valleys would be discovered once the world faced destruction, hatred and lawlessness.

The stone house sheltering us was once the palace of the king of the Nyingt valley. Though Dorje was born a prince, he practices as the village shaman (traditional healer). His daughter Jianggchu, schooled in Kathmandu, alternates as herbal researcher and gatherer in the forest. The kitchen shelves that are check-full of dry plates and cooking utensils, also hold a TV. We break our discussion of Jianggchu’s maternal nutrition research to watch the horrors of the corona virus as it is being reported on BBC. The climbing number of cases in the US is relevant to this family. The older daughter is employed as a babysitter in New York City. Traveling with me to Pem is my friend and co-author, photojournalist Thomas Kelly. On the sunlit morning of the next day, Thomas photographs Dorje’s family altar and an image of his father, the king. Dorje shows him scar from a bear attack and describes how the village was wrecked by earthquake. He points out his photo with the Dalai Lama. The conversation deepens our understanding of how lives are led here in Pem. Hardships balanced out by faith. Dorje is reading his prayers when Jianggchu guides us to a monastery that the community has reinforced with ample cement. Even though the bayul was not spared the earthquake, people here survived.

A principal from a school in Kathmandu joins us. He is on his way to visit his grandson in a village tucked in the forest high above. In that remote village the elders meditate and live peacefully, and the principal desires it the oldest possible refuge from coronavirus.

At the end of our tour with Jianggchu, Thomas and I discuss what to do. We have been trekking for over a week by the time we’ve arrived in Pem. Since Kathmandu has gone under full lockdown over the virus, should we even try to get back to our homes there? What if we were to suggest to our guide and two porters that we should all explore the bayul at least for another week? But we pack our bags and press on. Weeks later we will both find ourselves thinking back on Pem. And Jianggchu will be communicating with us by messenger. She will send a video from a wedding ceremony supported by donations collected from the villagers. We will play that video many times, watching the monks of Pem performing masked dances, dancing to keep the corona virus at bay.

Our trekking group originally numbers six. We receive our trekking permits on the last day for the season. The country is just beginning to take measures to curb COVID-19 (which people here tend to simply call “coronol”). We have all wanted to trek the famous Manaslu circuit before the road being constructed through it to Tibet drastically alters the landscape, interrupting the ancient trail of salt traders and their mules. So in early spring our group is ascending the steep valley cut by the raging Budi Gandagi. We have the support of our experienced guide Manabanta, and two porters, Lucky and JB. “Mules coming!” Manabanta shouts and we press ourselves to the inner side of the cliff as a train of mules comes jingling through, oblivious to us if not wholly impolite. The mule herders are fit young men with sharp blue eyes andradiant smiles promoting rock bands. Like the mules, their future will be uncertain once there is a road.

The mules’ days have grown more arduous since the 2015 earthquake. Now they carry loads of rebar and other building material. Thomas and I have not traveled together since we completed a book, Himalayan Style, about vernacular architecture of the Himalayas. On day three we pass through the poor village of Rans where nearly every house is under construction. New roads in Rans and other villages are bright blue metal sheeting. Gone is the integrity of traditional building, but in its place is something lighter, safer. First the earthquake, then the road and now coronavirus. I have always resisted calling the people of Nepal “resilient”, as it implies they have a choice. But here in Rans is evidence of how people endure, adapt, rebuild.

In the villages of Bibi there is WiFi powered by solar panels. I call my husband who is in Kathmandu nursing a broken leg. Thomas only reaches the answering phone of his father who is spending his 99th birthday in quarantine at a nursing home in New Mexico. A heavy rain falls throughout the night, almost ensuring that the last pass, our crossing point to the next valley, will be blocked by snow. Our group discusses flying home by helicopter. As we lie at night with rain pounding on the new metal roof, we face all our fears about what the future holds.

But crossing the village of Namrung the next day, we enter a new realm: entrances to villages are marked by Khmony, gateway chorions on which the painted eyes of Buddha look protectively in four directions. We are now in the Newark valley, distinguished culturally from Koshi as people here are descendants of Tibetans. The famous mountain of the region, Himalchuli (7,843m) and Manaslu (8,163m) rise before us. The trail becomes treacherous and we were to slip we would slide down the snowy cliff to the river. When...
A Himalayan trek in the time of coronavirus is a reminder of connection, faith and vulnerability

Of the spirit

at last we arrive in the large settlement of Samagun. We receive news that Lacks Pass is closed for the season: too much snow and a lack of tourists. The choice is to retrace our steps or helicopter out. While our friends decide to pack their bags, Thomas and I set off to explore Samagun.

We follow the call of a conch shell to a juniper grove above the village. Through the dense fog we see monks and nuns hurrying to take their places inside an ancient gompa. We enter shyly, respectfully, to listen to the chanting, drum, and murmured prayers, and to absorb the mood of peace. Rituals are being performed for a village that died 49 days ago.

When we return there the next morning, the worshipers share with us their butter tea and tamsas. We observe the offering of a form in a ritual to help the deceased reach the afterlife. A young monk places the torma on a white-washed wall. Crows descend to peak at it. Knocking it to the ground where it is consumed by a mangy dog.

From the gompa I watch tiny figures, our trekking mates, boarding a helicopter parked in a Samagun field. The helicopter rises and makes a wide circle over us. I wave. With my friends suspended in the air, the solemn rituals following death, and the shared disquiet over the virus, life has never felt more fragile. As the helicopter vanishes into clouds, my tears come hard.

"Connection, Faith, Vulnerability": These words come to me swiftly as my friends lift from the mountains to their families in the city. For Thomas and me it will be many days before we reach home. I reflect on faith: it is what the death ceremony has strengthened in us before we journey on.

By afternoon we are passing a long prayer wall in the Kermo Kharka and our trail is thick with snow. As the peaks rise all around us we feel like Lilliputians in a large white bowl. We cross avalanches, none too recent but one after another, and are struck by the peaks surrounding us.

Three lamassas dance in the fields as we approach the village of Prok. Lucky waves from the entry gate. He has found the only geesehouse that is open. It is hardly a refuge: the solar power is frozen and cranes now are required to climb the icy steps to the bedrooms. It is run by twin brothers, Pemba who studied hotel management in Kathmandu and Nima who remained at home. Now the brothers are reunited, sharing fears that the virus could even reach a place as inhospitable as Samagun.

In the morning we are not too sure to return back down the valley. In my campone I fly across the trail, re-crossing several avalanches, tinted by the snows. But the news in Samagun is bleak: the whole country is locked down. I call my husband who is sheltered: "No need to hurry back. Enjoy!" For Manabhan the news brings increased responsibility and he worries how to get us all home safely.

We continue past families lingering in the sun on the terraces of their earthquake-damaged houses. "Why should we work if we are going to die?" they joke. With their mobile phones they track the progress of their children coming home from schools in Kathmandu. As we descend the trail, local people are working together to dig steps and spread pine needles on the steepest and snowiest sections, ensuring a safe passage.

The school children from Nuhat are among an estimated 1.5 million people who set out from Kathmandu just before it went into lockdown. "I was training to be a bartender," a young man on the trail tells me. "But there is no work now. He hurries to catch up with his chores, four little boys who throw snowballs. "Have a good life!" he calls back to me."

In the we find Pasang Diki weaving pangden. Her focus is on keeping straight the order of colours in her stripes, but now and then she turns her gaze to her four children who play cricket in front of her empty guesthouse. Two of the children have not returned home for five years. The mood is jubilant; only because of school closings have the children had this chance to play together.

The next day finds us in the peaceful village of Prok and our point of intersection to stay in a realm of apparent safety or to head home.

In fact we could not have left the haven of Prok so easily, had we not been tired by images of Sengar Monastery that Bangshak shows us on her mobile phone. There, wild geese walk from your hand and the forest is supplemented with rhododendrons of all colours. But soon after leaving Prok, Manabhan receives two calls. "There is the good news and the bad news," he announces. The bad news is that Sengar monastery has closed to all outsiders. The good news is that the American Embassy and the Nepalese Tourism Board can help organise your rescue."

"The thought of being rescued from a beer with its mountain peaks, majestic cliffs and mighty river, depresses us entirely. The sky, in which clouds had been building, unleashes heavy rain and the solar power goes out. We head early to bed feeling out of options: it is time to return to Kathmandu.

Following the hard rain, birds are singing heartily as we set off the next morning. Now we meet the cook and the house cleaner from the guesthouse in Lho and the cook of our lunch in Pema; the tourist season had not even begun before their jobs ended abruptly. "Good luck! Take care!" we call to each other, like old friends. I repeat my mantra: Vulnerability, Faith, Connection.

Arriving in the village of Lho we have our weight, blood pressure and temperature tested in the (AG) Corona Awareness Program and then continue on in mid-day heat. Lucky and I stop for cold Mountain Dew at a little cafe perched on the edge of a cliff. The proprietor laments these are no tourists buying her chips and drinks. She sits with her two little children, four in her eyes. "How will I feed them if this goes on? And what if my children catch coronal? Hospitals are so far away."

Her fears are echoed by the roadworkers we pass who have been let go without pay, and the male herders who have no more business. Back in Tsetopani we have to coax Kalini and Sunita to reopen their lodge for us.

On our last day we hike through the rubble of the new road down to khumsi Khola. A Coast Guard is calling out to all boats to come into bright leaf. We pass nomad shepherds moving their sheep up the valley just as they always have done come spring. Thomas photographs the groups of school children heading up to Nubet, the desolate hotel owners, the out-of-work mules, and the village people who wear masks and turn away from us.

Our journey has finished abruptly and a car will fetch us soon. We look backwards up the valley to the mountain peaks. The valley thunders with old rhythms as well as the certainty of change.

Today I focus on faith, which is alive in the villages, spreading from the monasteries, bringing strength to people so that they can endure the days and years to come.

Seven weeks later we remain confined in our homes on opposite sides of the Kathmandu Valley. The lockdown has been extended yet again. Thomas phones his father whose heart is weakening and decides it is time to find a flight out of Nepal. My husband’s broken leg has improved and he goes out on his bicycle to find us food. Lucky and I become Facebook friends, and Manabhan sends me updates on bird sightings.

We read of Nepali migrant labourers stranded in the Gulf states and of daily-wage earners all around Nepal who cannot afford to buy food. The virus is starting to spread rapidly and we wonder about the people we met on our trek. Yet according to the news, the virus has not reached mountainous regions. Bangshak sends photos of fields in Prok that are now deep green. May it be true that in his infinite wisdom many centuries ago, Pulindasamudra established the byre, the hidden valleys that offer protection when the world is in deep trouble.
Nepali cartoonists poke India over Kalapani

Much smaller Nepal gets back at India on border row using the power of satire

Kuma Dixit

A

n fostering row between India and Nepal over a section of their Himalayan border has seen an eruption of cartoons in the Nepali media that poke fun at India’s claim to the territory but also ridicule their own rulers in Kathmandu.

The mainstream media in Delhi and Nepal have staunchly defended their own governments, although the Nepali press has also been unforgiving about lapses by Nepal’s rulers over the past 150 years in raising the issue with Britain, and later India.

“A sketch speaks a thousand words, and images leave a more lasting imprint in people’s minds than text,” explains Rajesh KC, who makes cartoons under the nom de plume Phaasha in the portal, baardhwaj.com. “The Kalapani issue is made for satire because Nepal is the underdog and the only way it can hit back is by making fun of the stronger side.”

Indeed, most Nepali cartoonists have joined this David vs Goliath fight with sketches that deride Prime Minister Modi, Indian Army Chief Naravane, and Indian television talk shows. However, in contrast to Indian mainstream media during this dispute, Nepal’s cartoonists have reserved their sharpest barbs for their own leaders.

“This gives Nepal’s media much more credibility, it shows that we are free enough to criticise our own rulers at a sensitive time provides a powerful tool to get the message across quicker and more effectively than a long text-based analysis,” says Bipin Prasad, an editorial cartoonist who works for the Kathmandu Post.

“An editorial cartoonist needs to incorporate these components: art, journalism and humour,” explains KC, who received a severe reprimand in 2009 from the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu for lampooning Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a Kamipur cartoon about another border dispute with India over the Susta corridor.

It is because cartoons are so effective in expressing hypocrisy, telling truth to power, and making people laugh, that those who are the butt of jokes sometimes cannot take it. Nepali Times cartoonist Diwakar Chhetri often depicts both India and China as bullying big brother. He says: “Cartoons are actions, and the pictures are more powerful words because they use satire, irony, metaphor to add flavour to the unvarnished truth. It is a cartoon’s bold honesty that makes it such a powerful medium.”

Rajesh KC (Photo): working at home on Tuesday with his digital studio set up in a room dedicated to this pursuit

Rabin Suyaga: This photo shows a cartoonist at his desk, preparing a cartoon for the paper’s next day’s edition

Rakshya Bhandari: A detail from a cartoon showing the border dispute with India in Kalapani