

NEPALI Times

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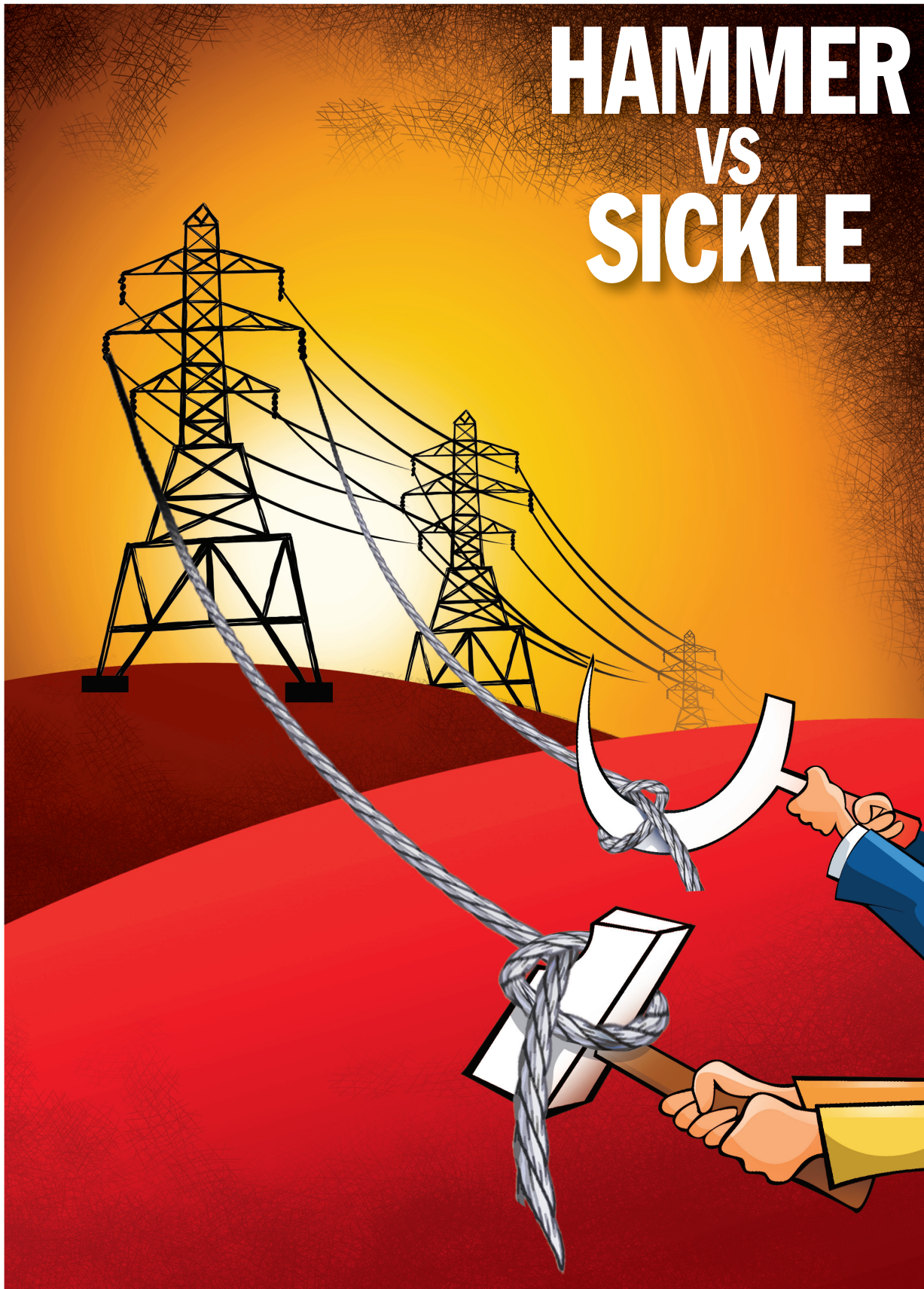
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HAMMER VS SICKLE



BHANU BHATTARA

Not much has changed since the row within the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) erupted in February over the \$500 million Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC) grant from the US government to build transmission lines in Nepal.

A dissident faction led by party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal is still using the MCC as a battering ram to

try to dislodge Prime Minister Oli from office. He has got Parliament Speaker Agni Sapkota to delay debate in the House, mobilised ex-UML dissidents and the NCP secretariat in which his faction has a majority, and incite populism and ultra-nationalism through the media to sabotage the initiative.

The five-year project would help link new hydropower producers

to the national grid, and export surplus electricity to India. Governments of major parties all enthusiastically endorsed the project when it was signed in 2017. But suddenly, it is stuck because the MCC has become a political football between the two alpha males of Nepali politics.

Dahal has used ex-UML figures like former prime ministers Madhav

Kumar Nepal and Jhalnath Khanal, as well as Bhim Rawal, to flog Oli. While Dahal has remained behind the scenes, others have been on tv talk shows and social media to say that the MCC is anti-Chinese and is America's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Outnumbered in the party secretariat, Oli has been trying to woo Nepal and others away from the Dahal faction. He said recently: "We need transmission lines. If the Americans want to build them for free, what's the problem?"

Most of the leadership of the Nepali Congress is for the MCC, which means the project represents an internal power struggle in the ruling party, while the government and the opposition are on the same page.

KNOWING WHAT'S GOOD FOR NEPAL EDITORIAL PAGE 2

Many of the bureaucrats involved in designing the MCC say they envisaged it as a project capable of jump-starting the economy through better connectivity. Hydropower developers on the Budi Gandaki, Trisuli, Kali Gandaki, Marsyangdi, Kosi and Tama Kosi corridors all need the MCC's 400KVa Kathmandu-Hetauda-Butwal transmission line to evacuate the electricity they generate.

"It is important for Nepal to start building these transmission lines with or without the Americans," says Hitendradev Shakya, a power grid expert.

There is an extra 830MW of generation capacity coming up on the Bhote Kosi in Rasuwa and Nuwakot, although they have been delayed due to the lockdown. A 220KVa transmission line has already been built to take some of that electricity to Kathmandu Valley, but more grid capacity will be needed to transfer power to other load centres, and even sell future surplus to India.

This monsoon, Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) is already losing Rs10 million a day in spilt energy because of the reduction in demand during the lockdown. But the utility has signed agreements to buy 6,000MW more from private producers in the next five years.

Without the transmission lines, those agreements will have to be scrapped, and Nepal may plunge back into the dark days of power cuts.

Kunda Dixit

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Knowing what's good for Nepal

If Nepal's politicians do not come to their senses soon, a \$500 million US grant for critical infrastructure will be cancelled. This will be a debacle for Nepal's economy, and an international embarrassment that will tar the country diplomatically for years to come.

The Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC) was initiated by the US government in 2004 as an independent agency to seek innovative ways to end poverty in least developed countries. Nepal was selected as a partner, and planning for the MCC started during the government of Baburam Bhattarai.

The entire phalanx of NC leadership, as well as NCP leaders so vociferously trying to scrap the agreement today, were involved in the meticulous design of the MCC.



Nepal was suffering up to 18 hours of load-shedding a day, so the MCC team, along with Nepali politicians and bureaucrats decided that transmission lines were urgently needed to evacuate generated electricity to load centres, boost consumption of clean energy to replace imported petroleum, and export any excess to the Indian market.

The Nepal government signed the agreement in 2017. But when it came time to implement the Compact and spend the \$500 million, along with another \$130 million equivalent put up by the Nepal Government, violent objections suddenly arose from the CPN flank. Some royalist conservatives jumped on the bandwagon.

Painting Nepal as a victim of American imperialism and geopolitical designs, the anti-MCC campaign has used in-party machinations, ultra-nationalist posturing, and populism against the project. If you would believe it, the Americans are about to steal Nepali intellectual property, give all MCC-related jobs to Americans, and locate missile silos in Nepal aimed at China.

To be sure, US Under Secretary of State David J Ranz last year fuelled the fire by asserting that the MCC was part of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. That foot-in-the-mouth comment was picked up by critics to prove that the MCC is against China.

The Americans backpedalled furiously, but the damage was done. Truth be told, the

Indo-Pacific strategy was announced in 2018 by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, much after negotiations on the MCC began in 2012 and the agreement was signed in 2017.

At a time when international development assistance has dried up further because of the pandemic, the MCC promise will inject \$100 million a year over five years on crucial energy infrastructure. The timing is perfect to help revive Nepal's economy with catalytic liquidity as recession accelerates worldwide. The transmission line will also have downstream benefits nationwide for economic growth, equity and social justice.

To ensure that Nepal does not get mired in delays such as the Melamchi Project, the MCC agreement has some failsafe measures. Endorsement of the Parliament was not necessary, but the US Congress too has adopted the MCC Compact for Nepal, so there is no loss of sovereignty as alleged.

The economic argument for the project has been overshadowed by heavy anti-MCC populism. So much so that NEA's top officials and independent power producers who need the transmission lines to sell their electricity have preferred to keep quiet.

Most intriguing is the inability or unwillingness of the media and civil society to pinpoint the actual root of the anti-MCC campaign. It is the weaponisation of the MCC by NCP co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal against his main rival, Prime Minister K P Oli.

Dahal, with the assistance of the majority of the CPN secretariat, is engineering the failure of MCC to question Oli's command over the Parliamentary Party and hence, the right to lead the government.

Then, there is House Speaker Agni Sapkota, who is doing Dahal's bidding by not presenting the MCC bill for debate – just as his predecessor Krishna Bahadur Mahara did since the bill was presented over a year ago. This delay should have triggered an uproar in Parliament, but ruling party MPs are confused, while the opposition NC leadership (which is for the MCC) does not speak up for fear of being tarred anti-national and 'in the take'.

The MCC is also important to restore Nepal's international credibility. For a Parliament to reject an agreement signed in good faith by an earlier government and supported by the current ruling party would send a message to the world that Nepal's politicians are not trustworthy.

Given the polarised world where Kathmandu is required to balance two belligerent neighbours, India and China, Nepal needs to keep the West supportive of its development agenda and place in the world.

Failure to accept the MCC would not only poison Nepal's relationship with the US, it would also help alienate the international community for the worst of reasons – not knowing what is good for us.

The MCC has been weaponised by Pushpa Kamal Dahal against his main rival, Prime Minister Oli.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

10 years ago this week, in issue #507 18-24 June 2010, Sujeev Shakya, in his column Artha Beed, questioned the Nepali psyche that regards manual work as shameful, yet consciously chooses to do menial jobs abroad. Unfortunately, his argument is as relevant today as it was a decade ago. Excerpt:

'Why is it that Nepalis don't want to work as hairdressers, washerwomen (or men), cleaners, door-to-door delivery people and lots of other service providers? Why should selling vegetables be considered a menial job? Nepalis would rather sweat in the Gulf's heat and be exposed to abuse than work for a Nepali in Nepal. Are foreign masters really better than Nepali ones? Even in Nepal you get inklings of this mindset in the way you are served in restaurants frequented by expatriates...

What Nepali youths require is not only skills training (which is limited) but also a large-scale campaign that acknowledges that leaving Nepal is fine, but emphasises the fact that there is nothing wrong with working in Nepal if there are opportunities.'



SUMNIMA UDAS

What a woman ("I care how Nepal is presented on the world stage", *page 10*)! Absolutely well informed, well spoken, with exactly the right tone to create harmony and understanding!

Renate Schwarz

■ Bravo, she has to courage to say clearly what the issues are with Indian media, not many in India are able to do the same in plain speak.

Vijaya Nidadavolu

■ I hope our media world takes her suggestions and makes changes in their way of presentation.

Smriti B Tuladhar

■ I wish we had more journalists such as herself in the United States.

Gabriel Teitelbaum

■ She is correct. Most of our interviewers are keen to show their knowledge and then ask questions.

Dipak Gurung

WEEKEND LONGREADS

Interesting read that spreads positivity ('The clouds are lifting below Dhaulagiri', Joy Stephens, *page 8-9*)! Cheers

Anju Sharma

■ As a lifelong fan of well-researched long form journalism, I love these 'longreads' from *Nepali Times*! This one is really good, if you like this sort of story.

Ashutosh Tiwari

WORLD CUP LABOUR

Shocking practices of enslavement ('World Cup stadium workers in Qatar unpaid' *nepalitimes.com*). World Cup football on the back of human degradation and misery.

Rachel Hodge

■ Sad to see people being taken advantage of this way. We need to boycott companies and events who exploit people like this. Taking profits from them is the only thing they understand!

Jason King

ANTI-GOVERNMENT

They are helping the economy through remittance and contributing in various other aspects...and this is how the government pays them back ('The high cost of returning to Nepal', *nepalitimes.com*)?

Priiyya

■ Incompetence is not acceptable ('More anti-government protests in Kathmandu', *nepalitimes.com*). Make room for those who listen to the people, care about the people and truly represent the people.

Sav Shrestha

■ I do agree the government is corrupt and they need to be doing much more for the good of all people in Nepal. But these crowds are not helping to lessen the risk of the virus.

Diane Slessor

■ This protest should not rest until we make this government transparent, accountable, and responsible towards its citizens. What a disgrace when a foreign government brings you back with such respect and your own government cannot pay \$10 to send you home.

Pramod Acharya

HUMAN RIGHTS DENIED

At least the justice system is doing its work. those who have perpetuated war crimes, will be punished ('Nepal runs out of excuses to address war crimes', Tufan Neupane, *nepalitimes.com*). The present government cannot erase their crime and they will not be in power forever.

Kin Bee

■ The perpetrators of war crimes are in power. They will have sufficient excuses.

Lal Bahadur Nepali

NEW MAP BILL

I feel this is an indirect result of the recent protests and rallies done by the youth of Nepal, although the cause was unrelated but the message has gone to the politicians it seems ('Nepal passes map bill, India reacts', *nepalitimes.com*).

Tango Wangyal

■ Hard work lies ahead. Dealing with India requires considerable planning and teamwork on Nepal side. It is catch 22.

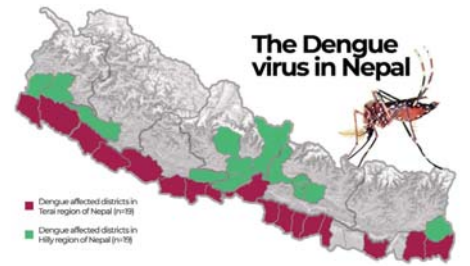
Gyurme Dondup

■ It has been a disputed area since ages ('Jaw-jaw not fued-fued', Akanshya Shah, *nepalitimes.com*). But we should not repeat the same mistakes what our ancestors made by postponing this matter.

Suman Thapa

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



The dangers of the dengue virus

by Tom Robertson

We have had few days without rain this April-May-June, meaning more disease for Kathmandu. Not COVID-19, but the virus we used to talk about — last year's scary unknown disease, dengue. Read this latest in the History of Disease column where we dissect the dengue virus.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

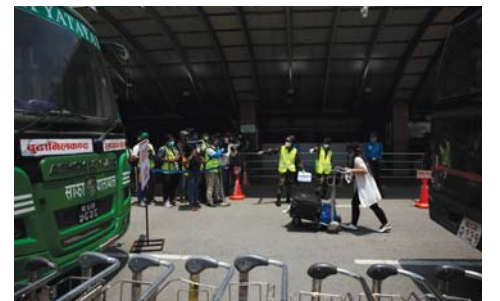


"I care how Nepal is presented on the world stage"

Award-winning Nepali journalist and former CNN reporter Sumnima Udas recently tweeted with an unusually strong line on India's claim to Nepali territory in Limpiyadhura. This interview with her on the state of media in the age of populist authoritarianism was read by thousands and shared widely on social media.

Most popular on Twitter

Most commented



The Kathmandu airlift begins

by Upasana Khadka

After outrage on social media about the government not following its own guidelines about repatriating Nepali migrants from abroad, stranded and desperate workers are finally beginning to come home.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Does Nepal deserve 2nd term at @UN_HRC? Nepal is running for re-election at the UN Human Rights Council even as it suffers from a chronic problem of non-implementation of human rights protections at home.



Frederick Rawski @FrederickRawski
Excellent and comprehensive review by @NepaliTimesof #Nepal's human rights record as it seeks a second term on the UN Human Rights Council. @ICJ_Asia



SUVASH GURTI @ansunot
One thing for sure is that you can't assure hundred percent safety of human rights but it should be judged on how the cases are handled aftermath and justice is served or not.



Naran Klyphree @NaranKlyphree
With its track records, No!



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Award-winning Nepali journalist & tv personality formerly with @cnni @sumnima_udas recently tweeted with an unusually strong line on #India's claim to #Nepal's territory. Read this interview for her take on Nepal-India relations & modern-day #journalism.



Milan Shrestha @MilanShrestha
Very insightful and thoughtful perspectives from someone who knows India mediascape well. Those helped make sense of the recent hysterical, biased Indian media coverage of Nepal. Thank you.



Nischal Dhungel @nischaldhl
Powerful statement by @sumnima_udas. I often feel we sell ourselves too short, if we always present or project ourselves as small or poor, that will be our reality. It is time we re-imagine the positioning of our country. TYSM @NepaliTimes

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MANI LAMA

Ode on unlocking

Nature is settling into the hollow spaces of the lockdown

No one forgets there is a lockdown going on, but you could be forgiven for believing the Valley is a *beyul* cloaked in emerald, a sanctuary freshly washed with unseasonal downpours, the air unusually pristine and clement.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

No one forgets that the process of unlocking might be even more painful, but the distant white peaks are unveiled, every scrap of empty land is productive with cultivation, the birds clatter in the unaccustomed quiet.

No one forgets the growing clamour of dissatisfied voices throughout the country, but the garden has exploded into a thousand shades of green, soaking up the showers and storms, the voice of the river making itself heard as the waters swell.

No one forgets the tear-gas attacks as protesters politely request accountability from their leaders for pandemic preparations during the past ten weeks, but early morning mists swathe the hills and swarms of insects cloud the cobwebbed trees. Nature is settling into the hollow spaces of the lockdown, creeping like the purple convolvulus that has overtaken our neglected hedge.

No one forgets the terrible human cost of the virus, but birds twitter, trill, chirp, sing and squawk louder than ever, the cuckoos dominate the cacophony and navy thrushes are most strident long before dawn.

No one forgets the plight of the hungry and the sick, the distress of the deprived and destitute, but dark kites delicately tilt their wings on their overhead patrols and flocks of rose-ringed parakeets fan their tapered tails to perch noisily in the yellow



SUJOY DAS



LISA CHOEGYAL

bamboo.

No one forgets the devastation to the Nepal economy, but the twilight symphony at dusk features staccato crickets in stereo with undertones of cooing pigeons and croaking frogs, and the occasional basso profundo crow.

No one forgets the suffering of migrants, the dismal border quarantine and the dilemma of the stranded both here and abroad, but butterflies float through the

blossoms, bees industriously collect their nectar and dragonflies hover hopefully over the quiet pond.

Despite the science, we eagerly embrace the freedom to fill the formerly deserted streets on odd and even number days, to escape our overfamiliar locked down homes where the sunlit shadows chase around the rooms and moods fluctuate with the day, whilst outside, the window seasons evolve from spring to summer.



SUJOY DAS

No one forgets how long the shutters have remained closed and how daily commerce has stood still, but the plums weigh down their branches and stain the ground, the jacaranda carpets on the driveway mauve, the pale hydrangeas flourish then fall, and the datura trumpets pinkly wilt and drop.

No one forgets how much anguish has been endured these last two months, dreams dashed, exams untaken, livelihoods suspended, but the crimson bougainvillea bravely withstands the onslaught of the rains.

I leave the house bleary-eyed and face-masked on an early walk as the pink light steals across the horizon. A brown dog sniffs along the edges of the dirt road and an old lady wrapped in an orange shawl sweeps her doorway. A skinny man in a grubby singlet stretches irritably at the start of his workless day and a girl crouches under an outdoor tap washing metal plates beside her house. A woman arranges oranges in her makeshift roadside stall. But no temple bell rings, no offerings of petals, fruit and tika powder stand ready on a brass tray.

Only a crackling radio disturbs the timeless morning routine of life in the time of the coronavirus. 🇳🇵

What do I know?

Tashi Sherpa

I wonder what it must be like to be the ostracised
What do I know
of the universe denied to you,
the asphyxiation of your song,
this crush of ancient inequity,
blades of shame that cut like sin
and rape the soul.
Fear that rips your neurons
when sirens, bullhorns and dishonor
aim their arrows at you alone
How do I gauge the dark depths
In your posture and your eyes
the sweat of your clench
in deference to norm

Sullen, silent and hooded
in hurt and defiant pride
How could I see or hear
When I have stayed blind and deaf,
Willfully superior, purposely negligent
on pedestals of privilege,
and self anointed caste.
Pontificating.

My empathies, muted at best
twice removed, in a bubble
of benign ignorance
I may read the signs
But haven't felt the slights
the burn of cringing,
you get from bullying looks,
The averted shuffles in spacing,
social distancing in auto mode
when they see you approach
Eyes down on the village path,
the sidewalk, the subway stop,
You do not seek my mercy,
my useless righteousness,
my guilt ridden compassion
you're not asking to eat,
to "contaminate"
the crumbs off my plate
or the soil under our feet
you detest the smell of pity
the fake hand of courtesy
when all you want is the equality
of unseeing your presence ,
of accepting your absence,

Just like one of us.
why do You have to be the one
to make a crusade of doing right,
when they've always seen you wrong.
It must be exhausting and excruciating,
Eviscerating..
this existence.

Birth and death during a pandemic

Nepal's lockdown to stop the spread of coronavirus has indirectly led to a rise in maternal deaths



PHOTOS: HIMALKHABAR.COM

MEDEVAC: A maternity patient being airlifted from a hospital in Achham last month. Many mothers are giving birth at home because of the lockdown, and only going to hospital if there are serious complications.

Nunuta Rai

Given the unlikelihood of mother to child transmission, the COVID-19 pandemic should have had minimal impact on childbirth, but the lockdown imposed to curb the virus in the past three months has indirectly led to a rise in maternal deaths in Nepal.

Lack of transportation has meant that pregnant women and mothers have not been able to get pre- and ante-natal care. There has been a sharp rise in home deliveries, and when complicated maternal cases do arrive at hospitals, it is sometimes too late.

Although Nepal's maternal mortality rate has come down dramatically over the past 20 years, the lockdown has worsened an already substandard maternal healthcare system especially in rural areas.

Srijana Khanal is five months pregnant and had recently visited Patan Hospital for her first dose of the Tetanus-Diphtheria (TD) vaccine. She waited for three hours before giving up. She was too hungry and none of the teashops or restaurants close by were open because of the lockdown.

"I went back the next day but it was even more crowded so I went to a private hospital and got the shot," she says, adding that because of her pregnancy and the pandemic, she has become paranoid of strangers touching her, even unintentionally.

Gita Thapa is seven months pregnant. She has not been able to go to a hospital in Kathmandu for her second dose of the TD vaccine due to the continued restrictions on movement.

"I was expecting the lockdown to open but instead, the coronavirus infection is spreading even more," says Thapa. "I don't own a vehicle to go by myself, and I'm also scared of going to hospitals due to the higher risk of coronavirus there."

Two doses of TD vaccine are recommended for all pregnant women at intervals of a month each after the second trimester. The vaccine is essential not only to the health of the newborn child, but also to meeting the targets set by UN Sustainable Development Goal 3, which Nepal has committed to.

However, more than three months into the lockdown,

pregnant women across the country are having a hard time visiting health facilities for regular check-ups, thereby losing access to essential supplies of iron, calcium, folic acid pills, and recommended vaccine shots.

Kusum Kafle of Jhapa is four months pregnant but has not been able to go for a check-up and find out about the condition of her baby. She has had to buy iron pills otherwise free-of-cost during normal times. "Health wise, I'm fine, but without regular check-ups, I'm afraid for my baby," she says.

Health facilities across the country, already under-equipped and dealing with the pressures of the COVID-19 outbreak, are now running out of their stock of essential prenatal medication. Their efforts to provide check-ups and consultations to pregnant women are hindered by the restrictions placed to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Shanta Khanal, who works as a female health volunteer in Arjundhara of Jhapa district, says she has not been able to supply patients with essential medicines due to the lockdown. "But I still provide consultations to pregnant women in my community," she adds.

Pawan Sharma at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS) advises expecting mothers not to visit the hospital unless required and to get necessary consultations via phone or online platforms.

"If a woman is experiencing a normal pregnancy, I recommend that they stay put at home with a balanced diet and basic exercise," says Sharma who has been providing consultations to expecting mothers via PAHS' Viber service. "Visit nearby health clinics for blood pressure check-ups and iron pills. And if one must visit a hospital, masks, sanitiser, and physical distancing are a must."

Jogendra Gautam, director of the Paropakar Maternity Hospital in Kathmandu, says, "We recommend pregnant women to visit the hospital only in the case of emergency or for the TD vaccine. Otherwise, we have set up a toll-free number for telephone consultations."

Traffic restrictions and the continued ban on public transport have rendered pregnant women immobile, causing a spike in

deaths caused during childbirth. UN estimates show that roughly, a woman dies in childbirth every two minutes around the world – a bulk of these deaths in developing countries.

However, Nepal is considered to be a success story in improving survival rates for childbirth. Between 1990 and 2015, Nepal reduced its maternal mortality ratio from 901 deaths per 100,000 live births to 258. It had gone down further since, but there has been a spike in maternal and neonatal mortality across the country that threatens to undo the progress.

The situation is worse in remote areas where hospitals are few and far between, and communities are plagued by regressive patriarchal values, coupled with a lack of awareness about reproductive healthcare.

Bayalpata Hospital in Achham district recently persuaded a patient who lived 7 hours away to stay at the hospital for her childbirth. She gave birth to healthy twins. However, such positive outcomes are rare during the lockdown.

"Delays in getting the pregnant women to hospitals has been a major reason for maternal mortality in the mountains of Nepal and this is exactly where the lockdown has hit the hardest," says Bikash Gauchan, healthcare director at Bayalpata.

There have been at least 30 reported maternal deaths nationwide in the past two months, and this is much lower than the average as fewer mothers are doing institutional delivery because of the fear of coronavirus.

"Maternal deaths have gone up dramatically during the lockdown, most of them cases of excessive bleeding, ruptured uteruses, and infections directly linked with (the) inability to access birthing facilities due to the lockdown," says Punya Paudel at the Family Welfare Division.

Although the Ministry of Health and Population has come up with interim guidelines to alleviate the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on reproductive healthcare, public health experts fear the mass movement of returning migrant workers across the country will continue to impact many pregnant women among them.

With additional reporting by Sonia Awale

Saving one Nepali mother at a time

At 11AM on 23 May, 21-year-old Saraswati Pokhrel of Tundanda village in Baglung district fainted during her baby daughter's naming ceremony. With her husband working in India, family and relatives were unsure how to help the new mother and called local authorities.

Municipality chair Meher Singh Paieja started making calls to government officials including the CDO, local MPs as well as provincial and central government ministers requesting a rescue helicopter.

But the Home Ministry said she did not qualify because she had already given birth. The Army helicopter was said to be grounded. The Province 5 government wasn't of much help either.

But at 2:30PM, the mayor of neighbouring Dhorpatan Municipality, Dev Kumar Nepali, who happened to be in Baglung for coronavirus relief distribution, called Prabhu Helicopter to dispatch a rescue chopper from Pokhara. It arrived an hour later, and Saraswati Pokhrel was airlifted to the Western Regional Hospital in Pokhara.

Doctors found Pokhrel was suffering from postpartum eclampsia, not an uncommon condition among women who have recently given birth. Pokhrel had delivered her baby only 11 days ago at a local birthing centre in Baglung.

"Postpartum eclampsia happens due to high blood pressure. But regular check-ups to monitor blood pressure and medicines can help prevent it," explains says Jogeswor Gautam, a physician at Paropakar Maternity Hospital in Kathmandu.

Saraswati Pokhrel's life was saved only because the mayor of a neighbouring municipality happened to be in Baglung by chance, and had the connections to get a rescue helicopter. Many other Nepali mothers with complications are not so lucky during the lockdown.

"If the government had more accessible emergency rescue mechanisms, lot more pregnant women and new mothers wouldn't have to lose their lives," says Mayor Meher Singh Paieja. *Ramu Sapkota, Kamal Paudel and Jivan Pandey from Baglung*



The Far-western Province has become a model in organising emergency rescues of maternity cases in the region with the highest maternal mortality rate in Nepal. It has conducted at least four helicopter rescues in the last few months under the President's Women Empowerment Program.

Patients unable to access timely healthcare services due to the continued lockdown, the inaccessibility of health facilities, or their inability to pay for treatment, have the option of requesting heli-rescue.

25-year-old Nirmala Khadka from Chaurpati of Achham district was 20 weeks pregnant when she had complications that needed an immediate operation. She was airlifted to Nepalganj Medical College in Kohalpur.

In another case, 23-year-old Lajima Magar of Kanchanpur district was diagnosed with kidney malfunction following childbirth. She was taken to Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu via a helicopter because of her critical condition.

Janaki Devi Rawal, 33, of Kailali was airlifted to Kathmandu on 4 May due to post-partum complications, but died a week after returning home.

Recently, 24-year-old Deuma Saud from Ramroshan, Achham was admitted to a hospital after excessive bleeding. She was airlifted by the Nepal Army and taken to Nepalganj Medical College. Her baby did not survive but she is in good health nevertheless.

Unnati Chaudhary in Kailali



FIBONACCI BLUE

We all yearn to breathe free

‘Americans are outspoken on human rights, not because we think we are perfect but because we know we are not’

Like so many others in Nepal, the United States, and around the world, I was shocked to my core by the video that shows George Floyd gasping for air as four policemen violated his rights, one with his knee planted firmly, fatally, on Mr Floyd’s neck.



COMMENT
Randy Berry

That shock has been magnified by images of protests and violence that were triggered by Mr. Floyd’s violent death but that also reflect America’s outrage after a series of publicised murders of black American men and women over the years. These events are particularly jarring for American citizens.

We recognise, with personal pain, that recent days have laid bare how much hard work still remains to live up to our values and our founding principles that we are all created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

As we undertake that hard work at home, some people have suggested that the United States should ‘shut up’ about violations of fundamental human rights in other countries. These people misunderstand: Americans are outspoken, not because we think we are perfect, but because we know we are not. We know from our experience that the struggle for freedom cannot be advanced alone. America’s patriots,

just like Nepal’s democracy activists, benefited from ideas and support from around the world.

America is outspoken because we believe that free people are obligated by conscience to speak up for the rights and liberties of others. Or, as Martin Luther King Jr wrote from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere ... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

This is why America doesn’t sweep our history or our current challenges under a rug. We hold them up for examination so that we and others can use those experiences to push America and other societies forward and build a better future.

This principle is most apparent in how we invite Nepalis to interact with the United States. We invite diverse groups to visit our country – and seek to expose them to the diversity and differences that are the strength and foundation of the United States. When America sponsors Nepalis to visit the United States, we invite Dalit activists and labour organisers and women entrepreneurs.

We encourage them to examine America, to have conversations with our own human rights activists — those who criticise our government — and to tour civil rights monuments that mark with transparency America’s continuing journey of self-improvement. As Americans do through the study of their own history, we welcome others to learn from our successes as well as our failures.

There is a reason that people in Nepal and all around the world

know George Floyd’s name and know the history of racism in America: our media is free, and we protect the rights of those who criticise our society and our government. We protect especially the rights of those who criticise our society and our government, in the media, on the internet, and in the streets. We speak out — and will continue to do so — against those who attack peaceful protestors, whether abroad or at home.

The United States was born of a protest movement demanding inalienable rights, including peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. And peaceful protests demanding that our government live up to its own stated ideals throughout our history have made our country stronger.

That is why the gathering of bold women a century ago in Seneca Falls demanded, and achieved, voting equality. That is why the brave men and women who marched with Dr King in Selma to protest inequality and demand justice led to the adoption of broad Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s. That is why LGBT Americans, long criminalised and ostracised, refused systemic discrimination through protest at the Stonewall Inn, and gave birth to the modern LGBT rights movement. And that is why today we protest Mr. Floyd’s death, condemn racism, and demand justice in America.

And that is why we continue to hold those ideals, these truths, to be self-evident: as we continue to work to improve our country, we will never be so insular or elitist to assume that only Americans are entitled to such rights. Indeed, these rights are universal and not the province of a state to give — or

deny. Condemn racism and demand justice in America. But do so, too, in Nepal. For Dalits and women and ethnic minorities. For people who criticise Nepal’s government and Nepal’s society.

And not only in Nepal and America. Speak up for our fellow human beings regardless of

nationality, religion, geography, or the system under which they were born. Speak out and demand justice whenever the deprivation of those fundamental freedoms, which are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are curtailed by governments worldwide that are fearful of the honest, truthful voices of their own citizens.

Speak out and demand justice for minority communities who are told their traditional culture and religious beliefs must be ‘corrected’ by the state. Speak out and demand justice for women worldwide who face unequal treatment, harassment, and violence in the workplace and in their homes.

As a result of our respective struggles, inspired and supported by democracy champions around the world, Americans and Nepalis enjoy more rights today than ever before. Our respective national journeys are not finished. There is more work to do, both in America, my home country, and in Nepal, where I am honoured to make my home.

America is struggling now, but our strength lies in our ability to improve ourselves. And America is strong enough that we can — and will — mend ourselves at home while continuing to support those who champion human dignity around the world.

People yearning for freedom can take comfort: America will continue to be outspoken in the defense of human liberty, at home and abroad. 🇺🇸

Randy Berry is the United States Ambassador to Nepal.

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Repatriation flights

Himalaya Airlines and Nepal Airlines are operating 40 repatriation flights for Nepali citizens till 24 June as per schedule and fares set by the Ministry of Tourism. Oman’s budget airline Salam Air has brought home



320 Nepalis stranded in Muscat in the past week. Jazeera Airways has also been flying home Nepalis from Kuwait City. Turkish Airlines and Qatar Airways are also operating four repatriation flights from US destinations in the coming weeks.

Asian Paints

Asian Paints will distribute COVID-19 protective gear to its business partners,



suppliers, and employees amid growing concerns over health and safety during the pandemic.

Banking on banks

NIC Asia implemented the directive issued by the Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) to reduce interest rates of loan payments due until mid-April by 2% to minimise the financial impact of COVID-19 on borrowers.

Mega Bank customers now get 10% discounts while shopping for personal protective equipment, sanitiser, infrared thermometers, surgical masks, gloves, face protectors, and disinfectant spray from online shopping portal Reecharger.

Laxmi Bank is offering easy financing schemes at competitive fixed interest rates for customers to purchase laptops and PCs

because of online classes. Applicable for Acer, Epson, Dell and Apple computers. **Sanima Bank** has provided Rs1 million to Karuna Foundation Nepal to support people with disabilities in Province 1 for buying support equipment.

Nissan and Datsun

Pioneer Moto Corp has launched a nationwide ‘Buy Now Pay Later’ scheme for



the Nissan range as well as Datsun Redit and Datsun Go vehicles. This scheme aims to ease the financial pressure felt by customers during the pandemic.

Ncell

Ncell has partnered with online payment platforms Khalti, Prabhupay, and Unipay so that customers can now buy data and voice packs from digital wallets and authorised Ncell point of sales (PoS). Customers will be able to buy 6 data packs

and 6 voice packs via these wallets, using funds available in their wallet or through amount reserved in user’s bank accounts linked with the wallet.

Nepal Clearing House

Nepal Clearing House’s connect IPS e-Payment System has crossed over Rs 2 billion in daily transactions. The month to month connect IPS transaction grew by 75% and 186% in terms of number and value respectively during the three months of lockdown.

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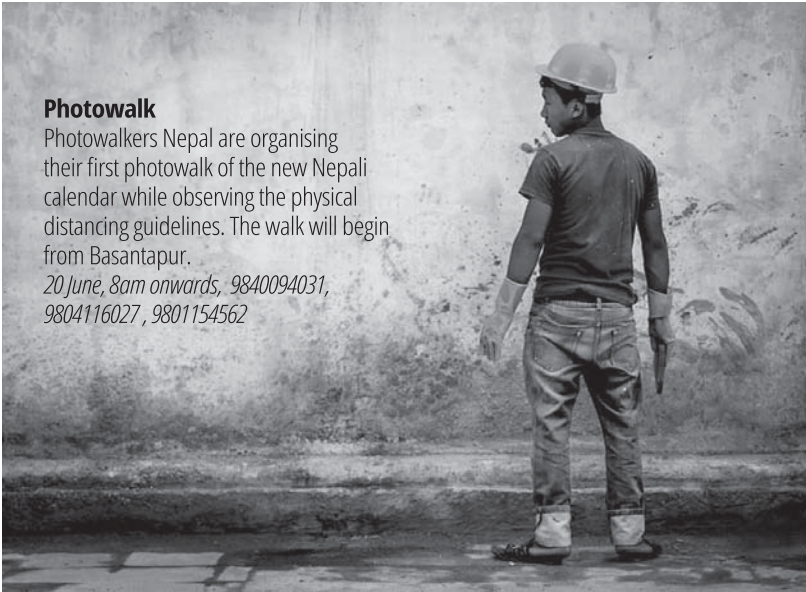
VIRTUAL EVENTS



Nepal Reads
This pride month, the book discussion sessions for Nepal Reads will be focused on gender and sexuality. Join online sessions about gender, sexuality, the history of pride and Nepal's LGBTI movement with the LGBTQIA+ community. Find the necessary reading material and register for the discussions on the Quixote's Cove Facebook page.
21 June-8 July

Meditation Workshop
Join 'The spiritual touch- Mindfulness Meditation' workshop by Mapping Roads. The session will focus on 'twin hearted meditation', founded by Choa Kok Sui. Register at https://bit.ly/spiritual_m-r
20 June, 3:30pm-4:30pm


Photowalk
Photowalkers Nepal are organising their first photowalk of the new Nepali calendar while observing the physical distancing guidelines. The walk will begin from Basantapur.
20 June, 8am onwards, 9840094031, 9804116027, 9801154562



Art Exhibition
On the occasion of World Refugee Day 2020, Artudio and UNHCR invite Nepal's 24 years or younger to send in photographs of their artwork. Selected ones will be exhibited on Artudio's website and social media platforms. Deadline for submission is 25 June. Go to www.artudio.net for details on the theme and how to submit the artwork.
20-30 June, 9851081931, 9823490390


Le Sherpa Farmers Market
Le Sherpa weekly farmers market resumes from this week. Shop for fresh and organic vegetables, fruit, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more. Go to the Le Sherpa Farmer Market Facebook page to learn about physical distancing measures and rules while shopping.
Every Saturday, 8am-12:30pm, Le Sherpa Maharajgunj

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Sustainable Summits 2020
Listen to Sustainable Summits global leaders speak out on World Environment Day. SUSTAINABLE SUMMITS 2020: A POST COVID19 VIEW FROM THE TOP, an online 50-minute programme in which some of the conferences' inspirational leaders share powerful messages on the future of mountain environment. Watch video here: <https://youtu.be/tpjicGJrHk>

Veritasium
A channel of science and engineering videos featuring experiments, expert interviews, cool demonstrations, and discussions with the public about everything science. Check out the playlist on YouTube and find what appeals.




Many Books
Browse through a selection of more than 50,000 modern and classic books spanning genres available for download for free and in most eReader formats.



Van Gogh Museum
See the works of Vincent Van Gogh up close through a virtual tour of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, home to the largest collection of his artwork. The collection includes over 200 paintings, 500 drawings, and over 750 personal letters.

Global flea markets
Experience 9 of the world's most iconic flea markets including France's Les Puces de Saint-Ouen, India's Anjuna Flea Market, and London's Portobello Market with this Google Earth virtual tour.

QUARANTINE DINING





Mechung
Experience the best of Tibetan cuisine from this authentic Tibetan restaurant. The shaphaley, thukpa, and kothey momo are a must.
Delivery: 12pm-8:15pm, (01) 4477759



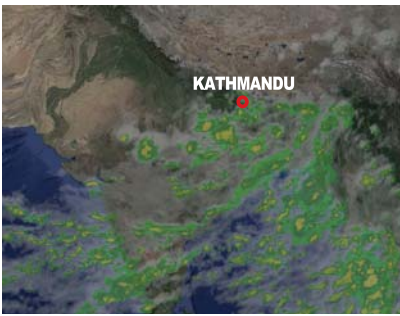
Dip In Donuts
Satisfy that sweet tooth and choose from among varieties of doughnuts from blueberry and cream, coffee and crackers, or the classic cream. Choose from the menu on Foodmandu.
Delivery: 12pm-7:30pm



Gangnam Galbi Barbecue
Tantalise your taste buds with the best of Korean barbecue and grill. Try the Suntofu stew and duck roast grill.
Delivery: 12pm-7:30pm (01) 4434780

Vera Pizza
Vera has your pizza cravings covered. Try the artichoke pizza or the spicy bacon. Find more options on Foodmandu.
Delivery: 10am-6:30pm, 9869540023

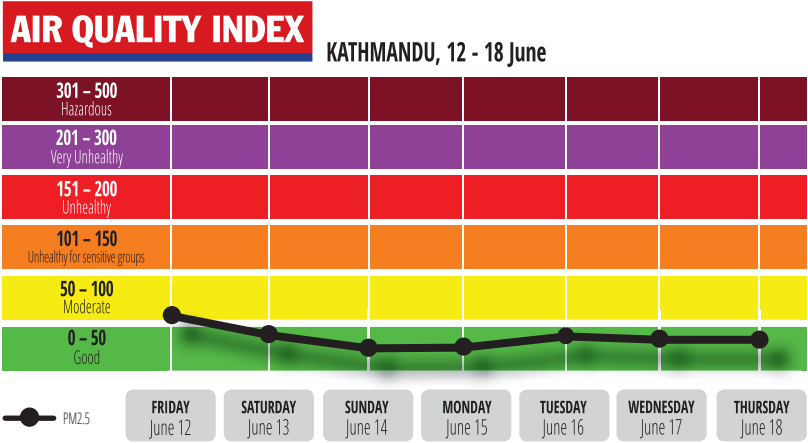




KATHMANDU


FRIDAY 26° 21°
SATURDAY 26° 21°
SUNDAY 27° 20°

What we are witnessing is a massive tug of war between surging monsoonal winds moving in from the east and a lingering westerly. But the jetstream that pushes the westerlies have now moved north of the Himalaya, which means the moist monsoon winds have the upper hand. This year, the trough was propelled by a big low pressure circulation in the Bay which is why the rains arrived bang on schedule. Overcast skies with short sunny spells and mostly night rain into the weekend.



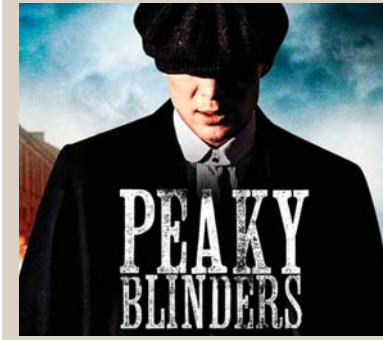
For the first time since we started to publish the Air Quality Index (AQI) measured at the US Embassy in Phora Darbar the average daily concentration of pollutants is in the All Green 'Good' zone – except on Friday when it rose a bit because it did not rain much. The air is usually cleaner during the monsoon, but with the lockdown, the concentration of suspended particles in the air has also gone down.
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI **KRIPA JOSHI**



USE REUSABLE SHOPPING BAGS

While disposable shopping bags are convenient, they start out as fossil fuel and are often discarded within minutes of use to end up as deadly waste in landfills and oceans. Animals, birds and marine life often die from ingesting or getting trapped by plastic bags. Many counties now either ban or charge a levy on single use plastic bags. Using reusable bags (made from a variety of materials such as cotton, canvas, jute, nylon or even stronger plastic) makes environmental and economical sense.



OUR PICK
A British period drama set in Birmingham, England, *Peaky Blinders* follows the exploits of Shelby crime family in the early twentieth century. The fictional family is actually loosely-based on a real 19th century urban youth gang of the same name active in the city. The BAFTA Awards recipient series has 5 seasons so far and stars Cillian Murphy, Helen McCrory, Joe Cole and Paul Anderson.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Nepal farmer refuses to bury head in sand

Despite lockdown, entrepreneur invests in pioneering ostrich venture

Mukesh Pokhrel
in Rupandehi

Despite the economic gloom and doom due to the coronavirus crisis, one farmer in Nepal's southern plains is optimistically and adamantly pinning his hopes on an ostrich venture taking off when business returns to normal.

C P Sharma has always been a pioneering entrepreneur who saw great potential in farming at a time when most young Nepalis were leaving the land for salaried jobs in the city or overseas.

With Rs 1.6 billion in investments, Sharma is using the lockdown period to finish construction of Nepal's first large-scale ostrich farm in Tilottama Municipality of Rupandehi. Intergrated with a mushroom and strawberry farm, Sharma's venture has a cold storage of 10,000 ton capacity.

"This is an integrated farm, and the cold storage will give us the flexibility to store produce for times when there is a shortage of items in the market," explains Sharma, whose venture is already producing 3 tons of mushrooms daily, thereby creating jobs for at least 800 local people.

The venture has a lot of other downstream benefits: the ostrich farm needs commercially grown grass, which local farmers are growing as a cash crop to sell to Sharma.

C P Sharma graduated from Shankardev Campus in Kathmandu in 1987 and did his masters from Russia. Despite an option to remain abroad, he returned, brimming with ideas to create a viable agri-business that



PHOTOS: SAGAR PANDEY



BIRD MAN: C P Sharma supervising construction at his integrated ostrich farm in Rupandehi this week. This farm has created employment for 800 locals.

when he was traveling to America with a Japanese colleague. He was pulled aside to be questioned by US immigration officials, but his friend was permitted to pass through. After 45 minutes of questioning, he was finally cleared.

"It changed my whole outlook on life. I was no criminal, yet they treated me like one just because I came from a poor country," Sharma recalls. "I decided to do what I could to live a dignified life in my own country."

He returned to Nepal in 1995 and saw

great potential in the fertile lands of the Tarai. He had seen ostrich farms in the Ukraine, and tasted the meat in upscale restaurants in Paris, and knew there would be demand for ostrich meat.

The Maoist war forced him to shelve his plans for a few years, but he imported 1,500 ostrich eggs, of which 900 hatched and only 200 survived. Sharma was frustrated after realizing agriculture was not like any other business – it needed patience because of the risks and slow rate of return. His partners quit, but he decided to pursue his goal.

Being a visionary entrepreneur and more importantly, a passionate farmer, Sharma began working his way up to where he is today. His son has now returned from the United States to help in the family business. His wife, who is a physician, helps out when she can.

Besides ostrich, Sharma saw sound business potential in mushrooms. Nepalis consume 25 tons of mushroom daily, but much of the high grade mushrooms are imported from India, China, Vietnam, and Thailand. Because of the shortage of fresh mushrooms, most hotels were using canned alternatives.

Before the coronavirus, Sharma was selling 3 tons of mushroom daily. His plans of ultimately producing four times more may have to be postponed because of the collapse of the tourism industry.

One of the by-products of his integrated farm is high-grade compost consisting of ostrich manure, straw, wheat husk, and sugarcane skin. The compost is used by farmers who grow the commercial grass on which the ostriches feed.

The global pandemic may have slowed business, but Sharma is confident the economy will bounce back and that many Nepalis will also be returning with fresh ideas and expertise from abroad.

He says: "Many of my friends who settled abroad are now planning to return to Nepal. I hope I have shown that it is possible to do well in Nepal, too." 🇳🇵

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The clouds are lifting



ALL PHOTOS: JOY STEPHENS

Joy Stephens
in Myagdi

At first glance, 67-year-old Bal Bir Biswakarma looks like millions of other Nepalis – a poor and illiterate subsistence farmer. There is nothing in his clothes, his one-room house, and the way he squats in his courtyard, that indicates what an extraordinary life he has lived.

Yet, had he been born with a different name, or in a different country, he might now be a celebrity on the speaker circuit, a successful business tycoon, or someone who may have made a movie about his life.

I am meeting him to discuss how to get some benefits from tourism trickling down to his village of Lulang in Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality amidst the craggy mountains of Central Nepal.

“We live in the shadow of Dhaulagiri, but tourists don’t come here,” Bal Bir explains, in a soft and dignified voice. “Several people in our village are licensed trekking guides, but they can’t find employment. A few go to Jomsom and hang around the airfield for portering work, but the competition is intense and they are paid a pittance. So they are forced to go abroad as migrant labourers.”

We chat in the veranda of his house. From the ridge above, we see

a vista of snow-capped peaks of the Dhaulagiri Range, and the serrated outlines of forested ridges fading away one after another into lighter shades of blue in the distant haze.

“I’ve done a bit of guiding myself,” he admits modestly. Bal Bir was no ordinary guide. He was a sirdar for mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas. But like most Nepalis, he is a master of understatement and plays down his accomplishments.

As the head of high altitude porters, his job was to get expedition supplies to Base Camp and from there to the higher camps. He describes how, in the days before roads, the trek to base camps could take two weeks or more, and he would be responsible for over a hundred porters and their loads during these treks. It was a major logistical and financial responsibility.

Pulling the stories out of Bal Bir is like extracting teeth. He is not one to blow his own trumpet. Slowly, I learn that he has been to the top of Mt Lhotse. He has climbed the Tukche Peak, where he has planted the flag of an exhausted foreigner he was guiding.

He has climbed the majestic Churen Himal, visible from above his village to the northwest on the border with Dolpo. There, he was once caught in an avalanche and badly injured. He had to be stretchered 7 days to Pokhara (no

helicopter rescue in those days) and spent three months in hospital.

The stories go on . . . I learn that Bal Bir has even been to the United States, spending six months there at the invitation of an American climber. The highlight of his trip was not cruising down the interstate highways, but rock climbing in Wyoming.

Why is this man, who should be a national treasure for having accomplished so much and helped so many, facing a poverty-stricken retirement in a poverty-stricken village up in the mountains? Why has he not been able to capitalise on his skills and experience?

While there may be many contributory factors, the biggest stumbling block is that Bal Bir was born into a poor Dalit family in western Nepal, where caste-based discrimination remains at the heart of conservative societies, despite more education and awareness.

Growing up, Bal Bir learned about his people’s place in society, the rules he had to follow for being from an ‘untouchable’ caste. To be successful in business requires not only financial capital but also social capital (*aphno manche*) — the network of influential people who have decision-making power in the world of business and politics in Nepal.

Bal Bir might have been to America, but in Nepal he is a nobody. He is a Dalit, he is poor, he

is from a remote far-flung village, and he is illiterate.

Lulang is not only a neglected far-away village, but its 300 households are all Dalit. Their combined financial and social capital, and self-esteem, are close to zero.

For centuries of Nepal’s feudal past, it has been a hopeless situation. Things should have changed after 1990 when Nepalis restored democracy, and the country became a constitutional monarchy. Things should have changed after the Maoists waged a war to liberate the downtrodden, and Dalits picked up the gun to join the militia, many sacrificing their lives to end the injustice to their people. But nothing changed.

Now, a ray of sunshine has broken through the clouds in Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality. What democracy and an armed struggle has not been able to achieve is beginning to happen with political devolution through Nepal’s new federal constitution.

After elections to all three levels of government in 2017, the new federal system is flexing its muscles and showing how it can sweep away the cobwebs of old power networks. People from under-served communities have begun to take charge.

The very first decision taken by Dhaulagiri municipality was

to ignore the power centre in the bazar town and select the village of Muna, higher up the mountain close to Lulang, as its headquarter. This was revolutionary because at that time Muna had no road, no telecommunication. But the site was carefully chosen because the local government was within a day’s walk of every citizen in every ward of the municipality.

To appreciate the significance of this decision to move, it is necessary to understand something of the demography and history of the cluster of villages in the rural municipality. Its population of 14,000 consists predominantly of Magar, Chhantyal and Dalit families living in scattered villages clinging to steep mountainsides, with some Chhetri, Brahmin, and others in the lower reaches.

Of particular interest is the high number of Dalit households. Overall, in Nepal, they represent 13% of the population, but in the Myagdi District, they comprise 24% and in the Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality, they make up 35%.

It was the copper mines and the processing of copper ore which attracted such large numbers of Dalits to this mountainous area during the 19th century. The Chhantyal did the mining, while Biswakarma metal-workers purified the ore into ingots which were carried down



below Dhaulagiri

Far away from cynical and pessimistic Kathmandu, federalism brings hope to a remote Nepal village



- 1 Panorama from the ridge above Lulang village with (left to right) Churen Himal, Gurja Himal, Dhaulagiri I and far in the distance, Annapurna.
- 2 Lulang village is made up of mostly Dalit households.
- 3 Muna village became the new centre of Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality of Myagdi District after the 2017 election.
- 4 The old power centre at Takam Ward.
- 5 Dalit family at a homestay in Lulang.
- 6 Thamsara Magar, the newly-elected mayor of Dhaulagiri Municipality.
- 7 Bal Bir Biswakarma who used to be a mountaineering guide, and has climbed Mt Lhotse.

to Takam, where Thakali brokers controlled the metal trade. When the mines closed down, the Dalit Biswakarma remained, taking up subsistence agriculture.

A second action of significance was the election of a Magar woman as the mayor of Dhaulagiri Municipality in the 2017 election. Thamsara Pun comes across as a very astute and competent woman, with a passionate commitment to her home villages. She was previously headmistress of the local secondary school here, and has the confidence and eloquence to convey her vision for her municipality.

“As a teacher I could help a limited number of people. What attracted me to politics was the thought that here I could help a far greater number,” she explains.

Thamsara feels federalism is a very strong system from a local development perspective. “Formerly, the budget for one VDC (village development committee) was around 1 million rupees, but now, the budget for one Ward (formerly a VDC) is 10 million rupees,” she says.

“Previously all business had to go through the district headquarter in Beni, which was a four-day walk to the east. But now we have real autonomy and can make decisions which truly favour our needs and goals. One benefit is that many more people have found local

employment in our development projects. Our only concern is making sure that we keep within the budget.”

In area, Dhaulagiri is one of the largest municipalities in Nepal. Covering 1,037 sq km, its terrain rises from 1,000m altitude to the 8,172m summit of Dhaulagiri I, the world’s seventh highest mountain.

The stunning scenery and its relatively unspoilt wilderness gives the region great tourism potential, and it is one of four areas Thamsara is focussing on to lift living standards and push economic development.

Here again, the clustering together of ex-VDCs under federalism, is aiding the development of a more coherent plan for tourism. Under the previous political system, each VDC was like a child isolated from its siblings, linked only through the parent at district level.

In Beni, the Myagdi District authorities neglected the inaccessible and poorer western half of the district, concentrating on the Annapurna Circuit and the tourist/pilgrim traffic to Mustang. Now, however, the former Wards are joined at the hip under the municipality and can pool their budget and develop together new trekking routes and necessary infrastructures.

With this climbing experience, Bal Bir shares his dream to

establish a Dalit-managed Guide/ Porter cooperative for trekkers. Assuming this can happen, it still begs the question how to connect such an entity with the trekking market.

I put this challenge to Thamsara Pun. How could a poor Dalit man get the business necessary to run a successful trekking operation?

“Maybe in (the) future, we can establish an online booking portal for our homestays,” she answered with a hint in her voice of someone who has thought of this already, “but let’s be realistic — we are some years away from that point. Bandwidth and internet connectivity are still very poor here. For two years we had to hold our meetings in Beni because we had no building, no road, no internet, and no reliable phone communication in Muna. We must be patient and take small steps.”

Given its starting point, Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality has already made some giant strides towards better and fairer governance. For a visitor, it is a refreshing change to see so much hope and vision for the future, even in such an isolated region, and among some of Nepal’s most marginalised peoples. 🇳🇵

Joy Stephens is author of Window onto Annapurna, and Off-the-beaten treks in Dhaulagiri
www.offthebeatenreks.org

Post-lockdown Lulang

When tourism picks up again after Nepal opens up after the lockdown, visitors may want to venture off the beaten trek to the wilderness of western Myagdi.

This is what Nepal was like before tourism took off, and there are now efforts to build a network of homestays so the income from trekking stays in the homes of people.

Lulang, on the south slope of a pass leading up to Gurja Himal, is a village made up of Dalits where families have set up homestays. One of them is Rati Maya Biswakarma, chair of the local Tourism Committee — a position doubly remarkable because not only is she a Dalit, but also a woman.

“People respect me more because they see that I have a steady income from my rooms,” says Rati Maya.

Most trekkers to Nepal are not aware of the caste discrimination that is still prevalent in Nepal. Dalits have not been able to benefit proportionately from tourism because they are not usually hired by trekking agencies. If they are, it is usually for the lowest paid job of portering.

Trekking was already a seasonal occupation, and now with the collapse of tourism, even that source of income is gone.

Fair-Tread is a mode of trekking that tries to make sure that porters are hired locally so income stays in the villages. It also puts an emphasis on respecting the local culture and the environment — similar to how the fair-trade label on foodstuff guarantees that the produce is exploitation free, and is not harmful to the environment.

Nepal can move to a better normal with an improved model of trekking that benefits the most under-served communities. Post lockdown, just such a place could be the Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality and its network of homestays.



“I care how Nepal is presented on the world stage”



Sumnima Udas is an award-winning Nepali journalist and tv personality with 12 years of experience leading CNN International’s news and features coverage from New Delhi, Hong Kong and New York. Her most recent posting was in New Delhi, as CNN’s South Asia correspondent covering significant events including Nepal’s earthquake, Dhaka’s hostage crisis, and elections in the region. She is currently Executive Director of the Lumbini Museum Initiative.

She recently tweeted: ‘In a world of alternative facts India has made Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani their ‘fact’. It would be prudent for the Indian media to stop gas lighting Nepal with its patronizing preconceived narrative.’

Sumnima Udas spoke to *Nepali Times* about the state of media in the age of populist authoritarianism.

patronising tone of their coverage. When a General G D Bakshi glowingly repeats that Nepal is “India’s most important neighbour, a small brother, roti beti” etc etc, we may feel loved and cozy, but the usage of such terms immediately relegates us to a lower footing. Germany doesn’t call Switzerland a small brother, nor does US call Mexico a small sister. We shouldn’t be called small, period. I often feel we sell ourselves too short, if we always present or project ourselves as small or poor, that will be our reality. It is time we re-imagine the positioning of our country.

It was also clear to me that many Indian journalists were peddling a preconceived narrative from South Block. Both broadcast and print media from Republic TV to the Hindustan Times reported the story as if the area was always India’s and that the Nepali leadership was needlessly irritating its ‘big brother’ for its own political gain, or as the Indian Army General put it ‘at the behest of someone’. Simplifying the story in this manner worked for the Indian audience which currently seems obsessed with China. It comes from insecurity, but it was hugely misleading.

in an informative, interesting and, most importantly, fair manner.

We see tv hosts these days being jingoistic. Is it normal for them to be so overtly biased against one community, religion, or country?

It is not at all normal. In journalism school entire semesters are dedicated to the importance of objectivity. After 15 years in journalism, I recognise that there is no such thing as a completely objective media or a completely objective journalist because emotions and personal biases are so deeply ingrained, it is very difficult to detach oneself from one’s own views. For example, as a Nepali reporting for an international network, the way I covered the 2015 earthquake would undoubtedly be very different from the way a non-Nepali would cover it. It was personal for me, I naturally cared how Nepal was being presented on the world stage. However, as difficult as it may be, it is extremely important not to impose one’s worldview on to others. You can have values, but you can’t have views.

Even in the US, there are plenty of prime time shows that are partial to a certain political party or ideology. But most viewers in the US are aware of these alignments. What really worries me about India though is that this nexus between journalists, businesses and politics is not so clearly presented or known.

So you see Indian media being guided by government propaganda?

The Indian media is too vast and diverse to generalise, some newer online portals or or newspapers such as The Hindu, anchors such as Ravish Kumar, are excellent and continue to operate independently. But, yes, by and large many networks in particular are influenced and guided by the ruling party’s world view, some by choice, but most coerced. This is very unfortunate because it wasn’t always like this. It is a known fact that the media landscape in India changed dramatically after the 2014 elections. It was not uncommon for senior BJP leaders to walk into a newsroom and dictate the angle of a certain story. For the first time, I have seen real fear to report against the current government’s storyline. As someone who is very fond of India and Indians, I am shocked and dismayed to see how a beacon of democracy can unravel so quickly.

And how has this high decibel content of tv networks changed India’s political and media landscape?

Media is a business and in India, tv journalists in particular have discovered that the shriller and more

outrageous the debates, the more eyeballs/viewers and consequently, more revenue they get. You could have very smart people on tv but if they don’t have a ‘presence’ or if they don’t engage with passion, viewers disconnect. People in general engage through argument and as Amartya Sen wrote, Indians are perhaps the most argumentative in the world.

So, I understand why they do it, why this format works, but good journalists must always know where to draw the line. It is one thing to be high-pitched, brash and aggressive, but its quite another to drum up an atmosphere of hate and jingoism before an election or to outrightly distort the facts and make up/ exaggerate stories. Many primetime news shows in India have taken it too far, to the point where it is simply unwatchable and more importantly, unethical.

Do you consider Arnab Goswami of Republic TV, or Sudhir Chaudhary of the Zee TV journalists?

I view Arnab Goswami or Sudhir Chaudhary’s prime time show as a very dangerous form of infotainment. It is presented as news, but it is anything but. It is designed to influence people’s opinions towards a preconceived narrative. Some of their shows are balanced and intelligent, but many are blatantly biased, incendiary, and provocative. We also know Arnab’s channel Republic TV is co-owned by a BJP Member of Parliament and Zee TV is owned by a billionaire who is backed by the BJP in the Rajya Sabha. There is a clear conflict of interest here. They have become state mouthpieces.

And your assessment of the Nepal’s own media?

The Nepali media is much more mild-mannered, to the point where it often times seems dispassionate and, dare I say, slightly boring. Most of our news shows are still presented in a very traditional manner which gives them old school credibility and a certain gravitas. Unlike their Indian counterparts, they are ethically sound. But, they don’t touch the heart. In this age of information overload, in order for your story to stand out or resonate, you have to touch people. The way to do that—empathise with the characters you are interviewing, write and edit the script/videos beautifully, and most importantly, show compassion. Don’t just tell the news. It doesn’t work anymore. Aim for the heart. We have such fascinating stories to tell. Nepal is at the cusp of such immense social change.

How hard was it to sell coverage of Nepal to your international editors?

Working for a big global network has

its own challenges. For instance, we may see the recent Kalapani issue as a big story that warrants international attention because it involves two or three sovereign nations, it is located in a geopolitically vital area, and it is the perfect case of Goliath bullying David. But would someone in Bolivia care about this story in Nepal? I tried very hard to push CNN to cover the blockade of 2015, but when you compared what was happening in Nepal to Syria, Yemen or some of the other bigger stories of the day, Nepal’s suffering was seemingly small. I was disappointed of course. The stereotypical way in which the Western media often covers the East is also my personal pet peeve. In Nepal, or even India, we often see the international media as a gold standard that we must try to emulate. I’m not sure they are that perfect either. They have their limitations, they too have their own world views and biases.

How should journalism deal with the rise of populist authoritarians and their manipulation of social media?

The role of a journalist is to be a voice for citizens, and to hold power to account. Whether you are questioning the government, the police, the judiciary, business leaders or the media itself. As we see the rise of more authoritarian leaders in previously democratic nations, the need for the media to remain independent and true is even more vital. The main challenge now for many journalists working in a network or publication that has clear political allegiances is to stay true to one’s core purpose.

In countries like the United States, having leaders like Donald Trump is not so worrying because other key institutions such as the judiciary, legislative and the media remain strong. But in India, the fact that the very institutions that were put in place to monitor state power have been dramatically weakened is extremely worrying.

Thankfully, we are now seeing an increase of more independent online portals even though they may not have the mainstream media’s reach. The exponential prevalence of social media and its ability to mobilise public opinion has also changed not only the media, but the business and political landscape.

Traditionally, truth was the most important thing. Now its perception or optics, most often projected and led by social media. Social media has its drawbacks of course with fake news and click bait journalism, but in general the masses are much better informed, more aware, more woke.



Nepali Times: Your tweet. It took an unusually strong line on India’s claim to Nepal’s territory.

Sumnima Udas: I wrote that tweet because I was disturbed by the way in which the Indian media was covering the story, as if it were an indisputable fact that these three areas belonged to them.

Politically, it is a shrewd strategy, allowing them to begin the debate from a position of strength, even though their argument may be based on an alternative fact or half truth. This is a trick often used by President Trump. I used the term ‘gas lighting’ to describe their approach. It means to psychologically manipulate so one questions one’s own perception of reality.

Nepal may have had all the facts on its side, historically and geographically, yet I too found myself second guessing our version of history, questioning if this was, in fact , Nepal’s. Why didn’t we say anything for all these years? And while those questions still stand, the truth still remains.

I also did not agree with the

some of your guiding principles?

I produced CNN’s flagship weekly talk show called Talk Asia for 4 years, based out of Hong Kong. Every week we would profile newsmakers from Bill Clinton to Shinzo Abe to Ratan Tata to Roger Federer, Jack Ma to Lady Gaga. Unlike many other interview shows, particularly in India, the purpose of our interviews was never to antagonise. In India, or even in Nepal for that matter, I often feel journalists ask questions in an unfairly provocative manner to elicit a certain response which they can then dramatise out of context.

They feel emboldened by the ability to ask tough questions and viewers or readers often commend the journalist for it. I’ve always felt the interview format should never be about the reporter or anchor, an opportunity to show off his or her own intelligence. The purpose is simply to be a medium for information sharing and to facilitate the guest in articulating their views. This does not mean we shouldn’t ask difficult or uncomfortable questions. The trick is in knowing how to do it