As Nepalis prepare for the annual rice planting day on 29 June by wading into flooded paddy fields, it is a time to remind ourselves that the country is more dependent on the import of this staple than ever before.

As incomes rise, Nepalis are switching to branded fine, aromatic and long grain rice, and abandoning traditional nutrient-dense food like maize, millet, buckwheat. The share of rice in total cereal consumption has gone up to 67%. Still, rice contributes 40% of the energy and 33% of protein in a Nepali’s daily diet.

Rice is by far the most important crop of Nepal, the primary source of livelihood and income for more than two-thirds of farm households, contributing more than 7% to the total GDP.

But half of Nepal’s rice-growing farmers harvest just enough paddy for their own needs, and do not sell it in the market. Low agricultural surplus is the key reason for Nepal’s growing food imports since 1990.

In 2019, Nepal imported rice worth $300 million mainly from India (see charts), but with the coronavirus pandemic India has stopped rice exports.

The rice import bill is a major drain on the national budget, and diverts money from food and nutrition security, rural poverty and development.

There is a huge rice yield gap – the difference between attainable yield and potential yield which is between 45-55%. Only about 20% of Nepali farmers use mechanisation.

Yield is also low because average fertiliser use in Nepal for all crops averaged 47kg per hectare, when 100kg of just nitrogen is needed to produce 3 tons of rice per hectare. This year, the paddy planting season coincided with a shortfall in fertiliser imports due to the lockdown.

A rise in rice production and productivity is fundamental to Nepal’s economic development.
Media muzzle

In the western-style parliamentary democracy that Nepal has adopted, besides the three pillars of state (legislature, judiciary and the executive) there is also the media. The Fourth Estate has been sacrosanct. The right to press freedom has been enshrined in the constitution of Nepal since the 1990s. The media is seen as the third branch of state. For Nepalis, the media has always been a source of information, entertainment, and a powerful tool to hold the government accountable.

The recent clampdown on media freedom in Nepal has raised concerns amongst the international community. The so-called ‘media issue’ is not a new phenomenon in Nepali politics. The government has been known to restrict the freedom of the press in the past, particularly during times of political crisis. The recent crackdown on media houses is seen as a worrying trend that could have long-term implications for press freedom in the country.

Online packages

ASARI 3.5
As Nepalis prepare for the annual shopping festival on 20 June by marking the Tihar festival, it is a reminder that the country is still struggling to shake off the legacy of the Maoist conflict. Tihar is the largest shopping festival in Nepal, where people buy gifts for their loved ones and decorate their homes.

MCC debate
MCC has become a contentious issue in Nepali politics. The MCC is an agreement between Nepal and the United States to promote bilateral trade and investment. However, the implementation of the MCC has been met with resistance from various segments of the Nepalese society.

APKAR
What is the current state of press freedom in Nepal? The press is facing a tough time in Nepal, where the government has been cracking down on media houses.

Yolma
Nepal's economy is likely to face a severe setback due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The country's economy heavily依赖于tourism, which has been hit hard by travel restrictions. This is putting pressure on the government to take urgent action to revive the economy.

Most read and shared on Facebook

The clouds are lifting below Bhaglung
Far away from the epicentre of Kathmandu, the Terai region has seen a relatively calm situation. How are Nepal's most marginalised areas using political mobilization to prepare for a new wave of mobilization? This is the story.

Most popular on Twitter

Most visited online article

Most commented

Quote of the day

Nepal Times
Nepal Times is an independent English daily newspaper published in Kathmandu, Nepal. It is the oldest English daily newspaper in Nepal, established in 1953. The newspaper covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, sports, and more.

Nepali Times
Nepali Times is a Nepali-language daily newspaper published in Kathmandu, Nepal. It is one of the most reputable newspapers in Nepal and covers national and international news, politics, sports, culture, and entertainment.

Sanny S & S Bhai
Sanny S & S Bhai is a popular Nepali artist known for his unique style of music, which blends traditional Nepali music with modern elements.

Nepalnews
Nepalnews is a Nepali news website that covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, sports, and more. The website is updated regularly with the latest news and articles.

Nepal Metro
Nepal Metro is a Nepali news website that covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, sports, and more. The website is updated regularly with the latest news and articles.

Nepali Times
Nepali Times is a Nepali news website that covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, sports, and more. The website is updated regularly with the latest news and articles.

Nepal Today
Nepal Today is a Nepali news website that covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, sports, and more. The website is updated regularly with the latest news and articles.

Nepalese Doll
Nepalese Doll is a popular Nepali artist known for her unique style of music, which blends traditional Nepali music with modern elements.

Nepali Delight
Nepali Delight is a Nepali news website that covers a wide range of topics, including politics, economy, culture, sports, and more. The website is updated regularly with the latest news and articles.

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Lockdown puts Nepal’s media in intensive care

At a time when the media’s voice needs to be strong to protect press freedom and act as a check and balance in our democracy, the media itself has been weakened by the pandemic.

Namrata Sharma

If the media is in crisis, democracy will be in crisis. The media shines the light on issues in the public interest and keeps the state on its toes, to preserve democracy, we need to protect the media.

Kedar Bhakta Mathema

Our ad revenue is down 60%. Old advertisements continue to drop.

Dharma Bhushal

The crisis coincides with a time when the government is trying to curb media freedom by enacting various laws, thereby weakening its voice.

Prateek Pradhan

Where we can, we have to reduce cost, tighten our belts and prepare to ride out this crisis. We must also find other ways to get audiences to support quality content.

Rajendra Dahal

The same week, there was another high-profile resignation, that of Hari Bhandari Thapa, who stepped out of Annapurna Post daily to protest management decision on employee layoffs. “I was not comfortable with the proposal,” he said.

Radio listenership has grown 75% during the crisis, according to a media survey by Snowcast Solutions, but there has also been a drop in advertising revenue by 70%, forcing many stations to put their employees on leave.

Nepal Goopanj of Ujyal Radio Network has begun salary reductions since April due to a 30% drop in advertisements. “We have lost 80% of our revenue, and can do nothing but wait and watch,” says Shushil Shankar Kandel of ABC TV channel and it is a tough story at Hisalakar television.

Nepal Republic Media, publishers of Nagarkirti and Republica have laid off staff. Naya Patrika daily brought down print pages from 20 to 8, but has been placing at least three employees from each department on leave. Gunamulti Luitel, editor of Nagarkirti, calls on media bosses tostrategize and devise new means of survival. “After all, despite all the criticism of government, it is the media that keeps democracy alive,” Luitel said.

Indeed, some media companies have come up with creative ways to avoid layoffs. Bahakari.com has stated that it will continue to employ its workforce despite the financial downturn, and they whatever salary it is unable to pay now. Nepallive.com has formulated a rotation system in which groups of 10 employees work in turns.

Even media houses that have been able to rotate their workforce are facing difficulties. Himal media, the publishers of this newspaper and Himal Khahatarpani magazine were the first to stop printing hardcopy in early March, and have only online editions.

Kantipur Media Group, the country’s largest media house, also suspended the print editions of all its publications, including Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post, but resumed printing them with reduced pages on 8 April, Malresh Swar of the Group says. “Even though we have been able to pay our employees, we are facing more problems every month. We are not sure about our strategy for the future.”

Sneelada Dahal, editor of Shikshak monthly for teachers, says hiring employees is not the solution. “Where we can, we have to reduce cost, tighten our belts and prepare to ride out this crisis. We must also find other ways to get audiences to support quality content.”

Nepal Media Society estimates that the press sector employs up to 200,000 people, and says that if there is no rescue package half of them will lose their jobs. Warrant Shubhakar Kandel of the Society: “For the media it is now a question of life and death. Half the companies will be forced in close if this crisis goes on.”
Our uncommon future

There will be a new normal for Nepal, but we have to make it a better normal

The crisis has telescoped time, and brought forward the adoption of innovations and trends that would have otherwise taken decades. It is a watershed moment to address other global challenges like the climate crisis, North-South inequality, over-exploitation of natural resources, air pollution, etc.

At more local levels, drones are being used to deliver medicines during the lockdown, and they fly into the hospital wards to disinfect beds using ultra violet light. Restaurants have brought forward plans to use robotic waiters.

It is all about our willingness to re-imagine the world we want to live in and the world we want to leave behind for the future. Here in Nepal some believe that the solution to the country’s woes is to launch a pop song for every crisis. Others still try to convince us that importing more chocolate is good for the economy, and electric cars are bad.

Nepal’s health workers lack personal protective gear, but policemen seem to have access to plenty of gums and masks. For governments, scores are clearly more important than policing.

While states have no problem spending on war and order, public health usually takes a back seat. The Army has been deployed for medical imports and quarantine services, not the Department of Health. This could also explain why health sector needs foreign assistance while Home Ministry does not.

Some local governments like Minneapolis in the US now want to disband their police departments altogether, and create a whole new system for safety and security. The idea is to end the kind of policing the world is used to. Defunding the police is another idea that is being taken up seriously and could change the way protection of people will look like in future. We simply cannot rely on the police for everything from crowd control to solving crimes and enforcing physical separation. Even more radically, go to Costa Rica way and cut the military as well.

The challenge has always been to get people to open their minds, explore their own creativity and capabilities, and above all launch their new big idea. World history has shown us again and again that there is nothing more powerful than the will of a free person.

Recent demonstrations, all over the world against racism have seen the power of the camera in our phones and the ability to upload images of police brutality on a real-time basis. Nepal’s youth, denied by outrage over government incompetence, have taken to the streets. These are really big ideas.

Last week, inventors unveiled a new battery that could operate for 16 years and power vehicles for over trillion kilometer. The cost is only 10% over batteries currently available in the market. Electric cars and mass transit are the future of mobility, and between utility level solar stations like Nepal’s biggest in Nawakot, better battery, COVID-19 and Zoom, the world is changing for many.

The good thing about big new ideas is that they can come from anywhere in the world, no place has a monopoly on them. During the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale was credited with starting a whole new profession that stretched from nursing school, but saw the need and came up with a new big idea. During the COVID-19 pandemic peak in London, the UK government built a new temporary hospital and named it after Florence Nightingale.

Participation is another great idea that came from the need to protect and increase the shelf life of food for soldiers during war. We take many of these big ideas for granted today without realizing that each was the result of human creativity whose faced with a global crisis. Necessity is the mother of inventions, after all.

The demand for electric power has gone down significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. USA coal at one point last month was being sold at minus $37 a barrel. The UK has stopped using coal for over two months. This month, Nepal will have surplus hydropower. There are all signs of things to come that may become big, to change our common futures for the better.

Photocopies replaced carbon paper. 4G replaced 3G, the fax machine was replaced by digital attachments. During times of crisis many people are in a state of denial and sit back hoping everything will become normal again. There will be a new normal, but will it be a better normal? Will it include the products and services you use? How many will become obsolete like a Kodak film roll.

Barbers have to worry about their jobs, now that we have learnt how to trim our own hair. Kitchen gardens and rooftop vegetables are here to stay. All these changes also mean that the Ministry of Finance will have to think and think big to get over this crisis by expanding the economic pie with incentives to invest in renewable energy, sustainable growth, and stop relying on taxing the destruction of nature. With tax revenue plummeting, how is the government going to pay civil service salaries, more expensive vehicles for itself, new cars for the president? It must learn that taxing people to please political masters is no longer a viable option.

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddhartha Group.
Growing apples on a war-footing

Rejected by the British Army, Asha Gurung turned to make his farming career bear fruit

“All the apple seedlings had to be imported, which increased the costs of the business. I didn’t have that much money to set up my farm,” recalls Gurung, who spent eight years working in a restaurant and nursery to save up enough money.

Gurung then spent time meticulously running soil tests on the farm in order to ensure optimal crop production. He even consulted an agricultural technician who had spent 12 years researching apples in Mustang. Despite teaching Gurung how to properly plant the seedlings and then fertilize them, the expert warned Gurung that it was a waste of money and time to grow apples in the plains because the fruit needs low temperatures.

The technician spoke from his experience in researching apples in Mustang. But he had heard of apples being grown in hot climates, and so he pressed on, explains Gurung, whose mother and brother and family lives in the UK. He is eligible to settle in Britain as well, but is determined to stay put.

“I can emigrate whenever I choose to, but I enjoy it here,” says Gurung. “I have ceased 50% at this age why should I till in a foreign country? I want to live in Nepal, among my own people, work in my country’s soil and give people jobs here.”

Gurung seems to be born with a green thumb, and can make anything grow including dragon fruit, kumquat, apples, kiwi, pears, bitter gourds, long beans, cucumbers. His farm also breeds with goats, ducks, and chickens. Before the lockdown he was already selling up to Rs400,000 worth of vegetables and fruits. Prices have fallen though, and while Nepal’s farmers are struggling to cope with the coronavirus crisis, Asha Gurung’s apples are fruitful. He hopes to market them next year, but for now he is just glad he could prove the experts wrong by making apples grow in the Tarai.

Thanks to carrots in his teeth, Asha Gurung has found his purpose in life, to change the landscape of his native land and create employment for fellow-Nepalis in Nepal.
Lockdown Town
26 June - 2 July 2020 #0106

PM2.5
OUR PICK
ONLINE ARCHIVES
ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI
AVOID DISPOSABLE TABLEWARE
Our Pick

The mucormycosis has now spread to the city's suburban areas, and it has been noted that the healthy and elderly are particularly vulnerable. After the local authorities, it has been put in place a strict lockdown in the areas where the disease has been reported. In the southwest of Kerala, the air quality has been very poor, and residents are advised to stay indoors.

Exhibition

In Art Center, Beijing has organized the International Special Botanical Illustration Exhibition at Wuhan Botanical Garden. 62 artworks from 46 artists from China and international artists, including 3 prints from Nepal artist Reena Joshi. Prashanth artist are on exhibit at the gardens. Head to www.163.com to look at the artwork.

Susu's Pizza

Drama Competition

Shakthi Theatre is holding an online drama competition to promote artists of all ages and encourage them to participate. Participants must prepare an under 10-minute play based on the work of Bhumibol Adulyadej and send it to shubhakshara@gmail.com. Submission deadline: 5 July

Events

Private yoga sessions
Sooxy Wellness and Yoga Centre has made private yoga sessions available for the group's followers. Groups of up to 5 people can participate. Sessions are available on prior appointment. Go to the Sooxy Wellness Facebook page for details.

Girls in Tech
This edition of Business Gulf will be on "The Future of Women: What’s Next in 2021." The guest speaker will be Suhayla Durr Dal, secretary at Women in Information Technology, a nonprofit aimed at advancing women in technology. Register at the Girls in Tech Facebook page.

Boudha Farmers Market
Buy fresh veggies and spices, fresh baked goods, and other delicious goodies. Support local products and farmers, and follow physical distancing guidelines.

Evening-8am, Sunday, Upala Cafe, Boudha, 01810.060

Google underwater tour
Take Google's life in the ocean deep underwater tour and discover the mysteries of the newb Sir David Attenborough. Watch videos and underwater maps, and learn about the unique creatures that inhabit the world's oceans.

Books for children
Looking for ways to keep children occupied? The International Children's Digital Library has children's books from all over the world, including Adventures of a Nepali Frog from Nepal.

TED-Ed
Find hundreds of animated lessons on topics ranging from science and math to government. Go to the website for details, or go directly to TED-Ed’s YouTube channel and start watching.

Google underwater tour
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Night Vale
Welcome to Night Vale, a twice-monthly podcast from the fictional desert town of Night Vale, where every mysterious story is true. Find on YouTube, Sticher, or Apple Podcasts. The Night Vale website has a recommended list of episodes to start listening from.

Boulevard Kitchen

ONLINE ARCHIVES

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Blenders Milkshake
Beat the heat and humidity with delicious fresh milkshakes. Find flavors to suit on shopdine, or call to order.

Delight: 11am-7pm, 0980635618

Kato
Indulge in authentic Japanese cuisine from Makanwati Lome and Karnataka. Do to Japanese street food. Go to the menu on foodhub.com for a variety of dishes on offer.

Delight: 12pm-7:30pm, 091124292809

French Bakery
Enjoy scrumptious breakfast from the French Bakery. Get the yummy filling breakfast plate, on the bacon and egg sandwiches, also order from a variety of delicious cakes and muffins. Check out the menu at Foodhub.com for more.

Delight: 12pm-7:30pm, 091124292809

Dhokaima Cafe
If you have been missing Dhokaima’s palace menu, order for home delivery through Foodhub.com. Other menu items are also available.

Delight: 11am-7:30pm, 091124292809

Aakasha
How many ways can fries be made? Aakasha has got it all covered. Try the chaat fries or the butter chicken poutine go for the classic fries with Aakasha’s signature dip. Check out the menu at Foodhub.com.

Delight: 12pm-7:30pm, 091124292809

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

AVOID DISPOSABLE TABLEWARE

Disposables, plates, cups and cutlery, specially those made out of styrofoam and styrofoam, are ultimately harmful, non-biodegradable, and non-reusable. Styrofoam can also be toxic: contact with hot food or fluids the environment, and human animals that inhale or ingest it.

If you need to use disposable tableware, opt for one made of biodegradable and compostable, disposable tableware and packaging made out of plant fiber, bamboo leaf, palm leaf, sugarcane bagasse or bamboo.

These can be composted in the biodegradable and compostable.

OUR PICK

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After 60 years, Nepalis still miss Burma

“Burma was home, it was the most beautiful place in the world.”

Mukesh Pokhrel in Bhairawa

Burma in the 1960s was strikingly similar to the Tamils of Nepal: glinting paddy fields, lush jungles, and a heritage that had elements of both Buddhists and Hindus.

No wonder Burma’s Nepalis found place in the fertile land like home when they first migrated there during British days, and continued to stay even after the end of World War II, farming and trading.

Bhakala Pandey was married at age 23 to Reshamali in Nepal and migrated to Panchganga of Burma in 1952. They started a new life in a new land, building an 8-hectare farm with 300 cows, 50 water buffaloes and employed seven farmhands.

“I used to milk 80 cows every morning all on my own,” recalls Pandey. In 1970, B. R. Pokhrel, a Nepali dairy farmer in Burma who carried two containers of overflowing milk to deliver in surrounding villages.

“At that time, they used to have a saying in Burma: ‘Bengalis in the courts, and Nepalis in the fields,’ says Pandey, who remembers Burma as a melting pot of local groups as well as immigrants from the Subcontinent.

But not all Nepalis in Burma were farmers, some went into the lucrative gem business and others became senior civil servants. Himal Sharma himself was a school teacher for 23 years. Sher Bahadar Lama was a government lawyer, Anwar Singh was the dean in Madras University till 1960.

However, in 1962, Burma was plunged into chaos after the coup d’état by Gen Ne Win which overthrew Prime Minister U Nu. Ne Win began a mass exodus of Indians and Nepalis who had been living in Burma for generations, and nationalised their property and businesses.

About 200,000 Nepalis fled Burma, either returning to Nepal, to Thailand, or settling in Bengal and Assam. There are about 300,000 ethnic Nepalis still in Burma. The Nepali and Indian eviction has now been followed by the expulsion in recent years of 1 million Rohingyas Muslims, some of whom have landed up in Nepal.

Under the Orwellian-sounding Burmese Path to Socialism, Ne Win ruled with an iron hand, and this affected the status of the Nepali community, as described by Burma-born Lelia Ram Pandey in his book Jwanz Ra Ziyat. Himal Sharma recalls handing over 1.4 million kyats ($20,000 at the time) to the government for the military demobilisation all notes above 20 kyats. Nepal lost all their savings, tried to protect the little they had left, or fled Burma.

“What they called socialism meant we had to submit all our earnings to the government and in exchange received barely sufficient food to survive,” Reshamali Pandey recalls. “We farmed, but they took what we grew.”

There were days when they would survive on boiled peas, and times when they would catch snakes in rice fields, but they would eat them for the sake of their official duties so that officials would not catch them.

Remaining in Burma was bad enough, but the country’s history was also tortuous. Bhim Adhikari says the military would confiscate everything above 11 grams of gold jewelry, cash above Rs40,000, and let them leave with only two sets of clothes.

Chandra Pandey still has fresh memories of the escape from Burma. He had to leave a dairy farm with 150 cows behind, and had to sell even the clothes on his back to pay for food on the way to Calcutta. When he got to Nepal (like many other Nepal) refugees from Burma, he found refuge in a small village near Lumbini in Rupandehi District.

The Nepal cleared the forest and settled in Chhipa of Rupandehi, and started to make a home away from home from scratch again. Others settled in Bhairawa in a neighbourhood still called ‘Burma Tole’, even though there was hardly a handful of Burmese families left there.

Much like the Nepali-speaking-speaking Thimphu who were evicted by the regime in 1991-92, the ethnic Nepalis from Burma were also torn apart from cousins, nephews and parents, and aunts and uncles they left behind.

Nepali Pandey was forced to leave four brothers, and keeps in touch with them through social media. Once a year, he sends them a Nepali astrological calendar, a prized possession to keep track of festivities back home.

“ Didn’t realise how difficult it actually is to live apart from my family. How wonderful would it have been if we all lived together in one country,” says Chandra Pandey. His wife disciples second the story, 25 days mourning and performing religious rites for her brother who died in Burma without being able to meet her for the past 60 years.

For Laiwalti, festivals like Dasain, Tihar, and ‘Tij are especially heartbreaking, reminders of the years that left without her being able to bless her brother in Burma.

Chandra Pandey has a brother-in-law, sister-in-law and a cousin in Burma, and they visit every five years or so. Her husband Reshamali died two years ago, and says he missed what he left behind. “For him, Burma was home. The most beautiful place in the whole world.”

Reshamali, who had married a man in the last race, and he would constantly talked about going back.”

Angur Baba Joshi, 89

Angur Baba Joshi was a Nepali educationist and social worker who was way ahead of her time

Sitan in 1957, she applied to Oxford University and was accepted, but was refused permission to go because she was a woman. She sought an audience with Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. She met the prime minister in New Delhi. The first time they met, he frowned, but after the second meeting, he was impressed. She was called to the Prime Minister’s Office and was given a standing ovation.

Returning to Nepal, she became principal of Jana Jyoti School for 12 years and worked on various social and service organisations.

Angur Baba Joshi was a deep spiritual person, and was well read in the Sanskrit scriptures. She set up a religious school in Kathmandu, and was a leader in the local Buddhist and Hindu religious organizations.

She also fought strongly that Nepal should never become a secular country, arguing that the Hindu concept of ‘dharma’ was different from the English term ‘morality’, and the separation of faith and state did not make sense in Nepal. She popularized this in her acceptance speech for the Jagadguru Shri Haridas Tirtha achievement award in 2014, and in numerous books on spirituality.

In 2003, Joshi was diagnosed with cancer, and an operation disfigured her face. But she said in a television interview that she would fight, and continued to speak in public and write books. She was a role model for many women in Nepal and a symbol of strength and resilience.

In 2007, she was awarded the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian honour in Nepal. She was a member of the prominent Joshi family, known for their contributions to education and social work.

She passed away on 10 May 2022, at the age of 89. She is survived by her husband, two sons, and three grandchildren.

[Image of Angur Baba Joshi]
The Andes and Himalaya join hands

Before the pandemic, a Colombian and Nepali went on a trek that made them realise we need to rethink tourism

By Lorena Gómez Ramírez and Bibek Raj Shrestha

last December, at a time when no one had any idea what awaited us in the new decade, three Colombians, two Nepalis and a fellow Nepali-speaking French woman gathered for an impromptu dinner at New Age Kitchen, a family-owned restaurant in Naya Bazaar in Kathmandu.

Since the dining area was busy, the owner kindly opened up one of his family bedrooms closing a bed and bringing mats so we could enjoy our meal company in a more secluded environment.

Sound of the river, we sampled half chhwea aile and talked about our recent Nepali travel stories over the beaten rice, multicolored buffalo chans and Kathmandu Valley’s experimental rice spirit.

The Colombian couple had just been to Chitwan and Langkang National Parks. They were excited about their first encounter with a one-horned rhino, and laughed over a failed attempt to pass off as Nepalis to get cheaper bus fare. They were offered tea so often and with such insistence by guesthouse owners along their trek, that N awarded started sounding like “Namales”, they said.

The group burst into laughter, sharing more hilarious and even surrealistic encounters in Nepal. We agreed that things needed to change, little knowing that in a few months, there would be a global pandemic and lockdowns.

All of us that night in Naya Bazaar had no experience of a country called Nepal or how hospitality or tourist business in the world, notably after discovering what we believed to be an act of selfish local generosity was actually a tourist trap. But we admitted that we had also ourselves behaved as smiley light-hearted tourists before.

A couple of weeks before that dinner, both of us, Bibek is familiar looking Nepal ecologist and Lorena (a Nepali-looking Colombian anthropologist) went on a trek through the Tamang Heritage Trail in Rasuwa, north of Kathmandu, up the western edge of Langtang National Park. Raised in the Himalaya and the Andes respectively, we were driven by our love for mountains and trekking through them.

Beyond the physical challenge it implied, we were interested in connecting with place and people. Walking at a slower pace allowed us to linger, and look at things differently, opening up space for close encounters with local Tamang villagers, Nepali guides and international trekkers who we can name the trails. They all shared very personal impressions of life, languages and dreams with us.

The trip started with a bumpy, but majestic, road that rises from Kathmandu to Gatlang. This is the well-known ‘Black Village’—so-called because of its traditional black slate roof common on the Tibetan rilamids. Even though many of the old houses collapsed in the 2015 earthquake and were replaced with tin roofs, enough of them remain for the village to keep its name.

The Tamang Heritage Trail is one of those still little known hiking routes in Nepal in which you do not run into many outsiders, and get to see the kind of Nepal before trekking tourism took off, and where trekkers can get a more genuine travel experience and connect to the way locals live there. And the beauty of it is in the area we are close to Kathmandu.

Surprisingly, that night we met an Australian school trip of more than 20 girls who were rebuilding a local school damaged in the earthquake by distributing the ground, newspaper and sand and providing tools to the students. We shared tea with the two adults in charge, and one of them showed us the travel agency behind the idea.

The girls who had raised funds in the past year for the cause, pointing out how the journey was already transforming them. His eyes smiled as he showed us the students felt Australians could learn a lot from the Nepali lifestyle, which they found to be more meaningful and rich in hospitality, human connection and simplicity.

It was clear to us that their purpose is to help re-educate travelers through experience, by making them feel uncomfortable in order to expand their horizons. That is pure inspiration for others to do the same,

This was an example of how altruistic entrepreneurs can create more shared value in remote areas by connecting with the business and social aspects of their jobs.

After cultural trips create memories that provide us with a holistic wave of looking at life, and solving challenges at home, placing our community can have beyond the purely financial or leisure aspects of the activity. Active listening and collaboration between travel agents and local community leaders can happen before, during and after a trip. Further, defining a common vision leads to applicable and lasting impact.

Locals recommended that we hike up a few hundred meters above Gatlang to the alpine lake Pervet Kundu, a Hindi pilgrimage spot. We knew in Tamang the name means ‘Aamchhouden’ (another of deep lakes).

After the Nepal-Ghost entrance bell, we came upon the lake lined with trees, Prayer flags and scattered vermilion powder, evidence of how it is revered as holy by devotees from both faiths.

Aamchhouden is also home to some 40 bird species, and a source of drinking water for the villages below. But like many other misbegotten attempts at modernisation, the natural ambiance has been somewhat spoilt by a cemented wall. We struggled with this notion of development in which modern construction materials undermine the lake’s irreplaceable ecological function.

Even so, the place was serene with the rays of the December sun slanting down through the canopy of the forest. Our iridescent dragonflies joined us while we marinated on its shores. We observed how in different cultures dragonflies symbolise transformation, and we let them fill the state of our minds as well as that of the lake. Aamchhouden is indeed imbued with spiritual energy.

The neighbouring monastery and cheese factory were closed. But the caretaker Dai and Dai, our homestay hosts, were most welcoming by opening their kitchen to us. Dai offered 1.5 liter bread soup he was cooking, and we savored it, sitting around the fire.

Relishing his traditional tastes, we asked what being a Tamang meant to him. He giggled nervously at such a weird question. For the indigenous people in Columbia’s Amazon rainforest, the answer to that question is essential to their survival. Thanks to the stewardship of their ancestral roots, the tribes recovered their lands, sacred sites and the right to live according to their traditions.

In contrast, we realised that cultural and spiritual beliefs are even more respected in Nepal. Still, when Dai finally identified himself as Tamang, Tibetan, Buddhist and Hindu, we wondered if he preferred to be politically correct, or if he truly felt free to choose who he wanted to be.

Before we knew it, we invited Dai and Dai join us for dinner. She shyly proposed to have a plate of dal bhat—we have never had such a deliciously cooked dish with mild and kodo millets made from millet. With songs inside a basket we headed to the backyard to gather some aums and very quickly learnt a new Nepali phrase that polys, but the singing hands did not diminish from the pleasure of cooking the meal, singing and conversation by the kitchen fireplace.

Food is always a conversation starter during the trek. And meeting Dai and Dai as well as the dragonflies and birds turned our visit into an unforgettable experience. We are certain today and the children of tomorrow also realized that it is not just the mountain trekkers come looking for. Woman’s connection to nature is vital no matter how different we seem from each other.

After almost getting lost, we followed the electricity poles in our hike from Chilime (1,893m), site of the hydro power plant to Nagphali (3,130m). Surrounded by majestic snowy peaks, we only basked our own breath until reaching the top after a night-stay along the way.

That afternoon we set off to Thuman, missing the trail again. It was then that we remembered the story stories of other lost tourists who do not always make it. Trails often can indeed lose lives, and finding local guides is essential. Luckily, we managed to secure prior experience to read the deeper and reach Pemche’s guesthouse before sunset.

Pemche runs her homestay with a 6-year-old daughter who is constantly calling out to be “Asma, Asma” Like many Nepali village women whose husbands and grown up kids are either abroad or in cities, she raises her child, looks after the crops, does house chores and runs a small ecotourism business like a multi armed Hindu goddess. Her leadership, resilience, managerial and cooking skills are impressive. Pemche runs the facility, but choosy to be happy each time friendly guests sit to her.

The local government plans to invest public funds to build a view tower at Nagphali. This would be completely unnecessary, and the money could instead be invested in training guides to write up trails in English, or design Tamang heritage experiences. We reach the conclusion that tourism development is not just about building infrastructure, but mainly increasing meaningful human interaction.

Around dawn, we were welcomed with a refreshing breeze in Chilime. We started to descend to Syabru. But the world to the other side of the hills was blurry for the steep trek up to the holy lakes of Gosainkund. Roads were being built across the valley and rivers with makeshift bridges.

While crossing the valley, we were
Nepal went through a 10-year war between the government and Maoist guerrillas (1996-2006) and ended with a comprehensive peace accord that enabled their political participation and the induction of a part of the rebel militia into the national army. Cambodia has faced 60 years of armed conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), other smaller communist guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and political entities that have been fighting over land, political power, and drug trafficking routes. Colombia also signed a peace agreement in 2016 with FARC that brought relative stability. However, in Colombia’s case, remote areas which are strategic for the drug trade will continue to be unstable as long as there is a global demand for cocaine. The white powder is stained with much bloodshed.

Our childhoods in Nepal and Colombia were similar—both of us grew up with daily news of bombings, kidnappings and murders of civilians and civil leaders on highways, mountains and forests. For Nepalis and Colombians, traveling this freely was impossible during the conflict—this trek was a gift from history. We hoped our mountains can witness healing conversations and reconciliation among the people residing on their slopes.

We had lunch in Cheeghaung, and because it was the winter off-season we were the only guests. After devouring a dal bhat we continued our ascent to Leubahun (3,320m) and looked down at a carpet of clouds in the valley. And it was another two hours to the still waters of Gosainkunda, with a full moon rising over the ridge.

We spent two nights by the lake at 4,300m in guest houses that took turns to open. They were packed with Nepalis and foreign trekkers sitting around the central fireplace. Two friendly Nepali tour guides asked us to join them for a cup of Chha Char in the kitchen because they were curious to see a Colombian and a Nepali trekking together. They were even more surprised to hear that one of us was a tour guide back in Colombia.

Next morning, the scenic atmosphere was disrupted by a noisy helicopter. Passengers hopped off at the helipad, quickly ran to the edge of the lake, briskly washed their faces with its holy water, passed for a few selfies and headed back to the chopper. They spent 30 minutes on the ground and then took off again for Kathmandu.

The locals gathered around to watch — just another bunch of tourists invading their space without even saying namaste. That may be one of the reasons why some local hotel owners do not seem interested in knowing their guests. The local tourism climate and version was clear. Still, we managed to make a local woman laugh in an attempt to wash our clothes.

The following morning we crossed Suryakundu Pass (4,350m) surmounted by the cracking sound of the sun melting the ice crust on the lake's surface. Then through the cliff of Chepau, walking across slippery ice on rocks through cloud forests. The trail descended through messy farms all the way to Mokhim, our final destination. From there it was another full bumpy day on a bus back to the Kathmandu, with the music again blaring all the way.

Namaste dissolves unfamiliarity when served with a genuine smile. This unique hospitality towards guests is deeply rooted in Nepali cultural sightseeing. Nonetheless, that same “Namaste” made us feel uneasy in some trek steps.

Although Nepalis complain about low spending tourists, seeing them only at cash dispensers terminates the motto Aarti davo bhava (guest is god) values the country boasts about. “Namaste” adds a commercial dimension to the greeting. We ask ourselves how porters, guides and guesthouse owners like Pemba and Tashi would prefer to feel at work: what kind of hosts would they like to be? What kind of travelers would they like to receive? What can be done to create better connections between locals and foreign visitors?

Throughout the trek we witnessed how tourism transforms places and communities for both good and bad. For instance, realizing Tashing homestay menus were standardized, we suggested that owners added local ingredients, cuisines and drinks as options. Doing so would reinforce Himalayan traditions and a sense of identity of our national realities before the world. The more bilingual, knowledgeable, reliable and kind tour guides become, the more memorable experiences will become in already welcoming countries like Nepal and Colombia.

Our journey showed us that the main purposes of ecotourism can shift. From viewing romanticised “untouched” landscapes to discovering nature with people in it. Intervened in such are, both deserve the same respect. Notably, trek in Nepal can also teach us about farming, evolving and other skills required to sustain life in remote areas. Such activities increase intercultural and opportunities for local entrepreneurs. Traveling would be more fun, more meaningful and productive for everyone if we make it humane. If we remember to see the god that lives in guests as well as within us. Let us not forget what truly matters and who we are. When tourism finally picks up again after the virus, we should re-examine tourism saying “Namaste” with a smile and also add “Vande vandana Kumbhakam”, the Sandeep shaves from the scriptures which means “The world is one family.”
Rice self-sufficiency is key to Nepal’s economic development, but how to go about it?

Krishna Dev Joshi
and Santosh Upadhaya

Rice productivity has not increased as much as it should have in Nepal because of the lack of training, adequate and quality inputs, climate change and seasonal variations in rainfall. Low agricultural surplus has made Nepal a net importer of food, buying $300 million of rice alone, mainly from India, and increasing our trade imbalance with that country.

Increasing rice production, productivity and profitability would need knowledge of intensive rice farming using best rice varieties and best management practices, and linking production with rice-based agri-food systems. At present, women bear the brunt of the drudgery. Most are subsistence farmers, dependent on rained agriculture. Nepal lacks the technical capacity, milling technology and a developed rice value chain to work towards rice self-sufficiency even as demand grows, and the land under paddy cultivation falls.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink health and livelihoods of low income groups and vulnerable people in Nepal’s overall economy, and offers the chance to build technology intensive rice-based agri-food system in Nepal.

Nepal has released 87 rice varieties (including two hybrids) until 2020. More than two-thirds of genetic improvement in rice in Nepal came from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) contributing about 3.78 million tons of rice production worth $890 million annually.

Fast-tracking deployment of new and multi-stress tolerant hybrid rice farming practices widely. IRRI has developed 87 rice varieties and landraces fail to provide maximum benefits where inbred varieties are subsistent farmers, dependent on rained agriculture. Nepal lacks the technical capacity, milling technology and a developed rice value chain to work towards rice self-sufficiency even as demand grows, and the land under paddy cultivation falls.

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