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MONIKA DEUPALA

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 23% 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.

RICE DAY



But half of Nepal's rice-growing farmers **असार १५ 29 June** 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.

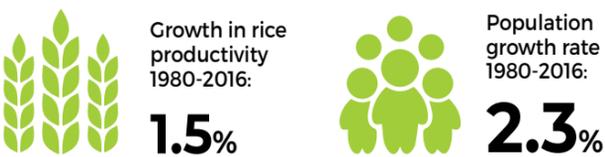
Yield is also low because average fertiliser use in Nepal for all crops averaged 47kg per hectare, when 100kg of just nitrogen is needed to produce 3 tons of rice per hectare. This year, the paddy planting season coincided with a shortfall in fertiliser imports due to the lockdown.

A rise in rice production and productivity is fundamental to Nepal's economic development.

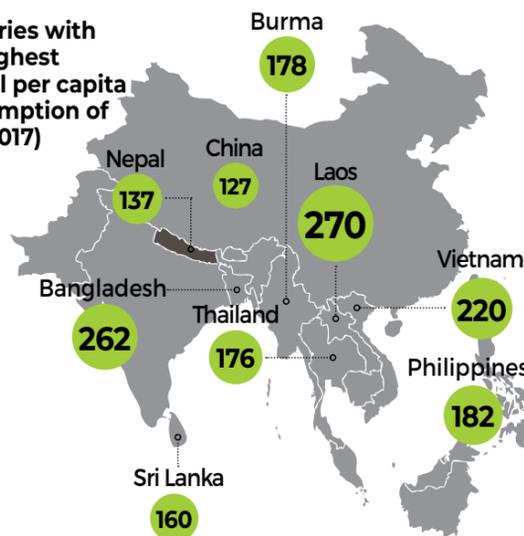
Read more PAGE 10

RISE OF RICE

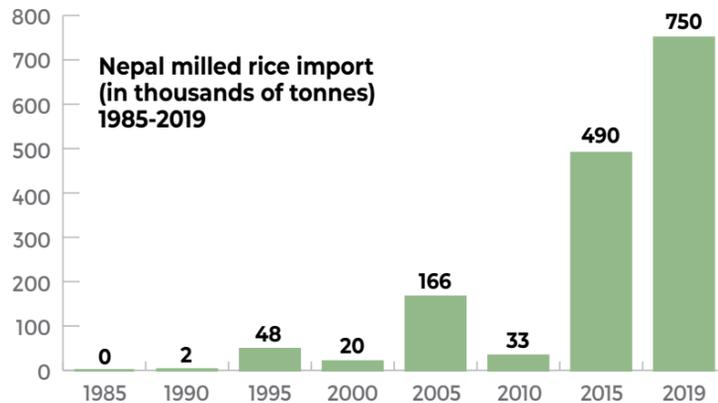
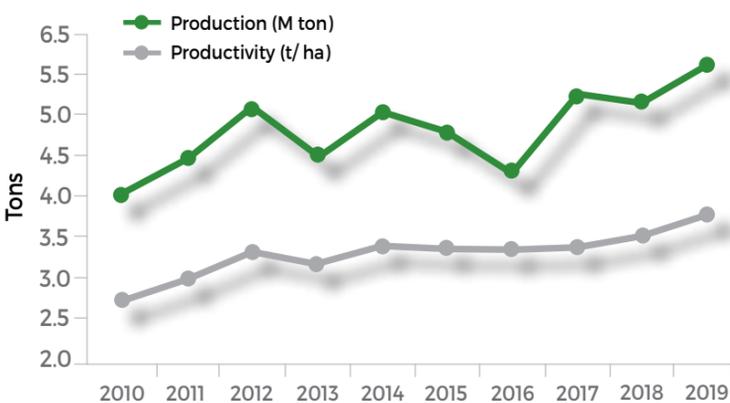
Nepal's population is growing faster than rice production



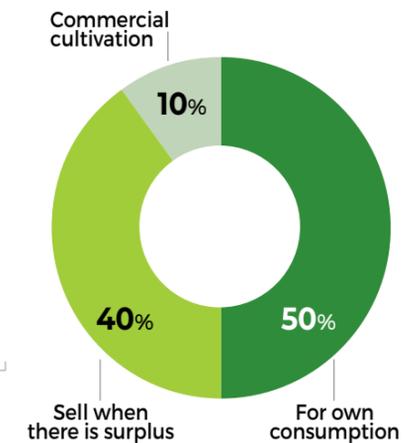
Countries with the highest annual per capita consumption of rice (2017)



Rice production and productivity growth 2010-2019



Rice farming by household



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Media muzzle

In the western-style parliamentary democracy that Nepal has adopted, besides the three pillars of the state (the legislature, judiciary and the executive) there is also the media.

The 'fourth estate' has been ascribed a triple redundancy check-and-balance role on the powers of the other branches. Democracies in Europe and the Anglosphere had in general been upholding this function – until recently. Today, of course, the liberal values are being undermined in many of the very countries where they were installed after long struggles.

cancelled talk shows, radio stations have cut broadcast hours.

Just when the media's role was crucial as the country grappled with the fallout of the coronavirus lockdown, its voice has been muted by this crisis. The pre-pandemic downturn in the media sector is now exacerbated, so that the financial emergency is further undermining the political independence of the press. Future government rescue packages could come with strings attached, or commercial interests will be tempted to buy media at garage sale prices for future political clout.

The media is supposed to play an adversarial role in a democracy by holding power to account. It is supposed to be a watchdog, not a lapdog. Despite its internal troubles, Nepal's media has been doing a commendable job covering the string of crises: the economic collapse due to the lockdown, the Lipu Lekh border dispute with India, scandals over medical procurement, the murder of Dalits, youth protests and the MCC.

It has been a busy time as reporters provide a blow-by-blow account of the power

struggle in the ruling Nepal Communist Party between Prime Minister K P Oli and Co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Interestingly, the adversarial role in Nepal's democracy is being played not so much by the mainstream press, but by a rival faction in the ruling

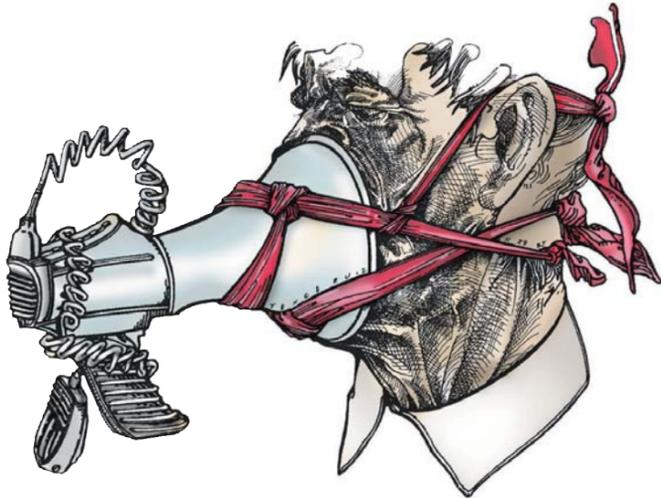
party – with the press often playing second fiddle.

Democracy and press freedom are two sides of the same coin. Undermining one weakens the other. At a time when the media's role needs to be even stronger in shining the light on the dark corners of the corridors of power, it is being systematically targeted.

Since coming to power in early 2018, the Oli administration has been trying to muzzle the mass media, curb the freedom of expression on social media, and arbitrarily jail people for vlogs, satirical songs on YouTube and Facebook posts. It has tried to pass the Media Council Bill, the Information Technology Act, and revise the penal code to include harsh punishment to journalists deemed too independent.

As Kedar Bhakta Mathema, former Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University and civil society leader says in our report: "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."

The adversarial role in Nepal's democracy is not being played by the mainstream press, but by a rival faction in the ruling party.



Elected demagogues do not have to resort to crude methods like curbing media freedoms or putting journalists in jail. The new trick of authoritarian-minded leaders is to hijack the media's agenda-setting role by co-opting the press, arm-twisting publishers to appoint sympathetic editors, and exerting commercial pressure through advertising. In addition, they can also infiltrate social media with troll armies, fake accounts and targeted advertising.

In Nepal, even before the coronavirus crisis hit, print circulation was already in freefall. Eyeballs were migrating to digital platforms, and advertisers were following, buying space on Facebook, Google or digital portals. The COVID-19 crisis has telescoped time, so that a transition to digital that might have taken another three years is hitting us as we speak.

The paradox is that while page views soared, income collapsed – especially in the past three months of lockdown. Having more readers has not translated into more revenue. Monetising online readership is media's greatest opportunity – and greatest test.

As our overview (page 3) shows, Nepal's media companies are in deep trouble. Journalists have been laid off, many have not got salaries for months, those that still bring out hardcopy editions have trimmed pages and reduced print runs, printing companies have gone belly-up. Tv channels have

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

A nice break from the COVID-19 and one national crisis after another is this report from 10 years ago in issue #508 where Rubeena Mahato takes us to Pragatinagar VDC in Nawalparasi district, a place in Nepal where plans translate into reality, goals are achieved on time and government offices do not reek of incompetence and corruption. An excerpt:

Pragatinagar is not only the first VDC in Nepal to declare itself a No Open Defecation Zone, but also the first VDC with 100 per cent school enrollment, iodine coverage and birth registration. Pragatinagar also has the lowest level of malnutrition (2.5%) and one of the highest levels of adult literacy (86%) in Nepal.

What do these statistics mean? Every child above five, irrespective of socioeconomic status, has access to education, every household with children consumes iodised salt and every child born is registered within 35 days of birth, ensuring its fundamental right to identity. The advances made in physical infrastructure are no less inspiring. The road networks are well managed, the water is safe to drink, and there are irrigation facilities as well as health and education services available.



ONLINE PACKAGES



ASAR 15

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. With strong monsoon this season, watch farmers in Kathmandu Valley plant the season's first rice seedlings. Story: page 1 and 10.

MCC DEBATE

MCC has strings attached ('Knowing what's good for Nepal', Editorial, #1015). Cannot let through without putting all reservations on the table. Why don't you write the valid point of misunderstanding that divided even the international law experts?

Sudip Umesh Bajagain

■ Without any 'disciplining device' MCC project will be another Melamchi ('Post-truths politics in Nepal', Nirnaya Bhatta, nepalintimes.com).

Nyima Sherpa

■ The MCC's own Act in the US as well as Article 2.7 of the compact with Nepal explicitly forbid MCC funds being used for military, police or militia activities. For example, MCC has already shared an aide memoire in 2017 that the compact will never be above Nepal's Constitution.

Steve L Roberts

ANGUR BABA JOSHI

■ What an extraordinary leader, guide, teacher and example for not only Nepali women but all women ('Angur Baba Joshi, 89', page 7).

Donatella Lorch

■ She blazed many a trail for the women in Nepal. She will be remembered for a long time to come. May her soul rest in eternal peace.

Yogi Satyal

■ Desire to learn coupled with favourable environment at her in-laws, Angur Baba Joshi went where a Nepali woman had never gone before. Revolutionising the whole perspective of how women's education is looked upon, she was indeed way ahead of her time.

Abhishek Gautam

■ Deeply saddened by the loss of such an inspiring lady. She was a role model.

Anupama Mahat

SHERPA GENES

Bizarre ('Sherpa genes for COVID-19 treatment?', nepalintimes.com)! The Sherpas apparently got the efficient haemoglobin genes through Denisovan ancestry.

Ranjit Devraj

■ HIF1 alpha is widely studied gene for high altitude adaptation in Tibetan people. It plays major role in hypoxia, making them more adaptable in the harsher environment...If they can find new genes or variants that would be interesting.

Ramesh Dhakal

■ That is just shameful. Making big money for pharmaceutical profits out of genetic material of the Sherpa clans and paying them back with a book translation and refurbishing a government school? Better help them to rebuild their homes that got destroyed by the earthquake of 2015.

Jennifer van der Helm

NIGHTTIME CURFEW

Locking the barn door after the horse has bolted ('Nepal announces night curfew during lockdown', nepalintimes.com). And the police have only just realised that people are sneaking in lorries; since they're obviously not fast on the uptake, someone also needs to whisper in their ear that they also sneak in in ambulances.

Kalps Para

■ Is the virus nocturnal?

Priya Birsingh Tuladhar

LOCKDOWN RAPE

Staying Quiet is not the solution to a problem such as rape ('Lockdown rapists locked up', nepalintimes.com). Thank you (survivor) for speaking up and motivating other women and girls to fight for justice.

Pabi Karki

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



The clouds are lifting below Dhaulagiri

by Joy Stephens

Far away from cynical and pessimistic Kathmandu, federalism brings hope to a remote village in Myagdi district. Find out how Nepal's most marginalised are using political devolution to prepare for a revival of trekking post-lockdown in this most-shared 'Weekend Longread'.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Knowing what's good for Nepal

Editorial

The MCC has been weaponised by Pushpa Kamal Dahal against his party rival Prime Minister Oli. But the main casualty will be Nepal's hydropower production in the next five years. Read and join the debate online at nepalintimes.com.

Most popular on Twitter

Most visited online page

Post-truth politics in Nepal

by Nirnaya Bhatta

There is genuine interest among public intellectuals to clarify the provisions of the MCC compact and the author did as much, dispelling myths and speculation that has captured the Nepali imagination. The write-up led to heated debate, both for and against the MCC. Go online to check it out.

Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Post-truth politics in Nepal. @nirnayabhata dispels four myths against the #MCC project propagated by Nepal's politicians. @MCCgov

Samar S J B Rana @samarsjbrana
Struggling to comprehend how the false narrative of our sovereignty being impinged by #MCC has spread & lead to people take to the streets. This article clears up some false information looming around the so-called 'controversial' MCC.

Netashwa Dixit @netashwa
Track records over long periods of time show many instances of agreements committed not being fulfilled by India. Commitments do not carry weight. So projects have to be built concentrating on catering to the Nepali public as well as on future growth within the country.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
If #Nepal's politicians do not come to their senses soon, a \$500 million @MCCgov grant for critical #infrastructure will be cancelled. This will be a debacle for Nepal's #economy, and will tar the country diplomatically.

Amul Mrjn @AmulMrjn
The article seems to have valid reasons for the MCC to be passed but I would am sure the youth would be grateful to have counter arguments for the points @Shahigyanendr has raised...

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 Raj Tuladhar @Milanrajtuladhar
All Nepalis staying anywhere and working in any profession are united for this national cause. Thank you, Sumnima.

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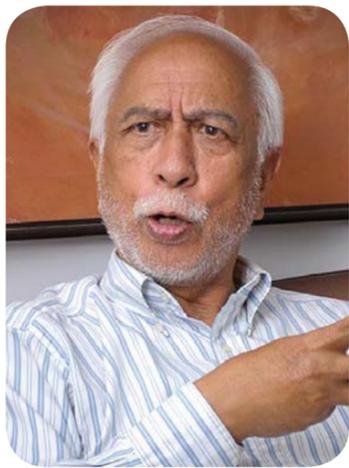


Lockdown puts Nepal's media in intensive care



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 Bhusal



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

Raju Banskota

As elsewhere in the world, and like every other sector of the economy, the COVID-19 lockdown has pushed Nepal's already-struggling mass media to the brink of collapse.

Newspapers, digital portals, televisions and radio stations across the nation are having to stop print editions or trim pages, downsize staff, cut regular talk shows and programs, and reduce radio broadcast hours.

At a time when Prime Minister K P Oli is coming under sustained criticism from a cross-section of the media for his poor handling of the pandemic and making misinformed comments about the coronavirus, critics say the government is not extending a helping hand to the fourth estate. Some think ministers may even be secretly glad about journalism being in crisis.

"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," says media commentator Namrata Sharma.

She adds that this will have serious repercussions for Nepal's democracy, a view shared by Kedar Bhakta Mathema, former Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University and civil society leader.

"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," Mathema says.

With competing demands for rescue packages from industries, tourism, aviation, health and education sectors, the government has shown no sign of struggling media companies any special attention.

In the two-and-half years that the Oli administration has been in office, there has been one attempt after another to muzzle the mass media, as well as curb the freedom of expression on social media.

Examples are the Media Council Bill, the Information Technology Bill, and high-profile arrests of vloggers, YouTube singers, rappers and individual Facebook users who ridiculed the government or made fun of politicians.

Radheshyam Adhikari, member of the National Assembly, says it is important for the government to lend a helping hand to the media when it is facing such an existential crisis.

"Today's crisis in the media could hurt the government tomorrow, so we need to save the press and not ask who owns which media," says Adhikari.

The Nepal Media Society which groups some owners and publishers, projects that revenue from advertising and subscriptions which totalled Rs12 billion last year will be one-tenth of that this year.

The drop in economic activity due to the lockdown in the past

three months had wiped out the advertisement market, according to Ranjit Acharya of Prisma Advertising.

"The annual Rs8 billion turnover in the advertising sector is down by 80%," he says. "Even if the lockdown is lifted, it will take at least another year or so for the economy to gain momentum again."

Rishi Ram Tiwari at the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology says the government is "observing and analysing" the effects of the lockdown on the media, and will decide on a course of action soon.

The impact of the drop in advertising revenue has hit across the board. At the digital news portal *OnlineKhabar.com*, editor Dharma Bhusal says ad revenue is down 60%. At *Setopati.com* Sudip Shrestha says the portal has been able to avoid job cuts so far but may have to if the crisis drags on. *Nepalnews.com* on 2 April, let go of 22 employees with 3-months' pay.

Prateek Pradhan, editor of the portal *Barakhari.com*, says: "The crisis coincides with a time when the government is trying to curb media freedom by enacting various laws, thereby weakening its voice."

At *Dekhapadi.com*, editor Rameshwor Bohara and correspondent Tufan Neupane have both stepped down. Bohara said, "I resigned because the newspaper couldn't guarantee occupational and financial security during the crisis."

The same week, there was another high-profile resignation, that of Hari Bahadur 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 Sharecast Initiative, but there has also been a drop in advertising revenue by 70%, forcing many stations to put their employees on leave.

Gopal Guragain of *Ujyalo 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 Shubha Shankar Kandel of *ABC tv* channel and it is same story at *Himalayan television*.

Nepal Republic Media, publishers of *Nagarik* 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.

Gunaraj Luitel, editor of *Nagarik*, calls on media bosses to strategise and devise new means of survival. "After all, despite all the criticism of government, it is the media that keeps democracy alive," Luitel says.

Indeed, some media companies have come up with creative ways to avoid layoffs. *Baharkhari.com* has stated that it will continue to employ its workforce despite the

financial downturn, owing them 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 retain their workforce are facing difficulties. Himalmedia, the publishers of this newspaper and *Himal Khabarpatrika* 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. Mahesh 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."

Rajendra Dahal, editor of *Shikshak* monthly for teachers, says firing 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. Warns Shubhashankar Kandel of the Society: "For the media it is now a question of life or death. Half the companies will be forced to close if this crisis goes on." 🇳🇵



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Our uncommon future

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

After every global crisis in history, human society has been able to come up with big breakthroughs that improve lives, and turn the world into a better place.

This could be another such time, but only if we think outside the box.



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

The crisis has telescoped time, and brought forward the adoption of innovations and trends that would otherwise have taken decades. It is a watershed moment to address other global challenges like the climate crisis, North-South inequity, 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 still believe that the solution to the country's woes is to launch a pop song for any 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 gowns and masks. For governments, nurses are clearly less important than policemen. While states have no problem spending on 'law 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 radical: go the 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, driven 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 1million km. 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 Nuwakot, 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 is credited with starting a whole new profession called nursing. She did not go to 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.

Pasteurisation 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 realising that each was the result of human creativity when 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 oil at one point last month was being sold at minus \$37 a barrel. The UK has stopped using coal for over two months. This monsoon, Nepal will have surplus hydropower. These are all signs of things to come that may become big idea to change our common future for the better.

Photocopiers 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 roof top vegetables are here to stay. All these changes also mean that the Ministry of Finance will have to think new 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 carpets 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 Bank.

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

World Bank Nepal

Effective 1 July, the World Bank Country Office in Nepal will be upgraded to a sub-regional office responsible for country operations Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Faris Hadad-Zervos is Country Director for



WORLD BANK GROUP

the sub-regional office operating out of Kathmandu. In addition, Lada Strelkova, has been appointed Portfolio and Operations Manager out of the Kathmandu Office, and will lead the daily operations and management of the Nepal Country Office.

Nepal Investment Bank

On 17 June, Nepal Investment Bank received the full amount of the bank guarantee amounting to Rs2 billion from



the Italian bank - Intesa Sanpaolo SPA. The payment was received after a three judge bench revoked the previous which had prevented Intesa to pay the amount to NIBL.



NIC ASIA

NIC ASIA has extended the loan interest reduction from 1% to 6% due until mid-July in an attempt to minimise the financial impact of COVID-19 on borrowers.

Vajra book awarded



Henry Edmundson's Tales from the Himalaya, published by Vajra Books in Kathmandu, got a special mention in the Kekoo Naoroji Award for books published in 2019.

Jury members cited the book's chapters on the history, religion, politics, and geology of the Himalaya, as well as its 'lavish illustrations and superb production'.

Samsung

Samsung has launched a new website that showcases the features and price of Samsung products and lets customers make

SAMSUNG Plaza

purchases so that customers can buy from the safety of their home. Customers can also ask service related queries on the website.

Hyundai

Hyundai Nepal has come up with a special package for its customers in light of COVID-19, under which the company will provide 50% of the first year's monthly



bank instalment when customers purchase a Hyundai car in addition to other offers. Hyundai has also created a special package for the health workers on the frontlines.

Harley Davidson

Harley-Davidson launches a Service Scheme focused on customers with the tagline Save your future, half the price, under which customers can get benefits including 10-time free servicing within 3 years, and a coupon that can be redeemed while buying Harley-Davidson merchandise and parts.

Sanima Bank

Sanima bank has set up a disability-friendly website in an attempt to make it more user-friendly for people with vision and hearing difficulties. The website will also aid the elderly to conduct their banking online. Users can go to Sanima Bank's website, www.sanimabank.com for details.

Siddhartha Bank F1Soft

Siddhartha Bank and F1Soft International have signed an agreement for the execution of invoice discounting service through the QuikBhuktani platform, Nepal's first online invoice discounting platform and provide facility for invoice discounting to its business clients while F1Soft will do platform management and technical support.

Laxmi Bank

Laxmi Bank has received \$20 million from Doha Bank as a placement for a tenure of 3 years per an agreement signed by the two banks in April. The funds were received upon regulatory approval and will improve the lending capacity of Laxmi Bank to various priority sectors across the country.



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Mukesh Pokhrel
in Rupandehi

Asha Gurung's known ancestors all served in the British Army, they fought in both world wars. His grandfather lied about his age and was recruited when he was merely 16, so he was technically a child soldier.

After his father, Asha was next in line to join the Brigade of Gurkhas, but after passing his endurance test, he failed his physical because of cavities in his teeth. He remembers being disappointed that he could not carry on the family's martial tradition.

But although Asha Gurung never got to serve with NATO forces in Afghanistan's Helmand Province, or be deployed in Bosnia, at 51 he is on a war-footing to make a living as a farmer in the fertile plains of Rupandehi.

He went to Germany to be trained in organic agriculture, and came back determined to turn his passion for farming into a successful business. Having worked in an apple farm and a nursery, he discovered that apples did not just grow in Mustang but would also thrive in the plains just as they did in Australia and Indonesia.

Not just any apples. Gurung's apples are a special species called 'nano apples' of which he imported 500 seedlings from Australia.

"Apple trees can usually only be harvested after the first three years of planting. But these trees have begun to bear fruit in just 18 months. I plan to start producing them commercially this year," says Gurung whose Lumbini Organic Farm and Research Centre near Bhairawa is now growing not just small apples but also a trove of 50 types of vegetables.



SAGAR PANDEY

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 fertilise them, the expert warned Gurung that it was a waste of money and time to grow apples in the plains because the fruits need low temperatures.

"The technician spoke from his experience in researching apples in Mustang. But I had heard of apples being growing in hot climates, and so I pressed on," explains Gurung, whose mother and brother and family live 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 crossed 50, at this age why should I toil 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 bustles with goats, ducks, and chicken. Before the lockdown he

was already selling up to Rs400,000 worth of vegetables and fruits.

Profits have fallen though, and while Nepal's farmers are struggling to cope with the coronavirus crisis, Asha Gurung's apples are fruiting. 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 cavities 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. 🇳🇵

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EVENTS



Botanical Exhibition

Lian Art Center Beijing has organised the International Special Botanical Illustration Exhibition at Wuhan Botanical Garden. 82 artworks from 48 artists from China and international artists including 3 prints from Nepali artist Neera Joshi Pradhan artist are on exhibit at the garden. Head to www.liancenter.org/exhibition-1 to look at the artwork.
Until 30 June



Private yoga sessions

Soorya Wellness and Yoga centre has made private yoga sessions available to everyone for self practice at home. Sessions are available on prior appointment. Go to the Soorya Wellness Facebook page for details.
Fee: 3000, 9818481972

Girls in Tech

This edition of Business Guff will be on 'The Future of Fintech: What to Expect in 2020'. The guest speaker will be Dibyswori Dhar Dali, secretary at Women in Information Technology, a non-profit aimed at advancing women in technology. Register at the Girls in Tech Facebook page.
26 June, 4pm-5:30pm

Drama Competition

Shabda Theatre is holding an online drama competition to promote art and literature on the occasion of the anniversary of the birth of poet Bhanubhakta Acharya. Theatre enthusiasts across all ages can participate. Participants must prepare an under-10 minute play based on the work of Bhanubhakta Acharya and send it at shabdathatre@gmail.com.
Submission deadline: 9 July



Boudha Farmers Market

Buy fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, fresh baked goods, and other delicious goodies. Support local products and farmers, and follow physical distancing guidelines.
Every Saturday, 8-am-12pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha, 9801978106

ONLINE ARCHIVES



One World Theatre

Two of One World Theatre's plays are now on its YouTube channel. Watch the play *The Flight* and its adaptation of the Russian play *Three Sisters*.



TED-Ed

Find hundreds of animated lessons on topics ranging from visual arts to mathematics. Go to the website for details, or go directly to TED-Ed's YouTube channel and start watching.

Google underwater tour

Take Google's Life in the ocean deep underwater tour and discover the mysteries of the sea with 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.



Night Vale

Welcome to Night Vale is a twice-monthly podcast from the fictional desert town of Night Vale, where every conspiracy theory is true. Find on YouTube, Stitcher, or Apple Podcasts. The Night Vale website has a recommended list of episodes to start listening from.

QUARANTINE DINING



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Delivery: 11am-7pm, 9860675655

Koto

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Delivery: 12pm-7:30pm (01) 5542936 (01) 4220346



Curilo

Try delicious pastas, pizza and sandwiches. Order the signature La Curilo Pizza. Also order freshly baked multigrain bread from Curilo. Find the menu at Fooddole.
12pm-6pm
(01) 4005079

French Bakery

Enjoy scrumptious breakfast from the French Bakery. Get the tummy-filling breakfast platter, or the bacon and egg sandwich. Also order from a variety of delicious cakes and muffins. Check out the menu at Foodmandu for more.
(01) 4251998



Aalucha

How many ways can fries be made? Aalucha has got it all covered. Try the *cholla* fries or the butter chicken poutine go for the classic fries with Aalucha's signature dips. Check out the menu at Foodmandu.
Delivery: 12pm-7:30pm, 9860108771

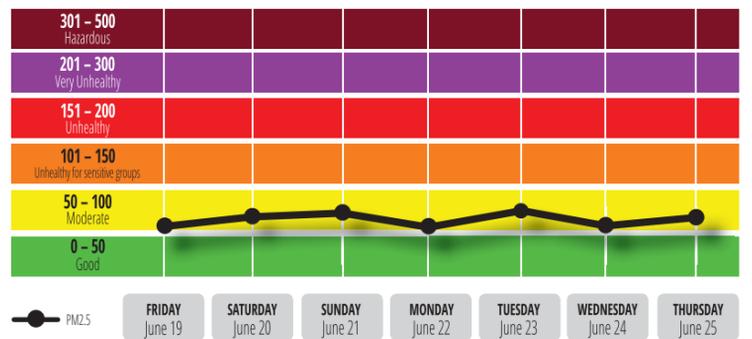


The monsoon has now covered the entire subcontinent, and it has been looking quite healthy and timely so far. After the initial first wave, it took a short breather this week, but as seen in this satellite picture there is another pulse amassing to the southeast of Nepal. This will bring heavy and sustained rainfall into the weekend, with lightning and thunder which are uncharacteristic for monsoon squalls.



AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 19 - 25 June



Kathmandu's Air Quality Index (AQI) improved as the monsoon took a short breather, and precipitation fell. But it's all relative, and compared to winter, the air quality has been consistently in the Moderate 'Yellow'. In fact, after showers, it has even gone to the Green 'Good' zone quite often. The graph above represents daily AQI average measured at Phora Darbar. For live hour-by-hour measurements go to www.nepalitimes.com. Hopefully the breath of fresh air will continue as the monsoon looks to remain strong into the weekend.
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



AVOID DISPOSABLE TABLEWARE

Avoid disposable plates, cups and cutlery, specially those made out of polystyrene and styrofoam, as they are carcinogens, non-recyclable and non-biodegradable. Styrene can also leach from containers into our food, pollute the environment and harm animals that mistake it for food. If you need to use disposable tableware, opt for ones that are biodegradable and compostable. Disposable tableware and packaging made out of plants (like banana leaf, palm leaf, sugarcane or bamboo) can be composted with the leftover food to produce fertiliser to help grow the next generation of plants.

OUR PICK



American science fiction Western and dystopian television series produced by HBO is set at the intersection of the near future and the reimagined past, and begins in Westworld, a technologically advanced Wild-West-themed amusement park where every human appetite can be indulged without consequence. Primetime Emmy Award-winning series *Westworld* has three seasons to binge on and stars Evan Rachel Wood, Thandie Newton, Jeffery Wright and James Marsden.

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

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After 60 years, Nepalis still miss Burma

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



SAGAR PANDEY



MUKESH POKHREL

BURMA DAYS: Chudamani and Lilavati Pant, (left) who were forced to leave a thriving dairy farm in Burma 60 years ago, and settled down in Nepal. Like many Burmese refugees, they settled down in this neighbourhood (above) along the Siddhartha Highway of Bhairawa, which is still called 'Burma Tole'.

Dhankala Pandey, 80, (right) still lives in Burma Tole. She lost her husband two years ago, and says she misses the relatives who are still in Burma.



MUKESH POKHREL

Mukesh Pokhrel
in Bhairawa

Burma in the 1950s was strikingly similar to the Tarai plains of Nepal: glistening paddy fields, lush jungles, and a heritage that had elements of both Buddhism and Hinduism.

No wonder Burma's Nepalis found the place so much 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.

Dhankala Pandey was married at age 12 to Reshmalal in Nepal, and migrated to Pungchang 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 Chudamani Pant, 80, a Nepali dairy farmer in Burma who carried two containers overflowing with 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 Pant, 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. Himlal Sharma himself was a school teacher for 23 years, Sher Bahadur Lama was a government lawyer, Antar Singh was the dean in Mandalay 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 expulsion 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, escaping 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 Rohingya 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 Leila Ram Pandey in his book *Jiwan ra Byaktitwa*.

Himlal Sharma recalls handing over 1.4 million kyats (\$2,000 at the time) to the government after the military demonetised all notes above 20 kyats. Nepalis 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," Reshmalal 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 sneak rice in milk cans, praying that officials would not catch them.

Remaining in Burma was bad enough, but leaving the country was equally tortuous. Bhim Adhikari says the military would

confiscate everything above 11 grams of gold jewelry, cash more than Rs400, and let them leave with only two sets of clothes.

Chudamani Pant 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 Nepali refugees from Burma, he found refuge in a *dharmasala* near Lumbini in Rupandehi district.

The Nepalis cleared the forest and settled in Chhapiya 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 are only a handful of Burmese families left there.

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

Narayan Poudel was forced to leave four brothers, and keeps in touch with them on social media.

Once a year, he sends them a Nepali astrological calendar, a prized possession to keep track of festivals back home.

"I didn't realise how difficult it actually is to live apart from my family. How wonderful would it have been had we all lived together in one country," says Chudamani Pant. His wife Lilavati recently spent 45 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 Lilavati, festivals like Dasain, Tihar, and Tij are especially heartbreaking, reminders of the years that have gone by without her being able to bless her brothers in Burma.

Dhankala Pandey still has her brother-in-law, sister-in-law and a cousin in Burma, and they visit every five years or so. Her husband Reshmalal 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. He loved it there, and he would constantly talk about going back." 🇳🇵

Angur Baba Joshi, 89

The words most people have used to describe educationist and social worker Angur Baba Joshi after she passed away on Saturday at the age of 89 is: "A woman ahead of her time in Nepal."

Indeed, Joshi was among the first four women to pass the SLC high school exam in 1949, the first Nepali woman to graduate from Oxford University, Nepal's first female college principal, the only woman in the committee to work on a new draft constitution in 1966. The list is long.

The flames of knowledge burnt fiercely in Joshi from a young age. Girls were not encouraged to study and read books in those days, but Angur Baba sat in with her brother and cousins to learn the Nepali and English alphabets from a home tutor.

She snatched their books and would teach herself English, and when her brother could not answer a question, she would surprise the teacher by blurting out the answer. She even got her brother to tell her his secret *mantra* after his thread ceremony.

But, as was the tradition in those days, she was married at age 11. Fortunately, her young husband was Balam Joshi, whose mother Chandra Kumari Joshi was herself a pioneer, having gone to high school and someone who valued the importance of education — especially for women.

She was happy to have a daughter-in-law who was also interested in studies. Chandra Kumari is now a sprightly 106 years old in the Joshi household in Bagh Bazar.

Both Balam and Angur Baba passed the SLC



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

exam together as married teenagers. Balam in fact topped the board, and Angur Baba took on private tutors after Tri Chandra College refused to admit a woman to major in science. By this time, she had already given birth to a son.

The two then went to Banaras to do their Bachelors,

where Angur Baba gave birth to her second child. After graduation, they entrusted the children with their parents and carried on with their Masters. She then returned to Nepal and started teaching at Padma Kanya girl's college.

When her husband got a scholarship to do a PhD in

Britain in 1957, she also applied to Oxford University and was accepted, but was refused permission to go because she was a woman. She sought an audience with King Mahendra and got the ban revoked. The couple left their three children with their parents and left for UK, he to Glasgow to do a doctorate in nuclear physics and she to Oxford to study law.

Returning to Nepal, she became principal of Padma Kanya for 12 years, and educated a whole generation of Nepali women. To get back at not being able to study science when she was younger, she started a science curriculum in the college for young women. Later, she was nominated to the Rastriya Panchayat legislature by King Birendra and also served in various academic and social service organisations.

Along with her interest in science studies, Angur Baba Joshi was also a deeply spiritual person, and was well-read in the Sanskrit scriptures. She set up a religious school in Dev Ghat, arguing that it was the male gurus who discriminated against women, not the Hindu religion itself.

She also felt strongly that Nepal should never have become a secular country, arguing that the Hindu concept of 'dharma' was different from the English term 'religion', and the separation of faith and state did not make sense in Nepal. She expounded on this in her acceptance speech for the Jagadamba Shree Award for lifetime achievement in 2014, and in numerous books on spiritualism.

In 2003, Joshi was diagnosed with cancer, and an operation disfigured her face. But she said in numerous television interviews that it did not matter what a person looked like from the outside. "It is the inner beauty that is important," she used to say, quoting several Sanskrit verses to prove her point. 🇳🇵

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



Ganesh II (7,150m), Paldor (5,896m) and Ganesh I (7,405) from Nagthali.

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, four Nepalis and a fluent Nepali-speaking French woman gathered for an impromptu dinner at Newari Khaja Ghar, a family-owned restaurant in Naya Bazar in Kathmandu.

Since the dining area was busy, the owner kindly opened up one of his family bedrooms clearing away a bed and bringing mats in so we could enjoy each others' company in a more secluded environment. Seated on the floor, we sampled *baji chwela aila* and talked about our recent Nepal travel stories over the beaten rice, marinated buffalo chunks and Kathmandu Valley's artisanal rice spirit.

The Colombian couple had just been to Chitwan and Langtang 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 fares. They were offered tea so often and with such insistence by guesthouse owners along their trek, that "Namaste" started sounding like "Namastea", they said.

The group burst into laughter, sharing more hilarious and even hypocritical encounters in Nepal. We agreed that things needed to change, little knowing that in a few months change would be forced upon the world with a global pandemic and lockdown.

All of us that night in Naya Bazar had not only experienced fake hospitality as tourists somewhere in the world, notably after discovering what we believed to be an act of selfless local generosity was actually a tourist trap. But we admitted that we had also ourselves behaved as smiley tight-fisted tourists before.



A couple of weeks before that dinner, both of us, Bibek (a foreign-looking Nepali ecologist) and Lorena (a Nepali-looking Colombian anthropologist) went on a trek through the Tamang Indigenous Heritage

Trail in Rasuwa, north of Kathmandu on 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 places 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 ran into on the trails. They all shared very personal impressions of life, longings and dreams with us.

The trip started with a bumpy, but musical, 8-hour bus ride from Kathmandu to Gatlang. This is the well-known 'Black Village' so-called because of its traditional black slate roof common on the Tibetan rimlands. 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 than elsewhere. And the beauty of it is the area is so 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 flattening the ground, repainting walls and providing materials for students. We shared tea with the two adults in charge, and one of them owned the travel agency behind the idea.

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

It was clear to us that his 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 ecotourism enterprises can create more shared value in remote areas by combining the business and social aspects of their job.

Inter-cultural trips create memories that provide people with additional ways of looking at life, and solving challenges at home. Locals and visitors can benefit 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 Parvati Kunda, a Hindu pilgrimage site, originally known by its Tibetan name Aamachodingmo (mother of deep lakes). After ringing the entrance bell, we came upon the lake lined with trees, prayer flags and scattered vermilion powder, evidence of how it is regarded as holy by devotees from both faiths.

Aamachodingmo is also home to some 40 bird species, and a source of drinking water for the villages below. But like many other misguided attempts at modernisation, the natural ambience has been somewhat spoiled 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. Two iridescent dragonflies joined us while we meditated on its shore. We recalled how in different cultures dragonflies symbolise transformation, and we felt they fitted the state of our minds as well as that of the lake. Aamachodingmo is indeed imbued with spiritual energy.

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

Noticing his traditional attire, we asked what being a Tamang meant to him. He giggled nervously at such a weird question. For the indigenous people in Colombia's Amazon rainforest, the answer to that question is essential to their survival. Thanks to the ownership 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, Hindu and Nepali, we wondered if he preferred to be politically correct, or if he truly felt free to choose who he wanted to be.

Before sunset we insisted that Didi join us for dinner. She shyly proposed to have a *sisnu* nettle dish with dhindo corn porridge and kodo wine made from millet. With tongs

inside a basket we headed to the backyard to gather some *sisnu* and very quickly learnt a new Nepali phrase *haat polyo*, but the stinging hands did not diminish from the pleasure of cooking the meal, singing and conversation by the kitchen fire.

Food is always a conversation starter during the trek. And meeting Dai and Didi as well as the dragonflies and birds turned our visit into an unforgettable experience. We are certain they and the children of Aamachodingmo also realised that it is not just the mountains trekkers come looking for. Warm human connection 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 (1,891m), the site of a hydropower plant, to Nagthali (3,150m). Surrounded by observant snowy peaks, we only heard our own breath until reaching the top after a night-stop along the way.

That afternoon we set off to Thuman, missing the trail again. It was then that we remembered the scary stories of other lost tourists who do not always make it. Trail signs can indeed save lives, and hiring local guides is essential. Luckily, we managed to use our prior experience to read the slopes and reach Pemba's guesthouse before sunset.

Pemba runs her homestay with a 6-year-old daughter who is constantly calling out to her "Aama, Aama!" 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. Pemba says she feels lonely, but chooses to be happy enjoying every time friendly guests talk to her.

The local government plans to invest public funds to build a view tower at Nagthali. This would be completely unnecessary, and the money could instead be used to training local trekking guides, put up trail signage 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.



Warmed up by the sunrise, we descended to Syabru Besi on the other side of the Bhoté Kosi River for the steep hike up to the holy lakes of Gosainkunda. Roads were being built aggressively, and had almost reached Thulo Syabru. While crossing the village, we were



Nagthali Panorama



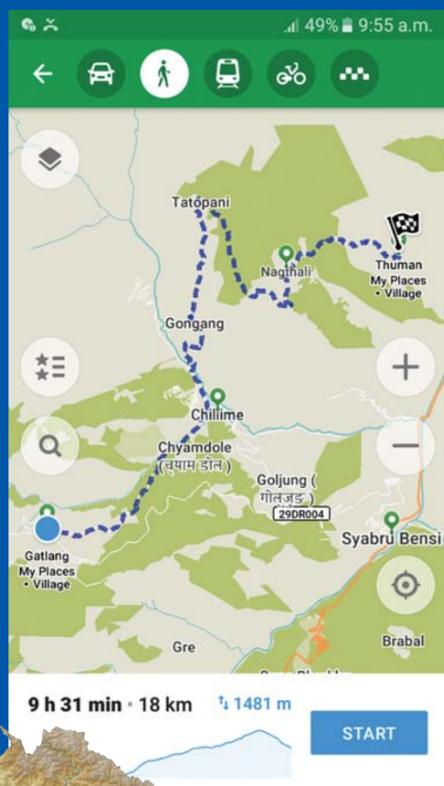
Dai carries a large straw mat down the slope.



The holy Gosainkunda from the trail to Suryakunda Pass.



Misty forest trail from Gosainkunda to Ghopte on the way back to Melamchi and Kathmandu.



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.

Colombia has faced 60 years of armed conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), other smaller communist guerrillas, paramilitary groups and political elites 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 social 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 Cholangpati, and because it was the winter off-season we were the only guests. After devouring a dal bhat we continued our ascent to Laurebina (3,920m) and looked down at a carpet of clouds to the west. 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 4,380m in guest houses that took turns to open. They were packed with Nepali and foreign trekkers sitting around the central fireplace. Two friendly Nepali tour guides asked us to join them for a cup of Khukri Rum 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 serene 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, posed 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 lodge-owners do not seem interested in knowing their guests. The feeling of being clients and vendors was clear. Still, we managed to make

a local woman laugh in an attempt to wash our clothes.

The following morning we crossed Suryakunda Pass (4,610m) surrounded by the crackling sound of the sun melting the ice crust on the lake's surface. Then through the cliff at Ghopte, walking across slippery ice on rocks through cloud forests. The trail descended through misty flanks all the way to Melamchi, 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 upbringing. Nonetheless, that same "Namastea" made us feel uneasy in some trek stops.

Although Nepalis complain about low-spending tourists, seeing them only as cash dispensers tarnishes the motto Atithi devo bhava (guest is god) value the country boasts about. "Namastea" adds a commercial dimension to the greeting. We ask ourselves how porters, guides and guesthouse owners like Pemba and Didi 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, realising Tamang homestay menus were standardised,

we suggested that owners added local ingredients, cuisines and drinks as options. Doing so would reinforce Himalayan traditions and a sense of identity.

The Colombian experience shows that tour guides are key to mutual understanding between travelers and locals. Guides should be more appreciated and supported for their contribution as translators 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 purpose of ecotourism can shift from visiting romanticised 'untouched' landscapes to discovering nature with people in it. Intertwined as they are, both deserve the same respect. Notably, treks in Nepal can also teach us about farming, cooking and other skills required to sustain life in remote areas. Such activities increase interaction 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-imagine tourism saying "Namaste" with a smile, and also add: "Vasudaiva Kutumbakam", the Sanskrit phrase from the scriptures which means "The world is one family".



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BIKRAM RAI

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 rainfed 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 batches of high yielding, climate resilient and multi-stress tolerant rice varieties is overdue to improve rice productivity. Nearly 85% of seeds



MONIKA DEUPALA

used for rice production are inbred varieties from farm-saved seeds.

Crops like rice need 17 elements (including trace elements) for their proper growth and development. The attention is concentrated on urea (nitrogen), but there needs to be more awareness about the other nutrients that the rice crop needs. Average nutrient use in Nepal for all crops in last 11 years was 47kg per hectare which includes nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium – half of it used on rice.

As a rule of thumb, 100kg of nitrogen is needed to produce 3 tons of rice per hectare, so we can understand how undernourished rice crops are in Nepal. We are expecting miracles in rice productivity growth if we do not increase balanced nutrition.

These trends have serious implications for food and nutrition security in the country. But this change in land use pattern and land abandonment is hardly reflected in any government data base of crop area coverage in Nepal.

Now is the time to have a national discourse and consensus on the type of actions needed to make the country self-sufficient in rice, improve

productivity and profitability of rice-based system using innovative solutions, create more jobs in rice-based agri-food systems for Nepal's youth and women by connecting production with the food systems and fully unlock the immense potential of rice-based agri-food systems in Nepal for overall economic development.

Nepal needs to adopt technology-intensive farming to increase rice productivity by at least 1.5 times in next five years and reduce cost of production to make it competitive while protecting the environment. This is best done by integrating climate resilient technologies and precision rice farming practices widely.

A practical strategy could be to intensify climate resilient, high yielding and high quality improved inbred varieties in at least 60% of the area, conserving and commercialising indigenous rice landrace in about 15% while growing high-yielding and multi-stress tolerant hybrid rice varieties in about 25% area.

Deploying hybrid rice in drought-



DEBJANI SAMANTARY

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prone areas is an innovative concept as this is where hybrids can provide maximum benefits where inbred varieties and landraces fail to provide economical yield. Developing hybrid rice seed production capability in country can provide additional 0.5 million jobs per year considering that hybrid rice technology is

intensified in about 30% of rice area. Unlocking the real potential of *chaite* (spring) rice using new technologies has strategic importance in achieving food security in Nepal.

Post COVID-19 agriculture extension can be totally transformed because 90% of Nepal's population now has mobile phones that can be used for sharing technical message during critical growth stage of rice. Digital decision support tools such as Rice Doctor, Rice Crop Manager, WeRise are also available, although some of these would need to be adapted for Nepal.

Nepal lacks a critical mass of trained professionals in the National Agriculture and Research Systems

(NARES) that have limited exposure to new science, technologies and innovations. Moreover, their institutional set up is not aligned to respond to the changing needs of transforming existing subsistence rice production into a technology intensive rice-based agri-food system.

The government of Nepal and IRRI signed a five year work plan to achieve rice self-sufficiency and generate employment in rural areas. IRRI builds capacity with cutting-edge rice science, farming techniques and technologies, and research and development.

Advanced plant breeding, precision rice farming, low emission technologies, women-friendly mechanisation and many other innovations that can contribute to transform the country's agriculture sector help achieve food and nutrition security. ■

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