



# Zip it

Why Prime Minister K P Oli decided to use the birth anniversary of Nepali poet Bhanubhakta Acharya on Monday to get embroiled in what he should have known would create a huge backlash in India is not known. We can only speculate.

Oli put forth the wild theory that the mythical Hindu god Ram was born in Nepal, and that the kingdom of Ayodhya where his family ruled was actually in present day Chitwan district near the Indian border. Never mind that neither Nepal nor India existed at that time.

He could have innocently blurted it out after being carried away by a receptive audience that was laughing at his repartees.

This was a function celebrating the Nepali language as one of the unifying pillars of nationhood, so it is much more likely that Oli brought up Ayodhya to fall back on nationalism. This has always been his default button whenever he faces a domestic political crisis, or challenge to his authority from rivals within his own Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

Either way, the remarks generated understandable outrage in India where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-right BJP has itself politicised the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi temple at Lord Ram's nativity site.

In Nepal also, the utterance backfired on the prime minister who has been ridiculed on social media all week with comments and memes. Even Oli's own supporters have called the remarks ill-timed and detrimental in getting Nepal-India relations back on track.

Oli could have been angered by Indian officialdom and television news channels which have been demonising him ever since he confronted New Delhi over the Lumpyadhura corridor that is occupied by India.

Faced with brewing mutiny led by co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal in May, Oli used the anger in Nepal against the Indian move and defied New Delhi by getting all parties to amend the constitution and use the new map in Nepal's national emblem.

That bought him some time, but faced with another challenge in the party's Standing Committee last month, he accused New Delhi of trying to unseat him, and threatened to split away from the party by re-registering the old UML at the Election Commission.

Chinese Ambassador in Nepal Hou Yanqi then had a slew of meetings with President Bidya Devi Bhandari, Dahal and NCP comrades opposed to Oli. She carried a message from Chinese President Xi Jinping saying that splitting the part would be a bad idea.

Indian tv channels and troll factories on social media then launched an all-out war directed solely at Oli, and calling openly for his ouster. Some tv channels even had graphics showing Ambassador Hou and Oli inside a Valentine's Day heart. Nepal's direct-to-home tv operators then pulled the plug on all Indian news channels.

What had so far been an escalating G2G spat has now turned many Indians against Nepal. Intentional or not, Oli should have known better than to drag an explosive mixture of religion and politics into an already volatile relationship.

Over the past two-and-a-half centuries, Nepal's survival strategy has been to keep both neighbours at arms length by maintaining a stable and balanced relationship with them. Oli is upsetting the cart.

Remarks supposed to stoke ultra-nationalist (read: anti-Indian) fervour have worked for him before, and Oli might have thought it will work

again. This time, it will take a lot more than the Foreign Ministry's clarification to undo the damage.

The Ayodhya reference also came during a tense ceasefire between Oli and Dahal as a result of Ambassador Hou's meetings last week. Loyalists on both sides now say they do not want to split the party, but the real issue has always been what will be the give-and-take between Oli and Dahal that will keep the party united.

At the heart of the dispute is Dahal's impatience to head the government and/or party. He had banked on Oli's health deteriorating to such an extent that he would automatically take over. He did not expect it to drag on for so long, and Oli seems to have come out physically stronger after his second kidney transplant in March.

It is not in Nepal's national interest to allow an ego-clash and power struggle at the top of the ruling party to impact any more on core concerns like the MCC, COVID-19 response, or the country's geo-strategic survival.



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## ONLINE PACKAGES



### VOLUNTEERS TO THE RESCUE

Contrary to what we believe, international humanitarian assistance makes up only 1% of aid during disasters. It is the volunteers who come to the rescue of the flood victims every monsoon. Watch drone footage of VCN rescuers in action in Jhambhu last week after landslides devastated the community following heavy rainfall. Story: page 4.

### COVID-19 REPATRIATION

The authors of the article have written everything there is to know right from the US to the holding centres in Nepal ('The long journey back to Nepal', Seema Subedi and Raju Bhandari, #1018). Accompanying videos of the lavatory and baggage claim help readers see the state of the airport.

**Nabin Paudyal**

■ Having gone through hours of waiting to get through customs at Kathmandu airport long before COVID-19 I have the greatest sympathy for what the elders had to endure to get home. Great article, thanks.

**Annie Campbell**

■ This article sheds light on what is happening around the world. In a nutshell, the article gives us a message about how we should travel safely during this global emergency.

**Shiva Neupane**

■ I totally agree about the lack of centralised system to collect information from passengers.

**Sibjan Chaulagain**

■ There seem to be good initiatives on repatriation, but the implementation seems weaker. The problem with the toilet need to be addressed immediately.

**Reecha Ghimire**

### LEGALISE CANNABIS

Cannabis, in hashish form particularly, was Rolpa district's primary cash crop ('Grass is greener in Nepal', Sonia Awale, #1018). The 1976 ban (along with HMG's long history of overall neglect) explains why the district sided so solidly with the rebels during the 1996-2006 Maoist war. Giving in to US pressure to outlaw cannabis had the unintended consequence of forcing the dynamic that eventually unseated the Shah regime.

**David Mason**

■ The US pressured Nepal to stop the cultivation of marijuana 50 years ago as a condition to provide aid to the development of the country, and to promote the sale of tobacco. The medicinal properties of the plant are already well known and the Nepal's government's decision to start commercial production can only be a good thing.

**Gary Wornell**

■ It must be legalised under certain terms and conditions for national prosperity.

**TR Khatiwada**

■ Farmers and local governments used to take good care of the ganja fields. Tax on ganja produced a good revenue stream.

**Hank Lacy**

### POOR GOVERNANCE

Enough Is Enough is just a small example of youth power ('The interface of politics and science', Anil Chitrakar, #1018). If the politicians fail to understand this and forget the role of young people in Nepal's revolutions, then surely this is a sign of their downfall.

**Ravindra Shakya**

■ Another one that hits the mark. But then Anil Dai gets it with amazing accuracy each time.

**Raj Gyawali**

### VISIT NEPAL ONLINE

That's an excellent idea ('Visit Nepal virtually 2020', Mukesh Pokhrel, page 5)! Hope this will work out well to survive these extremely difficult times of hardship.

**Jennifer van der Helm**

### WOMEN MAHOUT

That's the attitude that holds Nepal back ('Don't follow my footsteps, says female mahout', Mukesh Pokhrel, nepalitimes.com). Wish her the luck she deserves in finding a new job.

**Sam Vincent**

## Times.com

### WHAT'S TRENDING



### Light at the end of the Melamchi tunnel

by **Surenra Phuyal**

Melamchi water supply project is nearly ready for operation with 99% of the tunnel and the treatment plants now complete. At this rate it may be possible to send water to Kathmandu by September. However, the failure of a gate in the tunnel that killed two technicians on Tuesday may mean further delays. Story and video online.

**f** Most reached and shared on Facebook



### Grass is greener in Nepal

by **Sonia Awale**

Nearly 50 years after cannabis cultivation, sale and consumption was criminalised, Nepal is trying to bring back an important cash crop that also may have medicinal applications to fight COVID-19. Check out this detailed report which was the most read story last week at nepalitimes.com.

**t** Most popular on Twitter

**🔍** Most visited online page



### The long journey back to Nepal

by **Seema Subedi and Raju Bhandari**

Nepali medical personnel share their experience flying home on a repatriation flight from the US, and compare the response to the pandemic in Maryland and Nepal in this 'Nepali Times Weekend Longread' which generated a lot of comments online. Join the discussion.

**💬** Most commented

## QUOTE TWEETS

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
This week @lisachogyal journeys through Nepal's hippie history, and introduces us to Tony Jones, the first person to operate overland tourism along the #Hippie Trail when Kathmandu first started opening up and pioneer of rural heritage tourism in #Nepal.

**Joe @joe\_planet**  
A very charming man and a pioneer of tourism to wonderful Nepal

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
#Nepal is being held hostage by the battle for supremacy between PM K P Oli & party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal. This has undermined government capacity to deal with #COVID-19 crisis and now the response to #flood and #handslide. Analysis @rastrapahile.

**DevSarthakChaturvedi @d\_schat**  
Sad to see this state of Nepal. Wish politics could be kept out of medical emergencies at least.

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
The endangered Gangetic Freshwater Dolphin have made a comeback in Nepal, swimming upstream from India to the Karnali river to breed during the #monsoon. #Nepal #EndangeredSpecies Details in this report by Unnati Chaudhary:

**NaranKlyphree @NaranKlyphree**  
Now please keep the rivers clean

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK



20 years ago this week, we published Nepali Times print edition #1. Much has changed since then, yet more than a few things remain the same. So much so that reports and op-eds published in this paper two decades ago are as relevant today as they were then. In the week of 19-25 July 2000, in our very first editorial 'A sign of the times', we answered the question 'Why Nepali Times?'. We stand by the same beliefs even today. Excerpt:

Newspapers do more than hold a mirror to society. They become the mirror itself. Journalism is called history in a hurry. It is also culture, sociology, anthropology, philology, and philosophy in a hurry. Nepali Times will aspire to be a true reflection of our times—a journal to record the life and times of Nepalis in the decades ahead.

A newspaper cannot thrive by merely reporting. Collecting facts does not add up to truth. Facts are expensive and opinions cheap, but a balance of comment fosters debate, and expands the public sphere. A newspaper also needs a set of values to sustain itself. In a society cursed with extreme inequality, some of those values are fairly obvious: to speak for the last, the lost and the least. We will be fair, and we will protect our independence intensely. This is a modern newspaper for a new Nepal. A sign of the times.



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# Hippie Trail nostalgia in Kathmandu

The dusty overland vans were parked between rickshaws, tiger taxis, lounging bulls and grazing goats

Perhaps it's the reflective, introspective mood brought on by the lockdown, or the re-examination of history as we seek to define Nepal's border limits, but the media has recently seen considerable nostalgic chatter about the distant days when Kathmandu was a hippie haven.



**SO FAR SO GOOD**  
Lisa Choegyul

The freedom of the well-worn Hippie Trail of the early 1970s, overland from Istanbul to Kathmandu, seems unimaginable in today's world of COVID-19 travel restrictions – during this pandemic we can only dream of the joys of the open road.

From the mid-1960s, hordes of hippies in search of Shangri-La bussed or hitchhiked through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India before culminating in our Valley paradise, the end of the road. They came in tens of thousands pursuing enlightenment, preaching peace, finding themselves, escaping conformity, defying convention or fleeing the Draft, packed into gaudily-painted combis, busses and trucks resonating with Bob Dylan and Van Morrison.

Constrained by centuries of insecurity and conflict, the turbulent regimes along their overland route learned little from their legacy, persisting in more war than peace, more hate than love. Coinciding with the Haight-Ashbury movement, the respite in hostilities presented a brief window of opportunity. Seldom has this section of the Silk Road been safe for travellers to transit since Marco Polo passed this way, protected by the Mongol Khan's engraved tablet *laissez passez*.

Back in London, the ebullient Tony Jones was one of the first to capitalise on the trend, organising truckloads of punters to drive to Kathmandu in his specially converted Encounter Overland vehicles. Keen to know more, one spring morning over a decade ago, I sat on a yellow cushioned cane chair in the garden of a dilapidated homestead just outside Nuwakot. The neat rows of vegetables and ranks of blossoming fruit trees in the orchard reflected Tony's British army background.

Long since settled in Pokhara, Tony was in the process of rebuilding what became the Famous Farm, twinned with his game-changing Old Inn which he had cleverly and carefully restored in the centre of Bandipur, the original inspiration of the tourist rehabilitation of that by-passed



**FREAKIN' COOL:** A milieu-matching restaurant on Freak Street (above) from Desmond Doig's book *My Kind of Kathmandu*.

Taxis in Kathmandu had to mandatorily be painted with tiger stripes in the early 1970s.

Newar trading town. Tony and his team pioneered rural heritage accommodation in historic village houses.

"There's a good chap, do get a move on, chito chito!" Tony Jones was hanging off a carved balcony of the rambling Newar farmhouse, waving his hammer and yelling at Laxman who laboured up the narrow staircase under a pile of wooden planks. Grinning, Laxman dumped them noisily on the exposed beams at Tony's feet. Together, they laid and nailed them into place. Puffing with exertion, Tony continued to mutter in Nepali interspersed with English cockney expletives.

Distracted by the hammering but enjoying the banter, his wife and I shared a companionable pot of tea. I wanted to know more about managing the logistics of those unique overland operations, plus

Rinchen was planning a big drive from UK to Mongolia in a beat-up old car.

"Two pieces of advice for your son driving to Ulaanbaatar. First is be careful not to cross the Thames too many times as you leave London – most of my drivers got lost on their way to Folkstone before even reaching the English Channel!" Tony has a deep deprecating laugh, his eyes glazing as he remembered those far off days despatching truckloads of eager overlanders.

"And never be the last in a convoy of vehicles! Fatal." Which is exactly what happened to Rinchen when his engine flooded going through a river on the edge of the Gobi Desert and he sat powerless and increasingly desperate whilst his mates disappeared over the sandy horizon – but that's another story.

The Hippie Trail's terminus was Jhochon, Freak Street and I arrived there from the opposite direction towards the end of their era in March 1974. Have travelled from Bali by train through Malaysia and Thailand, my first glimpse of the then-emerald Valley was through the grimy windows of a United Burma Airways plane from Yangon. As we circled over the rice terraces, the afternoon sun glinted off the golden spires of Swayambhu and the white dome of Bodnath flashed beneath us.

The long-haired, beaded, colourfully-clad, chillum-toting hippies thronging the medieval streets of Basantapur when I first arrived in Kathmandu were no doubt free spirits, dropping out and hanging loose. Joints were rolled openly on table tops, ganja was legal and hashish-laced

cookies featured on menus in the cafes, restaurants and pie shops blaring western music that had flourished to cater to their alternative needs.

More interested in getting high and higher trekking than tripping, I soon grew impatient with the smoke-blurred far-out cross-legged posturing, checked out of my six-rupee a night City Lodge, and headed for the hills.

But it is simplistic and misleading to say hippies came to Nepal only for the dope. They were also tuned in to the chilled Himalayan hospitality, timeless culture, spiritual vibes, temple bells, chanting monks and exotic mountain mystery that the remote Kingdom offered in spades. They perched picturesque on the pyramid steps to witness Newar festivals and religious ceremonies, admired rooftop sunsets on the pink peaks, and pottered the streets amidst the ancient rituals of daily worship.

Between the cycle rickshaws, tiger taxis, lounging bulls and grazing goats, their dusty decorated vans parked on palace cobbles or unmade bazaar lanes – the few other vehicles of the 1970s were UN-emblazoned SUVs, black palace limos with tinted windows, and the occasional vintage car carried in for the Ranas.

The demise of Kathmandu's hippie scene was not only precipitated by President Nixon's global crusade against drugs that leveraged Nepal's leaders to ban cannabis, marijuana and the harder stuff, but more that King Birendra wanted the Valley tidied up prior to the arrival of royal guests and world dignitaries for his lavish state coronation. By the time he and the Queen swayed down a spotless Durbar Marg on their jewel-encrusted elephant on the auspicious date of 4 February 1975, their death knell had sounded, visitor visas had evaporated and the hippies had departed.

When I came back in late 1975, only the hard-core were still to be found in Nepal – explorers, entrepreneurs, art dealers, dreamers, poets and devout students of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. Many returned later in life with respectable friends and families to holiday in the ultimate destination of their errant youth. Thus the hippie subculture usefully kick-started Nepal's nascent tourism with both American dollars and an enduring flower-power image.

And some are still here to this day, including Tony Jones and myself, although neither of us would consider ourselves successful hippies. We just happened to be around at the time. 🇳🇵

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# Don't just blame God for floods and landslides

Diya Rijal

This year's monsoon rains started early, and have been heavy. But total precipitation for June and the rainfall recorded for the past five days in Central Nepal have not been above normal.

Kathmandu Valley saw 70mm of rain between 5-13 July, which is about normal for this time of year.

Many of the deadly landslides this week were triggered by haphazard road construction that disturbed the slopes, while in the plains floods have been made worse by poorly designed roads, urbanisation of floodplains, deforestation and sand extraction in the Chure, as well as embankment building across the border in India.

"The rivers all flow down from the Chure, and the soil erosion is raising the level of the river beds making floods damage of the fertile farms of the Tarai worse," says Nagdev Yadav of the Community Development and Advocacy Forum in Province 2.

After the 2017 flood, a study by Practical Action concluded: "The increased intensity of the flood impact was caused by improper drainage system in cities, cross-border embankment, and elevated roads in borders, causing more inundations in the Tarai."

Co-author of that study, climate risk expert Madhab Uprety adds that this year saw 30% higher pre-monsoon precipitation in April-May. The top soil on mountain slopes were therefore already saturated when the main monsoons hit, making them more prone to landslides. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA) there were already 120 major landslides from June 14 to July 8. So far, the death toll is 80 killed and 40 missing with many injured.

Experts who analysed the deadly flash-flood on two tributaries of the Bhote Kosi on the night of 7 July conclude that a combination of heavy rain and bad engineering on a road up the mountain caused the slope failure.

"There is a newly-constructed road above the stream that brought



RSS

Casualties are going up every monsoon season due to haphazard infrastructure construction

down the flashflood that swept away 14 houses,' tweeted water resource engineer Kapil Dhital.

Indeed, haphazard road construction without inputs from bio-engineers cause rock falls even in the dry season. When the rains come the entire slopes on which the roads are hurriedly dug by excavators are prone to failure. It is then the settlements and farm terraces below them where people are killed and farms destroyed.

This year's flood and landslide damage comes on top of the economic hardships caused by the coronavirus crisis.

Other reasons for annual floods along the southern borderlands are the unilateral construction of flood

control levees, road embankments without proper drainage in the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Tension between India and Nepal means there is no immediate prospect of negotiations.

"Normal pre-monsoon precipitation looks set to continue for the rest of the rainy season," explains meteorologist Indira Kandel. This is bound to make flooding and landslides even worse towards end of the monsoon when the Tarai is already waterlogged.

At the NDRRMA, the strategy is to have a proper early warning system in place, using remote sensing satellite weather data, rainfall measurements in the catchment areas, and monitoring of

river flow.

"We have installed instruments for early-warning so that if the water level rises above the danger mark, the information is passed on to communities lower down," says Nagdev Yadav, whose organisation is trying to broaden the scope of early-warning to also forecast the impact on farms and crops.

However, despite the early warning network throughout the country through SMS, radio and social media, many people still do not take it seriously. They may also not have anywhere safer to go, and there is no landslide hazard risk mapping for villages in the mountains.

Another reason for flooding

can be extreme weather events. Cloudbursts in which hundreds of mm of rain fall in just a few hours are common along the Himalaya, and can cause flooding and landslides even if rivers are flowing naturally, and there is adequate drainage. There is evidence that cloudburst are getting more frequent, and this has been attributed to climate change.

"The frequency of floods and landslides have increased over the years, and this could be caused by heavy rains," Uprety says. "Embankments are made for flood protection but confine rivers and cause more floods. We also do not take into account the sediment load raising river beds." 🇳🇵

## Volunteers to the rescue in Nepal's flood season

Report says international humanitarian assistance makes up only 1% of aid during disasters, and should complement local efforts

Marty Logan

Accustomed to seeing slick press releases and articles promoting multimillion-dollar aid response of donor agencies, many assume they are leading rescue and recovery efforts. A report last year suggests otherwise.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) research suggests that international humanitarian assistance accounts for as little as 1% of aid during disasters and crises. Other sources provide the rest, including:

- Monetary and in-kind help raised by crisis-affected individuals and communities
- Remittances from family members abroad
- Local and national governments
- Informal aid, including volunteering, philanthropy and faith-based giving.

A related ODI article that focused on aid in Nepal's Saptari district following the 2017 floods concluded that 'the response of the western international system (the UN and INGOs) played only a minor role, accounting for around a sixth of the resources that affected households said they received'.

'A third came from family, neighbours and landlords, the government, the diaspora or community-based organisations, including



in-kind items such as shelter, food, cooking stoves and fuels. Another quarter was from other countries, with China reported as the main source, and Nepali NGOs, particularly the Nepali Red Cross, accounted for a fifth.'

Volunteer Corps Nepal (VCN) currently has 500 volunteers on standby in Saptari to respond to flooding. "Our concern is

to prevent deaths, so we have alerted our volunteers to evacuate people to safe areas," says its president Deepak Chapagain.

VCN was the first organisation to arrive in Jhambhu of Sindhupalchok after the deadly landslides last week devastated the community. It helped organise the helicopter rescue of seven injured locals (left), and VCN's attempt to locate bodies using a drone was thwarted by the piles of rubble created by the disaster, but the video footage it captured shows the massive destruction.

Two people have been confirmed dead in the district and some 20 remain missing. Dozens of houses were swept away by the landslide.

VCN includes more than 3,000 trained local volunteers and a wider network of 8,000-plus people in 77 districts, and is increasingly relying on funding from within Nepal to run its operations, notes Chapagain.

"Big donors stopped giving four months ago because they were affected by COVID, and we get small funds from foundations and individuals but they become big when they come from many people," he adds.

Even in lockdown response, more than international help it is community efforts which are making a difference. NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati has been raising funds for food aid and helping organise an information campaign during the lockdown.

"Our source for funding certainly is not

any of the aid agencies that quote extremely large figures in their package announcements. It really is these other sources, including remittances, including diasporic communities, including large, global communities that care for Nepal," she told the podcast *Nepal Now*. "The difference we have felt this year is a lot of the fundraising has depended on the diasporic Nepali community and also those who live in and love Nepal."

"Why does this matter?" asks the main ODI article. 'If international aid is only 1-2% of what people receive, then it needs to be managed in a much more complementary way and in better alignment with other resource flows to address the real needs faced by people in crisis.'

"This means shifting perspectives from one with international resource flows at the core to one where households and affected countries are at the centre of how responses are planned and funded. Aid should be used not just to respond to gaps in need but to catalyse better and more effective use of flows beyond aid, which may be the best way to 'localise' the response."

Chapagain wants big donors to start putting money into rescue efforts: "We were the first responders at Sindhupalchok ... when the road is clear other organisations will also arrive but there is no sense in going then. They need to reach immediately so they can save the lives." 🇳🇵



**VIRTUALLY HOME:** Sonja Rusticus and Buddhi Darlami at their Bardia Homestay. They say live virtual tours have allowed them to keep staff employed during the COVID-19 lockdown tourism slump.

MUKESH POKHREL

# Visit Nepal (Virtually) 2020

Bardia Homestay's online guided tours are the next best thing to going to Nepal in-person this year

Mukesh Pokhrel in Bardia

For travellers whose Visit Nepal plans in 2020 were scuppered by the pandemic, Bardia Homestay is bringing Nepal's Tarai plains into living rooms around the world through virtual tours.

Co-owners Sonja Rusticus and Buddhi Darlami came up with the idea of virtual tours during the long hours under lockdown with no in-person tourists visiting the Bardia National Park to admire its abundant biodiversity and indigenous Tharu culture.

"This is the next best thing to being in Bardia yourself, and it will also generate income at a time when there are no visitors so we do not have to lay off staff," says Darlami who set up Bardia Homestay six years ago, combining his two-decade experience as a tour guide with Rusticus' entrepreneurial expertise.

The tours come with cooking lessons in local cuisine, farming tours, wildlife safaris and cultural tours. Bardia Homestay, together with Dutch tour operator Travel Nepal, created the tourism platform Mynepal.online, of which the virtual tours are a part.

For €8.5 euros per person, the 40-minute long farming tours involve rice planting, harvesting, de-seeding of seedbeds and ploughing of fields using oxen. Local Tharu guides take travellers on virtual walks through the lush Bardia countryside while explaining traditional farming methods.

The jungle walks also cost the same, but online tourists will accompany guides as they stalk Bardia's abundant wildlife, including swamp deer, gharial crocodiles, black bucks, the one-horned rhinoceros. And if it is your lucky day you get rare sightings of the tiger or the endangered Gangetic fresh-water dolphin.

In the simulated safaris, guests will follow guides as they go deep into the jungle, peer through undergrowth into clearings, tip-toe along the Karnali's ox-bow lakes, and wade through grasslands. The guides also explain the various vegetation zones of the National Park, as well as the conservation research efforts underway there with Himalayan Tiger Foundation based in The Netherlands.

Slightly more expensive at €15 per person are cooking lessons for Nepali-style *dal bhat*, or Tharu specialities including fresh water mussels, snails and tiny crabs,



accompanied by sesame rice.

"We try to make the live virtual tours as real as possible with two cameras," Darlami explains. One is a GoPro on the guide so guests see what he sees, while the other focuses on the guide as he describes the tour. The online excursions use the Zoom application, and last 40 minutes each.

Rusticus and Darlami were inspired by the success of virtual city tours and cooking classes in Europe. Says Rusticus: "Their methods and approach to guiding impressed us, so we wanted to bring such tours to our homestay."

Most of those have signed up so far are Dutch tourists among the 400 most recent visitors to the Bardia Homestay, and they have been happy to relive their experience in Nepal.

As information spreads through word of mouth, more and more people are Zooming into Nepal and the Homestay plans to move into the second phase.

"As this is a new experience for us, we are still in the developmental phase," says

Rusticus, "our target group so far has been Dutch nationals but we want to expand now to German, British and others in Europe."

Virtual tours also allow Bardia Homestay to generate some revenue and retain employees at a time when most companies in the hospitality business in Nepal have been forced to close or retrench staff.

Says Rusticus: "For the moment our virtual tours are just to manage costs during the lockdown so people do not lose jobs. It is not to earn profits."

The fact that people are signing in to the virtual tours may be a model for other crisis-ridden hotels and trekking agencies in Nepal. There can be virtual treks, virtual cultural tours of Kathmandu Valley towns and festivals like Sapharu on 4 August this year.

There could be virtual pilgrimages to Gosainkunda on Janai Purnima which this year falls on 3 August, or even online day-by-day sightseeing along trekking trails after the rains are over.



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## prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

### Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways has welcomed the judgment of the International Court of Justice affirming that the ICAO Council has the jurisdiction to hear any disagreement relating to the interpretation and implementation of the Chicago Convention 1944 and the International Air Services Transit Agreement. In line with the ruling of the ICJ, Qatar Airways will pursue a case for compensation for the aviation blockade.

### Himalaya Airlines flights

In line with the Government's permission and authorisation received to bring back Nepalis who are stranded due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Himalaya Airlines



will operate its third phase of repatriation flights from 15-21 July to ferry stranded Nepalis from Abu Dhabi, Doha, Kuala Lumpur, Manama in Bahrain, as well as Riyadh and Dammam in Saudi Arabia.

### ACCA Report

Future of accountancy and finance is set change for the better through an increase in digital technologies, according to Meaningful Work for the Digital Professional, a report by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) and EY based on a global survey of 4,281 respondents and 55 interviews between April and May 2020.

### Ncell Plus

Ncell has launched two new services under its Plus umbrella campaign with pre-booking orders for wireless technology-based Wi-Fi service Wirefree+. Ncell prepaid subscribers call at more affordable rates through its voice offer Endless Kurakani for prepaid customers, which allows users to choose from three voice packs with a validity of 7 days, 15 days or 30 days.



### Samsung A21s

Samsung announced the launch of the Galaxy A21s, the newest addition in its Galaxy A series of 2020 which is packed with a true 48MP quad camera, an Infinity-O display, and a long-lasting battery. The Galaxy A21s will be available in black, white and blue colours at Rs24,999 across Samsung brand shops and retail stores all over Nepal.

### Laxmi Bank network

Laxmi Bank inaugurated its 5th Extension Counter in the District Court of Rajbiraj, and the network now includes 121 Branches, 5 Extension Counters, 4 Hospital



Counters, 151 ATMs, 2500 remittance agents, and 61 Branchless Banking Agents spread across 48 districts in Nepal. The bank is also rapidly expanding to fulfil the growing demand for professional financial services.

### Jyoti Bank CEO

The Board of Directors of Jyoti Development Bank has appointed Srichandra Bhatta as the CEO for a four-year term from 25 July. Mr Bhatta was previously Assistant General



Manager at Nepal Investment Bank, Deputy Chief Executive Officer at Megha Bank and Chief Executive Officer at IME Life Insurance Company.

### Sanima Loan Agreement

Co-led by Sanima Bank and Nepal Infrastructure Bank, and under the participation of Global IME bank bank, Kumari Bank, Sunrise Bank, Prabhu Bank, Century Bank, Nepal Credit and



Commerce Bank, and Nepal SBI Bank, a Supplementary Syndicated Loan Agreement of Rs2.3 billion has been reached to increase the capacity of CG Cement Industry's Clinkerisation Plant this takes the total investment on the project by the participating banks to Rs9.06 billion.

### IME real-time remittance

Direct remittance sent through IME by users living abroad to mobile wallets and bank accounts in more than 50 Nepali



banks and financial institutions can now be deposited in real time. The service can be accessed through IME's agent partners in more than 200 countries across the world.

### Reliance AGM

Reliance Life Insurance Ltd. held its third annual general meeting on 12 July. Chairman Tara Chandra Kedia presided over the general meeting, which presented the annual report for the fiscal year 2075/76, the Audit report, Financial



Statement of the Fiscal Year 2075, and the profit-loss report. Additionally, the meeting also made an Audit proposal for the current fiscal year, as well as general proposals regarding salaries, allowances to the board of directors and issuing shares to the public.



## EVENTS



## Virtual Heritage Tour

This instalment of the Virtual Heritage Tour series designed by Story Cycle will take you on a discovery of Saipal in far west Nepal—ideal for skiers, mountaineers and climbers looking for adventures away from the hubbub of the city. Make reservations at <https://forms.gle/wrDsbmW7xTAMex6PA> on Nepal Tourism Board's Facebook page. 17 July, 4pm-5pm

## Art Exhibition

Bikalpa Art Center's exhibition 'A Portal to Nepali Contemporary Art After COVID-19' at Bikalpa Art Center and online at [www.bikalpastore.com](http://www.bikalpastore.com) will include artwork of 40 Nepali contemporary artists from across the country. 31 July onwards



## Farmers Market at Le Sherpa

Do your weekly shopping for fresh and healthy vegetables, fruit, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more. Physical distancing guidelines apply. Every Saturday, 8am-12:30pm, Le Sherpa, Maharajunj



## Comic-Con 2020

Join the largest convention of comic book, movie, and pop culture fans for this year's San Diego Comic Con. Stay tuned for updates about Comic-Con@Home on YouTube. 23-26 July

## Writing workshop

"Histories from Home: From Islamabad to Kathmandu" is an online writing workshop for aspiring writers from Nepal and Pakistan aged 17-22. Head to the Quixote's Cove Facebook page to fill the form and get details about the theme, and send in a 300-word writing sample. Selected participants will work together for six sessions. More details will be sent to those selected via email. Application deadline: 18 July

## ONLINE ARCHIVES



## Global Digital Library

Looking to enhance children's vocabulary while schools remain shut? The Global Digital Library has educational material and storybooks for parents and educators classified according to reading levels, including books in Maithili, Nepali, and Newari languages.

## Comic Geek Destinations

Meet superheroes, villains and giant robots on this Google Earth virtual trip around ten of the most iconic global comic book spots, including the Brussels Comic Book Museum, the Cartoon Art Museum in California, and the Ghibli Museum in Japan.



## VICE

Watch documentaries about anything and everything from all over the world on the VICE YouTube channel. Start from documentaries about Nepal's honey harvesters, The Nepalese Honey That Makes People Hallucinate, as well as the most recent documentary on human trafficking in Nepal.



## Audio Bites

Audio Bites by Shutter Corp films offers discussions with Nepali public figures on social issues including mental health, motherhood, social media, the environment and more. Find Audio Bites on YouTube.

## Tasty

This is the time to broaden culinary horizons. If there was one app that was made for millennial chefs, it's Tasty. The Tasty website and the mobile app has hundreds of recipes to choose from, and quick 'n easy how-to videos.

## QUARANTINE DINING



## Taza

Bring some Middle Eastern flare to the dining experience. Taza offers Shawarma, falafel, hummus, baklava and more—and everything is fresh and finger licking. Pulchok Lane, 9860960177



## Flat Iron Grill

Although this eatery is known for their sandwiches, their desserts deserve more recognition. From the cheesecakes to the eclairs, Flat Iron Grill offers the best of anything sweet. Get freshly baked goods, ham, sausages, and dairy products delivered. (01) 4413075



## Mamagoto Nepal

Enjoy delicious Pan-Asian food from Mamagoto, a restaurant that serves a variety of Asian fusion dishes. Order Spring Rolls, Soups, Dumplings, Ramen and more from Foodmandu.

Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm (01) 4446299, 9823056977



## Yellow Pomelo

Order some crispy fries, fish nuggets, buffalo wings, tummy-filling spaghetti and delicious pizza from Yellow Pomelo. Head to Yellow Pomelo's Facebook page to take a look at more options on the menu. 9813289975



## Fire and Ice

Fire and Ice offers genuine Neapolitan pizza and dozens of variants to choose from. Try the paesana, a combination of mozzarella, spinach, courgette and bacon, and the Spaghetti Pomodoro with homemade tomato sauce. Find more on Foodmandu. Delivery: 11am-7pm (01) 5350210

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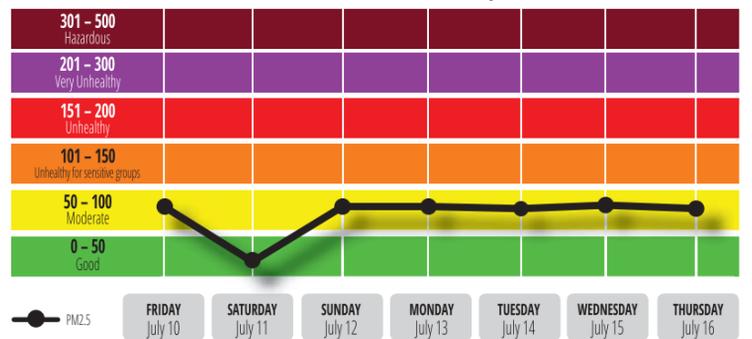


After that intense monsoon pulse this week that unleashed deadly landslides in the mountains and floods across the Tarai, the rains will taper off this weekend until the next trough. Mornings will be muggy as the sun comes out, but clouds will gather by evening to rain at night in Kathmandu Valley. Not as heavy as in the past week, but steady.



## AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 10 - 16 July



Despite easing of the lockdown and increased vehicular movement, concentration of pollutants smaller than 2.5 microns in Kathmandu city centre was consistently low throughout last week. Daily Air Quality Index (AQI) was either in green 'good' band or yellow 'moderate' zone much to the credit of intense monsoon rains. However, the rains will taper off this weekend which will mean air quality will deteriorate. Adding to the particulates in the air will be the increase in the number of diesel buses as the government opens public transport. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

## ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



## EAT LESS MEAT



Meat is a cultural staple in many communities across the globe. But if we decide to eat less meat or dairy, it can have a huge impact on our collective health and the health of the planet. Meat-rich diet increases the risk of chronic illnesses while meat and dairy production generates as much greenhouse gas emissions as all the cars, trucks and automobiles combined! Industrial livestock rearing practices also cause significant deforestation and pollution of landscapes and waterways. Developing "meat consciousness" is not about going on a meatless diet but about being more mindful of our meat consumption. We can all try simple ways to make fresh fruits and vegetables a bigger part of our diet. We can adopt Meatless Mondays, a flexitarian diet, weekday vegetarianism or go "vegan before 6". We can aim to keep our daily mix of food to 80 percent plant matter and 20 percent meat, dairy and seafood. This lifestyle change could be the single biggest way to help the planet and our health.



## OUR PICK

This edgy British teen TV series *Skins* follows a group of teenagers in Bristol, England as they grow up in midst of bad parenting, questionable adult behavior and hedonistic lifestyle. The stark portrayal of teenage life explored themes such as dysfunctional families, mental health, sexuality, gender, substance and bullying. The show ran for 7 seasons from 2007-2013 and stars Kaya Scodelario, Nicholas Hoult, Joe Dempsie, Hannah Murray, Dev Patel and Mike Bailey.

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

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# The rise of Curtis Waters

How a boy from Kathmandu is becoming a stunning international music sensation



Kashish Das Shrestha  
in San Francisco

Somewhere out there, at this very moment, there are people listening to Nepal-born Curtis Waters. And it is probably his infectious single *Stunnin'*.

In two months, the song has been streamed over 25 million times and is climbing across many Top 40 radio formats around the world. It ranked #3 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's Breakthrough 25 Chart for June.

Last week, it appeared on a Mercedes Benz advertisement. Things have been moving fast for Waters, who was born Abhi Bastakoti in Kathmandu at the turn of the 21st century when the Internet was still sparse. He came of age online and on social media in Germany and North America. Now, at 20, he isn't just living on the Internet, he has emerged as one of its biggest sensations.

"We are seven weeks in, and *Stunnin'* is growing faster than any song released this year," said Chris Anokute, who discovered Curtis Waters by chance, and is now his manager. "It takes about 20 to 25 weeks to properly cement a song into the marketplace, and another six to nine months to cement the artist. So it's still early days and we are very excited about the potential of what's to come."

Anokute would know. He is one of American music industry's top A&R executives and was central in launching young artists to great enduring success, including Katy Perry, Iggy Azalea and Rihanna.

When he heard *Freckles* by Waters, Anokute was captivated. "The song literally blew me away," he recalled. Like so many times before, he knew he was listening to an artist that just needed to be discovered by the world. So he reached out. The timing couldn't have been better.

*Stunnin'* was not released yet, but after more than six months of working on it, Waters had just started teasing it out on TikTok by posting snippets. It did not take



long for it to go viral. That's when Waters was flooded with offers from record companies.

"It was an extremely stressful three weeks," Waters recalled, speaking to *Nepali Times* about the many simultaneous offers from various major record labels he was suddenly having to figure out. "I would not have been able to navigate this without Chris. For me, I like making music and having fun. He really came through in helping guide me on the business side."

In the end, Waters decided to stay independent and signed on with Young Forever, Anokute's artist management company. The first order of business for this new relationship: releasing *Stunnin'*.

"*Stunnin'* is fresh, I liked it instantly," Ranzan, the popular Nepali producer and DJ said. "And it's great to see that he could choose to stay independent."

"It's raunchy 2020," added Rohit Shakya, the versatile and prodigious Nepali musician, songwriter and producer.

Born in Kathmandu on 20 December 1999, Waters was only four when he moved to Germany with his parents. When the family relocated to Canada, he was 10. His father is a PhD in environment science, and his mother has a double masters and works in Geographic Information Systems.

He has returned to Nepal only

once, for his bratabanda coming of age ceremony at age 14. Those three months in Nepal would change the trajectory of his life.

Waters enjoyed his sightseeing trips to Chitwan and Pokhara (pictured, above), but remembers being stuck in Kathmandu with bad Internet and an unfamiliar way of life while his actual high-school teenage life was falling apart. He could not talk to his friends in Canada because of the time difference, and the long distance relationship with his girlfriend had ended with her cheating on him.

"I was super bored, and I was also a little depressed," he recalled. "And I had a lot of time. So I started learning how to make music."

He hasn't stopped. The reason *Stunnin'* sounds like the work of a polished artist with a sleek producer, is because Waters spent all this teenage years training to be one — both as an artist and a keen audience of pop-punk, pop and rap.

Over the last four years, he has left a digital trail of his music and life. His songs were written when he was a teenager, and they do not pretend to be anything else. The lyrics tell it like it is: 'I like things/I like girls/I like the world/I know the world is mine,' he sings in one. 'I ain't so sure about my future,' he confesses in another.

Musically, genres seem to matter less to Waters. His focus is clearly on catchy melodies filled

with clever layers and beats while making it all sound simple, whole and natural. Stylistically, there are plenty of odes to his influences from all the years that he has been alive.

It's not surprising that currently 70% of his listening fan base is under 27 and about 65% are female. Nepalis now make up a part of his fast growing legion of followers. And as Nepalis discover him, Waters is himself trying to learn more about his Nepali roots.

"Honestly speaking, because I was so young when I left Nepal, I missed out on a lot of my culture. But I am on this journey of connecting with my Nepali roots now, and I love it," he said.

Waters confesses to also being fairly disconnected from the new Nepali music scene, but he is certain about his favorites in Nepali music: "I love Narayan Gopal, he is my favorite Nepali artist, and *Jun Phool Maile* is my favorite Narayan Gopal song. And *Gaun Gaun Bata Utha* is my favorite Nepali song."

Sure enough, he was recently holding court on Instagram Live when he spontaneously burst into the chorus of Raamesh Shrestha's revolutionary *Gaun Gaun Bata Utha* as his audience from around the world cheered him on. "My song System, you know I wanted the audience to feel the rage, sort of like *Gaun Gaun Bata Utha*," he added.

Waters is busy preparing the launch of his album in September. It was recorded in his college dorm at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. "Curtis produced and executive produced the entire album, with four collaborators in a few co-productions and features," said Anokute.

*Freckles*, the song that drew Anokute to Waters, will be released before the album. An older listener might find traces of the bright pop radio hits from about a decade ago, and be caught humming it before even realising it. And the sincere melancholic confession will certainly leave a lot for the younger audiences to relate to. *Freckles* may well become inescapable on the

radio and online this autumn, just as *Stunnin'* has fast become a part of the soundtrack to Summer 2020.

Anokute was the first major music executives to reach out to Waters, before any mainstream success. "Everybody loved *Stunnin'* but Chris didn't care about it. He loved the album," Waters said, of their initial conversations. "My life has really changed the last three months and everything has come together in a super surreal way."

When Waters worked at Tropical Smoothie, a local smoothie shop in North Carolina, occasionally a student would recognise him from his nascent online presence. Anonymity is now a thing of the past.

"It's pretty bizarre. Every time I go out people come up to me. And I'm walking around with my family, and when I'm with my family I'm just Abhi. On the internet, I'm Curtis Waters. It's sort of a character in my head," he said, giddy and wary in equal measure. "Now kids come up. It's a new thing, and am not used to it yet. I gotta look good every time I'm outside now."

He is the first Nepal born artist to reach international success of this kind, a feat that Waters, who yearns to understand and experience Nepal more than ever, is himself immensely proud of. But as a rising star with a serious international hit and a highly anticipated forthcoming album, this is perhaps only a glimpse of what's coming his way.

"He wrote the song, and I opened up doors for it to be heard and supported at major levels," Anokute said, of *Stunnin'*. "There's no difference between how this feels compared to when we launched Katy Perry's *I Kissed A Girl*. It's just 12 years later, but the story always stays the same. Hits don't lie. *Stunnin'* is a TikTok sensation, but Curtis is more than a sensation. He's here to stay." 📌

*Kashish Das Shrestha* has written about youth and music culture in Nepal since 1997. Twitter, Instagram: @Kashishds



## USA. No. 1

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# CASTE ASIDE

Stories of mothers, wives, and families of the six who were murdered in Rukum's caste-based lynching

Sunita Sunar is a widow at 20 after her husband, Tikaram was killed in the murders of six young men in Rukum on 24 May.



Grieving mothers of Nabaraj BK, Tikaram Shahi, Sanju BK, and Lokendra Sunar.

## THE MOTHERS

Two years ago, returning home from the village of Thati of Jajarkot district in Nepal's mid-western mountains, 39-year-old Laxmi Sunar's husband died in a jeep crash. Her daughter was permanently disabled, and Laxmi became a single mother taking care of her, and two other sons.

After the sole earning member of the family died, her eldest son Ram Bahadur Sunar decided to go to Malaysia to find work to augment the family income. The Sunar family was making ends meet with the money he sent home.

Her other son, Lokendra, 18, decided to accompany Nabaraj BK to the girl's home in Soti on that fateful day. He was among the six who were killed, his body fished out of the river a few days later.

"Four days after finding Nabaraj's body, they found my son's body as well. But, I could not even recognise him," Laxmi says, with a low, sad monotone. "All the other bodies also had deep cuts with sickles, they had broken bones, and gaping wounds."

Radhika Budhamagar also lost her teenage son, Ganesh Budhamagar in the mob killings. Although not a Dalit himself, he had joined the group because he was Nabaraj's friend and like him wanted to be a police officer.

The Budhamagar family subsists on farming, and has little extra income. That is why Ganesh's elder brother is in India working as a driver and sends some money home. The family had pinned its hopes on Ganesh, a responsible and hard working lad. A week before his death, he was working at a construction site to earn a little extra money for his family.

Radhika Budhamagar and other mothers believe that the post-mortem report have been falsified to show their sons drowned. She believes her son was injured by the police when it beat up Nabaraj's group instead of the villagers who were attacking them.

Gobinda Shahi, 19, was another non-Dalit in the group who got caught up in a crime triggered by caste-based discrimination. After hearing that Nabaraj's body had been found that night in the river, Gobinda's mother Bima Kumari was so worried she sent her eldest son, Sandesh, down to the river to see if he could find his brother.

Gobinda's body was found ten days later 30km downstream on the banks of the Bheri. For all those days, Bima Kumari clung to a slim hope that somehow her son had escaped and was still alive.

"I thought he might have hid in the jungle, and I sent people to look everywhere," Bima Kumari says, wiping her eyes. "But then

they found his body. What did they get out of killing my son? I still cannot understand this."

Sabita BK had arranged a marriage for her 16-year-old son, Sanju, with a 15-year old Sabina. Although child marriage is illegal, it is still practiced in a large part of Nepal, especially in the west. Sanju and his wife were looking forward to celebrating his son's fourth birthday.

"He had invited all his friends, and was planning to have a party. Now, he has left us," says Sabita, whose son also wanted to become a police officer.

Sabita's pain is immeasurable, and her 20-year-old her daughter-in-law Sabina faints from time to time whenever someone mentions Sanju's name. Sabita now has to take responsibility for her grandson and daughter-in-law.

"She is still a child," says Sabita about Sabina, "she has to wear a white sari at such a young age. I can barely sleep because I worry about how to take care of the baby and the others."

On the day of the killings, Tikaram Shahi, 20, and his family had just returned from his in-law's house. Tikaram had called his mother, Gita, to inform her that they were on the way home. However, he got a call from Nabaraj, that he was going to his girlfriend's house in Soti. He joined the group midway,

without going home. Gita Shahi got to see her son a few days later only after his death.

Tikaram wanted to make sure that his younger sister and daughter got a good education and could make something out of their lives. "I'll open a mobile shop so the family will have enough money, he would say. Now it is all a dream," Gita says, weeping. "Only if the guilty are punished will my son's soul rest in peace. But they are trying to let them go."

Urmila BK was full of hope that her son Nabaraj would group up to a successful policeman. He was good looking, talented and a good sportsman. After her three daughters were married, it was Nabaraj's turn. But Nabaraj's parents were worried about his choice of bride – she was from the higher Thakuri caste.

They knew what that meant in a conservative society, and Nabaraj's father even talked to the girl's uncle. Instead, he was verbally abused for even informing them about his son's friendship with their daughter.

Nabaraj was also his parent's insurance policy for their old age, and their sorrow is now tinged with worry about the future. Urmila says: "Not only did we lose our son, but our support system as well."

### Sushma Barali in Rukum

On 26 May, six young men were killed in a mob attack and their bodies dumped into the river in the village of Soti in Rukum West.

The six were in a group of 17 friends that accompanied a young Dalit man, Nabaraj BK, for moral support as he tried to get a teenage girl from a 'higher' Thakuri caste to elope with him.

Of the attackers, 23 including Ward Chair Dambar Bahadur Malla are in custody, the girl and her brother are in juvenile detention. The trial has been set for 26 July in Rukum District Court.

There have been protests by the families of the deceased, who fear that the accused will be set free or given a lenient sentence in what was essentially a caste-motivated crime.

Nepali Times reporter Sushma Barali spent a week in Soti and in Nabaraj BK's hometown of in Jajarkot to meet the mothers, fathers, sisters and widows of those who were killed and who are now agitating for justice.





Nabaraj BK (far left) and five of his friends who were killed on 24 May: Ganesh Budhamagar, Sandip BK, Tikaram Sunar, Lokendra Sunar, Gobinda Shahi.



The mother of Sanju BK (centre) who was also killed with Nabaraj BK and four others on 24 May in Rukum West.



## THE WIDOWS

Media focus after the murder of six young men in Jajarkot on 24 May centred on Nabaraj BK and his developing relationship with a 16-year-old girl from a 'higher' Thakuri caste. But rarely mentioned are Nabaraj's two loyal fellow-Dalit friends who went along with him to support his quest to elope with the girl.

Tikaram Sunar, 20, and Sanju Bika, 21, were among the six who were beaten to death and their bodies thrown into the Bheri River that evening in Rukum. What few know about is that Tikaram and Sanju were already married and left behind widows and young children.

Tikaram's wife, Sunita, is wearing a white shawl on top of a mourning dhoti when a journalist visited her at her home recently. Her face is puffed up with weeping constantly. The 18-year-old holds her two-year-old daughter in her lap, and says she has no more tears left to shed.

"Where is baba?" the daughter keeps asking in baby talk. There is no answer that Sunita can give her. She just sobs quietly and looks listlessly away. She had run away from home with Tikaram when she was barely 14. They were happy, and were making plans for the future. Now there is no future.

When they brought Sunita's husband home two days later, she fainted at the sight of his body – it was white and wrinkled from being submerged for so long in the water. It had gashes and bruises all over.

She was coming home from her parent's house with her husband that day, but Tikaram got a call from Nabaraj and decided to accompany him to the girl's village with other friends.

Sunita found out later that night that there had been a quarrel in Soti involving Nabaraj's group, but she thought it was just a minor brawl. Still, she was worried, and was shocked as news trickled in that Nabaraj had been killed and

his body had been retrieved from the Bheri.

"I took my daughter and went to ask the police," Sunita recalls in a soft voice. "They said they had found Nabaraj's body and one other body that they could not identify. For some reason, I had a premonition that my husband did not survive either."

When they finally brought her husband's body home, it had deep cuts made by sickles. Blood was oozing from his mouth, nose and ears. "That image just keeps coming back to me over and over again," she says.

Since she was married as a child, Sunita always regretted not completing her studies. Tikaram had promised her that as soon as their daughter grew up, she could go back to school. Now, Sunita does not know what she will do, she could return to her parents or stay in her husband's house.

Her in-laws are daily wage earners and make just enough to feed the family from one day to the next. The family had pinned its hope on Tikaram who wanted to open a mobile repair shop so he could earn more money to take care of his family.

"My in-laws love me, but the situation here is miserable, everyone had pinned their hopes on my husband to take care of the family, now he is gone," she says. "I never imagined that I would be alone this early on in life."

Sanju BK's wife Sabina, is just 20 and has a four-year-old son to support. Her parents arranged her marriage to Sanju at 14. Just like his friend Nabaraj BK, Sanju wanted to join the police, and was already training for it. "I may not get leave after I join the forces, so we should celebrate our son's birthday before I go, he used to say," Sabina recalls. They were preparing to mark his fourth birthday soon.

"I still cannot believe he is gone. I feel he will just walk in the door at any moment," she says, breaking into silent sobs.

Sanju's father was not well and needed to go hospital regularly for three years. While taking care

of him Sanju was determined to make his son grow up to be a doctor. He borrowed money so that their son could get a good education.

Sabina heard that Nabaraj had been found dead, and it was mental torture for her as she heard of bodies being retrieved from the Bheri one by one. Sanju's body was found five days later downstream.

Sanju BK's father is still sick, and cannot work. His elder sister takes care of her husband's family business, and does household chores. Sabina would like to get a salaried government job so her family can have financial stability, but there is no saying what will happen next. Nearly two months after the murders, Sabina waits for justice for her husband and 5 others.

Pending trial at the Rukum District Court, 23 of the 27 accused are in police custody. One of the alleged murderers is considered to be the main person behind the crimes, while others are accused to abetting the caste-based murders. The girl Nabaraj BK wanted to elope with and her minor brother have been sent into a correctional facility.

But there are rumours that the group might get off lightly because police reports have fudged the cause of death to reduce the culpability of the villagers involved.

Says Sabina BK: "For now, we need justice. After that, I do not know what will happen."

## NABARAJ BK

Nearly two months after six young men from the village of Soti in western Nepal were lynched by a village mob after one of them professed his love for a young girl from a different caste, the families of the victims fear a cover-up.

Piecing together eye-witness reports and after interviewing survivors and family members, it appears that on 24 May, Nabaraj BK gathered 17 friends from Ranagaun of Jajarkot for moral support as he walked to meet his love interest in Soti village across the Bheri River in Rukum West.

Being from a 'lower' Dalit caste, the parents of the girl were against the relationship, and were trying to marry her to someone from their Thakuri caste.

When they approached her house, hundreds of villagers descended on the young men, chasing them down to the river, slashing them with sickles and picks, and after killing them threw them into the river. Some jumped into the water and waded across to escape, only to be ambushed on the far bank.

Nabaraj's parents Munalal and Urmila from Ranagaun of Jajarkot had hoped their only son would take care of them after he joined the Nepal Police. He did well in school, excelled in sports, and was popular with friends. His plan was to get married before joining police training, postponed because of the lockdown.

Nabaraj's relationship with an upper caste girl scared his mother, but now what scares her more is that there will be no justice for her son, and five other families.

Families of the victims say the police and autopsy reports of the bodies that were found in the Bheri River have been tampered with.

"He used to assure me that he would support us after he join the police," Urmila BK recalled, sobbing. "He died because he was in love. Our hearts cannot accept that he is dead. We wonder who will defend poor people like us. They killed our son and now they are killing justice."

The Police filed a case saying the crimes were based on caste violence, and sent it to the district court in Rukum. Twenty-seven other villagers from Soti are also accused of murder, and have also reportedly confessed to the crime.

Nabaraj's shelf at home is filled with the shields and medals he had won in school, district and even national championships. The blue uniform he got as a NCC cadet is still hanging by a peg.

Nabaraj met the girl at the Presidential Running Shield Sports Competition two years ago in Khalanga of Rukum district. He was the star in the football field, and became very popular with the crowd. After that, Nabaraj and the girl became Facebook friends and dreamt of being life partners.

Once, Nabaraj brought the girl home with her young brother. His mother Urmila had no idea about their affair. "When she first came, I thought she was my daughter's friend, I only found out later," she said.

Then she noticed the girl's photo on Nabaraj's phone, and told her husband. The two were worried enough about the repercussions of an inter-caste relationship to try to talk him out of it. Nabaraj's father Munalal BK was in fact so perturbed by a caste backlash, that he even took his son's phone with the photo to the girl's uncle Indra Bahadur Malla so he could put pressure the girl.

But instead of thanking him for information, Indra Bahadur scolded Munalal: "What is this? Do you also want to be a Malla Thakuri's in-laws?" Munalal was so frightened he sought advice from MP of the area, Bhairav Sundar Shrestha and Dalit activist Gopal Nepali.

By this time, the relationship was getting deeper and the girl's parents were trying to her married to someone her own caste. Nabaraj then decided to elope with the girl. But for this he needed support, and gathered his friends to go to her house on 24 May.

Sudip Khadka was in the group of Nabaraj's supporters and friends. "We were surrounded on all four sides, even the people who we played football with started to attack us," he remembered. "Hundreds of people came out with sticks, stones, sickles and hoes and started chasing us."

Being outnumbered, many of the young men started running down to the river, but the villagers caught up with them and started hitting them with household implements. Their lifeless bodies were thrown in the water, while others tried to swim across. But there were people on the other side waiting for them to wade ashore.

"The boys were attacked after they had already decided to turn back home," admitted DSP Kishor Kumar Shrestha. But the police is

being criticised for arresting the victims instead of the attackers on that day. Eye-witnesses said they just stood around blowing their whistles, and not coming to the rescue of the men while they were being mercilessly beaten.

They watched as the bodies were thrown into the water. Nabaraj's body was found at 8PM downstream. When his son's body was brought to Ranagaun, his father Munalal fainted, and he is still not all right.

"So many people chased us and beat us, but the police arrested us instead," recalls Lal Bahadur Khadka, 17, who was also injured. According to Khadka, the police knew six people were missing, but did not bother to check up on them.

Sandesh Shahi looked for his brother, Gobinda, for ten days until they finally found his decomposed body 30km downstream. "Divers from the APF were there, and they did look around but not very carefully," said Shahi. He says the police did not accurately record the condition of the corpses.

One of Nabaraj's friend's corpse was tied with a rope, and it had a broken hand, but the police report did not mention this. Other bodies had severe injuries like broken necks, hand and legs, facial damage, and their lungs showed signs they were dead before being dumped in the water. The police did not record these either.

The second day after the murders at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, Shahi pulled Tikaram Sunar's body from the river with blood coming out of his mouth, nose, and ear. These injuries were not mentioned in the police report.

The body of Lokendra Sunar was found 40km downstream with his hands tied behind his back on 30 May. But the police record said the hands had been caught in a fishing net. The last body to be found was of Gobinda Shahi, who had been killed, buried, exhumed again, then dumped into the river.

"Gobinda did not have any teeth left, his forehead, and nose were cut, and his neck was broken. After seeing the condition of the body, they buried the body. But suspecting that he may be discovered they dug it up again and threw it into the river," said his brother Sandesh Shahi.

Families of those who were killed, those who survived, and other eye-witnesses also say that the district hospital falsified the autopsy report so that the murders could not be blamed on the attacking villagers. The police had taken pictures of the wounds, but the post mortem report does not mention them, saying that it was the result of prolonged exposure to water. The families say the police is trying to absolve the community in Soti of blame.

Despite the heinous crimes, lawmakers from Jajarkot and Rukum West have not spoken publicly after the killings. There have been no meetings with the Mayor of Chaurajahari Vishal Sharma and Bheri Municipality Mayor Chandra Prakash Ghartimagar from the ruling Nepal Communist Party.

Mayor Sharma is playing down the caste element, saying the men died because they jumped into the Bheri River, and he does not believe that they were killed first.

The murders have created an eruption of outrage. #DalitLivesMatter has trended on Twitter and a petition with over 20,000 signatures is circulating in social media.

Rights groups worry that as with many previous crimes against Dalits in Nepal, the police and dominant communities will try to hide evidence and cover up the crime. As before, it is the 'higher' caste people who once more literally get away with murder.



Suveda Pradhan Tuladhar

To wear or not to wear masks has become an ideological issue in some countries, but here in Kathmandu wearing them is now the law as the number of COVID-19 cases rise in the capital.

Last week, the Home Ministry slapped a Rs100 fine on anyone caught in public without a mask. But Kathmandu residents did not need much persuasion—they were already in the habit of wearing masks outdoors because of the air pollution.

Now, Nepal's entrepreneurs and fashion companies are following the worldwide trend to turn masks into an essential item of clothing. The more creative ones are making designer masks for those who want to make a fashion statement while covering their faces. In recent street protests, some have even used masks with political slogans emblazoned on them.

Businesses in Kathmandu have repurposed their workflow to produce masks. Some companies making trekking gear have switched to personal protective equipment (PPE) including gowns and hoods, garment manufacturers cannot produce cloth masks fast enough to meet demand, and fashion companies are producing more expensive designer masks.

Goldstar, Nepal's fast-growing footwear manufacturer, recently announced the release of its latest face mask line called MeroMask. It has several models, with or without valves and different price ranges.

Kolpa Store, a small-scale business based in Jhamsikhel has



Kokroma designer masks



Hemp Nepal mask



Kolpa store mask

released its own range of masks that are elegant and functional.

**Metro-Mask** has been producing masks for health-conscious Nepalis even before the pandemic, and it has had to just speed up production and switch to a different filter.

"The demand for Metro-Mask has grown tremendously ever since the threat of the virus," says Tashi

Gyalzen Sherpa, CEO of Metro-Mask.

The acknowledgement by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that COVID-19 is spread by the airborne route will add to the demand for masks. Kathmandu Valley has seen a surge in confirmed cases, with the total now 366. There were 5 fatalities.

# Masks unmasked

Fashion meets function as Nepal's social entrepreneurs jump into the mask market

The government has now allowed public transport at half capacity, increasing concern over which type of masks are foolproof.

Any mask will help in protection to some level, health experts say, but some masks are better than others. Metro-Mask has stopped making its masks designed to stop dust particles, and now focuses solely on producing high-tech industrial masks like N95 and KN95.

Earlier pollution protection masks had valves to allow wearers to exhale more easily. These are not recommended for coronavirus because although they protect the wearer, the masks put others around them at risk.

Experts also say that surgical masks are better at protection from the virus than a cloth mask. So while fashionable masks are a quirky accessory, buyers may want to reconsider if the cloth mask is worth the cost, when a simple surgical mask would do a better job.

**Cotton Mill Nepal** was producing high-end household linen items, now offers family packs of colourful masks in three sizes. They can be ordered online through daraz.com.

Similarly, **Kokroma** which makes baby clothing and accessories for export and the home market, is now also making cloth masks. Although the WHO does not say

babies need to wear masks, some parents do not want to take risk. Kokroma employs seamstresses who work from home, and besides baby items they can also turn out customised branded masks.

Another social entrepreneurship company, **Sabah Nepal**, which has a network of 3,000 home-based women members all over the country to develop craft and food-based products, has been contracted by UNDP Nepal to make 40,000 cloth masks. The arrangement provides income for the women as well as produce protective item that is in short supply.

Meanwhile, **Hemp Nepal**, which turns fabric from the hemp plant into clothing items, cushion covers and even shoes, is also turning its attention to making masks.

The one that stands out for its colourful range of designer masks is **Groomin**. With its motto 'Style and safety', Groomin offers ladies' face covers that are elegant while at the same time having three layers of filters with adjustable ear loops. A 3-pack costs Rs1,000.

At Metro-Mask Tashi Gyalzen Sherpa seems to be preparing to meet this growth in demand for both simple as well as fancier masks. He says: "We are slowly going to transition into making cooler looking high-tech masks." 🇳🇵

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