Push and pull of politics

A few weeks of bitter infighting within the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP), the three leading factions have now agreed on a ceasefire and there is an uneasy calm in Kathmandu.

The political counter-coup by Prime Minister KP Oli last week allowed him to keep his job for now, but in the process he had to make some compromises. The upset is that the concentration of power in the prime minister’s office that had characterized Nepal’s politics for the past two and half years has now been replaced with a tense triangular standoff.

Although Oli managed to forestall attempts to oust him, he is not as strong as before, and has been forced to yield to party cochair Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the faction led by former prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal.

It is difficult to say what tricks Oli had in the bag to disarm Dahal, but one major factor was the strong message from Beijing delivered by the Chinese Ambassador Hou Yanguang not to splinter the NCP.

The party rank-and-file got the message and lobbed intensively with Dahal and Oli to sort out their squabbling, desiring to hold the party and nation hostage.

The deal hammered out allows Oli to complete his term and effectively serve as incumbent during the 2022 election. In return the prime minister has agreed to back Dahal as the sole executive head of the NCP during its Special Convention in November.

Oli even convinced Dahal that Maestri as an ideology was obsolete, and he should reposition the ‘people’s democracy’ of the late UML leader Madan Bhandari. But Dahal may have also realized that his next rival in the party is Madhav Nepal and not Oli, and decided to jump ship.

Oli has also reportedly agreed to reshuffle the Cabinet by inducting more Dahal loyalists. There may have to be additional portfolios for supporters of Madhav Nepal, who already has two loyalists in the Cabinet: Agriculture Minister Gianakaryal Shrestha and Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai.

Critical in the political arithmetic that allowed Oli to survive the latest threat was the defection of Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa and UML leader Ram Dev Gurung. We can only speculate what those two got in return. But it looks like the prominent third-tier leaders deeply involved in mediation, including former Maoist guerrilla commander Mananda Sharma, Devendra Poudel and Ramkishun Gahatraj, would probably also stand to be rewarded with posts in the next government.

Finance Minister Yuvraj Khatiwada has made no secret of his desire to be the next ambassador to the US, and he may be replaced in the reshuffle by either Surendra Pandey or Bhaskar Poudel.

There may also be a rearrangement of Chief Ministers, and Oli may have to let go of some his people including Pralhadi Subba Gurung of Gandaki Province and Shankar Pokharel of Province 5. After all that hectic horse-trading, all is quiet this week in Khatmandu, Baluwatar and Koteshwor – the three residences of Dahal, Oli and Nepal respectively.

Dahal is said to be spending time with his family, and feeding pigeons. Nepal is sulking. And Oli, being Oli, must be plotting his next move.

Now that there is no imminent threat of government collapse, it would be a good time for Prime Minister Oli to focus all his attention on monsoon disaster relief and the COVID-19 crisis. But he is probably already busy deleing out portfolios so as to keep all factions happy.

There is so much bad blood between the three NCP factions that even when the reshuffle happens, the Cabinet will probably function like a coalition government.

Sahendra Rai
You stab my back, I stab yours

The back-stabbing in Nepali politics is now going into hyper timeslapse. It is becoming difficult to figure out exactly who is doing whom in.

Nevertheless, it does look like reports of Prime Minister KP Oli’s imminent oblivion are greatly exaggerated. We ourselves have written numerous editorials in the past six months either in the prime minister’s favour, or advising him to steer clear of governance failure, and mishandling the COVID-19 crisis.

But the whole Oli has outfought his rivals yet again. Even his enemies hand it to him: this is one crafty fellow. He was outnumbered in the party Secretariat, outgunned in the Standing Committee, his Cabinet was ministerless, his hold on the Nepali Communist Party seemed tenuous, and he was playing brinkmanship with India. But not only has he held on, he seems to have turned things around, the trends in his favour.

The party’s customary power struggle seems to have cooled down between Prime Minister Oli and his rival in the rival CPN (Ma) chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The latter was seen not onlysassily to his government, but also to his opposition. Oli, who had earlier cut loose his allies in the party, was seen in the street and in the social media, but Dahal had to back down.

In April, Dahal stepped up pressure again and Oli was isolated. At which point Oli’s close confidante and confessor, India, voluntarily tendered his resignation from prime minister’s post. The cabinet was intact by 105, but Oli’s power was gone. The cabinet, declared by 105, the cabinet, declared by 105, Dahal’s cabinet.

In May, Oli merged his party with the CPN-led Oli group, and the cabinet was back to 105. The government was back in power, the cabinet was back to life, and Oli was back in power.

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Stop complaining, start contributing

Whether you see the glass as half empty or half full, it is time to take action and move ahead.

The People’s Movement (PM) erupted because for three decades of partylessness, Nepalis could not let off steam and socio-political pressure had been building up.

We got a constitutional monarchy, the parties were unbanned, the mass media was unshackled. And soon enough, we started using our newfound freedoms to complain about the king and queen. When the Maoists took the country to war, we complained about the violence.

After the ousting of 2006, we were not happy about the restoration of peace – we started complaining about the political transition. Our constant moaning and groaning probably prolonged that transition.

Then the earthquake struck in 2015, and even as the aftershocks rocked us, we whined about the relief being poorly distributed, and the slow pace of reconstruction. We then had the Indian blockade to complain about. And as soon as the 2017 election was over, we started criticising the very leaders who had just elected to power.

We were about to run out of things to complain about when there was the COVID-19 pandemic, and we could complain about the lockdown and the corruption in the procurement of medical supplies and the government’s general incompetence.

It is human nature. Like most people around the world, Nepalis are never happy with the state of affairs. In fact, we do not score very high in the Happiness Index. That itself is a positive thing because it means we know there is plenty of room for improvement. Things can always be better. That is the whole idea behind the need to see the world as half full.

Remember the days when there were 16-hour power cuts every day? Now that there is surplus power, we are complaining that the electricity we generate is going waste. What do we do with it? Where to sell it?

There was a time in the 1980s when the proponents of the Himalayan Degradation Theory predicted that Nepal would be a desert by the turn of the century. Here we are four decades later, and Nepal has doubled forest cover. We have almost a quarter of our area designated as national parks, and 15% of Nepal is covered in community-managed forests.

Enrolment in school is nearly 100%, infant and maternal mortality have seen dramatic reductions. Absolute poverty has been halved in 25 years. The education we got and the remittance economy has exposed many Nepalis to jobs all around the world, and the quality of life has been truly improved with the money sent home.

Yet we complain that our youth are away. But that is also good because the end goal should be to create jobs for them at home.

There are many products in the market that require energy to produce. If Nepal is to select a few of these and manufacture them near our many hydropower plants, we could become productive and competitive.

In Bhairahawa, for example, there are trucks loaded of metal sheets coming in from India. They are sold into pipes and poles, and sent back out. This is the value added for Nepal’s abundant, clean, reliable energy.

Entrepreneurs will begin to look for energy production sites where goods can also be produced. We will then see how education will be valued in these areas because it means jobs at the local level. We will no longer have the debate about exporting energy, and sending Nepali youth abroad to prop up the remittance based economy. Local agriculture will have a local market. Nepal will also understand the true meaning of Value Added Tax.

We can use spilled hydropower at night to pump water for to irrigate farms and boost food production, and during the day use the water to generate power. This is the chance for an entrepreneur to set up a factory to manufacture rice cookers and electric kettles so we reduce our reliance on imported LPG.

Nepal’s poverty related problems can be solved with political will. Nepal’s problems are simple and we can see their solutions. Unfortunately, we like to complicate things so we can seek complicated solutions. It is almost as if we want to remain poor so we keep getting grants for poverty alleviation, so our experts and consultants have jobs. It is precisely because we have only complained and not implemented solutions over the past seven decades that we would rather expect manpower than value-added good and services.

Historically we have always described Nepal with what we do not have. For example, we do not have access to the sea. Or the terrain is not easy. Those were always top reasons given for why we remain poor, rather than look at poor governance and mediocre leadership.

More and more Nepalis now live in comfortable homes, drive fancy cars, send their children to the best schools. And yet we complain. Human progress is about not being content and wanting things to improve. There is so much to do as we move ahead whether you see the glass half empty, or half full. It is time to take the lead and move ahead.

Anil Chitrakar is a former Lok Ugra. No one is ever perfect, but we never forget to applaud others’ successes. Once again, congratulations Nepal! Your ‘Road Safety’ logo is a hit. Keep it up.

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*Contact Number: 9801052225*
Underpasses to reduce roadkill in Nepal

More than 400 wild animals were killed on the East-West Highway in past three years

Tufan Neupane

As wildlife deaths continue to mount along the 80km stretch of road, underpasses are set to be built to divert wildlife from the highway.

On the road to Bardia, a kilometer-long underpass has been completed, and another one is being built near the Dang road segment.

Wildlife authorities are planning to construct 7 more underpasses along the highway to reduce the number of deaths.

The road to Bardia has a dense wildlife corridor that is home to various species, including tigers, leopards, and bears.

The underpasses will be built in two segments, with one segment starting near the Dang road segment and the other near the Bardia National Park.

The completion of the underpasses will help reduce the number of wildlife deaths and enable them to cross the highway safely.

The following table shows the number of deaths in each category:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road accident</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural causes</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaching and hunting</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation

Don’t follow my footsteps, says female mahout

Woman elephant driver in Nepal national park faces discrimination and harassment

Mukesh Pakhrin

Hamini Tharu, 38, is a mahout who has worked at a national park for 15 years.

She faces discrimination and harassment from other mahouts and staff members.

Her colleagues have often called her names and made derogatory remarks about her.

She is constantly reminded that she is not a man and that she should not be driving the elephants.

Despite this, she continues to work hard and ensure the safety and well-being of the elephants.

She has been struggling to find work and has faced difficulties in finding a job that suits her qualifications.

She is often forced to work in menial jobs just to make ends meet.

She is a dedicated and hardworking mahout who deserves respect and equal opportunities to work in the field.

Her story is a testament to the importance of respecting and valuing all workers, regardless of their gender.
Freshwater dolphins make comeback in Karnali

The blind aquatic mammals swim upstream to breed during the monsoon

Unnati Chaudhary in Kailali

It is the annual monsoon season, and despite the rains this would be the time of year when tourists flock to the tributaries of the Karnali River in Nepal for dolphin watching.

But the rains are in spate as is when the endangered Gaugtic Freshwater Dolphin swim upstream from India to the mighty Karnali, Nepal’s longest river, to find mates on the still backwaters of the shallow lakes. But this year, due to the COVID-19 lockdown, there is no one here to watch the nearby blind aquatic mammals as they surface to exhale noiselessly through the blowholes on top of their heads. Swimming upstream in the strong current is hard enough, but navigating through memory and echo-location could be even more difficult for the only cetacean species found in Nepal. But they follow well-trodden paths that they have inherited from ancestors to travel to the same spot every year to breed and rear calves.

“When water levels begin to rise, they can be easily spotted,” says Bhoj Raj Dhijangna of the Dolphin Aquatic and Biodiversity Conservation Nepal. “They swim all the way from the Ganges to breed and rear their young in safer, more shallow waters in Nepal.” Dhijangna says that although only one mother dolphin and her calf had been sighted till mid-June, in the past month few juveniles and 10 adults have been seen in the water.

Locally referred to as ‘Suwas’ after the sound they make while surfacing to breathe, these playful mammals are mostly found along the Karnali’s confluence with rivulets like the Mohans, Pathariya, and Kuda in Kailali. As the monsoon tapers off, they swim back downstream into India.

After being red-listed as an endangered species by both the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Gaugtic Freshwater Dolphins are now actively protected in Nepal and India. Local conservation organisations in Tikapur and Bhairahawa municipalities whose community benefit from dolphin tourism are also involved.

River dolphins are known to be accurate indicators of a river’s health. If their numbers decline, as they have been for decades, it means the rivers are polluted, there is overfishing, they are entangled in fishing nets, or new dams are preventing their migration for breeding.

Over the years, the total number of Gaugtic dolphins have decreased from 5,000 to less than 2,000. They are present in all of Nepal’s big rivers like the Kosi, Gandak and Karnali. But except for the Karnali the other two are both dammed at the Indian border for irrigation and flood control, and the numbers in Nepal have dramatically declined.

“Although Gaugtic dolphins visit our rivers annually in the monsoon, increased pollution of the rivers and the poaching for food has seriously depleted their numbers,” says dolphin conservationist Vilay Kaj Shrestha, who noticed that the dolphins appeared earlier than usual this year possibly because of heavy pre-monsoon rains and the lack of disturbance due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

The government is now trying to declare the confluence of the Mohans and Pathariya as a Dolphin Conservation Area, ban the use of fishing nets, and prevent garbage dumping and use of fishing nets in the rivers.

Wildlife enthusiasts from all over the world used to flock to Kailali to see dolphins, contributing to the local economy and spreading awareness among local people about the importance of conserving the rare mammals. However, visitors had to rough it because there was no standard hotel and difficult access through the water.

Freshwater dolphins are found in South America and Asia, and regarded as some of the oldest creatures on earth. They have lost their fish-like shape and have evolved to live in such murky waters, instead they use ultrasonic clicks to navigate and find prey. They travel in pods with their calves.

In the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is helping Nepal and India to upgrade conservation efforts and spread awareness about river pollution. In Nepal, WWF has supported a dolphin census and monitored their population, while also advising the national and local governments about their conservation.

### BIZ BRIEFS

#### Monetary policy welcomed

The government’s new Monetary Policy for 2020-21 announced by Nepali Central Bank Governor Mahendra Adhikari on 17 July. The policy focuses on reviving the economy from the COVID-19 crisis, and aims to regain the growth rate of 7%. Banks will now have to invest 20% of their loans in agriculture and energy. Interest payment on past loans has been extended by six months. Banks will now be encouraged to merge with other financial institutions. Bank’s rollover limits have also been upped slightly to 70%.

#### Nabil Bank

Nabil Bank has introduced its 35th Anniversary offer for its customers to address the needs of local and Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bank is offering special discounts on the loans, with interest rates of 7.95%.

#### Ablof 1st anniversary

Bhutanese and Cambodian startup Sabroos celebrated its first anniversary on 17 July, and the hotel is offering an Anniversary Special Stay with 25% off all bookings and meals.

#### NIC and EPF

Himalayan Bank and NIC have signed an Agreement for Financial Support to the Employees’ Provident Fund. The agreement will provide financial support to EPF subscribers who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The bank will offer EPF members up to 20% of their monthly income, with interest rates of 7.95%.

#### Herbal Products

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#### NCCell

NCCell has launched a new recharged pack ‘Naya 4G/5G’ under its signature campaign ‘Flows’, which allows subscribers to enjoy zero call rate and SMS rates for every 100 rupees. New customers can subscribe to the starter packs for 1,500.

#### Himalayan Bank

Himalayan Bank has provided financial assistance worth more than 40,000 to repair and maintain the Nepali Radio Station and the Hotel Vasant and Life of Nalanda Children’s Hospital.

#### NEPAL WHERE YOU ARE.

Nepal National Bank operates its branches in all major towns and cities in Nepal. The bank offers a wide range of financial services and products, including personal and business banking, corporate banking, trade finance, and investment services. For more information, visit their website at nepalnationalbank.com.
Weekend hike
Feeling cooped up after months at home? Go on a one-day trip through farming villages while enjoying views of the snow-capped mountains on this hike from DAY TRIP to the Nagarkot farmhouse. Call for more details and to book the hike, or head to the Weekend 24’ Time Facebook page.
July 23: 9:00am-4:30pm, 9865165777

Summer Flash Fiction
Submit a work of fiction or nonfiction in any genre in less than 1,000 words for a chance to win Rs 1,000 and get published in The Writer Magazine. Learn more at writingmag.com.
Deadline: 12 August

KIMF 2020 submissions
Fill the KIMF 2020 entry form and send relevant films directed or produced in the last two years. Go to the website for more details.
Deadline: 1 September

Boudha Farmers Market
Buy fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, fresh dried goods, and other delicious goodies. Support local products and farmers, and follow physical distancing guidelines.
Every Saturday, 11AM-12PM, Lopchen Café, Boudha. 9871370106

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Educational resources
Looking for support during the COVID-19 crisis? This is a teacher or educator? Find a list of resources and ideas on the site.

Shilpaa Theatre
Pantepam Shilpaa Theatre are YouTube channel. Watch their work, and their adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler.

ONLINE ARCHIVES

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Enjoy authentic Thai dishes like Som Tam Thai, Pad Kra Poo and Pad Thai or Asian fusion dishes like the Ku! Lemon Grass and Chiken Satay. Find the menu on Facebook. Raid, Kasthesia. 9871059687 / 9860868618

Raihaane
Eat your way through Nepal at Raihaane, a restaurant committed to using locally sourced food. Each dish on the menu is connected to different communities of the nation. Look at the menu online.
7PM-10PM, Annapurna Square. 9871059797

IN PERSON

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

Our Pick
In Pushing Daisies, held a pie maker who can bring about great things to fill with the void. However, if the character name becomes famous for a second time, they will die again. Homer. Over two seasons, this fantasy comedy-dramaandler lived as he revives his murdered childhood sweetheart and gains the power to solve murder mysteries. Starring Lee Pace, Kira Foster, Kaiden Bliss, Chloë Mallees, Nolan Greene, and Steven Karf.

Air Quality Index

Kathmandu, 17 - 23 July

With the government’s announcement of the lockdown being lifted, and the street even more crowded, the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu, measured in Shimogyo on July 17 on Thursday evening, is still at the yellow ‘moderate’ air quality zone.

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Online archives

In this Google Earth tour, travel to landmarks in the Mediterranean where iconic movie scenes were shot, from the InterContinental Carlton Cannes where Alfred Hitchcock's To Catch a Thief was filmed to the Villa Miramare in Italy where Jean-Luc Godard's critically acclaimed film Contempt was shot.

Literary disco
A live chat with discuss books, writing, and reading, and talk to other writers about what they are reading these days. First Literary Disco on December 3rd at slumber, Apple podcasts, and Google podcasts.

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Suvendra Pradhan Tuladhar

Five years after the earthquake destroyed its central temple, the 350-year-old Rani Pokhari royal pond at the centre of Kathmandu is finally getting back its original look.

The pond had been rebuilt after previous earthquakes in the Moghul stucco style and was going to be converted into a concrete-lined structure. But today, the statues, the cowsheds and pond perimeter glisten with rustic brick.

Rani Pokhari has gone through many avatars in the past centuries. The earliest, an engraving commemorating the visit to Kathmandu by Prince Waldemar of Prussia in 1845, shows the Balgoderpaler Temple having a Shikhar style spire. After it came down in an earthquake, Jang Bahadur Rana had it rebuilt with the Moghul dome architecture of northern India that he admired so much.

This structure came down again in the 1934 mega-quake, and Jhuddha Shumsher Juna had it reconstructed and whitewashed, adding a metal fence around the pond. This structure, too, was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake, and Kathmandu Mayor Bidya Sundar Shukla’s attempt to surround the pond with cubes and shops was vehemently opposed by the local community.

Finally, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) is giving Rani Pokhari more or less its original look. After delays due to the lockdown, reconstruction is finally nearing completion.

The pond was built in 1671 by King Pratap Malla after his consort, Queen Ananta Devi, was devastated by the sudden death of her son, Prince Chakravat Malla. The king could not bear to see his queen so distraught, so he built Rani Pokhari to soothe her, and memorialize their lost son.

It was an exquisite architectural and ecological masterpiece showcasing the meticulous craftsmanship of the Malla era. The pond was consecrated with the crystal clear waters from 51 sacred sites all over the subcontinent.

On the south side of the pond there still stands a statue of an elephant bearing King Pratap Malla and his two sons Chakravatendra and Mahapatra. Four smaller temples protect the central temple from the four cardinal points.

Besides its beauty, the pond was also an engineering feat. It was fed by an intricate underground network of channels to keep it full throughout the year. It also served to manage the surface water around the area during monsoon, so that runoff from as far as Asian market would enter into the pond and overflow past farmlands down to Tsucho Rivulet in the east.

Because Rani Pokhari had underground water, it kept the water source like heets and wells in the surroundings flowing even in the dry season. The pond bed was lined with semi-permeable black clay (dyed) so it retained water but also allowed some of it to seep through. The pond thus served as a rainwater reservoir that not just replenished groundwater, but also irrigated nearby farms.

Rani Pokhari shaped the water management system around the area at that time, says Sudhanand Tiwari, professor at the Institute of Engineering and a conservation architect.

Kathmandu Valley traditionally had an urban-rural symbiosis with densely packed towns situated on higher ground, with intensive farming in the fertile soil below. The pond is a reminder of the wisdom of Kathmandu’s rulers who understood this ecological balance, as well as its cultural significance.

“Since the day of its inauguration the pond was already considered a sacred site due to the temple. The temple was the place where water from 51 holy places ceremonially poured into it,” says heritage conservator Alok Siddhi Tuladhar.

After it was damaged again in the 2015 earthquake, President Bidya Devi Bhandari inaugurated the reconstruction of Rani Pokhari in January 2016. The Kathmandu Metropolitan City got a budget of Rs40 million for the job, but it struggled to line the perimeter with cement for long, and used concrete to rebuild the temple. After opposition, the work was stopped and handed over to the NRA.

We wanted to make sure everyone involved had a say in the reconstruction, as the NRA is just a temporary organisation, so we formed a committee consisting of people from KMC, Department of Archaeology and local experts,” explained the NRA’s Sushil Gyawali.

After much debate the NRA decided to rebuild the temple in the original 1871 Shikara style, and also revive the original hydrological elements used in the pond. This was not an easy job. Experts from Bhaktapur were brought in to line the pond with black clay and bricks.

The biggest challenge was to revive the previous water management system. The artesian wells and underground channels that fed the pond have dried up or have been destroyed by surrounding building construction.

“We do not want to fill the pond through natural means but we will have to take extreme measures if the plan fails,” explained Gyawali.

One of those “extreme measures” was to start filling the pond last week with muddy water from a nearby tube well. But this was also stopped after local opposition.

“It was a mistake. Rani Pokhari is a holy site and using tubewell water diminishes its religious, cultural and ecological value,” said Tuladhar. The NRA stopped using the tubewell water, but Gyawali says that even the heavy monsoon rains will not be enough to fill the pond.

Other options are to use the trial feed from the Melamchi tunnel, or rainwater harvesting from the reconstructed Dharahara High School and Tri Chandra College.

Another problem might be that the bed of the pond is lined with trowpaul, a thick clay bricks and the gaps between them could over time be blocked by debris and prevent sewage of water for recharging.

“This will not only defeat the purpose of recharging the underground channels but it will also make the pond dirty, so money has to be spent in cleaning it,” says Sudhanand Tiwari.

Despite the compromises during its reconstruction, Rani Pokhari has become a symbol of what proper restoration should look like. Reluctant activism and communities wanting to preserve this heritage has saved Kathmandu’s past for its future.
The story of Langtang cheese

How Nepal’s famous yak dairy centre survived a deadly avalanche, and built back better
was in his blood. So with his pension he bought ten yaks and carried on doing what he did before, and selling the surplus milk to the cheese factory. His, and our, life revolved around the yaks. In summer, when the snow-covered slopes were replaced with a carpet of green grass with brilliant coloured flowers, we took the yaks up to graze on the slopes below Naya Kanga. It was the beehives inside these grazing yaks which I passed on to the cheese factory.

We used to watch the sun rise behind the distant flooded summit of Kanchendzonga to the east, and the shadows travelled across the valley as the afternoon clouds moved up, bringing the chilly monsoon rain. At night the clouds would part, and we looked up at the dome of stars with occasional meteorites cutting across the ghostly celestial river of the Milky Way. My father did not like sleeping indoors, and if the weather was all right he would take a nap in the grass as the yaks grazed nearby.

Looking at the children of Langtang today, in schools at Kathmandu, I feel sorry that they cannot do the same. They are too busy to be like the idyllic children we had. My own four children only get glimpses of this life as tourists for their holidays, even though this year Langtang valley is seen as a way of life. Langtang is no longer up here because of the COVID-19 lockdown. When I turned 18, I got a job at the Langtang Cheese Production Center that my father worked in, starting from the bottom – weighing the milk as it came in, collecting firewood, turning the blower to get the fire going, doing all the back-up work that was needed to make cheese. I know much of this from assisting my father when I was a boy, so it was all familiar territory.

Tourism really picked up in Langtang after 1960, there were people from all over the world – Americans, Israelis, Japanese, etc. In 1970, my wife and I decided that once the fact that people from so far away came all the way to Langtang to admire its wilderness made us proud of our land, and convinced us that we needed to protect it as much as we could.

By now, the valley was a part of the Langtang National Park, and there were strict rules about trail building, cutting trees and killing wildlife. The new road to Bhuclechu was built, so we did not have to walk all the way down to Trinka to catch a bus to Kathmandu anymore. Langtang was now only a two-day walk up from Syabru.

This meant that it was easier to transport the cheese to market in Kathmandu, and with more transport connections, local demand for cheese also rose. This meant more income for the yak herders, and it started becoming really busy during the peak milk season during the monsoons.

In Langtang itself, locals started adding floors to houses as the population increased and their earnings went up. The hotels became fancier, there was electricity, solar panels for hot showers, and better rooms and meals. Attracted by the scenery, and the fabulous day hikes in the surrounding mountains, many tourists started staying longer, and local incomes rose. Porters got jobs ferrying chicken, eggs, meat and other provisions from Trinka. People started flying in by helicopter for day trips.

The spring trekking season in 2015 had started well, there was a steady stream of trekkers walking up from Syabru to Lama Hotel. Those who had come earlier wondered on their way down to take transport back to Kathmandu. I remember the morning of 25 April was overcast and I left my parents in Langtang, and the next morning several hundred people died that day in Langtang, and the monsoon thundershowed on the other side of the valley, while others were forever entombed under the avalanches.

The avalanches also killed my kin in Nepalgunj, 600,000 people and the cheese factory building and equipment inside were all destroyed and was forced to cease operations. Cheese-making was already in crisis in Langtang before the earthquake because the older generation was unable, or unwilling, to do the strenuous work required. Youngsters wanted to leave for the bright lights of the city, cost N$400,000 each and the price of milk was too low to make maintaining sustainable.

But the disaster of 25 April 2015 turned out to be a chance for us to breathe new life into cheese-making in Langtang. The Swiss embassy and the embassy in Kathmandu helped compensate the herders who lost yaks, and donated nearly N$10 million to rebuild the factory and replace the equipment with more modern ones. They have installed a new lab to check the milk and cheese, it even sent a project manager and a control trainer to give us all a refreshers course.

More importantly, the Dairy Development Corporation in Kathmandu has not stopped listening to us small people from the mountains, finally agreed to our demand and doubled the selling price for milk to N$12 per litre. Suddenly, it became quite feasible for the herders to go back to yak herding. If the demand were to buy yaks and increase the size of their herds. A border with 17 yaks, for example, could now sell the cheese factory 45 litres of milk a day and earn 4,600 rupees. These were unheard of sums. We are now collecting 300 litres of milk a day, and earning about N$13,800 or 400 litre a day.

There are 63 farmers registered at the factory supplying milk to us daily. During this lockdown, with schools closed, I am glad to see that among them are younger Langtangsees. There are many 15-20 years who are learning to milk yaks and help their parents and grandparents. Some have found that the earnings are quite good, and have changed their minds to not emigrating abroad for work. Even if we can do a dozen of our younger Langtangsees in our valley alone, all the investment that has been made by the Swiss and Nepal government in more than 10 years, and many decades will have been worth it.

Today, the Langtang cheese centre is making 14 tons of cheese a week now. We are producing another 2,000 kg of better used for local cheese which will make Tibetan pizzas and for the lactose in our guts. It took a lot of effort to get the factory going again, but I think we have come out stronger than before the disaster. We have found new meaning in our work, and have felt that we are self-sufficient and helps raise our living standards.

Every morning, I wake up at 3AM just like my father used to, just to sing my white goat that made me look a bit like a doctor, and start my work. At 8AM in Firoj, the herders start coming in a few hours later, and we weigh their milk, measure the milk temperature, and add the cheese culture and begin the usual process. The milk is fresh and never have to be immersed in salt water for up to 48 hours so the final becomes salty. It is then left in store to mature for up to three months.

Because of the lockdown the store is now brimming with 85 cheese wheels, waiting to be taken down to Kathmandu. I have written to headquarters in Kathmandu to send transport to Syabru to take the cheese, but there has been no response so far. It is stored for too long to be dry and the quality will go down.

There is now so much milk we have added new cheese facilities in Langtang at 5,000m and at Naya Kangs at 4,300m. I often travel to those stations to inspect and do quality control. This is very important, because if the cheese does not meet strict quality standards, it will not be sold. With some Italian we are trying to build another cheese station on Kyanjin Ri at 3,300m. If it goes ahead, it will be in the Guinness Book as the highest cheese making place in the world.

Among the many changes I have seen in Langtang, most are for the better. But one worrying trend is that in the last 5-6 years, most springs have gone dry across the Valley. Even the ones that had water all year round do not have water. Some scientists from ICIMOD have come here, and they told me this is happening across the Himalayas. The reason, it seems, is that the ice in the glaciers is melting because of climate change and there is no more water seeping down to the springs. There are also years when there is no snow, or there are few storms.

This directly affects dairy production. With less water, the grasslands and pastures have also changed. I noticed that the quality of the yak milk is also going down. The fat content is lower, and the milk is not so tasty. Climate change is causing burning petroleum, but even though we have no cars in Langtang, we are feeling its effect.

Everyone here in Langtang says that the 2003 earthquake destroyed only the areas with human habitation, and spared nature. It is true, the avalanche was selective in what it smothered. We believe it was God’s wrath, and a warning to us to mend our ways, to be more compassionate towards other human beings and caring about nature.

And because we are more grateful to our Gods and nature for the bounty that the cheese centre provides us, we are rewarded. Our children are happy and healthy, and they have a sense of belonging to their home valley. We all eat better, we are healthier, especially the children. Langtang is being rebuilt for the day when the tourists will return, and hopefully they will find a place that has changed for the better. Where the nature is more resilient than ever, and the people see kindness.
Sonia Awale

On Friday, it will be four months since Nepal closed the country down to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus strain that causes COVID-19. Of the 40 who have died of the infection in Nepal, two are children below 5.

But many more children have died during the four months of lockdown compared to the same period last year because of lack of access to healthcare due to the restriction on mobility, interrupted vaccination campaigns and a lack of medicines.

However, the coronavirus grabs all the headlines. Mortality due to non-COVID-19 causes did not stop — even though it is clear that a lockdown enforced to control one disease has caused far more deaths from other prevalent diseases, and threatens to undermine Nepal’s progress in infant and child survival over the past four decades.

"The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown have pushed many families into poverty, many have lost their sources of income, leading to malnutrition among children," says Indrek Gautam of the Child Health Division at the Health Ministry. "Increased malnutrition means children are more susceptible not only to COVID-19 but to many other infectious diseases such as measles and polio as well."

Under-5 child mortality rate in Nepal had declined substantially from 271 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1969 to 32 in 2018. Government figures show that since July 2017 – 15 June 2019, a total of 1,387 children under 5 died of various infectious diseases all over the country. Preliminary figures for the same period 2019-2020 is 1,263 — even though only 78% of the data has been collected.

Initial government figures also show that a total of 294 children under 5 have died across the country during the lockdown between 14 March-14 June. This number was at a much lower 151 during the same period last year. This data clearly show that the total child death numbers collected by female Health Care Volunteers is higher this year — meaning they died at home. The number of those who have died at hospital in the same three months this year is lower than last year probably because parents are not taking children to hospital when they are sick during the lockdown.

As of yet, the Health Information Management System says when all the data for this year comes in, it is bound to be much higher than last year. This means the lockdown has pushed Nepal back in meeting its health targets under the United Nations’ SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

Under the SDG target, Nepal is supposed to bring child mortality down further to 25 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030. Persistent childhood malnutrition is a major reason for infant and child mortality remaining high despite dramatic progress in the 1990s. Figures for stunting, wasting and anaemia in Nepal have plateaued in the last decade. Now, the lockdown has added to the challenge.

Says Erik Waisch, UNICEF Representative to Nepal: “Progress made on children’s nutrition in the last decade is at risk of being reversed as rising numbers of children are facing malnutrition due to loss of household income and resulting food insecurity. The social and economic loss for Nepal resulting from the deterioration in children’s nutrition status will be felt long after the COVID-19 crisis is over.”

The lockdown has also disrupted vaccination campaigns across the country, leading to measles outbreaks in Mahottari and Gorkha in April. Although regular immunisation services have now been restored in health facilities in all 77 districts, parents have been unable to take their children for shots because of restrictions on transportation and also because of the fear of COVID-19 transmission in health posts.

In fact, the WHO and UNICEF earlier this week stated that preliminary data for the first four months of 2020 points to a substantial drop in the number of children completing three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTaP), first time in 28 years. Moreover, at least 86 measles vaccination campaigns were or are at risk of being cancelled, which could result in further outbreaks in 2020 and beyond.

“Vaccines are one of the most powerful tools in the history of public health, and more children are now being immunised than ever before,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “But the pandemic has put those gains at risk. The avoidable suffering and death caused by children missing out on routine immunisations could be far greater than COVID-19 itself.”

With schools closed for the past four months, children in many schools are also not getting their lunch. Domestic violence has also seen a spike during the lockdown, with many of the victims children. There is also evidence of a rise in child marriage, anxiety, stress and mental disorder.

Nepal appears to be on track to proving correct the grim prediction in May by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health that 1.2 million children worldwide could die from pre-existing diseases like malaria, pneumococcal or diarrhoea in the next six months due to the disruption to health services and food supplies due to the lockdown. That makes 8,000 fatalities a day — a whopping 65% rise in child mortality.

"Under a worst-case scenario, the global number of children dying before their fifth birthdays could increase for the first time in decades," UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore warned. "We must not let mothers and children become collateral damage in the fight against the virus. And we must not let decades of progress on reducing preventable child and maternal deaths be lost."