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Given how unconcerned rulers in Kathmandu have historically been to the plight of underserved Nepalis, it was perhaps inevitable that the current government would only start taking the COVID-19 pandemic seriously after the case load increased in the capital.

There is a heightened sense of urgency in the country's top leadership after one minister, five MPs, one head of a constitutional body, a provincial attorney general and other elected officials have tested positive for the virus.

On Thursday, the government even sealed off Kathmandu Valley indefinitely -- no one can now drive in or go out.

Nepal Communist Party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal is in self-isolation at his home in Khumaltar after a driver was infected. In Baluwatar, Prime Minister Oli, who has had a double kidney transplant, has also restricted visitors. But on

Thursday, Dahal broke his 10-day isolation to drive to Baluwatar to meet Oli.

Ironically, social distancing to prevent infection may actually reduce the political rift between the two leaders, which has paralysed the party and government. The struggle for supremacy between Dahal and Oli also seems to have been put on hold, since the two factions cannot physically meet to plan and plot their next moves. The media has got some respite from its blow-by-blow daily reporting of who from one faction or the other secretly met whom, where and for how long.

Also in Kathmandu, two justices of the Supreme Court, Ishwar Prasad Khatriwada and Hari Phuyal, are in self-isolation after one of his security guards tested positive. Opposition Nepali Congress leader Mohan Basnet is in home quarantine after his father died of COVID-19, and the NCP's

Amrit Bohara and Sher Bahadur Tamang are also in self-isolation after travel.

The Police Headquarters in Naxal and the Traffic Police Centre have both been sealed off after at least 200 police officers tested positive. The head of the Commission for the Control of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) Nabin Ghimire came down with the virus on Tuesday, and the corruption watchdog secretariat is sealed.

Spokesperson of the Federal Parliament Rojnath Pandey also tested positive last week. He had joined MP Pradip Yadav and a parliamentary team on a tour of the flood and virus affected districts of the Tarai. MP Yadav had tested positive, but has now recovered. Also recovered is Karnali provincial assembly member Jivan Shahi.

Similarly, Province 1 lawmaker Kusum Shrestha announced on Facebook this week that she had tested posi-

tive. Province 5 member of the legislative assembly Krishna KC also took to Facebook to inform that she had tested positive, was at Bheri Hospital, and added she was ready to donate her blood plasma once she recovered.

In Province 2, which is now a hotspot for the virus because of its proximity to Bihar, Law Minister Gyanendra Yadav and assembly member Rina Yadav have tested positive. Yadav says she has no travel history and no symptoms, and is now in self-isolation at home. "I only took the test because I wanted to go to Kathmandu to meet my family," she added.

Birganj Mayor Vijay Sarawagi is in a hospital in Kathmandu after testing positive, and will be tested again this weekend, according to doctors.

On Thursday, Kathmandu Valley saw 111 new COVID-19 cases -- the seventh day in a row with more than 100 new infections. There were 4 more fatalities, bringing the total

to 95. Across Nepal, the total confirmed cases hit 24,957 with 525 more infections Thursday. There are 14,769 people in isolation nationwide and coronavirus treatment centres are filling up with patients, especially in Tarai cities.

This week, the government instructed private hospitals to set aside 20% of their capacity for COVID-19 cases. The surge followed the partial lifting of the lockdown on 21 July after which people started streaming in to the

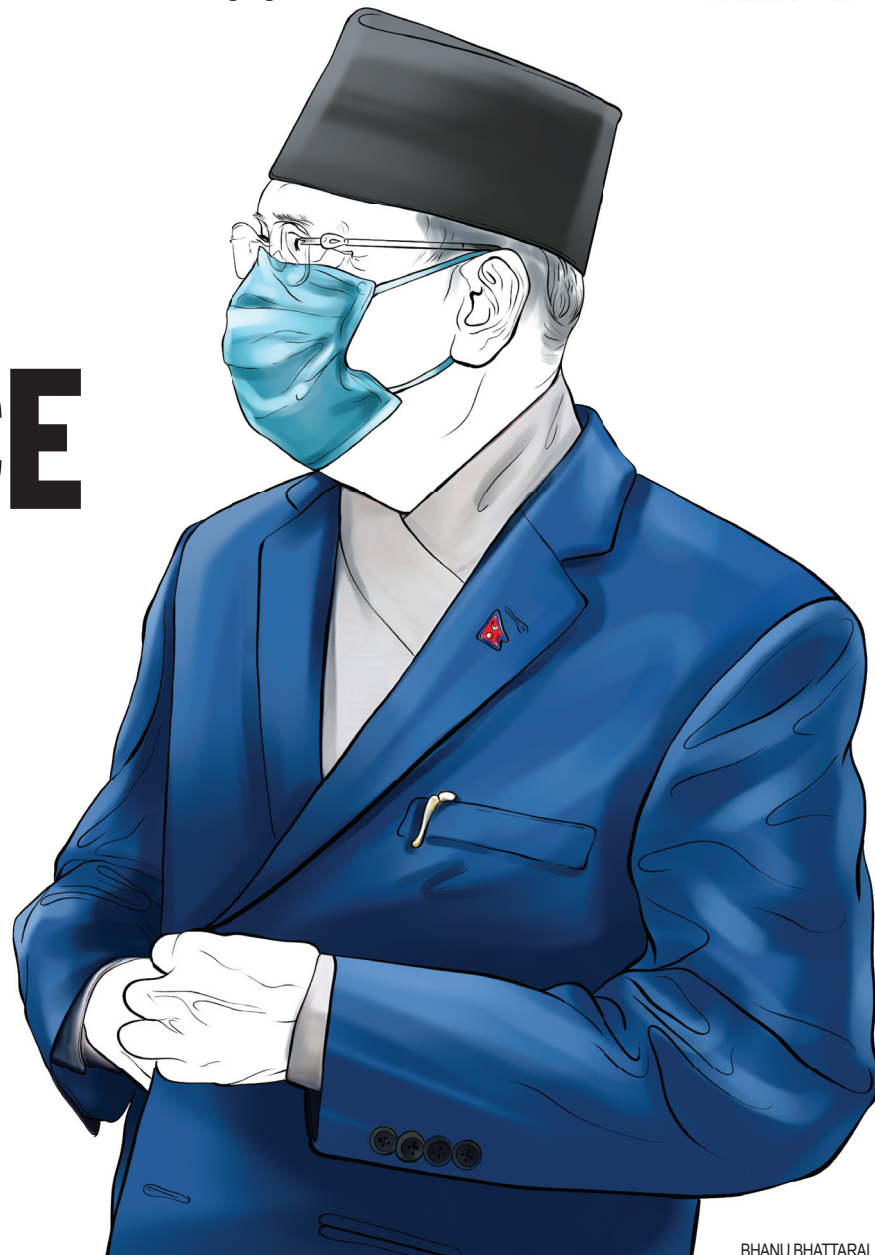
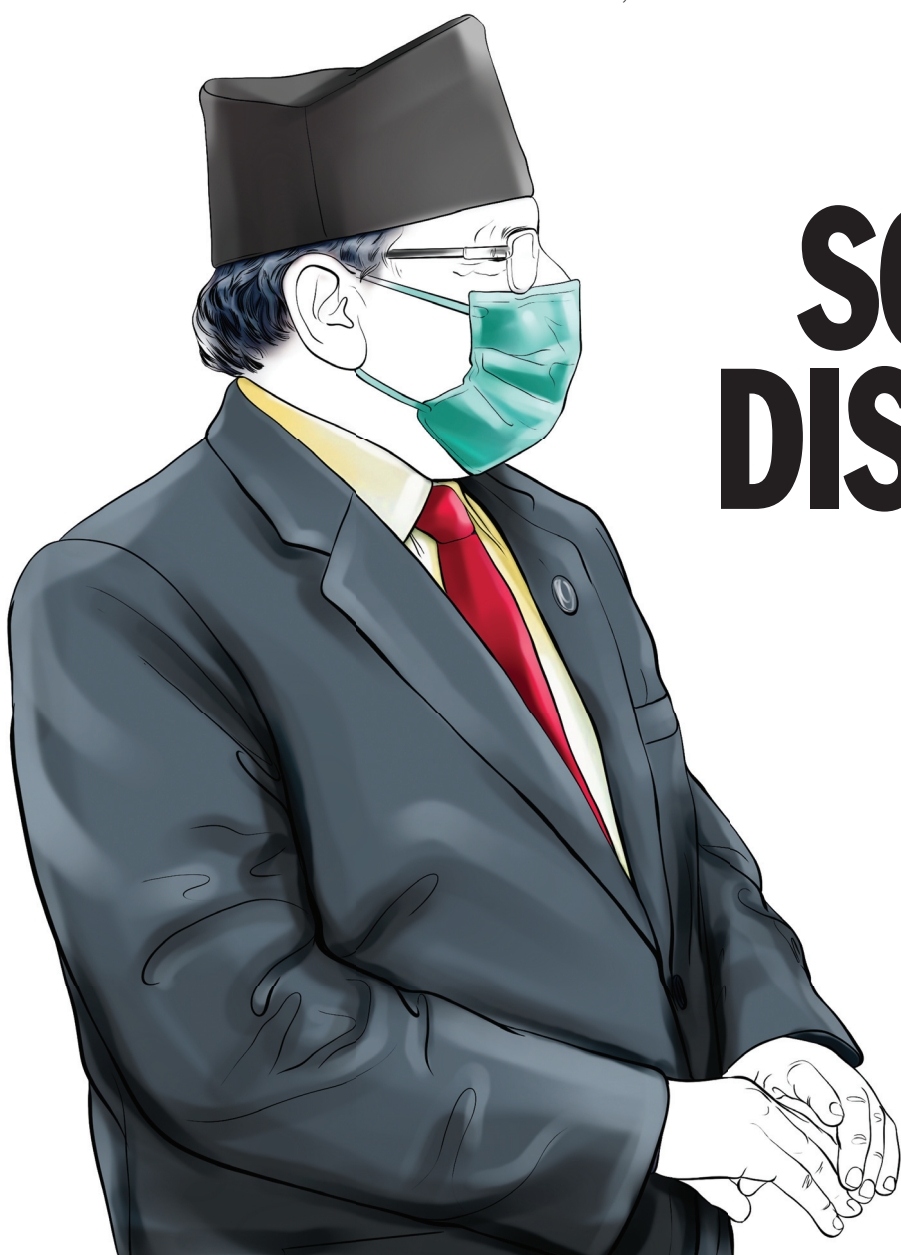
Tarai from India, and many from there traveled unrestricted to Kathmandu Valley. The government has extended the ban on regular flights and long-distance buses till 31 August, and once more shut down restaurants and closed district administration offices. 🇳🇵

## Opium for the masses Editorial

PAGE 2

Laxmi Basnet

# SOCIAL DISTANCE



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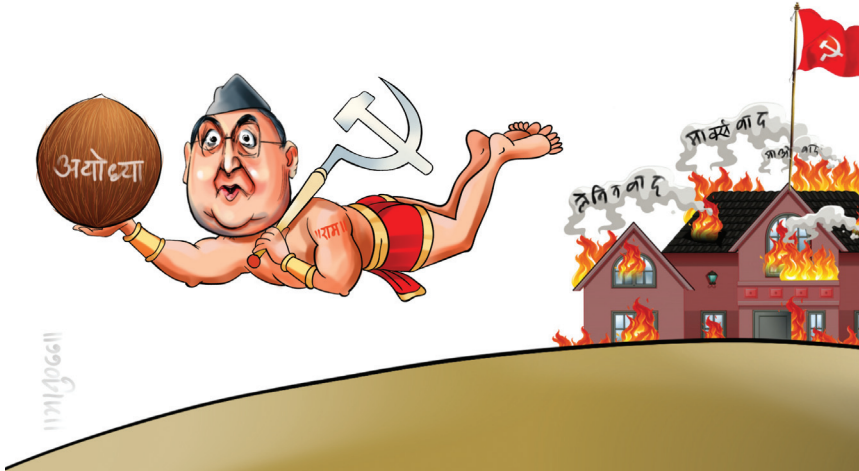
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# Opium for the masses

The country is being battered by a coronavirus surge and hospitals are running out of beds for the seriously sick. The economic fallout of the lockdown is going to be catastrophic. Yet, Nepal's Prime Minister K P Oli is obsessed about Lord Ram. He stirred a hornet's nest last month by claiming that Ram was born not in Ayodhya, which is in India, but in Ayodhyapuri, which is in Chitwan's Madi Municipality. Nepal's prime minister is adept at political calculus, and he has made it a habit of distracting attention from the real woes of Nepalis with ultra-nationalism, which in Nepal means constant India-baiting. It got him elected in 2017, and because of New Delhi's mis-steps, it had worked pretty well. However, this time Oli is concocting an explosive experiment by mixing religion with nationalism. And the irony seems to be

the base of a 16th century mosque razed by Hindu extremists in 1992. It set off religious violence in India that claimed 2,000 lives, and have been hugely divisive since. Nepal's prime minister is trying to do a Modi in Madi. But why would he want to tread on that religious and political minefield? Depending who you speak to, Oli is either a master tactician or a dangerously delusional leader. In May, when a mutiny was brewing led by party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a lucky diversion created by India's inauguration of the Lipu Lekh road saved Oli. The prime minister prolonged that crisis, and got multi-partisan support for a Constitution amendment to alter Nepal's own official map. Later, when party rivals once more ganged up, he accused them publicly of being puppets of Indian spooks. And now, when he faces another threat in the party secretariat, he invokes Ram.



lost on the prime Communist proponent of secularism to make a mythical god his main agenda. On 7 August, the Ward chair of Madi Municipality Shivahari Subedi got a call on his mobile from Kathmandu. It was the Prime Minister. Subedi was asked to urgently head up to Kathmandu with his mayor. At the meeting in Baluwater, the prime minister instructed them to plan a shrine at Ayodhyapuri to honour Ram, Laxman and Sita. They were told to have it ready for him to lay the foundation stone on Ram Nawami in April next year. He reportedly told them: "Don't worry about money, just get it done." It is significant that Oli's call to Madi happened the day after just 150km away in Ayodhya, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid a 40kg foundation stone made of silver for a temple dedicated to Lord Ram at

**Nepal's supposedly atheist communist leader is weaponising the Ramayana for his political survival**

by expediting plans to build a shrine in Ayodhyapuri, we know he is dead serious. Oli is trying to blunt the challenge from within his fractious NCP. Madi is also a stronghold of party rival Dahal, and Oli may be castling on the political chessboard. He may also have his sights on the 2022 election, and by trying to be more Hindu than the Shankaracharya, he could be trying to take the wind out of the sails of the royalist RPP, or even the Nepali Congress, who are both using the Hindu card. This could be why criticism of Oli's Ram move is muted within the NCP. For now, the goal seems to be to distract attention away from the failure to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its economic fallout. The farce is that a supposedly communist leader and avowed secularist is weaponising the Ramayana for political ends.

## ONLINE PACKAGES



In his second episode of his Walkabout series, heritage expert Anil Chitrakar takes us around Patan's ancient waterspouts to trace the history of Kathmandu's centuries-old water supply system and how it serves residents to this day. The episode premieres on Tuesday, 18 August in the Nepali Times YouTube channel.



Anna Marie Stirr has completely immersed herself into the world of Nepali *dohori* folk duets, not just doing a PhD on the subject and publishing a book, but also performing the song routines. Check out her popular duets with Nepali singers. Story: [page 10](#).

### CABALS AND CARTELS

The review adds interesting insights to Nepal's economic development drama (or perhaps more a farce) captured in Rajib Upadhyaya's book 'Why Nepal is stuck' by Kunda Dixit, #1022). The cabals and cartels that operate in Nepal are to be found in almost every developing country. Could it be that Nepal's extremes of geography and climate and their concentration in Kathmandu Valley make them so much more disruptive and predatory? Having participated in and witnessed the saga of donor-orchestrated development in Nepal for four fateful years (2000-2004), I feel that there is intrinsic resiliency in Nepali society and culture that propels the country forward despite the depredations of the cabals and cartels. Given its propensity to accept any and all aid, no matter its intent and purpose, Nepal becomes a fertile ground for cabals and cartels to flourish, mostly for the benefit of the Bahun-Chatri elite. The question to ask is whether the average Nepali today is better or worse off economically and socially than 20 years ago. If on balance the average Nepali is better off (which I suspect she is), then there may be a wisp of goodness in donor-led development despite the evil of cabals and cartels.

Asif Faiz

### REMITTANCE AND COVID

This is the extreme downside of migration and result of poor planning when our countries cannot absorb our labour ('High-risk remittance', Editorial, #1022).

Anita Anand

■ Countries need decent work and social protection so that people can find proper jobs or have income support instead of having no choice but to migrate into exploitative work away from home.

Gabriele Koehler

■ The government should recommend a team of highly talented youth to steer country's economic, health and education sector rather than relying on corrupted bureaucrats and officials who have been in Singha Darbar for ages with no progress to show.

Ngawang Tenzin

### TOPPLING STATUES

No need to adulate them in a public square ('Air-brushing history by toppling statues', Ivan G Somlai, #1022). Banish them to a museum for posterity to learn the atrocities they committed.

Swadesh Subedi

### SHREE SADAN

Sobering pictures ('Preserving King Birendra's family home', Alisha Sijapati, #1022). Compare these with the extravagant residences and lifestyles of the current occupants of Shital Niwas, Budanikantha and Khumaltar and know who the real feudal are.

Shyamal Krishna Shrestha

### COVID-19 PLASTIC POLLUTION

Plastic pollution is causing havoc to aquatic lives and is eyesore not only in Nepal but all across the world ('The COVID-19 plastic pandemic', Sonia Awale, #1021). A good read.

Bryan Hitan

### NEPALI POLITICS

It's completely unforgivable that the governing parties are spending this time of crisis squabbling (as ever) over power ('Experts caution against extending lockdown', Sonia Awale, nepalitimes.com).

Manjushree Thapa

### ANIL WALKABOUT

■ I was so waiting for this ('Walkabout with Anil', Nepali Times YouTube Channel). I used to love your written articles too.

Calix Dázeroth

■ I find Kathmandu and Nepal a fascinating place. When I visited in 2018 I had a wonderful city guide who was so knowledgeable of the history. I hope to return when the COVID crisis is over.

Jan Randles

## Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING

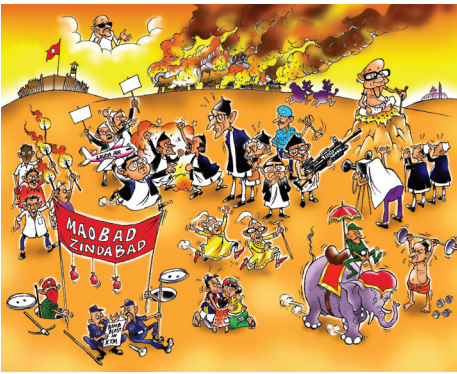


**Preserving King Birendra's family home**  
by Alisha Sijapati

20 years after the royal massacre, Nepal prepares to open King Birendra's family home as a museum. Take an exclusive (and emotional) tour of Shree Sadan that has been kept intact since 2001 only at nepalitimes.com. The report was the most widely shared on social media this week.

**Most reached and shared on Facebook**

**Most popular on Twitter**



## Why Nepal is stuck


by Kunda Dixit


Former broadcast journalist and ex-World Bank adviser Rajib Upadhyaya's new book 'Cabals and Cartels' is an insider look at how the World Bank interacted with Nepal's officialdom. Read this review, the most read item of the week and join a vigorous online discussion about the political economy of Nepal's development..

**Most commented**

**Most visited online page**

## QUOTE TWEETS

- 

**Nepali Times@NepaliTimes**  
The polarity of politics and the primacy of party agendas have reduced Nepali civil society to a mere duet, barring a few truly independent minds who might still voice the Nepali conscience. Read excerpts from @RajibUpadhyaya's new book 'Cabals and Cartels'.
- 

**sb@himlayanchildrn**  
Everyone who cares about Nepal should read this. Can't wait to get the book

- 

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Many cases of #acidattacks have surfaced over the past 2 decades in #Nepal, every time there is a new one, there are calls for stricter laws & control in acid sales. This time, the survivors want their voices heard & action taken to deter future attacks.
- 

**RajenLimbu@rajenlimbu1**  
The punishment in the existing law is not enough of a deterrence and Ministry of Home Affairs should start the process of amending the law to make way for stricter sentencing.
- 

**RumaRajbhandari@rumaraj123**  
This is beyond enraging. What is the sentence for perpetrators? Life in prison I hope.

- 

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
"Keeping girls at school was already a difficult task, but this pandemic is keeping them away from school and is putting them at a higher risk." Half of Nepal's girls may drop out of school when they reopen post-pandemic. @NamrataSharmaP@RoomtoRead
- 

**SagoonBhetwal@sagoonbhetwal**  
As I sit for my online classes every single day, I can't stop thinking about the growing divide in access to quality education.

- 

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
@SantoshKhaderi's #archive so far has 600 videos, 700 books & newspaper clips, including letters written by the palace in #Kathmandu to the British in India about the use of Simara airport during World War II. @AlishaSijapati
- 

**MahabirPaudyal@mahabirpudyal**  
Well-deserved feature of @SantoshKhaderi who has been doing a great job by archiving rare historical materials.

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

This week in 2000, journalist Bhairab Risal celebrated his 73rd birthday. On Thursday he marked his 93rd. There is a story about the power tussle between Girija Prasad Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai in ruling NC that seems very reminiscent to the Oli-Dahal split in the ruling NCP today. Salil Subedi has an obituary on the death of musician Praveen Gurung after a hit-and-run case involving Prince Paras Shah. Excerpts:

**Bhairab Dai:** At 73, activist-journalist Bhairab Risal has the energy that leaves today's young reporters panting far behind. When not doing his twice-weekly live talk-show on Radio Sagarmatha, he may be recording another of his weekly interview programmes with senior citizens. When he takes time off from his radio programmes, you can be sure Bhairab Dai is hiking in the hills of Humla or walking knee-deep in a paddy field in Kapilvastu. Last week he spent his 73rd birthday in Chitwan.

"I think it is my company of young enthusiastic journalists that re-energises me all the time," says Bhairab dai. "I feel younger every day."

**Congress VS Congress:** It has become a predictable ritual in the Nepali Congress: hard-fought elections are won, there is a majority in parliament, within months the party begins to self-destruct as a dissident faction mutinies, a new alignment is set up and the same cycle is repeated.



This week 20 years ago **Nepali Times** #5 print edition (16 August-22 August 2000) reminds us that the more things change, the more they remain the same in Nepal. The country has gone from war to peace, from monarchy to republic, but the politics is still the same, the government still underperforms, and there is constant infighting among the parties.

*This time, a crisis that started with a dissatisfied Khum Bahadur Khadka trying to oust his boss took a turn when the rebellious minister suddenly found himself sacked. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala then moved swiftly to outflank dissidents by meeting their guru. Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, and smoking the peace pipe. A cabinet reshuffle any day now will indicate how well the compromise works-the clue will be the number of Bhattarai men (and women) in it.*

**Praveen Gurung:** Backstage at the Yak and Yeti Hotel the support team moves about purposefully, changing the sets for the next number. The group plays a song from Himalayan feeling, and the audience gets quite immersed in the meditative folk blend of the music. Back stage, there are moist eyes. This is the music of their mentor and friend, Praveen Gurung who died on the night of 6 August in a hit-and-run incident involving the king's nephew, Paras Shah, just outside the Royal Palace.

"He was our inspiration, our guiding light. We can't believe he is no more with us, it's like a bad dream," says a young dancer, Manoj Shrestha. "He was generous and kind, and treated us like decent human beings, with respect."

From the archives of Nepali Times of the past 20 years, site search: [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com).



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# The silent skies

Remembering Ang Tshiring Sherpa 1964-2019

One side effect of the silent skies over past months, other than tipping tourism and aviation into freefall, is that Nepal’s air safety record is greatly improved.



SO FAR SO GOOD  
Lisa Choegyal

Last week marked the sombre anniversary of the Thai International crash in heavy monsoon rains 28 years ago which took the lives of so many Nepali families, friends and residents.

Almost exactly two months later, a PIA Airbus piled into the opposite end of the Valley at Lele, the nation’s worst air disaster. This time, 167 souls were lost, mostly tourists arriving at the beginning of the season -- so close that the specialist international forensic team were still in-country analysing the confetti-sized Thai aircraft wreckage.

Exasperated with devastation and grief at yet another catastrophe, I volunteered with the British Embassy to help look after distraught relatives of the PIA victims.

Nepal’s dramatic Himalayan terrain and fierce weather patterns make a deadly combination. The deplorable data confirms that the dozens of air accidents since the 1992 double carnage occur mostly during the turbulent monsoon months, and involve helicopters as well as fixed-wing aircraft, both international and domestic flights.

Usually, the pilots have something to do with it and almost all are weather-related, regardless of the season.

Early last year we lost an inspirational tourism minister when the chopper he was travelling in tried to take off from a socked-in hilltop temple intending to dive into clear weather, got caught in a freak updraft, and was slammed sideways against a cliff. There were no survivors and the industry is still reeling from the tragedy.

Along with the minister was Nepal’s most imaginative and daring tourism entrepreneur, Ang Tshiring Sherpa, managing director of Yeti and Tara Airlines amongst his many other ventures. It should never have happened, of course. Known to be fanatic about safety, on that fateful day, 27 February 2019, Tshiring allowed his usual strict flying rules to be compromised.

It is still hard to accept the chill reality that Tshiring is not coming back. He was only 54. Never again would he drop by our house sitting under the garden cherry tree or casually greet me as he crossed Dwarika’s courtyard to lunch. Never again would I be summoned into his expansive office, glowing with carpets, polished wood and glass, and asked my advice in his serious calm manner.

Never again would I see his wry sideways smile as he gently rubbed his stubbled head in that curious distinctive way, attentive, nodding, self-deprecating. Never again would we dine together off the candle-lit polished tables at Le Sherpa restaurant with clients and relatives



he wanted me to meet.

Tshiring never wasted words, and I learned to listen carefully. Not once did I see him riled or angry, or indeed anything but thoughtful and measured. Even when I could tell he did not agree with my recommendations -- to refocus the family brand, consolidate companies, or add value by improving service standards -- he was unfailingly polite and patient. “Thank you, madam,” he would smile. He always liked to call me madam, with irony, no doubt.

Tshiring was Nepal’s most innovative and wildly courageous tourism operator, striding fearlessly into deals with a sure instinct and confidence, trusting his powers of persuasion. His office team of competent henchmen and array of associated family members managed his Kathmandu-based empire of airlines, travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, remote lodges,

wildlife camps, trekking and mountaineering companies.

It was part of his quiet charm that he did not always get things right, had trouble navigating family politics, learned from mistakes, courted controversy and often moved in mysterious ways.

I admired his business panache, but was most captivated by Tshiring’s persuasive rags to riches story, his ascent from humble origins in the Himalayan hamlet of Pangom to creator of Nepal’s major tourism conglomerate.

“Let’s make a film about you,” I suggested. The narrative sweeps from a Solu Khumbu kitchen boy, the lowest rung of a trek team, running away to Kathmandu with Rs300 in his pocket (the exact amount is debated), to building the Yeti Group. He out-manoeuvred opponents with canny golf course diplomacy at Gokarna and invented champagne helicopter breakfasts with a view of Everest.

In between, as a Sherpa sirdar he led treks throughout Nepal and during the summer worked in French alpine chalets. With typical modesty Tshiring was reticent about a movie, but liked the idea of a book for his extensive and extended Sherpa family.

Mindful of those less fortunate than himself, philanthropy motivated many of Tshiring’s travel ideas interwoven with commercial interests. Every air ticket sold planted a sapling and each boarding pass donated five rupees to one of his charitable CSR causes. He embraced community development, and painted the Great Himalaya Trail logo onto his mountain aircraft.

He proposed a STOL airstrip at Lake Phuksundo to benefit the locals, homestays to restore the crumbling village of Braga, and a string of high altitude ecolodges to bring tourism to new areas of the Himalaya. Pilgrimage hotel projects

ranged from the Lumbini Hokke at Buddha’s birthplace to Mokshain Jomsom, rising after the earthquake for Hindus visiting Muktinath. He never forgot his origins nor his spiritual roots.

In 2016 at Chuksang we sat on plastic chairs in deep shadow under the apple trees, breakfasting on sweet tea and Tibetan bread. Tshiring had joined our recce to introduce high-end tourism to Mustang, quietly sharing his vision at a simple local lodge. His gentle demeanour fitted in anywhere, belying his relentless energy and appetite for business.

Early one blustery morning in 2010, bad weather defeated us from reaching Tsum, whose remote pristine landscape he had wanted to show me, but instead the helicopter dropped us into Langtang where he was working with the community to construct a trekkers’ lodge.

It was on that trip that I realised how cautious Tshiring was about flying, obsessed with Nepal’s air-safety, committed to carbon neutralising his airlines, and campaigning for UN and EU certification. A near-miss in Lukla involving his brother Sonam shook him greatly.

The seventh day ceremony was in full swing when I arrived at his home, with a vast gathering of mourners and monks, the family weary with sadness amidst the incense and chanting.

“He looked after me so well in life, I must look after him in death,” his wife Chanda smiled bravely. Nyima, his sister married to Tenzing Norgay’s grandson, took my hand and led me upstairs to the prayer room, wringing her hands in sorrow and denial.

Destiny had consigned Nepal’s most self-effacing tourism magnate to become yet another statistic in our wretched record of flying in the mountains. 🇳🇵

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# COVID-19 impact on food and school in Nepali children

20% of children eating less, 52% not studying at all from home

A survey of Nepal’s children in the past five months of lockdown has confirmed what experts had feared – that there has been an adverse impact on education and nutrition for a majority of them.

More than half the families polled reported a loss of jobs or earnings, and this resulted in one-third of the households facing shortages of food, medicines and other necessities.

This has impacted the children in the household most directly, according to the first of a monthly tracking poll conducted nationwide by UNICEF Nepal and Sharecast Initiative at the end of May.

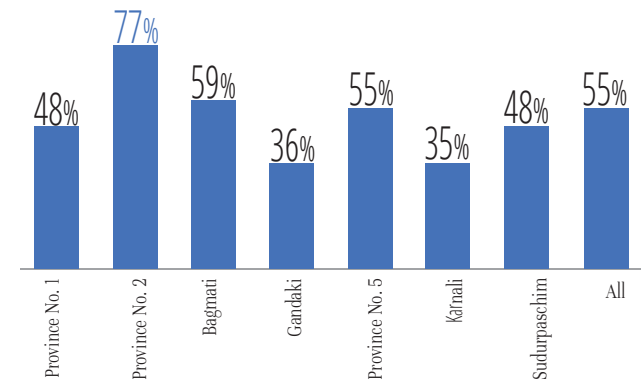
Because two months have passed since the poll was taken, the situation for children is likely to be more precarious. Some 7,500 households with at least one child was covered in the survey – more than 70% of them engaged in agriculture and a quarter had salaried jobs.

Province 2 reported the highest rates (77%) of job and earnings losses, and nationwide whose incomes were most affected by the COVID-19 lockdown lived in sub-metropolitan cities. People living in cities and Gandaki Province were least affected by the lockdown.

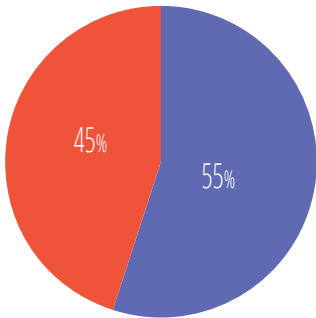
This is sure to mean that the pandemic and the lockdown is already widening the already skewed income disparities within Nepal. Those earning less than Rs20,000 a month were the ones whose livelihoods have been

LIVELIHOOD LOSSES

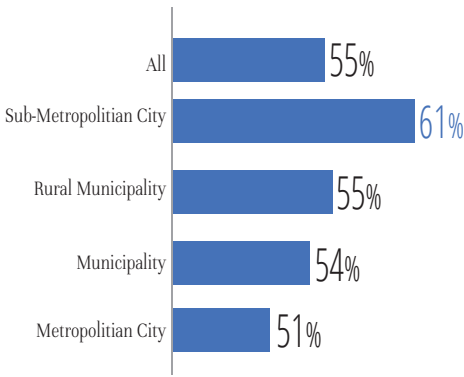
■ % reporting earnings or livelihood losses by province



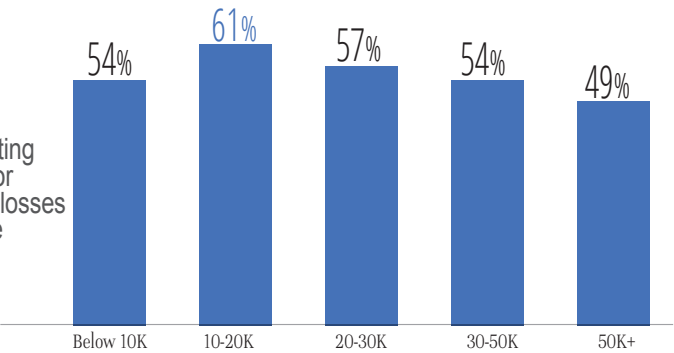
■ % reporting earnings or livelihood losses (Blue=Yes=55%)



■ % reporting earnings or livelihood losses and place of residence



■ % reporting earnings or livelihood losses by income group



most adversely impacted by the lockdown.

Households facing the brunt of this income loss reported shortages of food, medicines, fuel and other essentials. Since the survey was conducted in May, many households were already low on food, there were supply chain disruptions, and remittances from Nepalis abroad fell by half in April, compared to the same month last year.

“The survey was done in the early stages of the lockdown, so we expect the impact to be greater now,” says Madhu Acharya of Sharecast Initiative that conducted the survey.

Although 64% of those surveyed said they were not

suffering any shortages, rural respondents in Sudurpaschim and Province 2 reported the most food shortages. The shortages were manifested in families not being able to afford meat, eggs, dairy products, and some vegetables. This is expected to increase malnutrition among Nepali children under five, 43% of whom

were already malnourished.

More than half the children in Karnali Province are stunted because of insufficient nutrition. Many of the most vulnerable children who were getting in school meals have not been able to go to school for the past five months and have been missing out on supplemental nutrition.

One in every five household polled in the survey in May said their children were getting a reduced variety and smaller portions in fewer meals. Understandably, the reduction in food intake was highest in households with lowest incomes – one-third said their children were getting less food.

UNICEF says that although some of these changes could be related to existing pre-monsoon shortages,

The UNICEF survey shows that in May most families had been coping by digging into their savings (better of families), or by borrowing money from friends and relatives (poorer households). 🇳🇵

# Half of Nepal’s girls may drop out of school

Survey shows 53% of female students may not go back to schools when they reopen

Namrata Sharma

With schools closed for the past five months, and families losing their livelihoods due to the pandemic, many girl students across Nepal are helping their parents and may not rejoin schools once they reopen, a new survey has shown.

Some of the girls, especially from poorer families, have been lured into seeking jobs, and some have even fallen prey to labour and sexual exploitation, the survey by the Room To Read literacy group has shown.

The Girls’ Education Risk Survey among 3,992 girls in four districts from April-June this year showed that financial hardship caused by the pandemic may push back Nepal’s gains in improving its female school enrollment.

During the COVID-19 lockdown there has also been an increase in domestic violence against female members of households, and Room To Read itself has lost some of its students to child marriage.

“Keeping girls at school was already a difficult task, but this pandemic is keeping them away from school and is putting them at a higher risk,” explains Salina Tamang at Room to Read Nepal.

This survey included three indicators for identifying risk of not returning to school: girls not studying at home while their schools are closed, a loss of job or



ROOM TO READ

income in the household, and a girl’s stated concern that she will not be able to return to school.

Of the nearly 4,000 girls surveyed in Banke, Bardia, Nuwakot and Tanahun districts through June, 45% of girls reported their household income had fallen because members had lost their jobs — a factor that has lead girls to drop out of school even before this crisis.

Another 16% of the girls surveyed said they had stopped studying at home since school closed in March, meaning they will be hesitant to return to school or will have difficulty catching up and

passing important gate-keeping exams when they do return.

Of those surveyed, 7% admitted that they would probably not return to school when it reopens. The reasons include the need to work or provide care at home, lack of parental support, and limited financial resources. (See chart).

One 17-year-old surveyed in Banke district had left for Kathmandu in a truck when the lockdown began to find a job to augment her family income. But she fell into drug addiction, and had to be rescued.

“We were monitoring her because she had attended one of our awareness programs against sexual exploitation. Which is why she knew how to save herself when she fell into bad company,” says Ram Pyari of Room To Read.

Another 15-year-old from Kohalpur lost her father just before the lockdown started, increasing the responsibility to take care of her mother and three smaller siblings. She decided to drop out of school to take care of her family.

“We are trying to find a way for her to continue her education, while managing her family’s needs,”

explains Rachana Chaudhary of Room To Read in Kohalpur, who has been counseling the girl. “However dire the situation, a girl’s education should not stop.”

The Nepal survey was part of a series conducted by Room to Read among 28,000 school-going girls in India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Tanzania during pandemic lockdowns. The results were similar to Nepal – 49% of the girls were found to be at risk of not returning to school.

“We were very concerned about the impact on education of girls from low income families, and we need to develop strategies to retain them in school,” says Pushkar Lal Shrestha, Nepal Country Director at Room to Read.

Most of the girls interviewed for the survey were involved in domestic chores and did not have access to remote learning. Figures from another survey by UNICEF in May confirmed some of these finding. It showed that more than half the families reported a loss of jobs or earnings, with one-third facing food shortages.

The UNICEF poll also showed that children in 95% of families had stopped going to school, and 52% were not even studying at home, with only 12% attending classes online or by radio/tv.

Room To Read has been conducting remote learning classes as well as mentoring sessions with girls to keep them safe and motivated. Counselors sent keep in touch with their students through SMS or social media. 🇳🇵





DHARMEN SINGH

# Stranded visitors want to stay on in Nepal

Tourists still stuck in Nepal want the government to extend their visas till December

Sonia Awale

During the first two months of lockdown when foreign embassies in Kathmandu were rounding up their last remaining nationals to fly home from Nepal, there were some who refused to be repatriated. They are still here, and they want to stay put.

Immigration Department records show there are still 2,000 tourists who have been in Nepal since March. But over 250 of them from 50 countries have appealed through a Facebook group for the Nepal government to extend their visa permits till December.

Some chose not to risk infection by travelling long-distances to go back home where conditions were sometimes much worse. Expensive repatriation flights did not help matters.

“Until now Nepal has been among the safest countries from COVID-19 crisis and it is safer to stay where people are right now,” says Australian Brett Adamek, admin of the Pokhara Noticeboard Facebook group. “Long-distance travel is daunting and dangerous especially when many tourists are elderly. If allowed to stay on, everyone is happy to pay for the extension.”

Many of the foreigners staying in Nepal are not just enjoying an extended holiday, they are trying to help increase awareness about preventive measures against COVID-19, raise money for feeding programs, assist in charities, or help farmers with new ideas to raise productivity.

In June, the Department of Immigration announced that the stranded tourists would have to pay extra visa fee for overstaying due to the pandemic. After outrage on social media, the Home Ministry revised the decision and said extension and overstay fees as well as fines would only be levied 15 days after the resumption of international flights.

“As of now we are still going by the decision to allow 15 days after resumption of international flights for foreigners to leave the country. But we are expecting a new directive from the government in a few days,” says Madhusudan Bhattarai of the Department of

Immigration. The Department itself has been sealed because a staff tested positive for COVID-19.

But many of the foreigners who are located across the country from Ilam, Manang, Pokhara, Jomsom, Khumbu and Kathmandu say they want to remain in Nepal till December, and have promised to be in their best behaviour.

Like Admek, many of the foreigners who found themselves in Nepal when the flights were grounded in March, are nomads travelling around the world for years, and do not really have a ‘home country’ to get back to. Admek himself is Australian but has been travelling across Asia for years, spending 15 years in Nepal and India.

Briton Lesley D Junlakan has been in Nepal since 24 January, documenting her experience of the lockdown through photography. While she does spend five months a year in Nepal volunteering at monasteries in Kagbeni and Pokhara, this year she has not been able to go back to Thailand where she has been living since 2000.

“If the government does not to allow foreigners to stay on, I will have to go to a third country because Thailand has not resumed commercial flights and I don’t want to go back to Britain where I have no home or family,” says Junlakan, who has also been supporting families of trekking guides with no income because of the collapse of tourism.

There is also uncertainty regarding the resumption of international flights. The Cabinet on Monday concurred with the COVID-19 Crisis Management Committee recommendation that regular domestic and international flights that were set to resume on 17 August be pushed back till 31 August. Airlines say even that date may be pushed back, and when regular flights do resume, their frequency and destinations will be reduced.

Nepal Tourism Board CEO Dhananjay Regmi has advised the government to allow foreigners to stay on till December 2020, and charge them accordingly for their visa extension. At a time when even the autumn tourism season looks like it is going to be a flop, it would be logical to keep tourists who want to stay.

“Many of them came for Visit Nepal 2020 and they haven’t even got to experience it. The government’s positive response will also gain Nepal goodwill in the international community,” Regmi told Nepali Times, adding that he expects a positive response from the government.

Andrea Anastasiou from Cyprus came to Nepal for the sixth time in late January to experience Visit Nepal 2020. Trekking to Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) was on her to-do list, but the fear of COVID-19 followed by the lockdown pretty much confined her to a room in Patan.

“I would love the opportunity to stay on and explore more of the country given if restrictions are eased and it’s safer to travel around again. I might not get to trek ABC, but a day-long hike inside the Valley would also be great,” says Anastasiou.

Cesar Morales was invited to train Nepali tennis players preparing for regional championships and for the Olympics that would have been taking place in Tokyo this week if it had not been for the pandemic. He was supposed to travel to Spain and Italy before flying home to Chicago, but has been stuck in Nepal since 13 March.

Morales refused to be repatriated earlier because he did not want to risk infection while travelling long distance, and get back home to two elderly parents at a time when the pandemic was at its peak in Spain. The same reasons are still valid for US nationals stuck in Nepal.

“Nepal’s economy is struggling, so allowing tourists already here to stay on would help local businesses,” adds Morales who has used his extra time in Nepal to continue training Nepali athletes six days a week in Kapan. “We can contribute not only in terms of economy but with our skills too. Allowing us to stay on will also let us help people here, which is a win-win situation.”

Says Junlakan: “Most of us feel safe in Nepal and we have been doing fine with social distance and safety measures. Nepal government and Nepali people have been very kind to us so far and we are only asking for it to be extended for a little longer.”

## prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

### Etihad protective wear

Etihad Airways has launched new protective wear for First and Business



class guests. As part of Etihad Wellness, premium passengers will receive a snood style face-mask treated with MicrobeBARRIER made out of lightweight, breathable and stretchy jersey fabric.

### Soaltee and TED

Soaltee Crowne Plaza Kathmandu has partnered with TEDxDurbarMarg, per which the hotel will be the title sponsor



and the official hotel for all TED events under the banner TEDxDurbarMarg TED Talks in Nepal. Soaltee Crowne Plaza will host a series of TEDxDurbarMarg events, which includes TED Talks, TED Women Talks, Connected Talks, Countdown Launch and TED Summit and all partner meetings throughout this year and into 2021.

### Hyatt awarded

Hyatt Regency Kathmandu has been awarded the 2020 Traveler’s Choice



Award by TripAdvisor during TripAdvisor’s 18th annual Travelers’ Choice® Awards. TripAdvisor has been supporting the recovery of the tourism and hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### NIC Asia & Sipradi

NIC Asia has been made financing partner of Sipradi Pvt Ltd according to an MoU formed between the two institutions. Per NIC Asia’s Super Chamatkarik loan, customers will be exempt from paying six month of instalment amount on the purchase of TATA cars sold through Sipradi.

### Muktinath Bikas Bank

Muktinath Bikas Bank has partnered with institutions including NEPMEDS Online Pharmacy, Easy Care Online Pharmacy,



Alma Artes (Watch Company), Bajeko Sekuwa. Muktinath Bank Visa debit card holders can get a 15% discount on services provided by said institutions.

### Nepal Bank

Nepal Bank has contributed Rs34.6 million to the government-established COVID-19 Infection Prevention, Control and Treatment Fund. Chairman of the board of directors on NBL Basudev Adhikari handed over the cheque to Finance Minister Yuvaraj Khatiwada.

### Samsung

Samsung has announced the launch of the new Curd Maestro Refrigerator that comes with Samsung’s Smart Convertible 5 in 1 Twin Cooling technology. The appliance will be available in 253-litre & 315-litre



capacities and can be purchased within a price range of Rs63990 to Rs78990.

### NIC Asia Capital

The meeting of NIC Asia Board of directors has decided to distribute a 12% dividend amounting to Rs100.2 million to shareholders of the NIC Asia Growth Fund, as well as an 8% dividend amounting to Rs60.4 million to shareholders of the NIC Asia Balanced Fund.

## prabhu BANK

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EVENTS

Tulikaa exhibition

Tulikaa is an online platform connecting artists, entrepreneurs, art enthusiasts and collectors in Nepal. Curated by Ujen Norbu Gurung, the second of Tulikaa’s exhibition series will feature artist Aman Maharjan, who specialises in printmaking. Visit the exhibition at Dhokaima Café or online.  
21 August, Dhokaima Cafe

Art Saturday

Art Saturday is a weekend studio art session from Artudio under the mentorship of celebrated artists, designers and creative professionals. Head to the website to book seats for the weekly sessions.  
Every Saturday, 8am-10am, Artudio, Swoyambhu, 9823490390, 9851180088

Le Sherpa Farmers Market

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



Art Workshop

Each month, Bikalpa Art Center will feature presentations, meet workshops, critical analysis and discussions with two artists. This August, the featured artists are Paubha painter Lok Chitrakar and conceptual artist Prithivi Shrestha. Stay tuned to Bikalpa’s Youtube Channel shared on the Facebook page for upcoming events.  
18 August onwards



The Skin of Chitwan

Indigenous Pasts, Sustainable Futures exhibition by Nepal Picture Library  
Online from Friday 14 August.

The Phare

Send short stories, flash fiction work, poetry and photographs to the first issue of UK-based literary magazine The Phare. Head to <https://www.thephare.com/submit> to find out details about submissions.  
Submission deadline: 22 August



Boudha Farmers Market

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

ONLINE ARCHIVES

Poetry Foundation

Discover all things poetry. Browse through collections of classic and contemporary poems, readings, poetry news and the entire 100-year archive of Poetry Magazine. Go to <https://www.poetryfoundation.org> to start.



Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya

Browse through the collection of Nepali archived content, including manuscripts, newsletters, sketches and photographs on the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya database.



Free Netflix documentaries

Netflix has released some of its documentaries for free on YouTube for educational purposes in light of the global coronavirus pandemic. Watch the award-winning documentary Our Planet from Sir David Attenborough to start.



Lore

Each episode of Lore is an examination of dark historical tales that explores the mysterious creatures, tragic events, and unusual places that fill the pages of history. Find on Stitcher.

Europeana

Discover cultural heritage from 3,000 museums, galleries, libraries and archives across Europe. Head to <https://www.europeana.eu/en> to read about historical places, watch exhibitions, photographs, ancient manuscripts and more.



Botanical garden tour

Google Earth’s Stop and Smell the Flowers is a journey through eleven of the most breathtaking botanical gardens and arboretums around the world from countries like Russia, Sweden, and Canada, to the Netherlands.

DINING



The Workshop Eatery

Head to Facebook to choose from The Workshop Eatery’s selection of yummy doughnuts and Bagels. Try the mixed berry doughnuts and Workshop BBQ chicken sandwich.  
9860431504



Attic

Missed Attic’s signature Royal Aloo while staying at home? Then get it home delivered. Go to Attic’s Facebook page to see what else is on offer.  
9801222550, 9801222551, 9801222554

OR2K

Head on to the OR2K Facebook page to order delicious middle eastern/multi cuisine vegan and vegetarian dishes. Get the “Make Your Own Pizza” or the OR2K signature Zuri Cake  
(01) 4522097, 9819344318



Baskin Robbins

Nothing beats ice cream on hot summer afternoons. Baskin Robbins has picked from a variety of flavours of ice cream, sundaes, and ice cream cakes. See the menu on Facebook Foodmandu will also deliver.  
Delivery: 10am-6pm, 9801151597

PIANO B

Taste the best of Italy with PIANO B’s pasta, lasagne, calzones, and more. Head to Chito Mitho and choose from the menu. Try the Asparagus ravioli, Parma ham meatballs, and Chicken ragout lasagna  
9851061067

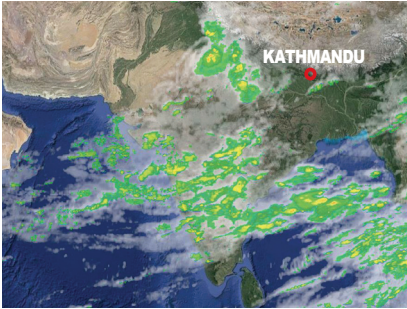
Dhokaima Lockdown Menu

Restaurant may be locked out again, but you can enjoy home delivery of Chef Ale’s new menu, including the sizzling Sicilian Pizza. Call (01) 5522113 or thru Foodmandu.



Pangra Express

Experience the best of street food and fast food from Pangra Express. Get the Classic Chicken Momo, Hero Sausage and Shaphale Chicken, or go for the Firehouse Burger. Foodmandu and Bhoj Deals will deliver.  
9801084777

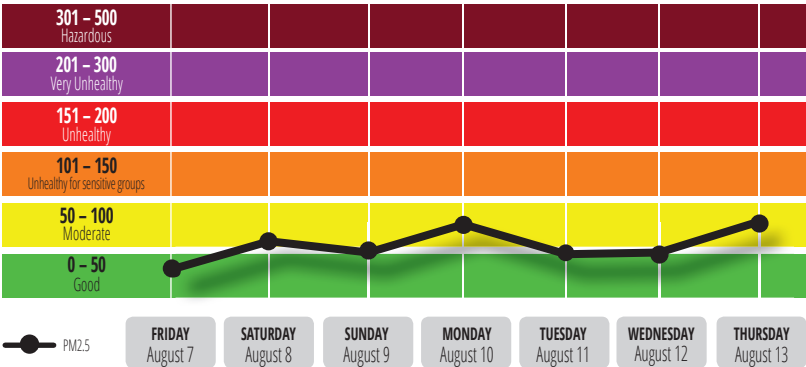


The monsoon was over by a long shot. It is picking second wind, as it were. In fact, it is picking winds from two directions. Both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal arms of the southwest monsoon are vigorous, and after a brief respite on Friday, we will begin to see their effect over the weekend with heavy precipitation along the mid-mountains. This will increase the threat of landslides along already saturated slopes. The Met & Hydro Dept has also warned of localised flooding.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
28° 19°	28° 20°	29° 20°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 7 - 13 August



The reimposition of the odd-even rule in Kathmandu Valley as well as the nightly downpours this past week have kept the Air Quality Index low. The daily average AQI measured at Phora Darbar alternated between good ‘Green’ and moderate ‘Yellow’ zones every day this week. With the monsoon rains picking up again, and the reinforced restrictions we are likely to breathe the clean air for a while longer. But don’t forget to put a mask on before you head out – keeps out both the virus and the pollution particles.  
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



The culture of concealment that surrounds menstruation makes talking about menstrual products difficult for many women and men. This stigma could be making us overlook options that are better for our bodies and for the planet. On average a woman will use more than 11,000 pads and tampons in her lifetime. These disposables typically contain plastics, synthetic chemicals and chlorine-beaching processes that creates harmful dioxins which pollute the environment and remain in our bodies for decades. Reusable options like period pants, menstrual cups (made from medical grade silicone) and reusable pads are much healthier for us and just as sanitary with the right maintenance. Although reusable products have a larger initial cost, they last much longer and are thus more economical in the long run. We can even make our own reusable pads at home.

OUR PICK



German-American production *Unorthodox* is a story of a Hasidic Jewish woman in Brooklyn who flees to Berlin from an arranged marriage and religious community to start a new life until her past comes calling. The critically acclaimed miniseries is inspired by Deborah Feldman’s 2012 autobiography, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* and stars Shira Haas, Amit Rahav and Jeff Wilbusch.

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

फोन: नं. ९०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



# COVID-19 sharpens caste discrimination in Nepal

Dalit returnees from India face double discrimination at home even after recovering from coronavirus infection

Unnati Chaudhary  
in Kailali

Across Nepal, it is the already under-served and vulnerable who have been affected by the prolonged lockdowns. But it is the Dalit returnees from India who have tested positive and their families who face double discrimination.

The Ministry of Health issues a daily tally of COVID-19 cases, but no one is counting the poorest of the poor who are dying of hunger or pre-existing diseases, or have been driven deeper into destitution.

Kalpna Nagari, 30, works as a day labourer by the roadside in Godavari Municipality to earn enough to feed her two children. This time of year there are plenty of jobs planting or weeding paddy fields, but she is unemployed because of social stigma after her husband, Tika Narayan, tested positive for COVID-19 last month.

Tika Narayan Nagari had returned from India after he lost his job there on 15 May. He tested positive was quarantined altogether for 50 days first at the border, and later because of delays in getting his test result. But even after he got out, the Dalit family has been shunned by neighbours and society.

Her family used to face discrimination even before because they were Dalit, but COVID-19 has added another layer of prejudice. Even that is not what worries Kalpna the most – it is not earning enough to feed her family.



“Without work, how are we going to feed our children that is what I am most anxious about,” says Kalpna, who does not have a house of her own and lives with her sister-in-law. Her husband had to go to India to find work to repay a loan he took for his mother’s funeral.

“During every meal, I worry about where the next one will come from, and I feel faint,” says Kalpna. “The landlords did not give me any work in the rice fields because they said ‘your husband has a corona, you might also be infected’.”

Kalawati Auji, 40, is also from Godavari and raised her three sons all by herself after her husband died nine years ago. Her eldest son died

last year, and her youngest has heart disease. Her middle child, Dipak is 22 and worked in Bareilly in India. It was the money Dipak sent home that allowed Kalawati to pay for food and medicines for her daughter-in-law, son and grandson.

But Dipak lost his job and returned to Nepal on 30 June. He tested positive for COVID-19 and was confined in quarantine for 34 days where he was ostracised both for being infected, and for being a Dalit. After coming home, he quarantined himself in a cowshed for a week.

But even after he recovered, the family has been harassed and humiliated by neighbours. Neither Dipak nor Kalawati can find a job,

and they owe a neighbourhood provision store Rs50,000.

Says Kalawati: “This pandemic has come to kill the poor like us.”

Fifty-year-old Harish B K also returned from Bareilly in the first week of May. Among the 234 people whose swab samples were taken, Harish was among 70 who tested positive – only two of them were non-Dalits.

“The non-Dalits in the quarantine used to get hot water, lunch, and more food than us. If we asked for more food, they would ignore us,” he recalls. Now out of quarantine, but jobless, deep in debt, and facing double discrimination and humiliation, Harish says he often has suicidal thoughts.

**CASTE OUT:** Kalpna Nagari and Kalawati Auji from Godavari Municipality who face double discrimination from society for being Dalit, and because their relatives tested positive for COVID-19 after returning from India.

Godavari Municipality says it has plans to provide farm subsidies to the most vulnerable during the pandemic and lockdown. Deputy Mayor Ratna Kadayat says the plan will give priority to Dalits, women, and marginalised communities under the ‘Prime Minister’s Employment Program’.

But these future plans are a mirage for most Dalit families like the Nagaris, Aujis and BKs here. Their needs are urgent and immediate, and they have heard these promises before.

Rights activist Savitra Ghimire at the Dalit Women’s Rights Forum (DWRF) says the relief may be too little too late for most Dalit families. Godavari and the Attaria highway intersection are hotspots for a surge in coronavirus cases. In the past month alone, the area got 4,000 returnees from India, and of them, 349 tested positive and 294 have recovered and gone home.

However, being virus-free is just the beginning of the struggle for Dalit families here in western Nepal. As more and more districts re-impose lockdown, business is not expected to pick up soon, and this means fewer options for employment. And even if jobs open up, Dalit returnees and their families here will be the last to get them. 🇳🇵

UNNATI CHAUDHARY

# The prolonged trauma of acid attack survivors

Teenage survivors in Nepal get together to deter future attacks with stricter laws and ban on sale of acid

Laxmi Basnet

Teenage survivors of acid attacks, nearly all of them young women, say regulating the over-the-counter sale of acid and life imprisonment for perpetrators are the only ways to stop the kind of attacks that disfigured them for life.

Some of these women attended a hearing convened by Parliament’s Women and Social Committee in Singha Durbar last week, just after news came in of another horrific attack on a young woman in Kathmandu by an employer who reportedly sought revenge for having his advances spurned.

Among those at the hearing was Muskaan Khatun, 14, who survived an acid attack last year in the street while on her way to school, scarring her right ear, cheek and neck. Two suspects were detained by the police.

Images of Muskaan Khatun went viral on social media, and coincided with the release of the Bollywood film Chhapaak on acid attacks on women in India. Khatun went on to use her high media profile to raise awareness about acid attacks.

Khatun came for the hearing wearing a black scarf last week with her parents, which she took off once inside the room, revealing the scarred right side of her face. She burst into tears while recalling the attack and the pain and suffering afterwards during the many operations at a hospital in Kirtipur that treats burn victims.

“Doctors recommend that I apply medicine on my wounds five times a day, but I can only afford to do it once a day because it is so expensive,” Khatun said as the masked committee members listened. “I have another nine years of treatment, how am I going to complete it? My parents have no work.”

Also at the hearing were other survivors like Jenny Khadka and Sangita Thapa Magar



who shared their pain from acid attacks.

Khadka used to be beaten often by her husband, and one day she had enough and went to a police station in her torn clothes to report an assault. The police sent her away and told her to sort out her domestic problems herself.

Her husband then poured acid on her, burning her hand, neck and body. Now, a year later, she has to be careful while dressing, her skin is often dry and painful.

“Throughout my life, I was never sick. Now I need life-long medication, and I am deeply in debt,” says Khadka. “People take pity on me, and that makes me feel even more helpless.”

Khadka is livid that while her life has been ruined, she has lost her job, and her mother became ill with stress her husband is not suffering much. The hospital where she was treated refused to discharge her because

she did not have the money to clear her bills, and she was only allowed to leave after her friends raised money through Facebook.

“Those who attacked us are clothed and fed in jail and are looking forward to the day that they will be released, while we suffer endless pain,” Khadka says. “I am against the death penalty because that would end it all in a second for them. They should have to bear prolonged suffering like us.”

Sangita Thapa Magar was 16 in 2015 when she was attacked by a young Dalit man who had been trying to have a relationship with her. Magar’s parents had told him to stop pursuing their daughter, and in revenge he bought Rs125 worth of acid in a shop in New Road and splashed it across her face while she was taking tuition.

She has since had 17 surgical procedures on her face, her hopes of one day making it to Nepal’s national karate team now dashed.

Magar is now determined to be an activist against acid attacks, and to help other victims like her cope with the physical and mental scars. Magar is now afraid because her attacker has been released from jail.

“It may be a feeling of revenge, but we would like our attackers to also suffer like us, maybe that will reduce the number of attacks,” she told the Parliament committee. “If stricter laws had been enacted as soon as I was attacked, maybe Jenny and Muskaan would not have to suffer.”

Karki, 22, was attacked in Kathmandu by her by a man hired by her employer who had taken fancy to her, and has severe burns in her face and hands. Police have arrested both men, while Karki is getting help from charities and good Samaritans like Ujjwal Bikram Thapa who also helped Khatun.

According to a police study, nearly all acid attacks are perpetrated by men who act in revenge because the young women rejected their advances. But this is the first time lawmakers have called acid attack survivors for a hearing to understand their struggles and discuss the existing laws that allow the crime to happen.

The committee has directed the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, and the National Commission for Women to provide education, health treatment, employment, and social rehabilitation to the victims of acid attacks.

The Office of the Attorney General under Agni Kharel on 2 August formed a committee headed by Deputy Attorney General Bishwaraj Koirala to look into the laws and submit a report within a month.

Many cases of women suffering acid attacks have surfaced over the past two decades, every time there is yet another horrific crime there are calls for stricter laws and control in acid sales. This time, the survivors want their voices heard and action taken to deter future attacks. 🇳🇵



# When will Nepal's future ever arrive?

Rajib Upadhyia

“What do people mean by poor governance,” asked Crown Prince Dipendra. “Are they fed up with corruption? Is it that they don’t like how the political parties are behaving? Are they frustrated with the government’s inability to push back the Maoists?”

A barrage of questions followed.

Corruption was obliquely referred to as the “C-word” and was used very sparingly in development literature back then. It was reserved for basket-cases like Zimbabwe, the Republic of Congo, and the like. “Poor governance” was the more elegant euphemism of choice for nascent democracies like Nepal.

Over the next ten minutes or so I gave him the low-down on the various “scenarios”, “triggers”, and “resource envelopes” that framed the World Bank strategy.

Dipendra listened very patiently.

But just as I finished, to my astonishment, he said, “You know Dai, I doubt that I’ll ever be crowned King. The way I see the palace old guard messing things up, I don’t see my turn ever coming. These guys just don’t get it. And they won’t listen to me. When I try to express my views, they say I’m out of line; they say I’m too political. The thought of what might be coming keeps me up many a-nights.”



I was stunned by Dipendra’s remarks. I could feel his pain and his anger, but I did not know what to say. Moreover, I had no clue who or what the “palace old guard” was; nor did I have the faintest idea where the line was drawn in his world between what was political and what was not.



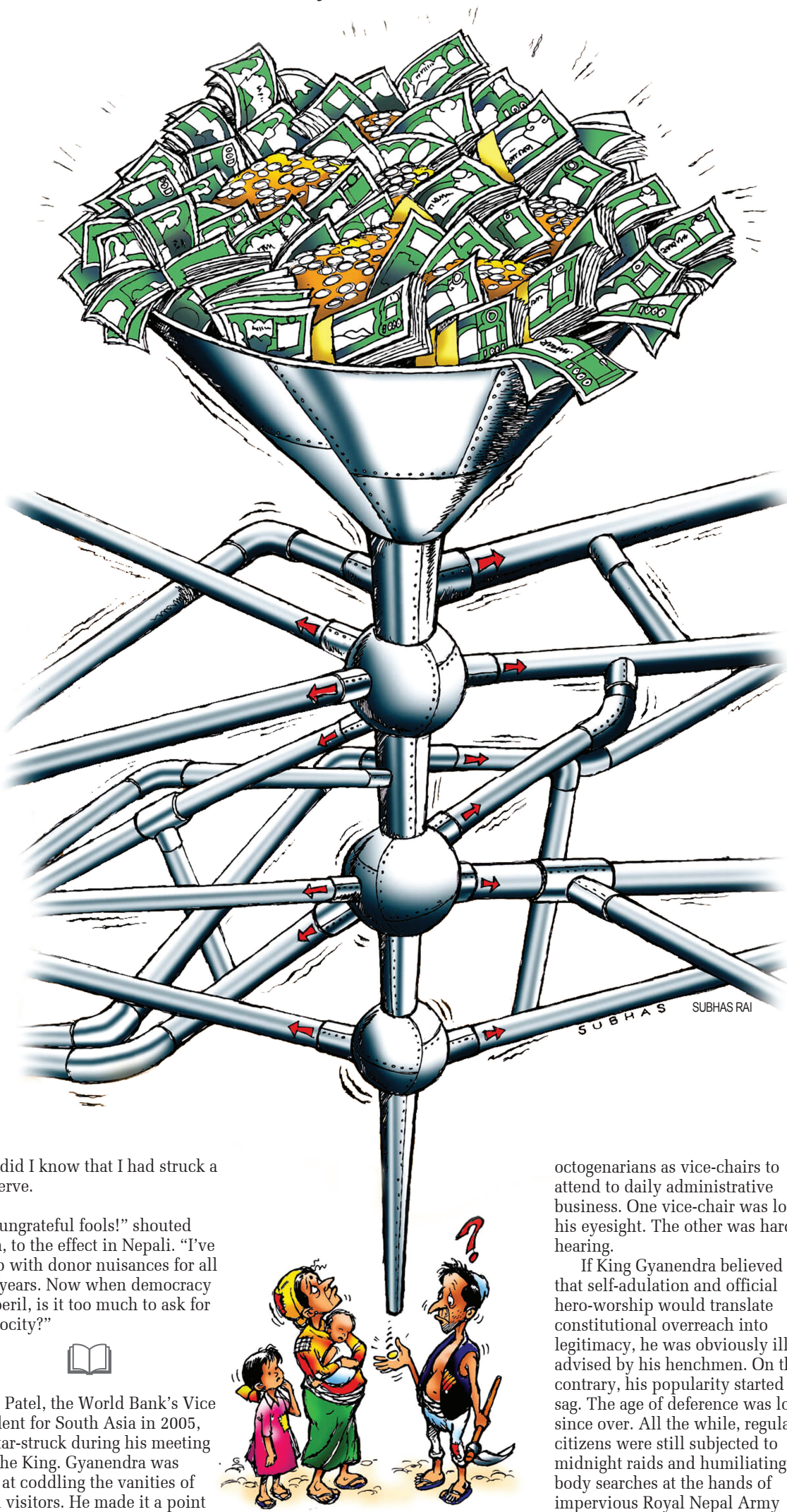
It was high wedding season in Kathmandu. As I stepped into the crowded marquee in the groom’s house, I was surprised to see Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba standing alone in a corner, nursing his drink.

We exchanged friendly banter until Deuba suddenly asked: “Can you get a couple of important donors to issue a statement, essentially to say that the King’s intentions are illegitimate?”

This was the evening of January 20, 2005 and the Kathmandu grapevine was swirling with rumours that King Gyanendra would soon relieve Prime Minister Deuba of his duties to take over executive powers for himself.

“I can’t speak for the other donors, but it’s very unlikely that the World Bank would issue such a statement,” I said, to the best of my knowledge. “Our charter forbids us from commenting on day-to-day domestic politics.”

Exclusive excerpts from *Cabals and Cartels* selected by the author himself



Little did I know that I had struck a raw nerve.

“You ungrateful fools!” shouted Deuba, to the effect in Nepali. “I’ve put up with donor nuisances for all these years. Now when democracy is in peril, is it too much to ask for reciprocity?”



Praful Patel, the World Bank’s Vice President for South Asia in 2005, was star-struck during his meeting with the King. Gyanendra was savvy at coddling the vanities of useful visitors. He made it a point to inform Patel that he specifically ordered the palace guards to open the main gate which was reserved only for “special guests”.

Patel was so enamoured that he shot off an email to his entire staff extolling King Gyanendra’s virtues and arguing why the World Bank should stand ready to do business with his government. But in his haste Patel apparently forgot to encrypt his email, an oversight that would come back later to haunt him.

The King hardly concealed his contempt for the political parties.

He also had choice words for the donors and NGOs.

“Terrorists are getting funds from the donors. We have the information,” said the King. “We don’t want to embarrass them. But how can a country accept this? My plea to you is this: you should not do anything that gives the Maoists an impetus to feel stronger.”

But the world would soon come to see that the royal government had lost the plot. King Gyanendra installed two Panchayat-era

octogenarians as vice-chairs to attend to daily administrative business. One vice-chair was losing his eyesight. The other was hard of hearing.

If King Gyanendra believed that self-adulation and official hero-worship would translate constitutional overreach into legitimacy, he was obviously ill-advised by his henchmen. On the contrary, his popularity started to sag. The age of deference was long since over. All the while, regular citizens were still subjected to midnight raids and humiliating body searches at the hands of impervious Royal Nepal Army soldiers. For all that the King painted himself as a redeemer, his government’s actions suggested anything but.

The swiftness with which the tables had turned and the enormity of the royal government’s diplomatic failures came as a shocking revelation to me when I overheard James Moriarty, the US Ambassador to Nepal at the time, publicly say this during a reception: “When you meet Gyanendra for the first time, you are impressed by his intentions. When you meet him a second time, you still give him

the benefit of the doubt. When you meet him for a third time, you’re convinced that he’s a con artist.”



I first met Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai in person in late August 2006. The fog of war had only started to lift and the Maoist leadership had taken a calculated gamble by making itself public in Kathmandu.

I had read somewhere that the greatest duos in history can exist independently of each other but that they really should not. The whole is always greater than the



sum of its parts. Bonnie and Clyde, Batman and Robin, Lennon and McCartney, Larry Paige and Sergy Brin, Madan Krishna and Hari Bansha. In my mind Prachanda and Baburam belonged to that same category of iconic dynamic duo.

Bhattarai did most of the talking that day. He was all fire and brimstone. No sooner had we settled into our seats, Bhattarai launched into a diatribe against the Seven Party Alliance. He demanded that the World Bank make a clean break from the past and impose a moratorium on aid. The donors should stop “subsidizing the corrupt”. The force of Bhattarai’s contempt for the Seven Party Alliance was quite revealing.



“Has the revolution started to eat its babies,” asked Ashraf Ghani, as I pulled up a chair for him in my office one afternoon. He was paraphrasing Mallet du Pan, the late-18th century French political essayist who famously contended that revolution leads to hope, hope to frustration, and frustration to fury.

Before his election as President of Afghanistan in 2014, Ghani frequented Kathmandu at the invitation of the World Bank to help the donors think through the implications of the new political and social order outlined in the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement.



The CPN-Maoist sprung an electoral surprise during the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections and far exceeded its own expectations. Not that the swing voters were suddenly sold on the Maoist ideology. Nor were they beholden to its leaders. And it was not like our hands hovered over the ballot boxes either. Many voters, myself included, decidedly voted for the Maoist party because we had convinced ourselves that our ballot might represent the best hope for a lasting peace. We were totally fed up with the paroxysms and constant political tantrums of the past year and a half since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

To use a crude Americanism, I, for one, believed it would serve Nepal’s interests to have the Maoists “inside the tent pissing out” rather than have them “outside the tent pissing in”.

Some months later I tried explaining my rationale (in slightly less graphic terms, of course) to Pampha Bhusal, the Maoist



candidate I voted for who went on to serve as a minister in the Prachanda cabinet. She thought I was pulling her leg. She could not for a moment believe that a World Bank staffer, as comprador bourgeoisie as they come, would ever vote for the Maoist party.



History has allegorical modes of transporting us back and forth across time and space. I find it a bleak irony of contemporary Nepali history that K.P. Sharma Oli, an elected Marxist who took his oath of office as Prime Minister swearing by the spirit of a post-monarchy, federal constitution, would soon adopt the same brand of “nationalism” associated with his bête noire, the authoritarian King Mahendra.

To most Nepalis it did not matter that Oli, up until that time, was merely part of the supporting cast; a side hero in the peace process. Nor did rumours matter that he was frequently high on prescription steroids to heal his kidney transplant from some years ago. His loquacious goofiness flummoxed some, but his sardonic wit endeared him with most others. Nepalis, by and large, finally found a messiah in Oli and his anti-Indian rhetoric.



The failures of Nepal’s transitional justice systems are only symptomatic of a wider malaise that has plagued Nepal since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The popular Nepali term to describe this travesty is bhaagbandaa, or cabal politics.

The origins of bhaagbandaa can be traced to the mid-1990s when, riven with instability, the collusive nature of Nepali democracy was exposed. Every government between 1998 and 2018 – twenty in as many years – was the product of either an unholy alliance, ribald political horse-trading, an obscure “gentlemen’s agreement”, or a coup.

Rather than expunging this legacy, with extra mouths to feed bhaagbandaa became more pronounced after the Maoists entered the political mainstream and proportional representation greatly inflated the size of the legislature. Bhaagbandaa manifested in deviant practices where every political party in the Constituent Assembly (there were 26 in the first CA and 30 in the second CA) deemed it an entitlement to claim their pound of flesh from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement – all in the name of consensus.

And bhaagbandaa did not stop there. It also involved the buying and selling of plum public offices. From fat contracts out of Singha Durbar to the puniest “small works” at the village “all-party-committee” level, nothing in between was spared in the feeding frenzy.

Bhaagbandaa explains why the so-called “peace-dividend”, a spurt in development and economic activity typically associated with the resolution of conflict, never materialised in the case of Nepal. It was usurped by the cabals.



The United Nations Mission to Nepal (UNMIN) descended on Kathmandu in early 2007 with all the flourish and trappings of a liberation force, albeit a civilian one. The sheer size and visibility of its presence dwarfed anything Kathmandu had ever seen before.

But UNMIN soon slid into infamy when its ubiquity was perceived as overreach. For all its grandstanding, in reality the special political mission had arrived with a limited mandate.

UNMIN staff were labelled as apologists for the Maoists’ ruthless



intimidation of opponents and activities that often bordered on the criminal. Its reputation took a constant pummelling from incorrigible sceptics in the non-Maoist parties. During its latter days, as the mission wound down, UNMIN was even accused of trying to ove=stay its welcome.

Following the 2008 elections to the first Constituent Assembly, the Speaker Subhash Nemwang told the donors, in no uncertain terms, that constitution writing in Nepal would pursue a unique, “homegrown” approach. While Nemwang managed to evade the pesky donors, he also prompted a certain torpor to set in. Most of the donors took his diktat as an excuse to lie back and think of England, as it were.



So, Nepal grew its economy 50 times over in the last 50 years, in nominal US dollar terms. We built up our human capital along the way too, quite respectfully according to many universal tallies. But, for a population size that ranks 49th in the world, we still rank 102nd in the size of our economy and 156th in terms of GDP per capita among the world’s 211 countries and sovereign territories usually listed in the global count.

One can always quibble about the veracity and the precision of the numbers; the timelines; the correlation between population size, productivity and growth; or the cross-country comparisons in human development outcomes.

But the question I would ask is: where then is the qualitative, feel-good factor underlying our “progress”? Where are the high quality public assets; the communities of world-class scientific and academic minds; the SME disrupters and the cornerstones of manufacturing; the cutting-edge innovators, the uniquely Nepali brands, the entrepreneurs and the start-ups; the money managers who trade lawfully across global markets; the sportspeople who star with international clubs; the international celebrities of Nepali literature, art and cinema; or the multi-millionaire philanthropists who pay it forward? Where are our points of entry into international diplomacy and global soft power?

Why do the loudest advertisements in our newspapers only tout education and employment abroad; short-term “consultancies” with the donor agencies and the NGOs, or job vacancies for salespeople for

foreign-made goods and spare parts? Why does the Henly Passport Index 2019 rank the strength of our Nepali passport 101 among 107 indexed? Why are our NRs denominated credit cards not worth the plastic they are embossed on anywhere beyond Nepal and India?

Self-starting societies around the world, some even in our proximity, have demonstrated that economic miracles can be engineered in one generation or less if governments invest in fortifying their institutions. They have proven that there are savvy short-cuts to progress and the late-comers to economic development in the modern-era need not trudge the same long and winding road.



Until fifteen years ago, many of us were convinced that we had hit a nadir; a point of no return on the slow road to Year Zero. Nothing short of a miracle explains how we managed to step back from the brink, bruised but not broken. Negotiation and compromise are the lifeblood of democracy and a little overkill was probably justified to help us make it through the night. Not many societies can say that today. Certainly not in the so-called “free world”.

What is there not to be hopeful about then?

Alas, in Nepal, the fact remains that politics has always been about the means and never about the ends. Politics is a cash-cow more than it is a calling. Its purpose has never been “to make citizens happy” as Aristotle would have us believe many eons ago.

The road ahead is strewn with banana peels and booby traps if we allow the short-term trading of favours to forever smoke and mirror the true purpose of politics, at its core: determining how, as a society, we might collectively prosper. We will have learnt nothing if we incessantly waffle on this count, for that will only send us back to the starting line again, possibly even at greater speed and at a much higher cost.

Real peace is more than just the absence of war. And given all that Nepal so perilously survived and so recently, one would think that our political class would keep things honest and level with citizens rather than arrogate itself to public office for purposes of vainglorious pontification. Should we not be staving off the next possible conflict? Or should we be stoking one? Is it our national fate

to constantly drift, generation past generation?

Disappointment is a dangerous emotion and the consequences of thwarted expectations could be ruinous.



Nepal has never lacked competent people or good ideas. What is sorely missing is politics-proofed institutions that connect pragmatic, transformative ideas with qualified and motivated individuals. After 60 years of development planning, it still requires a coincidence, an accident, or a stroke of extraordinarily good fortune to find the right person in the right job in the public service. This dismal lack of investment in institutions explains why Nepal’s experiments with systemic reform have been, by and large, flash-in-the-pan.

As far as democratic guardrails go, the polarity of politics and the primacy of party agendas have reduced Nepali civil society to a mere dud, barring a few truly independent minds who might still voice the Nepali conscience. By and large though, people in civil society will often complain that their “space” has shrunk in the new political order. But they will hardly let you in on their own complicity.



All is not gloom and doom. Yet, I am less than sanguine in my outlook when the cabals and the cartels, the dark underbelly of a transitioning Nepal, hollow out the prosperous and equitable New Nepal we were promised. The cabals and the cartels, the twin leitmotifs that drive my denouement, feed off each other and I do not see this deadly yoke being pierced anytime soon.

Regrettably, the 2017 general elections indicate that this will increasingly become the pattern as long as “proportional representation” remains wide open to abuse by the carpetbaggers and the party moneybags.

But glimmers of hope still glow, particularly in Nepal’s vibrant media – traditional and new – to tell it like it is. And in the gumption of my no-nonsense compatriots. I have seen enough examples of late to persuade myself that regular Nepalis across the spectrum will break ranks, gather, and grow for the next social movement every time we are outraged by an insensate political class that tests our patience or insults our collective good judgement. Afterall,

people power is mightier than people in power.



Bilateral grants and concessional multilateral loans are still the cheapest sources of Nepal’s external financing. Factoring in the time value of money, even the loans, if put to productive use, are as good as free at the end of their long maturities. But that is precisely the root of our troubles. The classical theory of foreign assistance syllogized by aid bureaucrats over many decades conditions us to miss the forest for the trees. If it is “free” then it must be good, we assume. We must take it. We rarely ask ourselves whether aid is working for or against us.

Truth be told, foreign aid and advice are too insignificant to make a positive difference anymore. Consider this: in any given year, our overseas workers rake in over five times the foreign exchange that Nepal receives in foreign aid. Over the years, Nepal, too, has produced an indigenous community of world-class development professionals and thinkers.

Yet, Nepal’s donors have been painfully slow to reinvent themselves. If anything, they remain cogs in a rusty piece of old machinery where the organisational raison d’être is reduced to simply spitting money out of the door, preferably along a path of least resistance. For all the shrill about impact and results, aid officials prize nothing more than achieving the fictional success of high “burn rates” and “disbursement ratios”.

None of this is very good for Nepal’s development. But none of this will change either as long as the donors put the interests of the cabals first.

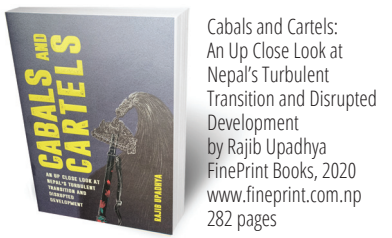
Consequently, when interests converge, the donors concoct artless excuses to keep throwing good money after bad. They devise gratuitous ways to reward the government even for elementary tasks that any government anywhere should be performing on its own. Perpetuated over many years, the donors reinforce a toxic sense of entitlement among the recipients. When aid need not be “earned” anymore, it is a crutch that cripples.



Nepal’s transition is heading off in diametrical tangents – in manners that even the most astute reader of tea leaves would be hard pressed to explain what it is we are actually transitioning to.

We can paper over our institutional failures and go on chipping away at the margins in an alphabet soup of second, third and fourth order economic reforms to still pretend we are making progress. But, similar to the recent past, those too will remain vulnerable to the fleeting fancies and pocketbook preferences of people in short-term office. None will endure unless we listen to our better angels to address the first order of fundamental change – the de rigueur quarantine of the worst instincts that tend to eclipse our sense of direction and misguide the priorities of our state and markets.

If the past continues to live in the present, will the future ever arrive? 🇳🇵



Cabals and Cartels: An Up Close Look at Nepal's Turbulent Transition and Disrupted Development by Rajib Upadhyia FinePrint Books, 2020 www.fineprint.com.np 282 pages





# An American-Nepali duet

Anna Stirr didn't just do a PhD on Nepali folk songs, but has also become an accomplished *dohori* performer

Gopal Gartoula

Anna Marie Stirr was intrigued and thoroughly captivated the first time she listened to a *dohori* traditional duet in Nepal twenty years ago. Was it a song or a long playful banter between musicians?

She was a student of ethnomusicology at New York's Columbia University at the time, and the *dohori* genre stood out not only for its unique vocal tone and style, but because it blurred the lines between music and drama, delivering a performance that was unlike anything she had ever witnessed before.

Stirr began to delve into the world of Nepali folk music, learnt the language and spent two decades traveling within Nepal, studying and analysing minutely the spontaneous lyrics, the rules governing the musical back-and-forth, and what made *dohori* such an essence of Nepali culture.

On one of her many trips in 2005, cheered on by members of a local mothers' group in Lamjung Stirr was urged to join in the singing. She came up with her own *dohori* compilation: "*Aye ma ta yo gaun ma khuruka, sab bhujna sukha ra dukha, mirmireko gham...*" (I have come to this village to understand both happiness and pain, the twinkling sun...)



The mothers were delighted by her fluent and mellifluous Nepali, and the way she had grasped the soul of the songs. Ever since, Stirr has been obsessed with *dohori*. She is now an Associate Professor at the University of Hawaii and her 2017 book based on her PhD research, *Singing across Divides: Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal*, was awarded the Bernard S Cohn Book Prize last year.

"*Dohori* is a truly challenging

and complex musical practice," explains Stirr, who has studied the variations of *dohori* by singers like Sharmila Gurung and Devi Gharti Magar, whose voices feature impeccable skill and precision when carrying out the complicated *kharki* voice modulation in their songs. Komal Oli's steady and controlled voice has now become characteristic of her personal style and flair.

"*Dohori* singers must be poets at heart," says Stirr, who defines the singing in her book as 'dialogic, conversational sung poetry' that uses improvisation, wit, playfulness, and ingenuity all at the same time. *Dohori* is not just entertainment, it tackles societal issues like gender, class and caste discrimination, and the songs challenge rulers.

During the Panchayat, *dohori* was a medium for democratic activism, and today with the failure of governance that is driving



**SAYING IT IN A SONG:** Anna Marie Stirr has completely immersed herself into the world of Nepali *dohori* folk duets, performing the song routines.

Stirr (*far left*) with folk singer Badri Pangeni, Devi Gharti Magar and Jamuna Rana at a performance in 2019.



in collaboration with Bhakla Syangtan of Radio Namobudhha that profiles folk musician-turned-MP Khushi Ram Pakhrin.

"*Hajarau ko balidan le kalo yuga dhaleko cha*," (The dark age has ended through the sacrifice of thousands of people) goes one of Pakhrin's song. And there is hope for a better future in this one: "*Srijana ra sambriddhi ko bato khulna thaleko cha*" (The path of creativity and prosperity is beginning to open up).

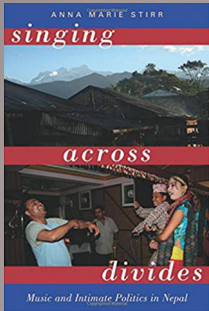
Stirr writes in her book: 'Mediating technologies, narratives of national feeling, and new feelings engendered in changing surroundings continue to shape modern ideas of "village voices" (folk music), at the intersection of development, nostalgia, exploration and evolving ideas of belonging.'

Stirr has spent nearly ten years studying and enjoying Nepali folk music in Nepal, she taught at the music department of Kathmandu University in 2004, fostering connections with folk musicians like Tulsi Parajuli and Satyakala Rai, and frequenting live performances of *dohori* songs in the Nirmaya Rodhi Club alongside folk singer Sheila Ale.

Preforming in traditional attire with near-perfect Nepali inflection, Anna Stirr is as much Nepali as she is American. She considers Nepal as her second home, and even though she is 13,000km away in Hawaii she keeps her connections alive through *dohori* and preparing Nepali food of which her favourites are local *kukhura ko masu* and *alu ko achar*.

Stirr says she would still like to visit many more places in Nepal, exploring and studying different regions and their folk music, and she would have been in Nepal now if it had not been for the COVID-19 crisis.

She told *Nepali Times* in an interview in 2008: "I can make people laugh when I sing a *dohori*, but I haven't yet been able to make them cry."



**Singing Across Divides:** Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal  
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