Tug-o-war during Covid-19 crisis

After six months of pressure, Prime Minister K P Oli has finally backed down to allow his ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) rivals led by co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal to nominate senior leader Ramdev Gautam into the Upper House.

The fact that this internal power struggle in the party dragged on for so long at a time when the country was reeling under the Covid-19 pandemic is enough proof that Nepali politics is not about improving governance and service delivery to citizens, but about Jabharganda division of the spoils.

And it is when the bargaining hits a deadlock that the country is held hostage, as it has for over a year now. Prime Minister Oli wriggled out of every challenge to his leadership by either using anti-Indian nationalism, or threatening to split the party.

But on Thursday, Oli relented and is now in a bit of a bind. He realised that he was in a minority in the party secretariat, with even his staunch loyalist Bishnu Paudel said to be supporting Gautam, and Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa fence-sitting. Oli had to agree to Gautam’s nomination to the Upper House, but he may still have something up his sleeves.

Gautam will have to resign from his finance minister position by Saturday, but insiders say Oli could still renominate him with President Bidhya Bhandari’s consent.

In the past, whenever he has been cornered in the NCP secretariat or standing committee, Oli has pulled a rabbit out of a hat. And given this track record, the Prime Minister will still have options to retain Khatiwada as finance minister.

One bone of contention between the Oli and the Dahal faction since January has been Gautam’s future. He is the only senior leader in the NCP who has never had a chance to be prime minister, and has openly admitted that he would like to get a chance to serve as one.

Knowing this, Oli had been stringing Gautam along, first promising a Constitution amendment to make an Upper House member prime minister, then assuring Gautam’s election to an NCP seat from Dolpo so he could become an MP and succeed him as prime minister.

Gautam allied with Dahal to put pressure on Oli, but the prime minister mollified him repeatedly by dangling carrots. At a late night meeting at Baluwatar on Wednesday, Oli gave it one last try and offered Gautam the Dolpo constituency so he could succeed him as prime minister.

The unelected Khatiwada was nominated to the Upper House and made Finance Minister by Prime Minister Oli, who has come to rely on him as a sounding board with the international community as well as on fiscal policy.

Khatiwada also became the Information Minister and government spokesperson after the resignation of scandal-ridden Gokul Banskota in February. Khatiwada’s term in the Upper House has been extended once before, but it ended on 5 September. Gautam was angling for his party’s nomination to the Upper House and to replace Khatiwada. But it remains to be seen if he will get it, because Prime Minister Oli can still renominate Khatiwada to the Upper House and retain him as Finance Minister.

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Oli tried to find a way to convince Dahal about retaining Khatiwada at a meeting on Tuesday, but Dahal told Oli that he could not take that decision on his own and would have to put it to the secretariat.

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A columnist recently described the state of education in the country as being characterised by the government’s neglect of public schools and disdain for private schools.

This is nothing new. Those in power have always taken it easy, trusting the private schools to shoulder the burden of educating the poor, while doing everything in their power to ensure that the poor have no recourse. The added tragedy is that the government has been caught red-handed, the numerous cases of mismanagement of taxpayers’ money but none have been held to account.

The likes of the “digital divide” to discount private schools from thinking of the box on online classes. Vague and ambiguous policy decisions have not helped clarify the confusing.

Now that it is clear that the pandemic is here to stay, the Ministry of Education has finally finalised a plan to grant formal recognition to remote learning classes. However, if not planned properly, this will widen the inequity in Nepal’s education system.

A survey in May showed children in 95% of households had stopped going to school, and 52% were not even attending classes. Only 29% had access to distance learning, of that only half were using it.

The attitude of the Ministry towards government schools which fall directly under its own purview is even more galling. While the government school teachers, administrators and the entire education superstructure have remained fully salaried throughout the nearly six months of lockdown, they have nearly nothing in term of remote teaching.

The government’s inactivity and unwillingness to address the lack of education for nearly 6 million students whose government schools are tantamount to criminal negligence. The ministry’s dynamism has long been ended by the politicalisation of the education sector, neglected by the education establishment from the federal ministries downwards, and lack of accountability and institutional memory among donors who have genuinely guided the education sector with its ‘basket fund’ over the past decades.

Even today, the ministry seems to be mainly concerned with the PDO’s requests coming to pandemic response. Better-off private schools have access to online learning, but most government school children have neither computers nor connectivity.

The most underprivileged districts have negligible Covid-19 spread, and schools there are sparsely attended. The government’s assurance that a review of the government’s closed schools was even more critical is palpable without physical distance in the classrooms. Yet, it has been five months and the Ministry of Education has not acted on the fact for this simple reality.

The government schools in urban clusters and the densely-populated Tarai, the federal government had enough time to implement an emergency plan for rural government schools to ensure availability and remote radio classes. Some of these online classes could have been centralised, while the individual schools that had the capacity should have been encouraged to start their own. The laissez-faire, yet sadly predictable.

Minister of Education Girijan Mani Pokhrel deserves an F for not responding to the Covid-19 crisis to improve government school education. But the buck stops with his boss, Prime Minister K O P O I. They should both read the Constitution, which relegates the responsibility for school-level education to municipalities. Local governments would do a better job.

It is well known for decades that while Nepal’s enrollment rate rose, literacy went up, and we have numerically more schools, there was affair on the part of the government in raising the quality of instruction. We had hoped that handing over education to the local governments was a way to improve the quality.

But alas, like everything else, education is still tightly controlled.

The Covid-19 crisis could still be turned into an opportunity if the federal Ministry of Education were to wake up and support urban and rural municipalities to restart remote and in-person classes, and raise the standard of instruction in government schools where it is most needed.

Economy cost of lockdown has been severe. Agree to do at some extent, but overall positive. A lockdown is not a solution to a problem. What is needed is a more sustainable solution in such communities.

I was wondering if menstrual cups distribution would have been encouraged to discourage private schools and government ones. It is surprising that the Ministry of Education gets an F.

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The goal of political stability does not remove the need for active promotion of human rights

End impunity, protect rights: HRW

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has once more urged the government to address allegations of recent extra-judicial executions and deaths in custody, as well as to respect the independence of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

The NHRC has filed reports of continued human rights abuses by Nepal’s security forces, and urged the government to end impunity and be accountable for the abuses.

“Nepal is still trying to grapple with delivering justice for unlawful killings during the armed conflict, but abuses continue to mount,” said Meena Khadka, HRW’s South Asia director.

“The government uses rule of law rhetoric to appeal to foreign diplomats and donors but actually fosters a culture of impunity,” she said.

In June, killed Kumar Paudel, 47, of the Biplav faction of the Nepal Police in Chitwan district. An investigation by the NHRC said police officers responsible should be prosecuted, but the Home Ministry rejected the report.

The NHRC also called for an investigation into the deaths of Raja Kumar Chapeung, 24, after being detained by the Army in Chitwan National Park, and Biraj Mahara, 19, after being taken in by Police for questioning.

The human rights violations have continued mainly because earlier heinous crimes committed during the 1996-2006 conflict have gone unpunished despite the government’s inactivity in pursuing transitional justice, rights groups have said.

Responding to the government’s request to the NHRC to reconsider its recommendation in the case of Kumar Paudel, secretary and spokesperson for the commission, Bed Bhattarai, told HRW: “The Home Ministry is asking the NHRC to rethink the recommendation of the commission but actually we have clear evidence. The NHRC has investigated and concluded it as an extrajudicial killing.”

Research by Advocacy Forum found that despite the end of the conflict in 2006, torture is still widespread in Police custody in Nepal, and members of the Dalit and other marginalised groups are far more likely to be tortured than those of the ‘upper’ castes. ‘Torture became a crime under Nepali law for the first time in 2014, but there have been no successful prosecutions.

The NHRC says the government has implemented only 12% of 310 commission recommendations in the eight years till 2019. The terms of the current members of the NHRC expire in October.

HRW is also critical of Nepal’s donors for not addressing impunity in the country, saying funders of the Nepal Police should publicly and privately insist that Nepal meets its basic obligation to investigate and prosecute grave violations.

When the country was elected to the current United Nations Human Rights Council, Nepal had said that it guaranteed the independence of the NHRC and the judiciary. It was genuinely committed to pursue transitional justice for conflict-era crimes.

Six UN special rapporteurs have warned that the Nepal government has failed to ‘sweep under the carpet’ the NHRC’s independence and authority, and the government had failed to comply with repeated Supreme Court rulings to amend the transitional justice law to meet international standards, and instead has ignored numerous court orders relating to conflict-era police investigations and prosecutions. Nepal is now standing for a second term at the Council, and its record is coming up for review.

Nepal must reboot human rights, rule of law

Sometimes it can feel as though Nepal goes through endless cycles that bring us back every time to the place where we started. Maybe we just need more years to look back and see the progress. But up close, we seem to stand still. If this country is ever to deal with impunity and injustice, we must break away from petty politics.

It is now two-and-half years since the elections that led to the creation of the Nepal Communist Party. Many see this as a decisive moment, a time when we left behind the uncertain past and could, finally, unify Nepal to become prosperous. Some saw an opportunity at last for a ‘peace dividend’. In the international community, many considered it as a harbinger of stability, which would allow them to finally fully implement development programs free from the disruption of war and political intrigue.

Yet very few were alert to the risks to human rights. It was almost as though political commentators and the diplomatic community shared the view that the political stability they thought was assured for the foreseeable future would automatically lead to a sudden respect for rights.

These days, the pandemic is occupying people’s thoughts. Nepal faces grave risk as the disease spreads, and there is an urgent need for appropriate and effective countermeasures. But even before this severe unforeseen shock to our society, political stability and respect for human rights was looking less and less certain. In the past few months the uncertainty is even greater.

One of the costs of ‘stability’ has been the non-compliance of the Home Ministry. In August of last year, the government refused to follow the Supreme Court’s recommendations to establish a transitional justice law to meet international standards, and to comply with repeated Supreme Court rulings to amend the transitional justice law to meet international standards, and to comply with repeated Supreme Court rulings to amend the transitional justice law to meet international standards, and to comply with repeated Supreme Court rulings to amend the transitional justice law to meet international standards.

The Nepal Police have since been allowed to refuse to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary and Arbitrary Executions and the NHRC, while the Indian government, which has been called upon to reconsider its recommendation in the case of Kumar Paudel, secretary and spokesperson for the commission, Bed Bhattarai, told HRW: “The Home Ministry is asking the NHRC to rethink the recommendation of the commission but actually we have clear evidence. The NHRC has investigated and concluded it as an extrajudicial killing.”

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Mohna Ansari is Commissioner, National Human Rights Commission of Nepal.
Drop in wildfires during lockdown

Satellite images show reduction in fires this spring compared to same period last year

Jayash Paudel

Comparisons of satellite images show that the Covid-19 lockdown has resulted in a reduction in the number of wildfires in Nepal in the spring of 2020 compared to the previous year.

Air pollution data for Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal also indicate an average of 38% improvement in air quality because of restrictions in vehicular movement since the first lockdown went into effect on 24 March.

However, there was a sharp deterioration in air quality mid-April this year in Kathmandu Valley despite vehicles being off the roads. This has been linked directly to several wildfires burning simultaneously in the districts around Kathmandu which caused an increase in outdoor air borne particles.

In fact, NASA satellite measurements show a significant increase in gases like carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide from the wildfires in that period compared to the previous year.

The air quality satellite image (see map, below right) shows that the number of molecules of NO2 per cm² was much higher in Kathmandu Valley in 9-14 April 2020 when compared to the same days in 2019.

But the fires in mid-April were an exception. The number of forest fires in Nepal, in fact, dropped drastically as the lockdown continued. A published study has found that restrictions on movement of people across districts in response to the pandemic likely caused a 5% decrease in the number of forest fire events and a 11% reduction in fire radiative power associated with the fires compared to the previous year.

These positive changes were more pronounced in districts with smaller areas of community-managed forests per capita. The difference across different areas of the country suggests that some districts are much better equipped in controlling fire incidence and its spread.

Districts including Arghakhanchi, Rupandehi, Salyan, Rautahat, Kapilvastu, Bara, Parsa and Dailekh implemented stricter control on movement of people during the lockdown. Other than the absence of humans in the forests, high pre-monsoon rainfall this spring may have also dampened the number of fires.

Among developing countries, Nepal faces the recurring threat of forest fires that damage around 200,000 hectares every year. A majority of these fires are human-induced and occur during the dry season, mostly between March and May.

Between 2000 and 2010, the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) data shows that Nepal faced 47,000 unique wildfires averaging fire radiative power (FRP) of 29.88 megawatts.

These fires have been linked to deliberate burning by grazers and collectors of non-timber forest products, human negligence and accidents. Wildfires cause massive degradation and damage of physical infrastructure every year, affecting livelihoods of people all over Nepal.

Empirical estimates suggest that forest fires result in an annual economic loss of Rs5,000 per household, equivalent to 7.12% of the annual per capita GDP in Nepal. This year has been different. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic led the government to enforce a week-long lockdown on 24 March, which was partially lifted for a month before being re-imposed in 44 of Nepal’s 77 districts.

A significant focus on precautionary measures over coronavirus during the nationwide lockdown raised questions about limited enforcement mechanisms among forest managers and a potential increase in illegal forest activities. This motivated researchers to periodically study fire data in the Himalayan region via the Aqua and Terra satellites available from NASA’s Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS).

India also saw a similar trend this year: high annual rainfall this year exceeding the 15-year average coincided with the reduced number of forest fires in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh in the western Himalaya during the lockdown.

This despite the fact that even in cases of high rainfall, the amount of moisture retained by the soil may still be the same compared to previous years.

Although the Nepali study takes fluctuations in rainfall and temperature into account, satellite data on real-time active fire locations have their set of limitations as well.

First, it is possible that multiple fire incidences within one-pixel area are reported as a single incidence. This problem occurs because the location of the fire is usually reported as the center of the pixel. Second, several factors such as land surface temperature, cloud cover and wind direction determine the minimum size of the fire a satellite detects.

Finally, it is possible that fires may have started and ended between satellite observations, implying that actual forest fire events may have occurred but not observed in the data.

These caveats aside, my findings indicate that the pandemic led to a strong positive effect on the environment in the short-run. A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that the reduction in the number of forest fire events in the aftermath of the lockdown resulted in a short-term weekly economic gain of Rs360 per household in Nepal.

This, however, does not imply that pandemic, in general, has been beneficial.

Rather, environmental benefits from reduced incidences of wildfires and improved air quality during the lockdown may partially offset the socioeconomic cost of pandemics across different parts of the globe.

The virus outbreak has direct repercussions on health and labour market outcomes. It would be interesting to see if the lessons learnt in reducing forest fires, air pollution and fossil fuel consumption can be adopted in planning for a ‘better normal’ for Nepal.

Jayash Paudel is an Economics Professor at Boise State University in the United States.
Turkish restarts flights

Following the government’s directive to resume limited regular flights, Turkish has started Kathmandu-Istanbul connections that were stopped in March after the flight ban went into effect. Turkish Airlines operated its first scheduled flight on 3 September, and will be flying weekly on Thursdays from Kathmandu to Istanbul on 10, 17 and 24 September. The flight coincided with the seventh anniversary of Turkish Airlines service to Kathmandu.

Turkish Airlines has created guidelines for safe travel during the pandemic, which include online check-in, fever checks, no contact boarding procedures, provision of a hygiene kit, new catering guidelines, and more. Passengers can get tested at the PCR centre in Istanbul Airport. During the flight, hospital-standard High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters will clean the air onboard.

Scheduled flights resume

The Nepali government reopened regular flights after nearly six months on 1 September with a scheduled Nepal Airlines departure to Narita. Since March, there have been only chartered repatriation flights to take stranded tourists out, and bring back Nepalis.

The government is allowing regular flights only from countries where PCR tests are easily available. There will only be charter flights from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for now, even though transit passengers will be allowed through Dubai. All passengers on regular flights need to have RT PCR negative documents before boarding, but will have to self-isolate at home for one week after landing. Only diplomats and families will be allowed to fly to Kathmandu, tourists and foreign visitors.

Nepal Airlines will be operating two more flights this month, as well as four to Kuala Lumpur and Dubai. Altogether there will be 14 flights during September to and from Kuala Lumpur by Nepal Airlines, Himalaya, Malindo and Malaysia Airlines. Most other airlines are flying once a week with limited passenger loads to comply with the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) limit on the number of arriving passengers. Earlier, CAAN had set a limit of 500 passengers a day, but has now increased it to 800, which includes charter flights.

International Airlines operating limited scheduled flights are Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, Etihad, Oman Air, Fly Dubai, Malaysia Airlines, Dragon Air, China Southern and Air China. Permission has not yet been given for flights from Indian cities because of the continuing rise in the number of Covid-19 cases there, airline sources said.

IMC, which had been scheduled to resume flights on 26 August, has postponed it to 1 September in light of the recent restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Galaxy Note20 is priced at Rs109,999 while the Galaxy Note20 Ultra is available at Rs139,999.

IME wallet

IME has mobilised its agent partners and enabled its digital wallet facility IME Pay mobile wallet app to make remittance directly available to users on their digital wallet during the COVID-19 crisis.
### Virtual Events

#### Pame Film Festival
The online Pame Film and Music Festival will screen feature films, short films, and documentaries from Nepal as well as around the world. Watch the films on the Chhuti TV app for free.

#### Learn French
Consider learning a new language in the free time at home. Join Alliance Française Kathmandu’s 6-week long beginner French language classes. Get details on the enrolling page on Facebook.

#### Sunday Sessions
This week, psychological counsellor and therapist Purja Pradhan joins journalist Pratibha Tuladhar in a discussion surrounding mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tune in to the livestream on Facebook. More details on the Quotient’s Cover Story page.

#### Women in Comedy
In Breaking Barriers: Women in Comedy, 4 influential women in Nepali comedy Uma Gurung, Loomba Tuladhar, Saranya Maharjan, and Yosna Thapa Magar, will share their experiences about working in a male-dominated industry and how they use their platform to bring social issues into focus. Learn more at bit.ly/3aFeLCn.

#### Air Quality Index

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>AQI</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>301–500</td>
<td>Unhealthy</td>
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### Online Games

#### Roblox
Roblox is a global wide game platform that hosts user-created games of multiple genres. Join the immersive 3D world and enjoy games created by players for players.

#### Boardgame Arena
Explore first-person, gather round the campfire, and trace the constellations in Lost Constellation and Longest Night, two games available in Boardgame Arena. Head to the website to start.

#### Kahoot!
A game-based learning platform, Kahoot! is used as educational technology in schools and educational institutions. Its learning games can be used in classrooms, home, and offices. Try the platform and share their experiences about working in a male-dominated industry and how they use their platform to bring social issues into focus. Learn more at bit.ly/3aFeLCn.

### Quarantine Dining

#### Hankook Sarang
Satisfy the hankering for Korean food with the delicious and crispy variety of momo and Guccha momo from Bota. Bota’s momo menu and Guccha momo are also available to order.

#### Grill Durbar
At Grill Durbar, there isn’t anything that can’t be grilled. Try the signature grilled chicken and the Durbar fries. Check out its Facebook page for take away details.

#### Saigon Pho
Experience the Vietnamese flavors of Vietnamese dishes, prepared by Vietnamese chefs. Try the Tom Yum noodle and the cold noodles with BBQ pork. Look at the menu and order for more.

### Virtual Events

#### Virtual Event 1

**Title:** Chef’s Table

**Description:** This original Netflix documentary series Chef’s Table introduces us into the kitchens of the world’s top chefs, from Mexico and Italy to Thailand and Australia. Creator David Gelb focuses each episode on a specific chef, their personal philosophies and approach to cooking. With pandemic here to stay, lockdowns still in place, the six-season long web series might serve as cooking inspiration for many.

#### Virtual Event 2

**Title:** Kahoot!

**Description:** Kahoot! is a game-based learning platform used as educational technology in schools and educational institutions. Its learning games can be used in classrooms, home, and offices. Try the platform and share their experiences about working in a male-dominated industry and how they use their platform to bring social issues into focus.

### Virtual Event 3

**Title:** Boardgame Arena

**Description:** Explore first-person, gather round the campfire, and trace the constellations in Lost Constellation and Longest Night, two games available in Boardgame Arena. Head to the website to start.

### Virtual Event 4

**Title:** Roblox

**Description:** Roblox is a global wide game platform that hosts user-created games of multiple genres. Join the immersive 3D world and enjoy games created by players for players.

### Virtual Event 5

**Title:** Hankook Sarang

**Description:** Satisfy the hankering for Korean food with the delicious and crispy variety of momo and Guccha momo from Bota. Bota’s momo menu and Guccha momo are also available to order.

### Virtual Event 6

**Title:** Grill Durbar

**Description:** At Grill Durbar, there isn’t anything that can’t be grilled. Try the signature grilled chicken and the Durbar fries. Check out its Facebook page for take away details.

### Virtual Event 7

**Title:** Saigon Pho

**Description:** Experience the Vietnamese flavors of Vietnamese dishes, prepared by Vietnamese chefs. Try the Tom Yum noodle and the cold noodles with BBQ pork. Look at the menu and order for more.
The empty chairs

The passage of time, of existing and not existing, in portraits of conflict victims and their families

Nepal went through a protracted internal armed conflict from 1996-2006 after the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched a rebellion to liberate the country from feudalism and monarchy.

However, serious human rights violations and abuses were committed by both sides: the state security forces as well as the guerrillas. Over 17,000 people were killed on both sides, and more than 3,300 people are still listed as missing. The families do not know whether they are dead or alive, or who was responsible for their disappearance.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) put an end to the conflict on 21 November 2006, with both sides agreeing to hold perpetrators accountable, and provide truth and justice to victims, including a commitment to investigate the whereabouts of those who were disappeared.

However, 14 years after the ceasefire, these promises remain unfulfilled. This photographic project focuses on the families of the victims of the conflict to mark the International Day of the Disappeared on 30 August.

My image making process involves ‘re-unions’, in which families who lost members are alongside projections of old photographs which include missing relatives. The passage of time, of existing and not existing, is layered within a single image.

Rekha Bastola

Rekha looks out her window while I was trying to capture her portrait, her nephew holds a backpack in front of her. This is the only picture of her husband that Rekha has. As Maoist commanders wanted by the government, their wedding was held secretly with only a few comrades attending. Four months after the wedding, her husband was arrested by security and never came back. After the 2006 peace deal, Rekha married again and gave birth to a boy.

Nijala

Nijala sits in front a picture of her father, taken during a festival. Her father was captured twice by the security forces, and later disappeared for being a Maoist. She was just one year old. Her mother Rubi, thinking she would be next, went underground. After the 2006 peace deal, Rubi married again and gave birth to a boy.

Bimala Bhakal

Bimala Bhakal poses for a portrait alongside the projected photo of her husband Rajendra Prasad Bhakal who was a human rights activist in Gorkha, and was disappeared in 1999 during a trip to Tamanah. She looked for her husband everywhere, and was herself arrested and tortured by the army. She never found him. Bimala rarely talks about her husband in front of her children, only when something reminds her of him.

Nagma Mali

Nagma poses for a portrait in front of a picture of her father. Nagma’s mother passed away while giving birth to her sister Swastika. Their father was abducted by the army when Swastika was three, and she had to support her little sister and her grandmother who was ill. Nagma now works for the Children of the Disappeared while studying for her bachelor degree.

Bikesh Dhakal

Bikesh poses for a portrait alongside a photo of his father Rajendra Prasad Dhakal projected to the wall behind him. He was only nine months old when his father was disappeared in 1999. “Sometimes, when I smile or sing out loud, my mother tells me that I look just like my father,” Bikesh says.

Swastika Mali

Swastika stands in the garden of their home in Lalitpur. Swastika’s mother died while disappeared. After her father disappeared, Swastika was raised by her sister Nagma.

Maina Karki

Maina Karki and her son sit in front a picture of her late husband, who was a sociology teacher in a government school. He was detained twice by Maoist guerrillas for refusing to give them a donation, and killed the second time. The police report said he had been shot four times.

Srijana Shrestha

Srijana sits in front of a picture of herself with her husband, Sanjay, who was a supporter of the Nepali Congress party. In 2001, Maoist guerrillas came into their home and shot her husband in the room. He died on the way to hospital. Theirs was an inter-caste marriage, and the couple had to escape to Pokhara to get married.

Gita Rasaili

Gita poses for a portrait in front of a picture of her sister Reena. Gita and two of her brothers joined the Maoist militia when she was 14. One of her brothers died in combat, and her sister Reena, a student at that time, was raped and killed by the army in her own backyard.

“Whatever I feel is that we need to speak up for tomorrow,” says Gita. Since 2007, Gita has been working for people who were victimised during the war and on issues of women empowerment in Voices of Women in Media.

Devi Sumar

Devi Sumar and her adopted daughter Maina in front of the picture of Devi’s late daughter Maina who was only 14 when she was tortured and killed by the army as revenge for her mother’s criticism of their involvement in the murder of her niece, Reena Rasaili. Accused of being a Maoist supporter, Reena was shot dead in her own backyard.

“Maina’s body has been in the hospital morgue for 17 years, and I will cremate her when she gets justice,” says Devi, who has founded the Maina Child Development Committee.

Suman Adhikari

Suman Adhikari sits in front of a family picture in which his brother and father Mukta Nath Adhikari are celebrating Tihar. Suman’s father was a teacher and human rights activist in Lamjung. He was accused of continuing to teach Sanskrit and for refusing to give donations to the Maoists cause. In 2002, a dozen guerrillas took him away from a class he was teaching, tied him to a tree, stabbed him in the chest, and shot him.

Former Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai has publicly acknowledged that the murder was a “mistake”. No one has been punished for the crime.

Guligo Jia, 30, is a Chinese photographer and documentary filmmaker based in Beijing, and was stranded in Nepal from February–July 2020. guligojia@qq.com
Looking back 70 years to the role of a German physiotherapist and her friendship with King Tribhuvan in Nepal’s transition

Erika and King Tribhuvan

Erika Leuchtag with King Tribhuvan, ‘Birdy’ and ‘Dreamy’ (Senior Queen Kanti and Junior Queen Ishwari) along with Princess Vijaya in Calcutta in 1951 at Princess Bharati’s wedding.

When Erika read the story to the King, he cried out, “But that is I, Erika! And that is you!” The King asked if he might keep the story and Erika said, “It was written for you, but I promise you, one day the whole world will know.”

The king is King Tribhuvan. Erika is Erika Leuchtag, a German physiotherapist. The story is the book *With a King in the Clouds* which came out in 1958, and a later edition titled *Erika and the King* published by Coward-McCann Inc.

The book is an intimate history of King Tribhuvan during Nepal’s political transition, his queens Kanti and Ishwari and the princesses Nalini, Vijaya and Bharati, who were not allowed to leave the Naryanhiti Palace by Nepal’s Rana rulers.

The 270-page memoir begins on Christmas Eve in 1948 when Erika receives a letter from a European doctor, asking if she would be prepared to be a masseur for the Senior Queen of Nepal, who was then staying in the household of the royal family of Patiala in India.

Despite her family and friends advising her against venturing out to what was then a forbidden Himalayan kingdom, Erika entered Nepal in February 1949 and walked up across Chandragiri pass to Kathmandu with her helper Gorkhi Ram and her spaniel dog, Peepchen.

Erika did not have a clue about the Shah-Rana dynamics of Nepal’s two royal families until she sensed something was ‘off’ when she visited Singha Darbar – ‘a prototype of the Palace of Versailles’ – to meet the last Rana Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher and the Director-General of Foreign Affairs, Bijaya Shumsher.

The British had left India, and an Anglophile Rana dynasty’s days were numbered. There were new rulers in Delhi, and many members of Nepal’s royal families and of India’s princely states were married to each other. Palace intrigue, royal rivalries, and geopolitics were rife, and Erika changed from what the Ranas saw as a ditzy European woman to an insider playing an integral part in helping Tribhuvan’s escape to India and the eventual end of Rana rule.

Her daily visits to the ‘Naran Hity Durbar’ was ostensibly to serve Senior Queen Kanti Rajya Lakshmi, but she ended up befriending the entire family, particularly King Tribhuvan. She was not just a physiotherapist for them, but a teacher, a Western dance instructor and a German language tutor.

She nicknamed the two queens Kanti and Ishwari ‘Birdy’ and ‘Dreamy’ for their beauty and personalities, but one gets hints of a growing intimacy with Tribhuvan. Erika Leuchtag herself left Germany before the war because of the rise of Adolf Hitler, and she makes no secret of the fact that the Ranas reminded her of the Nazis, and the Shahs were therefore allies.

Historian Dinesh Raj Panta remembers reading a smuggled copy of the first edition of Leuchtag’s book in secrecy because it was banned, ironically, after the Shahs came to power. As a historian, Panta was intrigued by the German’s relationship with Tribhuvan, his escape to the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu, departure to Delhi, and the events that followed.

“Was she in love with Tribhuvan? Or was it just loyal devotion towards the king? Maybe the book was banned because people might think that the king’s father had a romantic alliance with a European woman and that would taint the history of the restoration of the Shah dynasty,” Panta speculates.

Rajni Chand, the granddaughter of King Tribhuvan and daughter of Princess Nalini, was brought up in Happy Cottage inside Narayanhiti since she was two by both her grandmothers – Queens Kanti and Ishwari. Now 64 and living in Chhauni, she remembers her grannies talk about Erika and how everything changed after she arrived in Kathmandu.

It was not just Erika who was devoted to the family. Chand remembers being told the royal family was also extremely fond of her. They even named the room where she taught them to waltz the Erika Dance Hall in her honour. As
A child, Chand remembers sneaking into the hall every chance she got, describing vividly his melancholy and the beauty he saw in the garden. He noticed that even in that short time, Erika managed to leave long-lasting memories for each one of them, Chand told us in an interview last week.

Unlike many history books about Nepal’s longest reigning king, Erika gives us an insider’s personal perspective on the man, describing vividly his melancholy and frustration at being a mere pawn at the hands of five Rana prime ministers. Chandreshwar Prasad Shumsher, Juddha Shumsher, Padma Shumsher and Mohan Shumsher.

It is interesting to note that Erika’s influence that Tribhuvan developed helped Tribhuvan to transform the image of his country that would have never have been possible before.

The book concludes with King Tribhuvan’s death in a hospital in Zurich, and as Dinesh Raj Panta notes, leaves upon an interpretation about why Erika did so much for a country that would have never have been possible before.

This is all stuff that could be turned into a gripping historical TV series like The Crown for which Erika Leuchtag has already written the script.

The emotion of Erika Leuchtag’s days in Nepal for the life of the late King Tribhuvan (one of several portraits of his life) is intended to be the only time he said “The Bird and I.” Miss Leuchtag is a German physiotherapist, the caput of the Nepalese physiotherapy movement, the founder of the first school of physiotherapy in Nepal, and the wife of Tribhuvan’s two Queens (Tribhuvan and Laxmi were both married to one woman, Laxmi is more than a royal physiotherapist, she mentions her grandmother, mother and aunts in loving terms. That is the other unique part of this book – she admires and respects Erika, not only I, but all my colleagues offer you our heartfelt thanks for the trouble you have taken to plant and make it live from past.

"In a conversation with Indian ambassador CP Singh during a picnic trip to Budhanilkantha, Erika Leuchtag writes that she and Tribhuvan developed elaborate code words in their communications to keep their plans secret. Here were some of them:"

**Letter from Tribhuvan to Leuchtag**, giving due credit to her help through coded words:

- **Serpent** - A Rana
- **Big Snake** - Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher
- **Bird** - Ambassador
- **Moor - The King**
- **Flower** - Letter
- **Kite** - Airplane
- **Storms - Evacuation**
- **Erika - Lakshmi**

"Erika and the King, is now available as an e-book in English translation and is a timeless historical read. This is a fairy-tale account of that period if it is dopey and does not exaggerate her own influence. Rajni Chand, who has read the book, notes that Erika’s account and the oral history that she grew up with in the Shah royal family do match quite a bit. Chand admits she admired and respected Erika, probably also because the book introduces her, grandmother, mother, and aunts in loving terms. That is the other unique part of this book – very few historical accounts in Nepal mention the women behind the scenes, and if they do, female protagonists are often portrayed as power-hungry and ruthless.

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Even 62 years after its first publication, Erika and the King is a fascinating insider account of Nepal’s royal family through the eyes of a foreigner. It also re-introduces us to Erika Leuchtag, who seems to have played an important role in the escape of Tribhuvan and his family in 1951 to the Indian Embassy and four days later to Delhi.

On June 1, 1958, the team of four, including Miss Leuchtag, managed the escape. The King and his family were whisked away to a Swiss hotel, where they were flown to Zurich, and as Dinesh Raj Panta notes, leaves upon an interpretation about why Erika did so much for a country that would have never have been possible before.

The rest, of course, is history, the fate of which Tribhuvan and his family in 1951 to the Indian Embassy and four days later to Delhi. In the midst of, of course, is history, the fate of which Tribhuvan and his family in 1951 to the Indian Embassy and four days later to Delhi. In the midst of the month, he passed and produced one outstanding Western gadget after another, that he held in time bought the whole collection. His next weapon, “a different one each day and never the same one twice” was an ornamental, and I never saw him use a gadget made for purposes other than those for which it was made. “Why do you make gadgets to sell?” he was asked one day. “Because they sell,” he replied.

The New York Times
Health workers battle Covid-19, but also stigma

It is not just the virus that is spreading in the community, so is fear of frontline workers

Sonia Awale

N
epal reported the first death of a medical worker from Covid-19 last week, a 35-year-old health assistant in Mahottari district. Across the country, over 500 healthcare providers including doctors, nurses and lab technicians have tested positive for SARS-CoV-2.

But instead of crediting them for putting their own lives on the line at the frontlines of the war against the pandemic, health workers in Nepal are being ostracised, publicly humiliated, and sometimes threatened by landlords and neighbours who fear that they will spread the virus.

Even as they battle community transmission, in many cases it is the community itself that has turned against medical personnel.

Over 20 staff at Biryalpata Hospital in Achham district have tested positive for Covid-19 in the last month, and all are currently isolated in the facility’s staff quarters because landlords have driven them out of their rented rooms in town.

“The government has directed asymptomatic people to isolate themselves at home, but this shows just how difficult this is in reality,” says Bikash Gauchan, a doctor at Biryalpata. “It is harder to fight society than Covid-19.”

Gauchan himself was in isolation after a previous outbreak and tested negative, but on a recent trip to the market to buy groceries, the shopkeeper stopped him from entering just because he worked at the hospital.

At the Patan Academy of Health Sciences, the newly appointed director Rahi Shakya gets resignation letters from staff every day, and the reason cited by everyone of them is because of community harassment, or due to family pressure.

“Health workers are already working in less than ideal conditions, they are not properly equipped, are overworked and have no incentives. Many don’t even have family support,” says Shakya. “They are risking their own health for the public, but when that very public turns against you, it is very painful.”

Shakya says many younger doctors are now rethinking their decision to work in the medical field in Nepal. He adds, “Societal stigma is from ignorance, and something we have failed to communicate to the public how the virus is transmitted. Even some health workers themselves are not fully aware.”

Says epidemiologist Mahesh Maskey: “It is ironic that the brave workers are receiving abuse from the very people they are protecting. This is in reality,” says Bikash Gauchan, a doctor at Biryalpata. “It is harder to fight society than Covid-19.”

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Free minibus service for health workers in Kathmandu Valley hired by various charity groups.

I am surprised by how the psychology of fear has led us to do this, and urge everyone to change their mentality.”

The flood of positive cases in Kathmandu and other cities in the past month has led to public panic about Covid-19, and this is turning people against those who are self-isolating at home, or those working on the frontline with patients.

Experts partly blame the relentless media focus on the daily case totals and fatalities, instead of the recovery rate, Nepal’s relatively low death rate, and the precursors the public needs to take. This has fed the notion that Covid-19 is highly lethal, fuelling the irrational fear.

On Thursday, Nepal recorded a record 1,228 new confirmed cases, 481 of them in Kathmandu Valley alone. There were 6 additional deaths, bringing the total to 257. However, what was buried in the news reports was that there were 968 recoveries, one of the highest so far in a single day and the total recoveries now stands at 24,207.

Some doctors have reported on social media with messages for those who stigmatise health workers, saying they should also think about who is going to save their lives when they find themselves in the ICU.

Amidst the gloom and doom, there are glimmers of hope. Nepal Scouts, Nepal Medical Association and Higher Institutions and Secondary Schools’ Association Nepal in coordination with the Ministry of Health have started a free bus service for medical personnel inside Kathmandu Valley to take them to and from hospital and their homes.

Charities are offering free daily meals for those without any source of sustenance. In Biratnagar, local youth groups are helping rehabilitate Covid-19 patients who have recovered (see below). And there are communities which have honoured medical frontline workers who live in their midst, saying they are true heroes.

However, there are exceptions. Anisha Shakya, a medical officer at International Friendship Children Hospital says she and her colleagues are already working with limited equipment and resources, and the harassment heaped on health workers is stressful.

She adds, “What would build morale is positive reinforcement, emotional support in this difficult time and more tolerance on the part of the public.”

Youth help

Kamal Rimal

in Biratnagar

We are sanitising homes among families and school principals were against the presence of infected individuals in the community.

In its home visits and sanitisation campaign, the group tries to inform locals that the virus does not transmit if sufficient distance is maintained. They have also distributed masks, gloves, sanitiser and food rations to 54 households.

The municipality is also making home visits with immunity-boosting Ayurvedic herbs for those in self-isolation, helping people know about the disease and sanitising the homes of infected people.

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