The sight of jumbled up signs for seven provinces at Kathmandu airport (above) is symbolic of the shambles things in Nepal are in. Nearly half a year of lockdown later, there are still 150,000 Nepali workers overseas waiting to return. Some of those who came back from India have started going back because they could not find jobs in Nepal.

Although limited scheduled flights have started, returning Nepalis still have to inexplicably wait for up to 7 hours at holding centres even if they have PCR negative reports. Hygiene precautions at the airport are rudimentary.

As public pressure builds up, the government on Wednesday loosened up on some of the restrictions even though Kathmandu Valley is still recording a surge in cases. On Thursday there were a record 572 new coronavirus cases in the Valley, out of 1,246 for the rest of the country. Nine more fatalities were recorded nationwide, three of them in Kathmandu Valley.

Three weeks of restrictions, instead of bringing down the cases in Kathmandu Valley saw an increase – meaning the virus is spreading within families and communities. But economic desperation increased public pressure on the local administration to relax the rules. The government’s strategy seems to be to loosen up some more after 17 September, allow long-distance buses and domestic airlines to resume so people can return to their districts for the festival season. If there is another spike, they may lock down the Valley again over Dasain, which this year is 23-28 October.

The detailed do’s and don’ts are ambiguously worded. The directive states that ‘services similar to the above’ will also be allowed. Experts also questioned how wise it is to limit opening time for shops because it could lead to overcrowding.

Alisha Sijapati

Leaders in Isolation

EDITORIAL PAGE 2

Muddling through

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Leaders in Isolation

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

here are all these leaders and experts who would return home comedy. (Only memories remain, Bill de Blasio, nepalitimes.com). Such a touching abide, memory readied text. We need to house these precious possessions in a museum.

Rajendra Senchury

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This is an interesting read, an important piece of Hindukush to be kept (Title and King Tribhuvan, Albania Sijapati, #1028).

Hima Bista

TOURISM POST COVID

The first step to recovery is to allow tourists back in the country (Nepal expects more than 50% to return next year, nepalitimes.com). I visit Nepal every year, and every two years. This time tourists are coming up, the time for Nepal to do so too with safely precautions in place.

Robert Kay

This is a pessimistic approach. Optimistic approach is to expect. Nepal tourism by improving its shortcoming and find a fast channel to launch Nepal in an era post Covid.

Sujana Shyaja

Tourism will grow if Nepal engulf its? and canker and canker get out of the way, recovery can be accelerated.

Chandra GT

This would be a good opportunity to design a framework for high value, volume sustainable tourism strategy.

Apari Rajuripap

COVID-19

Mahan says that Nepal didn’t have to witness such a worst-case scenario as projected by the study. Nepal expects to tour 200,000 to 400,000 (Sindhu Aanka, nepalitimes.com). The current situation could’ve been much better if government acted efficaciously in the beginning.

Umesh Rai

Given the current incompetent leadership and lack of public understanding and support, this could very well be the case in the coming days.

Prativa Joshi

I think questioning the study’s methods and assumptions are good - I also disagree with the findings needing an alternative explanation of the reality that the experts actually knew earlier. As the experts know about this, this as the epidemic as the specified has high harm of error and it has lost any pasty of belief.

Sushil Koirala

We are just beginning to see what really is happening in Nepal, as an expert (Nepal’s lockdowns “just a mother”, Sindhu Aanka, nepalitimes.com). The differences is in the understanding. Autonomy and justice state methods against its own population is a sign of weak governance.

Marjorie Hoberger

Since the world will have to live with the virus for a while, keep safe and get with your life (Flights to Nepal linked by airport capacity - nepalitimes.com).

BI Nanopac

INDRA JATRA

Don’t miss the beautiful story of Indra Jatra (Yakshi) with Ashmin Bhattarai and Sujeev Shakya (flower photos.ourbun.com). Special Thanks to Indra Jatra and the Nepal Tourism Authority for creating and communicating this wonderful serial.

Deepak P Joshi

Bring more of such content Nepal Times. I have a deep love for the magnificent Indra Jatra.

Ashmin Bhattarai

Wonderful article by the late Damodar Das about our rich culture and heritage. (The legend behind the myth of Indra Jatra, nepalitimes.com). Never know that a Nepal Jatra participated in Maharatnas.

Sandeep Gurung

MACHINERAIN

Sad to see this lockdown discussion as the inclusive of vector diseases (Police stop Patton celebrate climbing Covid-19, nepalitimes.com). There’s more to do. If don’t just control Covid. It is also just the COVID. There’s a battle for culture, freedom & safety, alike to other parts of the world.

Kiran Maharjan

It is good to follow tradition but also birds. Rumbling during the pandemic is dangerous, people need to understand the corona is very contagious and could make havoc in Nepal if it goes uncontrolled. (Taste Tashi)

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Nepal's tourism now has to re-start from zero

As Covid-19 wrecks the industry, a nostalgic look back at Boris Lissavetich and his Royal Hotel

Despite the early 1950s having seen tour operators arrive in Kathmandu Valley, the combination of hostile geography and cautious politics had effectively conspired to keep foreigners out of the kingdom of Nepal, sealed for centuries. When King Tribhuvan wrested power from the reclusive Rana rulers in 1951, only an estimated total of 300 foreign officials, diplomats and royal guests had ever penetrated the malarial swamps of the Tarai or the snow-bound Himalayan barrier of the northern passes.

The metamorphosis of previous regimes considered it prudent to keep the doors closed to Westerners, especially with the changing fortunes of Tibet and China to the north, and a menacing East India Company followed by a power-hungry British Empire lurking along the southern boundary, which extended nearly twice the length of Nepal today.

All trade routes into the Valley were well patrolled, and the British incumbents at their Launceach Residency (now the Indian Ambassador's home) were tolerated to varying degrees, but remained under escort even around the Valley and seldom permitted beyond its rim except to their redtoppog cottage at Jholi, then Kakani.

Boris Lissavetich changed all that when he opened Kathmandu’s first hotel and brought the first tourist group to Nepal in 1955. Having visited on a 16-day holiday in 1951 at the invitation of newly instated King Tribhuvan, Boris moved to Kathmandu with Inger, two small boys, Mishca and Alexander (their third son, Nikolai, was born later in Nepal), and a mother-in-law with a penchant for collecting stray animals and antiques.

‘After a few hours I fell madly in love with this country’ Boris declared in a contemporary interview. ‘This is where we wanted to live.’ Inger, his beautiful Danish Scottish wife, 23 years junior, agreed. They never left.

An ebullient White Russian ballet dancer and big game hunter born in Odesa, Ukraine, Boris was a larger than life character, born into a wealthy military Tsarist family amidst the hardships of the 1985 Russian revolution. A cadet heading for a career in the Tsar’s navy, instead Boris had to flee to France, escaping Bolshevik persecution.

Boris’ eccentric career included performing with Diaghileff’s Ballet Russes in Paris and dancing with Manueline throughout Europe, South America and Asia. In 1936, finding himself stranded in India, he started the exclusive 300 Club in Calcutta, the first establishment to accept Indian members and to remain open 24 hours a day. Patrons included heads of state, elite, leading businessmen, world war pilots, diplomats and international celebrities. Boris had the opportunity to meet and charm royal and influential politicians from the region, especially Nepal.

In addition to King Tribhuvan, his close friends and frequent guests during his ten years at the 300 Club included the statesmen of Coshel Behar and exiled Nepali rana militiam, Mahaveer and Suhanna Shambhur, Suppossedly B P Koirala, Nepal’s democracy activist, and King Tribhuvan held secret negotiations in the men’s room.

Boris Lissavetich at the Yak and Yeti hotel in Kathmandu in 1955 when the first tourist group arrived in Nepal.

Not all the abundant stories about Boris’ exploits are true, but they are usually dramatic and always amusing – he was a collector of people and tall tales.

Boris set up a distillery in Kathmandu, and with Prince Basundhara converted Bahadur Bhawan in Kantipath (now the Election Commission offices) into the Royal Hotel with 40 restored rooms. In its 1960s heyday, the Royal was considered among the most interesting hotels in the world, and its charismatic proprietor was a major attraction.

The hotel’s Yak & Yeti Bar was the heart of Kathmandu’s foreign community with Boris providing, ever popular with a stream of mountaineers, envoys, explorers, spies, missionaries, aid workers, tiger hunters, yeti enthusiasts – and tourists.

As Tony Hagen remembered, the Royal Hotel was ‘an irresistible gathering point, eating, drinking and storytelling would go on late into the night, until Boris began to sing Russian songs in a deep voice or even perform Russian dances’. Featuring his flamboyant brand of personal charisma, warm hospitality and fine Russian recipes, Boris was the first to bring ‘ordinary’ tourists to Nepal and is thus credited with being the ‘father of Nepal tourism’.

Guests unable to pay the Royal room rate, pitched tents in the hotel’s spacious grounds, avoiding the litter of vegetables that Boris introduced – he was the first to cultivate mushrooms, strawberries, artichokes, carrots and beetroots – and a raving manegerie of stray animals. Lhasa Apso dogs, flying squirrels, leopards, the mouse that would come ‘clattering down the veranda to be fed lumps of sugar’, occasionally wandering into guest bedrooms leaving unwanted offerings. A red panda named Pandaji, a gift from Ed Hillary, was said to be the most photographed animal in Nepal.

In 1964 screen idol Jean Paul Belmondo introduced Boris to his perfumes, and Queen Sophia of Spain on her honeymoon.

Boris was always kind to me, the young intern I was asked to arrange his 75th birthday party and Chandeleer Day (picking up the legendary chandelier birthday cake from Battenberg’s) or 450 1980 Boris is seated, and playfully, I am handing a facsimile or double uncut on the electricity supply of the times.

By the time I came to Nepal in 1974, my boss Jim Edwards greatly admired Boris and helped him through many low tide times as he acquired a series of restaurants in Kathmandu, always strong on entertaining but light on commercial niceties. He left behind my blue painted desk in the Tiger Tops office. Boris could shuttle past in a gaudy short-sleeved shirt with a cherry wave, on his way to beg another loan from the soft-hearted Jim.

‘He was a terrible businessman, he didn’t think about money at all,’ bemoaned Inger. Boris himself said: ‘I always spent just about a little bit more than I made’. Disasters over the years included trout, pig and vegetable farming, peach wine, and the failed mahua flower liquor business, which had ended him in prison for a couple of months for non-payment of royalties.

Restaurants came and went, located in Dilli Bauz, Durbar Marg and Lhadhur Darbar which had opened in 1970 (now the Chummy Restaurant in the Yak & Yeti) and were all but lost since the early 1990s have disappeared.

In 1995 Boris persuaded the reluctant King Mahendra, newly succeeded to the throne on the death of his father Tribhuvan, to invite the first tourist group arranged with Thomas Cook & Sons in Calcutta. Consisting of ‘mostly old ladies from a cruise ship’, the narrative goes that the King was so impressed by their enthusiasm for his country, delighted by Kathmandu culture and hosiery and upskirt handicrafts in the Royal Hotel shop, that he was convinced by Boris to embrace tourism for his emerging nation, ordering officials to arrange two-week tourist visas.

Since then when Boris achieved this historic reversal and Nepal began to tentatively emerge as a destination for commercial tourism, Nepal has become an essential core industry with consistent growth, climbing from none in 1951, to 6,000 arrivals in 1982 and 1.2 million last year – until coronavirus hit...
Politician educates herself at age 43

To set an example, member of provincial assembly Chun Kumari Chaudhari graduates from school

For an illiterate woman from a destitute family of former bonded labourers, Chun Kumari Chaudhari could not have been more removed from the power centres of Nepali politics.

She comes from a family of kamlaris in western Nepal, who till 20 years ago used to be bonded to landlords through a hereditary system of indentured labour. Chun Kumari spent her childhood working in her landlord’s house as a semi-slave kamlari, and at 15 was married off. She never got to go to school, and in her husband’s home she was too weighed down with household chores to learn to read and write.

But earlier this month, at the age of 43, Chun Kumari went from being an illiterate woman from a destitute family to becoming a member of the Far-Western Provincial Assembly.

“Because of my poverty and society’s restrictions on females, I never got to go to school,” says Chun Kumari, “nothing can stop me now.”

It is this extraordinary confidence and unflagging grit that has brought Chun Kumari so far. She started her journey from a local community forest user group in Kailali, and rose up the ranks to become a member of the Far-Western Provincial Assembly. She then educated herself, and is determined to fight social-economic disparity and societal oppression.

“In class, Chun Kumari was aware of the wrong notion in Nepali society that women are not discriminated against, have better opportunities, and do not have to go through the anguish of being illiterate. Chun Kumari says: “I was humiliated because of my illiteracy.”

In 2018, when she became a member of the Far-Western Provincial Assembly, she had to face much ridicule from party co-workers for being illiterate. Chun Kumari says: “I decided then and there to turn my shames into determination and found the courage to join a school.”

So in 2018, inspired by another former kamlari/Shahta Chaudhari who was elected to the Constituent Assembly seven years ago, Chun Kumari joined Grade II of Bhagwewar School.

She did not tell her husband or children, thinking they would not come along. Seven years after her classes started her husband found out, but luckily he was supportive.

In class, Chun Kumari was aware of her age difference with other students. “It was incredibly uncanny at first. We could’ve even brought myself to get up and use the washroom. I became ill because of the stress. But slowly, I made friends among my classmates who were much younger than even my own children,” she says.

Chun Kumari’s son Dipak is 25, has graduated in science from college, and is now working at the Shikhaupatri National Park.

Chun Kumari Chaudhari’s political life began in 1994, much before she taught herself to read and write. She started out as a member of the local community forest user’s group and worked her way up to be secretary and chair. She then was elected vice president of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN).

She was affiliated with the UML party, and in 2017 was elected to the local committee of the provincial assembly. She says: “My role now is to change society so that girls are not discriminated against, have better opportunities, and do not have to go through what I did.”


determination Chun Kumari (right), got her school exam in Kailali last year. (left) The former kamlari educated herself becoming a member of the Far-Western Provincial Assembly 2017 after she became a member of the provincial
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Radio Active: Sona Khatik in the studio of Kapilvastu Community Radio Station Manager. She broke her leg while riding her bicycle to her studio/office. Sona Khatik rose up the ranks from being a sub reporter to Station Manager in 12 years.

unannounced from the police. I had not declared the lockdown myself but was told by the radio team.

The radio team which was willing to forego half a year’s salary was now getting paid in full, so staff decided to contribute to a fund to help free feeding programs for the poorest families in the neighbourhood.

We asked Khatik why she thinks her station has thrived when other media in Nepal are struggling. She replies: “I think it is because we engage with our community, we go into the field and record people’s voices and do not bring politicians to the studio. I think it is also because they know it is a station for the poorest.”

It has been so hectic, that last week while bicycling back and forth from home to the studio, Khatik slipped and fractured her leg. There was no one to help her; she had to use her plastered leg. Sona Khatik reminisces about those days. “I cannot believe that it has been 12 years since I started out as an intern. Now here I am. I am reminded of how important it is to listen to your employees, no matter what their position. A good leader values every member, and recognises the importance of team work. It is more than luck that makes a company successful, especially during a crisis.”

How a rural radio thrived during lockdown

When most media are on the verge of collapse, a woman-led radio station finds a successful business model

Sona Khatik (pictured, right) is still studying in Grade 12 when she found her calling in life: to be a radio broadcaster. She run a Tharu language program that was not just a hobby, she needed the income to support her family.

Sona, Khatik’s voice became a familiar sound in many households in this Tarai district. Even as an intern, she reported on farming with news people could use.

Soon, then, she has juggled her passion for radio with college, graduating in journalism. Khatik then worked her way up the ranks, and is now Station Manager at Kapilvastu Community Radio.

It has not been easy for Sona Khatik. She is a woman, she is from a Dalit family with few means. But she believes that it was precisely those attributes that helped her succeed.

As the whole country went into an economic standstill with the Covid-19 lockdown six months ago, life became even more difficult.

Some radio stations were forced to close, but Kapilvastu Community Radio has not just survived, it is now earning even higher revenue than usual.

The station mobilised teachers to conduct classes over the radio for free. Soon enough, Khatik was contacted by non-profits, local government and the district branch of the Nepal Teacher’s Association. Today, Kapilvastu FM is broadcasting classes every day to students in Grades 4-8.

Sona Khatik’s voice is now so trusted and recognised that when she once voiced an announcement by the local police asking people to obey lockdown rules, they called to ask her to lift the lockdown because it was causing economic hardship. “They did not realise I was just reading out a public service announcement from the police. I had not declared the lockdown myself but was told by the radio team.

The radio team which was willing to forego half a year’s salary was now getting paid in full, so staff decided to contribute to a fund to help free feeding programs for the poorest families in the neighbourhood.

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Demand for more flights
As per the government’s directive to increase the number of arriving passengers to 800 per day, more Nepalis have started arriving on scheduled and chartered repatriation flights. However, travel industry sources say the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) has not spaced out the arriving flights properly, and the airport is crowded when flights arrive at the same time making it impossible to maintain social distancing. They also say that far more flights can be accommodated if they are staggered through the day and nights to clear the huge backlog of stranded Nepalis for repatriation.

Unclear guidelines and haphazard management at the airport means that even passengers arriving with PCR negative reports have to spend six hours after arrival in holding centres.

Ten international airlines are conducting more than 100 scheduled flights in September, with another 54 chartered flights mainly from the Gulf. Although Indian civil aviation sources say they are ready to fly from Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata to Kathmandu, permission has not been forthcoming from the Nepal government. There are many Nepalis stranded in India and Indians in Nepal who want to fly back to their home countries.

Ncell
Ncell has launched its ‘Pahilo SIM’ campaign on 3 September, per which 2020 SEE graduates can subscribe to a prepaid SIM card for just Rs1. The SIM will be available from Ncell Centres, where students will be required to present a valid SEE admit card, passport-sized photo and their citizenship card. Ncell has also launched new offers under its Plus campaign that will allow its customers to enjoy nonstop access to YouTube, TikTok and Facebook.

NIC Asia
NIC Asia has handed over the ‘Bright School System’ software to 19 public schools in Samast, Butwal, and Rikidiya Rural Municipality in Province 5 in order to make education tech-friendly. The software will help the schools with attendance, payment services, parental approval forms, smart classes, exam report cards, fee lists, public holidays, assignments, exam schedules, classroom timetables, and more. The 4th Annual General Meeting of NIC Asia Capital on 3 September passed a resolution to distribute a cash dividend of Rs. 36 million at the rate of 18 percent of the paid-up capital as proposed by the Board of Directors.

Samsung
Samsung has launched its flagship Galaxy Note20 and Galaxy Note20 Ultra. The latest Note series includes a more precise S Pen, more flexible Samsung Notes App experience, adaptive 120Hz display, and an ultra-high resolution 8K camera. The Galaxy Note20 and the Galaxy Note20 Ultra are priced at Rs109,999 and Rs139,999 respectively, and will be available across Samsung brand shops and retail stores across Nepal.

Muktinath Bank
Muktinath Bikas Bank has entered into an agreement with Health institutions Kathmandu Naturopathy Hospital, Vision Concern, Doctor on Call, Gaya Healthcare, and the Central Diagnostic Laboratory (CCL) to provide discounts at various rates on check-ups, PCR tests, and other health procedures to its Visa debit card holders and mobile banking users.

Nepal Wherever You Are
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Pamacare Handwash
Cosmetic company Pamacare has launched its new line of hand wash which includes 3 flavours: lavender and water Lily, lemon and mandarin, as well as Tea Tree and apple. The hand wash will be available in 250ml bottles at Rs152.

Reliance shares
Reliance Life Insurance has listed 6.3 million shares sold to the public at Rs 100 per unit with the Nepal Stock Exchange. The shares were initially issued from 20-24 August and distributed to the public on 28 August. The company has appointed Sunrise Capital Limited as the Share Registrar to keep records of securities trading, keep track of stock cancellations, transfer shares, and keep up to date with shareholders’ data.
Virtual Events

Feminist Memory Project

Photo Circle is calling for applications for 10 archival Research Fellowship positions for the second phase of the Feminist Memory Project. Applicants must have previously submitted an outline. Applicants will put their outline to use as they create an exhibition, which will be housed in the Feminist Memory Project Virtual Archive. Application deadline: 12 July.

Writing Wednesday

Keep an eye out for Kathmandu University to put up a prompt for Writing Wednesday, designed for Ken Fowkes of specific, but not too serious, writing. Kathmandu University will put up a prompt on Facebook. Share stories in the comments on Kathmandu University’s Facebook page. To share anonymously, send your story to kuku664491@gmail.com.

Private Yoga Sessions

Sunny Wellness and Yoga in the Air invite mode private yoga sessions available for everyone for self-practice at home. Sessions are available on a prior appointment. Go to the Sunny Wellness Facebook page for details.

Speaking Events

Interactive International invites a video series on women in the workplace. Applications are invited to participate in this video. Applications can be submitted on the website. Application deadline: 14 September.

Photo Museum Nepal

Take a look at stunning photographs from throughout Nepal’s history and learn the stories behind the photographs.

Comic Library

Find a variety of comic books available from the British Council Digital Library, including classics such as Star Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Superman. Visit bit.ly/3O0XVPh to find out more.

TED-Ed

Educators, parents, and students. Find hundreds of animated lessons on topics ranging from visual arts to mathematics and more. Ted-Ed Education program and resources endorsed internally in the field of communication and leadership.

Air Quality

Kathmandu, 4 - 10 Sept

We have now entered the Smart Lockdown phase with odd-even rule for vehicles and partial opening of businesses, allowing people mobility. Unfortunately this is already visible in the Air Quality Index on Tuesday morning, which has worsened from Good (Green) to Unhealthy for sensitive groups (Orange). With the rains starting off, this will increase the concentration of pollutants in Kathmandu city centre. In fact the daily average AQI throughout the week was mostly in the yellow ‘Moderate’ zone.

Quarantine Dining

Bungalow Bar and Kitchen

Enquire to add to your daily menu and have Thai, Japanese, and Chinese delectables. Call 9828583465 or 9828952628.

Fire and Ice

Fire and Ice offers genuine Nepali pastas and dumplings of valley and mountain cuisines. Try the pastas, a combination of noodles, spinach, and dahi and whereas, the Gharghat Pomodoro with homemade tomato sauce. Find them on Foodmandu.

Haadi Biryani

Located in Kathmandu, Haadi offers a wide range of biryani and Halal dishes like the Biryani with goat meat, Lamb Biryani, and Chicken Biryani. Haadi prides itself on order makeup. Go to the Haadi Biryani Facebook page for details.

Sweet Fix

Keep hot, fresh lavender at bay with freshly handcrafted poppers, Gelato, Matcha, Splashes, and Mocha. Order from the Sweet Fix Facebook page for details or order from the Sweet Fix website.

Road Show

We are now at the tail end of the monsoon, but the breh made the past decade has been far from rain-free. For October, the precipitation has reached its peak, but we will peak up on Friday and into the weekend—especially in central Nepal near Pokhara. Kathmandu Valley will be cloudy, with some showers and evening and night.

Online Archives

Virtual Street Art

Google Arts Project. Street art showcases the world’s greatest graffiti walls and tells the stories behind them, including those of Nepal. Viewers can view walking tours, view online exhibitions and learn about the artists themselves.

Forest 404

Grazing 404 is a nine-episode environmental series that placed 26 years into the future where forests no longer exist. Each episode will explore the theme of the episode. Find it on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts.

Toasts

Imvictus

International Toastmasters is a video series on which participants record a video of a self-prepared speech based on the theme ‘Resilience’. The contest will be accompanied by a series of workshops and resources endorsed internally in the field of communication and leadership.

Eco-Green Living

Kripa Joshi

Unblock Drains without Harsh Chemicals

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Nepal, China re-measure height of Mt Everest

Two countries preparing to announce the new elevation of the world’s highest mountain

Sonia Awale

I t was not for the Covid-19 pandemic, we would by now have found out the result of the latest measurement of the world’s highest mountain.

Yes, 8,848m (29,029ft) is widely accepted as the height of Mt Everest since 1955, even though the elevation of the summit has fluctuated by a dozen or so metres since then, depending on who is doing the calculating.

Since previous measurements were by American, European or Indian surveyors, it has become a matter of national pride for Nepal and China to come up with their own height for the peak that lies on their Himalayan border.

The height of Mt Everest has changed with advances in survey technology. The Great Trigonometric Survey (GTS) of India in 1856 declared Mt Everest the highest mountain in the world at exactly 8,848m. But since surveyors thought no one would believe such a round figure, they added 29 to it as it sounded more precise. But it was surprisingly accurate for the time.

There are also many different ways to calculate Everest’s elevation: from mean sea level, from the lowest depth of the ocean, or even the distance from the centre of the Earth to the summit, which would mean that some Andean peaks would actually be ‘taller’ because the planet is not perfectly round but has a slight bulge along its equator.

Then there is the question of whether the true height is the bedrock at the summit, or should the snow cap on the top of Everest also be added? The height is also not static—the peak is undergoing tectonic uplift of about 1cm a year, and the ice cover on the summit varies in thickness because of precipitation, wind and (of late) global warming.

More recently, geologists and scientists have also come up with different figures for the impact of the 2015 earthquake—most agree that Mt Everest may have shrunk by about 3cm, and been displaced southwards by a metre or more.

“The height of Everest is constantly changing due to tectonic activity, of which the 2015 Gorkha earthquake is only the most recent contribution,” explains Christopher Pearson of the University of Otago in New Zealand who worked with Nepali surveyors on the measurement in 2018. “Since the present measurements are fairly old, we needed to update it.”

The New Zealand government assisted Nepal’s Survey Department in installing GPS equipment on the summit and train technicians in processing the GPS data, geodetic levelling and gravity measurements.

Says Navin Manandhar, formerly head of Geodetic Branch of the Survey Department who helped develop the methodology for re-measurement: “This body of work is a matter of pride for Nepal, but is also a huge undertaking and with the whole world keenly waiting for the result, it has not been easy.”

Indeed, Survey Department officials are tight-lipped about the final height and will not even give a hint about whether Mt Everest is taller or shorter. The reason for the sensitivity is that the governments of China and Nepal have signed an MoU to cooperate in the re-measurement and agreed during President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Kathmandu last October to announce the result jointly.

Even if the new height of Mt Everest is found to be lower, there is no danger of it being demoted as the highest mountain in the world. The second highest peak, Mt K2 in Pakistan, is “only” 8,611m.

Nepal’s own survey team led by Khim Lal Gautam climbed the mountain on 22 May 2019, and installed GPS equipment and ground-penetrating radar on the peak. The team risked its life, and Gautam lost a toe to frostbite.

A Chinese survey team finally climbed Mt Everest from the north in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic on 28 May, and left its own equipment on top. This allowed measurements with China’s Beidou satellite navigation system, as well as a series of overflights above Mt Everest in June by an aircraft installed with precision gravity survey equipment.

There is now concern about what happens if there is discrepancy between the Chinese and Nepalese calculations of the height. But experts interviewed for this report said the two elevations would be “close” even though China used the Yellow Sea as a reference for sea level, and Nepal chose a point much closer on the Bay of Bengal coast.

Says Pearson: “I expect the program will come up with by far the most accurate sea level height for Sagarmatha since Nepal has used cutting edge surveys in its survey. This work has also led to better models of geoid systems which will make it easier to measure the exact heights of other mountains in Nepal using modern GPS techniques.”

Nepal’s Survey Department deployed both traditional methods (Trigonometry levelling as done by Survey of India in 1950s with precise levelling and more accurate modern geoid system with gravity survey, and Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) to cross-check the results.

For precise levelling, the surveyors measured altitudes of 12 points from sea level right up to the base of the mountain. For this, surveyors had to use six Indian trigonometrical points from the sea to the Nepal border. The ground penetrating radar that the Survey Department team left on the summit of Mt Everest last May measures the ice cap at the summit and monitors its thickness.

This can be used to calculate the rock height of the summit.

Nepal’s surveyors have completed their calculations, and now face an even more tricky task of keeping that number a secret until the Chinese complete their calculations, and a joint announcement is made.

Even though the two countries share the mountain with the north, west and east face in Nepal, Mt Everest Sagarmatha was named an emotive issue in the country.

“It will be unfortunate if this purely scientific exercise is overshadowed by politics,” says Manandhar. “This exercise goes beyond Everest. The knowledge and experience we gained will be crucial in future survey work.”
Inside story of Nepal’s Rana dynasty

Kunda Dixit

When Sagar Rana launched his book ‘Sinhagadh: Rise and Fall of the Rana Regime of Nepal three years ago, I asked him and his two brothers Bhart and Jadhav why liberal-minded mixing of Prominent members of their clan that ruled Nepal for over a century. It was because he and his brothers grew up within the comforts and luxury of a Rana palace, and they were deeply aware of the poverty and social injustice in Nepali society.

I said, we told a minute, there were other Ranas of that era who also grew up in luxury and saw the country’s pervasive poverty first hand. But did he made him and his brothers different? Sagar Rana thought that over, and said it was probably his father’s emphasis on education. Indeed, Mitridiga Shumsher was Education Minister under the Ranas and the family lived under strict discipline and in a relatively Nepali lifestyle.

At age 12 in 1951, Sagar was sent to boarding school in India followed by five years in Leighton Park School in Reading in England, where he did his A Level and went on to Oxford for a Masters in Law.

He returned to Nepal during the tumultuous years after the royal coup of 1960 that put Nepali Congress in power, including his brother Bharat in jail. On return to Nepal, Sagar Rana became a member of the Nepali Congress party, the dominant party of the time.

In 1974, Padma Shumsher argued that the Nepalis laid down their lives for Britain in those two wars at least 50,000 young men served in the Afghan war and World War II. At least 50,000 Nepalis fell down their lives for Britain in those two years at a time when Nepal’s population was barely 2 million. This nearly emptied Nepal’s mountain villages of two generations of young people.

Like Jung Bahadur, Chandra Shumsher knew how to cash in on Britain’s goodwill. He hosted Lord Kitchener, invited King George VI and Prince Edward on tiger hunts in Chitwan, softened theBritish by signing the Anglo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1923 that firmly established Nepal as a sovereign state, unlike the autonomous princely states in India.

Chandra Shumsher should not be judged by today’s standards. He was ruthless, no doubt, but he and some of the other Ranas were always aware that their personal and family fortunes were tied with a strong and independent nation state. And unlike some famous Rana rulers, Chandra was not as openly promiscuous, and after his own visit to England, had a broader geopolitical perspective about Nepal in the world.

Singha Durbar contains intriguing revelations of how the Ranas tried desperately to preserve their rule as the democracy movement gathered pace. Nepali students in India were influenced by the Quit India movement against the British. But there were also liberal Ranas who felt their clan’s feudalism was outdated.

Mahavir Shumsher, the flamboyant businessman and one of Calcutta’s richest men, and Subarna Shumsher with his education, thought it was time to let go. The dynasty was also impeding because of the rebelling revolutionaries among it and C Chas Ranas classified according to the caste and ethnic hierarchy of the wives and concubines who begat them.

The second half of Singha Durbar is a blow-by-blow account of how the anti-Rana resistance took shape, the rise and fall of the Koiralas, the story of Biratnagar, and all about the freedom movement in exile and how it brought together a disparate group of democratic-minded young Nepalis with Rana dissidents. Ultimately it was the homegrown revolution led by martyrs like Shukra Raj, Dashashw Bhanu, Lal and Bhalma Bhatta that fired the resistance. Other activists, Tanka Prasad Acharya, Man Singh, Kambari Sharma waged an underground movement at the cost of their lives.

Some random notes:

- Sagar Rana’s sequel to Singha Durbar is with the publishers, and it traces the trajectories of some of the cast of characters from this book into the period between 1953 to the present – a time of waste opportunities and sacrifices, of historical lessons not learnt, and of freedoms bought for and squandered over and over again.

- As Chandra Shumsher compiles to unleash Dev Shumsher in 1901, he was hunting a trip in Chitwan for Governor General Lord Curzon to go to Nepal from the British for his planned family coup, much in the same way Nepali politicians today jet to Delhi before toppling governments to seek blessings.

Chandra built Singha Durbar, the palace which is nothing but its title. It had 1,400 rooms, but no toilets. When asked why, Chandra is said to have replied: “We don’t go to the toilet, here the vegetables do it.”

As Britain prepared to go to war against Germany in 1939 the Rana brothers asked for troops. Padma Shumsher argued that the Nuremberg trials were more likely to emerge victorious and Nepal should “kick the winning horse, or remain neutral”. Nepal sent 200,000 troops to Europe, Malaya and Burma in the Afghan war against the Allies, and one in ten did not come back.

- B P Koirala was inspired by Gandhi and initially opposed the use of violence. Koirala said Gandhi not to talk to him as talk some sense into the Rana rulers in Kathmandu so he would not have to take up arms against them. Gandhi’s reply: “I cannot help you when my own people do not heed me, why will the Ranas heed me?”

- Boria Lisanawichit of the 300 Club in Calcutta landed and later (1949-50) in Kathmandu facilitated Tibhurban evading his

Sagar Rana's sequel to Singha Durbar is with the publishers, and it traces the trajectories of some of the cast of characters from this book into the period between 1953 to the present – a time of wasted opportunities and sacrifices, of historical lessons not learnt, and of freedoms bought for and squandered over and over again.

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Rana guards during a visit to Calcutta to deliver a letter to Nehru agreeing to overthrow the Ranas.

In Patna, B.P.'s group was preparing for a military campaign when he was arrested on an Indian Embassy radio transmission from Kathmandu that said King Tribhuvan had sought refuge in the mission. Sugar Rana quotes B.P.'s memoir: ‘The matter has now gone out of our hands... the King is under our hands... the King is under the British Embassy control.'

The matter has now gone out of the hands of the Jung Ranas and the Shumsher Ranas. By 1885, matters reached a head again and Bhir had his own sons kill their uncle, Rana Udyp Singh and remove all the descendants of Jung Bahadur’s other brothers from succession.

Rana power transitions were messy affairs, and watching all this from the background was the British regent at Lainpurat. We see how British India tried to influence events in Kathmandu through the new dynasty and this has familiar echoes today. When Bir Shumsher sidelined Jung Bahadur and exiled him to India, the British refused for five months to recognise Bir as a leader.

Bir Shumsher built Nepal’s first hospital as well as the Darbar School, for which he imported teachers from England. He was also building a 1,400-room palace as well as the Darbar Hotel, with power generated by it after 1947. He also built a 1,400-room palace for himself, which seemed up being a contribution to the nation — it is now Singha Darbar. On the diplomatic front, Chandra Shumsher managed to convince the British to officially agree to Nepal’s independent status and got them to put it in writing in the 1923 Anglo-Nepal Treaty of Friendship.

The book also delves into other matters: that of tigers, rhinos, leopards, crocodiles, bears and pandas in hunting expeditions in honour of visiting British royalty. There is a dramatic picture of Juddha Shumsher posing in front of paws of a hundred or so tigers.

Good thing many Ranas have now moved away from hunting towards nature conservation. The rest of the book looks at Rana architecture, and mentions unsung Nepali engineers like Kishore Narasing and the legendary Jagad Shukla, known more popularly as Rupa.

However incongruous Kathmandu Valley’s wedding cake Rana palaces may have looked when they were built, the authors argue that the neo-classical structure ‘seem to have achieved their own particular balance with the environment’ with their use of local construction material and the incorporation of Nepali features such as courtyards, verandahs, and south-facing balconies.

The chapter on Rana jewelry traces the history of the Rana crown and how it evolved and bulged with gems and diamonds in 1885 (only to be sold to a Persian jeweller in the mid-1950s). Many of these gems, precious stones and ornaments were spoils from Lucknow after the Mutiny of 1857, or by Indian royalty fusing Mughal invasions.

The book has more: Rana cuisine, Rana lifestyle, Rana fashion, Rana art, and short biographies of some prominent Bir Shumsher’s sons. The Rana’s abridged family tree is still useful to navigate through the book and understand their personal and political struggles.

A new report out this week warns that hundreds of glacial lakes in the Himalaya are in danger of bursting because global heating is melting the ice on the world’s highest mountains. However, on only two of them have there been mitigation measures to reduce water levels.

Those projects have been prohibitively expensive, and questions have been raised about their sustainability and whether they offer a long-term solution.

The water level of the Tao Rolpa glacial lake in the Rolwaling Valley was lowered 20 years ago after scientists warned that it was in imminent danger of bursting. The project cost 80 million at the time, most of it coming from The Netherlands. Its sluice gate lowered the water level by 20% to reduce risk of it bursting. A network of early warning stations downstream also has not functioned as planned.

The other project was a drainage channel and gate built on Imja Lake in the world’s highest region in 2004 by the Nepal Army with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) at a cost of $7.2 million.

The project located at 5,000m altitude was criticised at the time for being an expensive show-case project. For instance, in 1988 the Gangapurna Glacier had shrunk considerably. For instance, in 1988 the Gangapurna Glacier had shrunk considerably. By 2015, the number had gone to 6,060 and they were combined in a area of 195.4km sq. Scientists have long noticed that the rate of melting is higher in the eastern Himalaya than in the west, and the report confirms this. Interestingly, while the number of lakes has not changed, the number of glacial lakes in the Nepal Himalaya as well as their stars. For example, one major cause of water spills in the report showed that there were 8,609 glacial lakes in Nepal’s three river basins with a combined area of 180.5km sq. By 2015, the number had grown to 14,360 and they were combined in a area of 195.4km sq. Scientists have long noticed that the rate of melting is higher in the eastern Himalaya than in the west, and the report confirms this. 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