A
tough Nepal is allowing tourists to fly in from 17 October, some mountain districts along trekking trails are sealing themselves off for fear of Covid-19.

Manang and Mustang districts have announced restrictions for outsiders, which may also affect many Nepalis planning to head out to the mountains for the Dasain Holidays after months of lockdown.

Manang has decided to seal itself off completely, and will only allow visitors if they have PCR negative tests, and spend two weeks in quarantine at Nishang.

“Since there were only a few weeks left in the autumn trekking season anyway, we decided there was no point risking opening up,” said Binod Gurung, Chair of the Tourism Entrepreneurs Association of Manang. “We will open only in March 2021.”

This time of year, there would be up to 700 trekkers in Manang, acclimatising before they climbed on to Tilicho Lake or crossed the Thorung La to adjoining Mustang district.

In Mustang itself, a meeting of the district administration, municipality office bearers and lodge owners recommended PCR tests for outsiders coming into the district, however there is confusion about the exact guidelines.

“The shrine at Muktinath remains closed as per the order of the federal government. For the past few months, Mustang has been cut off not just because of the lockdown, but also a massive landslide at Rupse and flight cancellations during the monsoon. Over in the Everest region, hoteliers had decided to restrict outsiders, but they are now allowing trekkers to land at Lukla as long as they have a RT PCR negative tests for themselves and their guides. Many lodge owners are hoping that in the absence of foreign trekkers the loss of business will be somewhat compensated by Nepali hikers, and some of them have already started flying into Lukla,” says conservationist Ang Rita Sherpa.

“The lodges are mostly open in Lukla, Namche, Tengboche and Phortse, but not those near the high passes,” says Sure Khumalo district in the Everest region has reported 13 cases of Covid-19 so far, and there is only one active case at the moment. Manang had four confirmed cases, and Mustang had one – neither district now has any active cases.

Trekker traffic had just started picking up in Langtang Valley after the earthquake and avalanche in 2015, with 15,000 visitors last year. But this year it is almost zero.

“The ward office has decided to allow trekkers in so there is some income,” says Gyablu Tamang, a Langtang cheese-maker. “Even if foreigners do not come, we hope domestic tourists will visit from Kathmandu.”

Hiking in the pandemic

Hiking in the pandemic...
Man Power

The two alpha males of Nepali politics finally sorted out their differences, ending months of deadlock that had brought governance to a standstill.

They agreed on the one-ju-jueh-juone principle, so k P. Oli will serve as his state prime minister, and Pushpa Kamal Dahal will head the party.

To drive the point home, Dahal held the party secretary meeting last week not at his Kathmandu residence, but at his erstwhile Maoist party in a room festooned with hammer and sickles, and life-size busts of Marx, Lenin, Mao and Stalin. Yes, Stalin.

The Constitution and its mandatory provisions for inclusion, quotas, and reservations have become a formality. Much more important for the ruling clique last week was the pursuit of power and perpetuating the pillage of state coffers.

We need politicians with technocratic and universal visions, unlike the much-anticipated reshuffle of the country faces the Covid-19 emergency. Only after that, if at all, will women leaders necessary than their male counterparts.

Minister of Water Supply Sunil Saha's daughter-in-law, Mala Dahiya, who needs to be appeased after the Supreom Court's decision last month to use his new Upper House seat.

Sahina Shrestha, a former soldier who is Nepal's only balloon pilot.

Before becoming a balloon pilot, Thapa was in the Pokhara.

When we have Shiva Tanduk Maha who would have been an excellent Speaker of Parliament, but fell victim to Oli-Dahal infighting last week, and was made Law Minister.

This is necessary to balance the nefarious Neupane and his nepotism.

A million trees will be a Stalinist project.

I hope they are not clearing the land now. This project will take over 100 years for Nijgad airport to be completed. The whole idea is to siphon off the Covid-19 induced billions to tax havens.

The leaders of Nepal's 60-plus indigenous groups.

This is necessary to balance the nefarious Neupane and his nepotism.

I hope what is truly best for Nepal prevails, not just for the sake of people, but also for the sake of the country.

A million trees will be a Stalinist project.

I hope they are not clearing the land now. This project will take over 100 years for Nijgad airport to be completed. The whole idea is to siphon off the Covid-19 induced billions to tax havens.
Nepal’s past, present and future in a photo
Peeling away layers of a historical photograph reveals lessons for Nepali politics today

COMMENT
Bhumi Ghimiré

R

eatingly, with my mother Kalpana Ghimiré and my aunt Chetana Kaushik Sharma, we discussed a photo that has remained in the family collection ever since I can remember.

For the child that I was, the picture was a mere image of my towering twenty-six-year-old grandfather Bal Chandra Sharma with his political colleagues and friends in Banaras. Without really understanding why, I insisted that they provide me the photo to have it placed in the public domain. Also, my father was unable to put my finger into why I felt the way I did about it, until the point of wanting to write this commentary. This picture is a genuine and strong historical testimony. Looking at it, I realise that like the Russian Matryoshka doll, which when opened reveals a smaller figure inside, which in turn has another figure inside of it, and so on, this image can be read and understood on many layers.

Given their patriotic inclination, these young men wished to dedicate their lives to their country. For the child that I was, the picture was a mere image of my towering twenty-six-year-old grandfather Bal Chandra Sharma with his political colleagues and friends in Banaras. Without really understanding why, I insisted that they provide me the photo to have it placed in the public domain. Also, my father was unable to put my finger into why I felt the way I did about it, until the point of wanting to write this commentary. This picture is a genuine and strong historical testimony. Looking at it, I realise that like the Russian Matryoshka doll, which when opened reveals a smaller figure inside, which in turn has another figure inside of it, and so on, this image can be read and understood on many layers.

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Economy

The future is older

As demand for Nepali geriatric caregivers rises, Nepal’s population itself is ageing fast

T he world’s 65+ population is growing faster than all other age groups, and by 2050, one in six people globally are going to be older than 65 — a milestone set to take place in 2022 in Nepal itself is ageing fast, even in the case of deaths overseas. The COVID-19 deaths taking place in living age homes.

Even before the current health crisis, the elder sector was already facing critical shortages worldwide. The OECD estimates that maintaining the current ratio of 5 workers for every 100 individuals above 65 will itself require 13.5 million more caregivers.  

As the deaths from Covid-19 worldwide exceed 1 million, the pandemic has drawn attention to the lackluster situation of elderly care, inadequate staff, PPFA, high turnovers, and with a big share of Covid-19 deaths taking place in living age homes.

There is no doubt that the demand for geriatric caregivers globally is on the rise. A bilateral agreement between Israel and Nepal to hire 500 more caregivers in the midst of the pandemic is expected to be signed soon. But even as Nepal mobilises frontline workers to fight Covid-19, tens of thousands of current migrants languish overseas.

Even traditionally closed countries which are concerned about social cohesion are now being flocked to relax their admission policies for caregivers. Japan stands out as a striking example: 28% of its population is already over 65, and this will increase to 55% in the next 49 years. The country hosts over 80,000 centenarians.

The worker shortage, including in the care sector, led to a bilateral agreement between Japan and Nepal last year to mobilise 60,000 care workers.

As the workers are on average younger, Nepal is expected to hire over 300,000 workers over the next five years from several countries including Nepal, which includes a quota for 60,000 care workers.

But so far Nepal has not mobilised a single worker, and the 500 program itself has got off to a shaky start, meeting less than 10% of its target of recruiting over 47,000 foreign workers in fiscal year 2019.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, Nepali migrants are re-migrating. Such is the desperation to provide for families, despite knowing the risks. But for many, remittance is the difference between being poor versus not poor.

Emigration of caregivers as the health crisis rages seems counterintuitive. But we know from experience that restrictive policies fail. When Israel banned Nepali caregivers in 2012, they chose to travel irregularly through India, paying exorbitant fees.

Nepal therefore needs a cleaner stance on dealing with the increasing global demand for workers in the care economy. Of Nepali migrant workers emigrating overseas annually, only around 10% are women. But demand is rapidly growing in the female dominated care sector across more countries, including OECD members and East Asia.

Without a vision on how to better manage migration in the case sector Nepal will continue to resort to irregular travel, resulting in higher recruitment costs, provides skill training that are not recognised abroad, and let workers invest time and money in admission exams without success.

Experience shows that willingness to pay recruitment costs is higher for attractive destination countries. Nepal needs clear sector-specific policies that address the particularities of the care economy.

All this while the share of Nepal’s own elderly population is rising. By 2028, Nepal will be an ‘aging society’ with 7% of its population above 65, and the figure will double by 2044, making Nepal an ‘aged society’. In addition to exposing the demographic dividend in the remaining decades, it is also a priority to make the society more geriatric friendly for seniors who have additional care needs.

With thousands of returns with experience, there is scope to mobilise them. Returns from Sky Overseas, just before Israel stopped the ban, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

The blanket ban on domestic caregivers globally is on the rise too. As demand for geriatric caregivers rises, Nepal’s population itself is ageing fast.
Nepal opens to tourists from 17 October, but conditions apply

International airlines operating out of Kathmandu are cautiously optimistic about traffic picking up

From Thursday, 1 October, Nepal’s Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) announced that it was lifting a cap on only 1,860 arriving passengers a day, allowing international carriers to resume an unlimited number of flights. As elsewhere in the world, Nepal is also trying to balance survival of its tourism and aviation sector with public health during the Covid-19 crisis. The government announced last week that foreign tourists and expatriates will now be allowed to fly to Nepal by October 17.

Turkish Airlines, the only airline operating direct flights between Kathmandu and Istanbul from Europe, is increasing its flight frequency to three a week from 2 October. The airline, which used to operate daily on the Kathmandu-Istanbul route just marked its seventh anniversary of connecting Nepal to the world.

“We are increasing our flight frequency to nearly these flights, and bookings are slowly picking up,” says Turkish Airlines international marketing manager, Abdullah Tuncer Kocici. “With protocols that ensure travel and health safety measures, we think, Nepal’s nature and adventure will be one of the first choices of international passengers.”

Traffic is growing after Covid-19 grounded most airlines around the world and mannually reduced international air travel to 10% of what it used to be. Turkish Airlines, which flies to more destinations than any other carrier, flew 2.9 million passengers from 1 October. Qatar Airways has re-launched flights to Doha twice daily from Thursday, 1 October. Malaysia Airlines are going back to pre-pandemic levels, and only 14 flights a day.

As elsewhere in the world, international carriers to resume an unlimited number of flights. As elsewhere in the world, airlines had been allowed to operate only 14 flights a day.

Besides Turkish Airlines, Korean Air, Dragon Air, Etihad Airways, Fly Dubai, Oman Air and Malaysia Airlines are going back to their normal frequency from 1 October. Qatar Airways has re-started twice daily flights to Dubai, Kathmandu.

We want to send the message that Nepal is returning to normal,” CAAN’s Rajan Pokharel said. The decision to lift restrictions followed a rise in demand from Nepali families coming to Korea for the Dashain-Tihar-Chhath festivals, as well as bookings from tourists who want to take advantage of the reopening of trekking and mountain climbing from 17 October.

International airlines expect tourist traffic to start getting back to normal only next year, but there may be increases even this autumn because the remote mountainous regions of Nepal do not get as many active Covid-19 cases.

The Visit Nepal Year 2020 secretariat had signed a partnership agreement with Turkish Airlines in December 2019 to promote Nepal in the carrier’s international network. The goal was to bring 2 million tourists to Nepal in 2020, but the campaign had to be called off because of the Covid-19 crisis.

“As the airline flying to the most destinations in the world, Turkish Airlines’ vision from day one has been to connect Nepal to the world,” Kocici said. “Nepal is a tourism destination for us, and we hope that as things return to normal, we will continue to be a partner for Nepal tourism and aviation industry into the future.”

Despite foreign nationals being allowed to fly to Nepal from 17 October, there is some confusion about the conditions. It is not clear if jetsetting tourists and foreigners on permanent residence are being allowed.

Nepali travel trade executives also say the two-week hotel quarantine requirement on arrival is impractical if the visitors arrive with RT PCR negative reports, and if incoming tourists are not allowed to travel in and out of the country. This is still no word on when flights to and from India will be allowed.

When asked about the confusion in the directories, Ministry spokesperson Kamal Bhattarai conceded: “Even though the guidelines have been sent to the concerned agencies, we may have to make it easier based on consultations. It is not final or official yet. We have had to balance surviving the tourism industry while ensuring health and safety during the pandemic.”

Global IME and HPFN Global IME Bank and Hotel Professional Federation Nepal (HPFN) have signed an agreement to provide loans, at concessional interest rates to hotel and restaurant operators affiliated with HPFN. In addition, the bank will also look into areas such as, provide training on banking and financial literacy to the entrepreneurs affiliated to the federation.

SOCEA Westend Premier Soceae Westend Premier Nepalganj, the first US Green Building Council-certified luxury hotel in Nepal, has been recognized with the Award for Environment Friendly and Sustainable Development of the 41st World Tourism Day by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation.

Shangri-La Staycation package Shangri-La Village Resort Pokhara has introduced its new 2-night 3-day staycation package ‘Where hygiene meets nature’ and is openers to Covid-19 health and safety guidelines. The package will include accommodation in the resort’s Deluxe Room as well as breakfast, lunch and dinner at the resort’s Shangri-La Staycation package.

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**Events**

- **Le Sherpa Market**
  
  Do your weekly shopping for fresh and healthy vegetables, fruit, sesame, rice, noodles, products, honey, and much more. Physical distancing guidelines apply.
  
  Every Saturday, 8am-12pm, Durbar Marg, Kathmandu.

- **100 Word contest**

  Submit a 100-word story either in fiction or nonfiction for a chance to win $1,000 and get published in The Writer magazine. Go to the website for details on how to send in submissions.
  
  Deadline: 6 October.

- **Music lessons**

  Sign up for Kathmandu’s Jazz Conservatory’s private Vocal, Guitar, Bass, Piano, Violin and Flute classes online, taught by experienced Nepali and foreign musicians. Send an email to art4kids@yahoo.co.in for details.

  9813506946.

- **Kaalo.101 exhibition**

  Kaalo.101 is calling for creative submissions for their next virtual exhibition titled POWER, REPRESENTATION and VIOLETS in the context of gender empowerment and feminism. Submissions can include any artwork that can be represented within a virtual space, including videos, photos, and recordings.

  Submission deadline: 5 October.

- **Courses**

  Interested to learn about subjects that aren’t available in Nepalese colleges and universities? Courses patterns with universities, organisations, and trusts around the world and provides universal access via a searchable database to free online courses covering a wide variety of topics.

- **Digital Archaeology Foundation**

  Look at historic photographs from Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur Darbar squares, and watch 3D reconstructed videos of temples around Nepal. Visit the Digital Archaeology Foundation website for more details.

- **ShilpGee Theatre**

  Plays from ShilpGee Theatre are on YouTube channel, watch COMA, and find their adoption at Hermes Town’s Hendra Gahlot.

- **Comics Geek Destinations**


**Online Archives**

- **ONLINE ARCHIVES**

- **ShilpGee Theatre**

  Plays from ShilpGee Theatre are on YouTube channel, watch COMA, and find their adoption at Hermes Town’s Hendra Gahlot.

**Dining**

- **Gangnam Galbi Barbeque**

  Tantalize the taste buds with the best of Korean barbecue, grill, and side food. Try the Sundara stew and duck meat grill. Find the menu online.

  Novel, (01) 4456780.

- **Nina’s**

  Nina’s has been a favourite of those seeking a juicy burger and steak. Their service is superb, and the quality of the dishes is unmatched and the owner is unlike any other in Nepal.

  7am-4:30pm. Mahabir nagar. 9813134043.

- **Dhokaima Cafe**

  Excited about the Plateau Dhaba for safety distanced one-air-ones for coffee, meals or drinks. Sample Chef Air s pre-Dasmine menu. Also available in takeaways.

  Call: 01 5522113.

- **The Chocolate Room**

  Enter a world of chocolate cupcakes, decadent brownies and chocolate of every size and shape. Between the chocolate, try the new Per Fins, and milkshake.

  Jhamsikhel. 9851056096.

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

- **Kripa Joshi**

  Kripa Joshi, a New York Times best-selling author, has been inspired to write a children’s book about forests. This book is about trees. Around 80% of all terrestrial biodiversity depend on forests, from the smallest bugs to magnificent mammals. Forests are essential to life. They are the lungs of the planet, providing oxygen and absorbing carbon. And they are home to the majority of life on earth, where two-thirds of the world’s population lives. Forests are also home to 10% of all global greenhouse gas emissions – more than all transportation emissions combined. Forests are being cleared, burned or degraded due to the global deforestation, which is the exploitation of natural resources (like logging and mining) and the growing demand for agricultural expansion, urbanization, and plantations. But forests not just trees. About 80 million of the world’s indigenous peoples depend on forests for their livelihoods. So do not put away your umbrellas just yet.

  So do not put away your umbrellas just yet.

**Our Pick**

Based on Charlie’s (Larson) 2020.21 book ‘Young Neer. Par, Alphonse Matteo’ directed by Tulu Wali and penned and directed by Oscar-winning music Jas/Booj. The film released in 2019 was widely reviewed for being a phenomenal watch. The comedy-drama revolves around a young boy in Raman Giri’s (Dhurry) loving mother Gopika (Gopika), Tulu Wali (Thomson Mokiri) and a friendly Adolf Hitler played by Aadyk Shirat.

**Air Quality Index**

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**Respite**

Showers this weekend will bring AQI down somewhat. For live Kathmandu AQI measurements, go to www.nepalitimes.com.
Nepal’s women envoy makes a mark

Pratistha Rijal

Nepal has a female president and a Constitution that reserves positions in government and legislature to women, and in the foreign service women diplomats make up more than half the ranking staff. Five of Nepal’s 25 currently serving ambassadors are women.

During the Covid-19 crisis, Nepal’s women ambassadors have shown that they are as good as, if not better than, their male colleagues in ensuring the welfare of Nepalis abroad as well as projecting the country’s international image.

“Society must stop judging women simply for their gender. We are not men, and we shouldn’t be compared to them. Our inherent femininity, sensitivity, nurturance, emotional temperament, are our best qualities,” says Nepal’s ambassador to Oman Samila Parajuli Dhakal, who has been praised for the efficient handling of the evacuation of stranded Nepali workers during the Covid-19 crisis.

Dawa Phul Sherpa, Nepal’s Ambassador to Spain, is also a political appointee but has been using her contacts to promote Nepal as an attraction in Spain.

Ambassador to Israel Anjana Shakya has just registered with payday app Cash for 500 Nepali caregivers, and is sending out travel coupons to boost Nepal’s agricultural productivity.

In Oman, Spain, Israel, Japan, Nepal’s female ambassadors are proudly flying the flag

Deena Puthi Sherpa, Nepal’s Ambassador to Japan, is also a political appointee but has been using her contacts to promote Nepal as an attraction in Spain.

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T
That night in Taplejung, we
were surrounded by the
lungs of the world, the
Kanchenjunga. The hazy
evening air was filled with
the sweet scent of
larch. I could see the
winding path that led up
the mountain. I
remembered the words
of my conservation
guru Chandra
Gurung, who sang and danced
to the tune of his
favourite song, and one he
sang during many occasions.
It was my conservation
guru Chandra
Gurung's favourite song, and one he
sang during many occasions. I was
supposed to be on it, but had to make space
for the dignitaries who had come
to the handover ceremony of the
Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) to the
community.

Twenty-four people died in
that tragedy this week 15 years ago,
among them Nepal's conservation
heroes: Harka Gurung, veteran
guide; and Chandra Gurung who designed the
model of using tourism income to pay
for conservation; Mingma Norbu Sherpa, who helped establish the
Ama Dablam Base Camp and
Tirendra Maskey, who paved the way
to the future of conservation.
Nepal also lost Forest Minister
Barkal Rai, Secretary Damodar
Parajuli, and Director Generals
Sharan K Rai and Narayan P Paudel.

After KAC, Nepal
has added three
more protected
area systems: Gauri-Shankar
Conservation Area, Api
Nampa Conservation
Area, Banko National
Park – covering
4,933 square km across
two landscapes,
Kailash and Utrai-
Annapurna.

These conservation
initiatives have placed emphasis
on ensuring equal
benefits to communities
promoting a harmonious
existence between
humans and wildlife.

The community-based
conservation initiatives have been
critical in protecting species as
well as ensuring a sustainable
future for people living in and near
wilderness areas.

While the sudden loss of
so many professionals put a dent on
Nepal’s environmental movement,
their legacy has continued with
the stewardship of the natural
resources. A community-based
scholarships to socio-economically
minority students, many of whom
have grown up to be professionals
working at KCA and elsewhere.

For the conservationists,
the handover of KCA in 2006 was a
significant milestone, it also ended
up being an unimaginable tragedy
and setback. Merely 12 hours
after calculating the tragedy to
the community in Taplejung,
and soon after taking off from Ghunsa,
the helicopter carrying Nepal's
top conservationists flew into a
crash hidden by cloud. Ever since,
23 September has been marked as
Nepal's National Conservation Day
in memory of those Conservation Heroes.

Chandra Sherpa, a former
scholarship recipient and now a
ranger at the Forest Research
and Training Center in Pokhara
says, “The Mingma Norbu Sherpa
Memorial Scholarship had a profound impact on my life. It built
my future, and I hope that I will be able to follow the footsteps of the
conservation heroes who made this possible. I hope that I can someday
give back to others.”

The leaders continue to make a
positive impact on Nepal and the
world long after their departure.
We may have lost heroes on
that fateful day, but their work has
carried on through a new generation which values the community
for the best conservation education
during their formative years in
their memory. I feel fortunate and
guided to have been one of them.

Now, we need to pass
the torch to yet another generation
to help preserve our natural heritage,
just like our predecessors once
did. Fifteen years down the line,
Nepal has taken great strides in
conservation despite the tragedy,
and despite facing multiple
challenges since.

Let us renew our commitment
to the goals set by our conservation
pioneers, so we can overcome
obstacles that lie ahead as we
grapple with the pandemic and its
aftermath.

Ghana Gurung

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the entire purpose of the ritual has their reasoning for changing their pain she feels from their loss.

riverbanks to construct the chaitya. Ganesh Maya says that the banks.

water, Ganesh Maya says that the accumulation of solid waste on the sacredness of the holy river, she says the river in the form of flowers placed on the riverbanks with Nil La: to offer it to the temple for their role in childhood ends, light a wick on the leaf that cross the valley. The rivers water is considered the most sacred water for cleansing the temple. The river was a source of life for him but after he saw human faces floating in the water when collecting jal for a ritual, he says he has never returned to the banks of the Bagmati. Bahai’s experience is not the same. For the rivers became more polluted, people began sourcing jal from wells near the river, their proximity affording the water extraction from them the same ritual significance as the river water once held. However, due to the rapidly declining groundwater table, many of those wells have gone dry, or have become just as contaminated as the rivers that worshippers were trying to avoid. Once again, the devotes were forced to search for alternative sources of jal.

Residents of Kathmandu, both religious practitioners and lay people, have also observed a gradual shift in conceptions of the water that can be considered ‘jal’ or ‘holy water.’ Chudamani, a Bajracharya priest, explains that river water is the quintessence of all forms and sources of water and has therefore traditionally been considered the most sacred. “But instead of trying to preserve and restore river water which is so essential for religious purposes, people are making changes in their cultural rituals due to the pollution,” he continued. In practice, this means that the definition of what constitutes as sacred water has expanded as an adaptation to changing environmental conditions.

Macha Bahai is a Nilija Puja Puraj, meaning he performs puja daily to the deity of the Kankeshwori Temple. He has spent innumerable days at this temple and on the banks of the river, collecting sacred water for cleansing the temple. He says the river was a source of life for him but after he saw human faces floating in the water when collecting jal for a ritual, he says he has never returned to the banks of the Bagmati.

Macha Bahai’s experience is not the only one. The rivers have become more polluted, people began sourcing jal from wells near the river, their proximity affording the water extraction from them the same ritual significance as the river water once held. However, due to the rapidly declining groundwater table, many of those wells have gone dry, or have become just as contaminated as the rivers that worshippers were trying to avoid. Once again, the devotes were forced to search for alternative sources of jal.

In the Hindu belief system, while river water is considered the most sacred, all water that is moving is pure. Under this definition, we could interpret the river water coming out of the taps and dhunge dhara also as sacred. However, arranged tasks in such water was not considered to be suitable for ritual purposes, but currently, the construction of adequate wastewater treatment infrastructure has resulted in vast amounts of grey and black water ending up in the rivers. Additionally, direct solid waste dumping, encroachment, and illegal and uncontrolled sand mining have all contributed to the degradation of the river. The river bed is true of urban development first begun in the 1960s, sewer and stormwater lines were directed to the Bagmati River intentionally with the idea that all pollutants would be washed away. Although the Bagmati naturally experiences wide fluctuations in flow rates because it is a seasonal, monsoon-fed river, now regardless of the season, the dilution capacity of the river is so low, and the level of contamination is so great, that the flow is predominantly wastewater. In many places in Kathmandu Valley, the river is considered dead, meaning it can no longer support biodiversity. Many say that with the death of the Bagmati, the Bagmati Civilisation has also been lost.

Despite the biological and spiritual death of the Bagmati and its tributaries, the rivers have become points of focus for infrastructure development in the name of modernisation. Consequently, the construction of walled river corridor, managed by the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (KVIDA), is used as the primary intervention to address flooding in the urban core. These corridors are also meant to help improve the flow of traffic and reduce congestion in other parts of the city. Now almost every stream and river in the valley has been straightened and confined by concrete walls, the widths of which are set as per the 20-year flood provisions, due to changes in monsoon rainfall patterns and the construction of the valley. 20-year floods are occurring every five years or less.

City residents have also long since been depleted of sand, mined for concrete to fuel the construction boom of the metropolis. Now that the rivers contain few natural resources, some have gone as far as to advocate that they are covered completely in concrete. In some places, they already have been.

Shir Kumar Basnet, the Executive Director of the Water Resource, Research, and Development Center at the Ministry of Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation says that encroachment on the rivers and settlements in the river’s right-of-way has made it so that normal flooding events now cause property damage and seem even more devastating. “A city’s rivers are like part of a cage,” Basnet says. “They think that from an ecological standpoint, as well as when considering what is best for urban development, the rivers ought to flow freely.” Many agree with him, including the late Hira Ram Baijaty, a prominent social activist who spoke extensively on the need to save the Bagmati to save its civilisation. Baijaty used to say: “The river is our nature, we should never destroy it, but live side by side with it. Instead of controlling its rivers, Kathmandu must work to conserve them.” When Hira Ram Baijaty looked out across the Bagmati from his home near its bank at ‘Chapaladi,’ he wondered about one thing: “Can modernisation exist without culture?” For truly sustainable development of cities such as Kathmandu, the centric cultural rituals and rituals associated with the rivers, which incorporate knowledge of both spiritual beliefs and sustainable land-use practices accumulated over thousands of years, must be preserved to help the city grow in harmony with natural ecological systems.

Rajani Maharjan is an environmental anthropologist affiliated with the Small Earth Nepal (SEN), an environmental research group. Madison Worytowicz is a 2019-2020 Fulbright-National Geographic Storytelling Fellow who studies water insecurity, primarily in Kathmandu Valley, and is now based in Colorado.
KC’s fast highlights Nepal’s Covid-19 failure

Government’s reckless disregard of the crusading surgeon’s demands shows why it has bungled in the pandemic

Ramu Sapkota

Last week, Nepal’s Health Ministry said it would recommend another lockdown if active Covid-19 cases crossed 25,000 mark. Given that 5% of coronavirus patients are now requiring ventilator and ICU treatment, the decision reflected the government’s realisation that it was running out of hospital beds and health infrastructure. The Health Ministry has already decided to charge fees for PCR even in the government labs, citing its inability to pay for tests for all suspected cases.

“The government is no longer able to treat coronavirus patients and this pandemic has exposed Nepal’s fragile infrastructure,” says public health expert Sujanbabu Mahara. But for that Nepal needs fully-equipped and well-staffed hospitals providing services all over the country. This in turn requires medical colleges to produce sufficient health professionals. Which is what has been driving Govinda KC for the past 20 years to push for healthcare for all Nepalis.

His activism has involved treating patients in under-served parts of the country and to push for specialist health care in remote areas, and setting up government medical colleges in all seven provinces. The government has repeatedly promised to meet his demands just to get him to call off his hunger strikes, and then ignoring them. As a direct result of these lapses, the Nepali state has been unable to get him to call off his hunger strike, and doctors say his condition is deteriorating rapidly.

Instead, critics and supporters of KC say the state is entirely focused on destroying public health structure by supporting and protecting medical education mafia and profit-oriented private hospitals. If there were government colleges across the country by now, the gap in service delivery and shortage in medical equipment would have been filled to a large extent, as such of these institutions would have adequate test kits and essential ventilators and ICU beds. People could have got healthcare at the local level without having to travel to the cities during the pandemic. Instead, many lives have been lost unnecessarily not just due to Covid-19 but also from other chronic diseases because patients could not get to hospitals due to the lockdown, or because they were afraid to go there for fear of infection. Meanwhile, private institutions are overcharging for PCR tests.

KC’s activism has its roots in 2010 bribery case in the Institute of Medicine (IOM) that exposed the culture of sale and examinations. The points from his first hunger strike eight years ago have still not been met even as he went on his 19th fast unto death on 14 September in Jumla. This time, KC has demanded that government establish state-run medical schools with necessary infrastructure and resources in each province.

On 17 June, prime minister K P Oli’s personal doctor Dhraya Singh was made the Dean of IOM, a political appointment that was met with heavy criticism in the public sphere.

Medical education reform activist Jijash Chettri says: “Most of the appointments at the IOM are of those who have political influence. This will surely bring down the institute and hospitals operating under it.”

Member of Nepal Medical Council Dhumji Raj Poudel says that Nepal’s universities are incapable of providing affiliations to more than five medical colleges.

Sunil Sharma, the operator of Nobel Medical College in Biratnagar invested Rs7.5 billion in Kathmandu Medical College. Sharma is the same person whose Grade 12 certificate was found to have been forged during a Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) probe in 2016. Unable to arrest Sharma, the CIB had then placed him in the wanted list.

Last year, students accused Chithwan Medical College in Bhairahawa, National Medical College in Birgunj and Noble Medical College in Biratnagar of charging more than the prescribed fee. But the promoters have such high level political connections that nothing happened to them.

When Lokman Singh Karki was the head of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CICSA), it had openly favoured his brother Bimal Singh Karki, who was the director of Kist Medical College when private medical education does not even fall under jurisdiction of the authority.

While KC repeatedly puts his life on the line for reforming medical education and making medical care affordable and accessible to all Nepalis, the government is out to back its cronies in the lucrative private healthcare sector.

“The part we couldn’t reform medical education under the pressure from the prime minister and education minister,” says former Registrar of Nepal Medical Council Baburam Marasini. Meanwhile, senior figures in the NCP government regularly pass disparaging remarks about Govinda KC. Last week, KC was forcibly moved to the Trauma Centre when he flew in from Jumla via Nepalgunj half-way through his hunger strike.

KC is on the 19th day of his current hunger strike, and doctors say his condition is deteriorating rapidly.

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