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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-job-one-person principle, so K P Oli will serve out his term as prime minister, and Pushpa Kamal Dahal will head the party. To drive the point home, Dahal held the party secretariat meeting last week not in Baluwatar, but at Paris Danda HQ of his erstwhile Maoist party in a room festooned with hammers and sickles, and life-size busts



of Marx, Lenin, Mao and Stalin. Yes, Stalin.

The senior leaders are now senior citizens, and the masked men had a hard time climbing the fire escape ladder to reach the green-carpeted third floor meeting room. The secretariat membership consists only of men, most of them Brahmin communists.

Predictably, Oli and Dahal are on the verge of falling out again over various overdue appointments to constitutional bodies, university chancellors, ambassadorships, as well as the much-anticipated reshuffle of the Cabinet. The two men are dividing up the spoils, and needless to say, most of those being considered for top jobs are men.

What an irony that after a ten-year war that was fought to drain Kathmandu's swamp, the political calculus is the same, and the main actors are still all males from the dominant community. Corruption has now trickled up to a level where some of these appointments are reportedly 'pre-paid' — offered in exchange for pounds of flesh.

This is necessary to balance the nefarious factions in the ruling party because whoever is going to be a minister now will be an incumbent during the 2022 election, and command the machinery of state during campaigning.

Over at the opposition Nepali Congress, things are not much better. Party honcho Sher Bahadur Deuba has been feuding with Ram Chandra Poudel for the better part of the past two decades, and that power struggle is still going on. Both are septuagenarians, and there is not a woman leader in sight.

The Constitution and its mandatory provisions for inclusion, quotas, and reservations have become a formality. Much more important for the ruling clique in the reshuffle, is to balance the interests of cronies, appease factions, and woo leaders from fringe parties needed to keep the two-thirds majority intact.

Only after that, if at all, will women leaders be appointed to ministries, and they will usually be marginal portfolios. Even those women are probably going to be relatives, like the wife of Bam Dev Gautam who needs to be appeased after the Supreme Court thwarted his plans to use his new Upper House seat leapfrog into a cabinet position.

It must be said that even if more women are appointed to the cabinet, they rarely behave any differently than their male counterparts. Minister of Water Supply Bina Magar is Dahal's daughter-in-law, and presided over the eviction of an Italian contractor last year just before it was to complete the Melanchi project. Minister of Land Management is Padma Kumari Aryal, who this month decided to lift the three-year ban on fragmenting land holdings — allegedly at the behest of the real estate mafia.

Radha Gyawali as Energy Minister in Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai's government in 2012 sacked Kulman Ghising from the Chilime Hydropower Project because he was doing a good job, and replaced him with a crony.

We do have Shiva Maya Tumbahangphe who would have been an excellent Speaker of Parliament, but fell victim to Oli-Dahal infighting last year, and was made Law Minister. There are women deputy mayors who are performing admirably in managing the Covid-19 crisis in municipalities. And Nepal now has five female ambassadors who are flying the flag around the world.

Implementing constitutional provisions for gender parity and ethnic diversity in government should not be tokenism, there has to be an acknowledgement of meritocracy in appointments. Unfortunately, the Oli-Dahal bargaining over the cabinet reshuffle is all about wheeling-dealing at a time when the country faces the Covid-19 emergency. We need politicians with technocratic backgrounds in high office, not warlords perpetuating the pillage of state coffers.

That does not seem to be what is happening. Oli and Dahal reportedly want to split ministries so there are 24 berths to accommodate candidates from their respective factions. If that is the arithmetic, then enforcing constitutionally-mandated affirmative action becomes meaningless.

When political calculus involves dividing up the spoils, constitutionally-mandated affirmative action for women becomes meaningless.

ONLINE PACKAGES



KITE RUNNING
Dasain is upon us and so is the kite flying season. In fact, there is a boom in the kite business this year thanks to Covid-19 induced leisure time. In this video we feature Nepali kites and visit Manandhar Kite Center in Kalimati, a family business that has been making and selling kites for four generations. Videos only on *Nepali Times* YouTube channel.

NUGAD

Why does Nepal require four international airports all within a radius of 200 km ('Zurich Airport International opts out of Nepal project', Kashish Das Shrestha, #1029)? This shows poor planning and isn't it a complete waste of scarce resources besides being a huge risk to aviation safety.

Shyam Visvambhara Das

- Convincing argument. Looking at the working speed of Pokhara and Bhairahawa airport, it will take over 100 years for Nijgad airport to be completed. The whole idea is to siphon off trillions to tax havens.

Prem Thapa

- The better option is to upgrade and maintain Kathmandu airport.

Claudine Bonis

- Nature is Nepal's only asset. You mess it, you're doomed. Period.

Varvāra Hajisāwa

- They should first build proper roads and railway system to transport goods instead of this huge airport, which is clearly not well-planned.

Pukar Uprety

- It makes sense to keep this project on hold. It shouldn't be the priority right now. The investors might come back in couple of years. If not, we'll find a new contractor. We definitely need a new airport, that's for sure.

Elite Akash

- In-depth articles like this are always excellent. I hope what is truly best for Nepal prevails, especially when foreign investors are not interested.

WALKABOUT WITH ANIL

For someone like me who grew up in Kathmandu Valley celebrating and observing the festivities and rituals, I had little to no idea about the myths or the ancient history of Nepal. For the first time I'm viewing Kathmandu in a different light, thanks to this series. This series fills that gap and will be very helpful for many more Nepali youngsters once it starts gaining momentum.

COVID-19

It's the same over here in my country ('Nepali workers stuck in no-man's land', Nitu Ghale, Tripty Tamang Pakhrin and Bunu Dhungana, #1029). Conveniently forgotten and ostracised by some sectors of society, even more so by the government.

Syirin Junisya

- I agree many people are still either unaware or do not follow safety measures but we also need a strong plan to keep the economy from collapsing ("We better take this virus seriously", Vijay Lama, #1029). I hope the virus don't spread to the villages and with Dasain so close.

Niall O'Caomhanach

- No more lockdown please ('Unlimited flights to Nepal from 17 October', nepalitimes.com). Let's welcome everyone with PCR negative report.

Tashi Gurung

- The public comes to the rescue again. It is always the people who have solutions that best address the plight of citizens ('Youth-led feeding campaign spreads across Nepal', Nunuta Rai, nepalitimes.com). Salute to the youth of our nation because we know the country is going to be in their hands in future.

Kyu Yeti

FAILED FEDERALISM

Our so-called leaders only knew how to do revolt, they didn't have vision or planning beyond that ('The 'f' word', Editorial, #1029). #FailedFederalism #FailedLeadership

Saisab Parajuli

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Nepal's QFX cinema needs a happy ending

by Alisha Sijapati

The pandemic has turned Nepal's biggest theatre chain's thriving multiplex business into a horror show much more frightening than any movie script. Can QFX cinema have a happy ending? Read this report online and find out.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Zurich Airport International opts out of Nepal project

by Kashish Das Shrestha

Zurich Airport International is no more interested in Nijgad contract. Nepal's last remaining sal forest in eastern Tarai gets a respite. Read this exclusive report only at nepalitimes.com and join the online debate, for and against Nijgad airport.

Most popular on Twitter

Most commented



Nepali workers stuck in no-man's land

by Nitu Ghale, Tripty Tamang Pakhrin and Bunu Dhungana

Hundreds of thousands of Nepali migrants in the Gulf are caught between cruel employers and a heartless homeland. This longread captures desperation of workers stuck in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and UAE due to Covid-19. Visit our website for full story.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

- Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**
Zurich Airport International opts out of Nijgad project Still, government pushes a ghost airport so it can clear-cut valuable hardwood forest, which is said to be worth at least \$500,000,000. An exclusive by @kashishds. #Nepal
- Ashok Pokharel @BigBlackYak**
We will eventually need a bigger airport. KTM, PKR, and BWA can't cut it in the long run. However, the Nijgad project was contemplated around the hub-and-spoke system while aviation is tilting towards point-to-point system. For this alone, the project needs a good, hard re-look.
- Shuvam Rizal @ShuvamRizal**
Just read this brilliant piece on the controversial Nijgad airport issue. @NepaliTimes @kashishds analyses important developments so far and sheds light on the infrastructure politics & ecological costs involved. Must-read! #Nepal
- Rajib Upadhyay @RajibUpadhyay**
One Tree is a Life. A Million Trees will be a Stalinist Statistic. Save Democracy!
- Joe Niemczura, RN @ccnepal2013**
I hope they are not clearing the land now. This project should never have been green lighted. #Nijgad needs to stop forever.
- Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**
What the Centre can learn from the Periphery. Even as the Tarai brings #COVID19 under control, Kathmandu Valley suffers sustained community spread. Analysis by @SoniaAwale in @NepaliTimes:
- Hari Sapkota @harrysapkota**
Decentralisation is the key! What's the point of having federal states if everything was always going to be KTM-centred?

- Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**
Of the 125,000 who registered to be rescued, more than 43,000 overseas #migrantworkers have returned to #Nepal during the #CoronavirusPandemic. How are the rest holding up as they struggle in no-man's land without job and savings?
- Malika Aryal @mikaness**
Important reporting on Nepali migrant workers waiting (but unable to) come home by journalist @NituChaley, Tripty Tamang Pakhrin, and @bunu_dhungana of @nepalphotoproj for @NepaliTimes weekend long-reads.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Twenty years ago in the #12 edition of *Nepali Times* (4-10 October 2000) Hemlata Rai reported on a controversial parliamentary bill on nationalities that proposed to remove Newas from the list of Nepal's 60-plus indigenous groups. The issue carried a vigorous debate for and against this proposal, and is still a matter for discussion two decades later.

The Editorial 'Clause 118 and 119' analyses the aftermath of the Maoist attack on Dunai, the capital of Dolpo district a week previously in which 22 people were killed. 'We celebrated Dasain with sacrifices not of goats, but of humans,' the editorial said. 'They were Nepalis, and Nepalis killed them.'

The paper also profiled Sunil N S Thapa, general manager of Balloon Sunrise Nepal and the only Nepali hot air balloon pilot who spoke about the potential for balloon tourism in Nepal. Before becoming a balloon pilot, Thapa was in the Royal Nepal Army. Hot air balloons have stopped flying over Kathmandu today, but there may be potential in Chitwan and Pokhara.

Excerpts:

Are Newas janajati?: The multi-religious characteristic of Newas is another reason for confusion over the community's status. The 1996-taskforce definition requires communities to belong outside the Hindu caste system to claim janajati status. But many Newas are Hindus and follow un-janjati practices such as observing an occupational caste system and 'untouchability'. This again could have been caused by centuries of Hindu domination over the Newa cultural space, argue some activists. "Some



Newas might have attained high posts and earned much wealth but as a community, we have no say in national affairs, we're a group left out in the cold," says Malla K Sundar, a prominent Newa pro-janjati leader.

Clause 118 and 119: Policemen are being killed by Maoists or vice versa. Innocent sons and daughters of Nepali peasants die. And the leaders on both sides? All that matters to them is power. While the killing fields of Dunai and Bhorlekar reverberated with the thunder of pipe bombs and guns, politicians in the capital were jockeying shamelessly to ensure a position in the post-Dasain reshuffle. The Army was busy presenting excuses why it did not come to the aid of the police when they were being slaughtered ("we were not formally notified", "the bridge was destroyed"). And a bigger battle looms between the two Darbars over the destiny of this land.

Up where the air is clean: Sunil NS Thapa says it is better than working for a living. And what a job he has: floating in a cane gondola at 3,100m above Kathmandu Valley drifting slowly across the cobalt Himalayan sky and making a dramatic landing on a field as water buffaloes watch lazily. While some pilots like to fly 747s, others love the thrill of a F-16, what is the glamour of piloting a large object that is technically lighter than air, and is at the mercy of the elements? Isn't it boring? "No, it's not monotonous at all," says Sunil, a former soldier who is Nepal's only balloon pilot.

From the archives of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com.



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Nepal's past, present and future in a photo

Peeling away layers of a historical photograph reveals lessons for Nepali politics today

Recently, with my mother Kalpana Ghimire 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



COMMENT

Bhumi Ghimire

my towering twenty-something 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.

At the time, I was not quite able to put my finger into why I felt the way I did about it, until the point of writing this commentary. This picture is a strong and genuine 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.

I am convinced that it bears not only a significant historical importance, but also is of strong relevance to Nepal's political climate today, and might even deliver a message for the future.

Amongst these young men, some are more familiar to us than others, but for the most part they have come to become these larger than life iconic personalities who were to leave behind important imprints in the historical, political and academic landscape of our country.

At the time this photo was taken, they were Nepali students studying in Banaras and key figures of the Nepali National Congress (Nepali Rastriya Congress). They had participated in the Free India movement and were inspired by the whirlpool of revolutionary ideologies and activities against British colonialism there.

Given their patriotic inclination, these young men wished to dedicate their lives to bring about socio-political change in their own country that was then under the yoke of the Rana oligarchy.

It is a studio-posed picture, and such photographs were markers of special occasions in those days. From family accounts, I know that this picture was taken in October 1947, not long after my grandfather and many others had been released from the Dhankuta Jail following their active participation in the Biratnagar Jute Mill labour strike of



CHETANA KAUSHIK SHARMA

BYGONE DAYS: (From left-right standing) Lakpa Tsering Sherpa (?), Ganesh Man Singh, Bal Chandra Sharma, Mahendra Narayan Nidhi. (Sitting) Matrika Prasad Koirala and Bishweswar Prasad Koirala.

March 1947.

The agitation had been put down *manu-militari* by the Rana state troops, workers were brutally repressed, its leaders arrested and imprisoned. The strike, which initially was a movement against the management for labour rights, turned into a call for the nationwide anti-Rana regime movement.

Youth and leadership:

This photograph draws attention to youth leadership, which is so glaringly lacking in Nepali politics today, and discouraged by the establishment, including the Nepali Congress. Apart from the occasional lip service to “*yuva shakti*” (youth power), we are having to put up with personalities in their mid to late 60's and 70's

at the helm of a nation that is predominantly young.

It is sad and ironic that the Nepali Congress today, the very party that these young men established, refuses to re-invent itself and pave the way for a new generation. The youth in this photo were promising, dynamic, purposeful and so are the young, aspiring leaders of today.

But they are held back by a coterie of over-the-hill oldsters who were nurtured and educated with outdated, obsolete social and political values. Whether it is the right or left, or the even so-called progressive ‘Maoist’ communists, our present leaders are utterly out of touch with where Nepalis are headed, and what they want.

The young men in the photograph changed the course of Nepal's history, and ushered in the transition from feudalism to democracy. They were visionaries, ahead of their time, capable of anticipating changes that were

sweeping the world during that period of history.

Nepal's current political elite lacks this vision, and is lagging behind in the collective aspiration of the people of Nepal. There is a massive gap in ideology, in communication, and indeed in comprehension between the populace and politicians.

The people do not understand the motives of their leaders, nor do the leaders address our concerns and aspirations. The current political watchwords seem to be sloganism, nepotism, ‘kursi ko khel’ (literally, a game of thrones) – in all political parties, including the former Maoists in the NCP.

Ethnic representation

The other layer in this photograph is its representation of Nepal's various ethnicities — effectively representing the Himal, Pahad, Tarai. This is something we do not see much of these days, at least within a single political party. Has politics in Nepal become so retrograde when we

are supposed to have a progressive and inclusive Constitution?

When did we last see a Sherpa in the leading committee of NC or the NCP? Many will see that there is a non-representation of women in the photograph, but for that one has to bear in mind that this was the 1940's after all. The fact that the minorities are so well represented is in itself remarkable.

The identity of the man standing on the top left corner has been a subject of debate. On the back of the photograph, a writer has identified him as Lakpa Tsering Sherpa and some have argued it to be Nirmal Lama, both were members of the Nepali Congress in the early days.

Pose and pahiran (attire)

It is obvious how the vestimentary call of the day was defiance and differentiation. These sartorial elements are more than just fashion statements. How one dressed in that generation reflected

one's political, ideological, cultural or social leanings.

When this photo was shown to friends, one of the recurring questions that kept coming up was: why none of these young Nepali men were attired in *Dhaka-topi daura-surwal*?

The *daura-surwal* as we know it today is a variation of the Tapalan, something that the Newa people had been wearing for years. The Rana regime declared it to be the national attire, and ordered all Nepali men to wear it for formal occasions.

For these revolutionaries, the *daura-surwal* represented the oppressive governance of the Ranas, who were often seen wearing them. These young men wanted to steer clear of this image, and depict a ‘newer’ Nepal.

Only after the iconic image of King Tribhuvan waving as he depaled a Dakota with registration ‘VT-CVC’ at Gauchar airfield in 1951 in a simplified *daura-surwal*, would the attire get its badge of democratic honour.

Sedition and disjunctures

The core of the layered Matryoshka doll in this photograph prompts us to dig even deeper into the bane of Nepali politics since.

We should not just revere these great men, but also critically analyse their shortfalls. Their expressions show resolve and determination, but also exhaustion from having survived the brutal sentence they served for the Biratnagar Jute Mill Strike. In their eyes, we see unity, fellowship and resolve.

However, looking back, we also know that this unity was about to crack. Discord, alienation, treason, alliances and misalliances were in the offing. In 1951, the Mukti Sena which had been established as the NC's Liberation Army against the Rana regime came into disaccord with BP with regards to the tripartite Delhi Accord.

Further tension between BP and his half brother Matrika created more fissures. It is tragic that they failed to work as a team for a common goal, and it is partly because of this that King Mahendra had the ammunition to be able to carry out his 1960 coup.

Infighting and division seem to be the malediction of Nepali political leadership. This is an invaluable point that the history of Nepal has taught us over and over: our leaders continue to fight among themselves like jackals over a piece of carcass.

Seventy years after this photograph was taken, this is still a burning question, and the curse that defiles, degrades and debilitates our political landscape and actors. We still seem to be stuck in square one. 🇳🇵

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The future is older

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

The 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, compared to 1 in 11 in 2019. Nepal itself is ageing fast even as overseas demand continues to grow for Nepali migrant geriatric caregivers.



LABOUR MOBILITY
Upasana Khadka

Even before the current health crisis, the care 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 exceeds 1 million, the pandemic has drawn attention to the lackluster situation of elderly care, inadequate staff, PPEs, high turnovers, and with a big share of Covid-19 deaths taking place in old age homes.

There are signs that the demand for geriatric caregivers globally is on the rise. A bilateral labour 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 help countries fight Covid-19, tens of thousands of current migrants languish overseas.

Even traditionally closed countries which are concerned about social cohesion are now being forced to relax their admission policies for caregivers. Japan stands out as a striking example: 28% of its population is already 65, and this will increase to 50% in the next 40 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 in March 2019 to mobilise workers under the Specified Skilled Workers (SSW) visa category. Japan is expected to hire over 300,000 workers over the next five years from several countries including Nepal, which includes a quota for



YOSHI SHIMIZU WHO

OLD IS GOLD: In the next four decades, half of Japan's population will be above 65. Last year, Japan signed an agreement with multiple countries, including Nepal, to supply 60,000 caregivers.

60,000 care workers.

But so far Nepal has not mobilised a single workers, and the SSW 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 non-poor.

Emigration of caregivers as the health crisis rages on 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 clearer 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 care sector Nepalis will continue to resort to irregular travels, allow exorbitant recruitment costs, provide skills 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 and bilateral agreements that address the peculiarities of the care economy.

All this while the share of Nepal's own elderly population is rising. By 2028, Nepal will be an 'ageing society' with 7% of the population above 65, and the figure will double by 2054, making Nepal an 'aged society'. In addition to reaping 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 returnees with experience in the care sector, there is scope to mobilise them. Returnees from Israel report that a platform that would help them engage in collective initiatives in the professional care economy would allow them to use the skills and

experiences to make a living in Nepal itself.

It is cheaper for employers to invest in training in the origin country especially in healthcare, one of the rationales for skills partnerships. Since destination countries like Israel and Japan are also Nepal's development partners, there is scope to mobilise funds to design mutually beneficial skills training for geriatric care. This would help equip Nepal's training centers as we transition rapidly into an ageing society.

Caregivers in countries like Israel and Japan enjoy equality of treatment with locals in employment, and earn between \$1,000-1,500. But there is also illicit migration of other types of care workers such as household help, which is currently banned by the Nepal government.

The Israel admission requires at least a high school education as well as completion of language and skills tests. In Japan, foreign caregivers require rigorous computer based language and skills tests. These are not options for most Nepali migrants taking surreptitious travels through India because of the ban, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

The blanket ban on domestic care workers without addressing the rising international demand or

credible alternatives for the women opting this path therefore remains ineffective.

There is also support needed for ageing returnees. Yubraj is a second generation Gulf migrant following his father who spent his youth in the Gulf. There is no formal support system, and the father-and-son duo simply switched their remittance transfer role.

The Nepal government's policies such as promoting savings or investment of remittances through the Foreign Employment Savings Bond and Remit Hydro have failed to yield results. Countries like the Philippines allow migrants to contribute to their national social security system, and secure a safe future while they are still earning overseas. Nepal needs to explore these options and help current migrants plan for their future.

Overseas work outside India, unless they travel irregularly, are formal and contract-based, so the employers can be held responsible to contribute to the social security funds.

For example, Malaysia's Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) and Nepal's Foreign Employment Board are set to sign an agreement providing workers and their dependents a range of benefits, especially related to work related injuries, illness or death. Employers are required to pay 1.25% of monthly wages while workers are not required to contribute.

Nepal can easily enter into a similar Social Security Agreement with South Korea under the Employment Permit Scheme (EPS), similar to other EPS member countries like the Philippines that entered into an SSA last year allowing Filipino migrants to refund their social security contributions.

The future is older, and it is also mobile. In this new demographic era, caring for the elderly is a policy priority in Nepal and globally which has implications on the future of labour mobility management, both for migrants as carers and as elderly returnees. 📌

Upasana Khadka writes this column Labour Mobility every month in Nepali Times analysing trends affecting Nepal's workers abroad.

Demand grows for Nepali caregivers in Israel

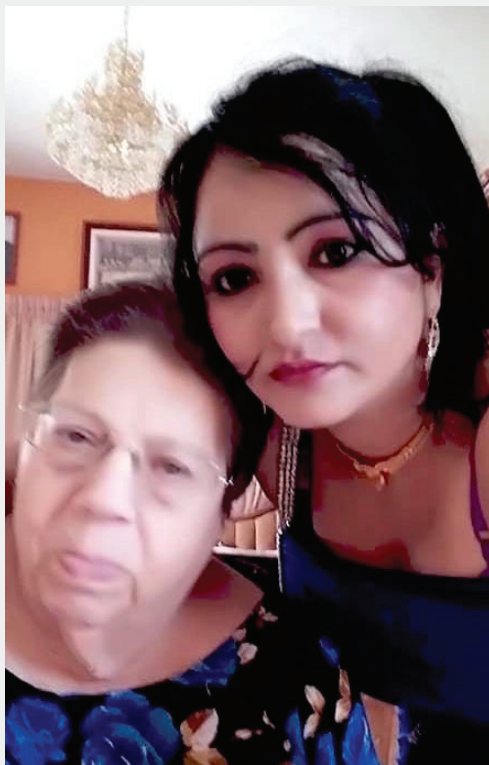
Prakriti Kharel spent 12 years in Israel as a care-giver and is now back home in Jhapa. She says she was lucky to have good employers, her salary was good, and she got bonuses, insurance and gratuity.

She says Israeli law protects workers, but the job itself can be demanding and Nepalis seeking work in Israel need to be physically and emotionally strong. This advice is especially relevant as Nepal prepares to send hundreds more caregivers to Israel.

Israel tightened its second lockdown this week after the country recorded 8,000 new Covid-19 infections in a single day on Friday. Israel now has the highest per capita rate of infection in the world, with mostly elderly people affected by the coronavirus.

Sourcing workers from Nepal was banned in 2009 after malpractices in the recruitment of Nepali caregivers, including exorbitantly high recruitment costs. The previous pilot program in 2015 had also tried to cut out recruiters, but failed to mobilise any workers.

"Geriatric care is not easy work. It is physically demanding and requires a lot of empathy and emotional strength as well. Workers need to clearly understand this, or



TAKE CARE: Prakriti Kharel and her employer before she left Israel to return to Nepal. She says Nepali caregivers going abroad have to be physically and psychologically strong.

else they will be disappointed when they arrive here with false expectations," Ambassador Shakya said on the phone from Tel Aviv.

A male Nepali caregiver went to Israel in February 2009 after paying Rs800,000 to Blue Sky Overseas, just before Israel stopped the intake of Nepali caregivers. The man, who did not want his name used, described the work: "I weighed 60kg but then had to take care of a patient who was over 110kg, having to lift him several times a day. It left me with back pain, and other Nepalis also report such ailments from the physically demanding work."

After spending so much time with the elderly, caregivers also develop an emotional attachment to them. They are often lonely, and need someone to talk to. Taking care of Alzheimer's patients is most difficult because it requires patience and compassion as they forget things, and their families blame the caregiver. Taking photographs, or installing a CCTV camera helps.

Nepali caregivers interviewed for this report said the death of patients they have looked after for many years affects them deeply. Prakriti Kharel has lost three of her patients, and said: "It is like losing family, but that is the nature of the job, to ensure that they are as comfortable as possible right till the end."

Deepika Bhusal arrived in Israel when she was just 20, and took care of an Israeli woman

named Malka Cohen for 12 years until she died at age 79 last year. She had told *Nepali Times* in a profile in 2017 that the two had grown close, as Cohen depended on her for everything, including feeding, medicines and daily walks.

"She had become like a mother to me," recalled Bhusal, who remembers feeling like she had lost a family member when she got a call from the hospital at 4am.

Ambassador Shakya recognised that the new bilateral agreement for 500 caregivers is relatively small, but added that diplomatic negotiations took a lot of effort because of the abuse of the recruitment system that had led to the ban on Nepali workers to Israel.

"Whether we can turn the 500 to 20,000 depends on the performance of the 500 new recruits," said Shakya, who is also exploring similar opportunities in agriculture, construction and the hospitality sector.

"For Nepali women who want to work abroad, Israel is one of most secure and financially rewarding destination country," explained Shakya. "There is equality of treatment between locals and foreigners, and strong labour laws. As this is temporary migration, workers will return to Nepal financially better off, and with skills that can be used back home for Nepal's own rapidly ageing population." 📌

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 (CAAN) announced that it was lifting a cap on only 1,600 arriving passengers a day to allow international carriers to resume an unlimited number of flights.

As elsewhere in the world, Nepal is also trying to balance revival of its tourism and aviation sector with public health during the Covid-19 crisis. The government announced last week that foreign trekkers and mountaineers will now be allowed to fly to Nepal from 17 October.

Turkish Airlines, the only airline operating direct flights between Kathmandu from Europe, is increasing its flight frequency to three a week from 3 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 weekly three flights, and bookings are slowly picking up," says Turkish Airlines manager for Nepal Abdullah Tuncer Kecici. "With protocols for tourist arrival 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 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 in August. The airline is now flying regularly to 200 of its more than 300 destinations worldwide.

Devendra KC of Tribhuvan International Airport said the government had lifted restrictions on the number of flights because it was confident



Turkish Airlines Nepal manager Abdullah Tuncer Kecici

it could address health issues.

"We have been able to cope with the present volume of passengers, and although it will be challenging, we are confident that we can handle the greater numbers at Kathmandu airport," he said.

Airlines have also been upgrading their on board and airport safety protocols. Turkish Airlines, for example, says that there is through disinfection of aircraft cabin after every flight, there are HEPA filters on board that can remove 99.97% of all particles with diameters up to 0.3 microns. With a 7 hour flight time, the Istanbul connection is the longest distance direct flight from Kathmandu at present.

"Hygiene expert cabin crews are appointed on our flights, and they are in charge of lavatory disinfection and enforcement of all on-board safety and social distancing measures," Kecici told *Nepali Times*.

Normally 30 airlines used to fly 53 international flights daily from Kathmandu airport to 32 destinations in the region and beyond. Since 1 September 14 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 Doha-Kathmandu.

"We want to send the message that Nepal is returning to normal," CAAN's Rajan Pokhrel said. The decision to lift restrictions followed a rise in demand from Nepali families coming home for the Dasain-Tihar-Chhat festivals, as well bookings from tourists who want to take advantage of the reopening of trekking and mountaineering after 17 October.

International airlines expect tourist traffic to start getting back to normal only next year, but there may be increase even this autumn because the remote mountain regions of Nepal do not have any 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 Airline's vision from day one has been to connect Nepal to the world," Kecici said. "Nepal is a tourism destination for us, and we hope that as things get back to normal we will continue to be a partner for Nepal's 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 sightseeing tourists and foreigners on personal visits will be 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 they also want visa on arrival to resume. There is still no word on when flights to and from India will be allowed.

When asked about the confusion in the directives, 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 reviving the tourism industry while ensuring health and safety during the pandemic." 🇳🇵

TAKING FLIGHT: Turkish Airlines Airbus 330-300 at Kathmandu airport last week pushing back for a 7 hour flight to Istanbul.

prabhu BANK

SIPRADI-Sanima Agreement

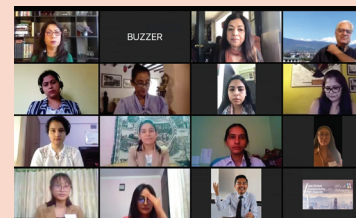
As per the directive issued by Nepal Rastra Bank, Siprati Trading and Sanima Bank have signed an agreement that will let entrepreneurs and organisations take out concessional loans on the purchase



of commercial TATA vehicles. TATA itself unveiled its Dasain scheme for customers that offers a cash discount of up to Rs400,000 on the purchase of the TATA H5, Nexon, Tiago, Tigor, and Altroz passenger vehicles. The offer also includes one year worth of free vehicle tax, and an exchange bonus of up to Rs50,000 on any vehicle.

Nepal Daring Debates 2020

The winners of the Nepal chapter of Daring Debates are Prashamsa Ghimire from National Law College and Saugat Pokhrel from Kathmandu School of Law. Daring Debates, an annual event from Difficult Dialogues that discusses issues of contemporary relevance in South Asia, brings together college students from varied backgrounds, regions, and ethnicity into the discourse of policy ideation and formation.



Miss Nepal Earth 2016 Roshni Khatri moderated the debates, while jury members included actress and UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador Manisha Koirala, *Nepali Times* editor and author Kunda Dixit, as well as columnist and novelist Sheeba Shah. The winners from Nepal will join contenders from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Africa and the USA in the grand finale of Daring Debates from 16-20 November.

Daraz Sahayatri

The Daraz Sahayatri Program, a Rs5.5 million support package that invited SMEs to set up their online stores on Daraz, has received more than 8,000 registrations, with 2,100 SMEs beginning online operations. The e-commerce platform had waived marketplace fees worth four months for online sellers, providing them access to more than 700,000 active monthly Daraz customers across the nation.



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 facilitate access as well as provide training on banking and financial literacy to the entrepreneurs affiliated to the federation.

Soaltee Westend Premier

Soaltee Westend Premier Nepalgunj, the first US Green Building Council-certified



Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Category hotel in Nepal, has been recognised with the 'Award for Environment Friendly and Sustainable Development' at 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' as it reopens with 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 a cost of Rs12,999 double occupancy and Rs9,999 for solo guests. The resort will provide safety kits with masks and sanitisers to all guests.

Hyatt Regency Kathmandu

Hyatt Regency Kathmandu celebrated its 20th anniversary on 27 September, having been inaugurated by King Birendra in 2000. During its 20 years in service, Hyatt has focused on environmental sustainability, economic development and investment, and education, supporting various non-profit organisations including Buddhist Child Home, Gargi Kanya School, Umbrella Foundation, Hope Center, Nepal Child Protection Home, and Habitat for Humanity.

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EVENTS

**LGBTQ+ Expressions**

LGBTQ+ Expressions from the WOW virtual Nepal series will feature activist/content creator Shailee Chaudhary, intersex rights activist Esan Regmi and UK-based digital content Creator Lex Limbu. Join the discussion on Facebook.

2 October, 5pm-6pm

**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

Le Sherpa market

Do your weekly shopping for fresh and healthy vegetables, fruit, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more. Physical distancing guidelines apply.

Every Saturday, 8am-12pm, Le Sherpa Maharajgunj

**Kaalo.101 exhibition**

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

Submission deadline: 5 October

Music lessons

Sign up for Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory's private Vocal, Guitar, Bass, Piano, Violin and Flute classes online, taught by experienced Nepali and foreign musicians. Send an email at info@katjazz.com.np for details.

9813556945



ONLINE ARCHIVES

**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.

**Comic Geek Destinations**

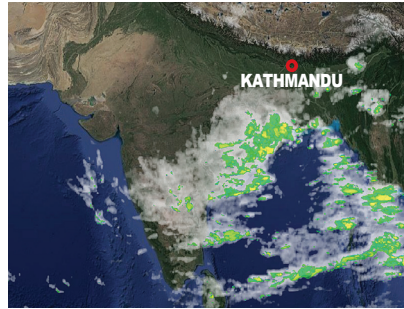
Meet superheroes, villains and giant robots on this Google Earth virtual trip around ten of the most iconic global comic book spots, including the Brussels Comic Book Museum, the Cartoon Art Museum in California, and the Ghibli Museum in Japan.

Coursera

Interested to learn about subjects that aren't available in Nepali colleges and universities? Coursera partners 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.

**Bookclub**

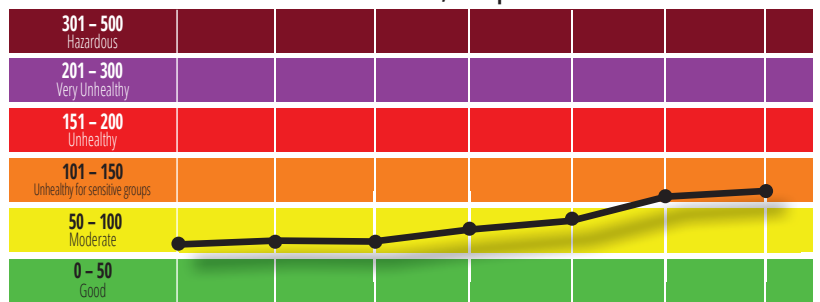
A group of readers talk to acclaimed authors about their best-known novels in this podcast from BBC Radio 4. Find Bookclub on Stitcher.



We are in that phase when the westerlies play a tug-o-war with the monsoon winds from the east. The low pressure circulation is massing up over Bihar and moving northwest despite the headwind of the jetstream. Some of this moisture will collide with the mountains over the weekend, bringing back some heavy rain over Central Nepal after that weeklong respite. So do not put away your umbrellas just yet.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 25 September - 1 October



PM2.5

FRIDAY September 25, SATURDAY September 26, SUNDAY September 27, MONDAY September 28, TUESDAY September 29, WEDNESDAY September 30, THURSDAY October 1

Since March, Kathmandu residents have been enjoying lockdown-induced clean air. But this is coming to an end with the lifting of travel restrictions and the end of the rains. For the first time in months, concentration of PM 2.5 in Kathmandu's city centre rose past 100 last week, taking the daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) to the orange 'Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups' zone. Some hourly peaks were much higher. Showers this weekend will bring AQI down somewhat. For live Kathmandu AQI measurements, go to [www.nepalitimes.com](https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/)

<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



Forests are essential to life. They are the lungs of our planet and help to regulate our climate. Their ability to generate rainfall is vital for millions of farmers around the world and for global food security. They prevent soil erosion, sustain a diversity of life and provide food, medicine and economic opportunities. They are the second largest global storehouse of carbon. It is estimated that deforestation contributes 15% of all global greenhouse gas emissions - more than the global transport sector. Forests are being cleared, burned or degraded due to the global economy built on the exploitation of natural resources (like logging and mining) and by land-grabbing for agricultural expansion - converting forests to croplands, pasture, and plantations. But forests are not just about trees. Around 80% of all terrestrial biodiversity depend on forests, from the smallest bugs to magnificent animals. When we take away the forest, it is not just the trees that go. The entire habitat and ecosystem begins to fall apart, with dire consequences for all of us. As we fight to stave off climate change, forests could be our most important natural climate solution. #FridaysForFuture

DINING

**Gangnam Galbi Barbeque**

Tantalise the taste buds with the best of Korean barbecue, grill, and stick food. Try the Suntofu stew and duck roast grill. Find the menu online.

Naxal, (01) 4434780

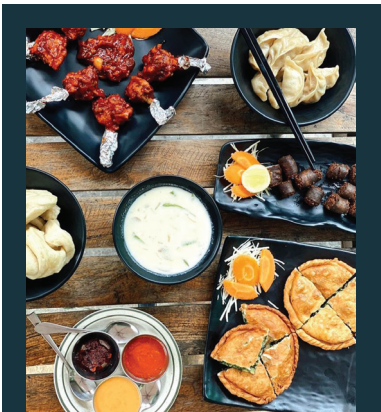
**Captain Egg**

Egg lovers can rejoice at this egg-themed restaurant. Have a savoury Amritsari Egg Chole, Potato Egg Rosti or even an Egg Sizzler. 11am-9pm, Gahanapokhari, 014445330

Nina's

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

11am-8:30pm, Maharajgunj, 9851130043

**Dechenling Garden Restaurant**

Dechenling is a quaint place to eat within the chaos of Thamel. It serves one of the best Tibetan and Nepali food in Kathmandu. From Shapta to Ting momo and Ping Sha to Kewa Dhatsi, Dechenling is the place to be. Also try the new cocktails on the menu. Keshar Mahal Marg, Thamel, (01)4412158

Dhokaima Cafe

Secluded oasis at Patan Dhaka for safely distanced one-on-ones for coffee, meals or drinks. Sample Chef Ale's pre-Dasain 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 Peri Peri fries and milkshake. Jhamsikhel, 9851056096

OUR PICK

Based on Christine Leunens's 2008 book *Caging Skies*, *Thor: Ragnarok* fame director Taika Waititi wrote and directed this Oscar-winning movie *Jojo Rabbit*. The film released in 2019 was widely reviewed for being a wholesome watch. The comedy-drama revolves around a young boy Jo (Roman Griffin Davis), his mother (Scarlett Johansson), a Jewish girl (Thomasin McKenzie) and a friendly Adolf Hitler played by Waititi himself.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Nepal's women envoys make a mark



Sarmila Parajuli Dhakal, Nepal's ambassador to Oman has been praised for her efficient handling of the repatriation of stranded Nepali workers during the Covid-19 crisis.



Dawa Phuti Sherpa, Nepal's Ambassador to Spain, is also a political appointee but has been using her tourism connections to promote Nepal as a destination in Spain.



Ambassador to Israel Anjan Shakyha has just negotiated well-paying jobs for 500 more Nepali caregivers, and is working on Israeli cooperation to boost Nepal's agricultural productivity.



Prativa Rana, Nepal's Ambassador to Japan.

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

Pratistha Rijal

Nepal has a female president and a Constitution that reserves positions in government and legislatures 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 Sarmila Parajuli Dhakal, who has been praised for ensuring the repatriation of stranded Nepali workers, and bargaining with airlines to get them cheaper air fares than those negotiated by the government in Kathmandu.

In June, Dhakal personally went to Muscat airport to see off the first batch of returning workers. As of this week, the embassy had arranged seven rescue flights, repatriating 1,178 stranded workers. Between 10% to 30% of migrant workers in

various Gulf states have lost their jobs, and Nepal's embassies in other Gulf countries are struggling with the sheer numbers who want to return.

Last month, Ambassador Dhakal and the Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed an agreement to lease land for construction of a permanent Nepal Embassy in Muscat, a diplomatic milestone for a Gulf monarchy that is emerging as a major destination for Nepali workers, as well as source of tourism and investment.

Anjan Shakyha, Nepal's ambassador to Israel, has also been making inroads into ensuring well-paying jobs for Nepalis, and has just negotiated an agreement with Israel to provide openings for 500 more Nepali caregivers.

"It takes a woman to understand better the problems of women. They must be brought into politics, and in policy and decision-making positions," Shakyha says. "Female political participation is crucial in addressing gender issues and bringing about gender equality. Our 2015 constitution has ensured gender balance in politics. We must abide by it."

Ambassador Shakyha is also pushing an agreement with Israel to set up Centres for Excellence in Agriculture in each of Nepal's seven provinces as part of Nepal's goal of food self-sufficiency. Recently, Shakyha was the first Asian envoy to be named 'Ambassador of the Year' by the Ambassadors' Club of Israel.

She says: "Just like a chariot needs two wheels to move, Nepal cannot move ahead if half of our population is left behind. So we have to engage and involve women."

Even though five of Nepal's ambassadors abroad are women, only one of them, Sewa Lamsal the out-going ambassador in Pakistan, is a career diplomat. Prativa Rana, Nepal's long-serving ambassador

to Japan, is from the RPP party and mother of Arzu Deuba, wife of NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba. Anjana Shakyha and Dawa Futi Sherpa are said to be close to Prime Minister K P Oli. And as with foreign services of other countries, there is some tension between careerists and those named ambassadors by political parties.

But political appointees do have their advantages. Ambassador Dhakal, for instance, has been able to use her connections in the labour recruitment sector to focus on migrant issues. And Ambassador Sherpa, who grew up surrounded by mountaineers and tourism entrepreneurs, has used her background to organise promotional events and hopes to further strengthen cooperation between the Madrid-based World Tourism Organisation and Nepal Tourism Board.

"Nepali women have fewer economic assets, less access to finance, higher rates of illiteracy, and little knowledge of their legal rights," says Ambassador Sherpa. "We are generally bound to responsibilities at home and have fewer opportunities than men for earning income and participating in decision making and governance."

She adds: "To attract and include more women in politics, we need to start at the very beginning: more opportunities and access to education, information, empowerment and mentorship. And while promoting gender equality in politics, we also must be aware of ethnic diversity and representation at the table."

Nepal's constitution does guarantee female representation and reservation for disadvantaged castes and ethnicities. Political parties are required to have women in one-third of positions in federal and provincial assemblies, and half the proportional representation seats are reserved

for women. If a mayor or municipality chair is a man, the deputy has to be a woman.

In 2019, all four of the national political parties Nepal Communist Party (NCP), Nepali Congress (NC), Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN), and Rastriya Janata Party (RJP) failed to meet the criteria that one third of their members be female.

In line with the constitutional requirement that the president and vice-president must be of different gender or ethnicity, President Bidya Devi Bhandari made history in 2015 as Nepal's first female head of state. She is currently one of the only 22 female heads of state worldwide.

However, the constitution has not been able to make Nepal's political sphere completely inclusive. Traditional patriarchal values persist in Nepal, most glaringly in its citizenship laws, and senior politicians and legislators often make misogynist remarks in public.

Currently, only three out of 17 ministers in the cabinet are female. A recent report shows that across Nepal, most-primary leadership positions in local governments are held by men, while most secondary-leadership positions are held by women.

Indeed, as per a 2020 World Bank report on economic empowerment of women, Nepal scored merely 73.8 points out of 100- lagging behind the global average of 75.2 points. The report examines factors such as legal rights, equality of pay, access to assets pension, etc. The 2020 Global Gender Index ranks Nepal 133rd in terms of educational attainment- only 59.7% Nepali women are literate, in stark comparison to 78.6% Nepali men.

Patriarchal norms manifest themselves in all spheres of life in Nepal: femicide, child marriage, online harassment, period stigma, high maternal mortality rates,

illiteracy, and trafficking. Some of these problems have become more serious with the Covid-19 restrictions.

The persistent gender gap in Nepal has been hard to eradicate despite laws and quotas. Studies and public opinion polls show that women in politics encounter more barriers, are subjected to more stereotyping and objectification, and are held up to greater scrutiny than men who are in similar positions of power.

One example of this was Lucky Sherpa, who was named Nepal's ambassador to Australia in 2017, but resigned on moral grounds after her own Nepali driver, whom she had fired, accused her of human trafficking. The former member of the Constituent Assembly was appointed by the then Maoist party, and her supporters said she had been framed. Sherpa herself has said she was the target of a witch hunt.

Despite quotas, therefore, Nepali women find it difficult to maneuver in the labyrinths of a male-dominated government machinery, which is often run like an old boys' club. Many resign, either because of mistreatment, out of frustration at being passed over for promotion, or for family reasons.

Ram Krishna Tiwari, head of the Political Science Department at Tribhuvan University, says that even among Nepali women, some are more disadvantaged than others because there are also overlapping class, caste and ethnic hierarchies.

"In the high mountains and the Tarai livelihood is more difficult, so women are more focused on putting food on the table, and surviving from day to day, than participating in politics," he explains. "Women in the mid-mountains have a greater reach in politics, so they are more active." 🇳🇵

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Remembering Nepal's conservation heroes

How a new generation of Nepali conservationists was inspired by the pioneering work of those who died on 23 September 2006

Ghana Gurung

That night in Taplejung, we sang and danced to the tune of *Sorha Barse Umera Ma*. It was my conservation guru Chandra Gurung's favourite song, and one he sang during many occasions.

That song still brings back memories of the night 15 years ago as I sing it in every staff retreat to pay tribute to my mentor. The pain of loss is still palpable.

We celebrated, but it was short-lived. Little did I know that 24 hours later I would be hiking all night with Ang Phuri Sherpa and a rescue team to Ghunsa to find the crash site, after bad weather forced our search helicopter to drop us in Pholey.

It had been rainy in Ghunsa on 23 September 2006, as the Mi-8 helicopter took off and disappeared into the clouds. I was supposed to be on it, but had to make space for the dignitaries who had come for 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 geographer and planner; Chandra Gurung who designed the model of using tourism income to pay for conservation; Mingma Norbu Sherpa, who helped establish the Annapurna Conservation Area; Tirthman Maskey, who paved the way for people and parks to coexist. Nepal also lost Forest Minister Sharad K Rai and Narayan P Paudel. Also on board was the first Chair of the KCA Management Committee, Dawa Tshering Sherpa.

The shock of the deaths posed a pressing question: were Nepal's achievements in conservation now in jeopardy? The model of participatory conservation pioneered in Nepal was an example to the world, but could the path-breaking work of these visionaries be sustained?

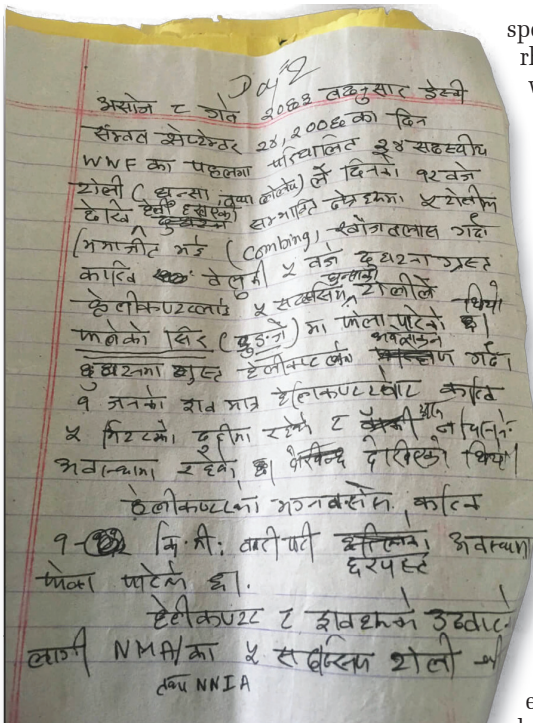
Fifteen years on, looking at the accomplishments since, we can proudly say that the country has honoured those leading lights of Nepal's conservation movement by carrying on their work, and come out even stronger.

We have witnessed a remarkable shift in various facets of conservation in Nepal: from the recovery of species numbers to the expansion of protected areas systems with growing participation of people from all walks of life.

Nepal's tiger population has crossed 235, indicating a dramatic



Memorial painting to honour the conservation heroes, showing Kangchenjunga, Ghunsa village and the tail of the helicopter disappearing into a cloud.



My journal entry from the day we reached the crash site.

increase from 121 in 2009. The number of rhinos increased from 435 in 2008 to 645 in 2015, with zero rhino poaching for the first time since 2011. Snow leopard conservation and research has advanced, with Nepal now holding the fifth largest population among 12 snow leopard range states.

There have been similar successes among other species, including blue sheep, Himalayan tahr, gaur and gharial. The

species recovery of rhinos, blackbuck, wild water buffalo in their former ranges are other important milestones of our conservation journey.

After KAC, Nepal has added three more protected area systems: Gauri-Shankar Conservation Area, Api Nampa Conservation Area, Banke National Park – covering 4,632square km across two landscapes, Kailash and Chitwan-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 a new generation of committed specialists who were trained and mentored by them. This new crop of young conservationists received scholarships established in the memory of the pioneers who died

15 years ago. They have gone on to do exemplary field work, and are now in key decision-making positions in Nepal to guide future conservation efforts.

In Kangchenjunga itself, the KCA has led by example for 15 years, presenting a strong case for participatory conservation where the local community is entrusted with the stewardship of the natural and culture resources of the region below the world's third-highest mountain.

The concept of participatory conservation has been around since mid-1980s after Mingma Sherpa and Chandra Gurung first introduced

it in the Annapurna Conservation Area followed by the Manaslu Conservation Area. Now, the KCA has gained recognition across Asia as an exemplary model in championing this approach.

There were a slew of underlying factors that laid the basis for KCA's success – primary among them were concrete legal, institutional and financial mechanisms.

The KCA project was launched in March 1998 by the government in partnership with WWF Nepal to address both the livelihood needs of local people and biodiversity conservation. In the lead-up to the handover of this protected area in 2006, numerous legal and policy instruments were put in place, including conservation area management regulations and plans.

A community-based Kangchenjunga Conservation Area Management Council (KCAMC) was formed, and entrusted with running the KCA with full authority to take care of the region's natural resources. A community-based women's group was also formed and trained, and now has 33% representation in KCAMC.

We can take this as an example of how integrating communities into conservation efforts can yield multipronged benefits. To date, 35 mother's groups have provided 206 scholarships to socio-economically excluded girls, many of whom have grown up to be professionals working at KCA and elsewhere.

For 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 celebrating the transfer to the community in Taplejung, and soon after taking off from Ghunsa, the helicopter carrying Nepal's top conservationists flew into a cliff hidden by cloud. Ever since, 23 September has been marked as Nepal's National Conservation Day in memory of these Conservation Heroes.

Chungla 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."

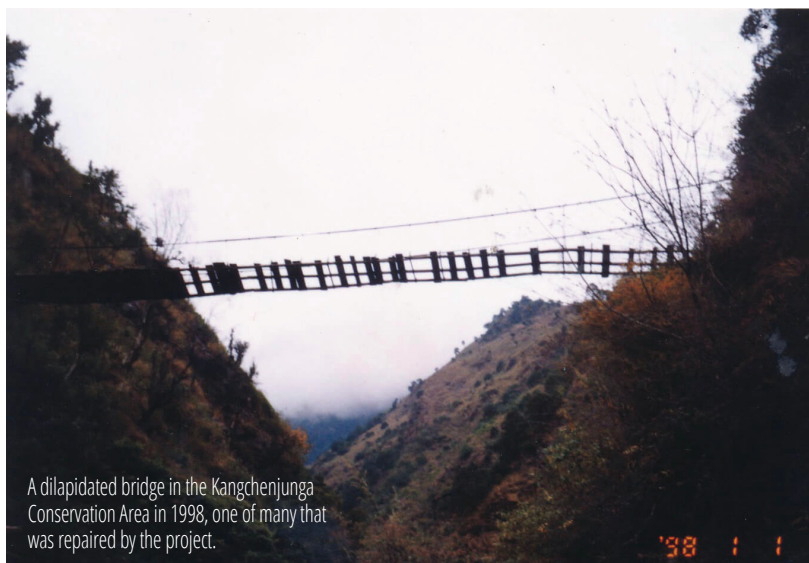
The leaders continue to make a positive impact on Nepal and the world long after their departure. We may have lost our heroes on that fateful day, but their work has carried on through a new generation which was given the opportunity through scholarships created in their memory. I feel fortunate and grateful 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 S Gurung is the Country Representative of WWF in Nepal and Snow Leopard Champion for the Global WWF Network. The views expressed here are personal.



A dilapidated bridge in the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area in 1998, one of many that was repaired by the project.



A memorial in Taplejung at the place where Nepal's top conservationists celebrated the handover of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area project to the community in 2006, the night before the helicopter crash. Photo: KUNDA DIXIT



Issue #317 of *Nepali Times* from 29 September-5 October 2006 that carried the news and photograph of the handover ceremony of the KCA to the government in Taplejung the day before the crash.

Rajani Maharjan and
Madison Wrobley

“As far as I know, there is no one conducting the ritual these days,” began Ganesh Maya Khadgi as she gazed out from her home on the banks of the Bagmati River to the grey, slow-moving water just outside her door.

She is referring to Naworatri, a ritual practiced by the Newas of Kathmandu during first nine days of the Dasain festival, which this year falls in end-October. When she was young, she would join crowds of worshippers at two or three in the morning and they would walk together to the tirtha, holy sites on the banks of the river.

On each day of the nine-day festival, they would travel to a different tirtha to cleanse themselves with holy water and offer *puja* to the river in the form of flowers placed on chaitya, small mounds of riverbank sand.

“Why would anyone participate in this ritual anymore?” Ganesh Maya’s friendly, open face clouded over as she further poured out her disappointment.

The communal pilgrimage along the rivers facilitated contact with the sacredness of the holy river, she says, but due to the highly degraded quality of the water, even the most devout worshippers no longer want to make that connection. In some places, worship is not possible due to the accumulation of solid waste on the banks.

Even if people are willing to make the holy ablutions with the polluted water, Ganesh Maya says that there is not enough sand left in the riverbanks to construct the chaitya. She speaks fondly of her memories of conducting the rituals despite the pain she feels from their loss.

Neither her children nor her grandchildren have visited the tirtha for Naworatri, but she understands their reasoning for changing their ritual practice. Due to river pollution, the entire purpose of the ritual has been lost.

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Across South Asia, rivers are regarded as sacred and are often worshipped as gods and goddesses, revered for the way they link heaven and earth. Some believe the rivers are homes to the divine, while others pray to the life-giving power inherent in the water. Because of this, rivers have historically played an essential role in the daily functioning of the communities built upon their banks.

This is especially true in Kathmandu where the history of life in the valley is intimately connected with the rivers that define the landscape, so much so that its residents have often been referred to as members of the ‘Bagmati Civilisation’.

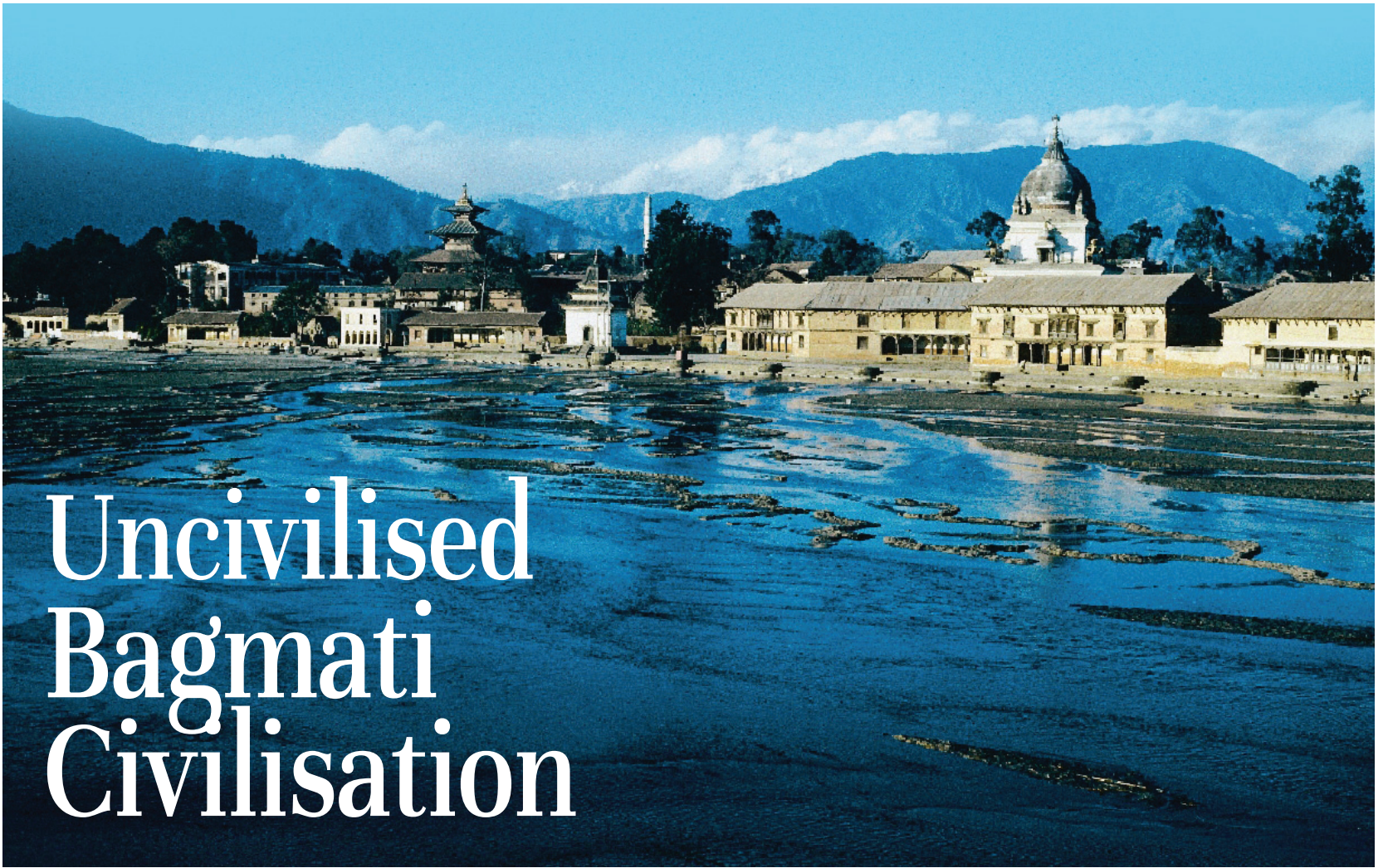
Early settlements within the valley were clustered on hilltops with farmland below on the river floodplains to utilise the natural flow fluctuations of the monsoon. Despite the way that the rivers served agricultural functions, they were perceived as more than as natural economic assets.

Instead, people saw themselves as living a balanced life with the environment, a belief that was reinforced by the traditional rites and rituals that have historically been tied to the rivers. Therefore, a harmony that emphasised co-existence and regeneration existed in the name of culture and religion.

Now, however, those ties are being severed due to pollution and ideas about modernisation that relies upon the exploitation of natural resources and spaces. But what happens to the Bagmati Civilisation when its people can no longer bear to stand on the banks of their sacred river?

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Tej Maya Maharjan also grew up going to the rivers for ritual



Bagmati River in the 1950s.

events, watched this change occur throughout her life. She was elderly at the time of this interview, and has since passed away. Tej Maya visited the Kankeshwori Temple almost every morning for 70 years, and said the time she spent there was the highlight of her days.

These visits were essential parts of both her religious and social life. She was widowed at a young age without children, and spent most of her life as a single woman. Instead, she found a family and a sense of community at Kankeshwori Temple. Tej Maya and her friends would gather along the river at the temple and whether they were singing songs, performing *puja*, or gossiping about their daughters-in-law, these morning trips for religious and social connection brought her joy throughout her entire life.

Tej Maya emphasised the importance of conducting rituals at the temple for their role in childhood development. From a very young age, she would join her friends at the Bishnumati River every day during the Newa month of Yalaa to collect Nil La:, sacred water, and make chaitya.

“We would collect leaves from the pipal tree which had fallen on the ground. We would put some rice grain, tika power, and flowers on the leaf and twist the top and bottom ends, light a wick on the leaf then put it on the flowing water and watch it flow down the river. Then we would all walk to the temple with Nil La: to offer it to all the shrines present in the temple and offer *puja*,” Tej Maya said.

For Tej Maya, conducting this ritual was the first time she and her friends had done *puja* or gone to the temple unaccompanied by adults, and therefore, they learned the procedures of the rites and how to take responsibility for the rituals on their own. Because children are no longer spending time at the rivers and riverside temples, with or without family members, Tej Maya and many others say that the youth of Kathmandu does not have the same understanding of the rituals or how to conduct *puja*.

Although religious activity continues, increasingly, people say that the rituals are often conducted simply because they are tradition but there is less consideration for, or knowledge of, the meaning behind the actions being performed. This has a fundamental impact on the practice of religion and some of the most foundational tenets of the Bagmati Civilisation.

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 purest of all forms and sources of water and has therefore traditionally been considered the only source of *jal*. “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 counts as sacred water has expanded as an adaptation to changing environmental conditions.

Macha Bhai Maharjan is a Niti *Puja* Pujari, meaning he performs *puja* daily to the deity of the Kankeshwori Temple. He has spent innumerable hours at the temple and on the banks of the river, collecting sacred water for cleansing the temple. The river was a source of life for him but after he saw human feces floating in the water when collecting *jal* for a ritual, he says he has never returned to the banks of the Bishnumati.

Macha Bhai’s experience is not an anomaly. As the rivers became more polluted, people began sourcing *jal* from wells bored near the river, their proximity affording the water extracted from them the same ritual significance as the river water once held. However, due to the rapidly depleting 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 devout were forced to search for alternative sources.

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In the Hindu belief system, while river water is considered the most sacred, all water that is moving is pure. Under this definition, people could interpret the water coming out of the taps and *dhunge dhara* also as *jal*. Initially, water stored in tanks was not considered to be suitable for ritual purpose, but for many, this has changed once again. Now every temple has a tank that is filled by the municipality and there is no longer a need to visit the river.

Macha Bhai’s experience with contamination in the Bishnumati was the moment he says he realised the sacred river no longer held its religious significance. He too uses water sourced from a tank at Kankeshwori Temple for his daily

puja. While changes like this are upsetting to Chudamani, he says that despite his role as a priest, he and the others in his lineage profession “cannot do anything about it” and that he too limits his exposure to the once sacred water.

The dissociation from the rivers, which have historically been considered the lifeblood of the city, happened gradually over a couple of generations. Just 30 years ago, many residents of Kathmandu remember swimming in the rivers and creeks that cross the valley. The rivers were wide and shallow with sandy bottoms that they could wade across. But a population growth rate that places Kathmandu among the fastest-growing cities in South Asia, coupled with the widespread adoption of water-intensive household and commercial amenities including flush toilets, washing machines, and solar water heaters without the construction of adequate wastewater treatment infrastructure has resulted in vast amounts of grey and black water ending up in the riverways. Additionally, direct solid waste dumping, encroachment, and illegal and uncontrolled sand mining have all contributed to the degradation of the riverscapes.

When this period of urban development first began in the 1980s, 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 predominately 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. Currently, the construction of walled river corridors, managed by the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (KVDA), 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 to 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. But due to changing monsoon rainfall patterns and the concretisation of the valley, 20-year floods are occurring every five years or less.

The riverbeds 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.

...

Shiv 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 settlement in the rivers’ right-of-way has made it so that normal flooding events now cause property damage and seem even more devastating.

“Constraining the rivers is like putting a bird in a cage,” Basnet says. He thinks 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 Huta Ram Baidya, a prominent social activist who spoke extensively on the need to save the Bagmati to save its civilisation. Baidya 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 Huta Ram Baidya looked out across the Bagmati from his home near its banks at Thapathali, he wondered about one thing: “Can modernisation exist without culture?” For truly sustainable development of cities such as Kathmandu, the centuries-old cultural rites 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.

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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.

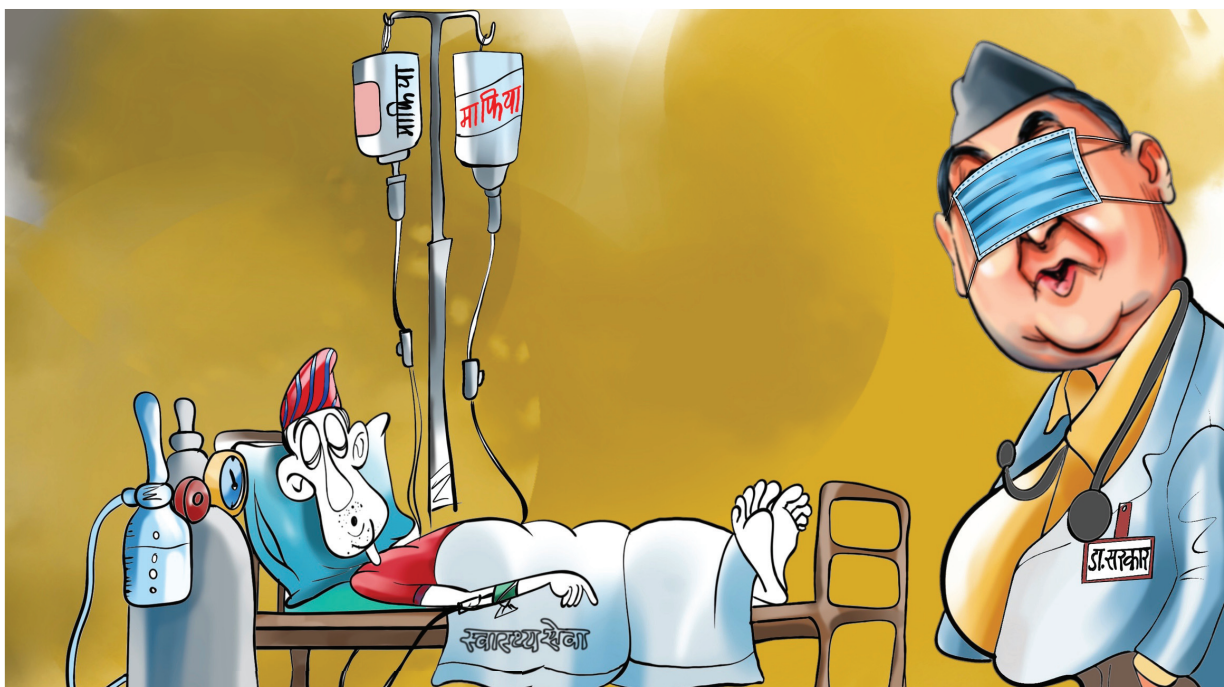
Given that 5% of coronavirus patients are now requiring ventilator and ICU treatment, the decision reflected the government's realisation that it was running out of hospital beds and health infrastructure. The Health Ministry has already decided to charge fees for PCR even in the government labs, citing 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 Marhatha.

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 Nepal, 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 cope with the testing, tracing, quarantining and treatment necessary to control and manage the Covid-19 pandemic.



BHANU BHATTARAI

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 each 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 entrance examination of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) that exposed the culture of sale and purchase of medical education in Nepal.

The dean of the IOM is a coveted position, but the appointment is political, which means lack of transparency in the admission of students. Medical colleges have been admitting pupils who pay higher fees over those who are eligible.

KC started his campaign in 2012, and since then has been demanding the government to end political appointments at the IOM and to ensure transparency in admissions 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 Divya Singh was made the Dean of IOM, a political appointment that was met with heavy criticism in the public sphere.

Medical education reform activist Jiwan 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 Dhundi Raj Poudel says that Nepal's universities are incapable of giving affiliations to more than five medical colleges.

Sunil Sharma, the operator of Nobel Medical College in Biratnagar invested Rs1.7 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 Chitwan Medical College in Bharatpur, 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 (CIAA), he openly favoured his brother Balman 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.

"In the past 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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