Upended Dasain

Besides language and shared history, the glue that binds the Nepali world is Dasain. It has traditionally been that joyous time of year when the harvests are in, the clouds part, and icy peaks reappear behind forested ridgelines. It is the time for people to go home to their home districts, emptying out Kathmandu, and for the diaspora to return to the motherland. It is a time of renewal and hope. Dasain is the season Nepalis can briefly take their minds off problems, of season Nepalis can briefly take

A virus that had figured out how to exploit the human need to

In Nepal, the government has
crowd control and fill vacant ministerial posts,

The attempted ‘coup’ was haled only after Dahal managed
to get his ally Madhav Kumar Nepal to get his supporters to withdraw the vote.

All three new ministers

In Kathmandu Valley, the main
defuse the Covid-19 explosion

At a time when it should be taking emergency measures to
defuse the Covid-19 explosion in Kathmandu Valley, the main

Countries around the world

In Nepal, the government has

Politicians were either in denial,

Even when senior advisers are down

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It has left it up to citizens to take their own precautions, and the

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The Dahal-Oli duel is diverting all focus when the worst is being overcome in the worsening Covid-19 crisis.

The no-confidence motion flared up on Tuesday at the Karnali Provincial Assembly in Surkhet after some former UML members loyal to Madhav Kumar Nepal sided with ex-Maoists with Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Prime Minister K P Oli’s supporters were outnumbered. Even though Oli and Dahal did patch up their differences last month, the saga of the epic struggle for supremacy within the party has dragged on with a deadlock in negotiations on a cabinet reshuffle.

Over the past two months, there has been a transformation in Karnali.Politics and Dahal’s position has weakened significantly with second tier members breaking ranks. This new dynamic has gone largely unremarked because of the tendency of commentators to be anti-incumbent. The Oli administration’s frequent gaffes and governance failures, have provided ample ammunition for Dahal and his supporters. Still, despite concerns about his health and his political longevity, Oli has so far soothsedowers.

The NCP Secretariat meetings repeatedly demand that the Prime Minister and co-Chair give up one or both of his positions, and yet it just keeps on not happening.

The reasons are twofold. Dahal does not have the numbers in the Central Committee, the all powerful titular position in the party. The secretariat sits above it as a body created with second tier members breaking ranks.

If he decides to go down fighting, Dahal might try his party and country up against him, and that will mean more years of political uncertainty and socio-economic turmoil in the country already ravaged by the pandemic.

For his own sake, and for society at large, he should choose the softer route.

PKD runs to remain in place

The vote of no-confidence this week by former UML leaders of the Nepali Communist Party (NCP) in Karnali Province against the chair of the Chief Minister of their own party has exposed more once that the two sections of the ruling party never really united.

The distress between the ex-Maoist and ex-UML members of the NCP might be the one that is kicked down from the power struggle at the centre to the six of the seven provincial governments that the NCP-Maoist alliance swept in the 2017 election. Dreams of a Nepali eurosceptic dream team, again, have been shattered. The power play between Oli and Dahal has turned into a sewer. Water shortages have become a year-round worry.

The provincial government, run by former UML leaders of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in Karnali Province, has run out of space. It has been considering four projects next month. But it will take at least six years for the Melchami project in that edition tried to get to the government. The capital is still running out of water, but the UML stream of Melchami project in that edition tried to get to the government. The capital is still running out of water, but the UML stream of the government.

For his part, Madhav Kumar Nepal has put all his eggs in Dahal’s basket, while many senior Maoist leaders are busy transferring their eggs out of it. House Minister Ram Babu Thapa, Lok Raj Bhatta, a Dahal loyalist, Top Babhu Ramayali, Devendra Poudel, Kishor Maharjan and others have abandoned Dahal.

As his grip on the reins begins to loosen, will Dahal mellow, or breathe fire through hispliant outfits on all matters from transitional justice to governance?

The government has a permanent state of siege going on for the last two decades. Then and now, it was the power broker and Mayor of Bhaktapur Dr Shanti Suwal’s way.

Dr Shanti Suwal’s menu in that edition tried to get to the government. He was low on his list and no passion to him to be a high on the list. With the municipality mayor himself, and low on his list and no passion to him to be a high on the list.

Mayor Suwal Mayor Swastik Suwal of Bhaktapur is an ideal leader who would expect the municipality to run on, but not to become involved in the political turmoil that has been his undoing. In the municipality, the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve is land which falls within the boundaries of the village municipalities, and to which they have, for centuries, the right to bequeath and receive the increasing revenue harvested from their fields. To put things in perspective, the average foreign hunter spends around $30,000 for his hunting trip in Chitwan. Inhabitants who are banned from hunting live less than 120 per year. In other words, that $30,000 would support one of them for 250 years.

Of course, there is no need to protect wild animals and prevent cruelty towards human and human beings. A compromise in game reserves in other parts of the world that aren’t their own, providing they use traditional methods such as bow and arrow, or primitive guns. This could be a solution in Nepal.

ENERGIES

I for one, would miss the magic of riding an elephant through the jungle (‘The elephant dilemma’, Lisa Choegyal, #1031). I think informed, humane and economically viable wildlife management, not heritage conservation is needed. The Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve is land which falls within the boundaries of the village municipalities, and to which they have, for centuries, the right to bequeath and receive the increasing revenue harvested from their fields. To put things in perspective, the average foreign hunter spends around $30,000 for his hunting trip in Chitwan. Inhabitants who are banned from hunting live less than 120 per year. In other words, that $30,000 would support one of them for 250 years.

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Breast Cancer

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WE WISH YOU A PROSPEROUS
VIJAYADASHAMI
AND A HAPPY
TIHAR,
FILLED WITH HAPPINESS,
PEACE AND PROSPERITY.
hot packed earth echoed with the silence of far distant ancestors. Occupied in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic times through to the historic period, the shimmering walls of Bhimbetka rock shelters were alive with drawings of stylised animals, ritual dancers and faces of Bhimbetka rock shelters, preserved by UNESCO in the remote archaeological world heritage site of Bhimbetka. Our footsteps on the

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Andy Chong was appointed CEO/MD of Ncell in November 2019 and has been with the Axiata Group since 2008. Chong is a cycling enthusiast and spends weekends exploring the terrain around the Valley and is interested in discovering challenging routes across Nepal. He spoke to Nepal Times this week about telecommunications during the Covid-19 crisis.

Nepali Times: Economic activity has come to a standstill globally, yet the telecommunications business appears to be least affected. Is this also the case in Nepal?

Andy Chong: It is true telecommunications businesses have been more resilient than many other industries which have been impacted by as much as 95%. For Ncell, while we are in a relatively better position compared to other big businesses, the telcos are not spared. Telecommunication is a utility to a large extent, and during times like this, access to communications, content, services, entertainment almost uniquely channelled via data connectivity has been heightened.

In Nepal, telecommunications network utilisation has increased by more than 40%. However, the impact of increased use of services with people living at home and working from home has not translated to higher revenues.

Telecom companies were compelled to provide this essential service at subsidised rate to ensure our customers had connectivity during lockdown. For example, we provided 120% bonus on top up, increased call charges. However, the impact of increased use of services is much higher than the increase in revenue. Recovery has been slower than the increase in consumption. Data price had jumped by up to 40%, while overall income declined by 35%, and we believe the same was the case with other telcos. With easing of lockdown there is sign of some hope with business recovering to 28% of pre-lockdown levels. Yet, this will take some time to reach to normalcy.

It is evident that consumer behaviour has changed -- we saw substantial shift from voice usage to data during the lockdown. As many as 1 million Ncell customers stopped using their services after lockdown which, we assume, is due to unemployment.

We will get a better outcome if all of us work to recover to within 90% of pre-Covid levels before 2023.

How do you see the future growth of the telecommunications sector in Nepal, and your own market share?

We will give priority to digitalisation of our business as much as we can so that we get out of the pandemic as we are ahead of the curve and better able to serve our customers.

Our business strategy remains on track and investments as planned remain unchanged. We are going to be data oriented. Nepal is not digital enough today -- both from a supply and demand perspective. Had Nepal been up the curve in terms of its digital economy, the impact would have been lessened with easy access to services for customers.

Data is the future and there is significant opportunity for growth as Nepal embraces a digital future. Share of data in revenue of telecom companies has been increasing every year whilst voice remains relatively constant. We aspire to be a digital telco and strategy is in place, which for enterprises, we hope to be first choice of Nepali businesses to help them achieve their aspiration.

Limited competition has been cited as the reason for high cost for calls and data in Nepal. How do we compare with other countries in the region?

For making the data service cheaper and profitable, spectrum is needed to expand the overall utilisation, which for enterprises, we hope to be first choice of Nepali businesses to help them achieve their aspiration.

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The human face of a Himalayan climate crisis

Fatalism and denial among mountain communities living downstream from a dangerous glacial lake

Rastaraj Bhandari
in Dolakha

It is a small riverbank community of Dongang below Mt Gauri Shankar. Jamnu Sherpa runs a small teahouse. The settlement has two families who are still rebuilding their homes after the earthquake five years ago. Jamnu has a dozen goats, her primary companions in this wilderness near the Chinese border. The teahouse is a rest stop for trekkers headed up to Tso Rolpa glacial lake, or onwards to Tashi Laptsa Pass to Khumbu.

With the Himalaya warming between 0.3-0.7°C faster than the global average, these mountains will lose at least one-third of their ice by the end of the century. And that is the best-case scenario, according to the Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment: Climate Change, Sustainability and People (HKH AC).

The increased melting means melt water is accumulating in glacial lakes that also absorb and transmit thermal energy to the glacier face, causing a positive-feedback loop and accelerating the thaw. The lakes are growing in size, and are at risk of bursting to flood downstream valleys. Glacial Lakes Outburst Floods (GLOF) can be caused by avalanches falling into the lakes, or by earthquakes.

In the late 1990s, the risk of a GLOF event from Tso Rolpa led to panic among people living in the Tama Kosi Valley below. Scientists had been monitoring the lake which had grown seven times in size since 1957.

Twenty years ago, the Nepal government with international partners constructed a 70m canal that lowered the water level of the lake by 1m. Scientists believed the water level needed to be lowered by 2m to mitigate the risk of a GLOF, but this was better than nothing.

The resulting decrease in pressure on the terminal moraine is probably why Tso Rolpa did not burst during the 12 May 2015 aftershock which was epicentred 20m to mitigate the risk of a GLOF, but this was better than nothing.

However, people living along the Tama Kosi appear to be either oblivious or skeptical of the danger. Many think it is a hoax spread by the international community to mine precious stones. A hint to the lake has an Maoist slogan that reads ‘End American Imperialism, Long Live the Nepali Maoist Party’. Ordinary citizens cannot understand why else the government and foreigners would spend almost $1 million dollars on future climate change when many villages in the region urgently need proper schools, hospitals, post and roads,” explains Charikot resident Aku Man Maharjan.

Out of the 407 young undergraduate students from Dolakha and Kathmandu interviewed recently, more than one-third believed glacial flooding to be a hoax.

Jamnu Sherpa is different. Despite having no formal education, her knowledge of global warming stems from her closeness to nature of which she considers herself to be a part. She has noticed erratic weather brought on by an increased frequency of flash floods and landslides.

Tso Rolpa is directly upstream from Dongang, but the lack of alternatives and fatalism has helped her put climate change at the back of her mind and carry on with her daily life.

“Whenever we see people travelling downstream from a dangerous glacial lake to see how precarious it is. People living here are unable to stop it, they can only adapt to the changes. Some do it by putting it out of their minds and plodding along in forced denial. Others think the climate crisis is a conspiracy.”

While the long-term impacts of climate change are widely understood among many residents of Nepal, it means very little to people who struggle to live in this harsh environment.

Engaging local residents as citizen scientists who can contribute to data collection and documentation would be a step. Micro-insurance schemes are a great tool in protecting low-income communities against risks of climate change exchange for a regular payment of premiums proportion to the likelihood and cost of the relevant risk.

The mountains are melting before our eyes. People living here are unable to stop it, they can only adapt to the changes. Some do it by putting it out of their minds and plodding along in forced denial. Others think the climate crisis is a conspiracy.

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Durga Sob is now a central committee member of the People’s Socialist Party, but she has no illusions about ever rising to a position higher than secretary. She concludes: “When racism is direct and open, we can resist it. But when it is hidden, it is difficult to endure and fight against.”

Even in politics she found prejudice against her. She started becoming politically active, but resolve caste racism is through politics. So, first because they are women and second because they are members of the ‘lower’ caste.

“...I have had to move so many times. It took a long time for the police to arrive and arrest them. In 2012, they brought a sewing machine to the college dormitory, in the classroom, Sob faced the same ostracisation and taunts of fellow students...”

She says: “It is even more difficult to fight discrimination when it is so entrenched in supposedly better educated people in the cities.”

It was after he became a well-known singer and famous for a hit song about untouchability that Yash Kumar started really feeling societal discrimination. A sister of his best friend with the Brahmin surname ‘Acharya’ was getting married, and he came over to give Yash Kumar an invitation card to the wedding. But the said the invitation was just for formality, and that he should not come to the reception. “He told me he did not believe in colour or food. But after that he could not rent a room anywhere. He finally found a room with two other friends, but he had to move out when their parents were visiting.”

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“...Even so, I often notice people’s attitude change after they find out I am a Dalit. They talk down to me,” she says. “They ask me my caste and profession of my parents, and when they find out I am a Dalit they actually tell me I must be a non-Dalit because of my senior position.”

In 2012, she had gone to interview a senior official at a government office. He did not even tell her to sit down in the sofa, she had to take the interview standing up. Because caste discrimination is now punishable by law, the prejudice is also more subtle. One of her close friends eats with her, but when she inquired to her friend’s house she has to eat outside the kitchen. “It really affects me when close friends do that,” she says. “I just stopped going to such functions. I counter indirect stigma with an indirect boycott.”

“...I am a singer, and I pour out my anger in my songs, but this is Kathmandu, the message is restricted to the songs, it does not change too many people,” Amragi says.

DURGA SOB
Politician

Durga Sob was born in Deuli, and was sent to her family for higher studies in Kathmandu in 1980. She had faced caste discrimination in Nepal’s culturally conservative east-west, they had thought educated and prosperous Kathmandu could be different.

How wrong she was. In 1980, she was a final year student dormitory in the classroom, Sob faced the same ostracisation and taunts of fellow students from the so-called ‘upper’ castes that she used to get in Deuli.

She got a job at ActionAid while still studying, and in 1988 she met American rights activist Robin Morgan. They talked a lot about how Nepal’s gender activism was not inclusive, and it left out women perceived to be of a ‘lower’ caste.

Morgan helped Sob set up her own group. Forty years later Sob is still running her Dalit Women’s Organisation which he now has grown to become nationwide. Sob rented a flat in Kathmandu and kept two rooms as her office and two rooms to live in.

Soon, the landlady found out that Sob was a BuwaFrom, from the Dalit community. The usually friendly woman became hostile, and gave Sob notice to move out immediately.

Sob went flat-hunting throughout Kathmandu without finding her caste, since she did not want to face the same problem again. But that made it even more difficult for her to find an office and residence space to rent.

“I asked many people for help, no one came forward,” Durga Sob recalls. “In the end, I lied about my caste and soon got a flat. But even then, they would find out and harass me by coming off the windows or knocking on the door to drive me out. I have had to move so many times in Kathmandu because of my caste.”

In 1995, Sob was invited to attend the Beijing International Women’s Conference with other Nepali women activists. She had to share her hotel room in Beijing with a Nepali, but because she was a Dalit, none of the other conference participants from Nepal agreed to share a room with her.

“That was the worst day of my life, I wept,” Sob remembers. “This was an international conference on women’s rights, the Nepalis were gender activists, and yet this was happening.”

In 2002, Sob was nominated member secretary of the newly established National Dalit Commission. But the discrimination did not stop. She says: “Dalit women have to face double discrimination: first because they are women and second because they are Dalits.”

Sob was convinced that the only way to resolve caste racism is through politics. So, she started becoming politically active, but even politics she found prejudice against Dalits. First, she joined Baburam Bhattarai’s Naya Shakti Party as a coordinator, hoping that its progressive agenda would help in her struggle.

“I got that position because of my ability, but I started feeling pressure, there was a feeling that a Dalit women should not have a leadership role. I should have been a deputy chair or general secretary, but I was denoted to be a secretary,” she says.

Durga Sob is now a central committee member of the People’s Socialist Party, but she has no illusions about ever rising to a position higher than secretary. She concludes: “When racism is direct and open, we can resist it. But when it is hidden, it is difficult to endure and fight against.”

YASH KUMAR
Singer

Yash Kumar’s father was a Brahmin and his mother a Dalit. When he was 10 years old, his parents brought him to Kathmandu from Sarlahi. He did not have to face racial while in the Tarai because he was quite young, and he was not discriminated against in Kathmandu because he had a Brahmin surname. However, when he was making his citizenship papers, he added ‘Patriy’ to his formal name.

It was after he became a well-known singer and famous for a hit song about untouchability that Yash Kumar started really feeling societal discrimination. A sister of his best friend with the Brahmin surname ‘Acharya’ was getting married, and he came over to give Yash Kumar an invitation card to the wedding. But he said the invitation was just for formality, and that he should not come to the reception.

“He told me he did not believe in colour or food. But after that he could not rent a room anywhere. He finally found a room with two other friends, but he had to move out when their parents were visiting.”

“...I am a singer, and I pour out my anger in my songs, but this is Kathmandu, the message is restricted to the songs, it does not change too many people,” Amragi says.

SONA KHATIK
Radio Station Manager

Throughout her life, Sona Khatik grew up suffering from caste discrimination. Her life story indicates that caste stigmas are more entrenched in the Tarai than in the mountains. “I like to report from the field instead of dealing with people in the office,” says Khatik who worked her way up from being an intern to the Station Manager of Community Radio Kapilvastu.

“...Even so, I often notice people’s attitude change after they find out I am a Dalit. They talk down to me,” she says. “They ask me my caste and profession of my parents, and when they find out I am a Dalit they actually tell me I must be a non-Dalit because of my senior position.”

In 2012, she had gone to interview a senior official at a government office. He did not even tell her to sit down in the sofa, she had to take the interview standing up. Because caste discrimination is now punishable by law, the prejudice is also more subtle. One of her close friends eats with her, but when she inquired to her friend’s house she has to eat outside the kitchen. “It really affects me when close friends do that,” she says. “I just stopped going to such functions. I counter indirect stigma with an indirect boycott.”

HOLI NEPALI
Tourism entrepreneur

Nepal’s Dalits face discrimination even when they are abroad; And Holi, who runs Top of the World trekking agency in The Netherlands, has a direct experience of this. She started singing at a local gaur restaurant, but had to move multiple times when landlords cut off his water supply or harassed him when they found out that he was a Dalit. There was a Nepa landlady who had a room, and he told her he was a Dalit. But her reply surprised him: “It does not matter to me what caste you are as long as you are a decent person.” She was an exception.

In 2003, Amragi moved to Kathmandu, but here the discrimination was of a different nature than Pokhara. “In Kathmandu people did not bring up caste directly, but would insinuate things which was difficult to counter,” she says.

From this day, she notices that people’s demeanor changes completely when they find out he is a Dalit. Neighbours do everything together, but do not call him for their parties or festivals. “I am a singer, and I pour out my anger in my songs, but this is Kathmandu, the message is restricted to the songs, it does not change too many people,” Amragi says.
Nepal was born near Pokhara and through the kindness of trekking agency operator Rajiv Shrestha she got a good education. She stayed with his family, so others did not treat her badly then.

When some people in Nepal used to ask her what her caste was, she would say she was from the leather worker ‘Sarki’ caste. They would reply: “You are so good looking even though you are a Sarki!”

She started working in Shrestha’s trekking agency where she met a Dutch national and got married to him, and started living in The Netherlands in 2012. But even there, caste discrimination has followed her.

Nepali has a Nepali Chhetri friend whose relatives admonish her for hobnobbing with a Sarki. During Nepali gatherings, she has heard many Nepalis advise others not to marry a Sarki. During Nepali gatherings, she has heard many Nepalis advise others not to marry outside their caste groups.

“It seems that no matter how educated you are, no matter if Nepalis are in Europe, they cannot rise over bigotry,” she says.

SHANTI PASWAN
Activist

She was born and raised in a town in the Madhes and never had to face discrimination in her home town of Siraha. That may have been because she grew up in a Tamang majority neighbourhood.

However, after she became older and got involved in social service activities, she faced discrimination at every step. In 2012, when she wanted to stand for election to a school management committee she was forced to step down because of her caste. Her rivals thought she might win, so they threatened and intimidated her. “After it got nasty, I thought it was just not worth it,” she says. Because it is illegal to openly discriminate against a Dalit, the educated ones pass snide remarks to put them down. “They will not say it directly, but if there is someone who is not good-looking or if there is an undesirable person around, they describe them as ‘being like a Dalit’. If there is a crime anywhere, it is a Dalit who is the first suspect,” Paswan says.

She has developed her unique way of dealing with such racism. “If it is someone who is just not aware or is illiterate, I let them slight go, but if it is someone who should know better, I come down hard on them.”

BHUVAN SINGH BISWAKARMA
Ex-soldier

He is one of the few Nepalis who has even been to Antarctica. Bhuvan Singh Biswakarma was born in Baglung but moved to India when he was 10, and later joined the Indian Army. He joined an expedition to Antarctica, and says he was never treated different because he is a Dalit.

However, after retirement and return to Nepal he has been facing discrimination in his own homeland. “Earlier, even the educated people used to discriminate on the basis of caste, but now because it is illegal to do so, there is a different more roundabout kind of discrimination,” he says. Biswakarma says such indirect treatment manifests itself in friends who do everything together, but stay apart while eating. Once, he was drinking tea with a friend when he inadvertently touched his glass. The friend got up and left saying he did not feel like having tea that day.

“I always know they are doing it because of me, but how do I fight that?” asks Biswakarma who now lives in Bireth, “Close friends do not invite you for weddings and other parties at their homes. It hurts.”

PURNA LAL BISWAKARMA
Engineer

Even if a Dalit is an engineer, he has to face discrimination. In fact, no matter what senior position they hold, even if they are rich, or hold high office, Dalits still face caste discrimination from a society that should know better. Engineer Purna Lal Biswakarma is living proof of that.

Born in Kusma of Parbat district, Biswakarma grew up with other Dalits, and did not face stigma for being from a ‘lower’ caste. Even when he enrolled in an engineering college in Kathmandu, he did not really face much discrimination.

It was after he gave his Public Service Exam that he started facing the brunt of the injustice. After joining the irrigation department, he had to travel across Nepal. It was in Baitadi in far-western Nepal where he had to face the worst treatment even from co-workers.

He still remembers the discrimination from a close friend and long-time colleague who was getting married. Everyone got an invitation but him. He was invited for a reception later, but did not go because the ill-treatment affected him deeply.

“They talk to you with respect, but as soon as they find out you are a Dalit, the tone changes completely.” Biswakarma says.

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Caste is a system that stands against the injustice. After joining the Irrigation Department, he had to travel across Nepal. It was in Baitadi in far-western Nepal where he had to face the worst treatment even from co-workers. He still remembers the discrimination from a close friend and long-time colleague who was getting married. Everyone got an invitation but him. He was invited for a reception later, but did not go because the ill-treatment affected him deeply.

“They talk to you with respect, but as soon as they find out you are a Dalit, the tone changes completely.” Biswakarma says.

BHUWAN SINGH BISWAKARMA
Engineer

He was born in India and was raised in Raplaiwasa where he faced ill treatment, abusive language and discrimination every step of the way while growing up. But it was after he moved to Kathmandu that he had to face other kinds of poor behaviour. He joined the United Nations Gender Mainstreaming Project and was assigned to Myagdi where he faced caste violence from his own colleagues. They did not drink water from a bottle that he had touched, “They never said anything bad, but their behaviour was appalling,” Nepali remembers. “It affected me deeply at a psychological level.”

In 2008, he had gone to Bajhang and Doti for research into his PhD and it was difficult to get a room for the night. “Dalits did not have room, and non-Dalits would not give you one,” he remembers. “There have to be stricter laws against caste discrimination, and they need to be enforced. The only way to reduce this racism is through a zero tolerance policy.”

CENTRE FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM- NEPAL
Nepal, China re-measure height of Mt Everest

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

Sonia Awale

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

Yes, 8,848.43m (29,029 ft) as widely accepted as the height of Mt Everest since 1955, even though the summit’s elevation has fluctuated by a dozen or so metres since then, depending on who is doing the calculating.

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

The height of Mt Everest has changed with advances in survey technology. The Great Trigonometric Survey Of India in 1856 declared Mt Everest the highest mountain in the world at exactly 8,840.00m. But since surveyors thought no one would believe such a round figure, they added 2 ft to it so it sounded more precise. But it was surprisingly accurate for the time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nepal’s Survey Department deployed both traditional methods (trigonometry levelling as done by Survey of India in 1956) with precise levelling and more accurate modern geoid system with gravity survey, and Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) to cross-check the results.

For precise levelling, the surveyors measured altitudes of 12 points from sea level right up to the base of the mountain. For this, they had to use six Indian trigonometric points from the sea to the Nepal border.

The ground penetrating radar that the Survey Department team left on the summit of Mt Everest last May measures and maps the summit and monitors its thickness. This can be used to calculate the rock height of the summit.

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

Even though the two countries share the mountain with the north, west and east face in China and the south face in Nepal, Mt Everest (Sagarmatha or Chomolungma) is an emotive issue in the country.

“It will be unfortunate if this purely scientific exercise is overshadowed by politics,” says Manandhar. “This exercise goes beyond Everest. The knowledge and experience we gain will be crucial in future work.”

Count Survey and trigonometry map of the Everest region (below)

Everest measurement timeline

1855 - Great Trigonometric Survey (GTS) of India (1850). Declared Mt Everest the highest peak in the world at 8,840 m.

1955 - Survey of India revised the summit height to 8,848.43 m.


1999 - US, 8,848.43m (29,028 ft) (Survey of India).


How high is high?

The modern history of Mt Everest is replete with debate about its true height. The Great Trigonometric Survey (GTS) of India in 1856 declared the mountain the highest in the world at 8,840 m - and named the peak after Sir George Everest, its chief in 1865.

In 1955, the Survey of India revised the height of Everest to 8,848.43 m, and this was recorded by China (6448.13m) in 1975. But in 1999, US survey using GPS and radar technology declared its height to be 8,848.43m.

In 2005, a Chinese expedition remeasured Everest’s rock height and claimed it to be four meters lower at 8,844.43 m. Given rise to long-standing debate on whether the true height should be offset by 2ft. China and Nepal then agreed they would use both figures.

The problem with taking the ice cap at the summit height is that its thickness varies from year to year, whereas the rock summit is more permanent.

Nevertheless, the summit height is considered as 8,848.86m, the rock height as 8,848.43m.
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As the Dasain festival approaches, the pandemic sees a surge in Nepal’s kite warriors

Alisha Sijapati

The monsoon has retreated, there is a fresh westerly breeze, the sky is blue, the mountains are out again. It is probably the best time when the Nepali kite-flying season is here.

There was a time when the sky in Kathmandu used to be filled with colourful kites as almost every nook and cranny in Kathmandu Valley would be flying kites. First it was movies on the television screens, then came mobile phones and the Internet, people were too distracted to fly kites anymore.

This year, though, because of the spread of Covid-19 in Kathmandu, families are confined to their homes and the kites are back. The roof terraces are once more filled with kites, and even adults, conducting test flights for the Kathmandu journals.

In Kalimati, Mohan Manandhar, along with his father, brother and son run a small kite shop that has been in the family for generations.

"We thought of shutting the shop for good, but it is surprising that this year probably because of the lockdown, there is renewed demand for kites, aattal results and thread," Manandhar says. "The business is back."

History of kite-flying

Kites were invented 2,400 years ago, and came to China from Bali. They were used by the Chinese general Han Hsiong in 170BC to measure distances and it was probably Marco Polo who took kite technology to Europe, just like he took Chinese noodles and pasta.

Matroni used a kite to lift an antenna for his trans-Atlantic radio transmission from Newfoundland to Holland. Franklin made a static electricity experiment flying a kite during a thunderstorm. Averroes, the kite fighter like the editor of this paper have flown kites at 5,800m at Makalu Base Camp in winds gusting up to 60 knots. (The kite survived because the air is so thin.)

Kites that fight

Whereas European and Chinese kites float lazy in the sky waving their tails, a Nepali kite flying is a martial art. Here, a kite has to fight. The idea is to cut the enemy’s thread with your own. Which means the kite has to be able to fly in tight and, be obedient and have a killer instinct.

A user’s airmanship is determined by proficiency in the use of lattai, or the adversary’s threat. It is the lattai that gives a kite the capacity to reel in or out. The kite reel out faster than a side-wind; the kite line is adrift, it is mandatory for the take-off to be just right as you let it go in a tumbling motion riding on a gust of wind. Tumbling (ghumaure) makes the kite line length. Pulling at the string with a lattai raised above the head is the trademark Nepali way of flying a kite in light breezes.

There are various traditional ways to steer a kite. To take the kite left, for example, twist for the kite to point left and give the aattal a yank pulling it on the right side of your body. Ditto if you want to go down or up. While reeling loose the aattal, the kite fibers relax, and you have to be careful not to reel in while the nose is point downward this could pit it in an uncontrolled dive. Always remember to allow for delay for the kite to respond to your command, and this delay is always directly proportional to the tension on the line. So, if your line is tight the kite responds immediately, if it is sagging it is sluggish.

Because of the congested urban space, the Nepali roof-top kite flyers are sometimes compelled to yank the Jattal to coax their kite up. But field kite flyers have the advantage of a long runway for a kite’s takeoff and get it higher after the launch for it to catch a passing breeze.

Types of kites

Traditionally, Nepali kites were made of hand-made kapa paper. They were heavy and took a stiff breeze to get air borne, and are rare now. But once on, they behaved like lumbering bombers – unlike latter day “Lockheeds” which were made of lighter paper and are more manageable. Although they do not come from Lucknow anymore, these versatile and fast kites are the Spitfires of the air.

The skills of Kathmandu’s kite warriors are passed down from generation to generation. A kite's aerodynamics is crucial to make it respond to your command, and this delay is always directly proportional to the tension on the line. So, if your line is tight the kite responds immediately, if it is sagging it is sluggish.,

Aerodynamics of kites

A kite is a heavier-than-air object and logically should fall under the influence of gravity. But it doesn’t. The reason is that it is an airfoil, and its flight is defined by aerodynamics and Bernoulli’s principles. Unlike the wings of airplanes, sails, bird wings and parachutes, kites can alter or redirect the flow of air around it unceasingly so as to create pressure differences. While putting the kite in the air, the angle of the kite diverts the flow of air unevenly over it. This causes the air passing over the kite to move faster than the air passing under. At this point, according to Bernoulli’s Principle, the faster a current of air moves, the lower its pressure becomes. And, as any physics student will tell you, there is thus a high pressure build up beyond the kite which gives it lift. Gravity tends to pull the kite down, while the lift makes the kite float.

When the kite is in equilibrium, four forces-gavity, lift, resistance (drag) from the wind, and the tension of the kite line-cancel out. Drag tends to push the kite horizontally back while the kite line pulls the kite forward. This state keeps kite in steady position.

There are some late changes, or kary kites which respond only when stronger force is applied through the line. This is caused by the lower lift-to-drag ratio. If the drag is greater than the lift, the kite will not fly at all.

On a keen breeze, a kite will be at equilibrium and easy to control. When the wind dies down, the kite stalls. But even here, quick action can keep a kite adult. But there is a penalty: you will have to sacrifice line length. Pulling at the string with a Jattal raised above the head is the trademark Nepali way of flying a kite in tight breezes.
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**EVENTS**

**Fulpati**
The seventh day of Dasain is dedicated to Kali, the seventh form of Goddess Durga. A holy water vessel, banana stalks, jasmine, and sugar cane are brought to Hanuman Dhoka from Gorkha after which there is a military parade.

20 October, Tundikhel

**Bijaya Dashami**
The main event of Dasain is a celebration of Goddess Durga’s victory over the Demon Mahishasur, and Lord Ram’s victory over the Demon Ravana. Hence, from the tenth day until the pujaam, families recite Aka jasmine and blessings from elders. 26 October

**Chang Chai**
Start your Dasain off by taking out in a bike riding event at Shivay Chhime Restaurant. Eat, drink and enjoy turmeric spice infused Chai Chai concoction. 17 October, 6pm, Bhoj Chhen Restaurant, Basantapur, Rs 1000, 9851220397

**Virtual street art**
Google Arts Project: Street Art showcases the world’s greatest public works and tells the stories behind them, including those of Nepal. Viewers can take virtual walking tours, view online exhibitions and learn about the artists themselves.

**MoNA exhibitions**
Go to the Museum of Nepali Art website to watch their newly installed video art exhibitions: Tangential stress 2020, a contemporary exhibition featuring 19 prominent artists and their work under lockdown and isolation. A collection of Nepali artistic masterpieces by some of Nepal’s best traditional artists.

**Dining**

**Chulo**
From Nepali dal bhat, Newa mutton, Swiss Rosti, Italian Risotto and Thai aloes, Chulo has a variety of cuisines to offer. The garlic chilli prawn at this cosy restaurant is to die for.

Jumlaah ((01) 3542986

**Dining**

**Detox Cafe**
If you’re looking for healthy-regime sounds appealing, order Detox Cafe’s Grilled chicken salad, Buckwheat brownies and banana bread. What’s more, there is a special bakery sale going on. Check out the cafe menu on Foodism and buy some yummy and healthy cookies.

88645181

**Friday night BBQ**
Unwind on Friday fall evenings with a buffet of delicious barbeque and dinner with music, beer and more at Park Village Resort. An overnight package is also available.

Friday, 6pm, Park Village Resort, Budhanilkharan, Rs 21200 per person (01) 4379280

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Glaciers are massive blocks of snow that are created, over millennia, as accumulated snowfall and ice. As they form, they cover land, especially uplands, like mountains. Glaciers are especially large in mountainous areas. They give us cold water, help to cool the planet, and power hydroelectricity generation capacity and less water for irrigation. The white surfaces of glaciers also reflect the sun’s rays, and help to cool the planet. In the Himalayas, glaciers are melting and creating floods. It’s Glaciers that hold the key to the world’s water future. Understand how climate change is impacting life and property downstream. Glaciers are only indicators of climate change and we need to reduce global CO2 emissions in order to stop global warming and save the glaciers, Himalaya today.

**Kripa Joshi**
In October 2019, Amazon released a well-written, Women’s Hunter, on New York City where she is a writer. The story is about four women, four great friends and their adventures and stories. Female hunters and their adventures.

**Our Pick**

**Mithai by Marriott**
Send gifts to family this Dasain with delectable mithai from handcrafted hamperly, exclusively curated by Sanjeev Banerji of Khaitan’s. Marriott Hotel. Call for details.

Kathmandu Marriott Hotel, 9801787643

Embridge Restaurant
Enjoy a hearty meal in this centrally located restaurant known for its lively ambiance and assorted menu. Try the Duck breast, served on a bed of mashed potatoes and roasted vegetables in a rich propegyi steak sauce.

Zoysaip, 9801320402

**Going places together - qatarairways.com**
As you can see in this video, the Subcontinent is a paradise for birdwatchers. Qatar Airways’ flight that started on the Bay of Benga moved right across Central Asia. This will be some incredible views, as you’ve never seen. We can also see the Himalayas from the plane. In northern Asia, we’re pushed in our direction by providing weather, Distant valley skyes, and some Penguins flying below on the Himalayan mountain. In the windscreen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ym210mzg09u

**Post-lockdown town**
Nepal’s women envoys make a mark

Pratistha Rijal

Nepal has a female president and a cabinet that includes women in government and legislature. 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, 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 considered inferior to them. Our inherent femininity, sensitivity, nurturance, emotional temperament, are our best qualities,” says Nepal’s ambassador to Oman Sarmila Punjabi Dhakal, who has made great progress in ensuring the repatriation of stranded Nepali workers, and bargaining with airlines to get 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 repatriation 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 Shakya, Nepal’s ambassador to Israel, has also been making strides 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 the problems of women. They must be brought into politics, and in policy and decision-making positions,” Shakya says. “Female political participation is crucial in moving away from traditional gender roles and bringing about gender equality. Our 2015 constitution has ensured gender balance in politics. We must abide by it.”

Ambassador Shakya 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, Shakya was the first Asian envoy to visit Nepal’s first agricultural trade mission to Israel, sponsored by the Ambassadors’ Club of Israel.

“Nepali women have fewer economic assets, less access to finance, higher rates of illiteracy, and little knowledge of their legal rights,” says Ambassador Shakya. “We are generally held 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 in local governance and positions in 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), Nepal Congress (NC), Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN), and Rastriya Janata Party (RJP) failed to meet the criteria that one-third of their membership be female.

In line with the constitutional requirement that the president and vice-president must be of different gender, a woman, President Bidhya 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 those 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: domestic, child marriage, online harassment, period stigmas, 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 Sharma, 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. Sharma herself has said she was the target of a witch hunt.

Despite quotas, therefore, Nepali women find it difficult to maneuver in the labyrinth 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.

“Tension between careerists and those giving up their careers in order to have children is serious, and in the mid-mountain areas this tension is more pronounced than in the Tarai,” Tiwari says. “Women in the mid-mountain areas have a greater choice in politics, so they are more active.”
F
or those who are convinced that Nepal is a hopeless cause, and nothing can be achieved, Ujjwal Bikram Thapa is a shining example of activism with impact.

The day 28 September will forever be etched in this activist’s memory. After years of lobbying to stop acid attacks that continue to disfigure mostly young women, Nepal’s President Bidya Devi Bhandari finally signed into law two ordinances regulating acid sales and criminalising perpetrating of acid attacks.

“It was a victory for all the survivors of acid attacks, a recognition of their suffering and sacrifice,” says Thapa, who has been working relentlessly for the last six years helping many of them with medical treatment and rehabilitation. “They are the heroes. I am just a medium for change.”

Ujjwal Bikram Thapa, 52, says his main inspiration for social service is his father Mohan Bikram, Nepal’s first forest conservation officer. After the 2015 earthquake, he helped construct 1,000 shelters for families, and has also helped 400 victims of burn related violence, many of them young women punished by in-laws for inadequate dowry.

Thapa has devoted his life to social service, and started out helping his father to take care of patients from the family’s ancestral district of Simikot to get medical treatment in Kathmandu. After his father died nine years ago, Thapa carried on the work, financing it with earnings from his wife and other investments.

Thapa has been encouraged by another famous alumnus of Sherwood College in Nainital, Amitabh Bachchan, who has helped publicise his work with acid victims in Nepal and India.

Indian acid attack activist Laxmi Agarwal also called Thapa last month to appreciate his work to help acid attack survivors and to give him a new lease of life, but also to work as a one-man pressure group to bring the new ordinance into force.

Among those who have benefited from his assistance are acid attack survivors Sangita Magar, Jenny Khadka, Bindabasini Kansakar and many others, whom he has arranged jobs at Kumar Bank. Another victim, Ramraja Thapa, recently found work in the Attorney General’s office.

Thapa’s coming full of confidence and self-esteem. He encouraged 14-year-old Muskan Khatun to write to Prime Minister KP Oli, facilitating the high profile parliamentary hearing, and a meeting last month at Baluwatar between Oli and acid attack survivors who led to the Cabinet decision on the ordinance.

Thapa has also built a solidarity group of acid attack survivors who help each other, visiting the latest victims in hospital to provide moral and material support. Many call Thapa “father”, “uncle” or sometimes even “grandfather”, and speak of him with great fondness.

The first person at Rajaram Thapa’s side at Teaching Hospital recently, for instance, was 16-year-old Muskan Khatun, who herself was splashed with acid last year in Bungamati by a rejected suitor.

“Ties of acid run thicker than blood,” explains Thapa, who traces the beginning of his work with acid attack victims to an incident at Bir Hospital in 2015. He was attending to an ailing relative, when there was a loud commotion at the emergency. Sangita Magar had just been brought in, her head disfigured and crying in pain. She was 16 when a young man threw acid at her during an SLC tuition class in Kathmandu.

Thapa’s world shook when he pictured his three daughters in Sangita’s place. “I could not bear looking at her. I could only see my daughters in her place,” he recalls. “This was the first time in my life I felt so helpless.”

Thapa decided to turn his outrage into action, and his appeals to then Prime Minister Lokendra Chand and Home Minister Bundev Gautam secured free treatment for Sangita, who went on to finish her SLC exams and get free college education at Nobel Academy.

The new law will now allow survivors like Sangita to have the government cover lifetime treatment costs, and her nasal reconstruction surgery that will cost Rs8.8 million will also be possible. Her nose was so badly burnt by the acid that surgeons grafted tissue from her thighs to allow her to breathe through her left ear.

“After seven years, Sangita will not have to breathe through her ear again, she can breathe through her nose,” says Thapa.

Bindabasini Kansakar had Rs70 worth of acid thrown at her, but her medical treatment so far has cost Rs20 million. Says Thapa: “The shopkeeper who sold the acid must have made just Rs20 profit on that bottle. With the new law, he will not be able to sell acid so easily.”

In September 2018, Samjhana and Sushmita Das had acid splashed on them by a neighbour in Ratathit district. Samjhana had nearly 10% burns and her skin had melted away. Sushmita’s injuries were less serious.

Samjhana fought for life, but died 12 days later, the hospital would not let her family take her body until they paid the bills. “I made a promise to Samjhana’s soul that day I would not rest until these crimes are stopped,” Thapa says.

Jenny Khadka was attacked with acid by husband Bishnu Bhujel in May 2019 after a quarrel. She was taken to the burns hospital in Kirtipur. The crime on Khadka had been in the media headlines, and Thapa remembers a 12-year-old girl greeting him at the hospital entrance giving him an envelope and saying:

“Ujjwal Sir, this is for Jenny’s treatment.”

Before he could ask her anything more, she disappeared. He opened the envelope to find Rs21. Thapa is emotional recalling this incident.

Thapa was awarded Nepal’s Social Service Medal on Constitution Day last month, but he says the real prize will be won by Nepalis the day the legislation comes into full effect.

While coverage of acid attacks are mostly sensational stories of rejected proposals and revenge on women, there is a broader criminal intent. Four male victims of such attacks have been reported, not one of whom has received any state assistance. With new legislation in place, they are hopeful to be recognised.

“Gender will no more be an issue in the delivery of justice,” says Rajaram Thapa, whose wife threw acid on him.

The new laws introduce tougher punishment for perpetrators, Murder by acid attack carries a life sentence, while damage to vital organs such as eyes, ears, mouth and chest now carries a 20-year prison term. Damage to limbs and peripheral organs carries a 15-year term, while even the intent to attack carries at least a 10-year sentence.

The government has also waived medical treatment for victims, taking responsibility for their preliminary and long-term treatment.

The new laws are expected to reduce acid attacks by tightening acid sales and restricting access to them.

Sabina Devkota

Nepal’s acid attack survivors find a saviour

Activist Ujjwal Bikram Thapa says he will not rest until this crime is eradicated.

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Take to pottery during the pandemic

Ceramics classes allow Bhaktapur potters to keep family heritage alive, while giving people a chance to de-stress

Monika Deupala

Amidst Covid-19 surge in Kathmandu Valley, people are taking up new indoor hobbies and finding ways to do more creative and calming activities. One of them is taking up ceramics.

And where else to discover one’s talent for the craft than in Bhaktapur, the centre of traditional pottery in Kathmandu Valley. The craft demands patience and concentration as a lump of clay is moulded on the potter's wheel, fired, and then turned into a work of art.

Archana Panthi, 23, a theatre artist from Kathmandu used to buy ceramic gifts for friends, but decided to take up the clay herself. She enrolled in Cera Nepal when the lockdown was eased, and the experience was so positive that she is determined to go back now that there are no travel restrictions.

“The owner gave us instructions, and we moulded the clay with our palms and fingers, and once they were really we could even take it back with us, it was a whole new experience,” Panthi says.

Cera Nepal is a company specialising in fine ceramics, and builds on Bhaktapur’s pottery tradition, but instead of just making flower pots or water containers, it tries to be more creative with different items and innovative designs.

For Ratna Prasad Prajapati, 47, setting up Cera Nepal Udyog in 1984 was just an extension of his ancestral occupation of potters. He admits that when he was younger he was not so interested in the profession of his forebears, and dabbled in importing and selling TV sets.

But he switched, and found that innovating and improving on traditional pottery items was actually quite a lucrative business. He started producing crockery sets for hotels, decorative pieces, earthware, and lately even new designs for terracotta tiles for flooring and roofs.

“What we make is still what our ancestors made, we have just tinkered with the techniques by glazing so that the items have a shine, have different colours and designs and also make the items more aesthetic,” Prajapati explains.

Unlike other businessmen, Prajapati does not want to keep the skill and craft to himself, but share it as widely as possible, which is why he has started taking on students into his ceramics school. It is a way to not just keep his family occupation alive, but also spread the traditions among other Nepalis who can experiment with new techniques.

“It takes days to see a blob of clay transform itself into a perfectly blended crockery set. That is what is most satisfying, and it is also very soothing work and calms the mind,” adds Prajapati, whose daughter Alina is now managing the company.

Due to the pandemic, however, business is down. It was Alina’s idea to offer pottery lessons when the restrictions were lifted in July. The classes were held only on weekends, there was a limited number of apprentices and proper precautions were taken to space them out.

Alina Prajapati has been watching her father working on the potter’s wheel from a young age. Like her father, she tried other jobs, but has returned to the family’s pottery business with new ideas and innovation.

“I hardly see people of my generation going back to their traditional family occupations, but after I saw the potential of ceramics I thought it was high time I helped my father with his business,” says 25-year-old Alina, who hopes that the classes will take off with the lockdown fully lifted.

Subekchya KC, 35 was on her maternity break before lockdown and joined the pottery lessons at Cera Nepal, bringing along her older four-year-old son. She says, “It was a break for me. I forgot all my stress while making a bowl or ceramic plate. And my son found it lots of fun too. I completely forgot about postpartum angst, it was a real stress buster for me.”

Pottery making has often been described as being therapeutic. The mind is focused on what one wants to create, and it needs concentration and delicate work. Alina Prajiapati says there have been many troubled adolescents who have found it to be useful to relax mind and body.

Suvidha Sinhdeo, 34, used to work in an event management company and had a stressful job. It took just one session at Cera Nepal to change his entire outlook on life, friends, work and family.

He says, “A day spent in front of the potter’s wheel has taught me to be more patient and concentrated on creating something. It is good therapy to be focused on what you want to do.”

For Rajiv Sharma, 37, it was boredom during the lockdown that made him enrol at Cera Nepal. He took his young son along, who was also tired of being at home.

“Making something out of nothing was a great experience, it also allowed me to bond better with my son and we enjoyed shaping the clay together,” Sharma says.

Both Ratna and Alina Prajapati have restarted the ceramics classes with lifting of the lockdown. They use it as their responsibility to society to keep their family heritage alive, while giving people a chance to de-stress during the Covid-19 crisis.

At Cera Nepal in Bhaktapur, new mothers and youth seeking relaxation techniques from the lockdown are taking pottery classes to de-stress while learning a new skill. Take a look.
As they struggle with disrupted classes, enterprising students are using the lockdown to turn hobbies into business ventures

- Sampurna Bhusan and Dilba Shrestha, students at the Kathmandu School of Law, have their final year exams pushed back indefinitely due to Covid-19. They have used this time to work on Mero Wokil, a new online legal news portal. They said, “lockdowns to contain sporadically imposing Covid-19 have given us extra time to research and develop a proper legal awareness platform.”

- Harshita Agrawal, whose graduate studies were put on hold, co-founded a spatial design firm, Studio Rever, with a friend in Mumbai.

- Rinchen Phinzhon Sherpa started Bumble Beads, a bracelet venture, and cannot keep up with demand. She says, “With a workforce made up of trained teachers, the digital divide, constant government flip-flopping, and immigration uncertainties have meant that most students are looking for other avenues.”

- Pratistha Rijal, a first year BBA student at Pokhara School of Management, has opened Chevron.np, a tie-dye tops and maudesigning company they started during the pandemic. They said, “This lockdown has given us the time and freedom to work on making information and news available to a large public. We have been able to spread legal awareness, as well as explore the nexus between law and technology.”

- Supriya KC and Medha Malla, first year BBA student at Pokhara School of Management, have opened Chevron.np, a tie-dye shirt business.

- Tashi Chozum Lama (stage name TASHIII), an emerging singer/songwriter, has noticed the popularity of tie-dye tops and maudesigning. She says, “For instance, COPE’s gender and age breakdown of Nepal’s Covid-19 caseload illustrates how with very simple graphics which segment of the population is most impacted — in Nepal the positive cases are mostly among younger people, but fatalities are in an older cohort. After Harshitaa Agrawal’s plans to attend graduate school were compromised by the pandemic, she co-founded Studio Rever which specialises in art installations, interior design, set designs, and product styling. Agrawal and co-founder Ankita Saigal, based in Mumbai, met while pursuing their undergraduate degrees in the US. Their plan to open Studio Rever, which had been in the cookbooks for a while, seemed too far-fetched till Covid-19 created a world where they could work together despite being located in different countries. Now, their firm is fully operational and has hired a marketing intern.”

- Says Agrawal: “Of course, the pandemic has shown that in fact we cannot keep up with orders. For majority of artists, live shows are the main source of revenue.”

- Rinchen Phinzhon Sherpa always loved creating and making bracelets, but she never imagined she could make a business out of a passion. Her Bumble Beads bracelets are now so popular on social media that she cannot keep up with orders. She says, “It started off with me buying beads and charms to make bracelets in small quantities but soon, I was running out of supplies. I learned a lot about managing demand-supply and figuring out profit margins.”

- Undergraduate student and aspiring singer/writer Tashi Chozum Lama (stage name TASHIII) has also found a therapeutic way to deal with Covid-19. “Music as a profession is emotional. As a musician, I have to isolate myself so I can introspect and write about things I feel deeply about. So, Covid allowed me to transcribe and create New York City Lights,” she says about her first single.

- New York City Lights debuted internationally on 4 September. She describes it as a soft guitar ballad, unfettered and raw. It is available on music streaming services such as Spotify and Amazon Music.

- While appreciating the positive role played by Covid to advance her musical career, TASHIII still misses doing live shows: “The downside to that is I can’t perform live anymore. For many artists, live shows are the main source of revenue.”

- As they struggle with disrupted classes, enterprising students are using the lockdown to turn hobbies into business revenue. "It started off with me buying beads and charms to make bracelets in small quantities but soon, I was running out of supplies. I learned a lot about managing demand-supply and figuring out profit margins."
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Let us pledge to protect the trans-Himalayan migratory route of Demoiselle Cranes

I was in Kagbeni in 1980. High above in the deep blue Himalayan sky was a flock of graceful Demoiselle Cranes, flying north riding up-valley winds on their annual migration across the Himalayas. It was my lucky day.

The Kali Gandaki at this point is the deepest gorge in the world, located between two eight thousand feet peaks, Dhaulagiri and Annapurna I. It provides a passage for migratory birds from the Tibetan Plateau and Siberia to the Subcontinent and back.

Kagbeni is a vantage point to spot migratory birds, and I had visited it multiple times to provide expertise for filming by NHK and BBC. Till then, I had never seen the cranes, only watched them on Planet Earth5 Mountains on Discovery Channel.

Demoiselle Cranes are the third most common crane species after the Sandhill Crane in North America and Eurasian Crane in Europe and Asia. They number over 200,000, and demonstrate spectacular migratory flights. They breed in the vast expanses of the steppe grasslands of Mongolia and Russia, and fly south across the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalaya to winter in western India.

Unlike other cranes that dwell on wetlands, these cranes prefer relatively dry habitats for survival. Their nests can be found on dry ground around 500m apart from each other.

Prior to migration, the birds flock with their fledglings. Birds from Mongolia and Russia overflying Nepal and Pakistan covering nearly 3,000km one way, and finally converge in western India, where they live in large flocks in their wintering grounds.

They can fly over extreme habitats of the world including the arid Gobi Desert, the high and dry Tibetan Plateau, the Himalaya with its jet stream, the lush Ganges Plains and the farms of Western India.

Satellite telemetry studies have recorded a cyclic migration pattern of Demoiselle Cranes, flying over Nepal during autumn and returning via Mongolia in spring. During their autumn migration, birders can see magnificent flocks of Demoiselle over Nepal’s high mountain passes, gorges and along the Tarai. Farmers in Nepal often witness flocks flying in V formation like a swaying garland pattern in the sky, and call it ‘karyang kurung’ for the sound the make.

In 1972, a flock of Demoiselle even alighted on Tundikhel at the centre of Kathmandu. More recently, I have observed them flying over my office in Baluwatar in 2015, and from my house in Chetrapati in 2016. But for these migrating cranes, Kagbeni remains the flight path of choice since the Kali Gandaki serves as a funnel that cuts through the Himalaya. My highest count of the Demoiselle has ranged from 50,000 in 2004 to only 5,000 in 2009.

Variance in counting can be tied to weather, wind and visibility. When the wind in the Himalaya picks up, the flocks descend to lower altitudes. When they have the jet stream on their tails, they ride it over the mountains.

For these expert fliers, the flight

Eurasian Curlew visits Kathmandu after 50 years

They once used to arrive in flocks of 200 in Kosi Tappu wildlife reserve, and frequent Kathmandu Valley’s wetlands. But after their numbers started dwindling sharply, the first Eurasian Curlew has been spotted for the first time after half-a-century by birders in Kathmandu last week.

A group of wildlife photographers were out taking pictures along the Manahara River in Bhaktapur when they spotted a brownish bird with a long curved beak feeding by itself along the shore. They took close-up photographs and showed it to Hem Sagar Baral, an ornithologist with the Zoological Society London (ZSL) who positively identified it as the Eurasian Curlew.

Sanjay Shrestha and Pemba Sherpa took pictures of the bird on the ground, while others in the group have photos of the bird in flight. What intrigued Baral is that Eurasian Curlews are usually in flocks, and this seemed to be on its own.

The bird used to be a common autumn visitor in Nepal’s national parks as they made stopovers in their migrations to and from Siberia and India, and possibly as far away as Africa. The birds of passage even used to make a refueling stop for a few days in Kathmandu Valley, but had not been seen here for 50 years.

Eurasian Curlew spotted in Bhaktapur last week.

Eurasian Curlew visits Kathmandu after 50 years
for migrating cranes

The bird used to be abundant in Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and has also been spotted lately in Chitwan, but not in large numbers. Eurasian Curlews use their characteristic curved beaks to burrow into wet sand banks after monsoon floods for worms.

The first person to identify a Eurasian Curlew in Kathmandu was the British resident Brian Hodgson in 1844, who reported seeing flocks of them stopping over briefly on their migration. Ornithologist R K Fleming and artist Lain Singh Buxted in their 1976 book, Birds of Nepal, say the bird is found in Kathmandu Valley. H S Nepal in his unpublished work in 1982, List of Nepalese Bird Species, also reports that the bird is found in Kathmandu. However, both bird books probably relied on an earlier sighting in 1970.

Till 20 years ago, Anish Timilsina of the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve remembers seeing flocks of up to 200 stopping by the river banks to feed, usually in the autumn season. They even used to winter there because of the abundance of food. But for the past decade, he said, they come only in groups of three or four, and some years there are none at all.

The International Conservation Union (IUCN) has classified the Eurasian Curlew in the threatened list. Their numbers are also going down in the British Isles, which had up to quarter of the population of the birds, and has not been put on the Red List of endangered birds. The reason is habitat loss at wetlands disappear, water pollution and hunting.

The reasons are similar in Nepal – the loss of wetlands as well as the disappearance of sand banks and mud flats by rivers where the birds prefer to feed. Their numbers could have also dwindled because of hunting and habitat loss in stopover sites and wintering habitats. We aim to generate awareness and seek support for the conservation of these legendary migratory species so that they survive into the future.
Preserving King Birendra's family home

Alisha Sijapati

When Narayanhiti Palace was opened to the public in 2009 soon after Nepal was declared a republic, Nepalis flocked in to see what daily life of the royals looked like. They were not impressed.

Many thought they would also see Tribhuvan Sadan, the building where the 2001 family massacre took place in which ten members of the royal family were killed, and which was later demolished.

The pink pagoda shaped building with a tower designed by American architect Benjamin Polk was a ceremonial structure for official functions, and there was not much to see there about the private life of royals.

Now, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum is set to open Shree Sadan, King Birendra’s private family residence, which has been kept intact since the massacre at 8:45 PM on Friday, 1 June 2001.

Nepali Times get an exclusive sneak preview of Shree Sadan and it is like a time capsule – Prince Nirajan’s room still has his class schedule for Kathmandu Management College pinned to the wall and a weekly schedule printed in dot matrix: ‘Wake up at 6.30 and head to bed by 23.00.' Friday wake up at 10 am and FRIDAY NIGHT From 19.00 to 23.00.

Princess Shrutl’s room is different. She was two years older than Nirajan, and it is more feminine: pink flowered closets, family portraits, single bed, study table with VCR tapes which she often shared with brother Prince Dipendra.

The living room has portraits of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya and has preserved the rooms exactly like it was 20 years ago – even Ninajun’s class schedule for Kathmandu Management College pinned to the wall and a weekly schedule printed in dot matrix: ‘Wake up at 6.30 and head to bed by 23.00.' Friday wake up at 10 am and FRIDAY NIGHT From 19.00 to 23.00.

The opening of Shree Sadan has been delayed by the pandemic and bureaucratic hurdles. But Director of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Bhashi Nainayu Dalal says they are being sorted out.

There are other sections of the palace that are still closed. Trishul Sadan to the east of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum has been kept in the rooms of the Narayan Temple. Prime Minister Shurman Shumshane Rana, who had his daughter marry King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah, moved out of the palace when he was killed.

Narayanhiti is named after the Malla-era water spouts near the Narayan Temple, Prime Minister Bir Shumshane Rana, who had his daughter marry King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah, moved out of the palace when he was killed.

Narayanhiti Temple was the three-story castle named Shree Sadan for his family when he was Crown Prince. It now houses the palace park, and preserved the rooms exactly like it was 20 years ago – even Ninajun’s class schedule for Kathmandu Management College pinned to the wall and a weekly schedule printed in dot matrix: ‘Wake up at 6.30 and head to bed by 23.00.' Friday wake up at 10 am and FRIDAY NIGHT From 19.00 to 23.00.

The royal family in 1991 (above, right). All five were killed in the palace massacre of 2001.
The same Cabinet meeting on 1 October that decided to nominate Yubaraj Khatiwada as Nepal’s new ambassador to the United States also partially reversed a hefty tax increase on electric cars that he announced as finance minister in May.

But the tax reversal is not going to bring down the price of electric vehicles by much, and the higher capacity battery-powered cars would remain almost as expensive.

The prime minister’s office was under public opinion pressure ever since the budget announcement that raised the tax on electric vehicles, so they had to show that they were doing something.

In May, Khatiwada’s budget increased the price of small and mid-sized electric vehicles by 55-59%, but the revision brings the price down by only 17%.

In other words, the price of an electric vehicle like the Mahindra e20 that used to cost Rs2.6 million after taxes were slashed in 2016, went up to Rs3.6 million after the budget tax increase this year. With last week’s revision, the same model with the same options will now have a price tag of approximately Rs3 million.

Electric SUVs like the Hyundai Kona or the Kia Niro with higher kW that used to cost Rs6.6 million before the budget, shot up to Rs9.5 million, but may now fall to just Rs8.5 million depending on the mark-up. This could be about the same as the petrol or diesel versions of the same SUVs.

The rationale supporting a shift to electric cars is logical: 15% of Nepal’s total imports go to buy petroleum products from India totalling Rs215 billion annually. Even if this could be reduced by 10% it will mean considerable savings for the country. This in turn will lessen air pollution in urban centres, and with the Covid-19 scare, air quality could be a life-or-death issue.

After the budget announcement, there are 450 vehicles still stuck at customs and the International Container Port in Birganj. Importers had been waiting for a government decision to revise the tax, but now have no option but to clear the vehicles.

The extra cost will be passed down to customers who had booked the vehicles, and some of them will be paying up to 50% more than they would otherwise have. Some buyers have cancelled their orders.

Before the budget in May, electric cars only had to pay 10% excise and 13%VAT, minimal customs duty, and the Rs30,000 annual road tax was waived. This had led to a dramatic spurt in electric car sales in Nepal because they were more competitive than fossil-fuel cars which are taxed at 260%.

However, the budget in May raised the total tax for electric vehicles to between 120-140%, which priced battery cars higher than a petrol or diesel car of the same size. Electric vehicles of peak power 50-100kW had to pay 40% excise, 50% if it was 100-150kW. The excise went up to 60% for battery cars with peak power of 150-200kW.

But although last week’s Cabinet decision reduced the tax on smaller capacity e-vehicles by 80% of the increased amount, and by 75% for cars in the 40% excise bracket, there were only minimal reductions for cars with higher kW.

Says Cabinet Shrestha, whose Agni Group represents India’s Mahindra, makers of the e20: ‘Electric vehicle sales were picking up, we thought there was a bright future. But Nepal has gone back five years.’
The reconstructed royal pond is beginning to resemble what it must have looked like 350 years ago.

Suvendra Pradhan Tuladhar

Four years after the earthquake destroyed its central temple, the 350-year-old Rani Pokhari royal pond at the centre of Kathmandu is finally getting back its original look.

The temple had been rebuilt after previous earthquakes in the Moghul stucco-dome style, and was going to be converted into a concrete-lined structure. But today, the shrine, the causeway and pond perimeter gleam with mussel brick.

Rani Pokhari has gone through many avatars in the past centuries. The earliest, an engraving commemorating the visit to Kathmandu by Prince Waldemar of Prussia in 1845, shows the Baghpati Bhawan having a Shikara style spire. After it came down in an earthquake, Jang Bahadur Rana had it rebuilt with the Moghul dome architecture of north India that he admired so much.

This structure came down again in the 1934 mega-quake, and Sudhakar Sunsher Rana had it reconstructed and whitewashed, adding a metal dome around the pond. This structure, too, was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake, and Kathmandu Mayor Bidyut Sunar Shaka’s attempt to surround the pond with cades and ships was vehemently opposed by the local community.

Finally, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) is giving Rani Pokhari more or less its original look. After delays due to the lockdown, reconstruction is finally nearing completion.

The pond was built in 1671 by King Pratap Malla after his consort, Queen Anantapriya was devastated by the sudden death of her son, Prince Chakrawatendra Malla. The king could not bear to see his queen so distraught, so he built the pond to console her.

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Uma Bhujel in and out of prison

The war is long over, but this ex-guerrilla is still breaking out of jail

Tufan Neupane

Maoist guerrilla Uma Bhujel has spent her entire revolutionary life in and out of jail. During the war, she was captured, made a jail break, was recaptured, and escaped again. After the ceasefire in 2006, she was nominated to the Constituent Assembly and joined the YCL. But since then, as a semi-underground member of the Biplav faction of Maoists, she has again been in and out of jail 12 times in eight months, accused of being in possession of weapons. After being shunted around the country on court summons, she appealed to the Supreme Court which ordered her release on 30 August. But as soon as she was released from detention in Sunsari, she gave police the slip and has vanished again. All this would have been farcical enough. But what even more ironical is that she is being released by the judicial system of a state that she has taken up arms against, and is being detained by a police force under direct command of Ram Bahadur Thapa, her former Maoist comrade who is now Home Minister.

Since December, Uma Bhujel has been arrested, released, re-arrested, relocated and presented before multiple district courts. "After filing and losing all cases, the Nepal Police has no charges left against Uma Bhujel," says her lawyer Ekraj Bhandari, who is now Home Minister. In the middle of a pandemic.

One of the Supreme Court’s core values is to uphold the independence of Nepal’s judiciary so that it can perform its duties without political interference and preserve the principles of democracy, multi-party and an open society.

Initially, Bhujel was charged with organizing explosions, possession of arms and ammunition, crimes against the state, and high treason. The Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (as opposed to the ruling Nepal Communist Party which is an alliance of the former UML and the Maoist party) went underground after being banned.

After police arrested her in December last year in Sunsari, she was detained for 25 days. Tried in court on a weapons charge, she was ordered released on bail. But just as she paid her bail, police re-arrested her and handed her over to Bapa police.

She was detained in Bapa for 22 days, and on the 14 February she was released on bail for Rs50,000. Again, as her lawyer paid the bail she was taken in and driven to Dhamulia where the court ordered her released on a bail of Rs30,000; but she was re-arrested and taken this time all the way to Kathmandu in western Nepal on 31 May in the middle of a pandemic.

There, the court declared her innocent and ordered her release. Police then brought her to Gorkha where the district court again said on 2 June that she should be freed.

But police once more dragged her to the Lalitpur District Court, where she was again ordered to be released. In a pattern that had by then become familiar, she was interrogated and presented at the Kathmandu District Court which again released her without bail on 11 June. After that, police got her tried in courts in Bihagur, Sankhuwasabha, Dharan and Saptari until Uma’s niece Pratima Bhujel appealed directly to the Supreme Court.

At the Supreme Court, Bhujel made three requests: that she not be handed from one district to another, to be tried in front of the Supreme Court, and not to be ever arrested again without reason. On the 21 August, the Supreme Court issued Nepal Police 24 hours to show cause.

The bench of Justices Om Prakash Mishra and Bankumwar Shrestha said, “Personal freedom cannot be restricted except in accordance with the rule of law. The petitioner cannot be considered to be in judicial custody as there is no proper and sufficient basis and reason of keeping her in custody and conducting an investigation.”

On 30 August Uma Bhujel was finally ordered to be released from her jail cell in Sunsari. However, as she was being taken out she escaped, and has been underground since.

All this is nothing new for Uma Bhujel. During the war, she was captured in 1998 in Tandrang of Gorkha, and was in jail for one year where she was tortured. She made a jail break and was captured again. She has written about her dramatic jail break in the book ‘Historical Gorkha Jailbreak’. There have been documentaries and features films made about her life.

One of the Supreme Court’s

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Global NCAP features films made about her life.
Masks unmasked

To wear or not to wear masks has become an ideological issue in some countries, but here in Kathmandu wearing them is now the law as the number of Covid-19 cases shoots up in the capital.

There is a Rs100 fine on anyone caught in public without a mask. But Kathmandu residents did not need much persuasion — they were already in the habit of wearing masks outdoors because of the air pollution.

Nepal’s entrepreneurs and fashion companies are following the worldwide trend to turn masks into an essential item of clothing. The more creative ones are making designer masks for those who want to make a fashion statement while covering their faces.

Businesses in Kathmandu have repurposed their workflow to produce masks. Some companies making trekking gear have switched to personal protective equipment, garment manufacturers cannot produce cloth masks fast enough to meet demand, and fashion companies are producing more expensive designer masks.

Goldstar, Nepal’s fast-growing footwear manufacturer, released its latest face mask line called MeroMask. It has several models, with or without valves and different price ranges.

Kolpa Store has its own range of masks that are elegant and functional. The company has several models, with or without valves and different price ranges. The masks can be ordered online through daraz.com.

Similarly, Kokroma which makes baby clothing and accessories for export and the home market, is now also making cloth masks.

Another social entrepreneurship company, Sabah Nepal, which has a network of 3,000 home-based women members all over the country to develop craft and food-based products, has been contracted by UNDP Nepal to make 40,000 cloth masks. The arrangement provides income for the women as well as produce protective items in short supply. Meanwhile, Hemp Nepal, which produces fabric from the hemp plant to be turned into clothing items, cushion covers and even shoes, is also turning its attention to making masks. Hemp is said to be a breathable fabric with insulating and anti-bacterial properties.

One mask that stands out for its colourful range of designer masks is Groomin. With its motto ‘Style and safety,’ Groomin offers ladies’ face covers that are elegant while at the same time having three layers of filters with adjustable ear loops. A3-pack costs Rs1,000.

At Metro-Mask Tashi Gyazlen Sherpa seems to be preparing to meet this growth in demand for both simple as well as fancier masks. He says: “We are slowly going to transition into making cooler looking high-tech masks.”

Experts also say that surgical masks are better at protection from the virus than a cloth mask. So while fashionable masks are a quirky accessory, buyers may want to reconsider if the cloth mask is worth the cost, when a simple surgical mask would do a better job.

According to a study on the effectiveness of cloth masks versus medical masks, the infection rate was the highest in cloth masks compared to any other medical masks. If a cloth mask is being worn, it should be washed frequently to keep them clean.

Cotton Mill Nepal, which was producing high-end household linen items is offering a family pack of colourful face masks in three sizes for the whole family. The masks can be ordered online through daraz.com.

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Kathmandu homes and hotels turn into hospitals

Nepal’s capital has run out of affordable ICU care for its Covid-19 patients

Sonia Awale

A s government and private hospitals in Kathmandu fill up with Covid-19 patients, some of them are offering rented hotel rooms or home care to meet the surge of the seriously sick. Even then, these extensions of the hospitals can only cater to patients with milder symptoms, and there is no room in the ICUs if their condition gets worse.

The government has now officially allowed hospitals to start moving patients with mild symptoms to hotels in Kathmandu as long as they do not have non-coronavirus guests.

After it got filled up with SARS-CoV-2 patients, Star Hospital in Lalitpur came up with the ‘Housepital’ service under which it sends people with mild symptoms to self-isolate at home, provide regular tele-consultation, three times a day vital sign monitoring, blood tests and dietary and psychiatric consultations. The basic care package costs Rs12,500, while a more advanced treatment that includes essential medical kits and hands-on care is Rs30,000 for 14 days of isolation.

“There has been a steady increase in people coming for our Housepital service, we now get about three patients a day,” says Pratiksha Dhalak of Star Hospital, adding that in case of complications, individuals are admitted to the hospital if a bed is available.

Ideally, asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic people self-isolating at home should have a separate room and a bathroom. Patients should confine themselves in their room, wash their utensils, wear mask while going to the toilet and sanitise it after use and wipe door and other handles.

Individuals need to keep track of their temperature and symptoms, measure oxygen saturation level if possible, take paracetamol for body ache and fever and make sure to eat nutritious food. One must be aware of danger signs: oxygen level below 93, chest pain, difficulty in breathing and blue tint to lips and limbs.

“One of what is happening now is unexpected, and we did have quite a while to prepare but it was not well planned. Now it is extremely difficult for all of us,” says pulmonary specialist Rakeshya Pandey of HAMS hospital. “None-the-less, if asymptomatic and mild symptomatic people follow safe home isolation, it will help break the chain of transmission.”

Some asymptomatic people who have tested positive but live in crowded joint family homes have now started moving to hotels for self-isolation. The Hotel Association of Nepal has designated 80 of its properties in Kathmandu as quarantine hotels at Rs5,000 per night, and at Rs7,000 if two people share a room with four meals a day.

“For all intents and purposes, Kathmandu has now reached a saturation point for Covid-19 patients, and with Dasain and winter approaching, the dangers will multiply. Even the government seems to now have thrown up its hands, and left it up to citizens to take care of themselves.”

“We are now in a situation where asymptomatic patients are being sent home, and rationing hospital beds, oxygen and ventilators, that is like being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea,” says Buddha Basnyat, a physician at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences.

The winter flu season and increased pollution will add to the respiratory complications due to Covid-19 and there might be another explosive surge, warns Basnyat. “For now, because therapies and vaccines are not yet available, prevention is the best medicine.”

Some of this shortage could be artificial. Kathmandu Valley’s government and private hospitals have 195 ICU beds and 88 ventilators, of which 154 are presently occupied and 50 ventilators are being used by patients with Covid-19 or other chronic ailments.

There are an estimated 2,600 ICU beds in private and government hospitals nationwide, and only 498 ventilators of the 900 are in working order. As of Thursday, there were 314 patients being treated in ICUs and 68 of them were on ventilator support. Bagmati province alone had 175 patients in ICU and 56 on ventilators.

“For some doctors, the problem is not so much a shortage of ICU beds and ventilators, but the fact that they are either too expensive for most patients, or they are not where they are needed the most. They say ventilators are important, but less than 3% of seriously ill Covid-19 patients in Nepal who need ventilator support make it.”

Says Buddha Basnyat: “Our focus should now be on strengthening nursing care and supplying adequate oxygen, which are more important than ventilators, and for patients that need oxygen to be administered the cheap but effective drug dexamethasone.”

DHANA DHATTORI
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It is hereby notified to all concerned that this year’s Dasain Festival has been postponed. The festival was originally supposed to be held in five phases starting 17 October, but has been put off because everyone has been locked up. All concerned should watch this space for new dates, but expect it to be held in April 2022, or thereabouts when it will be celebrated in conjunction with the end of the world as we know it. Goats and buffalos earmarked for martyrdom will now be allowed to carry on with their daily lives until such time as they may again be required to be decapitated in the epic struggle of good against evil. For further information, contact the Department of Human Sacrifices.

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