



Nepal Army special funeral team brings home the first fatality from Covid-19 in Bhojpur District. She was a 24-year-old woman. The government's challenge is to bring the Covid-19 vaccine to remote parts of Nepal like these.

RSS

Vax Populi

Nepal's surge of Covid-19 continues unabated with new hotspots, and because of inadequate testing, no one really knows how much and how fast the pandemic has spread.

The government has left Nepalis to their own devices, only issuing guidelines on precautions, but stopping free testing and treatment. Meanwhile the daily positivity rate and fatalities have not come down. As of Thursday, out of the 9,805 people tested nationwide 2,103 were positive, which gives a very high positivity rate of 21.4%.

Nepal's death rate from the coronavirus of 43 per million is much lower than India (93), but much higher than China and Sri Lanka (3). This points to poor prevention measures as well as inadequate or unaffordable hospital treatment.

The only option for Nepal is to wait for vaccines to be available,

but even on this it has moved too late. Many governments around the world have pre-booked vaccines from pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer and Moderna, and most countries will first prioritise their own citizens.

Last week, the Nepal government finally set up a committee of secretaries of the Finance, Home, Health and Foreign Affairs ministries to study vaccines under development as well as procedures to procure them.

On Wednesday President Bidya Devi Bhandari signed an ordinance empowering the government to import Covid-19 vaccines from international pharmaceutical companies, and to use them even if they are authorised only for emergency use.

Despite this, Nepal will possibly be one of the last countries in the world to get a

vaccine, and even when the first vials arrive perhaps by the middle of 2021, the poorest Nepalis living in the remotest areas will be the last in line to get them.

The government, which has failed all these years to make free health care accessible to all, will have to prove that its vaccine distribution is fair, and the poor in remote areas of the country are not left out.

Says Bikash Gauchan, a physician stationed in remote Achham district: "We need to immediately start identifying vulnerable groups like frontline health workers, the elderly or those with co-morbidities to prioritise for immunisation, and have an effective distribution plan for remote areas."

Nepal is internationally recognised as a model low-income country with an effective vaccination programs against measles, polio and other

childhood killer diseases. It has valuable experience in deploying a nationwide network of Female Community Health Volunteers, and Nepal's Covid-19 vaccine delivery will have to re-learn from its own best practices.

Monitoring the follow-up vaccine dose can gain from Nepal's acclaimed DOTS program to deliver anti-tuberculosis therapies, and Nepal's rural health care workers have experience in maintaining the cold chain from previous vaccination programs.

Despite recent breakthroughs in trials (see page 12), public health experts say Nepal should be looking at neighbouring China and India and belatedly begin 'vaccine diplomacy' to secure its supply.

Nepal Health Research Council is once again considering

conducting Phase III clinical trial of Coronavac by China's Sinovac Biotech after an initial divided opinion over its safety. The vaccine has shown quick immune response in mid-stage trials in South America and parts of Asia.

In India, the Serum Institute has anticipated demand by already manufacturing 40 million doses of AstraZeneca's potential Covid-19 vaccine. It will also soon

manufacture Novavax. "There is bound to be vaccine politics and it will mostly likely be ugly," predicts Sher Bahadur Pun of the Health Ministry. "But we should not lose track of two things: efficacy of the vaccine against our population and its economic viability. If we do that we should be on the right path, more or less."

Sonia Awale

**Season 4
Episode 1**
EDITORIAL
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Season 4 Episode 1



PHOTOSHOPPED FROM PMO IMAGE

For a government with a hefty majority that loftily promised voters prosperity and stability, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) has been able to ensure neither. There had been no signs of improvement in the economy even before the Covid-19 crisis hit this year. Ambitious economic growth forecasts had to be scaled back because of policy uncertainty and underperformance. Foreign and Nepali investors were spooked by high risk, and endemic corruption. Then the pandemic killed any hope that was left. The prospect for prosperity in the run-up to the next election in 2022 looks dim.

The NCP can try to use the coronavirus as an excuse for the economic breakdown, but there is no justification for this chronic instability. The country has been made to suffer because the two most powerful people in the party want more power.

This never-ending battle for supremacy within the NCP has affected the management of state affairs, sidetracked its executive, legislative and even judicial functions, and stymied the government's ability to respond to the health and economic challenges of the pandemic.

Going by the reaction of Nepalis on the internet, the public's response has been to let off a big yawn. Most have tuned off, or post scathing ridicules of politicians.

In Season 4 Episode 1 of this epic teleserial, relations between Prime Minister K P Oli and NCP co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal deteriorated further during the Dasain break. Oli shuffled some Cabinet portfolios and appointed new ambassadors. The Dahal faction accused Oli of making moves without consulting the party.

The duel of the supremos then turned into an artillery barrage of written statements. Dahal fired off a 12-page salvo against Oli's various transgressions, and the prime minister retaliated with his own list of the co-chair's misdemeanours. All the while, Oli tried to tarry Dahal's insistence on calling a NCP Secretariat meeting to sort things out, and threatened once more to split the party.

There is a philosophical disagreement about whether the government or the party should call the shots. But there is also the tussle between former UML and ex-Maoist rank and file. It has by now also become

The epic teleserial within the NCP coincides with greater regional involvement in our politics.

a clash of personality cults between Dahal and Oli.

If the interest of the country was the main concern, these differences should be quite easy to resolve. But the level of mutual mistrust is now so high, so many promises have been made and broken so often, that neither faction will take any new agreement at face value.

It is into this scenario that we now have the larger geopolitical rivalry involving Nepal's northern and southern neighbours. India and China had stored trans-Himalayan border disputes in deep freeze as they had their hands full ensuring domestic growth.

But China is now emerging as a global economic and technological power, challenging American supremacy, especially in the Asia-Pacific. After signing the BECA pact with the US and taking part in the Quad naval exercises in the Indian Ocean earlier this month, New Delhi is now firmly in the 'Indo' part of America's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Looking at all this from Beijing, Chinese military leaders feel encircled. Which is why the Himalaya that once formed a natural border wall between empires for centuries is

now the frontline. Greater connectivity and infrastructure means the mountains are no more a barrier.

Formed by the geo-tectonic clash of continents, the Himalaya is now a stage for geo-strategic confrontation, and Nepal is smack in the middle of it all.

Whether the infighting within the NCP is a proxy war between regional powers, or whether Nepal's inability to put its own house in order has prompted India and China to extend their influence, is a chicken-or-egg question. The reality is that when a house catches fire, neighbours will not just stand around and watch.

The NCP leadership crisis coincides with greater regional involvement in our politics. India has sent its spy and army chiefs to Kathmandu, and its foreign secretary is visiting next week. The Chinese Ambassador in Kathmandu has once more had to step in to prevent the NCP from splitting.

As Nepalis, this self-destructive power struggle is difficult to watch. The ruling party must reassure the people that even if it cannot deliver prosperity, it should not hold the country hostage because its two leaders cannot get along.

NEPAL-INDIA RELATIONS

Reads long like a PhD thesis but I found this worth the time ('New Delhi's new dealings in Nepal', Kanak Mani Dixit, #1035). Incisive, comprehensive take on the ups and downs of Nepal India relationship from Brian Hodgson to the present.

Manohar Budathoki

• Best in-depth article/analysis I have ever read on Nepal-Indo relationship. Wish some of our Indian national newspaper would publish such an article from neighbouring countries for appreciation by us common Indians.

Richa Agarwal

• If Nepal had competent and honest leaders, it would be soaring high up in the sky with cooperation from both India and China. Only a new generation of leaders can accomplish that. Thank you for writing this complete history of Nepal - India

relations. I hope it will open eyes in both Indian and Nepali leadership.

Shiva Nepali

• Interesting but you missed mentioning that King Birendra opted to give in to his people rather than surrender to India in 1990. Whatever the monarchy's weaknesses, it asserted Nepal's sovereignty in the face of Indian hegemony in the region, unlike our political parties.

Shyam Lal Shrestha

• My takeaways: India has imperialistic designs on Nepal, Indian Establishment has outsourced its Nepal policy to incompetent spies who have ended up hurting the interest of both countries, Nepali politicians lack spine and Maoists were Indian instruments.

Surja Karki

SNOWLESS SAIPAL
The Himalayan glacial melt crisis can

be mitigated by reducing black carbon (soot) from coal in India, and by rapidly increasing renewable energy and electrification in South Asia ('In just 2 years, a Nepal peak becomes snowless', Basant Pratap Singh, #1035). No time to lose.

Tim Gocher

• This is a striking example of the growing climate crisis in the Himalaya. Dual threats of glacial lake outburst flood together with depletion of river flow to the livelihoods and economies! #ClimateEmergency

Namindra Dhakal

• The people from Bajhang have a negligible contribution, but they are facing consequences from global warming.

Hemant Raj Joshi

• There is overwhelming evidence

of climate change, but photographs like these are often misleading.

Rahul Sigdel

It's very easy to generalise things, what about possible microclimatic variation? The snow content would vary at what time the photograph is taken. More rigorous study is needed.

Vijay Bhatt

LAIN SINGH BANGDEL
Wonderful piece ('Lain Singh Bangdel's legacy lives on', Alisha Sijapati, #1035). I especially liked BP Koirala's letter. Very touching.

Himali Upadhyaya

• Lain Singh Bangel was a precious gem of Nepali art and literature scene. He was a world class talent. My sincere tribute to the great artist and many thanks to King Mahendra who invited Bangdel back to Nepal.

Shreeram Singh Basnet

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

As the countdown begins for the first census under a federal system, we look back at our report from 20 years ago this week in *Nepali Times* issue #18 (24-30 November 2000) when we looked ahead to the upcoming 2001 survey. In the story by Hemlata Rai, we explored data collection challenges, the population boom, and the changes in demography of the time.

Since the first census in 1911, each has seen a significant rise in the population. The 2001 survey put the population at 22 million, which increased to 26.6 million in 2011, the 2021 count is expected to cross 30 million.

The 2001 census, for the first time provided answers, through gender-segregated data, on the status of women and their welfare. The 2021 survey will try to find out how many of the estimated 7 million households in the country today have family members working abroad, gauge their living standard, and probe local conditions. It will also be one of the first in the world to access availability of government services, disaster preparedness and access to natural resources.

Excerpt of the story:

On 22 June 2001, tens of thousands of specially trained enumerators will fan out across the country for what is officially called the Nepal Census on Population and Housing 2001. But this is not just a count: enumerators



will also collect data on age, sex, occupation, ethnic group, housing, schooling, migration and women's property rights. And for the first time, the census will provide answers, through gender-segregated data, on the status of women and their welfare. In themselves, the roles of men and women have a crucial bearing on family size, and the data will be invaluable in planning future strategies for Nepal's population management programme.

A consortium of donors, including various United Nations agencies, have already begun revising manuals, curricula and questionnaires, adding the gender perspective for the census takers. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is supporting the recruitment of nearly 4,500 specialised women enumerators who will be trained to accurately fill in the census questionnaire. A pilot census was conducted earlier this year to pre-test questionnaires and the results have already been used to fine-tune data tabulation.

The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in Kathmandu claims that the 2001 count will be the most scientific of all censuses since 1911 (when Nepal's population was a mere five million), and a virtual treasure house of valuable data compared with the last one in 1991.

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

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Imperious ambassadors, eager princelings and invasive spy-masters -- #Kathmandu has seen, and survived, them all. @KanakManiDixit on #NewDelhi's new dealings in #Nepal on this Saturday's longread.



Kosh R Koirala @KoshRKoirala
In this must-read peace @KanakManiDixit traces how Nepali rulers historically enjoyed dominance in their dealings with New Delhi & saw this downgraded at the level of junior bureaucrats post 1990. Blame yourself if you fail to learn from your own history.



Sushma Joshi @joshi_sushma
Took me a while to go through this: very comprehensive and illuminating. Thank you for taking the time to bring it all together. I look forward to the India-Nepal relations book! (Seems you've already written two chapters, inc. the flood mafia one.)



Souvidhya @souvidhya
Good read. Connects diverse dots well and offers many instances reflecting the evolution of Nepali politics.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
In just 2 years, a #Nepal peak becomes snowless The bare rock face of once-icy Mt Saipal has flabbergasted scientists and locals. Basanta Pratap Singh reports from #Bajhang #climatechange #mountains



Sujit Adhikari @wentshort
Like @LeoDiCaprio said "Let's not take this planet for granted." #climatechangeisreal



Shashi Sharma @LankaSharma
Just comparing 2 years' worth of data is fraught with problems. Some years you have more snow, some you don't. If the peak remains snowless in the next 10-20 years, maybe. This conclusion doesn't seem thorough. My humble opinion - happy to be corrected.

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



In just 2 years, a Nepal peak becomes snowless

by Basant Pratap Singh
Mountaineers, scientists, climate researchers, and local shepherds are all puzzled by a 7,000m high mountain in remote far western Nepal which seems to have most of its snow in the past two years. Find out why in this report at nepalitimes.com

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Impact of Bihar polls on Nepal

Editorial
When Kathmandu was fixated on the US elections, a neighbouring Indian state was holding its own, which went largely ignored. Now Nitish Kumar is set to return as the chief minister of Bihar and his win has important implications for Nepal. Go online to read the Editorial.

Most popular on Twitter



New Delhi's new dealings

by Kanak Mani Dixit
Imperious ambassadors, eager princelings and invasive spy masters, Kathmandu has seen, and survived, them all. This 7,000+ words longread explores how the Indian intelligence has historically operated in Nepal. Join in the heated online discussion.

Most commented



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Delhi-Kathmandu-Patna triangle

In his next, and last, tenure as Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar can deepen cooperation with Nepal

Nitish Kumar is set to return as the chief minister of Bihar state for yet another term in a tightly fought contest in which he leveraged Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity and the NDA (National Democratic Alliance). His win has important implications for bordering Nepal.



DEL-KTM

Akanshya Shah

The Nitish-led NDA managed to secure an absolute majority of 125, three more than the half-way mark needed in the 243-member Bihar state assembly. However, it is the BJP that has emerged as the senior partner in Bihar for the first time with 73 seats.

Modi, whose campaigning in Bihar paved the way for the NDA win, called it a mandate for "a self-reliant Bihar". BJP stalwarts in New Delhi have also called the victory people's desire for good governance and development revolving around Modi's call of "Sabh ka Saath, sab ka vikas, sab ka biswas." (Everyone's Trust, Everyone's Development with Everyone)

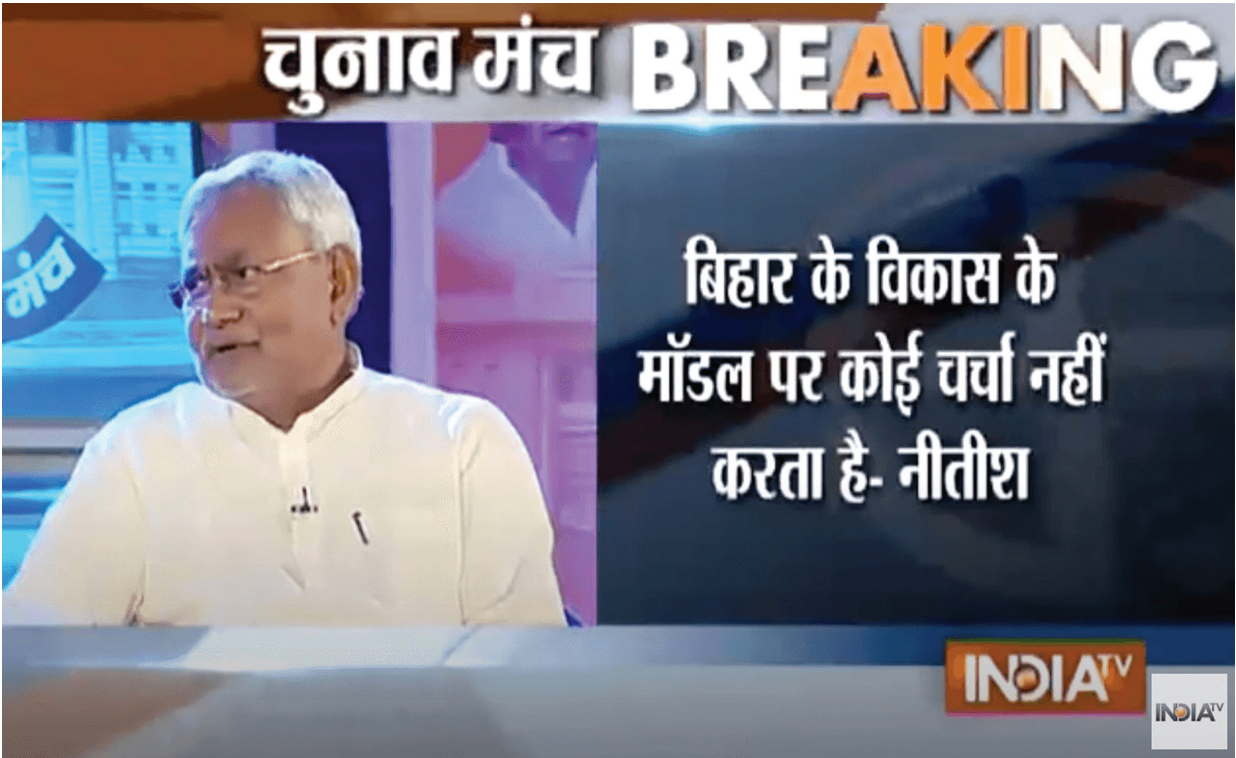
Although Modi has given Bihar to Nitish Kumar as he has been a valuable ally for the BJP, the Chief Minister can now only play second fiddle in policy making, with BJP maintaining stronghold in the state. So far Nitish-BJP dynamics was of equal partnership, but the new mandate will diminish Kumar's stature and credibility.

Bihar has a 726km long border with Nepal, the longest among five states. Most of Nepal's trade with the outside world passes through two checkpoints on this border, which were blockaded for five months in 2015 during the Madhesh Movement causing a humanitarian crisis in Nepal.

The people on both sides of the border share similar languages, culture and history, and also similar problems of development and caste divisions. The open border has also facilitated a fake currency racket, contraband of all sorts, human trafficking, and after Nitish Kumar declared Bihar dry, thriving cross-border alcohol smuggling.

A serious issue has been that of annual flooding and inundation. Nitish Kumar has been vocal on this matter mainly since 2008 when Bihar was badly affected due to a breach in an Indian-built embankment of Kosi river in Nepal.

However, no progress has been made in the management of crossborder rivers like the Kosi. In August, Nitish Kumar unnecessarily criticised Nepal over "non-cooperation" in Bihar's flood management efforts. He requested



Modi to intervene in order to resolve this "serious" matter.

As per the Indo-Nepal Treaty, Bihar government's water resources department executes the flood management work along the border. But it is futile to blame Nepal wholly when other cooperative frameworks have not been fully functional between the two countries.

Cooperation is subject to dialogue between the two central governments, and state governments have very little influence over foreign policy matters in India. In his new term Chief Minister Nitish

Kumar is in a good position to seek timely embankment works and encourage state and central government bureaucrats to speed up the long-standing water management issues between the two countries.

Nitish Kumar has been Chief Minister for 15 years, and his performance in delivering infrastructure and social development has waned. His alliance partnerships in the past have dented the Nitish brand.

In 2013 when Modi and the BJP's L K Advani factions faced a tussle for declaring a

prime ministerial face, Nitish sided openly with Advani even stretching so far as to say Modi would not be allowed in Bihar.

But soon after the 2014 BJP victory in national elections, he immediately went soft on Modi. In the 2015 Bihar state elections, Nitish Kumar sided with Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD and Congress to return to power. But with Lalu's jail sentence over the fodder scam case in 2018, he cosied up to the BJP leadership, which in return acknowledged his vital support for the party to make inroads into the State.

Two factors were mainly responsible for the BJP-Nitish alliance in 2020. First, the BJP brought into the political scene the young Chirag Paswan, president of Lok Janshakti Party and son of late union minister Ram Vilas Paswan, who could be used to cut Nitish to size and damage his image.

Second, another firebrand youth leader Tejashwi Yadav, Lalu's son, was beginning to pose a threat to Nitish, whose actual poll-alliance options were shrinking rapidly. However, by joining hands with the BJP, Nitish has lost his earlier credibility as the leader capable of bringing widespread changes and ushering Bihar into a new phase of development.

The real hero of the 2020 Bihar elections, as rightly pointed by experts and hailed by media in India, is Tejashwi Yadav. By breaking his party's traditional reliance over caste politics and Muslim-Yadav focus, and by emphasising 'economic justice' through job creation, Yadav led an energetic campaign and the RJD emerged as the single largest party with 76 seats.

But his larger grand alliance, the Mahagatbandhan, could not muster the required numbers with Congress winning only 19 of the 70 seats although the left parties put up a good show and increased their seats. This defeat signals that caste and religion still matters in Bihar politics and that people opted for status quo even when Tejashwi represented change.

But he will remain a strong opposition and the show will be BJP versus Tejashwi for now in Bihar. The All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) led by Asaduddin Owaisi has made a mark in Bihar with five seats this time. It contested only in 24 seats and in 2015 had not won even in a single constituency.

With the Bihar poll results, the BJP is set to maintain its dominance over Indian politics, thereby setting the stage solely for itself for 2025 in Bihar. Despite the Covid-19 related problems, crisis faced by the Bihari migrant workers in the aftermath of the lockdown, border dispute with China, and economic sluggishness, people have reinforced their faith in Modi.

Nitish Kumar, 67, is thus set to play a subdued role this time, and has declared that this will be his last election. Given his weakened position, the central BJP government would extend a helping hand to the state, but also maintain complete dominance.

Akanshya Shah is a Nepali journalist and researcher in New Delhi and contributes this column, DEL-KTM in Nepali Times.

NEPAL
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Times



Nepali diaspora hit by Covid surge

The second wave in Europe and the US has affected Nepalis living and working abroad

A second wave of Covid-19 cases in Europe and the United States has raised the number of deaths from the pandemic in the Nepali diaspora, but experts say the toll may be higher than officially reported.

The Non-Resident Nepalese Association (NRNA) which keeps track of the impact of the pandemic among Nepalis living outside the country says new cases and fatalities have been reported in the past two weeks from United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Germany, India, UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The estimated total number of Nepalis abroad who tested positive for the virus crossed 46,000 on 14 November, with 293 deaths in countries from where figures were available, NRNA said. Nepalis have tested positive in 44 countries around the world, and fatalities have been reported from 18 of them.

More than 1,000 new cases were confirmed in the past two weeks, and eight more deaths of Nepalis were reported from India alone in the past

week in Chennai and Maharastra states. The largest number of new cases has been reported from Romania, where 550 have tested positive in the past two weeks taking the total infected Nepalis there to 9,714. Two of them are said to be in a critical state in hospital.

There are no exact figures for the numbers of Nepali migrant workers in Romania, but 4,325 arrived in 2019 alone, and reports say Nepalis form the largest number of people applying for work permits in 2020. Most had jobs in the hotel and restaurant business which have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis. One report said all 22 Nepalis working in an auto company in Bucharest had tested positive.

Of the Nepalis abroad who were infected, the Association said more than 41,000 had recovered — possibly indicating that most of them were younger Nepali immigrants in Europe and the Gulf region. However, the death rate is higher in the UK, where there is a large population of elderly Nepali Gurkha pensioners and their families, as well as the United States.

Many Nepalis in countries like the UK, US and Israel are also at the frontlines as caregivers or medical personnel, or work in jobs which require public interaction, and where they are at high risk.

“Nepalis abroad should take care during family gatherings, they should keep a distance and wear masks at all times,” says NRNA’s

Health Committee coordinator, SanjeebSapkota.

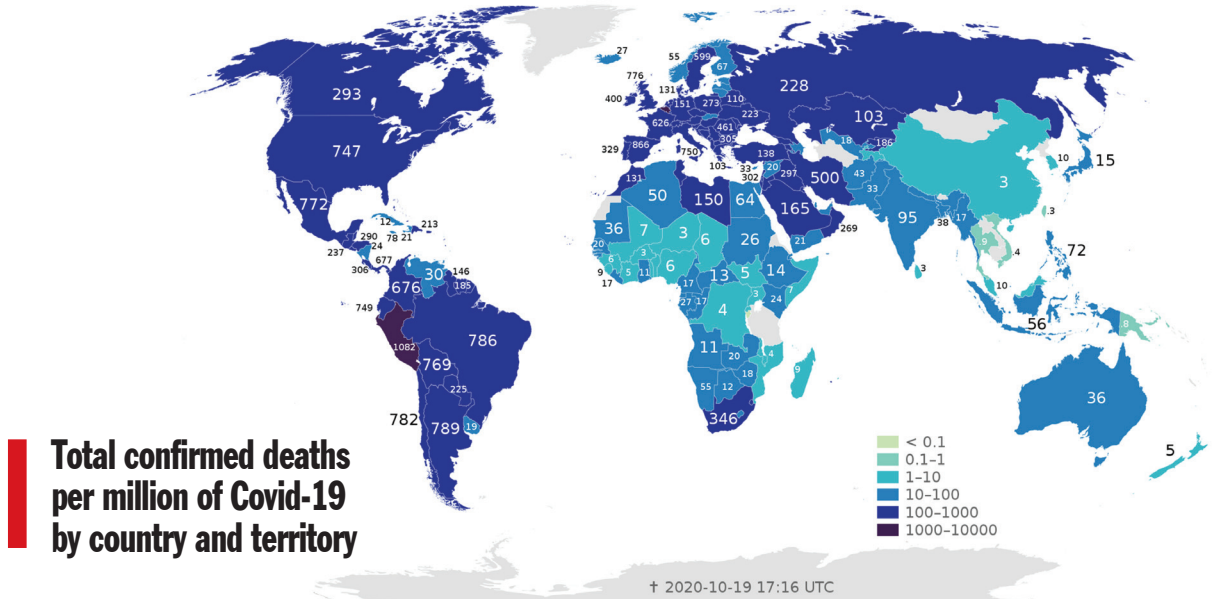
Meanwhile in Nepal, the number of infected crossed 200,000 last week, even though the recovery rate is at 82% and 182,780 people are not infected any more. The total fatalities in Nepal increased by 12 on Wednesday to reach 1,259.

Of the new infections, 1,038 were in Kathmandu Valley, and Wednesday saw 1,442 testing positive. The numbers are slightly slower than the daily average for the past two weeks because testing clinics were closed for the Tihar holidays.

Among those hospitalised with Covid-19 is Govinda KC, the activist surgeon who has for the past four years staged 19 hunger strikes demanding that the government reform medical education and make health care more accessible and affordable. Ironically, KC has been admitted to Teaching Hospital, where he has been treated in ICU in a critical state during his fasts.

The total number of active cases in Kathmandu is now 12,572, Bhaktapur has 1,062 and Lalitpur 2,056. Most are in home isolation, either because they have mild symptoms, because there are not enough beds in hospitals in the Valley, or because they cannot afford being admitted.

On Wednesday, 6,731 PCR tests were carried out, while 3,538 have made recoveries. 🇳🇵



Total confirmed deaths per million of Covid-19 by country and territory

1000+ deaths per million inhabitants | 100–1000 deaths per million inhabitants | 10–100 deaths per million inhabitants | 1–10 deaths per million inhabitants | 0.1–1 deaths per million inhabitants | 0.01–0.1 deaths per million inhabitants | No deaths or no data

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Nepal in Prosperity Index

After a decade of improvement, Nepal has regressed on the economy, freedom and environment, according to the annual Prosperity Index released by the London-based Legatum Institute.

With an overall ranking of 114, Nepal is still 22nd poorest out of the 29 countries in the Asia-Pacific. It has made the most dramatic progress over the last decade in safety and security (scoring from 47.2 to 68.5, a jump of 66 points in the global ranking) and social capital (37.5 to 50.5, up 59).

But there was little to no improvement in the country's investment environment and enterprise condition, which fell by 22 points in the global ranking. There were minimal gains in economic quality and governance, largely owing to the 2017 local elections that led to some grassroots development and accountability.

There was some progress in market access and infrastructure, health, education and living condition of Nepalis. But Nepal dropped in personal freedom and natural environment. Globally, 147 out of 167 countries saw prosperity rise over the last decade, but weaker personal freedom and poor governance held back improvement.

Amnesty for Nepalis in Malaysia

Undocumented Nepalis in Malaysia is set to benefit from a new 'Illegal Immigrant Recalibration Plan' to regularise



undocumented worked. It will allow them to return to their home countries, or be employed in four sectors facing labour shortages: construction, manufacturing, plantation and agriculture.

The plan will go into effect from mid-November till 30 June 2021. The Malaysian government has often flipfopped on how to manage undocumented workers, mainly from Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Nepal, because of its inability to reconcile the need to reduce its overdependence on foreign workers with its labour shortage.

Malaysia is not allowing recruitment of new workers till the end of year, and re-recruitment of undocumented workers could

address the severe shortage of labourers due to the Covid-19 crisis. Last December, 187,000 foreign nationals including 5,900 Nepalis in Malaysia took advantage of the government's 'Back for Good' amnesty drive.

11.11 sales

Daraz has broken all previous 11.11 records despite Covid-19 with sales worth Rs20.52



million within the first hour, a 60% increase from last year. There were 520,000 users on the 24-hour shopping event that also saw significantly higher numbers in online pre-payment via wallet and bank card taking up 45% of the total sales. Of the total orders nearly a quarter were from SMEs who went online during the pandemic.

Etihad to Tel Aviv

Etihad Airways, the flag carrier of the UAE will have scheduled daily flights to



Tel Aviv effective 28 March following the normalisation of diplomatic ties between the two nations in September. Departures will be conveniently timed to connect via Abu Dhabi to key gateways across the Etihad network including China, India, Thailand and Australia.

Sanima Bank

Sanima Bank Limited has held its 16th annual general meeting where it approved 10% bonus shares and 3.60% cash



dividend. The bank earned a net profit of Rs1.78 billion last fiscal year with total assets size of Rs126.31 billion. Compared to the previous fiscal year it is an increase of 15.81%.

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EVENTS

Photo Kathmandu
Photo Kathmandu, a bi-annual festival is a part of a larger continuum of image-making, research and civic engagements at photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library. The festival will go on until the end of 2021 and the events will be mostly virtual due to the pandemic.
3 December to 2 December 2021

Taking photo from the heart
Hosted by GrowInnova, this is a short course designed for photo enthusiasts as well as the researcher, communication professional and others. This two-hour session every Saturday with documentary photographer Nabin Baral focuses on the importance of images to convey messages.
Application deadline: Rolling basis



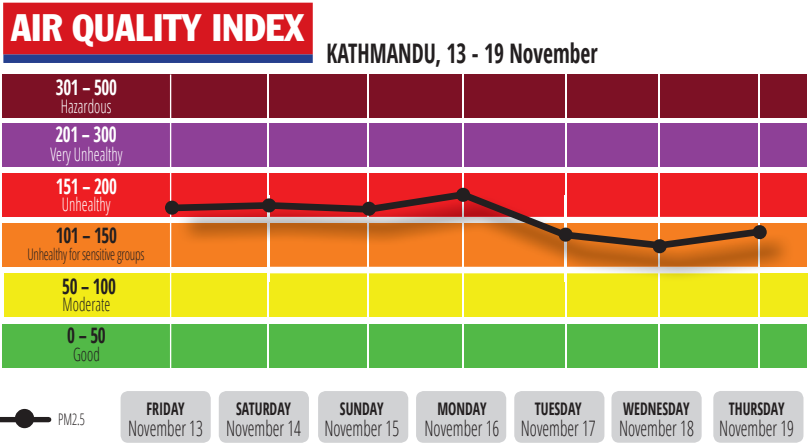
Otaku Next virtual showcase
For the first time since its launch in 2014, Otaku Next, the popular cosplay event in Nepal, is going online. It will be divided into eight segments: Cosplay showcase, chronicles, Q&A. To participate in visit its social media channels.
27 November

Mt Everest Diaries
In 2008, Shailee Basnet climbed Mt Everest and then led the Seven Summits Women Team which became the world's first female group to scale the highest peak in each continent. Basnet who is also a comedian is set to bring many funny aspects of this lifetime adventure on stage through 'Mt Everest Diaries'.
28 November, 5:45 am NST
Tickets available at: shaileebasnet.com

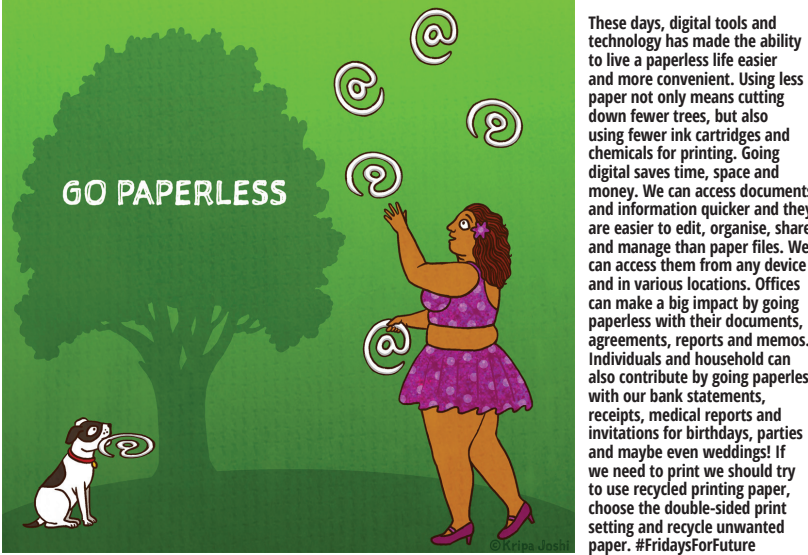


The glorious sunshine with ink blue skies will continue because, as we can see from this satellite image taken on Thursday at noon, the North Indian smoke haze has diminished and is being pushed away. Fingers crossed. But this also means the north-westerly wind is pushing dry and cold air into Nepal. The weekend will have a wintry feel with a maximum of only 22C and minimum that will drop to 5C in Kathmandu.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
21° 6°	20° 5°	19° 6°



We kicked off the week with considerably higher concentration of pollutants in Kathmandu's city centre. But starting Tuesday, the daily average Air Quality index came down to the orange 'Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups' level, mostly because smoke haze due to crop residue burning in North India has diminished, for now. And also Nepal's did not burn so many firecrackers during Tihar. But it doesn't cost anything to be safe: mask up when you go outdoors, which is also the best vaccine against Covid-19 presently.
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>



These days, digital tools and technology has made the ability to live a paperless life easier and more convenient. Using less paper not only means cutting down fewer trees, but also using fewer ink cartridges and chemicals for printing. Going digital saves time, space and money. We can access documents and information quicker and they are easier to edit, organise, share and manage than paper files. We can access them from any device and in various locations. Offices can make a big impact by going paperless with their documents, agreements, reports and memos. Individuals and household can also contribute by going paperless with our bank statements, receipts, medical reports and invitations for birthdays, parties and maybe even weddings! If we need to print we should try to use recycled printing paper, choose the double-sided print setting and recycle unwanted paper. #FridaysForFuture



OUR PICK

The fourth season of Netflix's much-loved historical *The Crown* is now streaming. The show based on the real lives of the British monarch revolving around Queen Elizabeth II and her family has garnered a plethora of awards and accolades since airing in 2016. *The Crown*, in its latest season focuses on Prince Charles and Diana's tumultuous marriage and the Queen's relationship with the prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Olivia Colman, Josh O' Connor and Emma Corrin star.



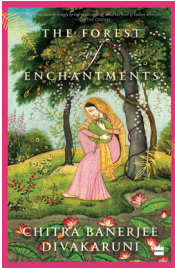
ISOLATION READINGS

Maharani, Chandra Prakash Baniya
Recently conferred with Madan Puraskar, Chandra Prakash Baniya's historical fiction *Maharani* is a good way to begin the weekend read. Baniya's fictional account is based on the political conflicts in the Baisya and Chaubise kingdoms before Prithvi Narayan Shah unified them into one Nepal.

Cabals and Cartels, Rajib Upadhy
A former broadcast journalist and ex-employee of the World Bank's Nepal office, Rajib Upadhy writes about Nepal's political economy since 1990 and during the author's tenure at the Bank between 1995-2018.

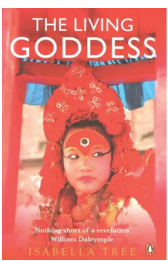
The Deoliwallahs, Joy Ma, Dilip D' Souza
Authored by Joy Ma and Dilip D' Souza, *The Deoliwallahs* is a true and untold story of the 3,000 Chinese-Indians

internment after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. The book narrates stories of tragedy, suppression and torture of the Chinese-Indians after the war, which makes for a moving and a compelling read.



The Forest of Enchantments, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
More than a decade after the release of her much famous highly fictionalised tale on Mahabharat's Draupadi's perspectives—*The Palace of Illusions*, author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has come out with a new feminist approach, as *The Forest of Enchantments* places Sita at the centre of the novel and narrates Ramayana in her perspectives.

The Living Goddess, Isabella Tree
The Living Goddess written by Isabella Tree is heavy on research and interviews as it delves into the cultural history of the tradition of the living goddess. The author goes back in time of the Malla and Shah dynasties, focusing on the emerging Kumari tradition in the Kathmandu Valley that is still practiced in Kathmandu Valley till today.



STAYCATIONS

Shangri-La Village Resort
Pristine nature, beautiful snowy mountains and a serene environment is something that Pokhara boasts of. Keeping in mind the Covid-19 stress, Pokhara's Shangri-La Village Resort has an exciting staycation offer that includes: breakfast, dinner along with a free yoga session at Rs 12,999 for a couple.
Reservations: 061-462222



Kasara Resort
In collaboration with Yeti Airlines, Kasara Resort brings a domestic tourism package of two nights and three days in Chitwan that includes jungle activities, canoe ride, nature walk and Tharu culture show all for Rs 16,999 for a couple and Rs 5,500 for singles.
Reservations: 01-4465888



ONLINE ARCHIVES

Global Nepali Museum
Global Nepali Museum is the first database of its kind in Nepal that features Nepali art and artefacts that are housed in museums around the world. Go to the museum website and learn about sculptures, paintings and other Nepali objects.

Poetry Foundation
Discover all things poetry. Browse through collections of classic and contemporary poems, readings, poetry news and the entire 100-year archive of Poetry Magazine.



Movie locations tour
Travel to landmarks in the Mediterranean where iconic movies were shot, from the InterContinental Carlton Cannes where Alfred Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* was filmed to the Villa Malaparte in Italy where Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* was filmed.

Virtual world tour
Travel may be limited these days, but discovering incredible experiences from across the globe doesn't have to be. Get your Guide's The world at home initiative brings some of their top tours, activities, and attractions to you online. Find everything on their YouTube channel.



DINING SEPARATELY

Achaar Ghar
Enjoy home-cooked meals along with various choices of pickles prepared using recipes passed down from generations. Try the lunch box or the khaja set. Go to Facebook for delivery options.
(01) 5541952

Little Tibet
Indulge in piping hot bowls of noodles, dapao and mouth-watering Tibetan, Bhutanese and Nepali food.

Get the Lowa Khatsa, Mustang Aloo, Sha Phale and more. Find the menu on Bhojdeals and Foodmandu.
(01) 4242656

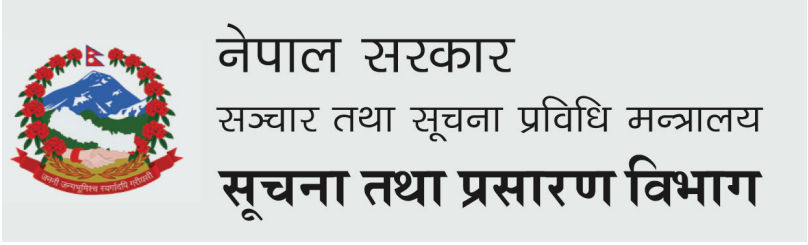
Flat Iron Grill
Although this eatery is known for sandwiches, the deserts deserve more recognition. From the cheesecakes to the eclairs, Flat Iron Grill offers the best of anything sweet. Go online, or call and get freshly baked goods, ham, sausages, and dairy products delivered.
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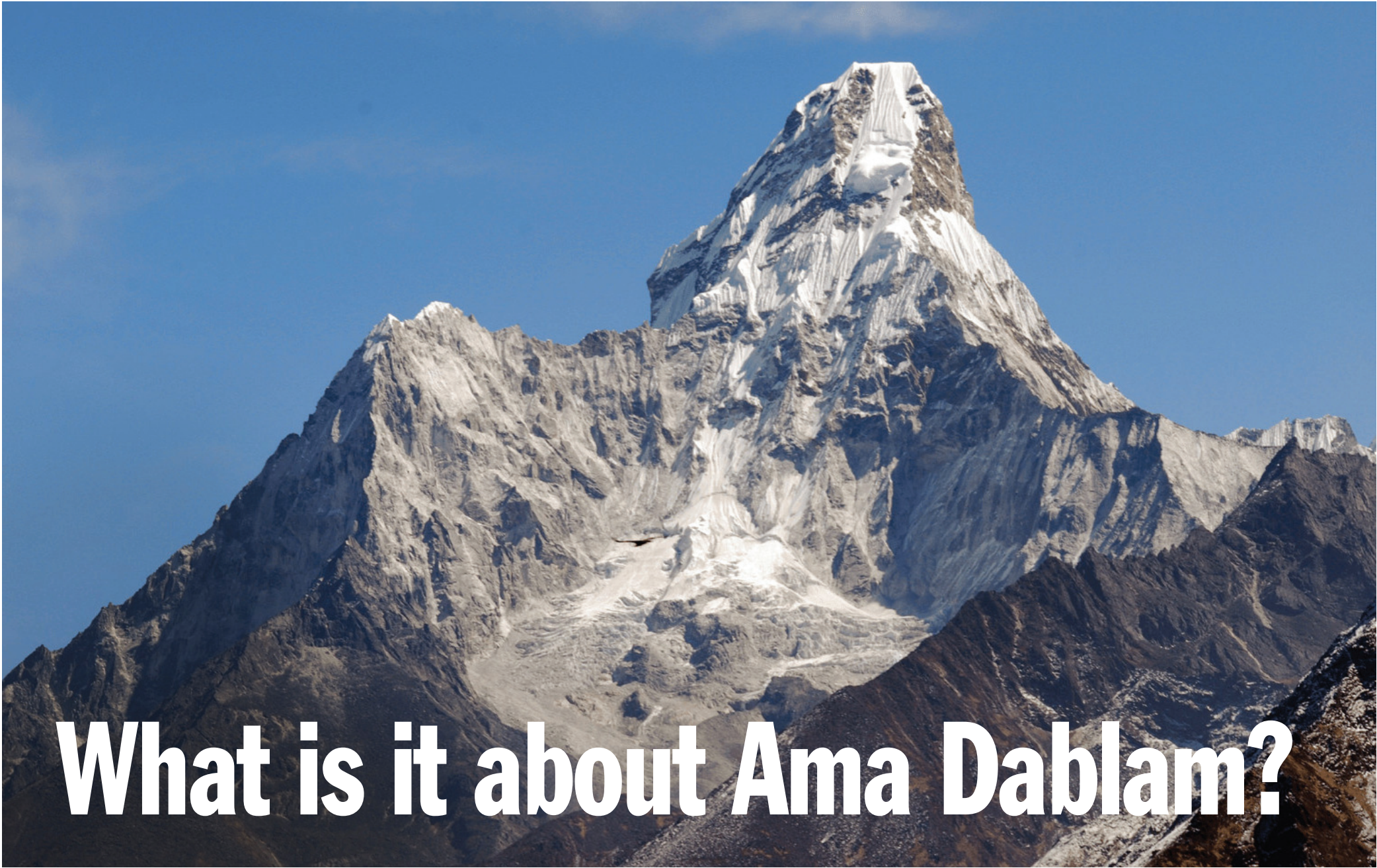


Taza Treats
Taza is a Syrian restaurant in Patan with a subsidiary Taza Treats that sells Mediterranean delights for the first time in Nepal. Try Taza's amazing Baklavas.
Instagram: Taza treats



Tasty Donuts Nepal
Recently opened online dessert store, Tasty Donuts offers a wide range of flavours for donuts previously unavailable in Kathmandu. Share these special treats with your family at home.
Instagram: tastydonuts.nepal





Despite the pandemic, mountaineers have flocked to Mt Ama Dablam, 6,812m in the Nepal Himalaya this autumn.

MAIK PSOTTA / WIKIMEDIA

Elegant but dangerous peak in Nepal draws mountaineers despite the pandemic

It has been described as the most beautiful mountain in the world, its silhouette is the logo of a global insurance company, and the 6,812m peak was once described by Edmund Hillary as being “unclimbable”.

Trekkers and mountaineers on their walk up to Mt Everest Base Camp have for decades marvelled at the chiselled sculpture that dominates the trail. Many have vowed to return to climb it one day.

One of them was Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulla Al Thani of the Qatar royal family who was among dozens who climbed the mountain last week during the peak of the pandemic in Nepal.

Sheikh ‘Moe’ Al Thani said in an interview that he had been obsessed with climbing Ama Dablam ever since he was trekking in the area ten years ago, and after climbing Mt Everest in 2013.

The very next day, on 12 November, not only did eight more climbers make it to the top, but four of them were Nepali siblings who run Seven Summit Treks that handled the expedition.

Mingma Sherpa, Dawa Sherpa, Tashi Lakpa Sherpa and Pasang Sherpa are experienced climbers, and Mingma and Chhang Dawa have climbed all 14 eight-thousand metre peaks in the world.

The Sheikh was part of a multinational team led by Madison Mountaineering that put all 13 climbing members on the summit including seven Nepali, four American, and a Canadian mountaineer.

Besides the sheer grandeur of the peak is its technical challenge with a knife-like ridge and a perpendicular face leading to the top. Added to that are the dangers of avalanches and rockfalls that have killed dozens of climbers.

Since climbing first began in the



Ang Phurba Sherpa on the spacious summit of Ama Dablam on 11 November, with Mt Everest in the background. Qatari Prince ‘Moe’ Al Thani on the summit of Ama Dablam on 11 November (right).

@AANG_PHURBA_MOUNTAINEER

region in the 1950s, 32 people have been killed on Ama Dablam, mostly in falls and avalanches, and one Russian died three years ago while jumping off from near the top in a wingsuit.

Lead guide of the Qatari Prince’s team, Garrett Madison, first tried to climb the mountain in 2003, but had to turn back due to technical difficulties on the southwest ridge, but returned to summit twice in 2012 and 2014.

Madison wrote in a blog post last week: “We had a beautiful clear, perfect day up on the summit ... it has been a wonderful, successful and safe expedition here in Nepal, we are very happy we got to come and experience the wonderful people with warm hearts.”

What is surprising this year is that these climbs of Ama Dablam have happened during the middle of a pandemic, and Nepal has been closed for trekking and mountaineering since March until foreign teams were finally allowed back in mid-September.

Even before that, a Bahraini military team got special permission to climb Mt Manaslu, and an all-Nepali expedition climbed Baruntse. And during the pandemic in spring, the Chinese climbed Mt Everest and Cho Oyu from the north. Besides the expeditions in Ama Dablam

this autumn, the only others were a Nepali team on Gyalzen Peak and two trekking teams on Himlung.

“Ama Dablam is a very attractive and challenging mountain, everyone who has been on the Everest trail dreams one day of climbing it,” says the president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association Ang Tshering Sherpa, adding that while most expeditions go for Nepal’s 8,000m peaks in spring, they prefer to climb Ama Dablam in the autumn.

In fact, last November a Kuwaiti expedition got into trouble with the authorities for unfurling a giant flag of the country from the summit and draping over the west face of the mountain. It was visible to the naked eye from Khumjung, which is 3,000m below and 12km away. The Kuwaitis said they were just trying to break a record, and did not know a permission was required.

Alan Arnette, a mountaineer and blogger climbed Ama Dablam in 2000, and describes the allure: “Ama Dablam is a fantastic climb by any definition. In many ways it is more satisfying than the 8000m climbs with the rock, ice and snow sections. But it is a very dangerous climb today with the instability of the Dablam.”

Ama Dablam means ‘Mother’s Pendant’ in Sherpa because its



@MOEALTHANI

summit makes the mountain look like a mother hugging her young, and the ‘dablam’ is the massive hanging serac near the summit which looks like a holy locket.

Mountaineers try to avoid climbing and camping below this serac, but despite that some have been killed by chunks breaking off. In 2006, a piece of the hanging ice fell and killed six climbers in Camp III at the point where the southwest ridge meets the top of the face. Three more were killed below the serac in 2014. Nepali climber Thundu Sherpa was killed when an earthquake in 2016 triggered an avalanche on the face.

This year, despite the pandemic and the dangers of climbing via the traditional southwest ridge route, mountaineers could not resist the temptation of climbing Ama Dablam. What helped was the relative ease of organising an expedition at short notice compared to the complicated logistics on big 8,000m peaks in Nepal.

Those who made it were rewarded with mountains devoid of other climbers, and a spell of good weather that has lasted more than two months now.

Nepal’s Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Yogesh Bhattarai himself helicoptered to Ama Dablam Base Camp on Monday just

as another 12-member expedition arrived to climb Ama Dablam. That team is led by Himalayan Guides and British climber Kenton Cool who has summited Mt Everest 14 times.

“We were glad to run into Kenton Cool and other mountaineers at Ama Dablam Base Camp, and also happy that Nepal’s climbing sector that has been badly hit by the pandemic, is getting back to normal,” Bhattarai said.

Despite the minister’s remark, it is clear that Nepal’s trekking and mountaineering has suffered from the Covid-19 crisis. The country usually makes \$20 million in royalty and other fees from climbing, and this year the count is only \$3.3 million.

Besides this, many Nepali guides, porters, trekking companies, hotels, airlines and helicopter companies have lost business. Last autumn there were 210 climbing expeditions in the Nepal Himalaya, but this season there are only seven.

Minister Bhattarai also hosted the Qatari team in Kathmandu last week after their climb, during which Prince Al Thani said: “I have always been enchanted by Ama Dablam, and I have been struck by the scenic beauty of Nepal and the hospitality of its people. I promise to return very often.” 🇶🇪



ALL PHOTOS: PRITI THAPA

Nepalis hopeful about Biden presidency

Nepali immigrants are looking forward to a kinder America

Priti Thapa

Many Nepalis based in the US and elsewhere closely followed the US election results. It was key concern because of what the election outcome meant for immigration policies.

Donald Trump was bad news for immigrants, including many Nepalis — responsible for over 400 executive actions since he took office.

“I did not care about the US election at all in 2016, but I followed the 2020 election very closely, refreshing my phone past midnight to check the results,” says 2020 Diversity Visa (DV) lottery winner Archana KC, who received news about her successful DV-outcome in May 2019. But on 22 June Trump banned migration to the US.

Every year, some 55,000 winners from over 14 million applicants are selected for permanent residency from underrepresented countries, including Nepal. The number of applicants from Nepal exceeds 600,000 annually. In 2018, 4,097 Nepalis were awarded permanent residency in the US through this program.

On 22 April, Trump signed a proclamation suspending migrants who pose a threat to the US labour market during the economic recovery following the pandemic, which was further extended on 22 June till the end of the year.

This was bad news for the 2020 DV lottery winners, as they lose their spot if they are not vetted for and receive their visas by end of September.

The DV lottery program has been one of Trump’s target programs. He has said it brings the “worst of the worst to the US”. In September, the US District Court Judge ordered the Trump administration to resume processing of DVs for 2020 winners. Prior to the ban, 12,000 diversity visas had already been issued.

Taking into account Covid-19 and its impact on the State Department’s visa and consular processing capacity, the judge ordered a total of 9,095 slots to be reserved past the end of 30 September deadline, but it is unsure which of the 43,000 remaining winners will fall in that group.

Stranded Nepali DV winners have built an online community and joke among themselves: ‘It is ironic that DV losers will never understand the pain of DV winners.’

Many have given up hope, but KC is confident it will all work out with the Biden win. “We have come this far and all the effort and energy that has gone into this will not go to waste,” she says, recalling how she had to go around with her one week old daughter to get her a passport. “But just to be on the safe side, I have also applied for the 2022 lottery.”

The other Nepalis impacted by the uncertainty are Temporary

Protection Status (TPS) beneficiaries, a humanitarian program that allows those affected by war or disasters to temporarily live and work in the US. Over 411,000 individuals from 10 countries are eligible, including 14,549 Nepalis who benefited from the program after the 2015 earthquake. They include students and those overstaying their visas.

Donald Trump has tried to end this program since 2017, citing countries have recovered from the natural disasters or violent conflicts that caused people to flee. He has faced a number of lawsuits including, one filed by a group of Nepalis and Hondurans. The TPS designation for Nepal is currently expected to be valid till 4 January, 2021.

A recent survey by the group Adhikaar of 324 TPS Nepalis showed that 68.7% reported thinking about this issue once a day or more, 54.3% of respondents think about being deported once a day or more, and 45.9% reported thinking about how TPS would mean not being able to see their children grow up.

Biden’s immigration plan includes protection of TPS from being returned to countries that are deemed unsafe, and to offer a path to citizenship to those who have been in the country for an extended period of time and built lives in the US.

Ramesh is one such Nepali



protected under TPS whose future hinges on these decisions. He says: “There is still a lot of uncertainty even under Biden, but we are hopeful that it will be extended given the positive signals from his campaign.”

Things are especially difficult for those with young children who are US citizens, because they may have to leave children behind or stay on undocumented.

Another prominent policy priority for Biden is to reinstate the Dreamers Program on his first day in office, that will allow children of undocumented immigrants to remain in the country. There are only 60 Nepalis under DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) out of the 643,560 active ‘dreamers’. Trump’s attempts to dismantle the program in 2017 was blocked by US Supreme Court.

Aalok is one of the 60 Nepali DACA recipients, who has lived in the US since he was six. “I grew up thinking I am a US citizen as my parents did a very good job of hiding this from my sister and I,” Aalok told us on the phone.

But once he found out, Aalok recalls the traumatic experience because of the constant uncertainty. “I am grateful for this program, but I disliked the term dreamers because it was anything but a dream, it was a nightmare, because your identity was often used as a political bargaining tool. It was particularly difficult when I had to get into college because I could not apply for any federal and state funding, but was lucky to get a merit-based scholarship.”

When the networks called Biden’s win last week, Aalok was part of the car honking and dancing celebrations in New York. He says: “It was as if the whole world was breathing a collective sigh of relief.”

Joe Biden also has a positive stance on skilled-visas like the H-1B, which has been contentious under Trump. Nepalis make up only 0.4% of H-1B visa holders annually, which is dominated by Indians who make up three-fourths of the visa holders.

The June proclamation also suspended the H-1B and other employment related visas, and in October the Trump administration announced further restrictions including narrowing the definition of ‘specialty occupations’ to ensure applicants have the degree specific to the job they are applying for, and increasing the salary threshold.

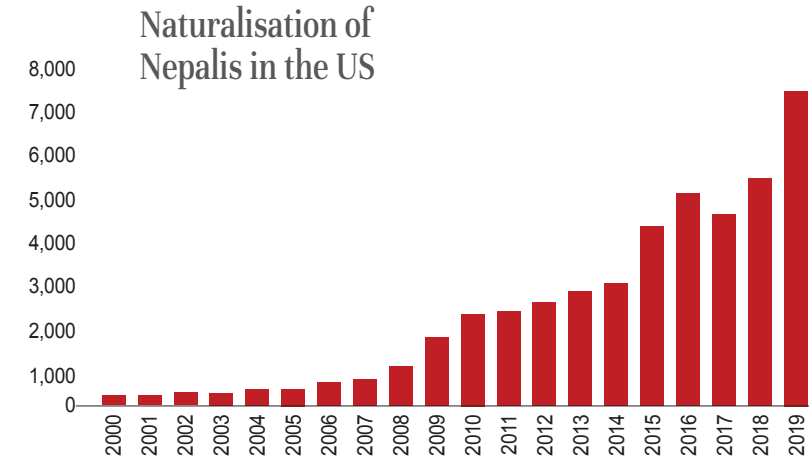
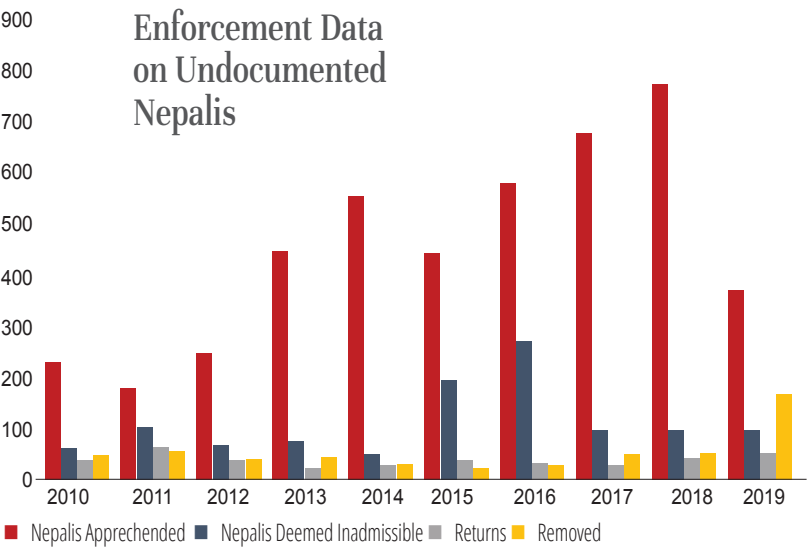
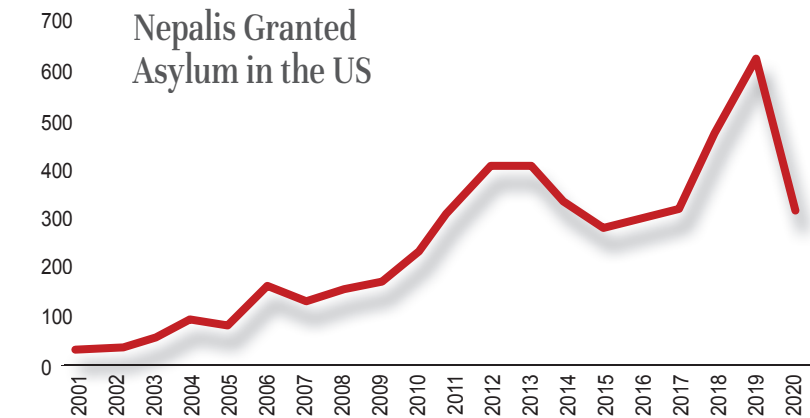
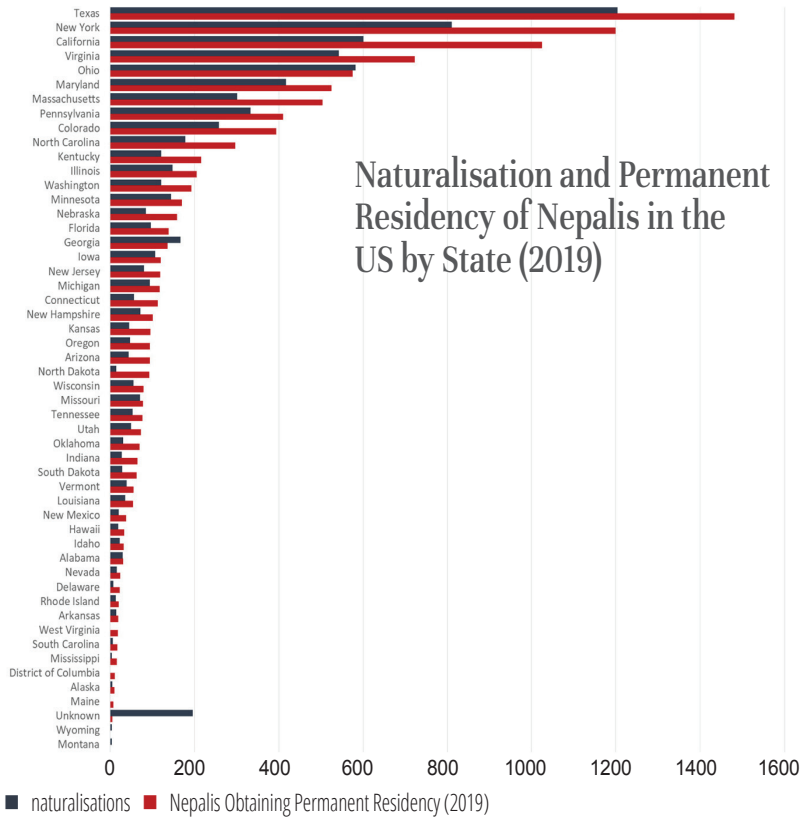
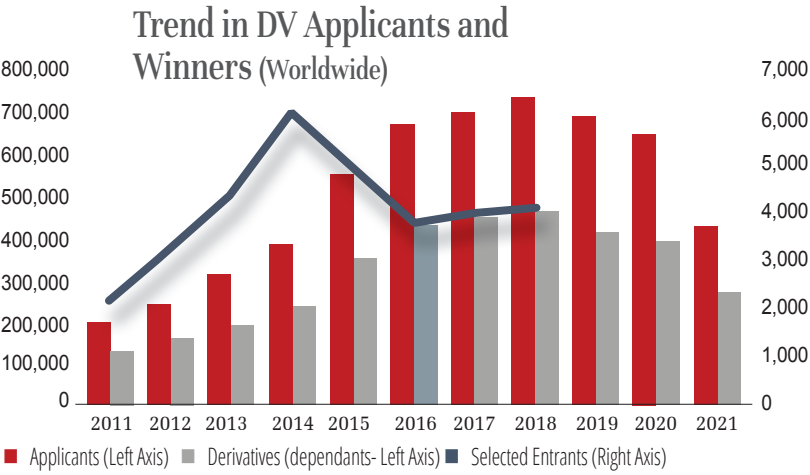
A Nepali with highly specialised programming skills in the Nepal branch of a small software development company says that he wrote the core platform and his managers considered him irreplaceable. He was offered a position under the L1B specialised worker visa, where his work was appreciated and he moved to a wider role.

“But after two years when it was time to get my visa renewed, it was rejected as my job description was deemed different than the original one,” he says. “The lawyers have filed a green card application, and hopefully things will move quicker under the Biden administration so I can go back to the US.”

Another student, an OPT intern who was working for a multi-billion dollar e-commerce retailer applied for an H1-B, had his visa rejected and had to move back to Nepal.

“The application was rejected over minor points regarding my salary, even though it was above the market rate, and because my area of study was not exactly computer science even though I had the programming skills,” he says.

Biden’s plans regarding skilled visas include reforming the temporary visa system to establish a wage-based allocation process so H1-B allocations are linked to prevailing wages and establish enforcement mechanisms. He also plans to expand the number of high-skilled visas, currently capped at 85,000, and elimination of the limits



on employment-based visas by country.

Last year, 7,409 Nepalis got naturalised in the US whereas 10,201 received permanent residency. The top five states hosting Nepalis are Texas, New York, California, Virginia and Ohio (see figures). In addition, a significant number of Nepalis also take circuitous paths to reach the US when they do not have access to the legal routes like H-1B and DV.

Ramesh went through multiple countries to make it to America. Before he took on the journey, he did not know much about Donald Trump except his obsession with the wall and increased enforcement at the border that would make his journey from Mexico difficult.

It did not deter him. His journey to the US took 2.5 months, which is relatively short to other migrants taking this circuitous path from Kathmandu via Dubai-Russia-Spain-Bolivia-Colombia-Panama-Honduras-Nicaragua-Guatemala-Mexico-US. The trek through the forest in Colombia was harsh when they even passed bodies of migrants who had not made it.

Ramesh and his friends took along six cans of Red Bull for energy during the forest trek. “It would make us feel energised to plod for another few hours,” he recalls. Besides the dangers of the jungle, they were also robbed, had nothing to eat and survived on bananas and water.

He reached Tijuana in Mexico, but soon after jumping over a wall and entering the US, he was detained. “After the torture we had gone through, we did not have much to complain about the detention centre where we were given food, hygiene kits and clothes,” Ramesh recalls.

After spending two months in detention, he was released on a bond of \$14,000 as he waits for his asylum case. After over five months, he was eligible to apply for his work permit and social security card. Now, he dreams of bringing his family to the US someday if he is granted asylum. Nepalis form one of the top ten nationalities receiving asylum grants. In 2019, 627 Nepalis were granted asylum, placing it in the 9th highest nationality.

“I don’t really have an opinion on Trump or Biden,” says Ramesh. “As a royalist who was vocal against politicians of the current ruling party, I often got into trouble in my village back home. I came here to earn. The good thing about US is that if you are willing to work hard, you can earn and that is all I am focused on now. And as long as I can work, it doesn’t matter who is President.”

But the work authorisation that Ramesh enjoys as he waits for his asylum hearing has been targeted by Trump who issued two new rules effective August requiring asylum-seekers to wait 365 days before applying for work authorisation instead of the 150 that Ramesh got, and removing the 30 day limit for the work authorisation applications to be processed. These rules were blocked by a judge in September.

Between 2010-2019, there were 4,511 unauthorised Nepalis who have been apprehended. Of them, 1,124 were deemed inadmissible, while 951 Nepalis were returned

or removed. Removals involve a formal court order, whereas returns are those who voluntarily go back to Nepal.

Particularly notable is the removal of 169 Nepalis in 2019, a significantly higher number than previous years. (See figure) Biden has committed to a 100-day freeze on deportations of unauthorised foreigners in the US after he takes office.

Hari is from the same village as Ramesh, and returned last year from the US. He spent six months in a detention centre, and unsuccessfully fought his case with support from a Nepali lawyer.

“When they were taking me to the airport, I thought that I was being transferred to another detention centre, it was a surprise when I found out I was flying home but there was no other option,” he says.

While in immigration detention, Hari wrote a diary with painful details of his journey to handle his emotions, but he decided to throw it away. “The plan was to turn the diary into a book, that I wanted to title ‘My Journey to America’ to dissuade other Nepalis from repeating my mistake, but no one wanted to listen to my advice in the village,” he explains.

Hari sold his house to pay back the Rs5 million loan he took for his failed journey to the US, and says he is not surprised that his journey was unsuccessful. He says: “I am not sure if having Trump as President versus Biden would have made a difference, but had I landed in another state and not Louisiana, or got a more lenient judge, I may have been released.”

Surya works in a California-based law firm and specialises in asylum cases, and confirms Hari’s hunch: “To get migrants out on bail from states like Louisiana and Georgia is very difficult. California, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado and DC have it slightly easier. But it also depends on the judges.”

The TRAC project maintained by Syracuse University shows the variation within and across immigration courts in judge denial rates, with a judge in New York who has a denial rate of 3%, and a judge in Houston with a denial rate of 100%.

TRAC data shows that the median bond amount for Nepalis was \$15,000 in 2018/2019 and \$12,000 in 2020. Research shows that detained immigrants from Nepal have higher odds of being granted bond, but also pay more compared to other nationalities. In 2018, 79% of the 593 detained Nepalis were released on bonds, higher than the national average of 48%.

Joe Biden has big plans from legalising 11 million undocumented workers in the US to expanding the skilled visa program, from reinstating DACA to protecting TPS beneficiaries. Many of these will impact Nepalis.

But a lot hinges on the two Georgia senate runoffs in January, and the health and economic crises that have taken precedence over other topics. Many Nepalis, in America and in Nepal, however, remain hopeful of a kinder America under Biden. 🇳🇵

Some names have been changed.

With temples locked up, Nepalis improvise

As the pandemic shows no sign of abating, much of the worship and rituals have gone virtual

Madison Wrobley and
Rajani Maharjan

For decades, Dhanamaya Singh concluded each day at Aakash Bhairab Temple in Indrachok in Kathmandu's historic heart, to sing *bhajan* hymns.

As an unmarried elder, these evening prayers were her way of engaging with her community and were the centre of her social and ritual life. But, at the end of March, with the first government-mandated lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19, her daily practice was stopped abruptly.

Dhanamaya has not seen a single one of her relatives since the lockdown began, and even after it was lifted has to be careful. While she previously visited them frequently for feasts and rituals, her family is strictly adhering to social distancing practices, so she now spends most of her time alone at home. She says the isolation, though protective of her physical health, has been detrimental to her mental wellbeing.

Numerous studies have shown the connection between religious practice and mental health benefits. The system of beliefs, the structure, and the sense of community inherent in most religions have a largely positive impact on mental wellbeing. Regardless of the belief system, including Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, all involve rituals that help people cope with difficult life events such as the death of a loved one, lessons that arise from challenging situations, as well as regularity and predictability, all of which are highly beneficial during the uncertainty of a pandemic.

Additionally, religion and spirituality create a group of people who connect over shared beliefs. The benefits of feeling a sense of belonging, a place for trusting public engagement, and social connection have been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental distress.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of religious practice in Nepal, most people, regardless of their age, gender, or social position, say that it is the change in community engagement that has had the most significant impact on their lives.

While many report that they are visiting temples less frequently and have reduced the scale of their rituals, people say they are still finding a way to worship and to regain the sense of community that their typical religious practice brings. To do so, more and more residents of Kathmandu are turning to technology, some for the very first time. But can tools like Facebook, messenger apps, and even virtual reality really replace the real experience?

Dhanamaya's struggle with loneliness and the way in which the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted her mental health is not uncommon in Kathmandu Valley, across Nepal, or around the world. Since the first case of Covid-19 was recorded in Nepal on 23 January, the valley has been in and out of lockdowns with varying degrees of restrictions.

Although restaurants and public offices have been allowed to reopen periodically, most of the city's temples, particularly the major ones that draw the largest



A locked up Ganesh temple in Kuleshwor in Kathmandu this week.

ALL PHOTOS: RAJANI MAHARJAN

crowds, have remained shuttered for over seven months.

Almost every country in the world has grappled with how to manage the disease burden without causing devastating impacts to the economy, and Nepal is no different in the way it has been forced to bear this struggle. However, because Nepal's healthcare capacity is already limited, the government instituted even more stringent lockdown actions, particularly in Kathmandu Valley, than have been seen in many other countries, including measures such as even/odd days for vehicles, grounding domestic flights, and the complete and long-term closure of businesses. The impacts of these extend far beyond purely the economic.

For example, when Maya Dangol's mother died a couple of months ago, she and her family struggled to conduct the death rituals due to the lockdown measures. Market closures, supply shortages, and the even/odd license plate restrictions on vehicles posed a challenge when trying to obtain all the necessary material to conduct the funeral rituals. She says her family visited the temples at four in the morning to burn wick lamps in their mother's name to enable them to return home by six to avoid vehicle restrictions and contact with other people.

Despite these limitations, coronavirus cases continue to increase daily and hospitals in Kathmandu are reaching capacity, some having to turn away even serious cases due to a lack of beds and other resources. The total confirmed cases in Nepal surpassed 200,000 last week, with nearly half of them just in Kathmandu Valley. The total deaths crossed 1,259 on 19 November, with 475 of them in Kathmandu. For the past weeks, the Valley is recording an average of 60% of the daily cases detected nationwide.

Public health experts say the government has failed to effectively respond to the pandemic because there was little planning or work to improve healthcare facilities before they became overwhelmed. Now some, especially underprivileged families, feel they have few options if they contract the virus.

There is also concern about how the government's response to the pandemic has impacted the

way religious and cultural events have been carried out. Dhiraj, a Newa environmental scientist is worried about the impact of the lockdown on some of the major festivals and rituals, including Rato Machindranath and Bisket Jatra.

"The government has prevented these festivals from taking place, but other functions are allowed to continue. Major temples like Pashupati, have been closed since the beginning of the lockdown period, while other activities remain open, like markets and shops," he explained.

"Previously, the Newa community of Kathmandu Valley was especially strong in its religious beliefs, these days this is breaking down. For the first time in a very long time, people are not observing the rituals," said Dhiraj, adding that this was partly due to fears about disease transmission, but also partially due to government regulation.

While most of the major religious events have been canceled or carried out with highly reduced numbers, residents of Kathmandu and people across Nepal have found ways to adapt and maintain spiritual and social connections despite the difficulty the pandemic poses.

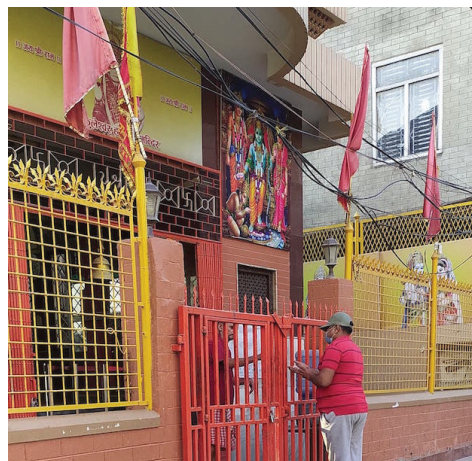
Dhanamaya, the *bhajan* singer, exemplifies this. Although she could no longer play *bhajan* at the temple, Dhanamaya realised she had another outlet to share her songs and worship with the community: through social media platforms such as Facebook.

It was difficult for her to embrace the technology at first, she admits, and she needed help from her young nieces and nephews to navigate the platform. But Dhanamaya says: "Now, when I have leisure time, I get dressed up as if I am going out. I then position my mobile to record myself singing and if the video is nice, I post it." When her friends and family give positive feedback, she feels less disconnected, and inspired to continue learning and sharing.

Similarly, Gyani Maharjan says she spends a most of her days on video calls and other social media platforms. Because she has high blood pressure and is therefore at a greater risk for a more serious infection if she contracts the virus, she too is limiting physical contact with others, including family.



A lone masked devotee at the Akash Bhairav temple in Kathmandu.



Ganesh Temple in Kuleswor. Pilgrims at boarded up Palanchok Bhagwati Temple in Kavre (right).



To stay healthy physically as well as mentally, she participates in a yoga class through a messenger application on her mobile. Like Dhanamaya, she says this has helped her regain a sense of community when she would otherwise be almost completely isolated.

Gyani and her nine siblings changed the way they celebrated the festival season this year, but she says, this did not make them feel any less connected as a family. During recent festivals, each sibling would participate in group video calls where they would show what they had prepared for that particular day and joke with each other and laugh. Gyani said she feels less anxious and stressed when she gets to connect using these platforms and watch videos of her grandchildren.

In India, virtual reality (VR) platforms are being marketed as a way to enable people to do *darshan* even when they cannot physically get to the temples. This began even before the beginning of the pandemic for people who have moved out of their home state or to a foreign country, because they are elderly or ill, and for those who were prevented from visiting the temples regularly due to the major traffic jams of the Indian metropolises.

Smartphone application downloads for VR temple experiences have increased exponentially since temples were closed in response to the spread of Covid-19. VR apps enable priests to continue to perform the rituals and maintain their livelihoods while devotees can continue to engage, though from afar.

Likewise, many Americans have adopted the habit of attending virtual church from their laptops every Sunday. Even after the virus is managed and in-person worship can resume, many churches report that they will continue live streaming weekly services to accommodate those who are unable to attend the service or who prefer to worship from home.

However, not everyone has embraced these changing forms of worshiping and socialising though. Baburaja Bajracharya, a priest, says he has heard that some of the Brahmin priests are instructing people to perform *puja* through video calls, however, he and other Newa priests that he knows have not

adopted this practice.


For Baburaja and many others who are hesitant to involve technology in religious practice or who reject it outright, the experience and perceived benefits of being at a temple or in the presence of a priest during *puja* cannot be replicated virtually. The sense of community afforded through religious practice is not felt to the same degree when those experiences are happening on a mobile phone.

Research has shown that social media can be effective in addressing loneliness when it is used to enhance existing relationships, like in the case of Dhanamaya and Gyani, but is counterproductive when it is relied upon to replace in-person interaction. Therefore, the benefits of this technology are largely dependent on the way they are integrated into daily lives.

However, during a pandemic, many feel as though there are few other options for socialisation other than to engage on virtual platforms. This suggests that for some, the perceived benefits may end up being short-lived or unsustainable if social distancing remains necessary far into the future.

For some, though, the use of technology to conduct and share ritual, religious, and community experiences has been essential. Alok Siddhi Tuladhar, a cultural activist, says his birthday would have been a lonely and isolating day for both him and his parents if not for platforms that enable virtual connection.

Because he tested Covid-19 positive, though asymptomatic, he chose to celebrate his birthday at home with only his wife and son. His elderly parents watched his wife perform the birthday *puja* from their house across the city over video chat.

Tuladhar says he thinks "technology helped us to fill the gap that comes with social distancing when we are unable to visit each other physically." Although technology has helped fill that gap for some, its impact in a post-pandemic world is yet to be seen. 

Madison Wrobley is a 2019-2020 Fulbright-National Geographic Storytelling Fellow who studies water insecurity, primarily in Kathmandu Valley, and is now based in Colorado.

Rajani Maharjan is an environmental anthropologist affiliated with the Small Earth Nepal (SEN), an environmental research group.



The Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura where a tiger was sighted in April at 2,500m. Conservationists want the area protected since it is an important wildlife corridor.

DABAL BOHARA

Kali-Karnali jungle corridor proposed

Nepal’s highest ever tiger sighting prompts calls for a new conservation zone

Mukesh Pokhrel
in Dadeldhura

When researchers installed camera traps deep in the forested mountains of western Nepal last year, they expected to capture lots of shots of leopards. And they did, but one day in April while scanning the images, they could not believe their eyes. Among other animals that had taken selfies through the motion detector cameras, they found one of a tiger.

Never before had a Royal Bengal Tiger been sighted so high in the mountains of Nepal. Tigers are supposed to roam the tropical forests of the Bardia or Chitwan National Parks to the south, but this one was at 2,500m.

The Divisional Forestry Office in Dadeldhura had installed the cameras with support from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Nepal after locals reported seeing tigers. The researchers wanted to make sure, because the Nepali word *bagh* can mean both tiger and leopard. Indeed, the cameras shot many pictures of leopards, and this one tiger.

Camera trap image of a tiger at 2,500m in the Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura captured in April 2020.

The forests of the Province have regenerated in the past 35 years after the establishment of community forests, and the thick vegetation has led to a proliferation of native animal, bird and land species.

But it was the tiger sighting that made the case for a nature conservation zone stronger. Although this was the highest elevation at which a tiger has been seen in Nepal, the record is held by Bhutan’s Thrumshingla National Park where tigers have been spotted at up to 3,350m.



Rare camera trap image of a tiger at 2,500m in the Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura captured in April.



MAP SOURCE: CRLNVL

Tiger ecologists say the spread of community forestry in Nepal, which has doubled the country’s woodland areas in the past 25 years could be one reason tigers are venturing so high. Other factors could be a reduction of prey density in the Tarai, water scarcity, as well as elevated temperatures in the plains due to global warming.

“The forests in the Mahabharat Range join the Kali and Karnali basins, and spread over an area of 700sq km that is important from a biodiversity perspective,” says Bishnu Acharya of the Dadeldhura Divisional Forestry Office, who adds that a further 800sq km could be declared a buffer zone, as in other conservation areas in the country.

If approved, the 1,500sq km conservation area would add to Nepal’s 27,300sq km of protected areas, of which 11,900sq km are national parks. For comparison, Chitwan National Park is only 950sq km.

Besides the tiger, the Divisional Forestry Office’s camera traps also showed the Mahabharat forests are teeming with other wildlife found both in the plains, such as the sambar deer and leopard, as well as ghoral and red fox which prefer the high Himalayan habitat.

“Most wildlife research in Nepal tends to be either in the Tarai or the high Himalaya, and the Mahabharat Range with an elevation between 3,000-4,000m is usually left out, which is all the more reason to study and protect the biodiversity here,” Acharya explained.

The camera traps were placed along the wildlife migratory route in the Bhageswar and Ghanteswar corridor with 32 camera in the first phase and 30 in the second. While most of the images in the first phase were of leopards, it was only later in the season that other animals, as well as the tiger, started appearing.

The slopes of the Mahabharat Range form Nepal’s mid-hill spine from east to west, and is the most-



Ganesh Bhatta



Bishnu Acharya



Radha Devi Kathayat

densely populated mountain region in the world. Deforestation had driven out most of the wildlife from here, but with community forestry, the vegetation and animals are staging a comeback. In addition, most mid-hill districts have seen a decline in human population because of out-migration, and a reduced birth rate.

Law makers both in Sudur Paschim Province as well as the Federal Parliament in Kathmandu are studying the National Parks and Wildlife Act of 1973 and the Forestry Act of 2019 to see if it is more feasible to declare the region a national park, or a conservation area.

Acharya says: “Either way, it is important to protect this forest. But which model is more appropriate is a political decision, and that has to be made at the provincial and central level.”

Meanwhile, conservationists have been trying to figure out where the tiger that they camera trapped in April came from: whether it had strayed across the border from Nandu National Park in India, or climbed up from the Shukla Phanta reserve in Nepal. They tried to compare the stripes to other tigers seen in Dadeldhura’s Jogbuda as well as Sukla Phanta, but none of them matched.

The Dadeldhura district authorities at first did not want to publicise the fact that a tiger had been sighted in the mountains, so as not to attract poachers during the Covid-19 lockdown. But they later decided to let the story out, and when they did many local villagers came up with reports of their own sightings.

One of them is 53-year-old Radha Devi Kathayat who lives near Dadeldhura town. She said: “It must have been about 22 years ago, we had gone to collect fodder in the forest and saw a tiger sprawled out in a clearing, fast asleep. It was definitely not a leopard with spots, this one had black stripes.” Her neighbour, Kalawati Kathayat, 54, confirmed she has also seen tigers in the forests before.

Zoologist Karan Shah at Tribhuvan University says it is not unusual that tigers are found at higher altitudes, it is just that no one was looking for them before and there is anecdotal evidence that tigers have actually been spotted even higher up to 3,500m in Nepal.

Acharya at the Dadeldhura Divisional Forestry Office says that if the proposal to set up a conservation area is indeed approved, the 53,014 hectares of Mahabharat forests in Dadeldhura and 23,000 hectares in Doti combined would form an important conservation corridor. 🇳🇵



When will Nepal's Covid vaccine turn come?

Nepal may be one of the last countries to get a vaccine, even then the poor here will be at the end of the line

Sonia Awale

With the pre-winter resurgence of Covid-19 around the world and in Nepal, pressure is mounting on governments to procure vaccines to protect their populations.

Last week, the Nepal government set up a committee of secretaries of the Finance, Home, Health and Foreign Affairs ministries to study vaccines under development as well as procedures to procure them. But the country is far behind other countries, which have already 'booked' their future supplies.

On Wednesday President Bidya Devi Bhandari signed an ordinance empowering the government to import Covid-19 vaccines from international pharmaceutical companies, and to use them even if they are authorised only for emergency use.

However, there is no effective strategy to ensure vaccines for all as distribution in Nepal comes with the challenge of taking it to poor and remote corners of the country. Experts fear that even when the vaccines become available, the campaign will be plagued by the same socio-economic inequities that afflict the medical sector.

"We need to immediately start identifying vulnerable groups like frontline health workers, the elderly or those with comorbidities to prioritise for immunisation," says Bikash Gauchan of a physician at Bayalpata Hospital in the under-served western district of Achham.

"We also need to set up proper cold chain facilities across the country as soon as possible and have a well thought out distribution plan so that when the vaccine does arrive, we can hit the ground running," he adds.

The silver lining is that Nepal already has a successful childhood immunisation network that has successfully mobilised Female Community Health Volunteers, and these can deliver vaccines to the homes of the elderly who cannot make it to clinics. Monitoring the follow-up second dose for some of the vaccines will be crucial, although Nepal's health system has experience with maintaining a cold chain for other campaigns.

Despite recent breakthroughs in trials (see box) public health experts stress the importance of exploring vaccine supply options closer to home. As of now, 11 vaccines developed in several parts of the world are in the third phase of clinical trials with many of them expected to be as effective.

Neighbouring China and India are at the forefront. And Nepal should have begun its 'vaccine diplomacy' much before this to secure its on supply of shots.



MONIKA DEUPALA

There is also the uncertainty of vaccine efficacy depending on the strain: the same vaccine could be highly effective against people in the West but not as much in South Asia where people suffer from chronic malnutrition and multiple infections.

"For a working vaccine to be made within a year is an amazing victory for science but we also need to know that these vaccines are designed for their population. So I'd want to know more about the vaccines in India and China," says Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal. "Particularly China, as it was where the pandemic started but has since controlled it effectively unlike rest of the world."

Buddha Basnyat of the Patan Academy of Health Science agrees. He says: "China looks at the reality in our backyard. So a more suitable vaccine for us could come from the Chinese, particularly because they have a track record of having developed better vaccine for this part of the world."

Indeed, the JEVAX made by the researchers in Chengdu is now the most widely used jab against Japanese Encephalitis because it's more cost effective compared to its western vaccines.

Nepal Health Research Council is once again considering conducting Phase III clinical trial of Coronavac by China's Sinovac Biotech after an initial divided opinion over its safety. The vaccine has shown quick immune response in mid-stage trials in South America and parts of Asia.

In India, the Serum Institute has anticipated demand by already manufacturing 40 million doses of AstraZeneca's potential Covid-19 vaccine. It will also soon manufacture Novavax.

Similarly, researchers at the Indian Institute of Science have designed a protein-based heat-tolerant vaccine that can stay stable for a month at 37°C, and could endure temperatures as high as 100°C if freeze dried, a feature that could be a game changer for mass vaccination campaigns

in lower and middle income countries in Asia and Africa.

The other factor to consider will be the duration of the immunity after each vaccine shot, as well reinfection groups and if antibodies developed in the first episode helps fight the mutated forms of the virus.

With Covid-19 crisis continuing to spread rapidly across Nepal and at 10 fatalities per million population (same as Pakistan and much higher than China's 0.9), it is not too early to start dialogue with Gavi, the vaccine alliance, COVAX and agencies like the World Bank and World Health Organization to help procure the most cost effective approach to vaccines most suitable to Nepal's conditions.

Alternatively, many pharmaceutical companies will want to play the field in order to boost their profile. In fact, embassies and foreign dignitaries are already hard at work pushing for trials and deals.

"There is bound to be vaccine politics and it will mostly likely be ugly," predicts Sher Bahadur Pun of the Health Ministry. "But we should not lose track of two things: efficacy of the vaccine against our population and its economic viability. If we do that we should be on the right path, more or less."

In all this excitement, Nepal's health authorities must also keep an eye on the plight of infected people and many more to come as it waits for a vaccine. The results of current treatment regimens ranging from plasma therapy to administering Remdesivir have been patchy. And as scientists study the long-term impact of Covid-19 on patients even after they recover, making an optimal use of resources becomes even more significant.

So far, the government has been faulted for squandering months of lockdown, not carrying out sufficient tests and contact tracing, not increasing hospital capacity and equipment, and letting the people fend for themselves.

The result is that Nepal is

suffering a sustained surge, with more than 1,400 new cases a day, over 60% of them in Kathmandu Valley alone and a quarter of those tested coming out positive. There is also a surge in symptomatic patients, even among those without pre-existing conditions, and those sick enough to require ICUs and ventilator.

Even when the government does act, the priorities seem to be misplaced. For instance, health experts say the emphasis in the past months should have been on high flow oxygen therapy or High Dependency Units rather than Intensive Care Units in hospitals.

"It would have been cheaper, it does not require highly trained staff or sophisticated equipment, and it would have freed up the ICUs for the really critical patients," adds Pun, who himself is at the Health Ministry, and this possibly means his advice is not been taken.

Insiders say it will likely take upwards of six months for the first vaccines to arrive in Nepal, and there will be a rush by the rich, the powerful and those with political connections to get their shots. The marginalised, poor, those in remote areas will be the last to get their injections, unless the government has fair and effective rules in place and implements them.

Till then, there is little else to do than keep masking up this winter, avoid large gatherings, keep distance and wash hands regularly.

Says Buddha Basnyat: "The mask is the best vaccine we have at the moment. These safety measures have largely reduced hospitalisation due to other infections in 2020, masks in particular will also protect us from winter pollution in the coming months."

The Vaccine Race

The global resurgence of Covid-19 in the northern winter has coincided with breaking news every day of successful new vaccine trials.

First the Russians announced a vaccine in September that is

92% potent against SARS-CoV-2. Last week Pfizer unveiled a 90% effective vaccine, which on Wednesday was upgraded 95% efficacy without side effects. Moderna was next with a vaccine 95%, and not needing extreme refrigeration. More companies in China, India and Europe are conducting their own trials.

Public health experts have hailed the developments, but warn that vaccines will not be universally available till late 2021 and even so will not provide full protection. They suggest continuing with masking up, keeping distance and avoiding crowded indoor places.

Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech's mRNA-based vaccine came out declaring over 90% effectiveness but only at -70°C ultra cold chain which will be a challenge even for countries with the best health facilities in the world.

Massachusetts-based Moderna's RNA shot has 94.5% efficacy, seems to also prevent severe infections and remains stable in medical and home refrigerators for up to 30 days, in freezers (-20°C) for up to six months, and at room temperature for up to 12 hours.

Even so, poorer countries are unlikely to get coronavirus vaccine any time soon. Even the biggest pharmaceutical multinationals can only manufacture a limited quantity of the vaccine over the next year.

Pfizer has capped its production at 1.4 billion for 2021, 80% of which has already been booked through advance purchase agreement by the US, UK, EU, Canada and Japan. Moderna expects to manufacture 20 million doses this year and up to one billion in 2021.

On the other hand, Russian's Sputnik V has been overshadowed by new developments, and due to lack of sufficient data to back up its claim of 92% efficacy. Although geopolitical rivalry with the West has given it negative publicity, some health agencies have not ruled it out. 🇷🇺