Throughout 2020, the ruling Nepal Communist Party has been so embroiled in an internal power struggle that its senior leaders either do not realise (or do not care) that there is a Covid-19 crisis.

Helloooo. There is a pandemic going on. Now, in addition to the health crisis, Nepal is also facing a political crisis.

In this year-ender issue of Nepali Times, we take a look back at 2020 and how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on the economy, environment, and socio-cultural lives of Nepalis. We have mined data that show a clear correlation between the spread of Covid-19 from January to December with positive aspects like cleaner air and fewer highway fatalities.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu started improving immediately after the lockdown went into effect on 24 March, and except from a spike in April because of forest fires, got even better after the monsoon rains began.

Road traffic accidents had claimed 1,400 lives between March-August 2019, but because of the lockdown it dropped to less than 700 this year. Our graph (right) shows AQI worsened after September, and road fatalities per month was creeping back up more ‘normal’ levels by December.

Traffic Police spokesperson, Shyam Krishna Adhikari tells us, “People have been driving more recklessly after the lockdown, they are drinking and driving because there is less checking.”

On the other hand, various other parameters like suicides, rape, domestic violence, child marriages (page 12), all worsened dramatically from April-August. The most worrying are police figures for suicides: the monthly average for suicide cases in Nepal pre-Covid used to be 350. It shot up to 668 in June and 972 in July. By October, monthly total suicides had dropped again to near pre-Covid levels.

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A parallel mental health pandemic across Nepal. Uncertainty, job loss, and lack of social contact has led to depression and psycho-social disorders. Societal taboos mean mental health is not mentioned. To make matters worse, Nepal is now also worried about political uncertainty and the fear of renewed violence.

“Being cooped up at home for months and being socially distanced is one of the main causes for the high number of suicides, the lockdown has not been helpful at all,” says psychiatrist Kamal Gautam, who also blames the “infodemic” of news of death and sickness in the media.

At least 1 million people depended directly on tourism, and indirectly it benefited many more. The Visit Nepal 2020 campaign with a target of 2 million tourists had to be cancelled, and it looks like 2021 will also be a washout.

Still, the former CEO of the Nepal Tourism Board Deepak Raj Joshi is hopeful: “The motto is to survive 2020, revive in 2021 and thrive in 2022.”

Alisha Sijapati

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Alisha Sijapati
As feared. Prime Minister KP Oli’s batonmanship has led the country to the edge of the cliff. This cartoon in Naipl Times last week was prevalent, which is why we are publishing it.

The coming days will show whether we as a nation are ever, or take a step back. While the role of Prime Minister Oli, who is running the point of solution of the House is obvious, it is also important to recognize the cast of characters who are urging the Prime Minister to the edge of the precipice.

There has not had a prime minister serve a full term since the end of the Rana regime in 1990. The continuity of the Head of Government in office itself was bound to have provided political stability and economic stimulus. That was PM Oli’s promise during the 2017 elections, which is why he was voted to power.

K P Oli had a second kidney transplant in May, and he has been overtaken by the Covid-19 crisis, but it is his style of leadership that has undermined the government’s performance.

He turned the Prime Minister’s Office into a parallel power centre to Singha Darbar. Decision-making was centralised, and he seemed to believe in appearing imperious and allowing animosity to fester.

Most inexplicable has been his deliberate sidelining of Prime Minister KP Oli’s first deputy Oli’s good, bad and ugly that six percent growth this year not because of good planning, an epidemic of graft and political instability. That was PM Oli’s message.

The Good

A healthy monsoon, well-spaced rains, no drought, and no major earthquakes.

The Bad

Most inexplicable was the way the government had undermined and bumbled its way to the point of disarray – in January 2001 listed the good, bad and ugly that six percent growth this year not because of good planning, an epidemic of graft and political instability. That was PM Oli’s message.

The Ugly

The government’s retreat. The party is virtually split. There are parallel Central Committees, both factions claim the party banner at the Election Commission. Despite their outward opposition to Oli’s move, the opposition Nepal Congress and smaller parties including the RPP and JSP want elections, and are already in campaign mode.

Meanwhile, a Communist prime minister who expresses multiparty democracy is on the back foot, while a former Maoist chattifian who proposes party control of government and an executive presidency, has the upper hand.

The Ball is in the Supreme Court’s court. And its decision will determine the next course of Nepali politics.

PM Oli has acted as a boss and not a statesman, unable to find a positive vision. Poorthing through Kathmandu’s multiethnic mess, no multiparty elections, it happened, would be an opportunity for other parties to capitalise on the Nepali’s disarray.

When the dust settles, let’s plan for a fair, free and peaceful elections in 2021.

Editorial

ONLINE PACKAGES

RED-HANDED

Watch video of a Department of Employment storytelling also published as a pdf that had been caught red-handed giving to Saudi Arabia. The Department had calculated 11 such cases in one year and half of Nepal due to what they were doing.

RESCUED MIGRANT

Poor lady, I am glad she is now safe now in Nepal in Saudi Arabia rescued after 12 years, Kavisha khadka and Marty Logan, #1040). How many more Nepali are kept prisoners like her? Don’t go to Saudi Arabia, Middle-East countries as desirable place. Rarely are they treated well.

• Rob $13,000 as compensation for thirteen years’ work and maltreatment? Is there not some international court where we can sue the employer?

Nepal’s highest-ever tiger sighting

A tigress and her cubs had been caught on camera in Kanchenjunga national park.

How a 105-year-old beat the virus

A Nepali woman from Nepal is among the first to receive the Sinopharm vaccine.

Nepali in Saudi Arabia rescued after 12 years

Nepali in Saudi Arabia rescued after 12 years

Tourists now open for Nepal

Tourists now open for Nepal

Most visited online page

Quote

Tweets

Nepal Times

Friday, 25 - 31 December 2020

#1041

Visitors visas

Visitors visas

#Brunei of

Benjamin Braham (@kpsharmaoli) govt acts wisely... Having a weeklong quarantine for tourist will be a major turning point for Nepal

Migrants Day Special

Labour migration is such a key part of Nepali economy (and now its political, society and culture) that it deserves this kind of comprehensive media coverage. Also, most migrant workers go to India, they stay on the bottom rung of rights in terms of the government. Improving their lot should be a priority.

Nepal Now

Anh we warned that this incidence could be because of climate change. We had a study to see the change in the pattern of pest incidence due to global warming which came back positive.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Twenty years ago this week, Naipl Times year end issue on 30 December 2000. A January 2001, the good, bad and ugly that six percent growth this year not because of good planning, an epidemic of graft and political instability.

The Good

Tiger safari from the last of GEF European funds in India with newly trained tigers. There were tigers that didn’t manage much, there were no new archeological sites and no new wildlife sanctuaries. Rarely are they suffering extinction risks, the tigers have faced threats since our intervention.

The Bad

Some of the tigers are threatened. The work continues to be done through India.

The Ugly

Sanubabu Tamang, new national Tiger Project Director, for his tireless efforts.

Kunda Dixit

www.nepalitimes.com

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A NEW YEAR

A NEW CHAPTER

Write a new story every day

HAPPY NEW YEAR

TURKISH AIRLINES
Collateral benefits

‘Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you...’

I t was the night after Christmas 1993 and we all thought the bumps were just someone else going to the bathroom. Next morning downstairs was devastation. Christmas gifts were strewn amongst the chintz-covered sofas, drums emptied onto the carpet, the valley's candlesticks gone along with a camera, binoculars and the children’s new toys.

The night-time robbery by a household of sleeping friends and family was all the more alarming as this was the home of the head of the special elite Gurkha force hired to protect the royal family, deep within the Sultanaat of Brunei.

I was visiting the Colonel during a break from one of my first consulting jobs with New Zealand teammates in neighbouring Sabah and Sarawak – marketing specialist for the Malaysian state’s tourism masterplans. Lessons learned from the jungle, wildlife and ecotourism experiences in Nepal were being applied to the rich rainforests of Borneo.

At Tiger Tops we had a long association with the military – British Gurkha as well as the Royal Nepal Army who guarded the wildlife of Chitwan National Park, manned the guard posts, and whose major would often drop by the Lodge for a cup of tea.

A retired Nepal general reminded me recently of the occasion in the mid-1970s when as a junior officer he led parachutist’s training at Moghalpur. Camping overnight on the grass airstrip, I had accepted their invitation for a war tea around the campfire, complete with an officious clipboard at the recce. My favourite story about Col Edwards was that the minutes were handed over with a ‘Audacious Loyalist’ sign above the last page.

A Gurkha general confirmed to me in private during the 2015 GWT celebrations in London, before the matches.

The first British Defence and Military Attaché appointed to Kathmandu in 1958 was mountaineer Lt Col JOM Roberts MVO MBE MC 2OR, distinguished for his war service in India and founder of Nepal’s trekking industry, providing employment for the Sherpas he so admired. Jimmy Robertson, as the British called him, made Nepal his home and stayed on coating new peaks in Pokhara post retirement until his death in 1997. He was followed by some fabulous and highly decorated army names in the 1960s, Wylie, Kimmis Betty and Hickey.

Others are remembered for less illustrious traits. One officer’s Land Rover mowed down the white posts that line the Embassy driveway after an evening of revelry, and another was infatuated when his wife slept with the tenor of the time. One colonel astounded the congregation by hunting tigers during a millennium service, and another enjoyed slipping into army fatigues with an officious clipboard at the most illustrious Princes.

My favourite story about Col David Scotten, DA in the late 1980s, was how he got married on crutches, both legs encased in plaster casts, having wandered out of the first floor window of his future in-law’s Swiss chateau to admire the view only to realise too late that there was no balcony.

The curfew that accompanied the end of the single-party system contained a full hand of all the immediate British royal family led by Queen Elizabeth II, a tribute to the legendary esteem in which Gurkhas were held in Britain.

In the words of Sir Ralph Turner MC 1888-1983, former Gurkha, linguist, philologist and Professor of Sanskrit: “At one more I see you in your liv’rousness or about your fires, on force market in the trenches, now shivering with wet and cold, now scorched by a pittance and burning sun. Uncomplaining you endure hunger and thirst and wounds; and at the end of the single-party system disappear into the smoke and wrath of battle. Bravest of the brave, many of the generation we have country more faithful friends than you.”

Lisa Choegyal is a Brit who has made Nepal her home since 1997. She is the president of the Sri Lanka Brunei Cultural Association – a British charity focusing on the cultural ties between the two countries.
Labour recruiter netted in sting raid

Agency taking illegal fees from migrant workers caught red-handed in undercover operation

Upasana Khadka

I was a chilly 5:30 in the evening on 22 December, and a team from Nepal’s Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) was staking out the overseas job recruitment agency, Manaslu, in Kathmandu’s Dhumbarahi neighbourhood.

Two Nepali migrant workers, Dambar Karki and Sailendra Singh, were inside making payments that had been demanded for jobs in Saudi Arabia. What the management at Manaslu did not know was that it was all a setup, and part of a sting operation.

Earlier that day, a distraught Karki and Singh had showed up at DOFE to file a complaint. The recruiter had told them before the pandemic that they would have to pay Rs800,000 each for their job placements as coffeemakers in Saudi Arabia.

The Covid-19 crisis brought overseas contract work to a halt for 10 months, but placements are opening up again. After Karki and Singh were done with their paperwork and had finally got the government’s labour approvals, Manaslu demanded Rs110,000 each for overseas job placements in Saudi Arabia.

The DOFE team had already made photocopies of all the bank notes that Karki and Singh were handing over to the recruiters. The officials noticed that the numbers on the cash and the money matters retired the cash that was retrieved from the recruiter’s drawer.

The case was documented in the presence of Manaslu management, and signatures obtained. Staff at the recruitment agency looked shocked, and admitted that in their 20 years in the business this was the first time something like this had happened.

The owners were summoned to DOFE the next morning. They will now be required to send the migrants to Saudi Arabia at the legally allowed fee of Rs16,000, their activities will be suspended for up to a maximum of six months until the case is fully resolved.

“People have started seeking the help of the government to stop this kind of activity,” said Dhumbarahi police Station Inspector Dangol Pariyar.

The DOFE raid has led to the suspension of most recruitment agencies, which is likely to increase. With the backlog of employment, the government is also taking corrective actions.

The DOFE team has already raided 4 companies (Sky Blue International, One Overseas, Surkhet Overseas and K.M.T. Overseas) that have been missing valid visas to send workers to the UAE. All the companies have been ordered to suspend activities while investigations are ongoing.

In addition to the Monitoring Section that conducts the sting operations, there is also a separate Complaint Section at DOFE that has blocked activities of recruiters engaged in unethical practices.

While workers who have travelled abroad can lodge complaints via the DOFE phones or through social media, most migrants usually report in person at the DOFE office, especially when they are overcharged by recruiters. The financial exchanges take place at the last moment before the flight, so migrants are usually in Manipal and in serious trouble with recruiters. But workers who are reimbursed for illegal activities such as conducting interviews for overseas work without obtaining permits.

“There is a general sense of hopelessness among migrant workers that lodging complaints with agencies like DOFE will not yield results. So they feel it is not worth turning recruiters into enmities,” says Burla, adding that he hopes the recent raids will encourage more migrants to come forward with complaints.

He says, “It is only when they share information with us, preferably while they are still in Nepal, that we will be able to take corrective actions.”

UK passengers stopped

Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAA) has imposed a ban on entry for people arriving from the UK over fears of a highly contagious new strain of SNS-CoV-2 circulating in London. The decision will also affect people travelling to UK from Nepal.

CAA has also asked all airliners not to bring passengers from or transiting UK airports. India, and most European countries have also banned passengers from UK and this has had a dampening effect on air travel, which was just starting to revive ahead of the holiday season.

Hotel Annapurna closes

Kathmandu’s iconic Hotel Annapurna has shut down all business across all departments because of a sustained lack of guests post-Covid-19. Other star hotels like Soaltee, Radisson, Yellow Pagoda and cinema halls will observe strict protocols, including mask, half-capacity halls, disinfection after each show and no food and drinks.

Global IME has provided Rs250,000 for the Nepal Red Cross Society as cash to support the COVID-19 relief efforts. The bank has blocked activities of recruiters engaged in unethical practices.

As a result of the ban, most overseas travel companies have been ordered to suspend their activities.

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**EVENTS**

**New Year Bazaar**
Grab yourself a gift in 2021 with Outdoor Adventure Centre Nepal’s New Year Bazaar which is promoting the local products. The event is being held with Covid-19 safety guidelines in place. 26 December - 31 January, 10am - 6pm, Goodman Avenue Centre.

**Online Food Carnival**
Foodblogger’s online food festival celebrates home cooking, and the hard work of ordinary staff. Under the theme ‘Unsung Heroes’, a list of hundreds of home cooks and thousands of customers via a daily basis throughout the week. Visit Foodblogger’s website for details. 26-31 December.

**Hike for Nepal**
Hike for Nepal is organising a Double-hilled Kaggrachtale this weekend for some adventure amid the hills and snow capped mountains. Hike for Nepal has been organising thrillingly hills and trek past earth quake prone terrain to promote tourism, and support local communities and schools. 25-31 December.

**Veritassium**
A science dedicated to science and engineering sciences featuring experiments, expert interviews, demonstrations, and discussions with the public. Check out the playlist on YouTube and first watch, apps you.

**Nature Picture Library**
Explore thousands of animated lessons on topics ranging from visual arts to mathematics. Go to their website for their complete coverage of issues of national importance.

**TED-Ed**
Nine short stories of animated lessons on topics ranging from visual arts to mathematics. Go to their website for details, or go directly to TED-Ed’s YouTube channel and start watching.

**Kathmandu Vegfest 2020**
The veggie is planned with the aim to help the public make positive changes in the way they eat and live and make positive changes in the way they eat and live and make positive changes in the way they eat and live and make positive changes in the way they eat and live. 26 December, 5pm, Nepal House Restaurant.

**Kathmandu Picture Library**
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**DINING**

**Country Yard Restaurant and Bar**
Country yard is popular for its royalty flavoured multi-cuisine delicacies serving Nepal, Indian, Chinese to Continental. Quench your hunger with their finest dishes.

**Tukuche Thakali Kitchen**
Tukuche Thakali Kitchen

**Cafe Imago dei**
Visit for the best chescake in town and stay for their variety of drinks. A go-to place for business meetings and private conferences.

**Photo99**
Photo99 is a fine-dining restaurant with a beautiful courtyard garden and fine dining experience. Profil infects local culture, art, fashion, food and fun with our unique culture.

**ONLINE ARCHIVES ONLINE ARCHIVES**

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**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

**KIRPA JOSHI**

**Our Pick**

**Broadsheet**

**Events**

**Online Food Carnival**

**Hike for Nepal**

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**Nature Picture Library**

**TED-Ed**

**Kathmandu Vegfest 2020**

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**Tukuche Thakali Kitchen**

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**Broadsheet**
2020 Vision

A Nepali Times selection of the most impactful Nepali films this year

Shristi Karki

The brevity of the film works in its favour — there are no unnecessary drawn-out scenes that attempt to force more meaning or gratuitous to the story. There are no dialogues, no angry schlepis, no one word from the protagonist. The film doesn’t need them. There is just weariness and resignation.

Culture

The film is not only emblematic of the working-class Nepalis into hard-bitten cynics. The food searching for food in his room and out-migration can be a ‘trend’ that turns the protagonist. The film brims with a young boy’s anger and hopelessness, and a grandfather’s sorrow.

The Snow Leopards Calling

The film includes heartbreaking footage of the movement of Snow Leopards, recognising the importance of the footage for conservation as well as much-needed tourism in the area. The film includes heartbreaking footage of snow leopards being carried by their tails and kicked by locals into holes in the ground. However, Thirling’s joy and enthusiasm at having captured snow leopards on film end with a beautifully written commentary on a hopeful, optimistic note.

Song of Clouds

Ankit Poudel’s film is an ethereal, empathetic, abstract story of life and death shifting from this world to the next as the dead communicate with the living they leave behind. Described as a fever dream, there is no plot or narrative structure to the film. There are long stretches of silence punctuated by sudden disjointed communications about regret and longing. A story without direction or an end told through still photographs.

Premiering at Sundance earlier this year and making rounds in festival circuits around the world, Poudel’s film has garnered multiple awards, including the Grand Prix at the Split Film festival in Croatia and the Best Fiction award in Nepal Panorama at KIMFF 2020.

The Winter Tap

In the hills of Sankhuwasabha, a young man has undertaken the solo task of building a water tap that will take water right to his home during the dry winter. Working methodically in silence, he cuts bamboo into pipes and tree branches to prop up the bamboo against. He then cuts strips out of some more bamboo and ties the pipe and the branches to make a long and winding canal wrapped around the hills.

As with Day 3, words are unnecessary, the sound crosses the hills as the man lays his bamboo pipe, the rhythmic thwack of his Ahkure as he cuts branches to support his canal, and the final, musical sound of the water flowing through the pipes toward his home. Simple, meaningful, and immensely satisfying, this film by Aashish Limbu and Debi Rai won Best student film at Film South Asia 2019 and was screened during KIMFF 2020.

The Big-Headed Boy, Shamans & Samurais

Reviewer Discretion Advised. Shakya is uncomprising in his visuals of cremations at Pashupati. Caution:

Gyan Bahadur cremates the dead, a cigarette held tight between his lips, discusses politics, offers medical advice, and tells the story of his life. Having himself lost two of his sons in their childhood, Gyan Bahadur says he makes money off other people’s losses. At times, he is scathing about the living, who like to send off their dead with style but have no words of kindness to the people who help them pass on. Surrounded by mortality, he speaks matter-of-factly about his own death, accepting that he will eventually find his way back to Pashupati and move on from this world the same way he helped countless others.

Day 3

Filmed in the throes of the Covid-19 lockdown, LSM’s (Sailesh RC) relevant short film captures a young man’s increasing agitation as he searches for food in his room on the 31st day of the shutdown. In the barely furnished space, surrounded by empty food containers and an empty wallet, he doesn’t find any. And so he must settle for anything that he can find within the space that he can move in.

The film is stigmatised, the film shines a light on how people deal with depression in rural areas. In a country where mental health is stigmatised, the film shines a light on how people deal with depression in rural areas.
Visionary artist brought out Mustang’s magic with pen, pencil and brush

Robert G Powell, 1948-2020

Last Wednesday, 16 December 2020, marked the passing of a visionary artist who shared his unique perceptions of Asian architecture, art and culture with the world. With an eye beguiled by beauty and a heart attuned to the strange and ineffable qualities of physical heritage, Robert Gordon Powell was a magician with pen, pencil and brush.

Born in Australia in 1948, Rob was teaching art and studying architecture when the Baul clan just divided state of Bengal in India, came to perform songs, dance and rituals in his university town. This initial introduction to the human-spirit world deeply intrigued him, and the Bauls, who stayed at his home, recognised in him a kindred soul. Laxman Das Baul invited Rob to visit their Bengali village.

Arriving at the teeming Howrah train station, riding the branch line through idyllic rice paddies and ending with an hour-long rickshaw ride deeper into mud-walled thatch-roofed villages, the young man from ‘down under’ was transported into an utterly different reality.

While sketching and experiencing life in Bengal, Rob heard that Ladakh had recently opened to foreigners, and determined to visit there as well. His camera disappeared en route, being fate’s way of telling him that hand drawings were to be his primary means of documenting what he encountered.

This foray immersed him in Himalayan culture which became his most famous subject matter. He first documented Ladakhi buildings painstakingly with dots, the lightest possible method of rendition, well-suited to a patient artist and perfectly suited to the high mountain light, soft palette of colours and often eroded surfaces of Ladakhi architecture.

Rob recorded architecture in Swat and Kalash Valleys of Pakistan, evolving a still detailed but faster illustration of light and shadow through cross-hatching in ink.

He documented the shamanistic culture of Western Nepal, portraying the initiation of a female shaman who meditated all night on a makeshift perch of perilously few small branches lashed high on a pole above her village. He drew drums, amulets and drumsticks – ritual implements that shamans used to mesmerise the world and captivate those journeying with them.

These ethnographically rich locales were sparse in material comforts, and Rob found his way to Kathmandu to more comfortably complete and develop paintings from his sketches. Here he became familiar with the Newa brick, wood and plaster architecture of the Kathmandu Valley.

He recognised that temples and residences follow traditional shapes, incorporate sacred proportions, and create a feeling that resonates with community, professional, and visitor.

He turned to red pigment watercolours to depict the brick and tile work, and used browns, creams and greys to show how time tempers wood, plaster and stone. He was commissioned to design the Green Pastures Hospital in Pokhara, a comely complex resembling monastic quarters in layout, with the warm detailing of a traditional, welcoming inn.

Early in Rob’s three decades in Kathmandu, he encountered the German government’s largest development project in the world at the time – the restoration and conservation of the traditional city of Bhaktapur. Fortuitously meeting its leader, the Austrian conservation architect Götz Hagmüller and his wife Ludmilla before they departed on holiday, they commissioned Rob to produce eleven drawings of Bhaktapur, including the Khuru Math priest’s house that they would later renovate as their exquisite residence. These drawings were exhibited at the Vajra Hotel art gallery.

The most challenging piece was a small Khuru Math room which had been used for years for distilling beer. The first sketch showed it cluttered and with blackened walls. After careful cleaning, Rob painted it as the three-century old puja room it originally was — every inch of wall richly decorated with sacred Krishna-Lila murals.

Rob’s Bhaktapur work generated a lifelong friendship with Götz, and professional recognition that brought further work in cultural heritage. His skills had arrived at a moment when the world was athirst for all things Himalayan, including the Kathmandu Valley’s ten World Heritage sites. Rob deeply appreciated the works of the great traditional Newa Malla Blood of the Ogress, Drakmar.
Artisans and honed what he saw into radiant compositions that elicited ancient memories and enticed new perceptions.

Before long, Rob was engaged by the Nepal government’s Department of Archaeology to accompany their team to Mustang. He travelled on foot and horseback to Lo Manthang, sketching the luminous, mineral-laden mountain-scape.

At the town of Lo, he spent hours on site, absorbing the forms and feelings of the buildings. He celebrated the rich red, white and black colours painted and poured down walls, to call forth the protection of the gods, Manjushri, Avalokitesvara, and Vajrapani on vulnerable building corners and doorways. He vividly highlighted the ram skulls and horns that are positioned above an opening to protect the inhabitants against malicious spirits.

When Rob met Mary Slusser, cultural researcher and author of Nepal Mandala, she was impressed with his virtuoso artwork and arranged for him to show at the Sackler Gallery, part of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. That exhibition, ‘Earth Door, Sky Door, Paintings of Mustang’ in 1999 introduced the global art world to Robert Powell. His works embraced and slipped beyond the boundaries of ethnography into apparitional forms that reflect the essence of the Himalaya. Michael F’Sullivan of The Washington Post said it well. ‘Robert draws buildings in an animistic way that reveals something that lies beyond what can be seen.’

In 1992, Rob married Lieve Aerts, a Belgian woman and teacher of yoga and chi qong, who became his partner for life. After three decades happily settled in the centre of the culture that he portrayed so well, Rob contracted a lung infection that left his health vulnerable. Rehabilitating at length in Europe, he was advised not to return to the poor air quality of Kathmandu. Rob and Lieve moved to Koh Samui, Thailand, where he designed the Kamalaya spa and an exquisite home for themselves that encompassed huge hillside boulders, lush trees and a sublime view over the Gulf of Thailand. As the inside trees grew, so did the building, with some roof sections rebuilt several times to accommodate the surging foliage.

In Thailand, Rob expanded upon the Himalayan themes that had fascinated him. Rams’ horns that protected the doors of Lo Manthang grew to a full, fantastical wall of hornery.

Mountainsides that had housed the awesome Bamyan Buddhas in northern Afghanistan were re-depicted with dakinis, looming, sensual female figures with small fangs to ward off treacherous foes. He discovered new media, moving into acrylics to capture the brilliant, evanescent skies and water around them, and to explore singularly potent spiritual symbols.

In 2019 Andrei Jewell made the documentary, Enchanted Matter, capturing Rob’s life, art and philosophy. Sadly his health gradually deteriorated. He passed away with Lieve at his side, in a room brightened by a view to a brilliant, orange-flowered tree, with music and candles to accompany his final journey.

Robert will not be forgotten. He will live on in our memories as a beloved, gentle being and a prodigious creator of wondrous works of art, who encouraged us to let the strange and beautiful lift us into enchantment.

Linda Kentro and James Giambrone are founders of the Indigo Art Gallery in Kathmandu.
The pandemic affected every facet of Nepal’s economy, environment and socio-cultural life.

Alisha Sijapati

It was December 2019, and world was gearing up for a brand new decade. The most worrying things in most people’s minds were the climate crisis and Trumpism. The 2020s were expected to be a harbinger of new hopes and beginnings. Then the coronavirus pandemic hit, throwing the world upside down, sowing uncertainty, loss and panic across the world.

The government promptly established the Covid-19 Crisis Management Committee (CCMC) after the second Covid-19 case was detected, and Nepal was one of the first countries in the region to go into strict nationwide lockdown.

“We panicked before time and when it was time to act, the people have given up fighting Covid, when they should be even more vigilant now,” public health expert Sher Baburaj Pun told Nepal Times, warning about the virus variants that could make the pandemic spread even faster.

Pun adds: “The government had ample time to learn from China, Europe and other countries to curb the spread of the virus, but it lacked the commitment and resources. Because of this, things could get worse.”

When the first Covid-19 case was recorded in January, Pun who was an employee at the Sukraraj Hospital saw people returning from China get ostracised. Then the discrimination shifted to people from the plains, and to frontline health workers.

In Kathmandu, many doctors, nurses, caregivers were asked to move out from their rented apartments. “Covid unleashed the worst side of people and this will have a long term effect,” Pun adds.

Indeed, the impact has gone beyond strictly public health aspects of the disease. The prolonged lockdowns, uncertainty, job loss, and lack of social contact has led to pandemics of depression and mental health problems, suicides, exacerbated the condition of those with pre-existing health conditions.

Statistic also show a direct correlation between the lockdown period and the incidents of gender-based violence and rape, which also rose dramatically in April-August.

The lockdowns did have some indirect positive impact: the AQI in Kathmandu and the plains improved dramatically in April-July as vehicles went off the roads. The number of highway fatalities went down by half to less than 700 in March-August 2020, compared to the same period the previous year.

“Nepalis outside the urban sphere have very little idea about mental health, and the lockdown was not helpful at all. Being cooped up at home for months and being socially distanced is one of the main causes for the high number of suicides,” explains psychiatrist Kamal Gautam at Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) Nepal.

Nepal Police data shows that the monthly total of reported suicides in Nepal shot up to 972 in July from 668 in June, and 352 in January before the lockdowns.

“If people do not get treatment in time and still think mental health is a taboo, suicides are bound to happen. Economic hardships and
being cooped up at home are the major reasons for the increase in the number of suicides,” Gautam says.

A survey by TPO Nepal with over 2,000 participants showed some symptoms of psychological disorders such as anxiety and stress. Gautam blames the increasing disorders to the ‘infodemic’ of death and sickness in the mainstream press and social media. “What do you do at home for three months? Get on social media and become experts on every topic possible and perhaps misinform people creating panic,” Gautam warned.

There was also an alarming rise in gender-based violence. In April, the group WOREC Nepal registered 36 cases of domestic violence against women, but by July this number had risen to 380. Forms of violence included domestic violence, rape, attempted rape and sexual abuse.

“It’s women who have had to bear the brunt of the Covid lockdown. The economic hardship and the increasing mental and sexual frustration in men has led to an increase of such incidents. Those who are weaker in the family get attacked,” says WOREC’S Sulochana Khanal.

Statistics show that suicide and violence against women increased steeply during the lockdown and started falling gradually when it was lifted in August. Similarly, as businesses opened and traffic picked up in August, air pollution in Kathmandu Valley and along highways got worst and the number of fatalities on the roads soared.

By the Dasain-Tihar festival in November, the number of deaths on the roads had spiked to 524 after falling to 52 in May.

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Everyone is in a rush, where do they have to go?”, asks a frustrated Traffic Police spokesperson, Shyam Krishna Adhikari. “People have been driving more recklessly after the lockdown, they are drinking and driving because there is less checking.”

Nepal also had high hopes for Visit Nepal 2020 with a target of welcoming 2 million tourists. But the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) was forced to cancel the campaign.

Tourist arrival figures show a dramatic drop after March to zero for three months after, and although the numbers picked up a bit after flights resumed in October, it looks like 2021 will also be a washout.

“Despite recent vaccine developments, it will take a few years for people to start travelling as they used to. The tourism sector will likely recover by mid-2022,” says Deepak Raj Joshi, former CEO of NTB. “But if we are well equipped for other future crises, communicate to the world about our preparedness and tap into the growing South Asian market, we can recover.”

Joshi’s motto is: “Survive 2020, revive in 2021 and thrive in 2022.”
Child marriages spike during pandemic

Faced with the economic fallout of the pandemic, under-age marriages have increased

Marty Logan and Shuddha Shree Maharjan

Thirty child marriages took place in one municipality in Sarlahi District during the lockdown earlier this year. This startling fact highlights how girls are at particular risk as the Covid-19 crisis impacts Nepal’s economy.

The legal marriage age in Nepal is 20. Globally, girls who marry before 18 are considered child brides, yet close to 40% girls under the age of 18 are married in Nepal, making the country one of the worst examples in Asia.

There were more child marriages than usual in Sarlahi, Daulikh and Surkhet districts during the lockdown, says Samita Pradhan of the Women’s Reproductive Rights Programme at the Centre for Agro-ecology and Development (CAED). “I think people are following their culture-marry your daughters at an early age because they are a burden.”

A survey by the British agency Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) shows that 11 out of 332 girls had been married in the four districts during the lockdown, and Room to Read said it had discovered 49 cases in the past three years.

“Children were not going to school, so they had more time and parents might have thought ‘let them go,'” says Pradhan.

In Nepal, following the 2015 earthquakes, child marriages rose when increased economic pressure led to more marriages of under-aged boys and girls.

“Deception of houses and property and interruption of livelihoods from the earthquake resulted in additional financial strain. For some parents, this directly related to decisions made to marry daughters early,” according to the report, Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia.

Factors for child marriage are similar in most humanitarian situations, says Apokhyra Rana Khatri at the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Nepal: “One very important driver is the socio-cultural norms and practices, which value girls less. It starts from there.”

In Dolakha and Sindhpulchok, the trend of arranged marriages before age 18 had been decreasing before the earthquake. Love marriages and elopements among older adolescents rose after the earthquake. Each area is a unique setting for child marriage, with the level of education, proximity to urban areas, culture and religion playing instrumental roles.

Puja of Godaita Rural Municipality in Sarlahi says she got married during the lockdown and was 20 at the time. Puja’s father, Raj Kumar, says his daughter is ‘marriageable’. “I married two of my daughters only after they reached the age of 20,” says Raj Kumar. “I married my third daughter Puja in March to a man who is working in a foreign country, because they did not ask for a dowry. I could not say no to such an offer because I already have debt to pay and if I have to take further loans for dowry in order to marry my daughters, I will die of debt.”

His reasons for arranging Puja’s marriage echo those often heard from parents: “I have five daughters and you know how hard it is to marry daughters in our society,” he says.

Financial issues can lead families to push their daughters to get married early, because it is one person less to feed and clothes. However, experts also argue that there is also the notion of having to get girls married before 18.

“But the biggest reason for child marriage we could draw after investigating was the economic cause,” says Anju Sah, a gender and sexual reproductive health rights activist in Sarlahi. Parents were also worried about their daughters eloping because of the growing use of smartphones that girls and boys use to meet, chat and sometimes to arrange to elope.

The lockdown also became an incentive to some families as they could easily complete marriage rituals of girls between 16-18 with smaller budgets.

They are mostly illiterate and they often have a hard time figuring out what to do if any kind of problems come their way,” says Sah. Young mothers are unable to birth normal babies, while pregnancy and motherhood also take a toll on their health. Misscarriages are also common among young mothers.

When we talked to Puja in November, she had returned from her in-laws’ to live with her parents while she wrote the Grade 11 exams.

“My husband and I don’t have plans to have children until I finish my studies. There is no pressure from my relative to have kids right now. I am lucky to have a husband who is understanding and supports my studies,” Puja says.

Creating opportunities for families to lessen the impact of the current economic downturn and raising awareness on gender-based violence would go a long way in reducing child marriage says Rana Khatri.

“Reopening schools is a key step in eliminating the risk of child marriage during the pandemic,” Samita Pradhan from CAED told Nepal Now podcast about 38 child marriages that had occurred in Sarlahi during the lockdown.

In September we began to follow up that story.

Sarlahi staff of the NGO confirmed that the marriages took place in just one ward, Godalita-10. But they corrected the number to 30. One of the names they provided was that of Puja, and soon after that we contacted Puja and her father, but they both denied that she was 18 when she got married, insisting she had been 20.

We then reached out to municipal officials in Sarlahi. One of them denied that the reported marriages had taken place, while another confirmed that “a large number” had occurred.

Another NGO told us no child marriages happened in the ward during lockdown, adding Puja had not been married, but only engaged.

Conflicting information is a shared experience for organisations doing work around child marriage. While parents are aware of the legal marrying age, marriages continue to take place before girls reach the legal age.

Official documents providing evidence of their marriage are often missing.

Some names have been changed.