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# Fight amidst the ruins

Nearly a month after he abruptly dissolved the Lower House and called for early elections, Prime Minister Oli is looking politically isolated and increasingly on the defensive. But he is behaving as if he is already on the campaign trail.

Oli is also ensuring he has geopolitical support from both India and China. Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali is on a three-day visit to New Delhi 14-16 January. His main mission is ostensibly Covid-19 vaccines, but he may be laying the groundwork for a visit to India by PM Oli.

All this has added fuel to the fire in Nepal's already volatile political milieu. Oli's critics say he is getting ready to sell his soul to New Delhi to ensure his political longevity. They trace his U-turn to visits to Kathmandu by India's spy chief Samant Goel and Foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla in November and December.

Prime Minister Oli gave two interviews to two pro-Narendra Modi Indian television channels this week. Holding forth in Hindi, he appeared to be trying to correct negative perception about himself in India.

But even Oli's critics at home

were impressed by his defanging of an anchor, who had earlier used derogatory terms and labeled him a Chinese stooge.

In the sometimes rambling interviews, Oli came across almost as a theologian-- recounting the glorious cultural ties between India and Nepal, and alluding profusely to Nepal's Vedic past. Oli was softening his image in India, while playing to the domestic gallery.

The Nepal Communist Party (NCP) faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal have peeled away most of Oli's supporters in the party, which is now as good as split.

The fight henceforth is about who gets the party name and the Sun election symbol. On Wednesday Dahal warned he would "unleash a hurricane" if the Election Commission did not give him the party symbol.

The Supreme Court resumed hearings this week on 13 writ petitions against the House dissolution, but was bogged down in procedural matters on whether it should be heard by a full bench or a constitutional one.

As prime minister, Oli has clout over the Election Commission and the Supreme Court. But the Dahal-


Nepal faction is piling on pressure from the streets, civil society, former Chief Justices, and on social and mainstream media for House restoration.

As nationwide demonstrations continue, the split in the party has now percolated down to the provinces. Analysts say that whichever way the Supreme Court rules, it will be the NCP that will lose out. A party with 65% majority in Parliament and leading six of the seven provincial governments has frittered it all away because two top leaders could not get along.

Although Prime Minister Oli sees himself as a shrewd politician, his biggest failure has, ironically, been politics. He has failed while in office to accommodate rivals, if only to make his own position more secure. He chose confrontation, and seems ready to take the party down with him.

The NCP feud has also intensified a power struggle within the opposition Nepali Congress (NC). Sher Bahadur Deuba wants elections, while his rival Ram Chandra Poudel does not. Even if the House is restored, however, the NC will be kingmaker as both NCP factions will need its 60 MPs to form the next government.

Meanwhile, the Chinese have not given up trying to keep a party they helped unify, intact. One option being considered is to have both top leaders take part in cathartic self-criticism that Communists are famous for. But with so much bad blood between Oli and Dahal, that is not likely.

Waiting on the wings are the RPP with its pro-Hindu right monarchist agenda, and the JSP, which is trying to cash in on public disillusionment with the old parties. 

**NATIONAL EARTHQUAKE SAFETY DAY**  
15 JANUARY 2021

**Be prepared**  
EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2

**Lessons not learnt from 2015**  
PAGE 14-15



**BLACK MONEY Love**



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# Be prepared



14-20 JANUARY 2011



11-17 JANUARY 2013



9-15 JANUARY 2015

destruction and fear.

Today, Kathmandu's population is 3 million. Buildings are densely-packed and most are multi-storey concrete structures. Kathmandu ranks #1 on the list of Top Ten cities in the world most vulnerable to a catastrophic earthquake.

The magnitude 7.8 and 7.3 quakes in 2015 were warnings for Nepal to be prepared. Nearly 9,000 people were killed in 14 districts in and around Kathmandu, but the casualties could have been much higher if the intensity was a little higher, and the shaking had lasted a few seconds more.

And, as our report this week on school reconstruction shows, the number of children who would have been killed had the quake not struck on Saturday at noon, is so high as to be unthinkable. That danger is not over. Seismic resistant classrooms and school retrofitting is one of the most urgent investments that Nepal can make.

The good news, as we report, is that most schools that were damaged in 2015 have been built back stronger. The attention of school administrators should now be on Covid-19 safety when classes resume, as well as upgrading the curriculum.

But we also need to move beyond central Nepal that was impacted by the 2015 quakes to make classrooms safer in other parts of the country. This is most urgent in western Nepal, which Himalayan seismologists say, has not seen a mega quake for nearly 700 years, and one is long overdue.

To be sure, a 8.5 magnitude earthquake epicentred in western Nepal will be a regional catastrophe, affecting the densely-populated north Indian plains, and scientists say its impact on Kathmandu could actually be worse than the 2015 disaster.

The most important lesson we must learn on National Earthquake Safety Day from the 40 seconds of shaking at 11:56am on 26 April 2015 is that we have to be better prepared — strengthening existing schools, hospitals and public buildings, enforce a building code on new ones, follow zoning laws, pre-position digging equipment and

supplies, conduct drills for search, rescue, and relief. This is not panic-mongering, it is a question of life or death.

Every Earthquake Safety Day over the past two decades, this newspaper has carried the same message:

let's be prepared. Ironically, an editorial three months before the 2015 earthquake struck was titled 'Preparing to be prepared'.

The message bears repeating: the next big earthquake in Nepal is not a question of if, but when.

**The next big earthquake in Nepal is not a question of if, but when.**

## ONLINE PACKAGES



SHAKY GROUND

As we mark 23rd National Earthquake Safety Day on 15 January, *Nepali Times* delves into why quakes are so devastating in Nepal, infrastructures that stand high intensity tremors and how retrofitting can be a cost effective approach against the disaster. Video only on our YouTube channel. Story: [pages 14-15](#).



ZERO COST JOBS

Nepali migrant workers usually pay hefty fees to recruiters who get them jobs overseas. Sometimes it is equivalent to a year's earnings in the Gulf or Malaysia. One job agency in Kathmandu offers zero cost job placements. At International Manpower, job applicants do not have to pay recruitment fees and tickets. Watch video. Story: [page 4](#).



COVID AND RELATIONSHIPS

Heeding the needs of loved ones in these testing times can help sustain relationships, writes mental health counselor and researcher Anjana Rajbhandary. Watch her vlog where she talks about how to nurture relationships in the time of corona. Her column: [page 12](#).

### DIRTY AIR

If the people of Kathmandu don't get organised and get the insane pollution sorted fast ('Dirty politics = Dirty air,' Sonia Awale, #1043), queues in the hospital's will grow and many tears will follow.

**Niall O'Caomhanach**

### CANCER IN NEPAL

The main cause of cancer in Nepal isn't food but pollution (Nepal's other pandemic: cancer', #1043). The quality of the air in the cities is shocking, one of the worst in the world. Just breathing Kathmandu air is like smoking a packet of cigarettes a day.

**Anna Maria Mitchell**

- Processed food, unhealthy and stressful lifestyles, anxiety and a polluted environment are behind this pandemic of cancer.

**Kalpna Ghimire**

### TOURISM

The sentiment is on the right path but, as so often in Nepal and elsewhere, it is talk without any serious action ('Survive, revive, thrive', Editorial, #1043). Good editorial piece, but who is listening or taking action? Since the start of the epidemic we have read much pious sentiment but, as days stretched to months, nothing has been done to take any action. To enable the sentiments expressed requires enormous effort from communities, industry, all levels of government in an effectively coordinated manner. The tourism industry must shoulder wider ethical and social responsibility than it has. Nepal gives every appearance of lacking, the breadth of vision, the capacity generally to rise above narrow self-interest to bring about the changes the Editorial envisions. Does Nepal truly and wholeheartedly want tourism, foreign visitors, foreign investment?

**Marcus Cotton**

- Definitely a valid assessment. Spreading income by tourism is maybe not the best tool to improve lives, there must be more reliable and stable economic tools/ skills to avert migration, to uplift poverty-tourism, as is being proven by the pandemic. Nepal is truly an attractive destination and it needs upgrading. Just now I tried to apply for my visa and had to go through immigration Nepal portal: my goodness, not an improvement. So many choices, all digital. How will travelers ever get through this? I am a regular, but for first-time visitors this portal is an obstacle.

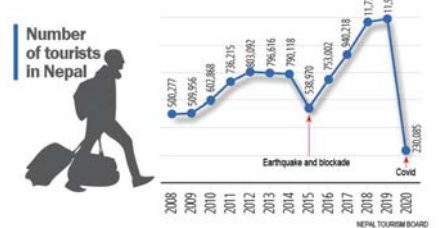
**Renate Schwarz**

- Nepal needs a balanced view on tourism: a balance between numbers and revenue. A realistic approach guided by the principle of sustainability to benefit the local communities as well. But, first and foremost, addressing poor infrastructure, human capital and environment degradation. What this pandemic has taught us is that we all need to start a new relationships with nature.

**Bijay Amatya**

**Times.com**

## WHAT'S TRENDING



### Survive, revive, thrive

*Editorial*

Nepal's tourism industry has hit rock bottom, but this also provides us with an opportunity to re-invent the existing model. To find out how, read the story at [nepalitimes.com](#) and join the discussion.



**Most reached and shared on Facebook**



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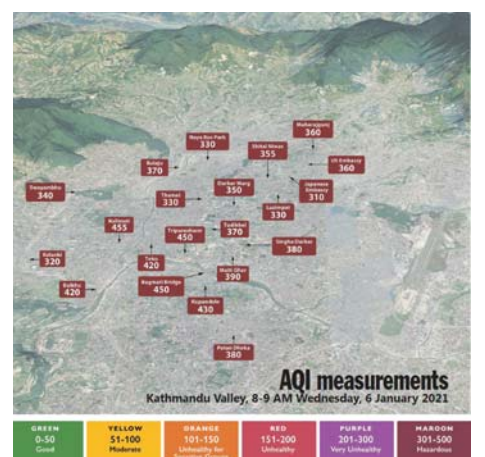
### Drawing a line in the sand

*by Bhrikuti Rai*

A year after the murder of Dilip Mahato, an activist against illegal sand mining in Dhanusa and the government's assurance to put an end to the unlawful activities, contractors have not stopped extracting sand from riverbeds. Read the full story and watch the video on *Nepali Times*.



**Most popular on Twitter**



### Dirty politics = Dirty air

*by Sonia Awale*

Last week Kathmandu's pollution levels reached record high but the air in the Valley is consistently bad and it is a clear indication of governance failure. Watch *Nepali Times* reporters as they fan out across Kathmandu with AQI monitors to measure air pollution.



**Most visited online page**

## QUOTE TWEETS



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Kathmandu air pollution hits record high

The #airpollution emergency in #Kathmandu puts the elderly, those with asthma and other respiratory ailments at high risk, and would be especially dangerous to those with #Covid19.



**Kashish Das Shrestha @kashishds**  
Danger indoors: COVID  
Danger outdoors: record pollution  
Prime Minister @kpharmaolint interested in neither emergency.  
Nepal+Nepalis abandoned.  
Why can't govt at least:  
Impose odd/even rule  
Actively crackdown on garbage burning  
Test vehicle missions, impound those who fail



**Ash Zayn Birthday @Aithmsa10**  
The beautiful city is polluted. Government should put effort to reduce the air pollution as soon as possible.



**Smriti Baral @smritibara1**  
Friends in kathmandu, Take care of yourself and your loved ones!



**Ashesh Sharma @asheshbro**  
And rolling back on the odd even rule was a big mistake. It should be maintained with provisions for public transport and essential services..



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Ashutosh Tiwari's new column 'CrossCurrent' delves into issues faced by women #entrepreneurs in #Nepal, who do not get the support they need.



**Prapti Sherchan @parrapapap**  
Holding up half the economy (but doesn't get the support she needs, financial or otherwise) - Thanks Ashutosh Tiwari for penning this article which shines a light on the issues faced by #WSMEs in #Nepal.



**Kul Chandra Gautam @kulcgautam**  
Excellent & much-needed column on challenges facing women #entrepreneurs in #Nepal. Hope Ashutosh Tiwari will also share some inspiring success stories & role models in future editions.



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Sangam Mahato remembers her brother Om Prakash Mahato who was murdered on 10 Jan 2020 by the sand mafia after he spoke out against illegal mining. A year later his family still seeks justice and illegal mining continues unabated. @bbhrikutireports.



**Dinesh J Thapa @DineshThapad74**  
The injustice in this country boils my blood. The next issue to fight for is Social justice. STOP IMPUNITY!

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Premonition

Twenty years ago this week, it is almost as if we all had a premonition of the disaster that awaited the country later in 2001. There was a sense of foreboding at the intensifying insurgency, the political disarray in the democratic process, and dysfunctional governance. In fact, there are a lot of aspects of 2001 that are familiar to us here in 2021.

Our Editorial in *Nepali Times* #26 of 19-25 January 2001 looked at the Nepali Congress party convention in Pokhara where Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala was facing a mutiny by supporters of Sher Bahadur Deuba. Very similar to the power struggle that is going on now within the nearly-split Nepal Communist Party.

This excerpt from the Editorial will show readers that in Nepal history repeats itself as a farce:

The Congress' Kumbha Mela in Pokhara this weekend promises some pyrotechnics, but nothing major—just another boring bout between Girija Koirala and the mentors of Sher Bahadur Deuba.

No one expects a real resolution of the crisis of leadership and governance in this country post-Pokhara. And even though the Prime Minister, who is also party supremo, seems to have got his electoral sums right and will probably keep both posts, this is unlikely to do anything to placate the Deuba squad. Koirala sits on two chairs, and the rebels will continue trying to pull both chairs from under him.



So nothing has really changed, except this feeling of free fall. The government is getting ready to arm a paramilitary force, and international arms dealers are circling like vultures. The ruling party had better sort out its power struggle for this country's sake, if not their own. Just look at the alternative. Trapped by the irreversible slogans of their own revolution, the ultra-left is inviting a crisis that could one day even cost us our independence. Those on the far right are set on a course of democratic reversal. And what does the government do? It plays petty games by blocking news and current affairs on FM, forgetting that rumours like the ones that fanned the flames last month can only be countered by open, transparent and responsible media.

Scapegoating selected media, and blaming the messenger is not going to mask the incompetence of a government that demanded an apology from a foreign actor for something he never said. Banning news on FM is the kind of decision we have come to expect from officials so insecure that they are afraid of their own shadow.

From the archives of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: [www.nepalitimes.com](#)

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# A few good agents

Recognising good examples among migrant worker recruiters is as important as holding the bad ones accountable

At the close of 2020, the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) conducted a sting operation on a recruiting agency that was fleecing workers. The raid of its staff was made possible by migrant workers who turned to the public system for help, and it responded efficiently in their favour.



**LABOUR MOBILITY**  
Upasana Khadka

This was not a one-off operation, but the eleventh one in December. It sent a strong message to the industry that every vulnerable migrant that is being cheated could be a potential whistleblower.

There was nothing exceptional about the way the recruitment agency was operating—similar transactions, potentially of higher amounts, are a norm. Interestingly, there are also a few exceptions at the other extreme: agencies that practice ethical recruitment.

One such agency is International Manpower (IMR), a recruiter that does not charge migrants any fees. As one of the largest recruiters in Nepal engaged with over a dozen employers in Malaysia and now diversifying to the Gulf, it has sent over 6,000 workers without charging them any fees.

But it is an uphill battle, says Y B Rai from IMR. “We have been around for 17 years but have been practicing ethical recruitment only since 2016. For a couple of years, we adopted a hybrid model before we transitioned to ethical recruitment,” says Rai, adding that there is a steep learning curve.

To be sure, the path IMR has chosen is fraught with challenges. Employers who want to source ethically, audit closely before partnering with agents and run a thorough check on their background and operation module.

In the past four years of operation, IMR has often turned down employers unwilling to pay service fees, even though it comes at a cost of foregoing easy money. The act of turning down business opportunities comes as a surprise to many employers who are used to getting kickbacks for job quotas.

And migrants are in disbelief when IMR staff counsel them on not paying a single rupee for the jobs, because migrants when seeking jobs, tend to associate recruitment costs positively with ‘job quality’.

At Kathmandu airport last week, Kishori Mahara was headed to the UAE through IMR’s support. He said that till the last moment he



Nepali migrant workers usually pay hefty fees to recruiters who get them jobs overseas.



Kishori Mahara from Mahottari left Kathmandu last week for the UAE.

still could not believe that he had not paid any fees for his job. He had paid agents in the past for jobs in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

IMR staff admit that they are an anomaly in the industry, and they have to forego easy and profitable offers. “To be able to hand over this business to our children with pride is a dream,” says Pranay Rai of IMR, who says the long-term economic gain of building a clean reputation is more important.

The experience with both IMR and Manaslu (the agency raided in December) underscores important learning points. Employers are best placed to influence recruiter behaviour, but a big share of employers hiring Nepalis would prefer sourcing Nepali workers through recruiters like Manaslu rather than those with ethical standards.

The Ethics Practitioners Association of Nepal (EPAN), an umbrella organisation of recruiters committed to ethical recruitment, has not been able to attract a single employer. Job offers by HR

departments of employers are often allocated based on kickbacks received. Employer HR visits to Kathmandu for interviews are often sponsored by recruiters who go overboard to lock in future demand and pass on the costs to the worker.

This unhealthy competition extends beyond borders to thousands of recruiters from the Subcontinent. The extent of unethical practices in the migrant labour industry was exposed during Covid-19 pandemic.

The Malaysian Government has been raiding its glove companies and exposing incidences of human rights abuse after the companies came to the global spotlight amid soaring profits during the pandemic. But pressure from third countries is still a rarity, while labour law enforcement in destination countries remains lax.

There are a number of examples of pressure from third countries that have led to improved working conditions, but it is also a reminder that obtaining a secure working environments is a tall order. Unless recruiters are seen as part of a larger transnational ecosystem, involving multiple profit-motivated players engaged in unethical practices, Nepalis will have to continue to be content with the existing provisions.

Raids like the sting operation last month, are necessary but not sufficient for systemic changes. Embassies that have the proximity advantage with the destination country players need to be further strengthened. Labour agreements that could form the basis for influencing how migrants are treated abroad need to be implemented.

Ethical recruiters like IMR and members of EPAN have received no

support from the government. As DOFE ramps up raids and suspends operations of fraudulent agents, it should also emphasise the good examples.

EPAN and IMR’s experience shows that pivoting to the ethical track requires additional resources and could entail short-term financial losses. Policies that make the system rewarding for ethical agents should be a government priority, and international organisations like the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and IOM (International Organisation for Migration) that have expertise in this area and the global reach need to be leveraged.

The ILO, for instance, has piloted a project promoting ethical recruitment of Nepali workers in Jordanian garment factories.

With vested interest groups, political interference, regulatory loopholes and profits at the cost of the needy, it is difficult to picture ethical behaviour. But crossborder intermediation services will remain in demand given the attraction for overseas jobs, since 90% of recruitment is driven by recruiters.

Perhaps the disproportionate focus on just the recruitment costs in Nepal’s migration governance is because it is often the root to subsequent vulnerabilities faced by migrants, and there is some semblance of control as the transaction takes place within Nepal’s jurisdiction. But salaries, associated benefits, and how they are treated, all affect the wellbeing of a migrant worker.

Sting operations are good examples to help curb fraudulent activities, particularly as the shrinkage in job opportunities

due to COVID-19 heightens the risks of unethical practices. Lack of employment opportunities has spurred unhealthier competition among recruiters and more desperate migrants. But a government reward system that recognises and supports pioneer recruiters opting the ethical route is also needed.

The migrants at the airport last week said they learnt about IMR through word of mouth and Facebook. They were lucky to land these jobs without paying fees because all overseas vacancies in Nepal are posted as ‘no cost’ in the public domain.

The good players in the industry need to be publicly recognised, provided training opportunities and other incentives that will help them attract both employers and migrants. Only then can they build credibility and lead the way. 🇳🇵

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



Nepali migrant workers usually pay hefty fees to recruiters who get them jobs overseas. Sometimes it is equivalent to a year’s earnings in the Gulf or Malaysia. One job agency in Kathmandu offers zero cost job placements. At International Manpower, job applicants do not have to pay recruitment fees and tickets.

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## prabhu BANK

### Nepal's own satellite

The Nepal Telecommunication Authority has received nine expressions of interest from companies for the country’s own satellite to use its geo-stationary orbit slot. NTA says the selection will be made on a point-system to choose the most suitable company. Among those who have bid for the project are companies from China, India, Dubai, Germany, UK and Singapore.

### TATA smart truck

TATA Motors has launched its newest smart compact truck, the TATA Intra V20, in Nepal

at a starting price of Rs1.9 million. Siprati Trading, with its extensive countrywide network for sales, service, and spare parts, will promote and distribute the new TATA vehicle in the country.

### Ncell Audio Class

Ncell has launched its Ncell Audio Class, an alternative learning platform that will enable students across the country to take curriculum-based courses on different subjects via audio format.

### Foodmandu in Pokhara

Foodmandu, the digital home delivery service

has spread its wings to Pokhara, after seeing sales boom during the pandemic when restaurants were closed. Foodmandu has agreements with hundreds of restaurants in Kathmandu and has its own network to deliver orders to customers who order online. Foodmandu has collaborated with 30 restaurants in Pokhara. Customers will get a 30% promo discount.

### What’s up, WhatsApp?

Facebook’s announcement that it will be using data of WhatsApp users has triggered a mass exodus to other platforms like Viber, Signal and Telegram around the world.

Users are concerned that WhatsApp may not be as secure as they thought. Previously, WhatsApp users could opt-out of sharing their phone number with Facebook. Users must agree to the new terms within 30 days or lose access to their accounts.

### Online Tax Payment

Everest Bank, with technical collaboration from Fonepay, has started an Online Inland Revenue Tax Payment System integrating with the Financial Comptroller General Office (FCGO). The electronic payment method will benefit customers by eliminating the hassle and lengthy process of physically visiting tax offices for



payments during the ongoing pandemic.

### New AAN committee

The Advertising Association of Nepal (AAN) held its 21st annual general meeting on Saturday to elect a new executive committee that will serve for three years. Som Prasad Dhital has been elected president while Narayan Kumar Shrestha is senior vice-president.



# Conquering the self

For former drug abuser turned Everest summiteer, it has been a lifelong expedition against addiction



'Walk with Wangda', is a campaign against substance abuse.



"It's the grueling climb of the mountain that showed me what I'm truly capable of," says Wangda Sherpa, for whom climbing is both therapy and a profession.

**Tulsi Rauniyar**

In 2017, Wangda Sherpa was experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms. One day, he woke up in the dark with severe pain and thought he was really dying. But he lived, and eighteen months later, he summited Mt Everest.

Wangda had been shooting up heroin, nitrovet and all manner of pills on and off for over 20 years. He went to rehab five times. The journey of recovery began when he realised he could not afford the addiction anymore.

"My brother couldn't see me in so much pain and misery, he gave me some money to buy drugs. I went to the dealer and it was he who recommended a rehabilitation centre," recalls Wangda. There were relapses, but he kept going back to seek treatment.

Unlike many drug abusers, who are shunned by family, Wangda received support. It was mostly his mother. "As an addict, my perspectives were myopic. My mother helped me embrace a life of patience and great compassion. I see it now—but I did not see it then," he says.

Wangda was born in Bhutan, lost his father before he turned five, and was raised by his mother in Nepal. He was athletic as a child and grew up aspiring to join the British Army. But with his single-mother as the key earner, the family was always in a financial crisis.

Wangda chose to follow in his elder brother's footsteps and trained as a trek leader soon after his SLC exams. But there was a parallel journey to the one he was making physically. It was a psychological one in which he would relapse, come out clean and stay clean for several years and then repeat.

It was after many years of overcoming physical and emotional challenges that he

climbed Mt Everest, unfurling the 'Say No to Drugs' banner to the summit in May 2019. That was when Wangda shot into the limelight, and brought discussion about addiction out in the open. He was in demand as an inspirational figure on social media, with many idolising him as someone who had emerged winner in a difficult battle.

Since Everest, Wangda has gone on to climb Mt Elbrus (5,642 m) the highest mountain in Europe, and he aims to do all the highest summits in seven continents. Now 38, he also wants to inspire other recovering addicts to participate in 'Walk with Wangda', his campaign against substance abuse.

He will invite those who are recovering from addiction on climbing expeditions and treks to different places in Nepal, while counselling them with insights from his own personal journey.

"I see young boys struggling with addiction, lost in their lives. I see myself," says Wangda. "Through Walk with Wangda, I want to share the message that if I can recover,

they can too."

When he is not climbing mountains, Wangda goes to various rehabilitation centres to share his life story, hoping to inspire others. He says his vision is to help struggling addicts rehabilitate by talking about his own recovery process, using nature and mountaineering to become stronger, and more able to handle withdrawals.

Wangda uses climbing as both therapy and profession. He calls it a chance to turn off his conscious mind's always-on, chitter chatter. "No judgements, no distractions—just the tunnel-vision focus that climbing requires," he explains. The peace, meditative calm and effort of the physical activity, is also what he believes has helped him and can help many other addicts recover.

"Sober living after addiction does not



Wangda Sherpa overcame alcoholism to climb Mt Everest on 23 May 2019.

present an appealing option for young people in recovery who might have criminal records or bad credit and cannot afford or manage to live alone," says Wangda. For him, the willingness to do something and the support that he received from the mountaineering community provided him structure, and a group of peers that was crucial in his transition.

"When an individual is diagnosed with cancer, they are treated with kindness, compassion and understanding. Cancer patients are not cut off by their families or judged for being ill. This is how it should be for addicts trying to recover, as well," he says. "Unfortunately, this is not the case."

From a teenager who got into fights to a mountaineer who assists others with their

struggles, Wangda hopes his story can be the light that other drug abusers see on the other side of the tunnel. "Through my seven summits expedition, I want to carry a message to different parts of the world. The message that I wish I had received for myself: Say no to drugs."

When asked what it is about climbing mountains that helped him recover from two decades of addiction, he quotes Edmund Hillary, "It is not the mountains that I conquer, it is myself."

The mountain is the quintessential metaphor of Wangda's journey. He says: "Flat, effortless terrain untarnished by rocks did not produce the sober version of me. It's the grueling climb of the mountain that showed me what I'm truly capable of." 🇳🇵



# Why Nepal must legalise cannabis



Nearly 50 years after the United States government forced Nepal to ban the cultivation and use of cannabis, MP Sher Bahadur Tamang is on a crusade to have it legalised. The ban led to the impoverishment of Nepal's poorest communities by eliminating this important cash crop. Driving it underground, led to the formation of a police-politician nexus, and may have contributed to the rise of the Maoist insurgency decades later.

In this interview on the Saglo Samaj tv magazine program, Tamang tells host Kanak Mani Dixit how his Cannabis Cultivation (Management) Act could benefit Nepalis.

**Kanak Mani Dixit: What led you to register the bill to allow the legalisation of marijuana?**  
**Sher Bahadur**

**Tamang:** Throughout this campaign, we worked with many researchers and experts, and realised the great medicinal and economic value of cannabis. After feedback from the research team, we tabled this bill in Parliament. We believe this is one of the ways to alleviate rural poverty. It also comes at a time when there is a push internationally to legalise not just medicinal marijuana, and the use of the plant for many purposes, including recreational cannabis.

**Why did you have to register a private bill in Parliament?**

We met with political leaders and parliamentarians, as well as members of the general public, after we introduced the bill. The 1976 law banned cannabis, criminalising its use. A significant number of the general public view on recreational use of cannabis as being wrong and the users are condemned as गजेडी drug addicts. We sought to counter that belief and create a conversation around the many benefits of cannabis. At a time when marijuana use is gradually becoming more and more open and legal globally, the discourse is also gaining momentum quickly here at home.

**Cannabis has been an integral part of Nepal's social and cultural life, but it has carried a very negative connotation after the ban. Why?**

We worship Lord Shiva, a wise deity who recognised the great medicinal value of cannabis. Over the last 45 years, we were duped into believing that cannabis was harmful.

**How would this bill lift Nepalis from poverty?**

There is a competitive international market for cannabis. The country that forced us to ban the crop is now legalising or decriminalising it. Marijuana has been legalised for recreational use in countries like Canada and Uruguay, and for medical use in Thailand. But all of these countries need to cultivate the plants in



Homesteads growing cannabis look relatively more prosperous than those belonging to subsistence farmers in Makwanpur.

controlled environments in massive greenhouses, which means the production costs are high. Nepal, however, has the right climate and soil conditions for marijuana cultivation, which means our produce will be organic. Moreover, Purple Haze, a more potent type of marijuana which grows in the Himalayan region of Nepal, is extremely valuable and could be an important cash crop.

I believe that the United Nations will make marijuana legal and even encourage the world to plant it widely within our lifetime. The wide-ranging benefits are too important to ignore.

**There is a widely held belief that cannabis is a gateway drug to harder substances like cocaine and crystal meth.**

This campaign is entirely driven by science. That cannabis is a gateway drug to harder substances is a false assumption. On the contrary, it is an 'exit' drug, as controlled and prescribed marijuana use has proven to help people move away from substance abuse, including cigarette and alcohol addiction.

**Given Nepal's poor governance record, do you think that cannabis cultivation and trade can actually be regulated transparently?**

Those who do not believe that regulation and transparency are possible, have no business being in positions of leadership. If one cannot work to overcome poverty and provide opportunities to citizens, why hold any office at all?

**What is your answer to people who think the ban should stay and legalisation will lead to 'mafiasation'?**

If a national governing board monitors cannabis cultivation and collection for medical purposes, we will be able to take the product to the international market, create opportunities for foreign investment, and also generate employment nationally for farming and processing. Of course, the government will require that cannabis farmers and suppliers be licensed.

There is the possibility of 'mafiasation', as you say, if we are only talking about recreational cannabis. However, the amount of money that can be earned from the medicinal product will far exceed the amount that would be earned from recreational sales. Moreover, cannabis will be the foundation through which Nepal can make the jump to other products in the future.

**What do the people of Rukum, Rolpa and Makwanpur, and also your own constituency in Sindhupalchok, say about your draft bill?**

The bill does not allow farmers to convert their entire land for cannabis cultivation, just a portion of it. If, for instance, farmers use a certain part of their land to cultivate marijuana, they will not sit idly by watching the plants grow while the rest of their land remains untilled. They might grow other food grains or vegetables on the rest of their property. And what they will not eat, they will sell, bringing in income. They will not need to leave home and head for the Gulf for employment.

**From what you say cannabis is not a gateway drug, but a gateway plant that will have a positive impact right across the national economy?**

Exactly. Everybody will benefit from it. But amending the current law is not enough. There needs to be a regulatory board to decide how much control local governments have over cultivation, how much land farmers will be allocated, and how much they will be allowed to cultivate. Local governments could also gain a certain percentage of the revenue earned from production. That is why a new law is necessary.



Nepal Police raids cannabis farms accompanied by reporters.

**Do you expect renewed obstruction to the bill from the international community like there was in the past?**

I do not think there will be any such pushback. The cost of production of cannabis in other countries is much higher than it would be in Nepal. When I began this campaign, many friends, international experts, and scholars got in touch with me to say that Nepal needs only to create a pathway for cannabis cultivation, all other resources required for processing will be readily available. There is also a significant market for raw materials.

**Lord Shiva himself may be giving his blessings for the bill to be passed.**

(Laughs) Yes, our sages whom we worship as gods knew the benefits of cannabis. And today, Nepalis who live in poverty or toil in the desert heat of the Gulf, are our new gods. This bill can give them financial security so they do not have to migrate. Those are the people who will benefit directly from this bill.



This interview is based on the third episode of Saglo Samaj, a tv magazine program produced by Himalmedia which is broadcast every Monday, at 8:30 pm on Dish Home Channel 130. Go online to watch a trailer of the program.



# 5 Myths about the Tharu

Clearing some common misconceptions about the Tharu on their New Year on 14 January

● **Tom Robertson** in Chitwan

The Tharu make up 5% of Nepal's population. One in every 20 Nepalis is Tharu. They outnumber the Gurung, Limbu, and Newa peoples. And yet, most Nepalis often know very little about Tharu culture and history. There are many things are told about the Tharu people. Most are wrong.

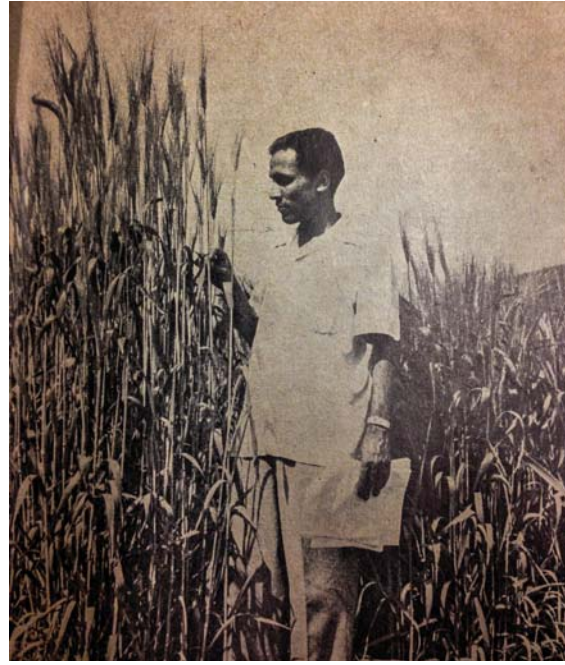
The first day of the Nepali month of माघ which this year falls on 14 January is 'Maaghi', the Tharu new year. माघ is also the day when tenants would decide whether to continue with their landlords, some of whom were Tharu and some पहाडी hill people or move elsewhere.

The Tharu are the original inhabitants of much of the Tarai, and there are several different groups each with its own language: The Kochila in the East, the Chitwan Tharu in the central area, and Dangaura, Deshauria, and Rana Tharu in the western Tarai. One anthropologist wrote a book about Nepal's Tharu called Many Tongues, One People.

The malaria eradication project in the 1960s dramatically changed Tharu lives. In Chitwan, for instance, in 1955 the Tharu (and related groups such as the Bote and Darai) formed almost 100% of the



These photos in Six Years of Nepal-American Cooperation, 1952–1958 (Kathmandu, 1959) compare traditional Tharu agriculture and modern 'scientific' agriculture. American officials often wrongly saw Chitwan evolving from unproductive 'backward' Tharu traditions to super-productive, science-based civilisation along the lines of the American Midwest.



region's population of 25,000. By 1970, they had dropped to 14%.

Birendra Mahato, Director of the Chitwan Tharu Culture Museum outside Sauraha, says: "Tourist guides and hotel owners used to spread very inaccurate ideas. They often put us down." Indeed, there are several misunderstandings about Tharu communities. Some of them are:

**Misconception 1: Historically, The Tharu Were Hunters**

**The Truth:** The Tharu were farmers who herded cattle and fished but did not hunt.

In The Kings of Nepal & the Tharu of the Tarai, Gisele Krauskopf

writes: 'Hunting as a subsistence technique to provide meat, is not central to the Tharu way of life .... Their subsistence is based on a close relationship between paddy cultivation and fishing. The Tharu used to live near the forest, but not in it. They were first and foremost forest clearers, which means that the forest had to be pushed back.'

**Misconception 2: The Tharu Lived in an Ancient Tarai Forest**

**The Truth:** The Tharu lived not in the forest but near it, over the years the forest grew back.

Krauskopf writes: 'Because of the relative isolation of the Tarai, a previously malaria-infested land,

prejudiced observers of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries created a false image of the Tharu ...as savage dwellers of a primeval forest--which the Tarai is not.'

**Misconception 3: Tharu Are Uncivilised जंगली**

**The Truth:** The Tharu made many ingenious adaptations to their Tarai environment.

According to this derogatory inaccuracy, the Tharu are forest dwellers little smarter than animals. They do not use their brains. They are too backward to wear clothes. But in fact, the Tharu have developed many skills useful for their Tarai environment: agriculture, irrigation,

house construction, fishing, handicrafts, herbal medicine, forest vegetables, midwifery, wood carving, and animal domestication.

**Misconception 4: The Tharu Never Got Malaria**

**The Truth:** Tharu got malaria less often than other groups, but infants often got it, and some died.

Many outsiders, and even some Tharu themselves, think that the Tharu never got malaria. They say Tharu did not get malaria because they ate snails, rice liquor, and spicy chilies. This is wrong. Elderly Tharu will tell you about malaria fever and shivers, and sometimes died from malaria. But it is true that compared to hill Nepalis, the Tharu had malaria less often and with fewer consequences.

**Misconception 5: Tharu Society Was Disconnected from Nepali Society**

**Truth:** Tharu groups before the 1960s had many interactions with other Nepalis and the Kathmandu government.

Tourist brochures often describe Tharu society with phrases such as 'untouched by civilisation' or 'forgotten by civilisation'. That is hardly the case. Even during malaria days, the Tharu had regular contact with groups from both the north and the south. Traders from the north would come every winter. In many places, Tharu tenants worked for hill landlords, or as land clearers and tax collectors. The Ranas relied on Tharu workers to build roads, provide supplies, drive elephants, and find tigers.

To learn more about the richness and complexity of Tharu life, please visit the Chitwan Tharu Culture Museum near Sauraha, Chitwan. Happy New Year.

*Tom Robertson, PhD has been researching malaria and Tharu history since 2007, and is an adviser to the Chitwan Tharu Culture Museum.*

## कोरोनाबाट सुरक्षित रहने तीन उपायहरू



कोरोनाबाट आफू पनि बचाउँ र अरुलाई पनि बचाऔं

युनिसेफसँगको सहकार्यमा,  
नेपाल सरकार, स्वास्थ्य तथा जनसंख्या मन्त्रालय  
र  
एनसेलद्वारा जनहितमा जारी

**Ncell**

**unicef**



नेपाल सरकार  
स्वास्थ्य तथा जनसंख्या मन्त्रालय



# The Hindu gods of

Laxmi, Vishnu and Ganesh co-exist with the Buddha in Thailand's multi-layered culture

● Moontae Jeong in Bangkok

Visitors from Nepal and India at Thailand's Suvarnabhumi Airport are often surprised to see a 15m long depiction of Hindu gods and demons churning the ocean to squeeze out the अमृत Elixir.

In another section of the terminal building is an ornate figure of Thotsakan almost touching the glass ceiling. This is the Thai name of Ravana, the King of Lanka in the Ramayana. The name of the airport itself, सुवर्णभूमि, means 'The Golden Land' in Sanskrit.

Across Thailand, the wat abound with images of Hindu deities even though they are Buddhist shrines. The architectural grammar and ornate structures hark back to the temples of the subcontinent, hinting at cultural influences that can be traced to past centuries.

Thailand is the largest Buddhist country in the world with 95% of its 69 million population following the religion. Those who consider themselves of the Hindu faith constitute just 0.03% percent of the population (22,100 people) according to the 2015 census.

Despite the very small number of Hindus here, elements of Hinduism permeate Thailand's socio-cultural life. Even as the group is a minority, various Hindu elements remain deeply embedded in the traditional culture and social life of the Thai people.

Waves of invasion left the residue of Hinduism in the Thai culture. And as is often the case with external influences, the influences have been absorbed and overlaid with Buddhist rituals seamlessly, giving them Thai characteristics.



Thai devotees at a Laxmi temple in the heart of Bangkok's business district.

Alongside their Buddhist beliefs, many Thais worship Hindu deities. One of them is the Brahma (Phra Phrom) at the famous Erawan Shrine in Bangkok. People in deep anguish are known to go to this shrine, and when a wish has been granted, devotees hire dancers to perform Ram Kae Bon, a dance performed to thank the god.

The Erwan Shrine at the corner of Ratchaprasong intersection in Bangkok was the site of the still-unsolved bomb attack in 2015

that killed 20 people and injured more than 120. No one claimed responsibility, and it is not known why this particular shrine was targeted. Despite the tragedy, the shrine soon regained its former popularity.

"People have different reasons for praying here. Some wish for good luck, others for health or a job. I am here to purify my mind and think about the direction of my life," says Natcha Chalayonravin, a flight attendant.

Another frequenter, Siwiban Nuchikaew, a dental nurse, speaks of her deep reverence and connection to the shrine. During a most difficult time of her life, she had stopped by chance in front of the shrine without really knowing who Brahma was and joined the others in prayer. "My prayers were answered and I have continued to return every month to offer gratitude," she says.

Statues of Ganesh, Indra (Phra In) and Shiva (Phra Isuan) can be found across Thailand. It is not uncommon

to see offerings being placed before the shrines of Ganesh, in the form of miniature elephants, garlands of fresh flowers, bananas or other fruits. Ganesh becomes a deity of significance, also because elephants are viewed as the national animal and mascot.

Numerous relics on temple walls, such as at Prasat Hin Phima in Korat, describe the episode of Krishna hunting wild boars. The temple, one of the biggest Hindu temples of Thailand, also carry evidence of

## Deities and divinity



**Laxmi**  
A shrine dedicated to Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, fortune, love, beauty, joy and prosperity is located in Gaysorn Village, a five-star shopping mall just opposite the Erawan Shrine at the Rachaprasong intersection at the heart of Bangkok. People believe the Laxmi shrine here sits in harmony with another site dedicated to Vishnu at a corner of the nearby Intercontinental Hotel, along with shrines to Trimurti and Ganesh at the Central World shopping mall.

**Vishnu**  
Vishnu is one of the principle deities of Hinduism, and is regarded as the preserver or the protector of creation. The Vishnu Shrine is located in front of the Intercontinental Hotel about 200m from the one dedicated to Brahma. The shrine portrays Vishnu standing on the shoulders of his steed Garuda, a mythical bird-like creature with divine attributes in Hinduism.



**Indra**  
Indra is an ancient Vedic deity in Hinduism, and is regarded as a guardian by some Buddhists. Indra's mythological power shares striking similarities with classical European deities such as the Greek/Roman Jupiter/Jesus and the Slavic Perun. He is also regarded as the god of thunder and lightning, and sits in front of Amarin Plaza, located just 100m from the Erawan Shrine and opposite the Intercontinental Hotel.

**Trimurti**  
Trimurti is a triple deity of supreme divinity in Hinduism, combining the cosmic roles of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer, with individual Hindu denominations interpreting this trinity in different ways. The Trimurti Shrine is located at the Rachaprasong Intercontinental on the corner of Central World Plaza, diagonally opposite the Erawan Shrine.





# Buddhist Thailand



ALL PHOTOS: MOONTAE JEONG

Buddhist and Animist influences, just as many other historical monuments in Thailand do.

The hills in northern Thailand bordering Laos are believed to be the eastern tail-end of the Himalaya. And so, Shiva, has a temple dedicated to him in the Issan province in northern Thailand on the Laos border. The word Issan itself comes from the Thai name for Shiva, Isuan อิศาน, which could be derived from the Sanskrit शिव.

The royal household of Thailand



The Erawan shrine in Bangkok depict a statue of Lord Bramha, the Hindu god of creation.

has given continuity to the Hindu traditions that has been in their family for centuries. Thai Royal emblem depicts Garuda, the vahana of Vishnu (Phra Narai), while Brahm Luang (Royal Brahmins) continue to be assigned the duty of engaging with the royalties to lead funerals, weddings and state ceremonies. This includes the Royal Ploughing Ceremony to ensure a bountiful harvest.

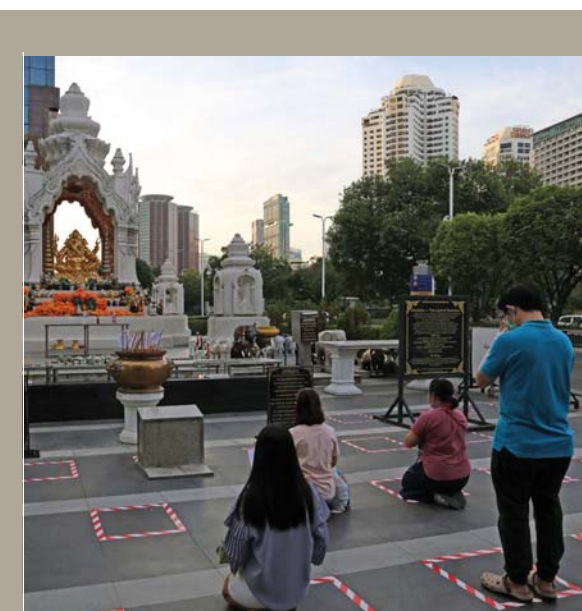
The late Thai monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej was an ardent reader of the Buddhist and Hindu scriptures. He also recreated some of the stories through his own research. He was particularly enthused by the life of King Janak and his benign ways as the leader of a country. He is known to have sent his researchers to Janakpur, Nepal, for their own reading of the ancient kingdom of Vidheha, part of which is now known as Janakpur.

The Hindu roots of Thai culture are also evident at the temple of Devasathan, which was established in 1784 in the Pra Nakhon district of Bangkok by King Rama I. The temple with its Sanskrit name which means 'abode of god', is also known as the Brahmin temple. It is believed to be home to the descendants of priests who came from India's Tamil Nadu during the Chola period, 1,000 years ago. They still perform ceremonies for the royalties every year.

Between the 1st and 5th centuries the northeast was strongly influenced by the Hinduised kingdom of Nokor Phnom (or Funan as it was known to the Chinese). From 802–1431 CE Hinduism was further absorbed through the expansion of the hybrid Hindu-Buddhist Khmer Empire. Meanwhile the northern and central regions were heavily influenced by Hinduism during the Dvarvati period between the 6th and 11th centuries.

Some say Hinduism arrived overland across Burma, others trace it back to the Chola dynasty of southern India. Still others say it was influenced by the Sri Vijaya Empire in Java, which itself was influenced by Hinduism from the Subcontinent. It could be that Thailand's multi-layered Hindu influences came from all three sources.

However Hinduism came to Thailand, this quiet co-existence of beliefs among a largely Buddhist people, speaks for the name the country bears: the land of freedom. 🇹🇭



## Ganesh

Ganesh, the Elephant God, is worshipped as a remover of obstacles and the god of accomplishment and wisdom. He has also been known as the patron of intellectuals, scribes, bankers and authors. The Ganesh Shrine stands just next to the Trimurti like its twin at the corner of Central World Plaza.

## Garuda

The national emblem of Thailand is called the Phra Khrut Pha, Garuda as the vehicle of Vishnu. The mythical half-man half-bird was officially adopted as the national emblem by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in 1911. However, the creature had been used as a symbol of royalty in Thailand for centuries.



## The Ramakien

The Ramakien รามเกียรติ์ derived from the Hindu epic Ramayana, has had a profound influence on Thai culture and arts. While the main narrative is similar to the Ramayana, there are many fundamental differences – Lord Ram is Phra Rama, a reincarnation of Buddha instead of being incarnated from the Hindu god Vishnu. Phra Ram is the ruler of Ayutthaya, the ancient capital of Thailand and no longer prince of Ayodhya as in the Ramayana.



EVENTS



**Word Warriors**  
As part of its 10th anniversary, Word Warriors is hosting a series of discussions and performances that reflect on the last decade and look towards the next 10 years. The three-day-program will include a round table, three panel discussions, and a curated performance.  
*15 January, 4pm*



**Art Exhibition**  
Catch the upcoming contemporary art exhibition The way home is away from home by Jagdish Muktan and In the realm of recollections by Priyanka Singh Maharjan.  
*15 January, 4 pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery*




**Online theatre**  
Register for the Online Planetarium and Dinosaur show, a theatre built primarily to present educational and entertaining shows about astronomy and the night sky.  
*15 January, 4pm, UTC*

**Le Sherpa market**  
Shop for fresh and healthy vegetables, fruit, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more. Physical distancing guidelines apply.  
*Saturdays, 8am-12pm, Le Sherpa Maharajgunj*



**Earthquake Aftersongs**  
Listen to Michael Hutt from the University of London and participate in the discourse surrounding music videos and the imagining of a virtual Nepali public. Register online.  
*19 January, 3pm*

**Saglo Samaj**  
In its fourth episode, *Saglo Samaj* takes on the deteriorating air quality in Kathmandu Valley and how it is affecting the health of citizens. It will probe why measures to lower pollution have not worked. Produced by Himalmedia *Saglo Samaj* airs solution-oriented coverage.  
*8:30pm, 4 January, Sarokar TV, Dish Home Channel #130*



ONLINE ARCHIVES



**Real Stories**  
Go to the Real Stories YouTube channel to watch compelling award-winning documentaries from all over the world. Watch factual films about war, crime, mental health, technology and more.

**MyLoft**  
Find thousands of books to read or listen to, from fiction to plays, non-fiction and self-development. Check out The British Council's MyLoft App for free access to educational and recreational resources. Register online for access.

**JSTOR**  
Need resources for your thesis or research project? JSTOR has hundreds of ebooks and academic journals on its platform as open access content.



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



**Project Gutenberg**  
Catch up on classics on the public domain. Search for literary classics at Project Gutenberg. Download ebook formats suited to individual devices.



The cold wave has returned with a dry westerly influx. Weekend will be partly cloudy, but will feel overcast because of the smoke haze from wildfires across the Central Himalaya combined with Indian smog. This satellite image taken on Thursday at noon shows the blue smoke covering the river valleys and Kathmandu with thick fog over the Tarai. We might get some precipitation early next week which could douse the fires.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 18° 6°	 18° 5°	 18° 6°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



After last week's rain over northern India washed away the pollution, the Air Quality Index in New Delhi is back to more 'normal' levels. In fact, on Thursday morning Pusa in Delhi recorded AQI 972, which is extremely hazardous. Unfortunately prevailing winds are blowing much of that muck our way. Kathmandu Valley air has been bad all week also because of smoke from wildfires in Lamjung and Rasuwa, and even on the slopes below Hattiban south of the capital. On Thursday morning, measurement at Phora Darbar was AQI 182 in the 'Very Unhealthy' band. Map from the World Air Quality Index Project. (<https://aqicn.org/map/india/>).

DINING



**Organic Smoothie Bowl**  
Resting around the corner of The Radisson Hotel in Lazimpat, Organic Smoothie Bowl and Café plates fresh, fast and Instagram-worthy smoothie bowls, sandwiches, drinks and more.  
Lazimpat, 9843514612

**Cafe Mozart**  
With a tint of Viennese charm, Cafe Mozart serves customers a wide array of baked cookies, bread, pastries along with famed grilled baguette sandwiches. Enjoy a winter evening on the lawn as if on a Piazza in Florence.  
*Jhamsikhel, 9840735589*



**Rhino Cafe**  
Rhino, serving the only siphon coffee in town, is a quaint little cafe run by a Japanese artist. Choose coffee beans from Colombia, Ethiopia, or Nepal and satisfy post-coffee cravings with deliciously loaded sandwiches.  
*Jyatha Marg, 9818829546*

**Places Restaurant and Bar**  
A testament to how vegetables can be used in a variety of creative and tasty ways, Places has an entire plant-based tasting menu—from vegan pizzas to vegan comfort food—all in one place.  
*Thamel (01) 4700413*



**OR2K**  
Dive in and lap up the refreshing Matbucha or roll along with the falafel grenade at this exquisite Turkish restaurant. The beaten copper bowls at OR2K will take every visitor's palate on a flight to the middle-east.  
*Thamel (01) 4422097*



**OUR PICK**

Dish home is currently streaming the popular Turkish romantic thriller *Black Money Love* takes a dramatic turn when a cop Omer's fiancée and a jewelry designer Elif's father are found dead together due to a theft gone wrong. The two must work together to solve the mystery. The series with over 150 episodes starts Selin Ortacı and Tuba Büyüküstün as the leads.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार  
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय  
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



# Wildfires ravage Nepal mountains

Unusually warm and dry winter has sparked forest fires across the Himalaya that have raged for months

A three month drought in central and eastern Nepal has sparked wildfires across the Himalaya which has shrouded the mountains in smoke, adding to the urban and crossborder pollution.

The big forest fires in Pathibhara in eastern Nepal and below Mt Machapuchre in Kaski raged for a week, and spent themselves. But major fires are out of control in Manang, Rasuwa, Lamjung and Sindhupalchok, destroying huge tracts of high mountain forest.

The most serious and widespread are the fires in Manang Valley around Chame. The vegetation on the slopes and undergrowth in the forests are tinder dry, and the authorities say they have caught fire accidentally because of people grazing livestock, or gathering firewood.

The fire in Manang started as far back as 26 November, and has since spread into the Marsyangdi and Dudh Khola valleys.

Efforts by local volunteers, Nepal Police, Nepal Army and Nepal Armed Police have been largely unsuccessful in controlling the fire whipped up by high winds because of lack



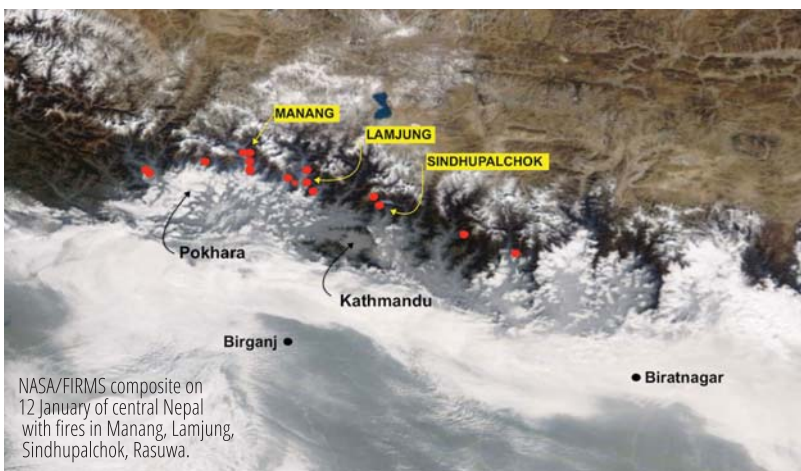
NABIN LAMICHANE / RSS (ABOVE, AND TOP RIGHT)



BIBI FUNYAL

Under-equipped Nepal Police and Army officials have been largely unsuccessful in controlling the fire, which is whipped up by high winds *left and top*).

An entire forest in Gatlang of Rasuwa was reduced to ashes in a wildfire on Monday-Tuesday. The fire only extinguished itself after there was no left to burn.



NASA/FIRMS composite on 12 January of central Nepal with fires in Manang, Lamjung, Sindhupalchok, Rasuwa.

of equipment, and because the blaze is fanned by strong up-valley afternoon winds.

Forest fire in Manang has been raging for over a month, after an unusually dry and warm winter.

The fire has destroyed over 700 hectares of forest rich in endangered wildlife and Himalayan plant species.

The effect of the fires is visible even in satellite images. This NASA image (pictured below) taken at noon on 12 January shows smoke shrouding the river valleys of the Marsyangdi, Budi Gandaki, Bhoti Kosi, Sun Kosi and the Arun.

The above image is a composite based on NASA Worldwide image and the Fire Information Resource Management System (FIRMS), from 12 January.

The smoke is also blowing into Kathmandu Valley and merging with the city's own pollution and cross border smog, to send the Air Quality Index soaring to above 200 in the 'Very Unhealthy' zone.

The satellite images also show ground fog covering the Tarai and Chitwan on Tuesday morning. 🇳🇵



स्वर्ण पदक  
विजेता



लण्डन स्पिरिट कम्पिटिशन २०२० को विजेता

Enjoy responsibly.





# Relationships in the time of corona

Heeding the needs of loved ones in these testing times can help sustain relationships

When Covid-19 hit, the hardest thing to do was staying home. I was like a prisoner in my own apartment, an experience shared by so many. Suddenly, everything that gave me energy had been taken away, and it left me feeling irritable.



**LIFE TIME**

Anjana Rajbhandary

I ran out of patience and began to vent my frustration on people close to me. I knew it was unfair. I was being selfish in focusing concerns solely on myself, on how Covid-19 was affecting me. It took some time to realise how much it impacted the whole world. Switching the focus from myself to the broader picture helped me have a more mature view.

When millions were losing jobs, some were busy posting on social media about how they were not able to get a decent haircut or a manicure. I was more concerned with my limited freedom, rather than the deteriorating health of millions of people. I was not putting things in perspective.

An article in John Hopkins Medicine stresses on broadening your support system instead of heavily depending on your partner for all emotional needs because everyone has their own threshold. We all come with individual needs. Speaking to my parents and friends helped immensely during the most difficult times. Never have I been so grateful to the internet for keeping people connected.

It had always been easier for me to complain and find faults in everything, but Covid-19 taught me to introspect. Instead of focusing on the negative, I started working on myself through yoga and healthier habits, and better communication.

Humans tend to show their worst side to the ones who love them the most because we know they will always be there for us despite our unacceptable behaviour.

Chartered Counselling Psychologist Krista Rajkarnikar says the pandemic has actually given newfound hope to relationships.

"It is fairly early to have a more specific response to this question, however studies have suggested it is not all bad for relationships. Despite higher divorce rates and various lockdown-related interpersonal difficulties, people have also shown higher rates of care, empathy, concern, and love for family and friends during these pressing times," she said.

What stands out is the support people received from their families as Covid-19 took a toll on many aspects of people's lives. A recent Monmouth University poll showed that most people were still satisfied with their relationships despite the stress of the pandemic.

The poll showed that 51% of the respondents expected their relationship to emerge stronger from the tests the lockdown had put them through, and 1% said their relationships would get worse. Although the findings are reassuring, people are not numbers.

It is important to focus on individual needs, because we all suffer differently. Even if the majority of people are doing better, it does not matter on an individual level for those who are doing worse. For them, statistics do not mean anything.

In the end, it all comes down to choice. That is what the pandemic has taught us—do we want to hold on, or let go? It is up to us to shape relationships, because they demand they be nurtured. From my reading of people in my life, I have seen that the pandemic is helping people appreciate what they have instead of run after what could be, and take responsibility for their actions.

I know couples who postponed their weddings, and they have all said that despite the stress and anxiety of having to replan the wedding, their relationships have got stronger. Before the pandemic, people with jobs could hardly

make time for their loved one, but being together also helped many couples re-bond.

Despite vaccines being rolled out, uncertainties abound. It helps to be more patient and understanding of others as well as of ourselves. This is not an easy time, and relationships take work.

We spend so much time paying attention to other people's lives, celebrity scandals on our phones that we must remind ourselves to be fully present when we are with the people we love. We have a desire to be heard but we also need time to listen. It is also important to realise when it is an unhealthy relationship, and when it is time to walk away instead of trying to keep fixing it.

I learned the value of nurturing my relationship by listening to people who knew its healthy definition. In most relationships, it is easy to find faults when you go looking, and in the same way it is also easy to find solutions if that is what you want.

A healthy and happy relationship gives people the emotional strength to handle life's various stressors much better. Always remind yourself that you are choosing to stay in a relationship because it makes you happy and because it makes you a better person. The companionship and emotional support are helpful for your mental well-being. 📺

Anjana Rajbhandary writes this fortnightly Nepali Times column 'Life Time' about socio-cultural issues, mental health and physical



**LIFE TIME**

Mental health counselor and researcher, Anjana Rajbhandary, writes a fortnightly column 'Life Time'. Watch her vlog where she talks about anxiety while travelling during the time of Covid.



NONA DEPREZ/TWITTER

**CAFFEINE BOOST:** Ambassador of the EU to Nepal Nona Deprez visits a coffee nursery of the Gandaki provincial Tea and Coffee Development Board on Wednesday.



UNDP NEPAL

**CYCLE CITY:** Locals participate in a rally organised by UNDP Nepal and Lalitpur Metropolitan City to promote cycling on Saturday.



KRISHNA NEUPANE/RSS

**WORK IN PROGRESS:** Energy Minister Top Bahadur Raymajhi inspects the progress of 140 megawatt Tanahu Hydroelectricity project on Monday.



**SPORTS STARS:** Swimmer Gaurika Singh and karate player Mandekaji Shrestha won the best female and male athlete of the year the Pulsar annual sports awards on Wednesday.



MONIKA DEUPALA

**HARD AT WORK:** A factory in Tokha, Kathmandu prepares a delicacy chaku (molasses) for Maghe Sankranti festival, which marks the beginning of the end of winter.



# Where have all the guides gone?

Nepal's trekking guides struggle to survive as tourism braces for another slow year

● Alisha Sijapati

In November 2019, Tsering Bhuti joined Alliance Française to learn French. In her job as a trekking guide, she thought learning a new language was going to be a boost.

But the Covid-19 pandemic had other plans for her, denting her ambition, taking away her livelihood, and knocking out Nepal's trekking industry.

"The Visit Nepal campaign would have been a turning point for my career, and I was looking forward to making business connections for the future," says Bhuti, who has assisted expeditions on Annapurna and Manaslu trekking circuit.

But she has not given up all hope. "Maybe this break will give me more time to prepare to be a better guide. I will train for mountaineering now," she adds.

Bhuti is just one of thousands of trekking and mountaineering guides in Nepal who have been unemployed for over a year now. Although regular international flights restarted in October, and trekking resumed in October, the number of tourists visiting Nepal slumped from over 1.1 million in 2019 to fewer than 230,000 last year.

There was a slim hope that things would pick up in the 2021 spring climbing season, but with many countries going through a third wave of coronavirus, airline and expedition bookings are seeing cancellations.

The impact of the global pandemic has been seen on all sectors of Nepal's economy, but none more so than in tourism. The industry used to directly employ 1 million Nepalis, and many more who benefited in ancillary sectors.

The suspension of travels after the coronavirus pandemic also dealt a blow to the government's Visit Nepal 2020 (VNY 2020) campaign, which had a set target of welcoming two million tourists last year.

After being closed for nearly a year,



21-year-old Tsering Bhuti during a trekking expedition in Manang in 2019.

the Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM) in Kathmandu is planning to re-open some of its classes with minimum students so that guides and tourism support staff can use the time to upgrade their skills.

"We get numerous calls every single day asking if we are resuming our classes," says Gyanendra Pandit of NATHM. "It's time to get back into action."

Last year, NATHM registered 300 students for tourist guides and 800 for trekking guide training courses which had to be suspended after running for a few weeks as the country went into lockdown.

When Visit Nepal year began in early January 2020, travel agents, guides, porters were all upbeat in the expectation of more business. But just as trekkers and tourists started arriving for the spring season, flights to and from Kathmandu were stopped in March.

"Tourism is largely run by the private sector in Nepal with very little help from the government. This unforeseen crisis has made us think about how we conduct tourism in this country," says Sarita Lama of the Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal. "This year our revenue is zero. Many trekking and travel agencies have closed indefinitely, as they were unable to pay rents and their employees."

Nepal's tourism sector brought in over \$700 million in 2019, and contributed 8% equivalent to the country's GDP. Indeed, tourism experts say pandemic has given the industry time to rethink the whole business model.

The former CEO of Nepal Tourism Board Deepak Raj Joshi agrees that the Covid-19 crisis has given Nepal some breathing space and to look for ways to make tourism more sustainable and for its benefits to be more equitably distributed within the country.

"We should use this pandemic as an opportunity to work towards improvement of facilities along trekking trails and upgrading skills of porters and guides so they can earn more when trekking resumes," Joshi says.

There are also sightseeing tour guides who have lost their jobs in the past year. Kedar Tamang has been a guide taking visitors to tourist attractions around Nepal for the past 25 years. He says he hasn't seen any crisis as dismal as the past year.

"As a tour guide, our responsibility has been to portray a good image of Nepal to the outside world by sharing our culture, history and heritage," says Tamang. "Out of 4,500 registered tour guides, not even one person has found another job for a year now."

The dire emergency has forced some in the business to adapt to the new environment and create new opportunities in domestic tourism, and to do advance online promotion for a time when visitors can return to Nepal.

Manish Shrestha of Enroute Nepal says, "Most of the travel agents have shifted online and have made us rethink our business model. That's how we are now adapting and adjusting to the new normal."

But for most porters and trekking guides, this is not an option. There is also a lot of competition to guide the few Nepali trekking goops that are venturing out along the trails.

Ang Kingka Sherpa, a certified trekking guide has been out of a job since the beginning of the lockdown. The 31-year-old has worked his way up the career ladder from being a porter.

"Being a guide or a porter is not just my job, it is also my passion. I do not think I can do anything else for a living," says Sherpa, who has difficulty providing for his family after losing his income, and exhausting his savings.

But he has not lost all hope. He is confident tourists will come back to Nepal: "April-May still might hold promise. Let's see how things go." 🇳🇵

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# LESSONS NOT LEARNED FROM 2015

The clock is ticking on the next Big One, but most schools are not prepared for disasters.



The brand new Patan School building that is nearing completion with support from the Japanese aid agency. A raft concrete foundation makes it withstand a magnitude 8 earthquake.

KUNDA DIXIT

● **Sonia Awale**

It took 40 seconds for the 25 April 2015 earthquake to seriously damage or demolish some 50,000 classrooms across central Nepal. If the earthquake had not struck on a Saturday, the death toll would have been unimaginable.

More than five years after a disaster that could have had a much more catastrophic outcome, and with most of the schools now rebuilt, Nepal does not seem to have learnt its lesson. The Covid-19 crisis has forced schools into hibernation, schools in other parts of Nepal are not prepared, and the retrofitting of classrooms has languished.

“Given the scale of the 2015 earthquake, our reconstruction process has been quite satisfactory but we are not prepared enough for future mega-quakes,” says Surya Narayan Shrestha, executive director of the National Society of Earthquake Technology (NSET) Nepal.

Indeed, National Earthquake

Safety Day on 15 January which commemorates the 8.3 magnitude 1934 earthquake that devastated Kathmandu, is the right time to assess our preparedness for future disasters.

“Western Nepal hasn’t had a major earthquake in a long time and a lot of stress has accumulated,” warns Shrestha. “But no part of the country will be spared, and we are not prepared for it – especially public buildings such as schools and hospitals.”

*Nepali Times* surveyed some of the rebuilt schools in and around Kathmandu, and in general the new structures appear to be of seismic resistant design. However, because there have been no classes for nearly a year, there have been no preparedness drills.

At Tripadma High School in Patan, a retrofitted block withstood the tremors in 2015, and served as a shelter for the community for more than a month. However, an older building was heavily damaged and got a red sticker in the post-quake assessment.

Across town, the Padmodaya High School in Putali Sadak would have had 1,000 students in the classrooms if the 2015 quake had struck on a regular day. The building was destroyed. A newly built, sturdier structure next to it survived and was a temporary home for many in the aftermath of the disaster.

According to the Central Level Project Implementation Unit (CLPIU) under the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), a total of 7,923 schools and 49,681 classes were damaged in the earthquakes.

“After the earthquake, we conducted classes in temporary learning centres for two years. It was unbearably hot under zinc sheets during summer. The roof leaked when it rained,” recalls Principal Narayan Prasad Gautam of Padmodaya School. “Things have got better with the new building. The engineer has assured me it can stand a 9M quake.”

Tripadma and Padmodaya were both rebuilt with support from CLPIU and are two of the 7,553

schools the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA) targeted for rebuilding post 2015 earthquakes. Five years since the earthquake, 6,085 school buildings have been reconstructed and another 1,468 are still under construction.

“We have reconstructed some 80% of the schools and the rest will be completed by June,” says Gopal Prasad Aryal of NRA. The government entity has also been working on rebuilding 44 universities and colleges with financial support from India. “We now have strong infrastructure with water, toilets and ramps. Our hope is that it aids the quality of education.”

This year’s National Earthquake Safety Day will have to also work on regular disaster preparedness drills, and reminders on earthquake safety. And as memories of the 2015 earthquake fade, many are becoming complacent with construction that flout the building code. Meanwhile, the western half of the country has little or no information about earthquake safety.

Like most houses rebuilt after the 2015 earthquakes, schools from Kavre to Gorkha now use reinforced concrete structures. This means safety drills will have to be adjusted, and search and rescue procedures completely revamped to take into account the new construction material.

The lack of trained professionals and training in search, locate and rescue in collapsed concrete structures will be wholly different than in 2015, when most of the collapsed buildings were of lighter timber, brick and mud mortar construction.

In 2015, crucial hours in rescue operations were lost because of the lack of concrete cutters, and with them, lives. Some children who had already escaped swaying buildings rushed indoors to perform duck-cover-hold procedures taught at schools when the structures collapsed on them.

“Despite having earthquake resistant structures we have drills at least once a month in school so that



SONIA AWALE

(Left to right) Two eight room buildings inside Tripadma School in Patan built after the 2015 earthquakes to accommodate the growing number of students. A retrofitted building next to it, survived the disaster and served as a shelter for the community in its aftermath.



students have complete knowledge regarding earthquake safety,” says Tashi Tenzing Norgay of Nepal Green Tara Foundation which rebuilt two schools in Nuwakot in 2014. When the earthquake hit central Nepal in 2015, those two schools were among the few still standing.

After the earthquake, the foundation has built three more schools. “Infrastructure is important but so is earthquake education,” says Norgay. But the importance of drills have been forgotten in most schools, especially as schooling scenarios changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

With schools closed for the past 10 months because of the Covid-19 pandemic, students have had no earthquake preparedness training. But as schools prepare to open now, the focus will largely be on infrastructure that ensures social distancing.

Local governments are working with the Health ministry and UNICEF to launch the Learning Continuity Campaign this week. The campaign engages parents, teachers and local government, providing guidance on safe reopening of schools and alternative modes of instruction like home-schooling, low-tech solutions like telephone/SMS for learning, radio programs on parenting and specific focus on marginalised children to prevent dropout, have been highlighted.


The newly-built infrastructure of the schools has been a draw for some parents, thus upping the number of enrollment to community schools at a time when Covid-19 crisis has weakened economic status. Many public schools have noted a rise in admission of students from private schools.

Patan School with its *ghantaghar* like clock tower stands out in the midst of the high rises, and is a model for earthquake

safe school reconstruction. Funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Rs 320 million building has a concrete foundation raft designed to withstand magnitude 8 shaking. The school has solar and rainwater harvesting backup, classes are spacious, and labs well-equipped.

Upgrading in infrastructure, however, does not always guarantee an improved standard of instruction. Patan School may have a fancy new building, but is grappling with enough teachers and students to fill the new classrooms, as well as a maintenance budget from the Education Ministry.

“There are now bigger, better school buildings but it won’t make a difference to the quality of education at this rate,” says Rajendra Dahal, editor of *Shishyak* monthly. “The 2015 earthquake and this pandemic could have been an opportunity to upgrade both hardware and software of our education system, but the teaching standards have instead, downgraded.”

Indeed, the only thing going for most post-earthquake government schools is that they will be safer during a future earthquake. Otherwise it is the same curricula, under-motivated and under-paid teachers, lack of facilities and budgets. 



As we mark 23rd National Earthquake Safety Day on 15 January, *Nepali Times* delves into why quakes are so devastating in Nepal, infrastructures that stand high intensity tremors and how retrofitting can be a cost effective approach against the disaster. Video only on our YouTube channel.



# Back to class after Covid

On Monday, it is first day back to school for ninth and tenth graders at Tripadma School, in Patan (*above*). But the basketball court is empty. There are no students loitering in the school grounds like they used to.

The school is running classes in shifts, there is no lunch break and students bring snacks and water from home.

Principal Kadam Baba Pradhan is on an inspection, and tells a visitor: “We have to take every possible safety measure to ensure that the pandemic stays out of school. Once it’s inside it will be a breeding ground, it’s a risk.”

Indeed, Grade 9 and 10 students taking English and Nepali lessons are spread out in two different buildings, some classrooms more spacious than others, and there are only two pupils to a bench. Masks have now been added to the school uniform.

Nearby at Patan High School students and teachers alike cannot wait for school to restart in their fancy new seismic resistant five-storey school built with support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

“The new building and facilities are a big draw for new students, and because our fees are much lower, we expects more parents facing financial crisis due to the pandemic sending their

children here,” says principal Iswor Man Bjracharya. “We have had many new students transferring from private schools.”

Schools across the country have been closed for most of 2020, some schools started remote learning and online classes. The Ministry of Education has been issuing contradictory orders about online classes, fearing it might widen the digital divide between private schools and government ones where 80% of Nepal’s students are enrolled.

The federal Ministry has now delegated decision on reopening of schools to local governments regarding reopening of schools. Kathmandu and Bhaktapur are planning to reopen school from this month. At Padmodaya School in Putali Sadak, principal Narayan Prasad Gautam and his team are busy making final preparations to reopen school despite shortage of classrooms to house over 1,100 students from Grade 1-9.

“We survived the earthquakes and their aftermath with temporary learning centres but Covid-19 is a whole new challenge,” says Gautam. “We can control and monitor students only for so long. As soon as they are out of our gates, it is up to each of them to follow safety precautions, and for parents to enforce them.”

*Sonia Awale*

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## Catching up with the West

It has come to the notice of yours truly asinine that a lot of readers out there these days are muttering behind your masks about how Nepal is going to hell in a handbasket. What's so bad about going to hell? It can't be worse than it already is here. I am also not sure if a handbasket is the best way to get to hell.

Looking around the world, and following twitter these days, it actually seems that we in Nepal are a bit half-hearted in trying to wreck this country. The question is: are we doing enough to take this glorious nation of ours from monarchy to anarchy and back?

We are falling further and further behind by only setting tyres on fire, and talking about scrapping the Constitution. It's time to walk the talk.

We may be proud of the Airbus scandal that allowed some Nepali kleptocrats to have wide bodies, but that kickback pales in comparison to what one Malaysian, who shall remain unnamed, allegedly pocketed from the purchase of jets. Compared to the level of plunder in other countries, ours is laughable. All that our oligarchs can muster is to eat red rice together.

While presidents in other countries grab pussies and brag about it in public,

Nepali politicians show a singular lack of leadership in that quarter. In fact, our democratic rulers under-perform in just about every sector, including the private sectors.

The farthest a minister here ever got was to grope fellow-paddy planters a few years ago. Nepal's politicians can also

learn from the pros about nepotism. The outgoing US president can teach our incoming prime minister a thing or two about family values.

To be sure, Nepal's movers and shakers have a steep learning curve. The most disgusting things our officials have ever done is to spit behind the rostrum, or pick a nostril or two during a live Covid-19 press briefing.

So, to all of you who cannot stop complaining about how things have got from badder to worst in Nepal these days, the Ass has only one message: if you don't like it here, leave. Good bye. Wait, take me with you.



The Ass

Why aren't we also wearing yak horns, storming Parliament, and purloining the lectern, as they do in advanced democracies? Why can't our staunch civil society stalwarts also be uncivil like their American counterparts, and take a dump in the Upper House commode, and not flush?

The ugly truth is: America is way ahead of us in destroying itself. It is my humble submission that our Stalinists are just not trying hard enough to dismantle Nepal. This is not why we elected them.

While they hee-and-haw, twiddle their thumbs, and squat on their haunches, other nation states are forging ahead to wreck their democracy.

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