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 to cement Covid-19 vaccines, but he may also be laying the groundwork for a visit to India by PM Oli.

All this has added fuel to the tinderbox 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 return to Kathmandu by India’s spy chief Satnam Goyal and former 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 deconstruction of an anchor, who had earlier used derogatory terms and labeled him a Chinese stooge.

In the sometimes rambling interviews, Oli came across as a statesman—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 pulled away most of Oli’s supporters in the party, which is now as good as split.

The fight ahead 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 pinning on pressure from the streets, civil society, former Prime Minister Gyawali, 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 66% majority in Parliament and leading six of the seven provincial governments has frozen it all away because two top leaders could not get along.

Although Prime Minister Oli sees himself as a seasoned politician, his biggest failure has, ironically, been politics. He has faltered 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 Nepal Congress (NC). Sher Bahadur Deuba wants elections, while his rival Ram Bahadur 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 cat-and-mouse self-criticism that Communists are famous for. Be it with so much bad blood between Oli and Dahal, that is not likely.

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

NATIONAL EARTHQUAKE SAFETY DAY
15 January 2021
Be prepared
EDITORIAL PAGE 2
Lessons not learnt from 2015
PAGE 14-15
Think the unthinkable

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

EARTHQUAKE

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Prominent

Prominent government leaders are uncertain about the best course of action to take in order to prevent further loss of life.

What can be done to prevent future disasters?

- Strengthen building codes and regulations
- Increase public awareness about earthquake preparedness
- Invest in earthquake-resistant infrastructure

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Prominent

WHAT IF?

n the current global climate, it is important to be aware of the potential risks and vulnerabilities we face.

What are the possible consequences of not addressing these issues?

- Increased vulnerability to natural disasters
- Economic losses and displacement of populations
- Strain on emergency response systems

30 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Prominent

On this day in history, a major earthquake struck Japan.

What was the impact of this event on the country?

- Destruction of infrastructure
- Loss of life and property damage
- Tsunami and other secondary effects

40 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Prominent

On this day in history, a significant event occurred.

What was the significance of this event?

- Historical, cultural, or political implications
- Immediate and long-term effects
- Lessons learned and implications for future events
TIME TO MEET AGAIN:
TORONTO

Have a healthy journey with all precautions taken down to the smallest detail for your in-flight safety.
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**

Sparana Khadka

This was not a one-off operation, but the eleventh one in December. It sent a strong message to the industry that every vulnerability, every cheating could be a potential whistleblower.

There was nothing exceptional about the way the recruitment agency was operating—similar transactions, potentially of higher amounts, are normal. 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, it is engaged with over a dozen employers in Malaysia and now diversifying to the Gulf, it has sent over 4,000 workers without changing 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 have had 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.

Employees who want to source ethical recruiters are often not well-supported by their peers and data is often not shared. Labours are often not very well-trained in their operation model. In the past four years of operation, IMR has often turned down employers unwilling to pay service fees, even though it comes at a premium cost of living for Filipinos.

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 a difficult situation when IMR staff counsels them on not paying a single rupee for the job, because migrants seeking jobs, tend to associate recruitment costs with job quality.

At Kathmandu airport last week, Kishor Mahara was head to the UAK through IMR’s support. He said that till the last moment he

Kishor Mahara from Mahattai 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 said that they are an anomaly in the industry, and they have to forsake easy and profitable offers. “To be able to hand over this business to our children with pride is a dream,” says Prayash Rai of IMR, who says the long-term economic pain of building a clean reputation is more important.

The experience with both IMR and Manosal (the agency that IMR worked with 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 Manosal 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 EPAN departments of employers are often allocated based on kickbacks received. Employer HR visits to Kathmandu for recruitment are often sponsored by recruiters who go overboard to hold up future-demand and pass on the costs to the worker.

This unhealthy competition extends beyond fees 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 relying on its goodwill and using expositions of human rights abuses after the companies came to the global spotlight amid worst practices during the pandemic. But pressure from third countries is still a reality, which labour law enforcement in destination countries remains lax.

There are examples of pressure from third countries that have led to improved working conditions, but it is also a reminder that ensuring a safe working environment is a tall order unless employers are seen as part of a larger transitional undertook, involving multiple profit-oriented players engaged in unethical practices, Nepalis will have to continue to contend with the existing provisions.

Risks like the sting operation last month, are necessary but not sufficient for systemic changes. Labour agreements that could form the basis for influencing how migrants are treated should be implemented.

Ethical recruiters like IMR and members of EPAN have received no support from the government. As DOFE ramps up raids and searches operations of fraudulent agents, it should also empower the good examples.

HR and IMR’s experience shows that pivoting to the ethical truck 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 Organization) and RSM (International Organization for Migration) that have expertise in this area and the global reach need to be leveraged.

The IMO, 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 cross-border 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 in 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 indicators, 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 shrinking job in opportunities due to COVID-19 heightens the risks of unethical practices. Lack of employment opportunities has triggered skewed 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 knew about IMR through word of mouth and Facebook. They were lucky to find such 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 publically 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.

**ZERO COST JOB**

Nepal migrant workers usually pay hefty fees to recruiters who get them job overseas.

Nepal’s own satellite

The Department of Home Affairs has received nine expressions of interest from companies for the country’s own geostationary satellite. The Department of Home Affairs has the selection of the successful private partner to be given the go-ahead. The satellite will be used to C-band, C-band, and Ka-band. The Department of Home Affairs will be responsible for the overall project management and will be responsible for the overall project management and will be responsible for the overall project management. The Department of Home Affairs has the selection of the successful private partner to be given the go-ahead.

**IAA smart truck**

IAA Makena has launched its newest smart compact truck, the IAA Makena, in Nepal at a starting price of Rs 3.3 million. Spearheaded by its parent company in China, India, Dubai, Germany, US and Singapore.

**Ncell Audio Class**

Ncell has launched its Audio Class, an alternative learning platform that will enable students across the country to access curated courses at different subjects via audio format.

**Foodmandu in Pokhara**

Foodmandu, the digital home delivery service, has expanded its wing to Pokhara, after seeing signs of growth in the city. With several restaurants closed, many restaurants in Pokhara and Ncell has its own network that delivers to customers in the area. With 30 restaurants in Pokhara, customers will get 30% price discount.

What’s up, WhatsApp?

nexpress mentioned that it will be using Giga WhatsApp on its app to opt out of sharing your phone number with credit card service users must agree to the terms within 90 days of the access to the limits.

Online Tax Payment

Eneral Bank, with technical collaboration from U.S., has started an online and mobile-based taxation payment service called the Federal Computer General Office (FCGO), the entrance paper will earn benefits to customers by eliminating the hassle and expense of physically sailing tax papers for

Users are encouraged that WhatsApp may not be able to verify your identity due to technical issues. The phone number should only be used for these mobile payments.

New AAN committee

The Advertising Association of Nepal (AAN) has held its 2nd annual general meeting on Saturday to elect a new executive committee, which will serve for three years. Senior District Director, Nepal Marketing Department has been elected president while Viman Kumar Shrestha is senior vice-president.

Zimmer Bank, a subsidiary of National Australia Bank (NAB), has launched a new mobile payment service called ‘Zimmer during the ongoing pandemic.

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Conquering the self

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

In 2017, Wangga 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.

Wangga had been shooting up heroin, sniffing glue and taking pills on and off for over 20 years. He went to rehab five times. The journey of recovery began when he realized he could not afford the addiction anymore.

“My brother couldn’t see me in such 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 Wangga. They were complex’s, but he kept going back to seek treatment.

Unlike many drug abusers, who are shunned by family, Wangga 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.

Wangga was born in Bhutan, but 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.

Wangga chose to follow in his older brother’s footsteps and trained as a trek leader even after his SLC exams. But there was a paradox in the one he was making physically. It was a psychological one in which he would sleep, 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 at the summit in May 2016. That was when Wangga 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 inviting him as someone who had emerged winner in a difficult battle.

Since Everest, Wangga 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 Wangga, his campaign against substance abuse.

He will invite those who are recovering from addiction on climbing expeditions and teach them 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 Wangga. “Through Walk with Wangga, I want to share the message that if I can recover, they can too.”

When he is not climbing mountains, Wangga 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.

Wangga uses climbing as both therapy and profession. He calls it a chance to turn off his conscious mind’s always-on, critical chatter. “No instruments, no distractions—just the tunnel vision force 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 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 Wangga. 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, Wangga 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 Wangga’s journey. He says: “First, effective terrains unharmed 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.”

Wangga Sherpa, a campaign against substance abuse.
Why Nepal must legalise cannabis

N
early 50 years after the United States government
forced Nepal to ban the cultivation and use of cannabis, MP Sheh Bahadur Tamang is on
a crusade to have it legalised. The ban has 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
given rise to a new
force of the Maoist insurgency decades later.

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

Kanak Mani Dixit: What led you to register the bill to allow
the legalisation of marijuana?
Sheh Bahadur Tamang: Throughout this campaign,
we worked with many researchers and experts, and
realised the great medicinal and economic
capabilities of cannabis. After feedback
from the research team, we introduced this bill in Parliament.
We believe this is one of the ways to
alleviate rural poverty. It also comes
to 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 public, but
after we introduced the bill,
The 1976 law banned cannabis,
and legalising its use. A significant
number of the general public
view recreational use of cannabis
as being wrong and the users are
condemned as 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
globally 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 Nepalese life and culture, but it has
carried a very negative connotation after the ban. Why?
We need to understand that Lord Shiva, who
is worshipped by a large
decent who recognized the
great medicinal benefits of cannabis.

Over the last 45 years, we were
duped into believing that cannabis was
harmful.

How would this bill lift Nepal from poverty?
This is a competitor 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
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 we
produce will be organic. Moreover,
Purple Jar, 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 ‘soft’ drug, as controlled
and prescribed marijuana has
proven to help people move
away from substance abuse, including
cigarettes 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
‘militarisation’?

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
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 ‘militarisation’, 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,
Kolpa and Makwanpur, and
also your own constituency
in Sindupalchok, 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 untenanted.
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 need to have
homes and land 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.

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
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.

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

Ganaju Ganaju

This interview is based on the 90th episode
of Saglo Samaj, a magazine program produced
by Himalaya which is broadcast every Monday at 8:30
pm on Nepal’s local channel 102. 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 to be said about the Tharu people. Most are wrong.

The first day of the Nepali month of Chaitra which this year falls on 14 January is Maagh Bihu, the Tharu new year. And it is also the day when tenants would decide whether to continue with their landlords, some of whom were Tharu and some non-Tharu hill people or more elsewhere.

The Tharu are the original inhabitants of much of the Terai, and there are several different groups such as the Bote and Dasi, and the Tharu in the western Terai. 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 1995 the Tharu, and related groups such as the Bote and Dasi formed almost 100% of the region’s population of 25,000. By 1970, they had dropped to 14%.

Birendra Mahato, Director of the Chitwan Tharu Cultural Museum, outside Sauraha, says: “Tourists 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 Terai, Gisela 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 dwellers, which means that the forest had to be pushed back.”

Misconception 2: The Tharu Lived in an Ancient Terai 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 Terai, a previously malaria-infested land, population reduces 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 Terai is not.”

Misconception 3: Tharu Are Uncivilized The Truth: The Tharu made many ingenious adaptations to their Terai environment.

According to this derogatory inaccuracy, the Tharu are forest dwellers little smarter than animals. They do not use brave hearts. They are too backward to wear clothes. But in fact the Tharu have developed many skills useful for their Terai environment: agriculture, irrigation, house construction, fishing, handicrafts, herbal medicine, forest vegetation, midwifery, wood carving, and animal domestication.

Misconception 4: The Tharu Never Get Malaria The Truth: Tharu get malaria less often than other groups, but infants often get it, and some die.

Many outsiders, and even some Tharu themselves, think that the Tharu never get malaria. They say Tharu did not get malaria because they are smart, not lazy, and lack chills. This is wrong. Elderly Tharu will tell you about malaria fever and chills, 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 The 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 civilization” or “forgotten by civilization.” 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 clerks and tax collectors. The RNAs 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 Cultural Museum near Sauraha, Chitwan.

Happy New Year.

Im Kloster, 400 km from earth in Nepal, 200 km west of the Indian border.
The Hindu gods of Thailand co-exist with the Buddha in the country's multi-layered culture.

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

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**Deities and Divinity**

**Vishnu**

Vishnu, one of the principle deities of Hinduism, and is regarded as the preserver in the trinity of creation. The Vishnu Shrine is located in front of the International Hotel about 100m from the one dedicated to Brahma. The shrine is an important landmark for tourists with divine attributes as Lord Vishnu.

**Laxmi**

Laxmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune, love, beauty and prosperity. She is loaded from the Ganges River in India and is the wife of Lord Vishnu. She is depicted as a beautiful female deity with four arms holding a lotus flower in one hand and a bowl of coins in the other. Her devotees believe she brings wealth and prosperity to those who worship her.

**Indra**

Indra is the ancient Hindu deity of thunder and lightning. He is also regarded as the god of strength and courage. Indra is depicted as a powerful deity with a large, muscular body adorned with jewelry and a weapon called the Vajra. He is associated with thunder and lightning and is considered to be the god of thunder and lightning.

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**Trilokini**

Trilokini is a holy shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva, the god of creation, preservation and destruction. It is located in the heart of Bangkok and is believed to be the most potent of the Shiva temples in the city. The shrine is a popular pilgrimage site for both Hindus and non-Hindus alike.

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**Trinity Shrine**

The Trinity Shrine is located at the Kuttappan Shiva temple in Bangkok. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahma, the three main deities of Hinduism. The shrine is a place of worship and pilgrimage for Hindus in Thailand.
Buddhist Thailand

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 Himalayas. And so, Shiva, has a temple dedicated to him in the beam province in northern Thailand on the Laos border. The word lao itself comes from the Thai name for Shiva, Issara, which could be derived from the Sanskrit Shiva.

The royal household of Thailand has given continuity to the Hindu traditions that has been in their family for centuries. Thai Royal emblem depicts Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu (Phra Nakhon), while Brahma Laoang (Royal Brahmin) continues to be assigned the duty of engaging with the royalty to lead funeral, weddings and state ceremonies. This includes the Royal Flouting Ceremony to secure a bountiful harvest.

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

The Hindu roots of Thai culture are also evident at the temple of Dusavanh, which was established in 1784 in the Phra Nakhon district of Bangkok by King Rama I. The temple with its Sanskrit name which means “abode of god”, is also known as the Buddha temple. It is believed to be home to the descendants of priests who came from India’s Tamil Nadu during the Chola period, 3,000 years ago. They still perform ceremonies for the royalties every year.

Between the 1st and 16th centuries the northeast was strongly influenced by the Hinduized kingdom of Nakhon Phanom (or Funan as it was known to the Chinese) from 800-1431. Hinduism was further assimilated through the expansion of the hybrid Hindu-Buddhist Khmer Empire. Meanwhile the northern and central regions were heavily influenced by Hinduism during the Dvaravati 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 these sources.

However, Hinduism came to Thailand; this quiet co-existence of beliefs among a largely Buddhist people. The state religion, the Buddhist Kingdom of Thailand and no longer under Ayutthaya as the Ramakien.

Garuda
The national emblem of Thailand is the Phra Khom 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.

Ganesh
Ganesh, the Elephant God, is worshipped as a remover of obstacles and the god of accomplishment and wisdom. He has also been known in the courts of maharajas, sultans, barons and authors. The Ganesh Shrine stands just next to the Phra Rattana Dhiphiyo at the corner of Central World Plaza.

The Ramakien
The Ramakien  is 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 changes. Lord Ram is Phra Ram, 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 Ayutthaya as in the Ramayana.
Word Warriors
As part of its 10th anniversary, Word Warriors is hosting a series of discussions and performances that reflect the last decade and look toward the next 10 years. The three-day program will include round tables, three-hour workshops and a curated performance. 15 January, 3pm, Sobhata Art Gallery

Earthquake Songs
Listen to Michael Holt from the University of London and participate in the discussion surrounding music videos and the making of a virtual Nepal public. Register online. 9 January, 3pm

Coursara
Interested to learn about subjects that aren’t available in Nepali colleges and universities? Coursara 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.

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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. 17 January, 4pm, UTC

Saglo Samaj
In its fourth episode, Saglo Samaj/Valks on the deteriorating air quality in Kathmandu Valley and how it is affecting the health of citizens. It will present why measures to lower pollution have not been taken. Produced by MyMedia. Saglo Samaj airs on Artemis, 91.7 FM.

Online archives
Library of Congress Online Archives is a YouTube channel to watch compelling award-winning documentaries from all over the world. Watch factual films about war, crime, mental health, technology and more.

Le Sherpa market
Yogs for fresh and healthy vegetables, fruits, deli, bread, meat, ice cream and much more. Physical distancing guidelines apply.

Dining
Cafe Mozart
With a tiniest of Venice charm, Cafe Mozart serves a whole array of Colony cookies, bread, pastries along with toasted grilled baguette sandwiches. Enjoy a winter evening on the lawn as if you’re in a Paris in Florence. (For outside, 94477235)

Rhino Cafe
Rhino, serving the only single origin coffee in Nepal, is located beside the delectable kathmandu restaurant. The beaten copper bowls at ORZK will take every eater’s palate on a flight to the middle-east. (For outside, 403597)

Parking around the corner of The Radisson Hotel in Lassipat. Organic Smoothie Bowl and Cafe plates fresh, fast and Instagram-worthy smoothie bowls, sandwiches, drinks and more. Lassipat, 386514.

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ONLINE ARCHIVES

ART QUALITY INDEX

After last week’s storms, the air quality index was listed as poor on all levels, but the Quality Index in Delphi’s book is more mellow with an index of 7, as on Thursday morning. Ozone over the capital is also expected to be low on Thursday morning. The capital recorded a very high temperature in the city. Thursday’s patrols were expected to be high in the western and eastern parts of the city. The forecast is based on the quality index of the capital. On Thursday morning, the Quality Index in Dehi was 110, and the quality index in the capital was 108.

ORZK
This weekend we’re seeing the popular Turkish romantic thriller ‘Dolunay’ on a big screen. Get ready to watch the first episode of the television film being aired on Tuesday and Wednesday. The two-part series has won the hearts of Turkish and Indian audiences.

Black Money

Our Pick

Online archives
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Black Money

Our Pick

Organic Smoothie Bowl
Parking around the corner of The Radisson Hotel in Lassipat. Organic Smoothie Bowl and Cafe plates fresh, fast and Instagram-worthy smoothie bowls, sandwiches, drinks and more. Lassipat, 386514.

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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 cross-border pollution. The big forest fires in Pathibhara in eastern Nepal and below Mt Machapuchare in Kaski raged for a week, and spent themselves. But minor fires are out of control in Mankang, 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 20 November, and has since spread into the Manang Valley and Dushi 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 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 extent of the fires is visible even in satellite images. This NASA image (right below) taken at noon on 13 January shows smoke shrouding the river valleys of the Manang Valley, Rudri Gandaki, Bhote Kosi, Sun Kosi and the Arun.

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

The smoke is also blowing into Kuthmandu 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 Terai and Chitwan on Tuesday morning.
**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 stay home. I was like a prisoner in my own apartment, an experience shared by many. Suddenly, everything that gave me energy had been taken away, and it left me feeling irritable.

I ran out of patience and began to vent my frustrations 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. I took some time to realize 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, I was only busy writing on social media about how we were not able to get decent hair cut or manage. 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 broadly your support system instead of being dependent on your partner for all emotional needs because everyone has their own threshold. We all come with individual needs. Speaking to your 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 Kiita Rajbhandary 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 trying 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 84% 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 choices. 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 are not demands they be nurtured. From my reading of people in my life, I have seen that this pandemic is helping people appreciate what they have instead of rushing 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 reschedule the wedding, their relationships have got stronger. Before the pandemic, people with jobs could barely make time for their loved one, but being together also helped many couples re-kindled.

Despite vaccines being rolled out, uncertainty abounds. 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 duty 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 relationships by listening to people who knew its healthy declarations. 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 stresses 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 for the fortnightly Nepal Times covering life style, inter-cultural issues, mental health and physical.
Where have all the guides gone?

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

Alisha Sijapati

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 every 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 mountain climbing 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, airfares 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 travel after the coronavirus pandemic also dealt a blow to the government’s Visit Nepal 2020 (VNYT 2020) campaign, which had a set target of welcoming two million tourists last year. After being closed for nearly a year,

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 enormous calls every single day asking if we are resuming our classes, says Gyamendra 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 Sunita 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 $1.5 billion 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 upskilling 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 Informate 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 groups that are venturing out along the trails.

Ang Kinga Sherpa, a certified trekking guide has been out of a job since the beginning of the lockdown. A 53-year-old has worked his way up the career ladder from being a porter.

“Being a guide at 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 tourism will come back to Nepal.” April-May might still hold promise. Let’s see how things go.”
LESSONS NOT LEARNED FROM 2015

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

Sonia Awale

It took 49 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 Droid 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 construction process has been quite satisfactory but we are not prepared enough for future mega-quakes,” says Sunya 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 how prepared we are 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.”

Nepal 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 preparatory drills.

At Tripudinema High School in Butwal, a renovated block withstood the tremor in 2015, and served as a shelter for the community for more than a month. However, another building was heavily damaged and got a red sticker in the post-quake assessment.

Across town, the Padmabindu 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, storey 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 (CLPUI) under the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), a total of 7,923 schools and 49,681 classes were damaged in the earthquake.

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

Tripudinema and Padmodaya were both rebuilt with support from CLPUI and are two of the 7,653 schools the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA) targeted for rebuilding post-2015 earthquakes. Five years since the earthquake, 6,083 school buildings have been reconstructed and another 1,468 are still under construction.

“We have reconstructed some 86% of the schools and the rest will be completed by June,” says Gyapali Prasad, a project officer 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 boon the building codes. 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 where the structures collapsed on them.

Despite having earthquake resistant structures we have drills at least once a month in school so that...
students have complete knowledge regarding earthquake safety," says Tashi Tensing Norgay of Nepal Greens 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 guidelines on safe reopening of schools and alternative modes of instruction like home-schooling, low-tech solutions like telephone/ SMS for learning, radio programs on parent education and specific focus on marginalized 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 hall designed to withstand magnitude 7.0 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 more bigger, better school buildings but it won’t make a difference to the quality of education at this rate," says Rajendra Dahal, editor of Shikshak 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, stagnated.”

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 facility and budgets.

SHAKY GROUND

As we mark 2nd National Earthquake Safety Day on 15 January, annual training in fire and earthquakes are being held in Nepal. Infrastructure has survived high intensity quakes and have been engineered to resist future earthquakes except in the affected area. The only one in our flood prone areas.

Back to school after Covid

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

The school is running classes in shifts, there is no lunch break and students bring their own water bottles from home. Principal Kajal Bada 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. Since it’s the first time for a breeding ground, it’s a risk.”

Indeed, in Kathmandu and its suburbs taking English and Nepali lessons are spread out in new different buildings, some classrooms more spacious than others, and there are only two pupils in a breadth. More have now been added to the school uniform.

Nearly a dozen High School students and teachers alike cannot wait for schools to restart in their fancy new seven-storey 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 they are much lower; we expect more parents facing financial crisis due to the pandemic sending their children here,” says principal Surendra Baral. “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, having it might offer the digital divide between private schools and government schools where 86% of Nepal’s students are enrolled.

The Federal government has now delegated decision on reopening of schools to local governments regarding reopening of schools. Kathmandu, and Bhaktapur are planning to reopen schools from this month. At Patan High School in Patul Salik, principal Narayan Prasad Gautam and his team are busy making final preparations to reopen school despite shortage of classrooms to house over 1,500 students from Grade 1-9.

“We linked the earthquakes and their aftermath with temporary learning spaces 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 gate, it’s up to each of them to follow safety procedures, and for parents to enforce them.”

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Catching up with the West

It has come to the notice of yours truly 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 what 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 behind 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?

Why aren’t we also wearing yak horns, storming Parliament, and purifying 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 Sinhaleses are just not trying hard enough to dismantle Nepal. This is not why we elected them.

While they howl and howl, twiddle their thumbs, and squat on their launches, other nation states are forging ahead to wreck their democracy.

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 Ayesha 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 master is to eat red rice together.

While presidents in other countries grab pussies and brag about it in public, Nepal’s 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 sector.

The safest a minister here ever got was to grape 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 deep learning curve. The most disgusting things our officials have ever done is to spit behind the restroom, or pick a nettle 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 worsest 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.