





# House of cards

In the two months since Prime Minister K P Oli dissolved the Lower House of Parliament, massive rallies were held across the country. Oli and his arch rival in the party, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, competed to have bigger and more expensive rallies. This my-crowd-is-bigger-than-yours contest was intended to influence the Supreme Court as it deliberated on the constitutionality of the House dissolution.

The enormous amount of money spent, from the state treasury by the Oli faction and from party coffers by the other, went largely to waste. In the end, the 5-justice Constitutional Bench decided on the basis of legal merit, not on the size of the crowds.



Each faction accused the other of “setting” the Supreme Court and the Election Commission to rule against it. But the judiciary reinforced the separation of powers doctrine and set a precedent. Chief Justice Cholendra SJB Rana read out the verdict on 23 February to reboot the House and ordered it to reconvene by 8 March.

Even though leaders of the two factions have tried since 20 December to portray themselves as staunch democrats who believe in the Constitution, it has been clear that this was always just a chess game to check mate the other side.

K P Oli in the nearly three years that he has been prime minister has used the 2017 electoral mandate to go it alone. He did not just want to be top dog. He wanted to be only dog. He spent most of his waking hours, not to attend to matters of state, but to undermine his arch nemesis, Dahal.

Oli had convinced himself that it was he who rescued the former Maoist chieftain from political limbo by merging the UML with the Maoists. Oli also used his office to get back at Madhav Kumar Nepal and his followers.

He did appease Nepal by making some of his acolytes ministers (Bhusal, Bhattarai, et al) but by and large he sidelined and humiliated the former prime minister every chance he got. Nepal took it personally.

The lifespan of politicians depends on their ability to get to power and hold on to it

by defusing threats from rivals. Oli did use the levers of office to dispense patronage, and woo away some of Dahal's former Maoist comrades (Thapa, Bhatta, Rayamajhi). But he failed to defang Dahal-Nepal.

He even held secret talks recently with the underground Biplav faction of the Maoists. But by then, Oli had opened himself on so many fronts that he had completely isolated himself.

The rift between Oli and Dahal was therefore not ideological, and not about the constitutionality or otherwise of the House dissolution. It was that Oli reneged on his agreement with Dahal on a rotational prime ministership. Prachanda desperately needed to be prime minister to indemnify himself from prosecution for conflict era excesses.

Many Nepali media commentators have said the Supreme Court decision pushes Nepal from the frying pan into the fire. Indeed, Parliament is once more going to be a “goat bazar” as it used to be called during the year of coalition politics.

**Reshuffling the cards may not be enough. We need a new deck.**

There are many possible scenarios, and they will all depend on Grandmaster Oli's next chess move. He could hand over the prime ministership to Dahal or Nepal (*see page 1*). This would defuse the situation, and keep the NCP intact to fight another day. But given the bad blood, it is not likely.

The second scenario is Oli pushing an ordinance to split the party, and face a confidence motion in the House. At present the NCP jointly has 174 of the 275 members in the Lower House, of which at least 90 have pledged allegiance to Dahal. Oli will need to woo members from the Dahal faction as well as the NC or JSP to win the vote. Also unlikely.

Although Dahal has said he does not mind offering Deuba prime ministership in a coalition, there is too much mutual distrust. Besides, Deuba has his own battles within the NC to fight first (*see page 11*).

The coming week will show which of these five tried, tested and failed prime ministers will get one more shot at the helm. Deuba has been prime minister four times already, Dahal has been prime minister twice, Nepal and Khanal once each.

Why are we stuck with just these five aged, mostly-Brahmin men, anyway? The trouble is that the young turks are not allowed to rise up the ranks, and they are all nearing 50.

It is well and good that the Supreme Court decided as it did, but it looks like we will just be reshuffling the cards. Nepal now needs a completely new deck.

## ONLINE PACKAGES



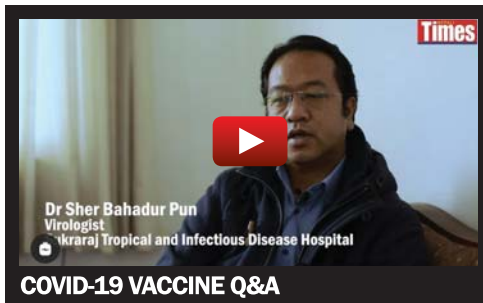
In 2002, Mayor Keshav Sthapit had the Mandala built for the SAARC Summit which later became the preferred site for civic protests. Kanak Mani Dixit speaks to Renshin Yonjan who oversaw the construction of the Mandala. Read the full story on *page 8-9*.



‘Between somewhere and nowhere’ is a fitting description of the lives of the 50,000 people of the Budi Gandaki Valley whose homes, farms and livelihoods will be submerged by what will be Nepal's largest reservoir.



It is important to respect women's privacy because some women may be trying to conceive without telling their family and friends, they may have suffered miscarriage or encountered unsuccessful IVF treatments.



Public health experts answer readers' questions regarding Covid-19 vaccine. Go online to watch.

### FRONTLINES OF WAR

Historical document of a forgotten conflict (‘From the frontlines of Nepal's war’, *Saglo Samaj*, Issue #1049). I had been surprised in 2015 after the earthquake, realising that most journalists and humanitarian workers who came to Nepal did not know that the country had experienced a long civil war that occurred less than ten years before.

Alfredo Mallet

Dark history of Nepal. And it seems like Nepal is going to make another political revolution again.

Parkaz Gorkhali

### VACCINE

Good news for the Nepalis (‘Nepal braces for new wave with vaccine drive’, *Sonia Awale*, Issue #1049). Not being able to get vaccinated in France despite a prescription I will end up going to Nepal when the borders are open.

Marc Panchaud

According to *Nepali Times*, official figures show only 184,000 of the 430,000 people on the government's list for the first phase opted for the jobs. Vaccine shortage for the third world is a real problem but people's refusal to take the jab makes it even worse.

Binita Shah

### TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

A good read in *Nepali Times* on the proposed requirement of paperwork from family or the ward to travel solo for the first time—and how the state has controlled Nepali women's mobility (‘History of female (im)mobility in Nepal’, Upasana Khadka, *Nepali Times* online).

Paavan Mathema

### TRAUMA OF WAR

Impunity and the tragic plight of the Thaus in Nepal never ends... (‘The lingering trauma of war’, Pratibha Tuladhar #1049)

Emperor of Icecream

### MUNDUM TRAIL

These are all the places my father used to name when he talked about our ancestral home in the mountains (Eastern Nepal's Mundum landscape, Achyut Tiwari and Ramesh Kumar Rai, Issue #1049). I have never been there, but I already know about Selme, Temke, Hanspokhari, and Salpa Pokhari. God willing, one day I will go to our ancestral village.

Madina Rai

Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING



### From the frontlines of Nepal's war

by *Saglo Samaj*  
Twenty-five years after the Maoist insurgency started on 13 February 1996, journalists who covered that war remember their own experiences reporting on the conflict. Read the full story on *nepalitimes.com* and watch video.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



### End of war is not peace

Editorial  
Twenty-five years after the war started, and nearly 15 years after it ended, the legacy is seen in residual violence and impunity, extortion and murder, rape and torture. Participate in the online discussion.

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### Nepal braces for new wave with vaccine drive

by *Sonia Awale*  
The government must continue its vaccination to reach as many vulnerable people as possible with a better communication strategy and more aggressive promotion. Visit our website for the latest vaccine updates.

Most visited online page

## QUOTE TWEETS

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes  
Dreaded Bliss  
Anjana Rajbhandary (@anjirajy) on how society's pressure for women to marry has more to do with cruelty than culture.
- Sujeev Shakya** @sujeevshakya  
Powerful #mustread from @AnjRajy in @NepaliTimes @PrabhakarShrestha

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes  
70 years after the first ascent of a 8,000m peak, a trekking group retraces the footsteps of Maurice Herzog's expedition to Annapurna I. By Bimal Kadel
- Surendra Phuyal** @surendraphuyal  
70 years after the conquest of—first ever—an Eight Thousand-er ever by Frenchman—a big feat back then—here's something special by another Annapurna expedition team. And it's made-in-Nepal:

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes  
Kathmandu Metropolitan City hosts a cultural program in Darbar Marg to mark the 70th Democracy Day.
- Bibek Bhandari** @bibekbhandari  
You may not find Kathmandu's mayor amid a crisis but sure he'll appear for a “cultural program.” Also, instead of being wary of the new coronavirus variants, here we are organizing mass gatherings.
- Kashish Das Shrestha** @kashishds  
The Mayor who is literally responsible for destroying Kathmandu's historic public events space...blocked one of Kathmandu's main boulevards to hold a “public” event! Who pays for all these many many useless self-glorifying extravaganza?

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

For the past few weeks, in this space, we have been revisiting political upheavals and governance failures from yesteryears and lamenting how two decades later, nothing has changed and we still have the same power-hungry politicians for leaders. As a result, the public have lost their faith in democratic institutions and the uncaring state.

But the last 20 years are not without some silver linings. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was at its peak in the early 2000s but over time the government was successful in turning public awareness into behavioural change for prevention.

Perhaps it is time we learn a thing or two from past achievements, such as prioritising public health over infighting within the ruling party for supremacy. The irony: it should have been obvious.

Excerpts of the report from *Nepali Times* #31 23 February–1 March 2001:

Sex is cheap on Nepal's highways. Demand is high, but it is the supply side that pays the price. Hundreds of women and young girls are risking their health and lives in the poorly paid but highly exploitative trade.

Poverty is the push factor here, but there are also other reasons that drag women into the trade. Renuka's is a typical story. Married off at the age of 13 to a widower 20 years older than her, she lost her



husband when she was 21. As a young widow, she was watched closely so she would not inflict the insult of “infidelity” upon her dead husband. Her life changed four years later. At 25, she eloped to a highway township along the Hetauda-Narayanghat section of the East-West highway on the border with a truck driver, a man already married once with a son. Renuka's second husband died when his truck collided with a bus three years ago.

Public awareness about HIV/AIDS, and also the use of condoms as prophylactic measures has increased, but sex workers and their clients remain at high risk. New ERA's research found that regular condom use during encounters with sex workers had jumped to 51% among truck drivers last year, up from 33% in 1997, and 32% among migrant workers, up from 23% in 1997. But it is not all rosy-data also

shows that sex workers remain at higher risk than their clients, due to lower levels of awareness, and the common perception that only men are protected by condoms. Last year, only 40% of sex workers said they used condoms consistently. Alcoholism among sex workers is seen as another reason for relatively low levels of condom use.

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

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER



# HIGHEST HONORS COME WITH HIGHEST STANDARDS

We have been awarded the Diamond Status by APEX Health Safety independent audit powered by SimpliFlying for our efforts in ensuring the highest standards of hygiene and safety for our passengers.



TURKISH AIRLINES



# “Some industries bouncing back to near pre-Covid levels”

**Nepali Times:** What is your assessment of Nepal's macro-economic situation and the risks to the banking sector?

**Anirvan Ghosh Dastidar:** Nepal's GDP composition is largely driven by the service sector which amounts to more than half of the pre-pandemic total output. The pandemic has slowed down the service sector which may have caused a majority of the aggregate demand subdue during the peak of the crisis. This also meant both consumption and production were impacted since interlinkages between services, agriculture and the manufacturing are very high in our economy. This may have been why our economic growth rates declined during the crisis.

However, Nepal's interlinkages to the global economy on both demand and supply drivers are very high. This also maybe one reason that the credit demand quickly picked up after the lockdown which can be seen from the CCD ratio in the banking industry – since Nepal's economy is dependent on drivers that may not need so much time for recovery, like remittances and the service sector, to drive majority of the demand, and imports to drive majority of the supply.

We also saw foreign exchange reserves reaching one of the highest levels with a constant remittance inflow and declining imports. Banks in Nepal are directly impacted by how the economy performs since there are no complex financial instruments in the system that stabilise or delay the impact of economic shocks. Most real GDP economic forecasts for Nepal have relied on a few assumptions: cases will gradually decline, and economic activity will gradually return to normal starting 2021 which we are witnessing at present.

The IMF recently revised GDP forecasts in January 2021; the world output is expected to grow by 5.5% in 2021 with emerging market economies at 6.3%. I feel that the quicker the banking industry adapts to the post-Covid new normal, the faster would be the risk mitigation with new trends in technology, macroeconomics and consumer behavior.

Meet Anirvan Ghosh Dastidar, CEO for Standard Chartered Bank in Nepal. Before arriving in Kathmandu in 2019, he served as CEO of bank in Brunei, Philippines and Sri Lanka. *Nepali Times* spoke to him about the current Covid-19 crisis and its impact on financial systems worldwide and in Nepal.

**Nepal Rastra Bank has allowed rescheduling and restructuring loans, would this provide relief or just postpone the problem?**

This would be completely dependent on how the economy and respective demand and supply drivers recover. If there is no recovery of economic activity in a particular sector, the problem would be there, irrespective. In this case, there is no other option but to reschedule and restructure loans with an expectation that in the recovery phase things will get back to normal. This trend can be seen across the world, and not only in Nepal.

The Central Bank Policy has in no way got to do anything with the problem. In fact these regulations are there by definition to ease the burden for all stakeholders in the system. The problem is external, which is dependent on market forces and these factors are beyond anyone's control given the global pandemic. I am appreciative of the efforts Nepal Rastra Bank has taken to stabilise the negative economic impact caused by this crisis, it would have been much worse if it were not for its interventions.

And we are also beginning to see some industries bouncing back to near pre-Covid levels and are recovering quickly.

**There was always a chronic liquidity crisis among Nepal's banks, but that is not the reality now. Would this not be a time to prime up investment?**

This is largely dependent on what you are investing in. Trying to invest now just because there is liquidity and prices of certain markets are low, would be myopic view. One might also argue that interest rates are down so credit is cheaper. However, the fundamental laws of the markets and economics cannot



be ignored. As long as the economy is down, so is the aggregate demand. When aggregate demand is down, an overall subdue in economic activities is bound to exist – this is a vicious cycle. Nepal's economy is quickly picking up, but not in all sectors. I would thus say investment decisions would depend more on the sectors involved.

**Do you see the possibility of mergers of financial institutions during this crisis?**

There are no clear answers to that. There are various academic arguments on various variables from economies of scale, synergy, efficiency of the industry, quality of assets and returns of the market the financial institutions are operating in. The sky is the limit for these variables. Therefore, commenting on the possibility of mergers is very complicated and this should be based on various factors that are important to the market and industry in question. Ultimately, however, fundamental rules always govern any banking industry: a bank needs to be profitable to sustain and should comply with the rules laid forward by the regulator.

**What would be Standard Chartered's strategy to ride out this crisis, and indeed see it as an opportunity for expansion?**

There was an interesting article in Harvard Business Review 'Why Japanese Businesses Are So Good at Surviving Crises' which pointed to a long term outlook of the society a business operates in. It argues that the more we contribute towards the overall development of the economy and communities in the economy, the more we benefit. We also follow this concept, which includes a focus on the long-term prosperity and economic development of Nepal which in-turn has a direct relationship to the banking industry's health. We are committed to the sustainable growth priorities of Nepal and are focused on helping businesses and communities revive post Covid-19.

We have had our share of learning during the pandemic and our plans are geared towards enhancing our digital capabilities to support clients with their banking needs. Our operating model will also consist of a refreshed health and safety standard where there will be a certain element of working from home even after the pandemic. I think our focus is more towards supporting our clients recover from this crisis and keeping our colleagues safe, more than expansion.

**Could you tell us a bit about your bank's corporate social responsibility initiatives?**

Our vision is to become the most sustainable and responsible bank globally. In this endeavour, we have partnered with many non-profits. We look out for a long term sustainable assistances to the beneficiaries and not just a short term view. The latest was to support the Covid-19 emergency relief where we contributed Rs57 million through various implementing partners including a donation of Rs11.6 million to the Nepal government's Coronavirus Control and Treatment Relief Fund.

We also have our flagship initiative 'Futuremakers by Standard Chartered' to tackle inequality and promote greater economic inclusion for young people in our communities. Under this initiative, we sponsored a lowcost sanitary pad project at Maiti Nepal. We also launched the 'Goal' program in 2020 for financial education and life skills training to children aged between 15 and 24. We have just successfully concluded our multi-year 'Seeing is Believing' program under which we extended support of Rs 112 million for various projects over years.

**What are some of the areas of digital transformation that you are witnessing in the banking sector?**

With the pandemic, the first area was cyber risk management with heightened vigilance due to increased dependence on technology. Moreover, the awareness of clients and colleagues increased tremendously as options were limited, the industry moved to various digital means for communication in a short span of time and this also meant being aware about protecting data. Online transactions increased, which also saw the industry focus more on the underlying security of these services.

Clients can now directly request for services through mobile banking which gets processed straight-through. We also implemented an exception processes to support transaction requests from clients over the email during the peak of the pandemic. We accelerated adoption of our digital channels by allowing clients to pay loan EMIs digitally. Lastly, we are working to rolled out integration with various in-country platforms to provide interbank fast pay solutions.

prabhu BANK

## Turkish Safe Travels awarded

Turkish Airlines has been awarded the highest level of Diamond status by APEX (Airline Passenger Experience Association) Health Safety powered by SimpliFlying. It is a recognition of the airline's hygiene standards at the airport and during the flight. The carrier has digitalised touchless check-in and boarding processes to hygiene specialist cabin crew and hygiene kits for passengers.



Turkish Airlines Nepal has also signed an agreement with Glocal for promoting skills and recognizing teenagers. Turkish GM in Nepal Abdullah Tuncer Keceli signed the deal with Ashish Thakur of Glocal, so aspiring Nepali youth will engage in a creative workshops and events such as CEO Unplugged.

## Bold and Beautiful Magnite

Pioneer Moto Corp is taking bookings for the all-new Nissan Magnite across all Nissan dealerships in the country and on its website, <https://nissan-nepal.com/>

book-a-vehicle. The Big, Bold, Beautiful and 'Carismatic' SUV is available at a special introductory price of Rs 2,949,000. "We believe that the Magnite will be a game changer that is high on technology and aspirations," said Sandeep Sharda of Pioneer Moto Corp.



## NABIC Board

Nepal Agribusiness Innovation Centre (NABIC) has appointed Siddhant Raj Pandey, CEO of Bo2, as chair of the board of directors. Other members of the board are Sunil KC, CEO of NMB Bank, Badri Pd Dahal from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development, Mahalaxmi Shrestha of FWEAN and Sabin Bikram Joshi from Kathmandu University. The CEO is Bhushan Shah. NABIC is the country's first agri-focused business incubation and innovation platform.

## Airlines to fly vaccines

In a landmark initiative, the world's 10 leading airlines have joined UNICEF in its Humanitarian Airfreight Initiative to the airlift of Covid-19 vaccines, essential medicines, medical devices and other critical supplies to respond to the pandemic. The Humanitarian Airfreight Initiative will also be



deployed to deliver the first batch of COVAX funded vaccines to Nepal this month. UNICEF is working with the supplier, airlines, and the Ministry of Health and Population to finalise the procurement and delivery to Nepal of 2.2 million doses of Covishield vaccines from India, and to ensure cold chain safety and rapid vaccine distribution to vaccination sites across the country.

## Daraz Haat Bazaar

The Daraz Haat Bazaar begins 23 February, offering customers mega deals: EMI service at 0% interest rate through four partner banks, free shipping and vouchers, as well as deals in the latest gadgets, clothes, and groceries encompassing half a million products.

Shoppers can participate in the '1 Rupee Game' and a chance to win various gadgets following a card payment of Rs1. Daraz has expanded delivery to 20 more locations outside the Valley.



## Ncell mobile app

Ncell has launched a new version of its mobile app as part of its #FastForwardLife campaign. Ncell is giving away 1GB worth of data for free to every customer who downloads the app for the first time for online recharge, subscribe to voice and data packages, track monthly bills, activate services.



## Xiaomi service center

Xiaomi has launched its Authorized Service Center (ASC) in at Eyeplex Mall in Kathmandu as part of the company's expansion of its after-sales service network in Nepal. Other service centers are located in Pokhara, Nepalganj, Narayanghat and Itahari.

## DishHome Khushiko Connection

DishHome has rolled out Khushiko Connection campaign commercial with production values with small video clips of episodes highlighting DishHome features in each like HD Picture Quality, PPV, PVR, X'VOD, DishHome GO App & Web, Exclusive Contents and Customer care service.



# Nepal's wildlife watchdogs honoured

Nepal Police investigators win the UN's Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards for prosecuting wildlife traffickers



● Sonia Awale

Growing up in a Darchula village near the Tibetan border, a young Birendra Singh Johari was no stranger to wildlife crimes.

At teashops and community gatherings, neighbours openly talked about transporting tiger pelts and elephant ivory to traders across the border to China.

"They called it दुइ नम्वरी घन्डा, but it was also how people in Darchula could make a living. Since then, I had always wanted to grow up to be a cop and arrest the real bad guys," recalls Johari, now 40, and Sub-Inspector at the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) Wildlife Pillar 4 of the Nepal Police.

Now, Johari and his colleague Inspector Sudarshan Panthee are proud recipients of the the UN's Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards for arresting the notorious ringleader of a smuggling network accused of transporting pelts and bones of tigers from India via Nepal to China.

Kunjok Lama (real name Kunjok Tsering Tamang) had been in the crosshairs of police in India and Nepal as well as Interpol for two decades. His name appeared in every major seizure of wildlife parts in the region before his arrest by the CIB in June last year.

In 2005, in one of the biggest hauls of wildlife contraband in South Asia, a Nepal Army patrol in the Langtang National Park in Rasuwa caught four people with 5 tiger pelts, 36 leopard skins and 113kg of tiger bones on their way to the Chinese border. Every one of them mentioned Kunjok during the investigation, but it was not until his real identity was verified that the case came to its climax.

"We led this investigation for years, we analysed his



property, companies, citizenship and passports, and we found a clue: the personal number he was using at the time was in one of the documents," explains Panthee. "We then found that Kunjok Lama and Kunjok Tsering Tamang was the same person."

Tamang is now in custody at the Rasuwa Prison, after his failed attempt to challenge the Rasuwa District Court's order at the Patan High Court and a writ of habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court.

Nepal Police has been often criticised for catching only the small fry in organised crime operations, but with the prosecution of Tamang, the officers say they are closing in on other ring leaders involved in the case in Tibet and New York, aided by new technology to analyse digital footprints and paper trails.

However, a reliable central data system and proper coordination between the police and the forestry and national park officials will

further assist in wildlife crime investigation, they say.

But even then, smugglers caught by investigators use legal loopholes, political connections and judicial corruption to get light sentences, jump nominal bail or altogether escape.

"It happens more often than we can count, we dedicate all our time and effort in these investigations but they find one loophole or the other to escape, it is frustrating," admits Johari. "But we don't let that dishearten us, we learn from each case, we build more evidence and a stronger case for the next time."

Wildlife crime investigators also face personal security threats. Recently, some men who are believed to be involved in wildlife contraband trade visited the school

where Johari's young daughter is enrolled. They claimed that the parents were out of town for work and were sent to pick up the girl. Luckily, Johari's daughter was back

from school half an hour earlier that day.

With the global coronavirus crisis, there has been a sharp rise in wildlife poaching. In April, six musk deer were found dead in traps laid by poachers during Covid-19 lockdown in Sagarmatha National Park.

For the first time in over half a decade, Nepal wasn't able to celebrate zero rhino poaching this year when four adult rhinos were found dead in Chitwan National Park. Recently, the CIB has seized two tiger pelts in Dang. So far, 14 people involved in the crimes have been arrested, 12 individuals are on the run.

Police investigations reveal that the big fish are using social media networks to recruit locals who have lost their jobs during the pandemic for killing rhinos, tigers and other wildlife in return for quick cash.

Despite Nepal's successes in wildlife protection, law enforcement agencies cannot afford to be complacent. And conservationists say recognitions like the Asia Environmental Enforcement Award provide a morale boost.

Sudarshan Panthee and Birendra Singh Johari (above) of the Nepal Police Central Investigation Bureau, the recipients of 2021 Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards.

Kunjok Lama (left) was named in numerous seizures of tiger parts in Nepal and India, and was finally caught in Kathmandu on 25 June 2020.

The team also won the Asia Environmental Enforcement Award in 2018.

"This award is an international acknowledgment of the Central Investigation Bureau's role in controlling wildlife crime in Nepal," says Sahakul Bahadur Thapa, chief of the CIB of the Nepal Police.

Johari, who was also the recipient of the Abraham Conservation Award in 2015: "This award is a reminder that hard work pays off, and for me personally it is a fulfilment of my childhood dream in Darchula. Our job is to catch the culprits, but it is much better if wildlife is so well protected by local people themselves that they are not killed and smuggled in the first place." 🇳🇵





# Nepal fights infodemic to push vaccine

A more effective communication strategy can turn Nepal into a model for a Covid vaccination drive

● **Sonia Awale**

So far, approximately 450,000 Nepalis have received the first dose of Covishield, reaching 85% of the target group in the first phase of the country's Covid vaccination drive.

Starting 7 March, 3.7 million Nepalis above 55 who make up 12% of the total population will get their shots against SARS-CoV-2. Teachers, students, bus drivers and other groups will also be included in the second phase.

On the paper, Nepal looks like it is in a better position with vaccination, especially given that more than 100 countries have yet to receive even a single dose.

"We have to applaud the government for its effort in bringing the vaccine earlier than expected and for rolling it out efficiently," says Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal. "Nepal will be among the first countries to take the vaccine to the majority of its population with the second phase in early March."

However, the vaccine campaign has been plagued with hesitancy and denial. Even doctors and nurses were reluctant to inoculate themselves, resulting in a low uptake. Failure to communicate, allay concerns about side effects, and ensuring access in remote areas were the main roadblocks to better coverage.

"The very fact that the vaccines arrived in Nepal much earlier than we anticipated and once it did, we had to use it on the fly with the pandemic still going on, leaving us without a proper communication strategy," admits Buddha Basnyat of the Patan Academy of Health Sciences.

Covishield, developed by AstraZeneca Oxford University and manufactured by the Serum Institute of India is being used in the UK, the EU, India with Australia starting



MONIKA DEUPALA

their vaccination soon. With the efficacy ranging from 70-80%, 0.5ml of 2 doses 4-12 weeks apart, the jab has been deemed safe with no severe reactions or any death.

In the recent past, local governments used to deploy Tole Health Promoters (THP) in neighbourhoods before a vaccination drive for measles, polio and other infections to address the public's safety concerns.

Another effective communication tool would have been the use of social media platforms and mass media to increase awareness about the vaccine as well as promote its use. Elsewhere

in the world, prime ministers and presidents being inoculated were being televised live. Celebrities took to the Internet to share their experience of vaccination.

"Someone like Nirmal Puja would have been best to promote the campaign and increase the acceptance of the vaccine in the masses with his legions of followers," says Sher Bahadur Pun, a virologist at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital.

Basnyat agrees that Purja with his international mountaineering fame and Gurkha commando background would have also bolstered Nepal's vaccine

diplomacy. "He could be our brand ambassador to take up our case to aid agencies given the UK's stand on vaccine equity while also backing India's interest to promote neighbourhood first policy with vaccines," he added.

The government has approved the second dose to be given anywhere between 8-12 weeks of the first one, prioritising vaccination of as many vulnerable individuals as possible before that.

But the availability of the vaccine will be the main concern as we move on to the next stage of the campaign. With the 1 million dose Covishield grant from India in January, another

2 million that Nepal purchased this week from Serum Institute of India, 2.25 million (with the first 300,000 arriving first) under the COVAX initiative, and 500,000 doses of Sinopharm from China, the government has a stock of close to six million doses. This means 3 million can be vaccinated soon.

"The second phase is as challenging as it is important. But this is also the group likely to have a higher chance of reaction, so we need to be prepared locally to manage them," says Shyam Raj Uprety, head of the government's Covid vaccine strategy. "It is crucial to communicate different types of side-effects and explain that they signify that the vaccine is working."

Around the world, the total number of new coronavirus cases and fatalities is dropping. Although India has reported spikes in some states and Nepal will have to keep a close watch on New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Nepalis have most likely developed localised immunity.

A Nepal Health Research Council study has revealed that over 45% of hospital staff had developed antibodies by December, adding to the view that we are nearing herd immunity.

"Once we have vaccinated a larger risk population, even if there is a second wave, it is unlikely to impact much because the group who were getting seriously sick will be protected," adds Dixit.

But even with the vaccine, Nepalis will still have to continue precautions. There is still uncertainty about duration of immunity, and whether vaccinated people can spread the virus.

Says Basnyat: "This has been a pandemic of misinformation, we have to negate that with public engagement. Good thing is that Nepal can draw inspiration from past successful vaccination drives and can become a model for others." 🇳🇵

## Everything you wanted to know about vaccines

Recently *Nepali Times* spoke with three experts with frequently asked questions from readers regarding the Covid-19 vaccination drive in Nepal.

Excerpts of interviews with Virologist Sher Bahadur Pun at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital, Shyam Raj Uprety, head of the Government Covid Vaccine Strategy and Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamic Nepal:



Once a person is vaccinated, there are antibodies that the body produces and then there are memory T and B cells. The lifespan of antibodies is about 3-6 months but we don't know about the duration of the memory cells since the vaccine has just been developed. The assumption is that it will work from anywhere between 9-12 months but we will know for sure once people who have been vaccinated pass that stage.

**Do we have to get the same vaccine for the second dose?**

Ideally, the manufacturers of the vaccine suggest we take the same for both doses. But there are instances you may be able to take a second dose from a different company.



**Do people who have recovered from Covid-19 need to vaccinate?**

**Sher Bahadur Pun:** We don't know exactly how long does the natural infection protect the body. The rough estimation is between 3-6 months. But it varies from one individual to another so it is recommended that people take the shot. Also, two doses provide longer protection.

**Can breastfeeding mothers take the vaccine?**

Manufacturers of Covishield have suggested pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers against taking this vaccine. But Nepal government recently said that those breastfeeding for six months or more could take it, but we don't have concrete data yet so we don't recommend it.



**How can people with vulnerable family members get them vaccinated?**

**Shyam Raj Uprety:** We identified health workers as the most vulnerable. We vaccinated them at their nearest convenient place. We will do the same for the next vulnerable group, take the vaccine to the communities.

**If someone is not on the priority list but still wants to get vaccinated, how can they get it? Can it be bought?**

It is unlikely for people who are not listed as the priority to get the shot. It is being administered for free for the priority group individuals and cannot be bought in the market. But after the most vulnerable are covered, the vaccine could be made available by the private sector.

**What are the precautions one should take before and after the vaccine?**

**Sameer Mani Dixit:** Covishield, the Covid vaccine we are using, is an intramuscular injection, 0.5ml in two doses 4-12 weeks apart. It is administered by a professional and after the jab, one will feel mild pain in the region.

**What's the efficacy rate of the vaccine and how long does it work?**

Covishield has been used in the UK, EU, India and many other countries, Australia is getting ready to use it. It has passed phase 3 clinical trials with over 12,000 volunteers without any severe reactions or any death. The efficacy ranges from 70-80%.



# South Asia’s vaccine geopolitics

How vaccine access puts Nepal in the crosshairs between China and India



China's Defence Minister Wei Fenghe with Prime Minister Oli in November in Kathmandu.

RAJAN KAFLE



Indian Ambassador to Nepal Vinay Mohan Kwatra at Kathmandu airport on 21 January with India's gift of 1 million Covishield vaccines to Nepal.

MONIKA DEUPALA

● Christopher Tan in Hong Kong

Covid-19 vaccines have become a means for global powers to flex their muscles to reap geopolitical gains.

As a landlocked country perched between China and India, the world's two largest vaccine manufacturers, Nepal has benefited from their overtures. Attempts by Beijing and Delhi to distribute vaccines to Nepal signify the Himalayan state's growing strategic importance to both.

India made the first move. In January, New Delhi pledged vaccines before any other country, and promptly dispatched 1 million doses of Covishield manufactured by its Serum Institute of India.

"Nepal is getting the vaccines within a week after India rolled out its vaccination drive, which signifies the friendship between India and Nepal and the importance India attaches to Nepal," India's ambassador to Nepal Vinay Mohan Kwatra said, as the first shipment of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine arrived at Kathmandu airport.

Such rosy optics masked recent complications in relations between the two neighbours. There are concerns in New Delhi that Nepal has become increasingly 'Sinified'. China was the architect of the alliance of Nepal's Maoist and UML parties, which swept the 2017 elections and united to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

Since 2018, Prime Minister K P Oli has signed off on numerous projects that are part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. The NCP and the Chinese Communist Party forged fraternal ties, and have been workshops on 'Xi Jinping Thought' in Kathmandu.

After Nepal's Supreme Court restored the House that Oli dissolved in December, New Delhi has a chance to jostle for influence. While India will need to present more robust measures of support to Nepal than vaccines to cement its influence, it has a head start in Covid diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the Chinese seem to be increasingly frustrated with the NCP leadership, and have sent a message by not opening two border checkpoints, citing the pandemic. China's Ambassador in Nepal Hou Yanqi failed after repeated attempts to get the NCP leadership to patch up their differences. Beijing sent its Army Chief Wei Wengfo to Kathmandu in November.

Not to be outdone in vaccine geopolitics, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali on 5 February, and pledged 500,000 doses of its Sinopharm vaccine. After a long delay, the Chinese vaccine finally got approval from Nepal's Department of Drug Administration last week for emergency use.

The delay in the approval process for the Sinopharm, which has not been approved by the WHO yet, appears to have miffed Beijing. The Indian media played up supposed pressure by the Chinese Embassy to fast-track approval.

Vaccine geopolitics is playing out elsewhere in South Asia. Attempts by China to distribute vaccines to Bangladesh were thwarted after Dhaka refused to contribute to the development costs of the Sinovac vaccine.

After India donated two million doses of Covishield to Bangladesh, it struck a deal to purchase 30 million doses of the vaccine for the country, snubbing Beijing. Chinese state media accused Delhi of depriving Bangladeshis of the vaccine.

Pakistan became the first country to receive donated shipments of China's Sinopharm vaccine, and 1.2 million doses were pledged.

Along with Nepal and Bangladesh, New Delhi also gifted Covishield to Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Seychelles, Mauritius and Burma as part of its 'Neighbourhood First' policy.

Nepal took delivery on Sunday of 1 million more Covishield vaccines that it ordered from the Serum Institute of India, and another 2.2 million doses under the WHO's COVAX initiative will come soon.

China has made strategic gains in the region in recent years to India's detriment, pouring investment through its Belt and Road Initiative into Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and the Maldives. With its bureaucracy and weaker spending power, Delhi had not been able to keep up with Beijing's soft power expansion.

Now, India is using vaccines as the vanguard of its response. The Serum Institute has been producing vaccine supplies at a much faster rate than the Indian government's inoculation program can distribute them, making it easy for Delhi to send them abroad without suffering political backlash at home.

This has given India new leverage for soft power in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions. Since most of

the developing world will not be vaccinated until 2023, demand for vaccines will only rise.

While China's manufacturing prowess means that it is likely to keep up with demand, regional resistance to its largely un-trialed

vaccines will complicate efforts to gain approval.

What happens in Nepal over the coming months will be a microcosm of regional vaccine geopolitics. The erosion of Chinese influence with its inability to keep the NCP together,

gives an opening for New Delhi to reassert itself in Kathmandu.

While China has promised Nepal continued support to help overcome the pandemic, its assistance may not be needed or welcomed if India already fulfils this role. 🇮🇳

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● Nilima Thapa Shrestha

For those growing up in the 1980s in Kathmandu, the ‘Green Belt’ became a familiar term as poplars rose up along the Ring Road. Over the years, this strip of green gave Kathmandu some breathing space as the city grew at breakneck speed.

Slowly, encroachment, carelessness and road expansion decimated the trees. The poplars were the first to go, then the jacarandas that lined the streets were cut, too.

From a Green Belt, Kathmandu has become a Dust Bowl. But all is not lost, the tree-lined Darbar Marg to neighbourhood beautification at Naryan Chaur have shown that if communities get together it is possible to revive the Valley’s lungs.

Kathmandu will benefit from developing a series of linked water bodies, open spaces, parks and patches of urban forests, by not only connecting fragmented green spaces but also increase their ecosystem services, a concept that gives economic value to restoring nature.

Lack of open, green spaces takes a daily toll on the lives of the residents who have limited



space for walking or other social activities. The abject lack of greenery in Kathmandu is a contributing factor to not just physiological but also psychological stress.

Sprawling, insensitive and haphazard development over the years have over-run what remained of open spaces. More recently, Kathmandu has experienced annual flooding during monsoon

and extreme temperatures, a new phenomenon for the city’s residents.

According to the World Economic Forum, access to green open space and a feeling of social connection creates liveable and vibrant cities. The small open spaces that remain are not a result of planning but due to litigation (Tinkune) or neglect (Tundikhkel). But even here, they provide people

a place to unwind and distress with friends and family.

The new corridors along the Bagmati, Dhobi Khola and other rivulets have constricted the floodplains, but at least the banks are tree-lined.

Trees have many obvious positive aspects like emitting oxygen, muffling noise pollution, moderating temperature. But also little-known benefits like releasing

# A green

## Connecting and improving green open spaces would make Kathmandu more liveable

essential oils like phytoncides, which help physical and mental wellbeing in humans.

While Kathmandu has not yet seen a campaign that calls for the protection and preservation of nature, we have in the recent years seen some movement around keeping open spaces intact.

For many Kathmandu residents, the realisation sank in after the 2015 earthquake. “It is important to tell the masses how our open spaces are being encroached upon and why they should be preserved,” says Vijaya Shrestha, who coordinated the Occupy Tundikhel campaign.

Organised by a youth group, it was an attempt to spread awareness about the importance of open spaces, of which Tundikhel was a prominent symbol. The historical

● Bicram Rijal

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Nepal’s politicians were engaged in political one-upmanship as they packed people into public spaces, particularly the streets of Kathmandu and other cities in shows of strength.

There was ‘my crowd is bigger than yours’ contest between factions of the Nepal Communist Party, one led by Prime Minister K P Oli and the other by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal. This was also a contest for who can display more control over the public space in terms of significance and size.

Prime Minister Oli’s mass assembly venue on 5 February, a closed-off Darbar Marg, was symbolic because of the gentrified public space with a backdrop of palace-turned-museum. The message seemed to be clear: ‘we have control of both the sadan (Parliament) and the sadak (street).

Lest we forget, Darbar Marg is not just any street. Whether during the Panchayat, the Maoist insurgency, the states of emergency, or countless political shutdowns, Darbar Marg has always

# Open spaces and open

## Public spaces in a city like Kathmandu are part of the infrastructure of democracy

remained the most protected street in the capital. Addressing ‘the people’ from this particular venue was synonymous to Oli stepping into the buffer zone, or what anthropologists would call a ‘liminal space’.

The prime minister speaking from that ambiguous space that belongs neither here nor there, can be interpreted as a dress rehearsal, as though he had traversed a rite of passage for what is about to happen next. And, amid the shows of force by the rival Communist factions, the next action may be marked by control of more public spaces, not just in Kathmandu, but across the country. So, the obvious question is: What does the control of public spaces by those in power, especially the government, mean?

Public spaces are an important part of urban life. If designed, built, and sustained thoughtfully, they serve as the infrastructure

of democracy, inclusive cultural setting, and powerful social fabric. In developed countries like Canada, public spaces like parks, community halls, libraries, art and recreation centers are designed and built through inclusive processes in consultation with the public. The exchange contributes to increasing accountability and ownership of public infrastructure both for the government and the public.

Public spaces and infrastructure are not just material spaces, they also have their own social and political lives that are instrumental for a democratic governance. As Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta argue in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, public infrastructure also ‘serves as an important locus for the evaluation of the morality and ethics of political leaders and the state’.

For example, broken infrastructure like



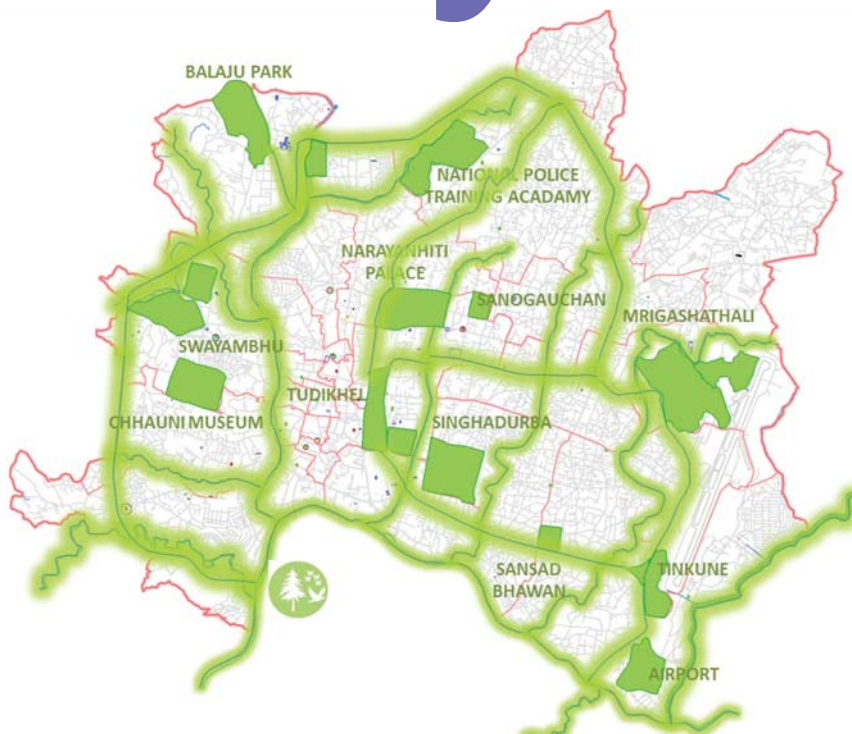
# “A sight for

Many people do not know where Maitighar intersection got its name: there used to be the office of the Nepali movie माइतीघर in the 1960s with a sign board there. In 2002, Mayor Keshav Sthapit had the Mandala built for the SAARC Summit, and the area automatically got the name माइतीघर मण्डल. This later became the preferred site for civic protests.

In this week’s episode of *Saglo Samaj*, Kanak Mani Dixit speaks to Renchin Yonjan who oversaw the construction of the Mandala, the only artistic open space built in Kathmandu in the past four decades.



# Green city is a smart city



and cultural importance of this once-vast maidan pre-dates its function as a military parade ground. But Tundikhel has been steadily encroached upon by the Army, and it is now only a sliver of its former expanse.

Restoring it to its original boundary would not only provide Kathmandu with lungs, but also

preserve its historical significance, as well as serve as a refuge in future disasters as it did in the 1934 and 2015 earthquakes.

The Kathmandu Valley Development Authority has identified 887 open spaces within the Kathmandu Valley: 488 sites in Kathmandu, 345 in Lalitpur, and 53 in Bhaktapur. Among these,

58% of the area is usable for public activities. These open spaces vary in size, services, and function. But identifying open spaces alone cannot guarantee their protection unless the feeling of ownership can be developed among the communities.

Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) has been developing a plan to carve out 36 parks of varying sizes and services in the city, in collaboration with 11 municipalities to develop other green spaces around the valley. So far, the plans have been restricted to maps and their sustainable management will be a challenge. Issues of ownership are unclear, and the lack of belongingness can lead to poor maintenance, commercialisation and encroachment.

In some cases, open space development has turned into bourgeois environmentalism--with high boundary walls, restricted opening times, and fees that favour a few well-off people. This deprives ordinary citizens from access to greenery. The valley's open spaces are fragmented, and unplanned urbanisation has left them disconnected with each other. They can be linked through ecological

corridors that help plants and animals spread, migrate, as well as rehabilitate environments.

In cities, ecological corridors also provide a continuous shaded path connecting urban amenities like theatres, universities, libraries, shopping malls, and offices with parks and water bodies, improving walkability.

Kathmandu's shrinking open spaces is due not only to encroachment but also to a lack of clear policies. In 2017, the National Urban Development Strategy identified 'poor governance and fragmented policies and regulations' as the major causes and pointed out the need for plans and projects incorporating nature and more green spaces.

Creating Kathmandu's green necklace requires political buy-in and support from communities. Unfortunately, politicians are drawn to flashy infrastructure projects that are visible enough to win votes, but have no patience to wait for a tree to grow.

For many residents who have lost hope of any significant progress in the city, a green necklace might seem too ambitious. But cities around the world have greened their landscapes by de-paving

hard spaces, developing parks and riverfronts, adding greenery to streets, encouraging gardening in schools and residential neighborhoods, and preserving the urban woodlands.

Kathmandu's river corridors have been designed purely for vehicular traffic. However, we can develop riverbanks as green corridors—which would also help reduce flooding. Last spring's colourful blossoms along the river corridor show what is possible.

Likewise, Kathmandu's Ring Road and major road networks can create and connect green spaces. Tree-lined streetscapes will create an ecological corridor, providing a continuous shaded path to the urban population, and a movement corridor for birds, insects, and small creatures.

Technically, connecting green spaces is possible if the city's environment department stands up strong against destructive development. The bigger challenge is a social and political willingness to participate in preserving and taking ownership of nature's aesthetics. 🇳🇵

**Nilima Thapa Shrestha** is an architect and urban planner.

## society



dug-up roads and uncompleted bridges reveal as much messy politics and failed governance as they do the unfulfilled needs and everyday suffering of citizens.

One example of the loss of a vibrant public space is the Khula Manch, which became a dumping ground for post-earthquake rubble and stalls, forcing demonstrators to spill into neighbouring streets in Kathmandu. Once a centre of historic pro-democracy rallies since 1990, the space is finally being cleared under direct orders of the Prime Minister's Office and will likely resurrect into its previous avatar of an open space for rallies.

The occupation of public spaces, including major streets and intersections like Mandala by the government as well as political parties, is a denial of public space to ordinary citizens. It also impedes the culture of democracy and civic engagements.

Spatial divisions are important for governance because there is always a moral boundary between the state and citizens in terms of which space they occupy. Generally speaking, if *sadan* is related to the government, *sadak* is where the public can politic. That boundary plays a role in a cultural and political order.

The government should deal with the agitating parties in a democratic way, which involves initiating a dialogue, working through the various government branches, and treating the public with dignity, respect,

and recognition. It is not a democratic step for the government to get on the street, draw on tit-for-tat tactics, and occupy public space. Anomalies inside the Parliament, like the passing of unconstitutional, undemocratic, discriminatory and exclusionary bills should be addressed by the voices and actions of people on the street. These democratic actions do not include resorting to violence, vandalism, blocking off streets, arson, or other forms of coercion and harassment.

Neither the public occupying the legislature, nor the government occupying the streets is democratic practice. The occupation of the US Capitol by the supporters of Donald Trump on 6 January, and the control of public spaces by the military in the aftermath of the recent coup in Myanmar are both examples of the transgression of democratic and spatial order. The rival rallies by competing factions of the Nepal Communist Party in Nepal's public spaces in the name of 'mass mobilisation' is a signal that the political leadership of whatever hue just want to control public spaces to fulfil their political ends. Control of this nature borders on moral and ethical transgression, that threaten the citizenry and civic engagement required for a vibrant democracy. 🇳🇵

**Bicram Rijal** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University, Canada.

## 'sore eyes amidst Kathmandu's chaos'



**Kanak Mani Dixit:** How did the idea of constructing this Mandala come about?

**Renchin Yonjan:** Originally it was called 'Garden of Hope' to give Kathmandu residents a small oasis of beauty at a time when its heritage was disappearing. The mandala was added later. It was meant to be a symbol of impermanence and that if we do not protect it, aesthetic beauty can be ephemeral.

And for the past 20 years, Kathmandu's commuters have

passed this site every day and experienced that moment of peace. How does that make you feel?

There is a sense of satisfaction, but also dissatisfaction. The upkeep is not as we had intended it to be. There was supposed to be water, the stone spouts are dry, the grass is supposed to be green. Still, I am glad that there is this sight for sore eyes amidst Kathmandu's chaos and urbanisation.

Originally, we had planned to plant only white flowers at the location, to spread the message of peace. Now they have planted flowers in all colours. But the saddest thing is the addition of these garish coloured rope lights.

I do not like them at all. When I pass the Mandala at night, it looks like a red light district in Thailand. We could have lights that imitate oil lamps to give it that devotional look. But look at these ugly lights, snaking around in blue, red, yellow.

**Can what you did with the Mandala be an example for other neighbourhoods in Kathmandu to revive open spaces?**

Definitely. And it is not even that expensive to carry out. Just needs imagination. The Municipality is now maintaining this space, but the idea should not be to make money out of it, but to think how it can provide contentment and peace to

this city's residents. I used to think of all those commuters in crowded buses on hot days, and how people may get a tinge of pleasure as they pass the garden and flowers so that when they reach their office or home they will feel less stressed and happy.

**Yes, let us hope the Mandala can inspire other neighbourhoods to also do the same.**

Yes, and my request would be that whoever uses these open spaces, they keep it clean. There are discarded plastic water bottles and trash here. It would be best if everyone treated this space as their own.



In the latest episode of Saglo Samaj, Kanak Mani Dixit speaks to Renchin Yonjan, the originator of the Maitighar Mandala project nearly 20 years ago. Yonjan is happy the open space provides an oasis of tranquility in the middle of the city. Saglo Samaj is broadcast every Monday at 8:30PM on Dish Home Channel 134.



## EVENTS

**Revamp Nepal**

In an attempt to enable ventures to directly connect and interact with prospective customers, clients, and partners, Revamp Nepal will host a diverse lineup of ventures, ideas, and initiatives currently active in the ecosystem.

27 February, 11am, Buzz Cafe & Bar

**Otaku Jatra Expo**

Costume up and participate in a full day of epic celebration of all things comics and pop-culture at the Otaku Jatra Mini.

13 March, 11am, Gokarna House Restaurant

**Hike For Nepal**

Join #HikeForNepal campaign to hike along the existing and new hiking routes with people from all walks of life, inspire tourists to visit Nepal. This time, hike from Lele to Lamatar.

27 February, 7AM, Lele-Lamatar

**Art Exhibition**

A seven-month-long exhibition, Tulikaa's Kholo 2.0 – A Cycle Of Life, will be the longest exhibition held in Nepal so far, displaying the best artworks of 28 upcoming, established and legendary Nepali artists in seven different genres. Until 27 August, Van Gogh Gallery, Dhokaima Cafe

**OAC Bicycle expo**

At this bi-yearly event, OAC brings together the cycling community under a single roof to seek answers to their problems. 13 March, 10AM, Outdoor Adventure Center



Spring has arrived in Kathmandu with the maximum temperature rising steadily into the mid-20s and the minimum in the double digits for the first time this year. The reason is wind blowing in from the south, which also brings with it the pollution haze from the Gangetic plains that filters some of the sunlight, see (left) in this NASA satellite image on Thursday. Possibility of cloud buildup towards afternoon and evening over the weekend.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
24° 10°	23° 11°	24° 10°

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 19 - 25 February

301 – 500 Hazardous							
201 – 300 Very Unhealthy							
151 – 200 Unhealthy							
101 – 150 Unhealthy for sensitive groups							
50 – 100 Moderate							
0 – 50 Good							

PM2.5	FRIDAY Feb 19	SATURDAY Feb 20	SUNDAY Feb 21	MONDAY Feb 22	TUESDAY Feb 23	WEDNESDAY Feb 24	THURSDAY Feb 25
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Wildfires have resumed in Manang and Upper Gorkha, and this, combined with transboundary pollution haze as well as Kathmandu Valley's own vehicular emissions have worsened the Air Quality Index (AQI) this week, keeping it consistently in the 'Unhealthy' orange and red levels. The haze goes up to 3,500m so the trekking areas are clear, with views of mountains. We will need a fresh westerly front with rain, and a change in wind direction to improve AQI. We advise you keep your masks on to prevent breathing in the coronavirus and pollution particles.

## ONLINE ARCHIVES

**Photo Museum Nepal**

Take a look at archived photographs from throughout Nepal's history and learn the stories behind the photographs.

**Comic Geek Destinations**

Meet superheroes, villains and giant robots on this Google Earth virtual trip around ten of the most iconic global comic book spots, including the Brussels Comic Book Museum, the Cartoon Art Museum in California, and the Ghibli Museum in Japan.

**Divya**

Celebrate Nepali art and artists. Check out the work of 17 traditional artists online through Tulikaa Kala's website. The artwork is also available to purchase.

**Botanical garden tour**

Google Earth's Stop and Smell the Flowers is a journey through eleven of the most breathtaking botanical gardens and arboretums around the world from countries like Russia, Sweden, and Canada, to the Netherlands.

**Digital Archaeology Foundation**

Look at historic photographs from Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur durbar squares, and watch 3D reconstructed videos of temples around Nepal. Visit the Digital Archaeology Foundation website for more details.

## DINING

**Newa Lahana**

Experience Newa hospitality and culture at Newa Lahana with food prepared by women of Newa households in Kirtipur, while you enjoy the view of the ancient city. Kirtipur, 9863311456

**Kairos Cafe**

Known for its craft coffee, customisable breakfast, variety of juicy burgers and an assortment of Italian, Spanish and English cuisine away from the hubbub of street noises, Kairos Cafe is a must for foodies. Jawalakhel, 9813493902

**The Social Cafe**

Order The Social Cafe's delicious chatpate-style marinated peanut as a starter or enjoy a variety of evening snacks with some chilled beer or a glass of wine. Gairidhara (01) 4527370

**Edamame**

Experience modern Asian food at Edamame, starting with the flaming salmon, one of the highlighted dishes. Call and inquire about reserving a table a day or two in advance—the restaurant has a bustling business. Kathmandu Marriott Hotel (01) 5970300

**Pho99**

Enjoy a wide variety of Vietnamese food prepared with fresh herbs including cold noodles, deep-fried spring rolls, Vietnamese salads and curries, as well as Vietnam's national staple, the delicious Pho. Boudha, 9803203119

## OUR PICK



In post-apocalyptic *Snowpiercer*, the remnants of humanity live in a perpetually-moving train that circles the globe seven years after the world has become a frozen wasteland. As the series progresses, the passengers question class warfare, social injustice and the politics of survival. Daveed Diggs, Jennifer Connelly, Mickey Sumner, Annalise Basso and Sasha Frolova star.



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

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नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



# Calm before another storm

Nine days before House reconvenes, political forces jostle to form new government

After Nepal's Supreme Court reinstated the Lower House that had been dissolved by Prime Minister K P Oli two months ago, the mood in Kathmandu is of a calm before another storm.

The past two months since the House dissolution on 20 December had been punctuated with daily demonstrations and rallies on the streets by supporters of Oli and his arch rival in the Nepal Communist Party, Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

Overnight, the reality has sunk in that the Supreme Court decision, while bringing derailed politics back on track, has opened up more uncertainties that will keep Nepal unstable into the near future.

A lot will hinge on whether Prime Minister K P Oli resigns, as his enemies have been demanding, or if he decides to face off a no-confidence vote in Parliament when it reconvenes before 8 March, as the Supreme Court ordered on Tuesday.

The Dahal faction of the NCP has been jubilant about the victory. However, even if Oli steps down, it will face a challenge in cobbling together a coalition with smaller parties.

Since Chief Justice Cholendra SJB Rana announced the verdict of the Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court on 24 February, which coincided with Oli's 68th birthday, the prime minister has said he is not stepping down.

Oli's advisers have said he is



SOCIAL MEDIA

"defiant and unperturbed" and is ready to face confidence vote in the House. However his options have run out.

The Dahal faction does not just want him to step down, but wants the party to take disciplinary action against him. They also will hold the threat of impeaching President Bidya Devi Bhandari, who is close to Oli, and who signed off on the House dissolution.

Dahal and Nepal fed each other celebratory ladoos in Chitwan (above) to return to Kathmandu for consultations with party colleagues in the NCP Parliamentary Party about his next move. They have also been lobbying the NC's Sher Bahadur Deuba, who has been prime minister four times already, PM again. The NC itself met on Thursday to plot a strategy.

Even though they have accepted the Supreme Court's verdict, supporters of K P Oli have

expressed their dissatisfaction with the ruling. Deputy Prime Minister and staunch Oli loyalist Ishwar Pokhrel said the move would destabilise Nepali politics.

"The prime minister was not allowed to work and sought a fresh electoral mandate," Pokhrel said. "His effort has been thwarted by a verdict in a constitutional garb. We accept it, but do not agree with it."

Meanwhile, another NCP leader, Bam Dev Gautam, who has tried to play both sides in the power struggle in his attempt to become prime minister even though he lost the 2017 election, has been trying to keep the party intact and carve out a role for himself.

The nine-member secretariat is almost equally divided between Oli supporters Ishwar Pokhrel, Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa, General Secretary Bishnu Poudel, while Dahal has former prime ministers Madhav Kumar Nepal, Jhala Nath Khanal, and Narayan Kaji Shrestha on his side. Gautam's vote in the secretariat would be a tie-breaker.

The alternative political party Sajha Bibeksheel welcomed the Supreme Court verdict, calling on Oli to resign from prime ministership and to work towards the formation of a new government without indulging in any more intrigue. It also called on President Bhandari, whom it labelled "a rubber stamp of the prime minister" to step down. 🇳🇵

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ALOK SHARMA/TWITTER

**CLIMATE LEADERS:** President of COP26 in Glasgow Alok Sharma discussed Nepal's commitment to climate action with President Bidya Devi Bhandari last week.



NRA

**HERITAGE LIVE:** Reconstruction of the first floor of the Rato Machindranath temple in Bungamati is being completed nearly six years after the earthquake.



RATNA SHRESTHA/RSS

**SPORTS STAR:** Swimmer Gaurika Singh was awarded the best player title in the women's category at the 15th Sports Awards held in Madhyapur Thimi, on Saturday.



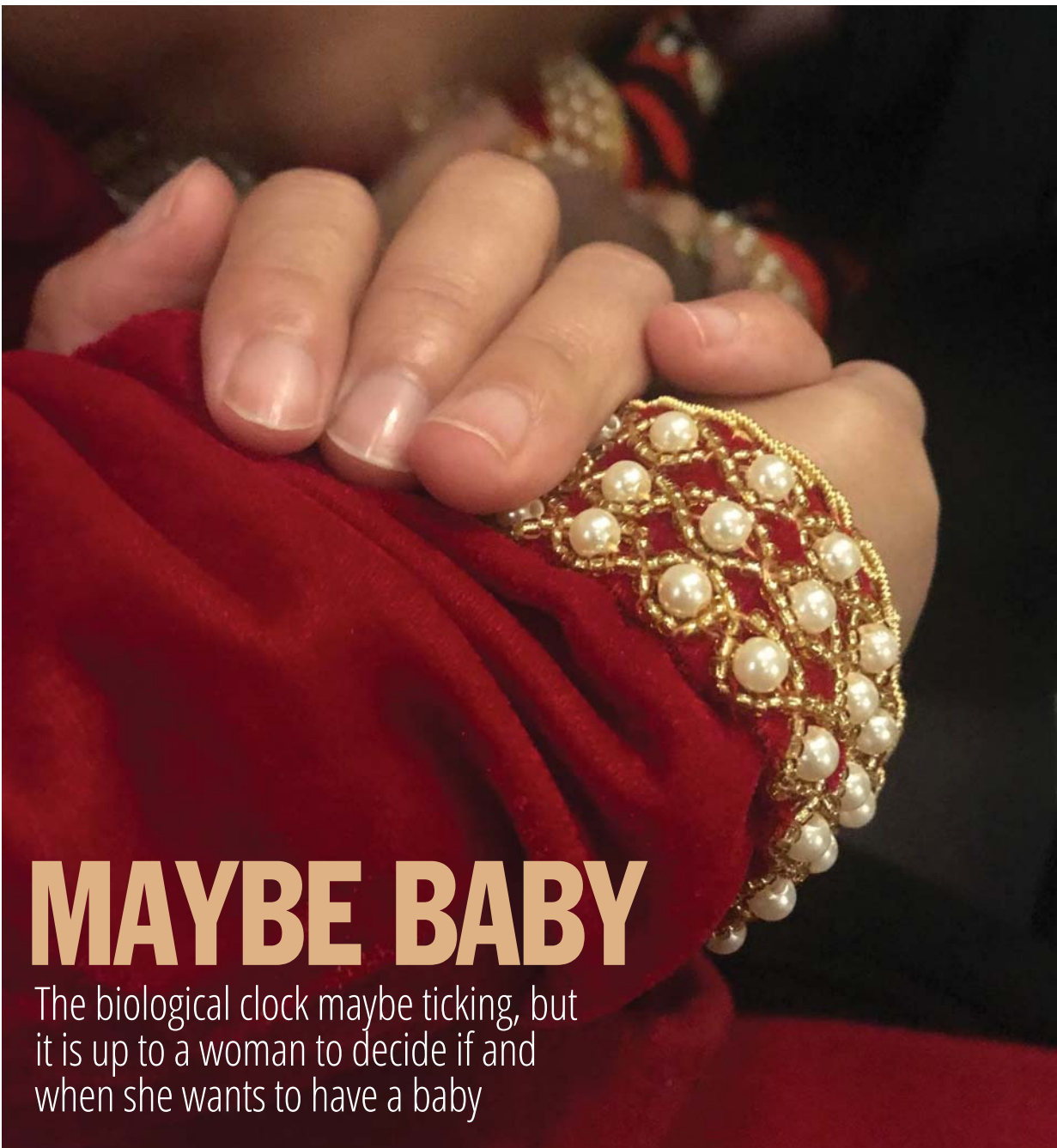
AMIT MACHAMASI

**VICTORY LAP:** Cadre of the Dahal-Nepal faction of the NCP staged victory rallies in Kathmandu welcoming the Supreme Court decision to reinstate the Lower House.



AMIT MACHAMASI

**HERO'S WELCOME:** Nepal Tourism Board, Global Academy of Tourism & Hospitality Education and The Voice of Chefs welcome BBC's *MasterChef: The Professionals* finalist, Santosh Shah at Kathmandu Airport on Thursday.



PRATIBHA TULADHAR

# MAYBE BABY

The biological clock maybe ticking, but it is up to a woman to decide if and when she wants to have a baby

There is never a perfect time to have children because there is always something happening in your life. Either they are too young or too old, they are not financially stable enough or ready for the responsibilities or want to travel.



**LIFE TIME**  
Anjana Rajbhandary

No one else but the woman should decide when it is the right time for her to have children. Sometimes, telling a woman that there is never a right time may end up in her having children at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. Many of us know someone who decided to have a baby to save their marriage or due to societal pressure.

“Women are born with a certain number of eggs and as women age, it is harder for women to conceive due to a decrease in the number considerably. Also, women may have a certain percentage of ‘abnormal’ eggs that when fertilized may result in miscarriages,” explains physician Sujan Rajbhandari Joshi. “It does become difficult for women to conceive after the age of 35, not saying that it is impossible or hopeless, but the probability of having a successful pregnancy is much higher at 25 or 30 compared to 35 or 40.”

It is important to consider nature and biology when it comes to having children, although the magic of modern science has made many things possible. I know women who have had their first child at 40 and I know women who have been struggling to have children in their 20s— these experiences are subjective.

Biologically speaking, a woman is physically healthy to bear children from her late teens to her early 20s. Fertility can also depend on age and genetics, so the sooner a woman can decide what she wants or does not want, the easier it is for her to work towards it.

Preserving her fertility, or

learning if she has any health issues such as polycystic ovarian syndrome, endometriosis or genetic history of reproductive issues, may affect her ability to get pregnant as discovered by many women. If you know you want children for sure but happen to be unsure when, it helps to know the best time to start freezing your eggs.

There are ways of having children in the late 30s and 40s, but it may be more expensive and difficult because fertility treatments and In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) may not always be successful. Another important factor is that if you have a male partner, his age will also affect his fertility and that may determine whether you can have kids.

It is important to respect women's privacy because some women may be trying to conceive without telling their family and friends, they may have suffered miscarriage or encountered unsuccessful IVF treatments. So telling them there is no right time, without even knowing what they have been through, would be cruel and hurtful. We can only plan and control so much about having a baby, the rest is up to chance.

Also, it is important that you and your partner are on the same page about having and raising a baby, so you must consider if they want to be a parent too. The help and support of family do affect a woman's ability to raise a child because affluent families have more resources to raise kids compared to someone from a low socioeconomic background.

In Nepal, the pressure on women to have male children to continue to family lineage is just as great. Maya, 32, is a successful working professional who has been married for five years. “I get pressure from my in-laws to have a child, preferably male. It makes me feel like everything I have done so far in life is inadequate. First it was the pressure to marry and now to have a child. Should I have a child for society if I have no desire to be a mother?” she questions.

Are you willing to give up your

spontaneous life of socialising to wake up in the middle of the night for a baby? Are you willing to give up the joys of being a mother to have a successful and happy career? There are sacrifices and losses on both sides and understanding what they entail would help a woman decide.

If you did not want children for years and suddenly decide at 50 or 60 that you want to be a mother, you may be able to adopt a baby, but you must consider if it is in the best interest of the child. It is not enough to want to be a mother, but also important to be a good mother.

Every decision related to having a baby has consequences. Factors, such as your age and fertility, financial stability, support of a partner, job, family, ambitions and how much are you willing to give up for what you want should be taken into account. This major decision can cause confusion and anxiety, and clash with other expectations.

It is easy to allow society, parents, or your own biological clock to tell you that time is running out and feel guilt and shame for not wanting what a woman ‘should’ want. What other people say or what you read may influence your thoughts and views. But, you have to be honest with yourself, take the time to listen to your inner voice and do what you know is right for yourself. 🇳🇵

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



**LIFE TIME**

Watch the video accompanying a new installment of Anjana Rajbhandari's column *Life Time* in which she talks about how the decision to if and when to have a baby depends entirely on the woman.



# Harnessing the sun to pump water

Solar irrigation can help Nepal’s subsistence farmers improve yield, cope with the climate and Covid crises

● Usha Manandhar

The answer to low agricultural productivity made worse by the climate crisis is simple: water. But the challenge has always been to find the energy to pump water to rain-fed terraces. Now, rapid advancement solar panel efficiency and falling costs have made it an attractive option for pumping water for irrigation for higher and sustainable agricultural yield. Solar powered water pumps in fact have the potential to lift Nepali families from subsistence agriculture and poverty, which has been exacerbated by climate induced water shortage and the economic fallout of the pandemic. Solar power has become a necessity to shift to higher-value crops and transform livelihoods of subsistence and smallholder farmers. This is why it has become the Nepal government’s priority to promote solar irrigation to address the food-energy-water nexus and its climate interlinkages. As of August 2019, Nepal had already installed 1,600 solar irrigation systems worth \$8 million all over the country. More than 75% of these were financed by the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPIC), an apex body on renewables promoting solar irrigation under the Renewable Energy Subsidy Policy (2016) and Subsidy Delivery Mechanism Guidelines (2016). Collectively, these systems irrigate 550 hectares of farmland and generate 2.5 megawatt of energy. In



a nation where only a quarter of the 3.5 million hectares of cultivable land is irrigated, and two-thirds of farms depend on the rains, solar irrigation systems are crucial for expanding acreage. There is great potential for solar irrigation systems as a solution to food security for smallholders because it can increase agricultural production to keep pace with food demand while at the same time adapting to changes in weather patterns due to climate change. This in turn will lead to

improved livelihoods and help in poverty alleviation. The use of clean energy also removes expenditure for diesel used in pumps, and reduces Nepal’s petroleum import bill. Much of the effort so far has been concentrated on improving access to solar technologies through innovation in infrastructure and financial instruments. There is now a need for concurrent investment in optimisation of energy generated through solar irrigation systems. Appropriate technologies could translate excess energy generated by

solar systems beyond irrigation. A solar irrigation facility in Devchuli Municipality of Nawalpur district shows that, on average, only 30% of 22.4KW energy generated is used for pumping water and the rest is wasted. An estimated \$188,727 worth of valuable energy goes down the drain. There are at least three ways to use the energy generated by solar irrigation systems for economically productive and socially valuable outcomes. First, we could sell back excess energy to the utility for feed-

in tariff as long as the feed-in tariffs and the cost of net metering are feasible. Secondly, irrigated water could also be sold to other farmers as long as they are nearby, the timing of local needs is compatible, and the availability of diesel-powered tubewells. Third, and most importantly, the energy that is presently being wasted could be used more productively by introducing innovation in the agricultural value chain. We call this ‘enhancing the social value of energy’. Market-based solutions such as post-harvest processing are contenders to improving energy utilisation and add greater value for the farmer. Innovations in agro-processing technologies can expand opportunities for local communities to improve their livelihoods and better respond in the times of crises like climate and Covid-19. Greater attention to innovation, both social and technological, is critical in ensuring the full benefits of solar irrigation systems. Proponents of Nepal’s solar energy need to move away from the traditional priority given to techno-centric strategies to find ways to efficiently use up the excess energy. 🇳🇵

**Usha Maskey Manandhar** is with MinErg and works with gender and social inclusion on energy and environmental issues. Jeevan Baidya of Sunbridge Solar Nepal and Netera Chhetri, professor at the School for Future Innovation at Arizona State University also contributed to this report.

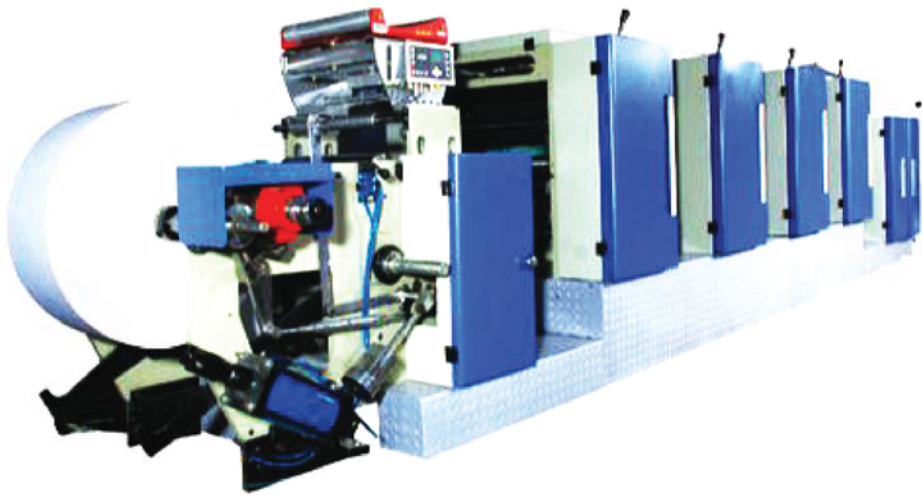
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# Nepal's mega-dam is a

● **Ramesh Bhushal** in Gorkha

**P**lans to build Nepal's biggest hydropower project was been delayed by politics for 10 years, but now it is on hold because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 263-m high dam on the Budi Gandaki River will be the world's tenth tallest, and impound a reservoir 45km long displacing 50,000 people, to generate 1,200MW of electricity. But the \$2.5 billion project is in doubt because of delays and concerns about its viability.

The project 60km northwest of Kathmandu was supposed to be completed by 2022. It was cancelled and revived several times, but has been stuck since the pandemic.

The China Gezhouba Group Corporation (CGGC) was awarded the main contract in 2018, but has now shown up for the past year.

"We have repeatedly tried to communicate with the company, but it has not responded clearly. We cannot say whether they are in or out, it is between somewhere and nowhere," said Gokarna Raj Panta at the Ministry of Water Resources, Energy and Irrigation in Kathmandu.

'Between somewhere and nowhere' is also a fitting description of the lives of those whose homes and farms will be submerged by Nepal's largest reservoir.

However, at the project office in Siurenitar near the proposed dam site, there is frantic activity. Phones are ringing constantly, and staff are busy taking calls from those asking about their compensation claims.

"The first priority is land acquisition and we have already paid out Rs33 billion as compensation," said Krishna Bahadur Karki who heads the project's compensation and resettlement unit. Another Rs20 billion is earmarked for other assets.

The government froze land dealings along the valley, but new roads and towns have sprung up in a district that has seen dramatic depopulation due to outmigration.

Ghare Gurung runs a roadside metal workshop 40km north of the dam site. He bought this small patch in Arkhet using money saved from working in Malaysia, and got Rs120,000 compensation for it.

"Now they have been saying that a 10% depreciation cost would be applied. If it happens, then I need to pay them instead of receiving money," he said.

Besides submergence of the main valley, the reservoir will put another 22km of the Aankhu Khola Valley under water.

Gyanu Maya Shrestha sells snacks in Hepne of Dhading district, and is worried about her future. The April 2015 earthquake destroyed her home, killing her buffaloes, oxen, and goats. Before the quake, officials had assessed both structures.

"After the earthquake, they inspected it again, and now say they will reduce the compensation," says Shrestha.

Krishna Majhi lives in unregistered land at Gumti village, 10km from the proposed dam. In 2017, the government had agreed to compensate structures on unregistered land. Till now, no payments have been made.

Krishna uses part of his earthquake-damaged house as a kitchen but has spent five years living in a makeshift structure. "Even a small earthquake would now be enough to kill us, and we cannot dismantle it because we need to show it to the project for compensation," he said.

Many promises were made to locals to persuade them to hand over their land, including of resettlement.



ALL PHOTOS: NABIN BARAL

They were asked to fill forms stating where they wanted to be resettled.

"We were told that new villages will be built on the slopes above the reservoir, with facilities. But we have heard nothing since. They tricked us," said Sushil Dharel, from Khahare on the Ankhu Khola.

Back at the compensation office, Karki says he can understand the frustration of the people, but adds, "The compensation amount is many times higher than the government rates, and there are rules. There are also people who have received millions in compensation and bought houses in Kathmandu."

**I**ndeed, while some have done well from payouts, the majority are from poorer communities without political clout or access. They resent the way the authorities downplay their problems.

"Our field is irrigable, there is a market nearby and we can produce three crops a year. I can't buy a piece of land in the city with our compensation. How do I make a living there?" asks Pampha Khadka from Khahare, bursting into tears.

Government officials in Kathmandu say the details need to be ironed out.

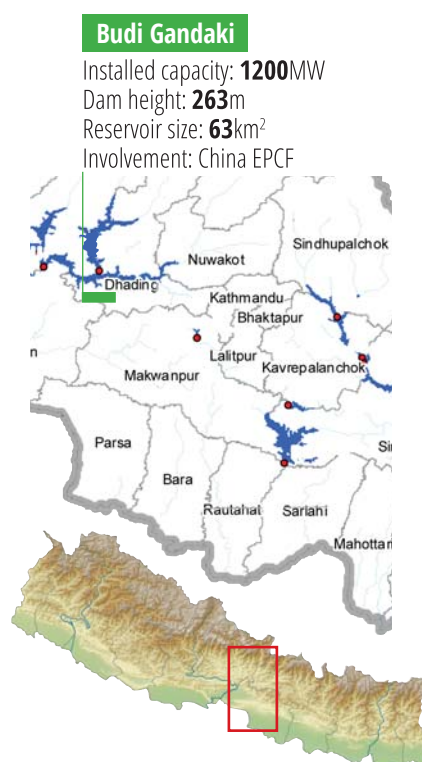
"We have drafted a resettlement policy, but there isn't clarity on the modality of project implementation. Unless it is finalised, resettlement is not possible," said Gokarna Raj Panta at Nepal's Ministry of Water Resources, Energy and Irrigation.

Botched resettlement policies are not new in projects in Nepal. And in Budi Gandaki, too, there are problems. Some families have spent the money they got on parties, which means they will be homeless and landless if not resettled. Many have used payouts to meet their daily needs or pay debt, buy motorbikes or educate and marry off their children.

"I received about Rs100,000 for a piece of land. I spent Rs10,000 on my grandchildren and sent Rs 80,000 to my daughter her studies," said Purna Ale Magar from Arkhet.

According to the environmental impact assessment, the reservoir will submerge 2,400 hectares of forests which are home to 19 mammal species, 9 reptiles and 54 birds. They include 15 protected species, and there are five fish species on the IUCN red list, whose habitat will be disrupted.

"There was interest in the 1990s about the social and environmental costs of large hydro projects, but



Budi Gandaki shows that there is no concern anymore," says water resource expert Ajaya Dixit.

There is also cultural impact. Much of life in rural Nepal revolves around rivers, which are considered holy. The Budi Gandaki reservoir will submerge 44 cremation sites, 74 religious and 29 places of historic and cultural importance.

"Even if you raise genuine and serious concern, you are tagged as being anti-development," he added.

The project will also undermine the region's achievements in forest conservation. Some 1,500 hectares of forests managed by 62 communities will be impacted by the reservoir. The Pashupati Community Forest in Majhitar is one of them, and locals are cutting trees before the waters start rising.

Suresh Shah pointed out freshly cut tree stumps. "When I try to stop them, they say why do you care about these trees? We have lost everything," he said. "Ownership helped conserve the forest, but that is gone now."

After the deadly flood on the Alkananda River in India this month that destroyed two hydro power projects and killed at least 100 people, concerns about the impact of the climate crisis also loom large. The Budi Gandaki watershed drains the eastern flanks of Himalchuli and Manaslu and the Ganesh Mssif to the east, which has many glacial lakes in danger of bursting.

Experts say it is very risky to build such a large and expensive



projects directly downstream from mountains that are melting rapidly due to the climate emergency.

Three successive governments in the last three years have made as many decisions to award or scrap the contract with China Gezhouba Group Corporation.

After pre-feasibility study in 1984, the project was sidelined till 2006, when it was opened to international bidders. There were no applicants. It was revived in 2011, when Nepal's power outages exceeded 12 hours per day. Once again, international companies showed no interest, so the government opted to make Budi Gandaki a 'national pride project' with domestic resources.

In 2016, the Belgian multinational Tractebel completed a detailed design. The project was set to move ahead with local funds and management when China entered the picture in 2017.

A few days before leaving office, the Maoist party Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's cabinet awarded the project to China Gezhouba Group Corporation, without any bidding.

In November 2017, the incoming Nepali Congress-led government promptly scrapped the contract stating irregularities and lack of transparency. A court action followed. Nepal got another new government four months later, and K P Oli became prime minister who returned the project to China Gezhouba in September 2018.

Now the problem is that China Gezhouba is failing to respond to government requests for information.

"It's not that Chinese are less interested now. They are just waiting for a favourable time as there is political chaos in the country," said Nepali hydro-economist Ratna Sansar Shrestha.

China's interest in Nepali hydro projects is limited to making money from construction contracts, he says, while India depends on water that flows from Nepal for irrigating the Gangetic plains.

**T**he Budi Gandaki feeds into the Gandaki, one of Nepal's four main rivers. It flows into India's Bihar state and eventually empties into the Ganges.

Nepal and India signed the 1959 Gandak Treaty, which bars Nepal from upstream activities that would impact water flow in Bihar, where millions of hectares of farmland depend on waters from the Gandak (as Gandaki is known in India).

However, China's growing influence in Nepal as the largest provider of FDI could lead to geopolitical friction, according to a 2018 report by the Asia Society.

Chinese firms recently built two other hydro projects in Nepal at Upper Marsyangdi A and Upper Madi, with a combined capacity of 75 MW. But both are run-of-the-river schemes, unlike Budi Gandaki which would be a gigantic reservoir.

Indian state owned and private firms have not built a power project in Nepal since the mid-1980s, although one is involved in large projects on the Arun River.

However, India is promoting cross-border trade in electricity as part of the nascent BBNI (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) regional sub-group in its sphere of influence.

Both Nepal and Bhutan have objected to the Indian power ministry's statement in December 2016 that electricity was a 'strategic commodity' so non-BBNI foreign powers could not be involved in the supply chain.

Shrestha says India is not concerned about China's involvement in the Budi Gandaki project, whose power is solely for domestic use, and it views the reservoir positively.

"In general, India is not happy with Chinese companies being



# mirage



The Budi Gandaki dam site on the Gorkha Dhading border with Manaslu, Himalchuli and Ganesh Himal in the distance (overleaf).

Fisher folk like Raju Majhi say they will lose their livelihoods after the dam is built (left, below).

Some of the villages along the river that will be submerged by the 63km<sup>2</sup> reservoir. (left)

involved in Nepal's hydropower, but in Budi Gandaki they would get lean-season augmented flow for free," he added.

India had said it was not interested in investing in or building the Budi Gandaki project, and withdrew from bilateral talks in the late 90s.

Another water expert, Dipak Gyawali headed a review committee formed by the government to look at the design, and says: "About 100,000 hectares of land in

Nawalparasi and Chitwan districts downstream could have benefitted in Nepal. The water that flows in dry months from the reservoir is produced by submerging our land. If India uses this water then we should get financial returns."

Gyawali also says the project is located close to the epicenter of the 2015 earthquake and may not be able to withstand a future megaquake. "For a seismically active region like Nepal, rock filled dams are better than concrete

double arch dams as proposed on the design," he said.

Laxmi Devkota, the former Chair of the Budi Gandaki Development Committee, says it has been designed by international seismic resistance parameters.

The delays could make the Budi Gandaki project financially unviable. Costs are plummeting for renewables like solar, wind power, and emerging hydrogen energy technology.

According to the Asia

Foundation report, solar electricity tariffs in Rajasthan, India, fell from more than 19 cents per unit in 2010 to 3.6 cents, and wind energy was 3.7 cents. Nepal's hydropower costs 7 cents per unit to produce.

India, which is Nepal's energy export market, is ramping up renewable energy capacity with 37 gigawatts of solar and 38 gigawatts in wind by 2020.

However, Budi Gandaki's output is planned for domestic use so need not compete directly in the

regional market. Nonetheless, the costs make its value questionable, even for domestic use.

"If we can develop this project within five years then we will definitely save some money, but if it is the next 20 years then it would be a hotpot of corruption for politicians and bureaucrats. It looks like this project is losing its technical strength in terms of cost already," said Dipendra Bhattarai, an energy expert.

Nepal doubled its electricity production from 700MW in 2010 to 1400 MW in 2014. Another 700MW is likely to be added in the next couple of years.

However, Nepal has been importing about 600 megawatts from India in the dry, winter months (November to April) to meet peak demand as the smaller run-of-the-river projects struggle when water levels are low—one motivation to build a big reservoir.

The Budi Gandaki dam should have been completed by 2022. In 2015, the cost was estimated at \$2.5 billion—more than one fourth of Nepal's total budget that year.

Says said Laxmi Devkota: "We have already lost about half a billion dollars in the last four years if we consider just 10% inflation rate. We could have also earned another \$1.5 billion by selling electricity in the four years that were delayed." 🇳🇵



THE BUDI GANDAKI MIRAGE

Join Nabin Baral of The Third Pole Network to visit the Budi Gandaki Valley, the dam site and watch interviews with some of the farmers and fisher folk who will be affected by Nepal's biggest hydropower reservoir.

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## Kiss and make up

The Ass is on the verge of throwing in the towel. Stop me before I quit. With so many professional stand-up comedians in the gobblement, and given all the clowns who hold senior positions in the political parties, I give up. There is just too much competition. These guys are really good, they keep the entire population entertained all the time, and they are putting amateurs like us out of business.

The past year has just been one long slapstick show. Every time Oli Ba gets up to speak, he has us in stitches. And when Comrade Awesome delivers one of his monologues, he has us ROFL, LMFAO, LOLZ, LQTM, LSMH, LMHO, not to mention OMG and WTF.



And this week was the climax of the show. If you had not been following the news, here is a brief recap: MKN and PKD went to Chitwan for another 'We Are Here' rally, but then came news from the SC that CSJBR had declared KPO's dissolution of Parliament null and void. The flit hit the san. On Tuesday evening, MKN and PKD fed each other ladoos, called SBD on the phone, and headed back to KTM. Meanwhile KPO was too busy blowing out happy birthday candles at Baluwater in the company of PKG, RBT, IP, SP and BR to notice that there was a national emergency afoot. Prednisone does wonders to make one lose track of reality.

Wednesday morning, MKN and PKD go off to Maharajganj to try to convince SBD to join a Commie-Cong Coalition (CCC). SBD plays hard to get, but he also has RCP to contend with. Soon after, they also meet JNK, NKS, BMP, GB, BB, BR, JS, PB, RP at Paris Hills to strategise. On Thursday MKN, PKD, JNK, RCP, NKS all met once more and at the time of going to press, the gathering had expanded to include ABC, DEF, MNO, QRS, and XYZ.

### Still with me? OK, let's summarise the story so far:

Two years ago, KPO and PKD agreed to take turns being PM. But KPO changed his mind. PKD realised that KPO's fourth kidney was chugging along better than predicted, and the man was much halier and heartier than he had been led to believe. So, he got MKN and JNK to poke KPO, who displayed no reaction, PKD got BDG into the Upper House with the help of NKS, JNK and MKN. KPO quickly dangled some carrots in front of BDG, who started wagging his tail. Said carrots were also waved at RBT, TBR and LRB, who said yes sir, yes sir, three bags full. Still feeling outnumbered, KPO decided he is a staunchly secular Hindu, and visited Pashupati to drape it in gold. BDG and RCP by now are both so desperate to be PM they will kowtow to anyone, even GBBSD, BDB or Lord Shiva. Because the friend of your enemy is your enemy, KPO is loathe to mend fences with MKN. After all, PKD and MKN are scratching each other's backs. MKN suspects PKD will dump him the instant he becomes PM, but wants to succeed BDB as Prez. JNK also wants to be Prez. But PKD himself nurses an ambition to be Executive Prez. (To be continued.)



The Ass



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