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The emergence of the coronavirus is linked to the destruction of biodiversity, and is believed to have crossed species from bats to pangolins to humans.

THE STAR/THE PANGOLIN REPORTS

The nature of pandemics

● **Sonia Awale**

Over 172 million infections and nearly 4 million lives later, the exact origin of the Covid-19 pandemic is still a matter of debate.

Early studies pointed to bats as the source of the novel coronavirus and that the virus could have jumped to an intermediary

host like the pangolin, which is a delicacy in certain parts of China, and then on to humans.

The rise of zoonotic diseases is now traced to the destruction of nature, and the flourishing illegal wildlife trade. This could be how the cross-species transmission of SARS-CoV-2 took place in late 2019, but there is little political will to stop the destruction of nature.

“There will always be a risk of pandemics as long as there is demand for wild meat and the destruction of biodiversity,” says Tulshi Laxmi Suwal of Nepal’s Small Mammal Conservation and Research Foundation and pangolin researcher.

The natural origin hypothesis for the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in late 2019 in Wuhan is being questioned because of the absence of an intermediary host and lack of a chain of mutations in the virus, so attention has also shifted to the lab-leak theory.

Whatever the root cause, this is not the first pandemic and it will not be the last if the planet's current rate of biodiversity loss continues, a trend exacerbated by the climate crisis.

"The coronavirus pandemic is a much-needed wake-up call but people have short-term memory, they will soon forget the connection to habitat destruction," says environmentalist Kumar Paudel of Greenhood Nepal. "Politicians can't keep destroying the ecology for the sake of economic growth."

Indeed, Finance Minister

Bishnu Paudel's new budget announced this week will allow further plunder of the fragile Chure Hills for quarrying to reduce the \$10 billion trade deficit with India.

This will add to the clearing of the last tract of native forests in the eastern Tarai for the construction of the mammoth Nijgad International Airport for which Paudel also allocated money for infrastructure, international investor selection, land acquisition and site clearing. On the occasion of World Environment Day on 5 June (Theme: 'Reimagine. Recreate. Restore'), eight of Nepal's development partners issued a statement cautioning the government about Nijgad.

'It is important to ensure that decisions ... for large projects such as Nijgad Airport, are based on sound economic, financial, climate, environmental and social impact analyses in line with Nepal's established economic, environmental and social regulations, as well as climate and other commitments,' the statement reads. (*See page 6*)

“Covering everything with concrete is not development, and our development model is suicidal, the coronavirus pandemic is just the latest example of this,” says naturalist Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha. “We need to link ecology with the economy to drive change to nature-friendly policies, and conservation education must be at the forefront.” 



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A yam between two Indias

Ever since Nepal emerged as a nation-state nearly two-and-half centuries ago, one of its guiding principles has been to socially distance itself from empires to the north and south.

As these powers rose and fell, Nepal's rulers adjusted. We fought, lost, and learnt to live with the British in India. When India became independent in 1947, the anglophile Rana regime also faded away.

Kathmandu maintained a difficult neutrality during the Sino-India war of 1962 because Nepali soldiers were at the frontlines, fighting and dying on behalf of one neighbour against another friendly neighbour.

Throughout the Cold War, Nepal's royal rulers walked the tight rope and even managed to take advantage of global and regional rivalries. And when China fell out with the Soviet Union, Nepal's Communists split into little pieces. Nepal's kings had to keep tweaking the yam-between-stones doctrine.



In today's multipolar world, as tectonic forces rearrange geopolitics, Nepal is wedged once more. Nepal's rulers have always been tempted to drag in outside powers into their internal palace intrigues.

Last year, Prime Minister K P Oli used a border dispute with India to stoke up nationalist fervour. Not to needle India so much, but to blunt a mutiny within his own party. That power struggle has continued non-stop through many twists and turns right up to hearings in the Supreme Court this week over PM Oli's second dissolution of the House and call for early elections.

This time, an increasingly cornered Oli has been trying to mend fences with New Delhi. India's spy chief, army chief, foreign secretary and senior BJP advisers all jet-dashed to Kathmandu in close succession. The NCP disintegrated, and the UML split.

Oli has been waving the saffron flag, declaring that Lord Ram was born in Chitwan, draping Pashupati in a Rs330 million gold pendant, and holding forth in Hindi to pro-Narendra Modi tv channels to trace India-

Nepal ties to the Vedic era. Oli was coming across not as a politician, but a theologian.

PM Oli is being pummelled in Nepal for his second dissolution of the House, a move squarely denounced as authoritarian and unconstitutional. Yet, through it all, he has had the backing of the Mahanta Thakur faction of the JSP, which is itself split between pro-and anti-BJP factions.

The perception in Kathmandu is that Oli has been 'Modi-fied', and is using elections for the Hindu-Right to rise, scrap secularism, declare Nepal a Hindu state, and perhaps even restore the monarchy.

It used to be that when it drizzled in Delhi people unfurled umbrellas in Kathmandu. It is now the other way round. In the past week there has been a barrage of op-eds in India's English press by three former Indian ambassadors to Nepal. First, it was Ranjit Rae in the *Hindustan Times* on 24 May, then Rakesh Sood wrote in *The Hindu* on 27 May, after that on 29 May Shyam Saran came out in *The Indian Express*. On the same day, Baburam Bhattarai chimed in with a co-authored comment in *The Hindu*.

All the pieces had similar arguments, some even had identical sentences. Shyam Saran was the most blunt, writing: 'India cannot but be engaged politically with events in Nepal, but engagement is not the same as intervention. India and the government must firmly and unambiguously declare that it does not support the revival of the monarchy, which has already been rejected by its people.'

PMO INDIA

Saran goes on to say that 'Kathmandu, if not the whole of Nepal' is convinced that Oli has promised the BJP that he will restore the Hindu monarchy, and keep the Chinese out. Saran urges the Indian government not to remain silent.

Nepal appears to be caught up in a proxy war for India's soul between the BJP and the left-liberal secularists. Kathmandu is in unfamiliar terrain: no longer do we have to just balance India vs China, we now have to prevent being sucked into India's bitter domestic confrontation.

It is not just the B.1.167.2 virus variant that is coming to Nepal from India, we are also being infected by its toxic politics. It is unwise for Oli to hitch his wagon to Modi, or for his enemies with anyone else in India. Nepal's internal squabbles are own, if we value our sovereignty we should keep outsiders out of it.

For the last 10 years the palace was playing by the rules set for it by the constitution, and is now slowly trying to create its own space. Other voices are asking for the role of a constitutional monarch to be redefined. Some want the monarch to reassert himself, while others want him to stay aloof and leave matters to the elected government. The compromise seems to be that most Nepalis would like to see their king play a more active part and be a role model in the development arena-much as he did during the winter visits he made to the various parts of the country during the Panchayat years.

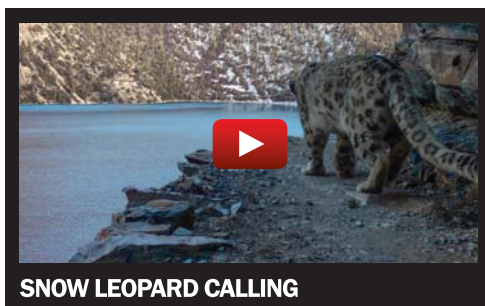


Ironically, as the government's image plummeted, the king's stature grew. Even though the constitution had taken away his executive powers, King Birendra's standing among Nepalis grew enormously, because he played the role of constitutional monarch by the book, never overstepping his bounds and preferring to be guarded, despite pressure from hardliners to resume his previous autocratic role. And now, ten years later again, the euphoria has worn off and just as in many newly-democratic nations around the world there are stirrings here, too, of nostalgia for strong-man rule.

For the last 10 years the palace was playing by the rules set for it by the constitution, and is now slowly trying to create its own space. Other voices are asking for the role of a constitutional monarch to be redefined. Some want the monarch to reassert himself, while others want him to stay aloof and leave matters to the elected government. The compromise seems to be that most Nepalis would like to see their king play a more active part and be a role model in the development arena-much as he did during the winter visits he made to the various parts of the country during the Panchayat years.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



SNOW LEOPARD CALLING

A recent World Wildlife Fund study has revealed that 74% of the snow leopard habitat in northern Nepal has been the subject of research into the species. This puts Nepal as the world leader in snow leopard study. Watch this trailer of the award-winning documentary on the elusive big cats of Nepal's high mountains on our website. Story: [page 6-7](#).



SAVING PANGOLINS

Meet a group of teenage conservationists in eastern Nepal who take their job of protecting pangolins very seriously. Their first task is to raise awareness in this remote region to this elusive and endangered species that is the world's most trafficked mammal. Report: [page 6-7](#)

COVID VACCINE

Thanks Prof Andrew J Pollard for your role in developing the AstraZeneca covid vaccine and for your deep empathy for Nepalis ('I'm sad vaccines are delayed in Nepal', Andrew J Pollard, #1063). Let's urge world leaders attending the G-7 Summit in the UK next month, including Joe Biden, Boris Johnson, Justin Trudeau and Angela Merkel to donate their extra vaccines to Nepal and other least developed countries in dire need.

Kul Chandra Gautam

- Election will bring no change for Nepal ('Vacillating on vaccines', Editorial, #1063). Instead of conducting elections, Unity Government is the need of the hour. Nepal needs vaccines and more tests.

Parkaz Gorkhali

- When a country is weak in a political and economic arena, this is unfortunately the result. I hope like-minded countries and institutions will help us with Covid vaccine supply on time.

MP Gautam

- Nepal is non-strategic, land locked nation with a limited small market. It doesn't offer anything much significant to the world and hence is not the priority for developed countries.

Karan

HAPPY SHERPAS

What a thoughtful, indeed, intricate analysis ('Why are Sherpas always happy', Tom Robertson, #1063). Not only fascinating in and of itself, I think I will share this article with my freshman writing students as a model of fine writing.

Rebecca Wheeler

- Respect is the most important thing in our culture, which brings out cheerfulness in an individual's nature towards others, especially if we find it difficult to express in words. As a Nepali, I find fellow Nepalis among the most cheerful people, sans our politicians of course.

Naren Gurung

- Whatever the reason, it's true that Sherpas are always joking and laughing in any circumstances. What cannot be said for sure is whether deep in their heart they are happy or not. In any case, it is really pleasant and great fun to be with Sherpas!

Jamyang Wangmo

- Vajrayana Buddhism is the key I think.

Tashi Lhazom

- My son is Nepali by birth and has always been cheerful, even at his worst times (so far).

Alison Miller

- I would like to argue that Nepalis in general are very cheerful and good-natured.

Lamu Sherpa

HISILA YAMI

What began as a fight for emancipation of the poor and the marginalised, the Maoist war would soon become a tool for foreign powers to sneak in their own agendas into Nepal ('Nepal's Maoist revolution from the inside', Sahina Shrestha, #1063). While India wanted the end of monarchy because it thought it would be easier to manipulate the political parties, some of the western powers wanted to loosen the stranglehold of Hinduism on the Nepali population and one way of doing that was to hit the institution of the monarchy that believed the King to be an avatar of Lord Vishnu. All of this would eventually spill out through books/newspaper articles/interviews of many of the people directly involved but this is where it hurts the most...That we turn pages waiting for some acknowledgement of the grief and suffering that the conflict caused to Nepalis, but it never comes.' I will not read this book precisely for this reason.

Krishna Joshi

- Hopefully some responsibility for the deaths, destruction, damages, extortion, robbery, kidnapping, child soldiers, land grabbing and corruption would be taken. But not likely.

Nirakar Pokhrel

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Why are Sherpas always happy?

by Tom Robertson

Is the Sherpas' perennial happiness based on fact or on their interactions with idealistic Westerners? Head to nepalitimes.com and join this intriguing debate.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Nepal's Maoist revolution from the inside

by Sahina Shrestha

Hisila Yami's new book *Hisila: From Revolutionary to First Lady* gives us an intimate peek into events that shaped Nepal's recent history from someone who was married to the revolution. The full review on our website.

t Most popular on Twitter

Was Tenzing a Tibetan, Nepali or Indian? It does not matter.

by Lhokpa Narbu Sherpa

When a person becomes famous, we have a tendency to crave ownership for them, instead of sharing their qualities with the rest of the world. On the 68th anniversary of the ascent of Mt Everest, read this rare radio interview in Tibetan with Tenzing Norgay Sherpa. Join the online debate.

“” Most commented

Aid pours into Nepal, but where be vaccines?

by Sonia Awale

The United States, the EU, Australia, China, Singapore are all flying in emergency supplies to help Nepal battle a fierce Covid-19 second wave, but noticeably lacking are much needed vaccines. Follow us on social media platforms for the latest updates.

🔴 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"I feel powerless..." In this op-ed, Prof Andrew Pollard @ajpollard1, University of Oxford scientist involved in @AstraZeneca research, urges quick inoculation of high risk groups in Nepal. Read his plea.

Namindra Dahal, PhD @ngamindra1
Thank you Prof Andrew Pollard @ajpollard1 for your call for support to the vulnerable groups of Nepalis.

Chanda rana @Chandarana9
Thanks a lot Prof Andrew Pollard for your genuine concern for Nepal #CovidCrisis. Yes #Vaccinesforall ASAP

Ishan Adhikari, MD MS-HCM @IshanAdhikarii
You have created one of the most powerful weapons against Corona that world has cherished! Vaccine Diplomacy is not a True scientist forte! Nothing Matters— VACCINES DOES!!

Neil Pande @neilpande
Thank you Professor @ajpollard1 for your love of Nepal and it's people. Hope we get your vaccine soon...

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Aid pours into Nepal, but where be vaccines? The international community is flying in supplies to help #Nepal battle a fierce #Covid19 second wave, but noticeably lacking are much needed #vaccines. @SoniaAwale reports.

Surya Rana @suryabrana
@nepalitimes and @soniaawale Very unfortunate when the country needs vaccines, leaders are striving for power and hunger and left the people of country in the mercy of god.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Protecting those who protect us from #Covid Frontline healthcare providers across the country battle pandemic even as they fall sick and despite staff shortage. @SoniaAwale reports.

Himalaya Night @night04812666
No one would take it for granted that healthcare workers keep caring for patients without a rest. We're very appreciative of their strenuous and consistent dedication to their patients sacrificing their own health. I hope they'll be able to spend some hours with their loved ones.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Why are Sherpas always happy? Tom Robertson analyses whether Sherpas are inherently cheerful and good-natured or was it the Western perception about Sherpas that shaped their interactions with the outsiders? #MEverestDay

Lhamo Y Sherpa ལམོ ཡ སེརཔ་ @Lhamo_Y
Everyone can become much happier if people focused less on dopamine-dependent instant gratification from Social Media :)

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

King Birendra's Reign

20 years ago this week, Nepalis woke up to the shocking news that their beloved King Birendra had been murdered and almost his entire family wiped out. Crown Prince Dipendra then turned the gun on himself.

In the days following the palace massacre, Nepal went through three kings in four days. But the institution itself saw its downfall in 2008 when King Gyanendra abdicated his throne, and Nepal transitioned from monarchy to republic.

Yet, two decades later, King Birendra is still remembered for his liberal values, mild manners, and a soft-spoken kind hearted personality. Many believe Nepal would still be a constitutional monarchy had he not been killed. See [page 5](#).

But here are excerpts from the report looking at King Birendra's 30 years of reign from issue #46 6-14 June 2001:

The reputation of the institution of monarchy has suffered setbacks ever since the dissolution of the BP Koirala government by King Mahendra in 1960. This experiment did not last, and in ten years public demands for full-scale democracy boiled over. The king's absolute powers were dismantled and replaced with a constitutional monarchy. Democratic leaders, many of whom suffered long years in jail and exile, soon assumed power and almost immediately began to experience first-hand the challenges of Nepal's governance. It became apparent that many of them were poor managers, the level of corruption escalated, and political infighting gradually brought governance to a standstill.

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TURKISH AIRLINES

● Kunda Dixit

It was in his passing on 1 June after a two-week battle against Covid-19, that Ujwal Thapa got the kind of public recognition that would have proven to him that his vision for the future of Nepal is the right one.

The outpouring of support and respect for this founder of a small alternative party showed just how much Nepalis want fresh new blood in the country's leadership, and the degree of disillusionment with the current crop of bickering, superannuated politicians.

His colleagues, friends and even those who did not know Thapa personally, have extolled his inspirational leadership qualities, and a self-effacing personality that hid a fierce drive to deliver through a new style of politics.

Ujwal Thapa never hankered to be a leader himself, but to breed leaders. Through the Bibeksheel Nepali Party that he founded and which later merged with Sajha Party, he incubated a new generation of groundbreakers with the vision, energy and competence that Nepal's present leadership sorely lacks.

In his death, Nepal lost a promising trailblazer who had the courage and commitment to lift Nepal with the gift of governance. Although his party united, split and



ILLUSTRATION: BHUSAN SHILPAKAR

Ujwal Thapa's light shines on

Bibeksheel Sajha Party co-founder wanted to breed leaders, not be a leader himself

united again with Sajha and despite not winning any seats in Parliament in 2017, in many constituencies candidates that Thapa groomed got sizeable votes.

One of them was Ranju Darshana whom Bibeksheel fielded as a candidate from Kathmandu. She tweeted on Tuesday: 'The physical body of Ujwal dai is no more with us ... I feel blessed that I got to

be associated with you in your journey. You lived gracefully dai. And you left gracefully too.'

With its sights clearly on the next election, Bibeksheel-Sajha was working to build its base and take advantage of the widespread disenchantment with Nepal's stagnant and corrosive politics. For this, the party would have to break the vote banks of the main parties

and get younger voters to place their bets on new candidates with potential for performance.

The overwhelming grief, respect and affection for Ujwal Thapa showed that the party he helped build is on the right trajectory. In his death, Thapa left a message: that a more accountable and responsive state would have reduced the kind of suffering and loss of life that Nepalis have endured during this pandemic.

To replace the old with the new, Bibeksheel Sajha will have to struggle against the established parties, including the one that once took up arms for the liberation of the people, which will fight tooth and nail to maintain their stranglehold on the state. They will use their troll armies, disinformation networks and detractors to discredit the new younger leaders (just as they did in 2017) to protect the crony-driven and corrupt political superstructure that they monopolise.

Thapa had gone on a trek, possibly trying to evade the second wave as it hit Kathmandu, which may be where he was infected. His condition deteriorated rapidly, and he was taken out of ventilator support and put on Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO).

In a self-published memoir in English titled *Why Nepal?* Thapa describes his return from Bennington College in the United States in self-deprecating style: how he became disillusioned with materialism, tried to enrol in a zen monastery in California, and finally returned to Nepal with just a computer in his bag and started an IT company. But

his activist streak showed in many rallies he held to defy political shutdowns, and how this grew into a citizen's movement and finally the Bibeksheel Nepali (literally: Nepali with common sense) Party.

In his books, he also lays out his vision for the country and how with honest and efficient politics Nepal can have accountable leadership. He wanted Bibeksheel Sajha not to be an 'alternative' party, but a mover-and-shaker political force to be reckoned with.

'To build a society that can produce (judicious) leaders consistently, I am helping provoke Nepali citizens to be 'bibeksheel' in nature, and bring positive change within them,' he wrote in *Why Nepal?*. 'I continue to work on my passion to build as many platforms/tribes/networks of hope for Nepal ... in the hope that in the coming days we can join together to build a peaceful, prosperous Nepal within our lifetime.' 🇳🇵



prabhu BANK



EV charge ports

Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has signed an agreement with Wanwang Digital Energy for import, installation and maintenance of 50 electric vehicle charging stations across Nepal. The project is funded by the Asian Development Bank, at a cost of Rs378 million and will be completed next year. The new budget incentivised surplus electricity consumption by repealing a controversial tax hike and excise duty on EV imports, while waiving five-year renewal taxes for those switching to EVs from petrol-diesel alternatives.

Limited flights

The Cabinet has decided to allow one flight per week to Turkey, Qatar and China from 3 June. Turkish Airlines will be flying every Thursday to and from Istanbul, Qatar Airways every Monday and Nepal Airlines on Tuesdays to Doha. Schedules for Chinese cities have not been announced. Since 6 May, only two flights a week connect Kathmandu to Delhi. All incoming passengers have to spend 10 days in hotel quarantine in Kathmandu.



IFC in Dolma Impact Fund II

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group is investing \$10million in the Dolma Impact Fund II to finance small and medium sized enterprises, in health care, renewable energy, technology, and other critical sectors, vital to Nepal's post-pandemic recovery. SMEs contribute 20% of Nepal's GDP and create over 60% of jobs but only 39% of them have access to finance.

"Private equity funds like Dolma can be an important source of capital and expertise for Nepali firms that have potential to grow, including those struggling to deal with the impacts of the pandemic," says IFC Resident Representative in Nepal, Babacar S. Faye.

Oxygen for Nepal

Seven Nepali firms Batas Foundation, America Nepal Medical Foundation, Syakar Trading Private Limited, Jagadamba Steels Private Limited, CREASION, Humanity Foundation Nepal and Mission Rebuild Nepal are joining hands to import ten oxygen plants and five oxygen filling systems from the French manufacturers Novair within three weeks. Ten oxygen plants are equivalent to 640 jumbo cylinders and will produce 2,400 liters of oxygen per minute.



"We hope that this mission will help flatten the curve and improve the ongoing health crisis to a great extent," says CREASION's Aanand Mishra. Meanwhile, Finland last week shipped 2,498,540 surgical masks, 164,500 vinyl gloves, 26,000 gowns, 349,920 KN95 masks and 288,000 face shields in response to Nepal's request for EU assistance.



Vaccine airlift

Himalaya Airlines and Nepal Airlines flew in from China the 1 million doses of VeroCell vaccines on 1-2 June. A Nepal Airlines Airbus 330 brought in 800,000 doses from Beijing, while Himalaya Airlines flew 417 boxes totalling 200,000 doses donated by the Tibet Autonomous Region from Kunming. Himalaya flew the vaccines without charge, while the cost of the Nepal Airlines flight was borne by the Nepal government. "We are proud to operate free shipping of cargo during such times of national crisis," says Himalayan President Airlines Zhou Enyong.

Healthpost handover

Arghakhanchi Cement Private Limited has built and handed over Mainahiya Health Post costing Rs7 million, complete with equipment, in Siraya Rural Municipality in Rupandehi. "The old health post was far away and locals were disadvantaged, but now we hope that the new, nearer health post will make things easier," says Arghakhanchi Cement's Rajesh Agrawal.



IME Covid aid

The IME foundation on Tuesday provided medical equipment (80 oxygen concentrators) worth about Rs30 million to the Health Minister Hridayesh Tripathi for the prevention and treatment of Covid-19.

The foundation had previously donated 15 oxygen concentrators for isolation facility run by Janata Health Centre. It has also ordered an oxygen plant caosting Rs12.8 million for Teku Hospital in Kathmandu.

Prior to this IME had established 'Bharosa Kosh' fund that benefitted 100 families of migrant workers who had passed away while on duty at destination countries. Each family received Rs58,000.



Budget gives Covid rebates

Businesses with turnovers of up to Rs2 million or incomes of Rs200,000 are eligible for tax rebates of 90%, turnovers between Rs 2-5 million guarantee 75%, and Rs10 million or more sees 50% struck off according to the new government budget. Gas and liquid oxygen, oxygen cylinders, Covid medication and equipment are now exempt from VAT, excise duties and customs fees until mid-January 2022. Hotels, trekking, travel and transportation services, cinemas, airlines and media are all to be taxed only 1% of their total taxable income and given a ten-year period to reverse losses.



AMIT MACHAMASI

▲ Six years after the earthquake and 20 years after the royal massacre, a building in Bhaktapur with framed portraits of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya is still in ruins.

If Birendra was alive, Nepal could still be a monarchy

20 years after the royal massacre, people who knew King Birendra pay tribute

● Alisha Sijapati

Twenty years ago at 8:45 pm on 1 June, 2001, King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and eight other members of the royal family were killed during a regular monthly family dinner at the Naryanhiti Palace.

People in Thamel heard the sound of automatic gunfire, and feared that the Maoists were attacking the palace. It turned out that Prince Dipendra had killed his father, mother, brother, sister, an uncle, aunts, and other relatives before killing himself.

The massacre shook Nepal to the core, and shocked the world — a regicide, patricide, matricide, fratricide, soricide, multiple homicides and a suicide all within minutes.

Nepal was in the midst of the Maoist insurrection which had the aim of abolishing the monarchy, and the monarchy itself had imploded. By November, the rebels attacked the Royal Nepal Army bases, intensifying the conflict.

Dipendra was in a coma for four days, and proclaimed king. After he died, his uncle Gyanendra became king. Nepal had three kings in four days.

This week, 20 years later, many who knew King Birendra still mourn him, and say that perhaps Nepal would still be a constitutional monarchy today if he had not died.

For some, he was “Maharaj Sarkar”, to others their beloved “Biren Dai”, Birendra was the perfect gentleman king, and for many Nepalis an incarnation of Vishnu. From palace colleagues to civil servants, relatives to politicians most have nothing but nice things to say about the man.

Since he was a child, Birendra was always known for his calm demeanour, mild manners, and a soft-spoken kind hearted personality. A man of frugal tastes, he was educated in India, Eton, Harvard and in Japan, Birendra was never comfortable being an absolute

monarch. So, when the first People’s Movement of 1990 took place, he relinquished powers to be a constitutional king despite misgivings from hardliners in the palace.

His leadership skills differed from all the preceding kings, and his brother who succeeded him to the throne. He wanted nothing but peace and development for the country. But critics say he was not assertive enough to follow through and get things done.

Bhekh Bahadur Thapa was Nepal’s ambassador to India when the massacre took place. He got the news from breaking news on television at the Barakhamba Road embassy residence in New Delhi. In interviews with the media the next day, he broke into tears.

Even after two decades, Thapa’s voice falters when he remembers the king who appointed him to be Nepal’s youngest ever Finance Minister. He recalls the king’s state visit

to India on Republic Day in 2001 where he showed himself as a leader without airs or arrogance.

“He had made peace with the idea of taking a back seat,” Thapa recalls. “King Birendra hated war and violence, and he was keen on finding a peaceful solution to the Maoist conflict. He was actually working on a peace plan when the massacre happened.”

King Mahendra had brought him back from college in the United States to become the governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, and instructed him to have weekly sessions with Crown Prince Birendra to instruct him about the country’s economy and development.

As crown prince, and after returning from abroad Birendra travelled all over Nepal in disguise to understand the socio-economic situation of his people. Thapa says, “In his mind, he knew that there is Nepal beyond Kathmandu and his love and devotion for his people showed in his deep sense of patriotism.”

Vivek Bikram Shah worked with Birendra as his military secretary for more than 27 years, and has similar memories of the king: a calm, collected leader not easily flustered in a crisis.

“He did not speak much, but when he did it was with deep and considered opinion, and he showed great compassion to people around him,” Shah recalls. “He loved and admired the Nepali people and worried constantly about the country’s resource limitation to move forward.”

Shah says King Birendra regarded the Nepali people as his family. So much so that he perhaps did not devote as much time to his own family. He says, “If King Birendra was alive today, Nepal would still be a monarchy and he would have devoted all his time and energy to confront a challenge like the Covid-19 pandemic.”



Ketaki Chester, First cousin

“I have never met a more genuine person than King Birendra. He was a wonderful, good human being. He was kind to everybody, I seldom heard his voice raised in anger. Once he became the reigning monarch, he was very popular, and I am sure the country would have been in much better hands today had he still been around. I was wounded in the massacre and even 20 years on, I have to live with the terrible memory, and still remember the tiniest details of that night.”



Rajni Singh, First cousin

“King Birendra and I have roughly 10 to 12 years of age difference. He was a very calm and good-hearted person. I remember how sweetly he signed an autograph for me and drew my sketch. Not everyone knows that he was a very good artist, too. He often took us for drives when I was a child. He didn’t talk much, but was a good listener when we were on flights to school in Darjeeling. He was a very thoughtful person and quite different from the rest of the family.”

Bhekh Bahadur Thapa Former minister and diplomat

“King Birendra was a nationalist and a decent gentleman. His approach to people and country was of a very high order. When he asked me to be his Cabinet Minister, I politely refused the offer but suggested that he wanted someone with a specialisation in economics and finance to help him.

King Birendra was devoted to the national interest, and was very mild-mannered, and he must have been under pressure from his family and society. Some in his family and core advisers may not have taken him as seriously as they should have. He believed in seeing things for himself rather than relying on others. Instead of listening to experts, he started listening directly to the people.”



Vivek Shah, King Birendra's military secretary

“I worked with him for over 27 years and he was so down to earth, simple and kind-hearted.

After the 1990’s movement, King Birendra was very well aware that things were not going too well, but he wanted to do the best he could to bring peace. He was always looking for solutions, he wanted to bring change to the country and for that he knew the country needed to be at peace.

As a person King Birendra was a devoted family man, but he regarded all Nepalis as his family. And perhaps he did not give as much time to his own family as he would have wanted to.”



MADHU CHETRI

Nepal leads in snow leopard study

Research into the habits and habitat of the elusive cat is key to protecting them

● Sonia Awale

What has helped save the endangered snow leopard thus far is that it lives in the world’s most inhospitable mountain terrain. But this is changing as new roads improve access, making the elusive cats more vulnerable to those who mean it harm.

Research into the behaviour and ecosystem of snow leopards is therefore an important part of protecting them, and a new international survey has shown that Nepal leads other snow leopard range states in studying and conserving the threatened species.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) study, *Over 100 Years of Snow Leopard Research*, shows that 74% of the snow leopard habitat in northern Nepal has been the subject of research into the species.

Most of the snow leopard’s vast 1.7 million sq km range in remote mountains spanning 12 countries in central Asia has never been researched to study its ecosystem.

Nepal’s neighbours India and China have only 40% and 25% of their snow leopard habitat explored.

“The snow leopard lives in rugged terrain, so research poses significant logistical challenges. Most of the habitat is still unexplored and we don’t have a full picture of the status of this magnificent big cat,” says Rishi Kumar Sharma, WWF Global Snow Leopard Leader, who is the lead author of the report.

Of the 23% of the area studied, only 3% of the snow leopard range has been more closely examined through camera traps and genetic tools to estimate their number in the wild, the WWF survey shows.

This, coupled with the absence of long-term monitoring programs makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of measures taken to protect the species, as well as track emerging new threats to the snow leopard. Sharma’s report examines the current state of knowledge by including peer-reviewed published papers on the species and its habitat.



The countries with the most snow leopard research are Nepal, India, China, Mongolia and Pakistan, in that order. The studies mostly focus on ecological research, human-wildlife conflict and socio-ecological dimensions of the snow leopard range.

However, since so little of the snow leopard’s ecosystem has been researched, the survey concludes that there are critical knowledge gaps that could be hampering more effective conservation measures.

“Snow leopards are not just the emblems of Asia’s high mountains but are also critical to sustaining the landscapes they live in, which support water sources for over 2 billion people,” says Margaret Kinnaid of Lead Wildlife Practice at WWF International.

She adds: “This report will be a guide for the conservation community to diversify and

prioritise areas of research to preserve sufficient and suitable habitat for snow leopards and to ensure water security for the vast human populations downstream.”

Indeed, protecting the snow leopard habitat also means protecting the environment of the Himalaya, Tibetan Plateau, Karakoram and Pamir that are together called the ‘Water Tower of Asia’ because 1.2 billion

Importance of Ecosystems for



Eight of Nepal’s development partners have issued a statement on the occasion of World Environment Day 5 June that underlines their commitment to help Nepal respond to Covid-19 and the climate crisis.

The statement also makes a reference to the mammoth Nijgad airport project, saying that while Nepal needs infrastructure, decision on large projects like Nijgad need to be ‘based on sound economic, financial, climate, environmental and social impact analyses in line with Nepal’s climate and other commitments’.

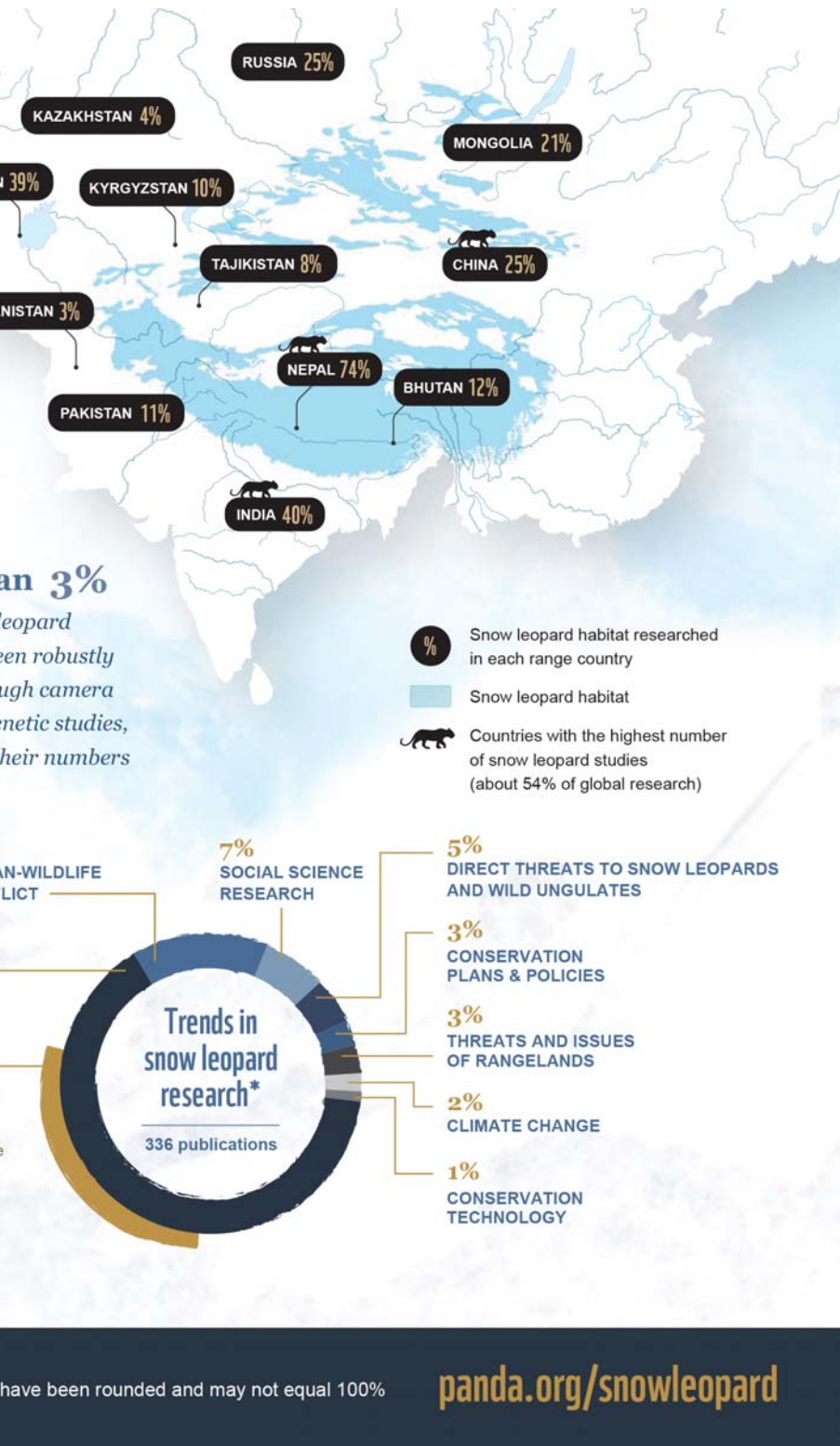
Full statement:



Development partners’ statement of support to Nepal on the occasion of World Environment Day, 5 June

On World Environment Day, we restate our commitment to helping Nepal respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and a sustainable and inclusive recovery.

This commitment is demonstrated in our joint support for Nepal’s Green, Resilient and Inclusive Development (GRID) ambitions for which development partners have committed up to US\$7.4 billion. With committed leadership from the Government we look forward to embarking on a green, resilient and inclusive growth path together as the Covid-19 crisis abates.



people downstream depend on the rivers that originate there.

The snow leopard is listed as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and globally, there could be as few as 4,000 of them left in High Asia. The remaining population faces traditional and emerging threats.

Nepal has an estimated 359 big cats, 320 of them in Western Nepal, 18 in the Kangchenjunga area, 17 in Rolwaling and four in

the Sagarmatha National Park. Nepal has the fourth largest population of snow leopards after China, Mongolia and India, in a much smaller area.

Despite their endangered status, between 221-450 snow leopards are killed annually across Asia, 55% of them driven by retaliation for preying on livestock like sheep, yaks and goats.

Increased habitat loss,

degradation and poaching have also contributed to their declining numbers, and with new roads making remote mountains more accessible, the snow leopards face new threats. However, only 14-19% of the snow leopard range is protected, with 40% of those being smaller than a single adult's home range.

The new threat to the snow leopard ecosystem comes from the climate crisis, and their numbers are predicted to decline by 8-23% by 2070 as the mountain ice caps melt.

The good news is that in recent years there has been more interest in saving the elusive cats, national-level population assessments have been carried out in several range-countries. New studies on the impact of the climate emergency have been conducted, with research in Nepal's Shey Phoksundo National Park, Manang and Mustang.

Scientist Madhu Chetri has extensively studied cat scat in Upper Mustang and Manang to analyse their prey composition, and find clues about human impact on their habitat.

Similarly, researcher Tshiring Lhamu Lama is planning Snow Leopard Conservation Treks to Dolpo's Phoksundo Lake to attract premium tourists from all over the world, bringing jobs and income to locals. She believes this will convince them of the value of protecting the habitat of the snow leopard in Nepal's largest district bordering the Tibet Plateau.

The WWF report recommends evaluating the effectiveness of conservation actions, monitoring snow leopards and prey species, integrating human dimensions into conservation, studying disease, spatial ecology and impacts of climate change and infrastructure development as priority areas for future research.

Says Sharma: "We need to build a more accurate picture of the status of snow leopard populations and their prey species so that range states can better assess future changes and evaluate the impact of conservation actions. But more than anything else, we need a much better understanding of what the people sharing space with snow leopards think." 🇳🇵

People and the Planet

Nepal has recently delivered a new budget that features GRID principles in action. It is our sincere hope that Nepal's commitment to GRID can be an example to the rest of the world at the Global Climate Conference, COP 26, to be held later this year.

Forests are essential to achieving green, resilient and inclusive development, as they reduce both the causes and impacts of climate change. Nepal's forests absorb dangerous climate gases, maintain water resources and decrease soil erosion, drought, and landslide risks. They are also the source of valuable natural resources and wildlife that support job creation and economic development in the forestry and tourism sectors.

Nepal has an internationally recognised record of increasing forest cover and maintaining biodiversity. Established forests, particularly, make

the biggest contribution to carbon capture, biodiversity and economic value. Before taking decisions to reduce Nepal's mature, indigenous forests, sufficient analyses of potential economic, environmental and social impacts are extremely valuable to ensure things are done right and the rights things are done.

The proposed Nijgad Airport is one example, which we understand may lead to the loss of up to two million native trees in an area of very high conservation value. We recognise the important role of infrastructure, and that development cannot avoid all environmental and social impacts. However, it is important to ensure that decisions, particularly those for large projects such as Nijgad Airport, are based on sound economic, financial, climate, environmental and social impact analyses in line with Nepal's established economic, environmental and

social regulations, as well as climate and other commitments.

International experience shows that transparency and public consultation are key to ensuring large projects are successful. A transparent and inclusive public dialogue on the costs and benefits of projects such as this can ensure that diverse stakeholders' views and available evidence are used to inform decision making.

As Nepal's development partners, we are happy to support these dialogues. This is especially important as the world looks beyond Covid-19 to a more sustainable, inclusive and climate-resilient future – a future that requires all of us to acknowledge our dependence on nature. 🇳🇵

This Statement is supported by the Asian Development Bank, Australian Embassy, British Embassy, European Union, Finnish Embassy, German Embassy, United Nations and World Bank in Nepal.

Young Nepali activists protect pangolins

Youngsters in Ilam prove local youth can have a powerful role in nature conservation

Four years ago, teenager Anish Magar saw a pangolin being killed close to his home in Yangshila, in the forested Chure Hills of eastern Nepal. He rushed to the office of KTK-BELT and Namuna Permaculture Learning Grounds (NPLG), demanding that they take action.

But NPLG Chair Kumar Bishwakarma advised the team not to go to the police. Instead, he urged the youngster to actively try to save the rare and elusive animals, the most trafficked mammal in the world.

"We must raise community consciousness about why it is important to conserve pangolins, and then they will not poach them again," Bishwakarma told them.

Anish Magar then became the local leader of the save-the-pangolin effort, and the team went from village to village showing videos of Jackie Chan and organising painting workshops developed by One More Generation and Louise Fletcher.

Pangolins are shy, nocturnal scaly mammals that look like reptiles. They quietly function as ecosystem engineers, burrowing under the soil, eating termites and other harmful insects. But pangolin scales and meat are prized in Chinese traditional cosmetics, and they are smuggled from Africa and South Asia to China by the tens of thousands.

Yangshila is located in the Chure Hills up to 1,950m elevation. Due to its topographic and climatic variation, it is home to rich biodiversity including over 500 plant species and three of the most endangered mammals, reptiles and trees — pangolins, the golden monitor lizard and rosewood.



After Yangshila, the youth team got support from KTK-BELT, which stands for the Koshi Tappu to Kangchenjunga project to set up a 'vertical university' for biodiversity protection in the foothills of the world's third highest mountain in eastern Nepal. Its co-founder Priyanka Bista has supported the initiative to spread the message in the home range of pangolins. Joining Anish Magar as Pangolin Fellows were Ganga Limbu, Shristy Thapa, Sushila Bishwakarma, Nishan Bista and Sabita Bhujel.

The members went from community to community conducting pangolin classes in local schools, where the most popular item was always the Jackie Chan Kung-fu Pangolin video. The awareness had an immediate impact, it fired the imagination of students, including 13-year-old Khadga Bahadur Magar.

The boy was returning home from school one day when he saw a family of pangolins scurrying towards the Budhikhola River. Worried that they would be poached, he quietly scooped them up and released them at a location where they could not be seen.

The boy then guarded the pangolin burrow, spending precious time on conservation that could have been spent on earning to augment his family income.

So, this year on World Pangolin Day on 20 February young Khadga Bahadur Magar received the 'Young Pangolin Protector Award' from the chief guest Province 1 Minister of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment Jagdish Kusayait.

Supported by experts and zoologists, the young group then got in touch with 16 community forest user groups and students in seven community schools. Using their multimedia campaign, they informed locals about the role of pangolins in nature, the condition of their habitat and the reason behind their decreasing numbers, and about poaching laws.

"If you had done this workshop before, then we would've saved more pangolins, but I promise from now on to ensure that in our community forests pangolins will be protected," Ghanshyam Paudel, Chairperson of Ekata Community Forest User Group told the young activists.

This year, the group provided grants and awards to the community forests that had helped spread awareness about pangolin protection. The activity did not just help in conservation, but its young members also learnt basic photography and filmmaking techniques. Called 'Scrappy News Reporting', they interviewed local people and edited the videos on indigenous knowledge about nature conservation in Ilam's Kerabari.

The role of biodiversity conservation is seen as the job for experts, PhD holders, or foreign consultants. Ilam's pangolin conservation initiative has shown that young local activists can be more persuasive in spreading the conservation message. 🇳🇵

*The 'Scrappy News Reporting' team from Rampur in Ilam who interviewed local people about pangolins for a video.
Ganga Limbu training youth activists in film-making to spread awareness about pangolins.*



PROTECTING PANGOLINS

Watch video of young students from Yangshila in Ilam who go from community to community to spread awareness about the importance of protecting endangered pangolins, and the benefits the shy mammals provide farmers.

VIRTUAL EVENTS



WWF webinar

On World Environment Day, join a Zoom webinar hosted by CREASION and WWF Nepal, where experts from the ground discuss the impact of human-induced waste in Nepal, and solutions geared towards ecosystem restoration. More on WWF Nepal's Facebook page.
5 June, 2pm-3:30pm

Road to COP26

Calls for Nepali women reporters to participate in a five-week virtual media workshop led by climate and science journalist Jocelyn Timperley. Participants will develop their own story relating to climate and gender focussed on their local communities, following which they will receive a reporting grant to publish the piece. More on <https://www.britishcouncil.org/np/workshop-and-grant-opportunity-women-reporters-climate-change>
Application deadline: 7 June

ICCROM webinar

As part of ICCROM's 'Sustaining Digital Heritage' initiative, the upcoming webinar 'Understanding Disaster Risk for Digital Heritage' will see noted speakers from the fields of heritage risk reduction, archives, and digital asset management share their experiences and expertise, and discuss how to prevent large-scale disruption and data loss during and in the aftermath of natural disasters. Register at <https://bit.ly/3yYLAGj>.
7 June

PODCASTS



Costing the Earth

BBC Radio 4's Costing the earth presents fresh ideas from the sharpest minds working toward a cleaner, greener planet. Find on the BBC Radio 4 website or on Apple Podcasts.

ISOLATION READING

The Sixth Extinction

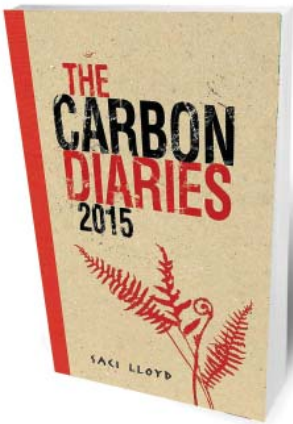
Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer prize winning book about the future of the world blends intellectual and natural history and field reporting into a powerful account of the mass extinction unfolding in real-time.

The Uninhabitable Earth

The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming by New York magazine columnist and deputy editor at David Wallace-Wells discusses the consequences of global warming and the future of the planet in the wake of predicted temperature spikes in the future.

Fairest

Fairest by Meredith Talusan is a memoir about a boy from a rural village in The Philippines who would grow up to become a woman in America, and explores race, class, and sexuality, gender, and identity.



The Carbon Diaries: 2015

Saci Lloyd's 2015 dystopian novel follows 16-year old Laura, her friends, and her worsening family dynamics in the UK after the country has imposed carbon rationing in the wake of weather-related disasters.

The Anthropocene Reviewed

The Anthropocene Reviewed is author John Green's collection of personal essays which are an extension of his podcast, in which Green reviews different facets of the planet on a five-star scale.

TILclimate

An award-winning MIT podcast that breaks down the science, technologies, and policies behind climate change and its impact on the planet. Each episode will include discussions from scientists. Go to <https://climate.mit.edu/tilclimate-podcast> to learn more.

Mothers of Invention

Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson, and comedian Maeve Higgins host this podcast about the women driving powerful solutions to climate change across the planet. Find on Stitcher and Apple Podcasts.

Attitudes!

Attitudes! is a weekly comedy podcast hosted by Erin Gibson and Bryan Safi, based on discussions of women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, pop culture, and various socio-cultural issues.

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Nature Picture Library

The Nature Picture Library provides access to more than 500,000 images and videos covering every aspect of the natural world's wild animals, plants, landscapes, environmental issues, marine life, pets and native peoples. Browse through the galleries.

Climate Museum UK

Climate Museum UK is a mobile and digital museum collecting art, objects, ideas, games and books to engage the public and respond to the Climate and Ecological Emergency. Find more on <https://climatemuseumuk.org/digital-museum/>

Vox Climate Lab

In Vox's 9-part YouTube video series Vox Climate Lab, produced by the University of California in partnership with Vox, UCLA visiting researcher M. Sanjayan explores ways to change how people think and act about climate change.

Stonewall Museum

Stonewall National Museum and Archives has played a significant part in the collection, preservation, and accessibility of LGBTQ+ culture and history in the US. Check out virtual exhibitions at <https://stonewall-museum.org/virtual-exhibitions/>



Google underwater tour

Take Google's Life in the Ocean Deep underwater tour and discover the mysteries of the sea with Sir David Attenborough. Watch videos and underwater maps, and learn about the unique creatures that inhabit the world's oceans.



Forest 404

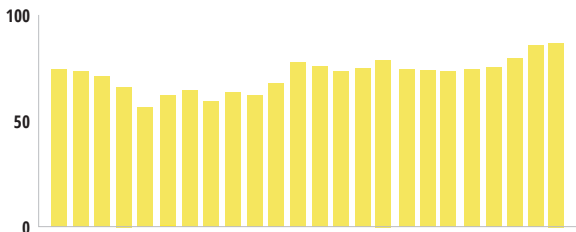
Forest 404 is a nine-part environmental thriller podcast set 200 years into the future where forests do not exist anymore. Each episode is followed by an expert discussion. Find on Apple podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts.



After those two back-to-back cyclones, we are now looking at a relatively dry spell over the weekend, as we go into a pre-monsoon lull. Kathmandu Valley will be hot with the mercury touching 30 Celsius, but it will feel like more because of the humidity. Because of the moisture floating about, expect some isolated thunder showers in places along the mountains. The Tarai will see sizzling temperatures bordering 40. More rains likely early next week.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
29° 19°	28° 19°	28° 19°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



11AM 2 June to 10AM 3 June measured at US Embassy, Phora Darbar

When we live in one of the most polluted cities in the world, the daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) well below 100 in the past 24 hours, keeping it in the yellow 'moderate' zone is as good as it gets most of the year. The air quality has worsened slightly from last week because there has been less rain. We are looking at a relatively dry weekend but as we go into a pre-monsoon lull along with continued prohibitory orders in the Valley until 14 June, we can expect to breathe easier for a little while longer.



OUR PICK

The award-winning eight-episode British documentary series *Our Planet* narrated by Sir David Attenborough was made available for free in 2020 in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, and centres around climate change, the human impact on biodiversity, and the conservation of living creatures. Each episode explores the planet's natural diversity, species that inhabit the world's frozen frontiers, jungles and rainforests, coastal waters and deep oceans, as well as deserts and grasslands. Watch the full series on Netflix's YouTube Channel.

CAREER IN MEDIA

You are looking to make a career in media.

You have first language spoken and written English.

Style and clarity in writing are your forte.

You are also proficient in Nepali.

A good visual and design sense.

Eager to learn and explore new ideas.

You have video skills, or can learn fast.

You believe journalism is not just a job.

You might be the Editor/Writer/Reporter
Nepali Times has been looking for all this while.

Send us a 300 word essay about why we should invite you to join the Nepali Times newsroom.

editors@nepalitimes.com
by 1 June 2021



“Be safe”

Safety is more than a synonym or a metaphor. It is a prayer. I hope you will not have to go through what I just did.

When I say, “Be safe”, I am asking you to be kind to yourself. I am asking that you remember to wear your mask right across your face without any gaps that are likely to expose you to the risks the world is now thick with.



When I ask you to be safe, I am hoping you will remember that surgical masks are one-time use and that if you are using other kinds of masks, you know the extent of protection they offer, and do not stretch them beyond it.

When I utter “mask” every time you step out on one of your short walks, it means I am whispering a reminder that you know to keep a safe distance from neighbours and acquaintances you might meet during your walks. It is me fervently hoping that when you run into someone, you will bring your palms together to greet them from a great distance, and keep to your side of the road and then walk away.

When I say “safety”, the word is more than a synonym or a metaphor. It is a prayer. It is me hoping you will not have to repeat the experience I have had, wherein one is sequestered from the world for weeks on end, often at the end of the tether.

It is a lonely place to be battling for breath and to have to be completely alone doing it, clinging to whatever remains of sanity when you are constantly in such a place— although, isn’t it true that each of us fight our battles alone?

This loneliness is not the one of choice that introverts like me often make. It is layered in different moods and moments. It is mostly about staring from one wall to another, learning every single item in your



PRATIBHA TULADHAR

room by heart. It is about thinking of friends and family and how long since you last held a hand or pressed someone to your bosom. It is about wondering if there might indeed be time for you to finish that story you were writing.

It is also about learning by heart the views your room has to offer. In Kathmandu, it is the squalour, now donned in colours that range from pistachio to fuchsia. They stare back at you as you watch from the solitude of your room, observing neighbours, making a mental note of their daily activities, even

though the last thing you want to do is to pry.

Some nights, the solitude will come back to bite as it leaves you reeling, your lungs as if knocked out of breath. And then you grovel, your head scooped in your palms, coughing into bedclothes, sometimes cursing, sometimes reminding yourself that you cannot let the virus stay and that you’re going to do everything to exorcise it from your body. But the virus is a vicious one and it slams you down, compelling you to lie prone sucking in only as much oxygen as your lungs have the capacity for just then.

You listen to the sounds of the night—they become an unending sad song as you try to calm a panic attack, reach for the can

of supplemental oxygen and draw some puffs in. You wonder what might be the state of someone who has no access to such a can.

When I say “be safe”, I am hoping that you do not have to queue up in public spaces to get a PCR test done. That you may always have the means to not risk closed spaces and long lines. But I am also hoping that the vaccination queues where you go with the hope for protection does not turn you away with the beginning of an infection.

I hope you do not have to lie in bed awake all night worrying about a cousin who is in

the ICU or thinking about another cousin who passed away last week after weeks of battle against the virus.

The virus—how commonplace the term and its presence—threatens our very breath, making us toggle from fear to fear. It gives us a start every time a loved one sneezes or coughs.

“How terrible is this? I have to shun my own children,” the mother says, as she speaks from outside a shut door, through her mask at her child who is quarantined.

She wants to cradle her child in her arms, but all she can do is fill the plate with food that she believes will nurse her babe back to health. She puts it down at the threshold, then steps away quickly before the child opens the door to pick the plate and shut the door again, like some criminal.

I wish to shield you from experiences like these.

I wish that after picking your plate, you never have to stare at the food for an hour, wondering if your sore throat will burn as you swallow, wondering why everything tastes like nothing. And then nibble slowly, not knowing whether to love or hate the act of eating food that is now sans taste, sans fragrance, but you must eat even though you have no appetite.

I wish none of these to ever be your experience.

When I say “be safe”, I wish you are not in a country where the government wrestles to stay in power as people struggle to find hospital beds and oxygen cylinders and to put food on the plate. I wish you never find yourself in a situation where there is no room to isolate, or the means to buy medicines or food that will nourish you back to health.

“Be safe.” I want you to always have lungs that allow you to breathe without having to lean on steroids or supplement oxygen. I want you to continue experiencing rain without worrying about catching pneumonia or bronchitis. I want you to outlive me. 🇳🇵

The healing power of nature

Reconnecting with nature makes us rise above our troubles, appreciate life and help others

It is crucial to stay connected with loved ones during times like this to keep our morale up. We must eat well and exercise to keep our minds and bodies healthy. What else can we do to keep our spirits from being dragged down?



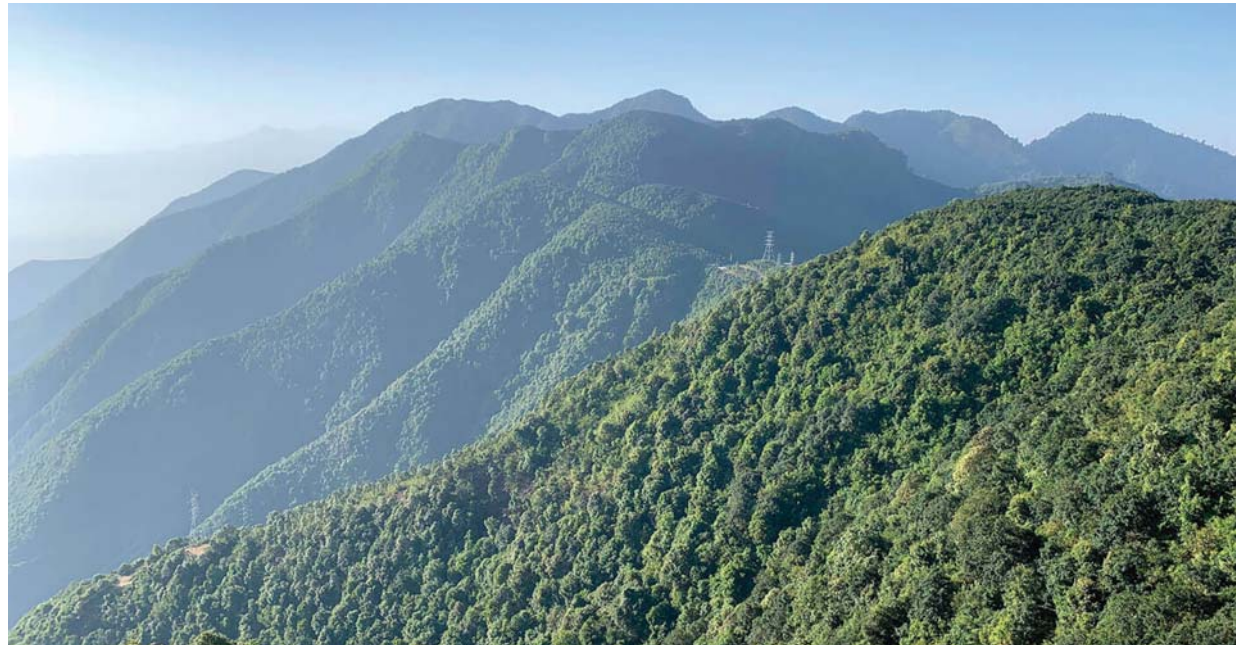
Turn to nature.

As we continue on month two of the second lockdown in Nepal when the rest of the world seems to be moving on, it can be difficult to stay upbeat. Some find it difficult to keep spirits up because of the lack of social interaction, others are frustrated with spending too much time with the same people.

It is natural to feel ill-tempered and irritated with family members when you spend much time with them. Our routines have been disrupted, and some of us will take the frustration out on the closest people.

Many of us are not aware of the positive impact nature has on us. Living in busy cities, we tend to overlook the benefits of regular exposure to nature on our mental wellbeing. We have heard of the benefits of gardening, and if you have not shown interest in plants before, this can be a time for you to start a new hobby that will be good for your soul.

Last year was challenging for the world with the global pandemic and lockdown. We were hopeful that vaccines would put an end to the isolation and mask-wearing,



KUNDA DIXIT

and looked forward to 2021 because we thought life would start to become more normal, but that has not been the case for Nepal.

It can feel suffocating to be locked inside the walls all day, so this is a time to remind yourself of the calming effects nature can have on your mind. It is important to spend time in the roof garden or the lawn to reduce stress and mental exhaustion.

Our busy pre-Covid lives disconnected us from the beauty of nature around us. It is not

possible to go on a hill hike or visit a park, but just walking barefoot on the grass and watching the seeds you plant grow in a pot can be therapeutic.

This can reduce anxiety and depression, which in turn strengthens the immune system. Being outside and looking at the world will promote mindfulness and feelings of gratitude. Taking a break from the monitor and sitting outside, listening to the rustle of wind in the leaves, the sound of rain or just watching the clouds go by will help clear your mind and reduce feelings of irritability and frustration.

Many therapists encourage people with depression to spend time outdoors because it increases their energy levels, and makes them happier. It helps the body produce endorphins that have mood-boosting effects.



Spending time with the trees and plants can help address your emotional, mental and physical needs. The increased stress and concern about Covid have resulted in sleeping issues and insomnia for many. Spending time outside in your garden or terrace can expose you to natural light, thus resetting your circadian rhythm, improving sleeping patterns and rejuvenating body and mind.

Gardening has been considered one of the most de-stressing activities because it lets you form a deep connection with the earth. It helps you bond with this intricate web of life.

It is hard to explain the calming powers of nature till you experience it for yourself. The quietude will help calm your mind if you give it a chance. Our mental health

influences our overall wellbeing.

You may have noticed that people who spend time outdoors or garden regularly are calmer and more relaxed than those who do not. They also tend to be in better physical health. The healing power of nature can reduce feelings of anger and fear and promote happiness. You owe it to yourself to take care of your health during a time like this.

Nature can restore your sense of being because looking at greenery improves your ability to pay attention to details. It provides comfort to hyperactive minds constantly worried about yourself, and the wellbeing of your relatives and friends.

The lockdown makes many spend too much time in front of TV, PC or mobile monitors. Even before Covid, too much screen time was associated with depression. Disconnecting from these distractions can increase your sense of altruism and make you want to help others. We tend to compare ourselves with others who have more when hooked to the internet and social media, the content is also full of news of the scourge, which keeps us down.

Reconnecting with nature allows us to rise above all this, and appreciate life. It makes us want to do more for others. It gives us a sense of purpose. It teaches us patience.

Start small and notice the mental, emotional and physical benefits you begin to experience. We are all in this together, and we need to help those who have less than us. If we can take care of our minds, we will be able to change our surroundings. 🇳🇵

3-pronged strategy to save

Nepalis can protect themselves against the worst of Covid-19. Here's how.

● **Mushfiq Mobarak**
and **Neela Saldanha**

The deadly Covid-19 surge that has engulfed neighbouring India appears to be spilling over into Nepal. Daily deaths have been exploding. The experience from India shows that fragile health systems can get overwhelmed quickly leading to needless suffering: citizens' pleas for oxygen, lack of ICU beds and medicines.

Tackling this threat requires Nepal to adopt a three-pronged approach immediately:

1. Promote consistent mask-wearing to contain the spread of disease, especially in rural areas where the healthcare infrastructure is even more deficient.
2. Prepare a healthcare response in the event of localised surges
3. Prepare for quick last-mile vaccination delivery, in anticipation of vaccine arrival.

There are rigorous evidence-based strategies to implement such a response, as Nepal's other South Asian neighbours are doing.



Estimated infections in Nepal, showing the first and second waves, and the impact of mask-wearing.

Nepal Covid-19 impact worse than official figures

Only hospital deaths are counted, without testing daily caseload total is meaningless

● **Kaustubh Dhital**

In its daily briefing on 1 June, the Ministry of Health announced that 6,085 people had tested positive for Covid-19, and 68 people had died in the previous 24 hours. This was the lowest fatality tally in three weeks, and the positivity rate had also fallen to 30%.

Experts were buoyed by these figures, and took it as a sign that the second wave had peaked. Indeed, the rolling weekly average of daily confirmed cases is much lower and the daily death toll had dropped from 200 just two weeks ago.

However, a new study shows that pandemic statistics the world over are fraught with inaccuracies. Nepal figures are also a gross underestimation, and the new daily infections were probably closer to 120,000, more than 30 times higher than official figures. On 1 June, the fatality total was ten times higher than the official tally.

The study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) of the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle goes beyond official confirmed figures to calculate 'excess mortality' and undetected Covid-19 infections.

'As terrible as the COVID-19 pandemic appears, this analysis shows that the actual toll is significantly worse,' said IHME Director Chris Murray, revealing the results of the analysis this month. 'Understanding the true number of Covid-19 deaths not only

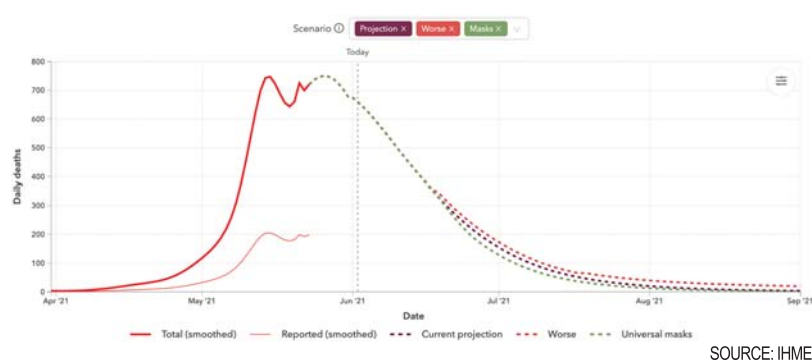
helps us appreciate the magnitude of this global crisis, but also provides valuable information to policymakers developing response and recovery plans.'

The official figures for Nepal are frightening enough. The country has the world's second-highest bi-weekly increase in deaths at 291%, and the highest national test positivity rate of 40%. Yet, Nepal conducts only 713 tests per million people, contact tracing is virtually non-existent, less than 2% of the 30 million population is fully vaccinated, and mask-wearing is at below 65%.

IHME's graphs for Nepal show that during the early May peak when new confirmed cases were above 9,000 every day, the actual daily number was probably closer to 350,000. Nepal's Ministry of Health's total tally of fatalities is now 7,163, but the modelling shows that the actual total is 28,256.

Epidemiologists warn that if the official figures are so wrong, then the planning to meet the requirements for everything from test kits, hospital beds, ICU, oxygen requirement, ventilators, and even funerary planning would need to be re-evaluated and up-scaled.

"We have known that under-reporting is widespread. The figures are underestimates, but the impact cannot be underestimated," says virologist Sher Bahadur Pun at Teku Hospital. "For example, although we are just beginning to see a plateauing of the second wave, the increase in new cases is constant and the strain on the health system remains the same."



This graph shows the discrepancy between official figures and total Covid-19 daily fatalities factoring in 'excess mortality'. There is usually a 3-week lag between infection and death.

The IHME uses the 'excess mortality' model to calculate a more accurate figure for the infection and death rate from Covid-19 by using data for previous years, and factoring in new variables to calculate how many more people are actually dying during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic years.

There are many factors affecting mortality during the pandemic: deaths directly due to Covid-19, increase in mortality because patients with pre-existing conditions are not getting the hospital care they need, or deaths due to mental disorders. However, there is also a reduction during the pandemic of deaths caused by high air pollution, fatalities from other air-borne infections like tuberculosis, measles or influenza, and even a drop in highway-traffic accidents.

So, IHME modellers collected available data on excess mortality from Covid-19, added an estimated

additional deaths that were not registered to come up with the total deaths from coronavirus.

In Nepal, even official data shows a steep spike during the whole of May as Nepali workers started arriving from India with the fast-spreading B.1.617.2 variant. But on 1 May when the confirmed daily Covid-19 deaths was showing only 32, the model shows that 117 people were already dying every day nationwide from the disease.

Within two weeks, even when the official total had soared to 205, the graphs show that the excess daily mortality was already 742. The reason for the discrepancy was that mostly hospital deaths were being counted, and the death registration system is inaccurate and late.

Epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa says the graphs just prove what everyone knew all along: testing is inadequate and even the distribution of testing facilities is lop-sided.

She adds: "People in remote parts of Nepal like Solukhumbu have to walk for days to give their swab sample, which is then sent to a lab in Biratnagar. By the time result is back, a week has passed by and many of them are already sick."

Even though the national case numbers have gone down, experts say it is raging across rural Nepal—but there is no way to quantify it because of the lack of testing.

Experts like Moshfiq Mobarak of Yale University say that the most effective strategy for countries with fragile health systems like Nepal to reduce fatalities is a three-pronged approach that aggressively promotes mask-wearing, responds to localised surges, as well as last-mile vaccine delivery. (See above)

Mask-wearing alone has been proven in a trial in Bangladesh to show that a vigorous campaign for no-cost mask distribution, aggressive awareness drive, and punishment for non-wearers tripled the number of people using masks properly.

Indeed, the IHME model also proves that direct impact of mask wearing in Nepal. The modelling shows that the total coronavirus death toll in Nepal by 1 September will be at 44,711 if mobility went up to pre-Covid levels. However, if 95% of Nepalis wore masks in public at all times, the number of deaths would be reduced to 42,500. This means 2,211 lives would be saved just by universal mask-wearing in the next three months. 🇳🇵

Nepal from Covid-19



On mask-wearing, researchers at Yale University and Stanford University, together with the non-profits Innovations for Poverty Action and GreenVoice ran a large-scale (350,000 adults) randomised controlled trial to identify a precise combination of strategies that are successful in changing mask-wearing norms. Randomised controlled trials are the same techniques used to test vaccine efficacy. When the strategies were jointly implemented, they tripled mask-wearing in rural Bangladesh, and this effect was persistent over 10 weeks of observation, including after the intervention activities ended.

These four strategies form the NORM model:
No-Cost masks distributed at scale
Offering Information on mask-wearing
Reinforcement in public places by intercepting non-mask wearers
Modelling and endorsement by trusted leaders

The researchers tested a dozen other strategies like verbal commitments, text message reminders, social signaling, involving the village police in reinforcement, and even village-level monetary rewards, but none of these were successful in increasing mask-wearing rates any further. The basic NORM model without these unnecessary add-ons is an extremely cost-effective way to reduce transmission risk and save lives.

Why do these strategies work? Door-to-door distribution with messaging makes it public knowledge that everyone in the community was given a mask, and neighbours are aware of the public health threat of not wearing one. Public, in-person reinforcement creates some social shame from being confronted by a stranger and creates incentives for people to carry the

mask to avoid the awkward confrontation. The endorsement from community leaders makes the program personal and credible.

The Stanford engineers on the research team produced high-quality reusable, washable masks that can be procured very quickly and cheaply in South Asia. The research team also provides detailed implementation protocols for all project activities, to make each step easily and quickly implementable for governments.

The results of this study were so compelling that state governments and groups in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have quickly moved to implement the NORM model, and it has drawn headlines such as 'India draws lessons from Bangladesh's mask study', in a leading newspaper in India.

In India, SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) is distributing 3-5 million masks and has implemented the model for 1 million people in Gujarat. The Mayor of Dhaka North quickly mobilised a consortium of partners within 48 hours to implement in crowded shopping malls and at transit hubs before the Eid travel rush.

The commissioner of Lahore and the health minister of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan have mobilised staff and resources to implement after Ramadan. BRAC, the world's largest non-governmental organisation, is poised to reach 77 million people in Bangladesh with the NORM masking interventions, along with associated healthcare responses and vaccine preparation strategies.

This model of community-level mask distribution, promotion, and reinforcement can serve as the anchor to cost-effectively deliver the other necessary components of an effective Covid response strategy: empowering community health workers to provide more accurate treatment options to those who fall ill, and undertaking the activities required to overcome vaccine

hesitancy and facilitate vaccine registration.

In both India and Bangladesh, SEWA and BRAC are taking advantage of the economies of scale in mask delivery to also set up Covid care centres to take pressure off hospitals. Distinguishing effective from inaccurate treatment strategies requires medical expertise and clinical experience. We have partnered with the Swasth Alliance convened by a professor at Harvard Medical School to create training manuals on effective Covid treatment plans for community health workers. We have also collected large-sample data to systematically understand the nature of vaccine hesitancy in Nepal, and other low and middle-income countries, to inform the design of vaccine campaigns.

Quick implementation of the NORM model in Nepal is feasible with decisive leadership and political will, as other South Asian neighbours are doing. Our international research team stands ready to provide any necessary technical support to adapt the model, share all implementation protocols, and monitor results to aid further tinkering and any necessary course-correction, as we have done for our other partners in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

The team is not looking for any monetary or research rewards. The evidence is convincing that this is a cost-effective way to stem Covid transmission and save lives, and we would therefore like to facilitate implementation by the Nepali government or other local non-government actors.

Mushfiq Mobarak is Professor of Economics, Yale University, and **Neela Saldanha** has a PhD in marketing from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and an MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta.

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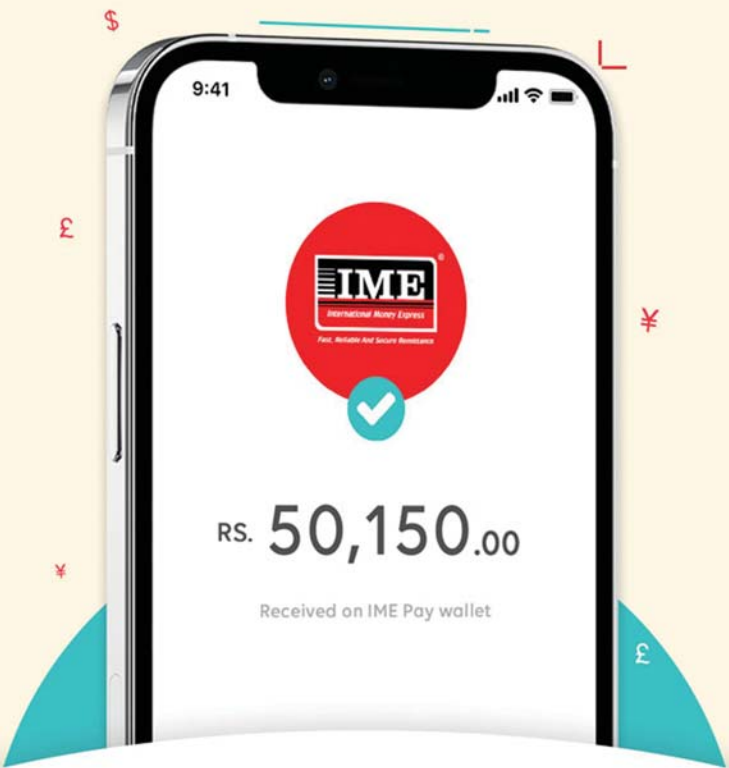
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Nepal rocks

We are so lucky to have a govt that gives it to us straight. The Primeval Minister never minces words, and FinMin Poodle does not beat around the bush to convey to us the bad news that the country is going belly-up, which is why we have to sell the Chure to India to reduce the trade deficit. We are lucky he did not mislead us by sugar-coating the message that we can only balance the budget by hook or by crook, mainly by crook.

Let's see, what else can we do to reduce the trade gap? Flattening the Chure would enlarge the Tarai, and after we are done with that, we can

sell the Mahabharat and turn the range into Nepal's Central Plains for plotting. And if we still have a balance of payments deficit, then we can start quarrying Ganesh Himal. That way we can open up a new trade route to Tibet, killing two birds with one boulder. Nepal rocks.

But why sell Nepal piecemeal? Here is an even better idea: let's sub-contract the whole country to a company that can run it better. For transparency, we would need to announce a global tender in the papers, and in the national interest, the Ass donates this week's space for the following declassified ad:

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Ample water supply in the monsoon, rivers still full of sand and boulders that can be bartered for vaccines, efficient garbage disposal on every street corner, plenty of parking on footpaths, pets allowed to roam freely in neighbourhood without leash and muzzle.

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