



Mahendra Shrestha, 61, in Melamchi Bazar breaks down as he surveys the damage to his home by Tuesday's flood on the Indrawati River.

When it rains, it pours

Disasters in Nepal come in waves. There are crises within crises, layers upon layers of calamities. The country sits on a pyramid of problems: poverty, inequality, exclusion, social injustice, lack of food. On top of all that, for more than a year, Nepalis have struggled with the pandemic. A prolonged winter drought caused by the climate crisis resulted in the worst wildfire

season in living memory — Nepal's mountains burned from November till March. Then the monsoon arrived with a bang this week, falling on the scorched slopes that could not soak up the water, forcing the runoff into rivers, washing away homes, bridges, roads and hydropower plants. Disasters are of two kinds: 'natural' calamities that hit without warning, and slow-moving crises.

Earthquakes, floods and landslides get all the media attention, but silent emergencies do not. There are no press briefings every evening to announce that dozens of children died yesterday all over Nepal due to malnutrition or preventable causes. Natural disasters are not natural. Floods by themselves do not 'wreak havoc', they do so when houses are along their banks, and poorly built roads set off

landslides. This week's rain may have been beyond our control, but we should have been prepared for inevitable floods and landslides in high-risk zones. Sindhupalchok was hit by both the 25 April and 12 May earthquakes in 2015, which caused massive slope failures. Haphazard roads increased the danger, and two landslides blocked the Melamchi and Indrawati on Tuesday evening. Both rivers burst through, and the torrent of liquid mud arrived at the confluence of the rivers at about the same time, overflowing into the new houses built on the flood plain. Since much of the sand and boulders have been mined

by construction contractors, the water's velocity was much more destructive. Elsewhere, at least 12 under-construction hydropower plants have been badly damaged. The worst hit was a 44MW project on the Madi Khola in Kaski that was nearing completion. None of this was unexpected. Anil Pokhrel of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority had warned in this paper last week that this year's monsoon would see above average rainfall in Nepal. Last year was the worst monsoon season in the past two decades with 500 major landslides, nearly 300 killed and 70 missing. Most of the landslides were in Sindhupalchok, and caused by unregulated road construction on fragile slopes. There was a flood of recrimination after last year's disasters. But there has been no let-up in rampant road-building. This week, Nepal's seven provinces passed budgets in which most of their revenue will come from quarry and sand-mining contracts. With politicians distracted by one upmanship and local governments still micro-managed by parties in Kathmandu, it will probably be the same this year, too. This week's disasters will stay in the headlines for a few more days. Until the next year's monsoon.

Kunda Dixit

Nepal's epidemic of hunger
Nepal's local governments lead from the front
PAGE 10-11



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Hunger for governance

Nepal has had one emergency heaped on top of another for more than a year now. The Covid-19 emergency, wildfires, and now floods.

Political flux in Kathmandu continues to undermine the state's ability to respond adequately. But this is nothing new. The most glaring governance failure of Nepal's rulers for the past decades has been their incompetence in being able to ensure nutrition for its youngest citizens.

Be it during the absolute and constitutional monarchy days, the post-democracy period or now, in the new federal system, the state has failed abjectly in its primary responsibility to fulfil the most basic of all human rights – access to adequate food.

Nepal did reduce childhood stunting from 57% to 36% in the two decades after 1990.



But progress stalled because of the conflict and political upheavals. Nearly a third of Nepali children are still stunted due to lack of adequate food, 12% are wasted, and 24% low weight.

The statistics are shocking. Nepal's hunger hotspots are Far Western Province where 41% of children are stunted, and in Province 2 where 34% of children have low height due to lack of food. A survey in May by Sharecast Initiative and UNICEF (*page 17*) shows that one in five families across Nepal reduced the quantity of meals their children ate during the lockdown.

Children have so far been largely spared by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its variants, but they have become collateral damage in the pandemic. Schools have been closed for most of the past year, and half the students had no access to distance learning. Immunisation drives against pre-existing killer diseases have been disrupted.

More than half of Nepalis lost their jobs in the past month amidst the second wave, and loss of household income has led directly to insufficient food for children.

Hunger is Nepal's real national epidemic and rampant malnutrition pre-dated the Covid-19 outbreak. The pandemic has undermined the country's past gains in battling childhood malnutrition.

To meet its UN sustainable Development

Goals (SDG) targets, Nepal has to reduce stunting well below 15% and wasting and low weight to less than 5% in the next nine years. At the present rate, we will not meet those goals.

Horrific as the statistics are, zooming down to ground level in Dhanusha and Mahottari districts of Province 2, our *Saglo Samaj* tv magazine report this week shows how much worse things have got during the lockdowns (*page 10-11*).

Despite Nepal being declared open-defecation free amidst much fanfare, Dalit and other marginalised communities in Dhanusha and Mahottari do not have toilets. If they do have one, there is no running water or soap. They use the same village pond for both humans and cattle, for cleaning and drinking. Things are not much better in pockets in the western mountains. Gastric infections compound malnutrition.

The least the government could do is equitably distribute the 'nutrition allowance' allocated for the Dalit families and educate the communities on the basics of sanitation and hygiene.

Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres for severely malnourished children must be set up closer to the communities so that the neediest can access the service. The annual budget on nutrition should be increased so that local health posts have sufficient supplements and micronutrients for new mothers and their children.

The government's Multi-Sector Nutrition Plan has not delivered as expected, tangled up over jurisdiction under the new federal structure. But it could just as easily deploy Female Community Health Volunteers, and local representatives to discourage child marriage that feeds the vicious cycle of malnutrition and high maternal and child

deaths.

Malnutrition is more than the availability of food and access to clean water, it is also confronting patriarchy, casteism and gender discrimination. It is a result of poor governance, lack of accountability and corruption.

But nothing is stopping newly-empowered local governments with technical and financial backing from the centre to now achieve results that Kathmandu's past centralised governments could not. Training of farmers on climate-smart agriculture, and leasing land to the landless is a good place to start.

Children are hungry because of poverty. Their families are poor because of state neglect. We must draw that causal link between lack of food and failure to deliver it by elected representatives. That is the real scandal the evening news bulletins should be highlighting.

ONLINE PACKAGES



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Follow Himalmedia's Saglo Samaj tv magazine crew to Dhanusha and Mahottari districts in Nepal's Tarai where children in most families suffer from chronic malnutrition. Watch what the locals have to say and how this chronic national crisis is made worse by the lockdowns. Saglo Samaj is aired on DishHome Channel 130 every Monday evening at 8:30pm. Report: *page 10-11*.



MONSOON MIGRATION

Watch video by Salik Ram Chaudhary of a wild elephant herd entering Nepal from India through the Khata Wildlife Corridor in their monsoon migration into the Bardia National Park. Story: *page 6-7*.

STOLEN OBJECTS

I am so glad these sacred arts are being returned to beautiful Kathmandu, Nepal ('How Nepali antiquities got to Chicago museum', Alisha Sijapati, #1065). I just hope they are protected going forward from others who do not appreciate the history and spiritual value of them. It is also so disturbing to see the photos of sacred art objects surrounding the swimming pool. Will those also be returned?

Janis Randles

- Government should take actions to return these cultural and religious valuable artistic properties of Nepal, similarly establishing a strong investigation team to find out who sold their morals for the bucks. I'm sure only the big shots of that era with political patronage within the country could have pulled off these thefts.

Sanjay Lama

- Thank you to all who were involved! Hoping to hear more of such successful cases in future.

Shaguni Singh Shakya

- All stolen historic items, cultural and art effects must be returned back to its original place or country. Any buying should be illegal. Good to push for it through a multilateral system.

Bishow Parajuli

- Stolen, smuggled and scattered all over the World, Nepal's precious pieces of history. Kathmandu's Taleju Bhawani necklace from the reign of King Pratap Malla (1641-1674AD), now resting at the Chicago museum, this just breaks my heart.

Sahana Vajracharya

NEPALI POLITICS

Thanks for this article which recaps what has been going on ('Going down with the ship', Kunda Dixit, #1065). I've been so confused for the past year I had given up on trying to understand Nepali politics.

Karen Ale

- For themselves, they have lifeboats, rescue helicopters and a team of paramedics on the standby. Unfortunately, they will survive to sink multiple Titans.

Karsang Sherpa

- They have us in a stranglehold. We the public will go down before them.

Lal Bahadur

- Covid cases ravaging the country, people dying in the thousands ('3 health ministers in 1 year', #1065). And yet, the politics goes on as usual.

Pratik Chhetri

OXYGEN CRISIS

Thank you for this important exploration of issues affecting Nepal's oxygen industry ('Pandemic and the political-economy of oxygen supply', Kaustubh Dhital, #1065). I knew there were oxygen factors involved, but I don't think anybody spelled them out so clearly.

Joe Niemczura

- An interesting problem to have in hand. Hospitals having on-site plants operating at a low percentage of full capacity is a must. I guess local bottlers who previously supplied hospitals can alter their plants to produce nitrogen (I know this can be done for PSA type plants). There could be an array of industrial applications of nitrogen.

Shobhit Shakya

MONSOON 2021

Disasters have socio economic implications too, NDRRMA must put emphasis those aspects too, not just technical and institutional solutions ('A disaster resilient Nepal is possible', Anil Pokhrel, #1065). We have good and proven practices of community-based disaster risk management. Communicating those and scientific information is also of utmost importance. Looking forward to a paradigm shift within the authority.

Prabin Man Singh

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Nepal goes viral

Nepal has gone viral for all the wrong reasons, even having a variant named after it, but the only 'Nepali variants' to worry about are our feckless politicians. Access the Editorial on the Nepali Times website and join the discussion.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Nepal braces for monsoon-pandemic double hit

by *Sania Awale*

Nepal must now buckle up for another high-risk flood and landslide season following a devastating spring wildfires and the second wave of the pandemic. Are we prepared? Does not look like it. Read the full report on nepalitimes.com for details.

Most popular on Twitter



How Nepali antiquities got to a Chicago museum

by *Alisha Sijapati*

After Bonhams' auction of Nepali artifacts was called off following international outrage, pressure has increased on the Art Institute of Chicago to return the 400-year-old Taleju Bhawani necklace that was stolen in 1971. Exclusive report, and much feedback online.

Most commented

So, you want to join Clubhouse?

by *Sania Shah*

Here is the lowdown on the sensational app that has taken many hostages, even in Nepal. Find out why this audio app goes beyond the usual social media networks.

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QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @Nepalitimes
Pandemic and the political-economy of oxygen supply
Donations of oxygen plants in response to the second wave may force local producers to fold. Kaustubh Dhital reports.



Rashesh Shrestha @ShrRashesh
In-kind foreign #pandemic assistance hurts local producers by reducing their market size. An illustration of #foreign #aid's negative side effects, long pointed to by critics. #Nepal should prioritise local producers as much as feasible and request fungible aid.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Two months after the Art Institute of Chicago returned a stolen 800-year-old stone sculpture, more of Nepal's antiquities have been located at the museum, raising questions about how they got there.



Roshan Mishra @r0shanmishra
Fantastic! It is about time that we investigate more about Bruce Miller Antiquities & Alsdorf Foundation collection. Whether it was gifted by the royals or stolen, it belonged to the community & it should always be. We need to bring them back, let's continue investigating.



Dr. Marsely Kehoe @marselykehoe
This better make the big news. This gallery was somewhat recently installed. I've taught field trips and done assignments among these objects. I had no clue.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
3 health ministers in 1 year
Prime Minister K P Oli has switched health ministers five times since he assumed office in 2018. Read full report:



Bharat Koirala @lampuchhre
When you don't have to explain why you do what you do, anything goes. And, when not much is done anyway, anyone would be suitable for the chair they occupy.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

If truth be told

On the evening of 14 June, two weeks after the mass murder of Nepal's royal family, a high-level official inquiry concluded that Crown Prince Dipendra killed his father King Birendra and the entire family in cold blood before shooting himself.

But citizens who had long been deprived of credible and accurate information because of the information blackout, refused to believe it. What fuelled conspiracy theories was the prolonged silence from the official channels about what happened on that fateful night, as we reported 20 years ago this week in issue #47 15-21 June 2001.

To this day, two decades later, large sections of Nepal's public still do not believe the official account, and would rather believe in a foreign hand or someone else being the killer. Excerpts from a page 1 opinion by Kunda Dixit:

Two weeks after the ghastly slaughter at Naryanhiti Palace, the findings of the probe panel have finally brought us closer to the truth. But, like a mirage, the truth keeps receding the closer we get to it, as an intrigue-obsessed public finds reality too hard to swallow. People are swayed by the government media's secretiveness, the private media's proclivity for either self-censorship or politically-inspired sensationalism, and the fixation of our Panchayat-era mandarins with information control. We are trapped by the lies.

Official media have been habitual liars on behalf of the



government of the day. It is a habit hard to break, and 14 years of democracy has not changed that. All we did was play doleful music, broadcast bland official pronouncements, and vacuous news bulletins that carried lengthy messages from foreign heads of state. We did precious little to quash wild rumours. It took decades for our official electronic media to forfeit public trust, they cannot regain it overnight. The result was that when a crown prince ran amok and killed his entire family there was little Nepal TV or Radio Nepal could do to convince the public that was what really happened.

For the first few days after the massacre the only people who knew what really happened were members of our traditionally secretive royal family and those close to them. So the truth remained a secret, locked up in vaults of silence. Bits of facts had started trickling out within hours of the shooting from eyewitnesses and close relatives. But this information never got to the larger public. Indeed, until the probe panel findings came out Thursday night, no government and palace source had actually told Nepalis that royal family members were murdered. If this is what you do, can you really blame the public for believing in conspiracies?

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

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Publisher and Editor: Kunda Dixit
Audience Engagement: Sahina Shrestha, Associate Editor: Sonia Awale, Layout: Kiran Maharjan
Published by Himalmedia Pvt Ltd | Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur | GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu
editors@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com
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E-vehicles prepare for post-lockdown boom

Importers rush to fill new demand for battery-powered cars after Nepal's tax reduction

Nepal's electric car importers are preparing to meet a post-pandemic demand for electric vehicles after the government in its new budget scrapped taxes imposed last year.

The new budget presented by Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel on 29 May completely repealed excise duty on battery operated cars, while cutting customs duty down to the earlier 10%.

Importers of electric vehicles are now rushing to cash in on an expected rise in customer demand once the lockdown is lifted. In addition to the brands that have a head start in e-cars in Nepal like Hyundai, Kia, Mahindra, MG, India's TATA Motors is planning an aggressive promotion of its electric Nexon model (*pictured*) after its launch soon.

Petrol and diesel Nexons are already a familiar silhouette in Nepal's roads since they were launched in 2017, and TATA hopes to repeat here the success it has in India with the electric version of the compact SUV.

More than 4,000 electric Nexons have been sold in India since its launch in January, with the slowdown only because of the second wave lockdowns. This makes the Nexon India's best-selling electric vehicle with 64% market share already.

The redesigned Nexon EV SUV with its Ziptron powertrain looks identical to the fossil version, except for its blue highlights, snazzy projector lens and sleeker front grill.



E-Nexons score better than their Korean and Japanese counterparts with 205mm clearing underneath (compared to 177mm in the MG, for instance).

The electric motor packs quite a punch in the torque department, giving the Nexon formidable acceleration (0-60km in 4.6 seconds) that will come in handy while overtaking a line of overloaded trucks on the Prithvi Highway.

A petrol Nexon needs Rs5,500 to fully top up its 44l fuel tank, while it will cost less than Rs500 in the electricity bill for a complete charge.

The only downside of the Nexon with its 30.2kWh battery pack is perhaps its range which, at 312km on a full charge, is slightly less than the Kia Niro (455km) and the Hyundai Kona (482km) both of which have 64kWh batteries — but

then those models cost more.

Besides the tax break, this is what is making all electric vehicles financially attractive over the long term. Nepali consumers will now find both the upfront cost and the energy savings of e-vehicles to be much more competitive than fossil fuel cars.

Siprati, the TATA distributors in Nepal have not yet announced the price of the electric Nexon, but it is suggested that it will be less than the Rs4.9 million price tag of the petrol Nexon.

Nepal has announced it will stop selling petroleum cars by

2031, and this is only because neighbours India and China have also announced that they will only be making electric or hydrogen-fuel cars by that time.

Other electric cars in the market include the Kia Niro which had stopped being imported after last year's budget hike that took its price tag to a whopping Rs12.5 million.

But with the new budget revision, the price is down to Rs7 million again. Similarly, the Hyundai Kona is priced at Rs5.6-Rs7.1 million depending on the capacity, while its Ioniq electric sedan is Rs5.7 million.

MG's Chinese made eZS was also quite popular till the budget hike last year, with dozens of its vehicles stuck at customs because they arrived after the tax increase. The price of these SUVs compare well with the Niro and Kona at

Rs5.1 million. Other cheaper Chinese electric cars are also poised to enter the market.

The pioneer of electric vehicles in Nepal is the Mahindra e2O, and is still the most popular for city driving with a range of 120km, a ground clearance of 170mm and a price that has now come down to Rs2.1 million for the 4-door model.

Former finance minister Yubaraj Khatriwada last year slapped excise duties on e-vehicles of 30-80%

depending on their capacity, and levied customs duty of 60%. He justified it saying electric SUVs were luxury items, and the government needed to augment revenue to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

This pushed e-vehicles out of the market with a 120% spike in prices at a time when sales had just started to pick up, and various brands of electric vehicles were gaining popularity because of their expanded range.

Finance Bishnu Paudel's move appears to be geared to reducing the petroleum import bill, and also to increase electricity consumption as Nepal's new hydropower plants come online this year, giving an energy surplus. 🇳🇵

prabhu BANK



Turkish Airlines' to Newark

Turkish Airlines commenced daily flights to Newark, New Jersey from June, making it the carrier's 10th destination in the USA and 325th worldwide to be connected from Kathmandu via Istanbul. "We are pleased to expand our presence in North America with the opening of our tenth US gateway, and look forward to welcoming travelers aboard this new route to experience our world-class service, award-winning cuisine, and world-famous Turkish hospitality," says Turkish Airlines board chairman M Ilker Ayci.

Aid for Education

The World Bank has authorised \$60 million to improve the quality of Nepal's higher education, scale up online learning, and expand access to academic institutions for underprivileged and vulnerable students.

"The program will expand targeted scholarships to help disadvantaged students pursue labour market-driven academic programs and support equity grants to higher education institutions in needy and disaster-affected areas in Nepal," says Mohan Aryal, World Bank's Program Task Team Leader.

Adds World Bank Country Director Faris Hadad-Zervos: "Improving access to quality higher education and helping students acquire the skills that are in demand in the labour market will contribute to Nepal's Covid-19 recovery and strengthen its resilience."



Germany renews support

Germany has pledged €34.4 million to Nepal, mostly for its health sector until 2023 and financial cooperation until 2025. Health gets €23.7 million, and the rest for renewable energy development.

"With our focal sectors of health, sustainable economic development and energy, we are strongly committed to achieving development together with the Nepali people. We see an important role with the civil society, which is an indispensable part of any development effort in Nepal," says German Ambassador to Nepal Roland Schäfer.



Indian Army Covid Support

Indian Ambassador to Nepal Vinay Mohan Kwatra handed over a consignment of ambulances, PPE kits, ventilators, ICU beds and PCR kits from the Indian Army to the Nepal Army on 11 June to fight the second wave.

Ncell revises call rates

Ncell has revised upwards International Call Distance call rates to 19 countries in line with new tariffs. Calls to Italy, Malta, Germany, Tajikistan, Jordan, Thailand, Latvia, Lebanon, Slovenia,

Ncell



Belgium, Estonia, Croatia, Finland, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Syria, Lithuania and Cyprus will now cost Rs30 per minute while calls to Maldives will cost Rs30.65 per minute excluding applicable taxes. Earlier, the call charge for these countries ranged from Rs.4.99-15 per minute.



Remittance inflow up

Defying predictions, Nepal continues to see a rise in remittances from its overseas workers from July 2020 to May 2021 compared to the same period last year. The Rastra Bank said this week Nepalis abroad sent home Rs810 billion in that period, which is up 19.2% from last year. Despite the pandemic, and perhaps because of it, Nepalis send money to families that had lost their incomes back home during the lockdown and the economic slump.



Honda CB 350 DLX in town

Syakar Trading Company Private Limited, authorised distributor of Honda motorbikes and scooters in Nepal, has launched the Honda CB 350 DLX. Chairman of the company Saurabh Jyoti launched the motorbike, which is priced at Rs750,000, via a YouTube video premiere.

EU Covid relief

Austria, Slovenia and Malta of the European Union have donated antigen tests, pulse oximeters, FFP2 masks, protective gear and other medical equipment in response to Nepal's earlier call for support. Similarly, aid has already poured in from Spain, Finland, France, Belgium and Germany with more emergency supplies from Ireland, Italy, Denmark and Lithuania to come.

"Since the start of the pandemic, Team Europe has stood in solidarity with Nepal and we will continue to do so, no one is safe until everyone is," says EU Ambassador Nona Deprez.

What can we do till vaccines arrive?

A unique South Asian initiative with proven success in saving lives by mass masking-up

● **Mushfiq Mobarak,**
Maha Rehman, Satchit Balsari

This op-ed is being simultaneously published in *The Indian Express* (India), *The Daily Star* (Bangladesh), *Nepali Times* (Nepal) and *DAWN* (Pakistan).

In February 2021, Covid-19 numbers started increasing again in South Asia with official daily case counts rising beyond 400,000 in India, 6,000 in Pakistan and 7,500 in Bangladesh, straining health systems.

The massive surge in India soon spilled over across the border into Nepal, leading to ‘apocalyptic’ scenes of overwhelmed hospitals.

This virus knows no borders. Containing it has necessitated global cooperation among scientists, policy makers and society. Despite a wide variation in how nations have responded to the pandemic, the most successful strategies adhere to science, and attention to local context.

The deadly surge in 2021 makes a regionally-coordinated, evidence-driven strategy even more critical. The virus continues to challenge us with its mutations and new lines of attack. If we are to move at the speed of the virus, it is necessary to construct multi-stakeholder regional coalitions to devise new solutions and frugal innovations that can be applied across South Asia.

Given our shared and mostly similar social, economic and cultural contexts, local successes must find means to be amplified across the region.

Is that even possible, given the troubled history South Asian countries share? The mutual mistrust appears to have hit a new low, as SAARC has not even managed to hold its summit since 2014.

But today we write a positive, hopeful story about a new consortium we are involved in, with core team members from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh jointly developing Covid prevention strategies. The emerging consortium provides an example of how neighbours can work together for mutual benefit, despite political differences.

Every country in South Asia has struggled to ensure consistent mask-wearing to stem the spread of Covid. Beliefs, priorities, traditions, and aversions to behaviour change are more similar across South Asia than we care to admit. These commonalities mean that interventions that are successful in changing behaviour in one place are likely applicable in other parts of the Subcontinent.

We have experienced this with Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) campaigns to solve the problem of open defecation -- originally developed by Bangladeshi NGOs in partnership with an Indian consultant --- and now broadly applied across South Asia and beyond.

The Grameen Bank microcredit model was an indigenous South Asian innovation that spread rapidly. BRAC’s recent ‘Graduation’ program targeting the ultra-poor in Bangladesh was replicated with success in India and Pakistan. India’s digitised social protection ecosystem with Aadhar IDs and Jan Dhan accounts serves as a model (albeit with cautionary notes) for other countries in the region.



MONIKA DEUPALA



E-governance programs in Pakistan, like eVaccs and Citizen Feedback Model have been replicated and provide strong models ready to be deployed regionally and globally.

The new pan-South Asian consortium in response to Covid-19 evolved out of an experiment conducted in Bangladesh, that successfully changes social norms around mask-wearing in rural communities. We observed that a combination of No-cost distribution, Offering information, Reinforcing the message in markets, mosques and other public spaces, and Modelling and endorsement by community leaders (NORM) leads to large, sustained increases in mask usage that persisted beyond the period of active intervention.

This four-part NORM intervention was originally examined in a cohort of 350,000 individuals across 600 villages. BRAC is implementing the model to reach 81 million people across Bangladesh.

The team is now partnering with several organisations across Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh to start adapting the model to fit each country’s context, and set up partnerships to pilot, implement, tinker, and learn.

The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) quickly implemented the model to reach over one million members in Gujarat. An additional 1.5 million masks were shipped from Bangladesh to support SEWA’s outreach to other states. Lahore’s Commissioner worked with our research team to adapt the NORM model to an urban setting, and devised new creative ideas to improve effectiveness.

For example, it has prepared to deliver masks at doorsteps using Pakistan’s postal service, and is targeting beneficiaries on the basis of billing information from utility companies. Philanthropists and private corporations are sponsoring the masks. We are re-importing some of these innovations back to Dhaka, inspiring further scale-ups in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Kathmandu.

Effective mask promotion requires visits to thousands of remote villages, and those same visits can be used to prepare for more effective community-based healthcare responses. To that end, a host of physicians, scientists and community based organisations created the Swasth Community Science Alliance, committing to

pragmatic, science-based protocols to manage mild and moderate cases of Covid-19 in rural India, where institutional health care access is limited.

These guidelines (available at <https://science.swasth.app>) were translated to training tools for healthcare workers by digital health innovators like Noora Health, making them widely available across the region.

NORM implementation teams based in Lahore, Ahmedabad, Peshawar, Hyderabad, Dhaka, Kathmandu, and Delhi are learning from each other’s successes and failures. The process usually starts with the original research team sharing evidence-based insights with implementing agencies, as the implementers adapt the design, co-create localised implementation protocols, and are threaded together in a collaborative environment across countries where each implementing team iterates while learning from others’ prior iterations, and all our sub-teams are connected in an active learning system that allows us to course-correct in real time. This coalition is poised to change mask-wearing norms amongst hundreds of millions of people across all of South Asia.

The CSA is working with partners across rural, tribal belts around India. A team of physicians from India and the Indian diaspora work with local implementing partners to support design, implementation and monitoring of home-based programs and Covid-19 centres providing rigorously protocolised treatment for moderate cases, with oxygen, proning and steroids.

Combining the NORM and CSA interventions, our Masking-Treatment-Vaccine Preparation

(MTV) approach offers a sensible strategy to mitigate the pandemic until universal vaccination is achieved. These are regional solutions that thoughtfully apply scientifically sound interventions to the local context.

The Covid-19 crisis has increased policymakers’ appetite for evidence-informed policy measures that can be quickly implemented to stem transmission. This drive for quick action has created some unprecedented opportunities for enhanced cross-country collaborations that are normally hampered by politics and mistrust.

We hope that the consortium that first formed around mask-promotion, and now around science-based treatment approaches, and that developed quickly and organically without regard to national boundaries, can serve as a model for a broader and deeper collaborative ecosystem that endures.

We need to come together to solve problems that affect us all. Let the lasting legacy of this pandemic be a new era of partnership in social innovations that can benefit all South Asians. ■

Mushfiq Mobarak is Professor of Economics, Yale University, and Director of the Yale Research Initiative on Innovation and Scale. Twitter: @mushfiq_econ

Maha Rehman is director of policy at the Mahbub-ul-Haq Research Centre at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. Twitter: @MahaRehman1

Satchit Balsari is assistant professor of emergency medicine, and of global health and population, at Harvard University. Twitter: @satchit_balsari

Watch video nepalitimes.com

Bardia’s wild elephants are also on the move

● **Salik Ram Chaudhary** in Bardia

Before Covid-19 and lockdowns I would be guiding tourists around Bardia National Park this time of year. But the pandemic has meant empty homestays along the Khata Wildlife Corridor that connects wilderness areas in India and Nepal.

Local villages may have lost their income from eco-tourism, but the absence of people during the lockdown means that wild animals have reclaimed their space.

Even with the restrictions on travel and scorching pre-monsoon heat of the plains of western Nepal, I cannot bring myself to stay indoors.

I am involved with the Khata

Wildlife Corridor Homestay Management Committee, which means I used to organise jungle safaris and wildlife excursions, showing visitors what Bardia has to offer. But it is not merely a job for me — I have been roaming these forests near my home since childhood and been passionately involved in nature conservation.

On 10 June, I was on my way into the forest when I saw a herd of about 40 elephants, ranging from calves to adults, moving just half a kilometre from the village. To say it was a sight to behold is an understatement — it is extremely rare to see such a large herd of elephants this close to human settlements. Just as rare as it has been to see the closely-watched herds moving across Yunnan Province in China.

Elephants in Bardia usually migrate through the Shiva Community Forest in Madhuban Municipality to the Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in India’s Uttar Pradesh during September and October, and return to Nepal as the monsoon approaches. It is a rhythm dictated by tens of thousands of years of migration of the ancestors of these great herds.

And although this group was the largest I have ever seen, it is quite common to see smaller elephant herds within the Shiva Community Forest.

This year, possibly because of the lack of human movement, the herd didn’t bother to stay within the jungle corridor in their annual migration back into Nepal, but marched right through the villages.

I followed the elephants along



Wild elephants, flying squirrels

Yes, there are flying squirrels in Nepal, too

● **Bashu Baral** in Ilam

A baby flying squirrel nesting in a rhododendron forest is not something one sees every day in Nepal. The thrill of this recent close encounter with a rare Hodgson’s Giant Flying Squirrel in Ilam was indescribable.

As a young student of the conservation biology, I am always looking for excuses to be out in the wild. In March, just before the lockdown, I was part of a biodiversity field survey organised by Small Mammals Conservation and Research Foundation in eastern Nepal.

A three hour bus ride north from Ilam Bazar along rough roads brought us to Maimajuwa, next to the Mai River tumbling over big boulders. We set off with team members Dibya Dahal and two local guides Man Prasad Rai and Birbal Rai.

We were on our way to a spot to set up camera traps. Passing a rhododendron forest at an elevation of 1,920m, a nest high up on a tree caught my attention.

We went closer, but this alerted the animal in the nest. Getting closer, it was clear that it was no bird. But what could it be?

One of the local guides said it could be what the Rai people here call a ‘Phepasa’. And indeed, it was a baby Hodgson’s Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista magnificus*), looking like a cuddly teddy bear atop its nest.

To take a closer look, I climbed a nearby tree and noticed that the baby squirrel was not unduly perturbed by my presence. But it was alert, and watched me with its dark eyes wide open. The drey was built of clumping twigs, dried leaves lined with fur and moss for cushioning. The mother squirrel might have gone somewhere to search for food, leaving the kitten-sized baby home alone.

Eventually, I got to within 2m of the nest and felt a surge of excitement being so near such a rare and angelic looking baby of the least-known squirrel species in the world. I took some photos, and climbed down.

Squirrels fall under the *Sciuridae* family



A Hodgson's Giant Flying Squirrel baby nesting on a rhododendron tree.

BASHU BARAL

in the *Rodentia* order, meaning that in the evolutionary past rodents and squirrels branched out from the same order. Squirrels are quite common, and in some cities are even regarded as pests. They have a slender body, long bushy tail and arboreal habits that make them good tree climbers.

Flying squirrels are from the same family, and evolved as their ancestors, instead of scurrying down a tree to climb another one, found it easier to glide over. Eventually, they evolved the distinctive membrane air foil (called the patagium) between their front wrists down to the ankles.

Flying squirrels are nocturnal, as opposed to the daytime habits of other wingless tree squirrels. Their size can range from the tiny pygmy flying squirrel *Petaurillus* (24g), to the giant flying squirrel *Petaurista* (1.5 kg). Like

their flightless cousins, the diet consists of acorns, chestnuts, other hard fruit and insects, particularly termites.

Our baby Hodgson’s Flying Squirrel was found in a rhododendron forest, but according to *Gliding Mammals of the World* (2012), the general habitat of flying squirrel comprises of evergreen, deciduous to coniferous forests at elevations of up to 4,000 m.

There are 49 species of flying squirrels in Asia, Europe and North America, and Nepal is home to six of them. Among them two species (*Hylopetes alboniger*, *Petaurista petaurista*) are categorised as ‘Least Concern’ and four species as ‘Data Deficient’ (*Belomys pearsonii*, *Petaurista elegans*, *Petaurista nobilis*, *Petaurista magnificus*).

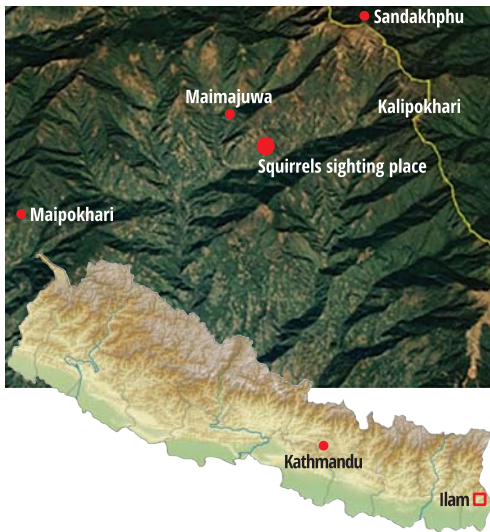
In Nepal, flying squirrels are mostly found outside protected areas, ranging from the Tarai to the Himalayan foothills. Their population is not known, but they are declining due to poaching for bushmeat and habitat loss. Some local people believe it is inauspicious to have a flying squirrel nesting near the house, and it is unlucky to see one in the air. They are then killed or chased away with slingshots.

Although listed, flying squirrels are not protected by law in Nepal, and are the least studied mammals in the country, probably because of their cryptic and crepuscular habits. Flying squirrels play key role in predator-prey relations, seed dispersal to pollination, but they never harm humans.

Hodgson’s Flying Squirrels are listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List and The National Red List Series of mammals in Nepal. According to the Red List Series, besides the local Rai name, the Nepali name for flying squirrels is.

Every day after the first sighting in Ilam, I checked up on the baby flying squirrel and was glad to see it doing well up in its nest. I am now back in Kathmandu, but often wonder where it is now, is it gliding from tree to tree, or has it been brought down by a slingshot? 🚩

Bashu Baral is a zoologist with the Small Mammals Conservation and Research Foundation in Kathmandu.





SALIK RAM CHAUDHARY

the village roads for quite some time, taking many photographs and videos along the way. I was so excited, there was no time to be afraid. These matriarchal herds can be nasty if they feel their calves are threatened.

The herd sliced right through roads and grasslands, stopping to graze before lumbering peacefully past farms. Had there been a lack of fodder, they might have broken into the fields of maize.

I posted the photos and videos I had taken on Facebook, tagging my friends so that I could share my experience and these animals with the world.

The elephants, however, were not the only bonus wildlife sighting I have had in the past two weeks.



On 28 May, I came across a tiger 400m away in the outskirts of the village. This was so unusual that I threw caution to the winds and tracked the tiger from a distance, following it, taking photographs. The tiger knew I was there, but left me alone — both of us were at peace with the world.

I followed the tiger to a watering hole in the buffer zone of Bardia National Park, half a kilometre away from the Dalla Homestay village that we had built with help from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Nepal a decade ago. It drank deeply, raised its head, looked around, and then drank some more.

Despite being a wildlife tracker and guide, I had never seen a tiger that close before. In fact, it is quite rare to see these elusive cats. I was trembling with sheer excitement and delight at being given this opportunity.

During the hot summers, the water resources within the Bardia National Park that fill the natural watering holes for wildlife begin to dry up, forcing many wild animals to rivers and ponds near towns and villages. And as the numbers of wild animals rise because of Nepal's conservation successes, there has also been an increase in animal-human contact.

The elephants and the tiger that I had encountered during these

two weeks had not veered off their usual routes or lost their way. Their proximity to human settlements was made possible because of decades of hard work and the conservation effort of communities, local governments and conservation groups.

Thanks to this achievement, wildlife sightings are now quite common, making it possible for us to share these animals with the guests and visitors who use our homestay services when the lockdown is over.

And as in Bardia, we need to ramp up conservation efforts across Nepal so that we can use the lockdown lull to share space and live in proximity with Nepal's vast and rich biodiversity. 🇳🇵

Salik Ram Chaudhary is Secretary of the Khata Wildlife Corridor Homestay Management Committee.



MONSOON MIGRATION

Watch video by Salik ram Chaudhary of the wild elephant herd entering Nepal from India through the Khata Wildlife Corridor in their monsoon migration into the Bardia National Park.

quirrels and red pandas



Paaru, the first red panda to be GPS collared in Nepal in September 2019.

JAMES HOUSTON/RED PANDA NETWORK

Red panda on the red list

● Sonam Tashi Lama

Despite its increasing popularity among researchers there is still a big gap in knowledge about the habits and spread of red panda across Asia.

The red panda is not related to the giant panda in China, and is actually the only living member of the genus *Ailurus* and the family *Ailuridae*, even though they were earlier thought to be related to raccoons.

A recent review paper by Griffith University and University of Southern Queensland in Australia, Kathmandu Forestry College and the Red Panda Network shows that despite red pandas being studied for over 193 years, there is still a significant

knowledge gap impedes its conservation in the wild and improved management of captive populations.

Lead author of the study, Sikha Karki at Griffith University, says: "We know that the red panda is an endangered indicator species of Himalayan forests. It is also associated with livelihoods as well as sentiments of local people. It is important to have a baseline to identify what needs to be done to save red pandas."

Despite conservation efforts, red pandas are still threatened by habitat degradation, poaching, and illegal trade. The study shows that the animals need support of local communities if are to survive into the future. Reviewing 175 journal articles on red pandas, the first dating back to 1827, the study found

most research was focussed on the biological aspect of the species and not so much the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions. Wild red pandas were less studied than captive populations, and the research was concentrated in China, followed by Nepal and India.

Most of the researchers were from non-range countries, and the study felt that it was important to empower and help build the capacity of local people and institutions to enable them to assist red panda conservation as citizen scientists.

"It is critically important to have more research related to identifying and prioritising ecosystem goods and services provided by red panda habitats to the local people and ways of establishing good governance," says

Tek Marasseni of the University of Southern Queensland, and co-author of the paper.

The study underlines the need for red panda research in underrepresented range countries, and assessment of climate change impact, ecosystem services of red panda habitat, bamboo distribution status, population estimation, and population dynamics, behaviour, and movement ecology.

As two new species of red pandas have been recognised recently, it is deemed important to further validate this with studies from underrepresented habitats. Their



numbers are now down to less than 10,000 in the wild across Asia, and there has been more than a 50% population decline over the last three generations.

Nepal has only about 500 red panda left in 24 districts, and 70% of its habitat lies outside protected areas in the country, mainly in community forests. Nepal has prioritised red panda research and conservation since the 1980s, but the numbers of animals is still in decline.

Tim Cadman at Griffith University, another co-author of the study, says local communities need support to deter poachers, and find better alternatives to the illegal wildlife trade, especially important during the pandemic, when many people's livelihoods are threatened.

"This review work on red panda research and conservation provides solid direction for its conservation and research measures in the coming days," says Ang Phuri Sherpa, Nepal Country Director of Red Panda Network. "Nepal's Red Panda Conservation Action Plan is important, but we also need partners in other range countries to cooperate in expanding research and maintain habitat connectivity." 🇳🇵

Sonam Tashi Lama is Program Coordinator at the Red Panda Network.

VIRTUAL EVENTS

Reading Circles

Join this session of Mobile Library Nepal's Reading Circles, a discussion on 'inclusivity and gender identities, and how queer artists navigate and express themselves through different mediums' under the theme 'Queerness, Gender & Sexuality'. Send an email at mobilelibrarynepal@gmail.com for reading materials and the meeting link.

23 June, 5pm-6:30pm

Museum in Motion

'Envisioning Emptiness: Contemporary Art and Buddhist Social Practice', the third edition of Lumbini Museum's online series Museum in Motion will feature artists Ang Tserin Sherpa and Charwei Tsai and will be facilitated by curator Haema Sivanesan.

20 June



Art exhibition

Look at the Museum of Nepali Art's online exhibition, Shilpakalakrita ko pratibimba, which will include traditional and contemporary Nepali artwork in various mediums.

Until 2 July

Space Apps Challenge

NASA's Space Apps celebrates its 10th year in 2021. Join the annual space apps hackathon with coders, entrepreneurs, scientists, designers, storytellers, builders, artists, and technologists. Go to Nepal Astronomical Society (NASO)'s Facebook page for details about where Nepali participants can participate from.

Sooriya virtual studio

Join Sooriya Wellness and Yoga centre's virtual studio for yoga sessions available to everyone for self-practice at home. Sessions are available on prior appointment. Go to the Sooriya Wellness Facebook page for details.

9818481972

BOOKSHOPS



Pilgrims Book House

Find rare and out of print books, books on mountaineering and trekking, and the Himalayas, as well as non-fiction books that explore Hinduism, Buddhism, Tantra, and philosophy at Pilgrims Book House.

Jhamsikhel, 7am-9am/Thamel 9am-11am, 9818973392

TAKEAWAY & DELIVERY



Dhokaima Cafe

Look at Dhokaima's menu online for takeaways. Try the Dhokaima club sandwich, shredded pork, or get desserts and customised cakes.

(01)552113

Gelato

Nothing beats the humidity of the monsoon like ice cream. Browse the menu at Foodmandu to get ice cream from the classic cookies and cream to apple cinnamon and every flavour in between.

Tasneem's Kings Kitchen

Order Tasneem's mouth watering authentic Bohra Muslim cuisine. Peruse through the menu for flavourful, spicy biryani, and others. Call or order from Foodmandu.

9801121212

Pangra Express

Experience the best of Nepali street food and fast food from Pangra Express. Get the Classic Chicken Momo, spicy vegetable noodles, Sha Phale Chicken, or go for the Dynamite momo. Foodmandu and Bhoj Deals will deliver.

9818453455



Dechenling Garden Restaurant

Dechenling is among the best restaurants for Tibetan and Nepali food in Kathmandu. Look at the menu on the Bhoj app and order Tibetan specialties, including Ting momo and Pork Dapao, Phing Sha rice noodles, and more.

(01)4412158

ONLINE GROCERIES

Kirana

Get essential items, including food and beverages, meat, dairy and baked goods, as well as babycare and pet products, household items, from <https://merokirana.com>.



Himal Mart

Get groceries delivered at home without paying additional delivery charges from Himal Mart. Details at <https://www.himalmart.com>

Metro Tarkari

Order fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables, as well as local items like Marsi rice and pickles from across Nepal from Metro Tarkari. Shop at <https://www.metrotarkari.com>

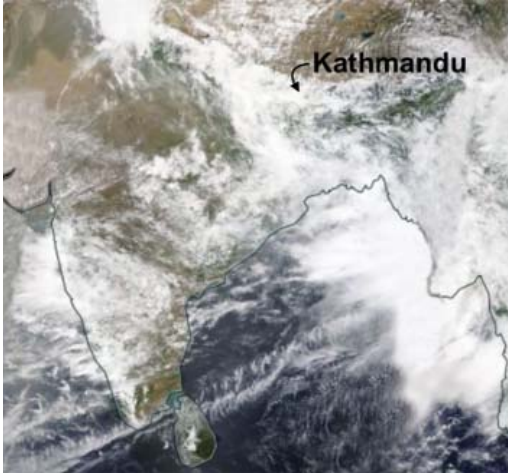


Le Sherpa farm shop

Shop for locally-sourced fruit and vegetables, dairy products, baked goods, and other fresh produce and much more at <https://lesherpadelivery.com>.

Daraz

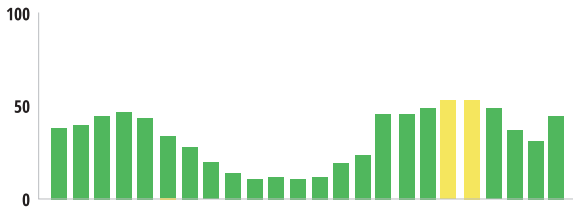
Online retail platform Daraz's dMart will only deliver essential items during the lockdown. Go to https://www.daraz.com.np/wow/gcp/daraz/channel/np/DMART_NP/ to find out what can be ordered.



The reason for that unusually heavy start to the monsoon this week was that it was heralded by a massive low pressure circulation in the Bay of Bengal. It lingered over Central Nepal, dumping huge amounts of rain, causing all those floods in Gandaki Province and Sindhupalchok. That system will be hovering around northern India into the weekend, which means that after a short respite on Friday it will be wet, wet, wet again.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
25° 19°	25° 18°	25° 18°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



Air Quality Index as measured between 9AM 16 June - 8AM 17 June at the US Embassy, Phora Darbar

As expected, the heavy and relentless rain over the past week kept the AQI within healthy 'Good' level. The rain washed most of the particulates from the air in Kathmandu, and the lockdown keeping most vehicles off the roads also helped a lot. However, once the rains stopped towards evening, the AQI did creep up again, mainly due to open burning.

OUR PICK



In Stephen Frears' acclaimed 1985 British comedy-drama *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Omar, a young Pakistan man living in London, is the caretaker of his father, a former journalist who struggles with alcoholism. The film follows Omar's reunion and eventual romantic relationship with his childhood friend Johnny—the leader of a group of right-wing street punks— as the two fix up and take care of a laundrette owned by Omar's uncle. Stars Daniel Day-Lewis, Saeed Jaffrey, Roshan Seth, and Shirley Anne Field.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



Build back greener

The pandemic offers us the chance to tread lighter on the land and allow nature to restore itself

Soon after the coronavirus first emerged in Wuhan in December 2019, it spread rapidly within weeks to become an international public health emergency. Though it took months for the root of the illness to be identified, the virus was carried by human hosts in a highly interconnected globalised world.



LIFE TIME

Anjana Rajbhandary

What would start as fever, chills, and flu-like symptoms began to lead to more severe cases of cardiac injury, respiratory failure and death. Those with pre-existing health conditions and the elderly were particularly vulnerable.

The pandemic hotspots shifted from China to northern Italy, New York, then it was Brazil and the second wave that is ravaging India and Nepal. People were locked in at home for months to stop the spread, and it came at an additional cost – the rise of a mental health crisis globally.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone and every aspect of our lives. The lockdowns may have helped contain the virus, but it destabilised economies, businesses went bankrupt, people lost jobs, again exacerbating the impact on mental health in societies. The coronavirus emerged because of the over-exploitation of nature by a globalised mass



MANISH POUDEL / NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

consumption society. But the pandemic it unleashed has allowed us to think about that, and also allowed nature to begin to restore itself.

Studies have shown that lockdowns in response to the pandemic have significantly improved the air quality in many big cities due to the shutting down of industries and fewer vehicles on the roads. From Kathmandu, the Himalaya suddenly came into view.

The restrictions and lockdowns led to a decrease in economic activity, resulting in reduced air pollution and emission of greenhouse gases. Ironically, while the virus was attacking the respiratory system, countermeasures taken against its spread were also making it easier to

breathe.

The ban on international travel also helped reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, dramatically demonstrating the path to reducing the impact of the climate crisis: the need to cap carbon dioxide emissions.

The collapse of tourism affected the economies of countries like Nepal, but it has allowed nature to regenerate. There is less waste along the trekking trails, less garbage.

Across the world, people are consuming much less than they used to. It is hard to say if this frugality will persist in the post-pandemic era, but it has set a precedent. Many of us are focusing more on our health, and have adopted better eating habits.

For nearly two months now,

there is also less noise pollution. Kathmandu's streets are silent, no roar of trucks, no honking, no construction work, and few jets overhead. Persistent ambient clamour is known to affect our physiological and physical health. With less unwanted noise, the soothing sounds of nature are more audible with bird song, frogs in ponds, and even the rustle of leaves on trees. The sound of silence, and comforting natural sounds carry many mental health benefits.

Cities attract people because of economic opportunities and their cosmopolitanism. The absence of people in these urban centres during the pandemic have allowed them to restore themselves organically – showing us that we have to tread more lightly on the environment. For once, the focus has shifted from people to nature so that it has a chance to recover from years of abuse.

All of this has come at a great price, no doubt, but Covid-19 has also shown us what we need to do for a sustainable lifestyle to reduce anthropogenic carbon and the burden on nature. If we focus away from the negative impact the pandemic has had on us, and redirect it to the nature around us, we see many positive outcomes that also have beneficial effects on our own lives.

We have started focusing more on relationships because earlier

most of us were too busy to find the time to do so. We have begun communicating more with family and friends. The pandemic also offers us a chance to rethink our lives, and our purpose.

We have started consuming less because we realised that we do not need as much as we thought. There have been significant changes in consumer behaviour that have been good for the planet just because we use, and waste, less.

The world is recovering from years of damage that we were so disrespectfully placing on the planet's resources. In Nepal, we have seen signs of the ecosystem starting to rebalance itself. The question is whether government policies will reflect this in the coming years.

It is terrible what Covid-19 has done to the world, but it has also shown us how to improve the planet's health, and with it, the human condition. We desperately want to get back to our everyday lives, but being isolated has reminded us that even if we go back to the way we lived, we have to be mindful of our impact on the planet.

We can rebuild the economy, but the damage humans are inflicting on nature is irreversible. The pandemic provides the chance to take action to restructure the way we live. 🇳🇵

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

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*शर्तहरू लागू हुनेछन् ।

Nepal's epidemic of hunger

Malnutrition among Nepali children pre-dates Covid-19, but the pandemic has made it worse



● Anita Bhetwal in Mohattari

There are 34 households in Mohattari's Anaita neighbourhood, most of them have at least four children each. In the last three years, three children in the community have died due to complications from the lack of food.

Raju Devi Sada first lost her three-year-old daughter, a week after she caught pneumonia and diarrhoea, already weakened by malnutrition.

"We spent quite a bit of money for her treatment in hospital, but we couldn't save her," says Raju Devi, wiping a tear with the hem of her sari. A year later, she gave birth to another daughter. But she died soon after being born.

"I don't even know why she died," says Raju Devi, who is now raising her third daughter.

The little girl is underweight and local health workers have recommended nutritious food. But Raju Devi cannot afford the vegetables, eggs, milk and meat, and what she earns as a daily wage labourer is barely enough to feed the rest of the family.

"What we make is not sufficient to pay for food, let alone medicines," adds Raju Devi, looking at her youngest girl, who reminds her so much of the other two daughters who did not make it. "A mother never forgets her children, even if they are dead."

Hunger has always stalked the land here in the backwaters of the eastern plains of Nepal. State neglect, inequality and injustice



have unleashed a vicious cycle where families are too poor to eat enough, which makes them sick, and having to spend on medical treatment drives them deeper into poverty and that means they can afford less food.

The first and second waves of the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in these districts bordering India before it spread across Nepal. Four months of lockdown in 2020, and two months so far this year have meant that subsistence farmers like Raju Devi's family have lost what little they could earn to buy extra food for the children.

At the nearby Manorasisuwa neighbourhood, Sagar Devi Sada spends her day caring for her grandchildren, both of them visibly malnourished. Her eldest grandson is four-and-half years old and is so weak he cannot even stand on his feet. He has poor eyesight and is mute, but the family can afford neither more food nor treatment.

A few weeks ago, a community



health worker gave Sagar Devi some packets of the supplementary food, Balvita, but she has run out of those by now.

"We built this house, but we haven't paid our loans, we don't have money for anything else, it's up to the gods now," says Sagar Devi in a resigned voice. "Their father makes some money but

doesn't provide for them, and their mother abandoned them. If not for me, these boys would be dead."

In Manorasisuwa alone, 17 children have so far been diagnosed with severe malnutrition. And this is just one neighbourhood of one village in Nepal -- a microcosm of what is happening across the country during this pandemic.

Even before this crisis, the lack of food was already the biggest cause of childhood illness and death, and parts of Nepal have rates of malnutrition that are highest in the world. Complications due to malnutrition cause more than half the childhood deaths in the country, according to a UNICEF report.

In addition to the risk of losing their lives, children with malnutrition have stunted physical and mental growth, are severely underweight, and their immune system is compromised.

Nepal's hunger hotspots are these districts in Province 2, and Sudur Paschim Province in Nepal's far-western mountains. The 2019 Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster survey found that 41% of children in Sudur Paschim Province are short for their age, and 34% of children in Province 2 are similarly stunted. The survey showed that a third of Nepali children show signs of stunting due to lack of food, and 12% are wasted, and 24% low weight.

"We have found that up to 70% of children who die every year in Province 2 do so due to malnutrition, and the main reason for that is extreme poverty," says Kedar Parajuli at Nepal's Family Welfare Division. "Without alleviating poverty, we can't solve malnutrition. And to do that these families need more land to farm, or a means of livelihood."

But malnutrition is not just about food availability. Many children even from better off families suffer from poor nutrition because of chronic diarrhoea caused by contaminated water, poor sanitation and hygiene.

In October 2019, amidst much fanfare, Nepal was officially declared the first open defecation-free country in South Asia. But here in Ramdaiya village of Dhanusha district that is noticeably not true.

There are 150 households from the Musahar community in the village, and half of them have

Nepal's local governments lead from the front

The elected village heads in Khotang join the Covid-19 frontlines

● Masta KC

Sabitra Devkota of Diphung Chuichumma rural municipality in Khotang had been isolating at home for four days after testing positive for Covid-19 in late May when she fell unconscious. There was no one to take her to hospital.

Devkota's relatives informed Diphung Chuichumma rural municipality Chair Bhupendra Rai about her situation. Rai immediately drove to Devkota's house and took her to hospital himself.

Devkota is one of many Covid-positive residents of this village in Khotang district of eastern Nepal whom Chairperson Rai has helped this month. With the vice-chair Sapana Rai, the two leaders have been actively on the frontlines as the deadly second Covid wave that has battered the country's urban hubs sweeps across rural Nepal.

Out of 300 Covid-19 PCR tests done in the village, 93 came back positive last month. And as cases began to rise, the only ambulance operating within the municipality was unable to attend



DIPHUNG CHUICHUMMA RURAL MUNICIPALITY



Chair Bhupendra Rai in full PPE assists a Covid-19 patient get to hospital in his office car. Bhupendra Rai (left) and Deputy Chair Sapana Rai of Diphung Chuichumma Municipality in Khotang.

to the increased number of calls. So Bhupendra Rai donned a PPE and turned his official vehicle into an ambulance. He now drives Covid-infected patients to hospital himself, spending more time on the road than he does at his desk.

Inaccessibility to roads in some areas of the municipality means that

Rai's vehicle sometimes cannot reach near enough for people to walk to. When that happens, Rai goes into their homes and carries them out to his vehicle himself.

He has to be hands-on, he explains, in order to reduce the risk of the infected person's family members being exposed to the

virus. "I wear a PPE and masks at all times, so the chances of me contracting the virus are relatively less than when relatives come in contact with infected people while helping them," says Rai.

Vice-chair Sapana Rai has been equally involved in the efforts, working with Bhupendra Rai to provide aid to Covid-positive residents, take people to get antigen tests at the temporary Covid hospital, and arrange for isolation facilities depending on the severity of individual Covid cases.

The municipality has set up a 25-bed isolation centre with supplemental oxygen. "Asymptomatic individuals are told to isolate at home," explains Bhupendra Rai, "while those who show serious symptoms are kept in this isolation facility." The two village leaders have also been coordinating to send critically ill Covid-19 patients for treatment to Kathmandu, Dhulikhel or Charikot.

Testing has also been ramped up across each tole to manage the spread of the virus before the situation gets out of hand. In fact, as health workers go door-to-door conducting antigen tests, Rai is usually right alongside them. "I have been accompanying health workers to keep the morale up," he says.

So far, 14 patients in the municipality have recovered from the disease during the second

wave. Khotang is among the few districts in Nepal not under prohibitory orders. As such, the local government has advised Diphung Chuichumma residents to stay home unless strictly necessary to go outside.

Additionally, they have tightened security measures, putting out an order that requires anyone entering the municipality from outside to have a negative test report.

The local government has also been actively pushing out campaigns on Covid prevention. "We have been providing support to Covid-positive individuals while simultaneously running awareness programmes across the municipality," says vice-chair Sapana Rai.

Meanwhile, constant exposure to the virus has meant that Bhupendra Rai has not come in close contact with his own family in a month. Rai is diligent about showering and disinfecting when he gets home from work every day. He stays and takes his meals in a separate room, and doesn't venture into the kitchen or to where his family gathers.

Rai believes in leading from the front. "Now is not the time for us to give out orders to others while we stay in a bubble of safety," he says. "We were elected to serve the people. If we unite now to fight this virus, there will be brighter days ahead." 🇳🇵

malnourished children. None of them have a proper latrine, with villagers using nearby fields. The village pond is used for drinking, washing, bathing and cleaning utensils, as well as a buffalo wallow.

But Ramdaiya was declared open defecation-free two years ago after distributing toilet sets to all the wards. No latrines were built.

Sri Narayan Sada is daily wage labour, and has a family of seven but no land. His two-year-old son is scrawny, and has all the symptoms of severe malnutrition: frequent diarrhoea, swollen stomach and skeletal limbs. “I don’t know what’s wrong with my son, only the gods know,” he says.

Assistant health worker Aruna Yadav says the child is underweight and is mentally retarded. She says the father earns Rs500 a day but spends half of it on alcohol, the rest goes to buy food, but it is not enough for the whole family.

Poverty, hunger, patriarchy, caste and gender discrimination make a dangerous concoction in these villages. As a result, most girls are married before pubescence. By the time the severely undernourished girls are in their mid-teens, they have already given birth to their first child – making it risky for both mother and baby.

The young mothers have never been taught about taking care of their health, or that of their children. Most do not know the kind of diet and supplements that pregnant and lactating mothers need, and even if they did, cannot afford them.

The Nepal government is supposed to provide Rs400 per Dalit family as a ‘nutrition allowance’. But the families in Ramdaiya in Dhanusa and Monorasisuwa in Mahottari interviewed for this report had not got even that paltry amount for the past two years because they did not

know how to work the system.

The government also implemented a Multi-sector Nutrition Plan to revive a successful program that saw dramatic strides in the last 20 years in raising family food intake the first two decades before the progress stalled. But the plan has got tangled up over jurisdiction under Nepal’s new federal structure.

If things were not serious enough, the Covid-19 pandemic has set back even the few inroads Nepal had made in tackling malnutrition. According to the Nepal Planning Commission, last year’s pandemic-induced lockdowns pushed 4% of Nepalis back below the poverty line.

A recent John Hopkins School of Public Health study concluded that severe malnutrition during the pandemic could kill up to 4,000 children under five a year in Nepal due to insufficient food caused by lost family income.

This is already visible at the community level. Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres across Nepal is seeing an alarming rise in severely malnourished cases, much higher than the yearly average.

“We recently admitted five cases of underweight children with very severe malnutrition, we rarely used to see such children,” says Karuna Yadav at a Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre in Janakpur. “And these are just cases that come to us, we have not even conducted camps or gone house-to-house yet.”

There are 21 centres like this one in Janakpur that treat severe malnutrition across Nepal, but they are not easily accessible to poorer families who usually live out of the way.

The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require Nepal to reduce wasting to less than 5% by 2030. Stunting needs to be well below 15% in 10 years

to meet the global target. Even the little progress Nepal has made in this regard is now jeopardised by the pandemic.

Says Kedarraj Parajuli of the Family Welfare Division. “Given inter-generational nature of malnutrition, we are focusing on what we call the 1,000 golden days after birth by promoting supplementary food and creating awareness.”

But it is easy to see that malnutrition is a structural problem that has deep political and socio-economic factors that are rooted in poor governance, corruption and ingrained cultural inequities. A piecemeal approach that just addresses nutrition, sanitation, environment and development must be replaced with more accountable national, provincial and local government. But given the chronic political instability and lack of political will, that is a tall order.

Says nutrition policy expert Atmaram Pandey: “Nepal doesn’t lack resources, but they are taken up by a faulty development model that wastes it all on view towers and unnecessary roads. Nepal’s chronic malnutrition can only be reduced with a more responsive state that generates jobs so the poorest have more money to buy food for their children.”



Follow Himalmedia's *Saglo Samaj* tv magazine crew to Dhanusha and Mahottari districts in Nepal's Tarai where children in most families suffer from chronic malnutrition. Watch what the locals have to say and what do the experts recommend for this chronic national problem. *Saglo Samaj* is aired on DishHome Channel 130 every Monday evening at 8:30pm.

Half of Nepalis lost jobs

More than half of Nepal’s employed people have lost their jobs in the past month, according to the result of a nationwide survey.

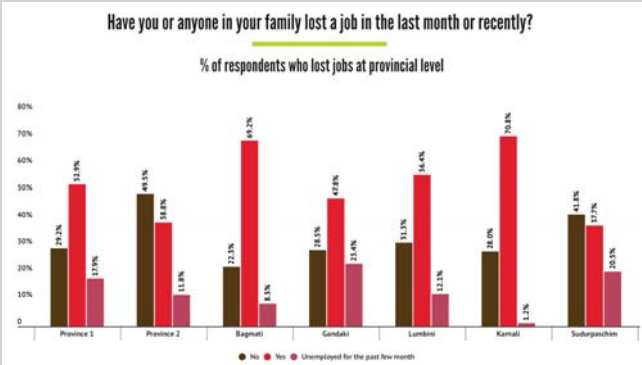
Agriculture and tourism were the two sectors most seriously affected by unemployment, while those depending on casual work incurred significant income loss which ultimately affected the socio-economic wellbeing of children and their families.

‘Most families may have been forced to reduce food intake and essential expenses, including nutrition and education for children. About 99% of the families reported receiving no support to stave off the

third of households had access to distance learning. Most Nepali children did not have access to distant learning for the past year.

The lack of work has also reduced child labour. While 31% of households said their children worked before lockdown, this dropped to 8% during the closures. Last year’s surveys showed, however, that in 20% of households children were back to working to augment family income after the lockdown ended.

‘This implies that while the lockdown contributed to a significant reduction in child labour, children are most likely to start work to help their families cope with the economic struggles,’ Sharecast says.



hardship,’ says a report on the results of the rapid assessment survey.

The poll was conducted by Sharecast Initiative Nepal with support from UNICEF Nepal during end-May 2021, and involved interviews with 3,000 households with families. The survey showed that job and income losses were most severe in Bagmati and Karnali Provinces.

The previous survey results had shown that the loss of jobs and livelihoods was down from 61% in July 2020 and 55% in May 2020 to 19% in January 2021. However, the job losses appear to have climbed steeply again, corresponding with the Covid-19 second wave peak in Nepal.

The results show that one in every five families had to reduce the quantity of meals their children ate, or had to change the variety of food intake. Children in only one-

Using the results of the tracking survey, UNICEF Nepal is implementing an emergency cash transfer scheme in response to the emerging needs of more than 10,000 children. But this is just the tip of the iceberg, and there are many more children in need.

The surveys show that the health, education and nutrition of children in families depending on daily wages and those who have lost incomes and jobs are being most adversely affected. UNICEF Nepal has welcomed the government’s decision to expand its Child Grant Program to 33% of vulnerable households.

The survey shows that the lockdown has been a serious setback for a vast segment of society, and there has been little or no government response. It shows the need for universal state assistance to citizens for jobs and income.

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Anti-corruption vaccine

Politics, being the world's oldest profession, has been honed into a fine art — and nowhere more so than in Nepal. What is less well appreciated is the contribution some of us presstitutes have made to elevate the stature and prestige of Nepali politics to the level it has attained at this point in time.

What has also not got as much attention is the vital role that corruption has played, and continues to play, in politics. Without it the wheels of government would grind to a halt. After all, graft lubricates the rusty machinery of the bureaucracy, greases the process of deal-making, and allows the country to chug along despite being, for all practical purposes, a flailing state.

Nepal's consistently high ranking in the Ease of Doing Business Index is proof of the role that malfeasance has always played in allowing swift decision-making on iffy investment proposals, speeding up bargaining, demarcating a clear chain of command that goes right to the top, and enforcing a one-window policy that cuts through red tape to facilitate under-the-table transactions.

However, now that Nepal is graduating from Least Developed Country status to a Last-but-not-Least Developed Country by 2025, we will be bound by international treaties to clean up our governance apparatus. It is a pity that we have fixed what ain't broke, but we will reluctantly have to find antidotes to corruption. To this task, we have to roll our loins and gird up our sleeves, and there is no room for competency. 2025 is only two-and-half years away, and time is of the essence if we are to move higher up in the Translucency International Index, even if it means bribing them to do it.

By now, we have tried just about

everything to stop corruption, but we have been half-hearted. We passed laws to outlaw bribes, and that just drove the business underground. We set up the CIAA, but had to investigate the investigators. We sent our taxmen on junkets to Singapore so they could learn a thing or two about clean government, but they returned with 3 duty-free bottles of Old Smuggler each, and bribed their way through the Metal Free X-ray machines at the airport. We gave them salary hikes, but that just jacked up their cuts.

Now, with advances in genetic engineering, there is hope. Complete genome sequencing allows us to pinpoint the exact genes for greed. Politicians genetically susceptible to purloining public funds can now be detected before they stand for elections, and can be debarred from contesting public office.

Also, since we have hit a dead-end on Covid vaccines, we might have better luck with getting the international community to donate anti-corruption vaccines so we can inoculate members of the executive and legislative branches, as well as the judiciary. The media will also be on the priority list, since we are a high-risk group at the frontlines.

KleptoVax will come in 2 doses. The first one is an antidote to petty bribes, graft and general crookedness. The second dose allows the body to develop antigens against nepotism, cronyism and Maoism. It is only after 70% of politicians get jabbed will they attain herd impunity.

Since there is great demand for KleptoVax in neighbouring countries, the government will have to buy it directly from manufacturers. The delay is due to a dispute over a non-disclosure agreement on kickbacks.



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