Class divide

Third grader Sona Lama lives in the uplands of Ramara and has not been to school for more than a year. But since Nepal Telecom built a cellphone tower on a nearby peak, there is now 3G connection — enough for her to attend class on her mobile phone.

Her teachers have partnered with a school in Kathmandu that offers volunteers to guide students like Sona to use Google Classroom or Zoom, and also offer tuition so they can catch up with school work.

"This is no substitute to going to an actual school and meeting friends and teachers face-to-face, of course, but at least the online classes partly make up for the disruption, and have introduced the students to new technology," says Samata Regmi, herself a Grade 12 student in Kathmandu, who mentors Sona and others like her.

Regmi lists many challenges: the network often goes off in the middle of class, video calls use too much bandwidth, and children have to share space with families and are frequently distracted by household chores.

"Many parents are out of work, so the children have to help at home, and it is difficult to get them to concentrate. They have very short attention spans on screen," adds Regmi, who despite the challenges, is glad to be helping children in remote areas with remote learning.

Sona Lama shares her mobile with three other older siblings, and since the tower brought data internet it is now in high demand for browsing TikTok videos and Facebook as well. Still, she is luckier than most Nepali children — a recent survey showed that 80% of students have neither been to school since March 2020, nor do they have access to classes online or by radio.

There was a class divide among Nepal’s 6 million school students even before Covid-19. But there is now also a digital divide that has widened the gap between private and government schools. While most urban private schools have been conducting classes quite smoothly, government schools have had less success because their students are from poorer families.

The Annapurna School in Biratnagar trained its teachers using online tools, but only half the students are attending digital classes. In a survey, it found out why of the school’s 700 students, less than 20% had wifi and only 10% could access mobile data.

Even after Yadav School in Lalitpur offered to pay data fees for mobiles of students to take online classes, only half the children did. The parent body of the school is mainly made up of daily wage earners.

Mangal Prasad School in Nepalganj has been encouraging its children to also get online so they can catch up with missed school. Says teacher Sandhya Sharma: "Those who are attending digital classrooms are doing well, we are happy with their progress. But I am sorry to say that there are many who have just not been logging on."

As the second wave crests, the government has eased lockdown. In Kathmandu Valley schools are preparing to reopen even as public health experts warn of a second peak in the second wave as the Delta variant spreads among the unvaccinated.

Lessons not learnt from the pandemic
**Parliamentary whiplash**

We will finally know in 12 July the fate of the dissolved legislature, whether or not K P Oli will stay as prime minister, if Sher Bahadur Deuba becomes prime minister for the fifth time in 20 years, or if Nepal has to vote in early elections in November.

After two weeks of deliberations, on 12 July the Supreme Court's Constitutional bench is set to decide on Nepal's political crisis challenging Prime Minister Oli's dissolution of the Lower House and President Bidya Devi Bhandari's conformation of leadership bids by both Deuba and Oli on 21 May.

Throughout the submissions by petitioners and government lawyers, depositions by the four members of the amicus curiae, as well as questions from the bench, the deliberation boiled down to this: in a multi-party democracy, will those who have more legitimacy in a floor test than a non-party individual vote? MP's from a ruling party would cast a confidence vote against Deuba, and even backed by a majority of opposition leaders to replace their own prime minister.

There were spirited arguments by lawyers from both sides. The petitioners went beyond consulting Oli to accuse President Bhandari of complicity and failing to dutifully perform her duties or the Constitution. From a collective effort to change the situation to ambition to clinch on to power.

Both Oli and his main challenger, former prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, have claimed that their actions were constitutional, and it was the other side that is acting against its letter and spirit.

The Constitutional Bench itself was formed last month on the basis of seniority by Chief Justice Cholendra Shumraj Rana and Bench members Gyanendra Karki, Anand Mohan Bhattarai, Mira Khiljana, Subbar Prasad Khadka.

We have no way of guessing which argument the individual justices will favour, but if some of its recent judgments are any indication, Prime Minister Oli is likely to win.

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"[The Supreme Court's] verdict will set the stage for a new, transparent and accountable political system in Nepal. We are hopeful that this will mark the beginning of a new chapter in our country's political history."

*Kiran Joshi, Nepal's Speaker of Parliament*

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Vaccines too little, too late for Nepal?

Only effective and equitable mass vaccination will save Nepal from a possible third wave

There is breaking news every other day: the United States donates 2 million Moderna shots to Bangladesh and Pakistan. Denmark announces its donation of 500,000 Astrazeneca doses to Bhutan. Japan pledges surplus AZ vaccines to Sri Lanka and the Pacific Islands.

Nepal is no news in the news, even though 1.4 million people still wait for their second doses of Covishield AZ vaccines and another 20 million people need to be inoculated before a possible third wave this year. So far, Nepal has only been gifted or bought vaccines from India, China or the COVAX initiative. It has not even got 1 million vaccines from Serum Institute of India that it paid for, and all others promised from western countries were never kept.

Nepal’s vaccine diplomacy has failed miserably. And the only silver lining is that there are four million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm VeroCell starting this week to immediately inoculate its above 55 population. Nepal is still recording an excess of 2,000 new cases a day and is seeing a slight daily increase following the relaxation of travel restrictions.

Everyone, the public and the government, seems to have forgotten that the real peak during the first wave last year took place only after this lockdown was eased.

“The third wave is already on its way, our figures are going up and we must assume we will be hit by new variants,” says Budhika Banskota, a physician at Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS). “We must vaccinate our people as quickly as possible, or we will not get more difficult variants that are potentially resistant to the vaccines.”

In other news, the Oxford Vaccine Group which developed the AstraZeneca (AZ) vaccine has found that administering two doses 44-45 weeks produced the highest antibody boost. This news, announced on 15th June by one of the developers of the AZ, is glad tidings for countries like Nepal where people above 60 are waiting for their second doses.

Pollard said antibody levels remained elevated for close to a year with a ten-month gap between AZ doses, as well as antibody levels twice that after the second dose among volunteers who were administered a third booster dose, pointing to a long-term, potentially lifelong immunity, also against variants.

“This is great news for the elderly, many of whom are packing, unable to get their second dose in the recommended time-frame. The additional time the study has afforded us should lend to our efforts to institute a second shot,” says Sher Bahadur Pun, an epidemiologist at Sukhraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital.

Norway, Czech Republic and Denmark have unsealed AZ shots they want to donate to Nepal, but have been forced to go through COVAX, which is unlikely to deliver the doses before the end of 2021. On 1 July, Denmark announced that it would donate 250,000 vaccines to Bhutan.

However, it is understood that these grants still need to be facilitated by the EU.

Also, in the news this week is the result of a new modelling study published in the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control’s medical journal Eurosurveillance that further strengthens the link between AZ vaccines and a rare blood clot.

The study models four months of a vaccine distribution strategy in France from May 2021 and concludes that using AZ on the entire adult population would avert 18 deaths from Covid among 38-39-year-olds. However, it would be associated with 21 deaths from blood clots to the same age group over the same time period.

In other words, clot risk to younger people from the AZ vaccine is twice as high as Covid death risk. But public health experts in Nepal maintain that the benefit of mass vaccination still far outweighs the risk.

“Similar studies in the context of the South Asian population are needed but as it is, transmission risk of Covid is much higher than the individual risk of blood clots here,” says epidemiologist Lhamo Yangthang Sherpa.

Buddhika Banskota of PAHS concurs: “The UK with over half of its population fully vaccinated is now being hit by the delta variant, although it has been largely spared from severity due to mass inoculation. Nepal being mostly unvaccinated is unprotected both from transmissions and severity. This should show us where our priority should lie.”

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control finding about clot risk therefore could indirectly be a blessing in disguise for countries like Nepal by further freeing up AZ stocks in Europe, as well as Korea and Japan.

Even so, blood clot risk has prompted leaders including Germany’s Angela Markel to opt for Moderna as a booster shot for their first doses of AZ jab.

Several EU countries including Germany have said mix-and-match vaccines are safe for Covid prevention, which according to new findings also point to a better immune response. This could offer much-needed flexibility when vaccine supplies are uneven or limited.

“We need to introduce mixing something also in Nepal in the face of mass. More delta variants, particularly for the elderly who are at the higher risk of developing severity from an infection, instead of waiting endlessly for Covishield,” says Banskota.

At a time when Nepal is yet to recover from a devastating second surge, only an equitable vaccination strategy will prevent an even more deadly third wave. But a mere 2.9% of Nepal’s population has been fully vaccinated, and less than 10% has received a single dose of either Covishield or VeroCell shots. And even the doses are unevenly distributed within the country. More than 90% of the first dose of VeroCell was distributed in Bagmati province, according to the government’s own figures. More than 80% of the booster jabs of VeroCell were used only in Bagmati province.

“We are seeing a similar kind of disparity in vaccination that we saw the second wave. More in urban centres and in particular Katmandu,” notes epidemiologist Lhamo Yangthang Sherpa. “The excuse for using most of the doses in Katmandu is that people outside refused to inoculate. If that’s the case what is the government doing to do stop vaccine myths?”

Virologist She Bahadur Pun says Nepal should immediately deploy its 60,000 or so female community health workers and health workers who have historically done such effective work in non-Covid childhood vaccination drives.

He adds: “They are spread across the country and are very well placed to communicate the significance of vaccination and reduce hesitations among at-risk groups.”

— Sonia Awale

**International tourism**

The Tourism Promotion Organization (TPO) Nepal is revising its international travel policy, which permits 25% of international arrivals, as the government has been advising its citizens against non-essential travel abroad. Restrictions with the international learning mission have some of the lowest levels of vaccinations, establishing a link between the speed of mass inoculation and easing of restrictions.

“Governments are instrumental for the restart and recovery of tourism through collaboration, use of data and digital solutions,” says NTO Secretary-General Laxmi Prakash Koirala.

**Khalti collaborations**

Khalti and digital cross-border payment company WorldRemit has launched a service which will allow anyone to receive money from more than 50 countries directly to their Khalti app and get a Rupee bonus every time in doing so.

The digital wallet app has also launched ‘Vault’, the Shikshya Yatanak campagne for students and educators. The learning platform and study app will get a new laptop each, four summ-ups will receive Rs 50,000 in their Khalti account.

**Election budget**

The Finance Ministry has allocated Rs 70 billion for the election of the House of Representatives to be held in two phases and slated for 12 and 19 November. The budget will cover operation, maintenance and equipment items. However, the Supreme Court has not yet ruled on the bill to retain the “striped” budget.

**Ban on mothers migrating**

Circa May 2021, 10,000+ women were seen on the border to travel abroad for foreign employment from 15 July. According to the law, Rs 25,000 will be levied on each woman. The Ministry of Labour will announce its action. In the first time a local government has ruled using the age of 12 as criteria.

**Discontinue expands service**

Discontinue’s Farmer Network expansion has now started service in Jhapa and Surkhet. Presently, Discontinue offers 30, 40, 60 and 100 Magspecies out its 90 plant planning to launch 300 Magspecies soon.

**NIBL Fund**

The NIBL Ace Capital (PCL) has launched a participative fund structure to encourage customers to retain the second year of its operation. News for the scheme

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**OPPO awarded**

OPPO took home 12 awards at the Computer Union and Partner Recognition Conference (OPPY) 2021. It received first-placed award, second-placed award and three third place awards in categories MultiAgent Behavior, AI-Konesia and 3D Face Reconstruction from multiple 3D images.

**National**

**Times**

— Prabha Bank
Lessons not learned from the pandemic

Nepal has squandered another opportunity to fix a defective education system

Dhurba Basnet

Over the past year-and-a-half, concerns about lockdowns, economic collapse, limited healthcare and shortage of vaccines have taken centre stage. Almost forgettable are millions of Nepali children who have been out of school for that long. Except for a few weeks earlier this year, there have been no classes since March. Meanwhile, the government and the Ministry of Education have been behind a flag-leaf of remote classes, when surveys have shown that 80% of children do not have any access to classes online or offline.

After the first wave, there was enough time to ensure wide connectivity for public schools at least in urban centres, and prepare for alternative methods of teaching such as remote radio, tv classes and Zoom lectures.

None of that was done. Instead, there was a blanket shutdown of schools nationwide, even in sparsely populated mountain districts with negligible Covid-19 spread where classes could easily have been held with mandatory masks and physical distancing.

Nepal is a federal state, the decision to open or close schools should be a matter for local governments, but Kathmandu forced schools nationwide to close. This has resulted in unnecessary loss for students,” says former education secretary Mahashram Sharma.

Before the Covid-19 crisis, students used to have 180 days of school. Attending class with fellow students and interacting with teachers was an essential part of their upbringing and personality development.

The lack of physical classes and face-to-face learning have meant that even students who are attending online classes have suffered. But a majority of students, especially in government schools, have not had any online classes.

Most urban private schools have been conducting online classes for more than a year, teachers and students adjusting and learning to the new online interface as they go. But Nepal’s distant rural children have also created an education divide. Most of the government school children have not attended classes online or otherwise. Even if they have mobile phones there is not enough bandwidth for digital classes.

“We tried everything from Zoom, Facebook messenger and Google Meet to Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams. We also trained our teachers to conduct classes online,” says Bikut Lall Tamang, Principal of Annapurna School in Lalitpur. “But barely 50% of our students attended their classes, the number was much lower for lower grades.”

Annupurna School later surveyed its 750 students to find out how many of them had access to the internet or electronic devices. Less than 20% had internet at home, and only 10% could access data via smartphones. And this is in a city in Chitwan with fairly good infrastructure.

All 340 students at Yasadra Barsha School in Lalitpur are from rural areas, mostly children of either daily wage labourers or who work as household help. They gave their meagre earnings to parents and even before the pandemic did not even have enough money for stationary and uniforms.

“Alternative learning is just not possible for us, and our experience is that online classes do not work in government schools, attendance was very low despite the free data scheme for the students,” says Yasadra’s assistant principal Dina Shrestha.

If that is the situation in Kathmandu Valley, it cannot be much better elsewhere. At the Mingal Pardah Secondary School in Nepalgunj, teachers have tried online and radio classes for its students who come from 16 districts of western Nepal. But many of the pupils have been out of touch for the past year. They have tried to keep in touch for students who are still in contact with us, but it is a small proportion of the total student body,” admits Sandhya Sharma, a teacher at the school.

There was a class divide in Nepal’s education even before Covid-19. The pandemic just widened the gap between urban, rural, private-government, rich-poor.

There are six million students enrolled in schools across the country, a majority of them in government or community schools. Educationists had told the government that the pandemic actually offered an opportunity to upgrade IT facilities in classrooms, train teachers in online interaction, and narrow the digital divide.

A second year in a row, schools have not been able to hold Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) and have allowed teachers to conduct internal assessments. But in many schools students have not attended neither online nor physical classes.

The second wave is creating in Nepal but public health experts are already asking the government to prepare for a possible third wave of the pandemic in which new coronavirus strains put children at risk, and there is not even a WHO-approved vaccine for those under 18.

Experts say that since the second wave has peaked, focus should now shift to resuming physical classes in areas with minimum Covid-19 spread, while maintaining strict mask wearing with distancing in well-ventilated classrooms where possible. Elsewhere, schools should upgrade their technical and teaching capacity for online classes, and equip students with devices and connectivity.

The Education Ministry should have already done all these things, of course, but ministries have changed so often in the past two years due to political turmoil that there is no continuity.

Children in Nepal have missed 63 weeks of school, whereas even countries worst affected by the pandemic like India and Brazil have had fewer weeks of classes (36) and 33 weeks respectively.

Devolution for education

Kanak Mani Dixit of Himal Media’s tv magazine Segbo Samjy interviewed former education secretary Mahashram Sharma about the role of local governments in revamping Nepal’s education sector post-Covid. Excerpts:

Kanak Mani Dixit: The gap between private and public schools is increasing, more so after the pandemic. How worrying is that?

Mahashram Sharma: From 2000-2015, the world over, the focus was on increasing school enrolment, especially of girls. Nepal did well on score, but not so much on quality. We have not prepared our education sector for times of crisis like this. Private schools are more accountable to parents and students, but government schools do not have a system to incentivize teacher performance. Until that happens, quality will not improve.

But quality was supposed to improve after federalism put education under the purview of local governments. This is a textbook case of being given rights, but not resources. Local governments are woefully under-funded. A few municipalities have education experts. At the end of the day, just devolving responsibility doesn’t solve anything. The focus should be on capacity-building and empowering local governments.

Can the pandemic be an opportunity to rebuild our education sector?

We have been lagging in information technology, and the pandemic could kickstart a campaign to set up computer labs and connectivity in all schools. Digital instruction is the way forward, and the pandemic may spur our acceptance of that fact, even if we eventually get back to the physical classroom.

But it looks like the pandemic has actually widened the digital divide.

Yes, and that is precisely why the government should be playing a leadership role to implement plans to help poor and disadvantaged children with resources. Local governments should take the first step, and make an inventory of electronic devices and connectivity of each family at the local level and plan accordingly.

Why did we have to close all schools during the pandemic?

First and foremost, education is not on the agenda of local governments. What made matters worse was the blanket closure by the central government just before the lockdown. I was in Manag, Lamjung and Syangja, they had no Covid fears. Yet schools had been closed for months.

The centre is responsible for developing policies but the management of schools is up to the local governments, they just need to be facilitated, especially when it comes to community schools.
Letting go of Sikkim’s ghost
Learning from history, Nepal must ensure domestic stability to strengthen its sovereignty

Ajay Pradhan

Nearly half a century after the overthrow of Palden Thondup Namgyal, the 12th and last Chogyal of Sikkim and India’s formal annexation of the tiny kingdom, the ghost of Sikkim still haunts the surrounding Himalayan states. Today, there are frequent dark references by media commentators to New Delhi’s plans for the ‘Sikkimisation of Nepal’ as well.

Sikkim was the smallest of the three Himalayan kingdoms, sandwiched between Nepal and Bhutan to the west and east, and between China and India to the north and south. Its location magnified its strategic importance. Although it was a sovereign country, after Indian independence in 1947, Sikkim (like Bhutan) had ceded to New Delhi authority over three important state affairs: defence, foreign relations and communication.

After the British left India, a treaty signed on 12 December, 1950 (within hours) gave Sikkim a special protectorate status, maintaining the kingdom’s independence under the Chogyal, the king. However, the Chogyal began to show an increasing desire to chart an independent course in foreign relations for his country. When India’s Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru became prime minister of India in 1949, she showed little patience for the Chogyal’s authority, and even less tolerance for Sikkim’s desire for increased independence.

Internal political turmoil in Sikkim eventually gave India the pretext to wrest power from the Chogyal and install its own administrative head to rule the country in 1975. The Chogyal wanted to renegotiate the 1950 Treaty between Sikkim and India, and made attempts to establish independent foreign relations. Sikkim’s government was especially suspicious of the Chogyal’s American-born wife, Hope Cooke, and the influence she had on him. She was suspicious of Sikkim’s unusually large new embassy building in New Delhi’s diplomatic quarter.

Then, in March 1975, the Chogyal and Queen Hope travelled to Kathmandu to attend King Birendra’s coronation, and even met Chinese and Pakistani leaders who were also attending. Moreover, while in Kathmandu, the Chogyal attended a conference in Lumbini, denouncing India as a hurdle in Sikkim’s attempts to raise its international stature. The Chogyal instantly became even more of a liability of India’s elite

The Chogyal’s desire to break out of India’s influence was audacious. But at a time when he needed to show up public support within Sikkim to stand up to India, Sikkim’s ethnic Nepali origin who made up 75% of the population were against him.

Several political organisations, especially the Sikkim National Congress led by Kazi Lhendup Dorji and Sikkim National Party had widespread support from Sikkimese Nepalis. They demanded greater political freedom and preferred to put emphasis on the country’s development. Three days after the Chogyal returned to Gangtok from Kathmandu, the Indian Army surrounded his palace on 8 April 1975. New Delhi then stage-managed a referendum to let the Sikkimese people decide whether the country should remain independent, or be assimilated into India. This result was a foregone conclusion.

Ironically, Sikkim’s ethnic Nepali majority voted overwhelmingly in favour of Sikkim’s assimilation with India rather than for an independent kingdom. The reign of King Palden Thondup Namgyal, the Chogyal, came to an end and Sikkim became India’s 22nd state on April 26, 1975.

Kazi Lhendup Dorji became the first Chief Minister of the new Indian state of Sikkim. To this day, politicians in Nepal pricked to be close to New Delhi swiftly earn the ‘Lhendup Dorji’ label in the media.

For Nepal, in Nepal, however, India’s annexation evoked deep-seated fears that New Delhi could plan something similar. Unlike Nepal in Sikkim, Nepal in Kathmandu staged street demonstrations against India, calling the referendum a charade.

Big Brother
India has boomed large right through recent Nepali history. Nepali politicians have found Indo-bashing to be a potent tool during elections to drum up nationalist support. And India has often obliged by behaving like Big Brother.

After the first Constituent Assembly abolished Nepal’s monarchy in 2008, there were murmurs of India’s grand design. Those views grew louder when Nepal’s first Vice President Purna Prakash Shumsher, a member of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MFP) took his oath of office in Hindi.

The MFP itself emerged as a credible political force, a power broker and kingmaker, and there was widespread belief in Kathmandu that it was New Delhi’s pawn. India was accused of using its influence on Nepal’s Madhusthat population, just as it had used Nepali-speaking to foment unrest in Sikkim half-a-century earlier.

The activities of successive Indian ambassadors and attaches were minutely followed by the media, which reported on their arrival and fist-like meetings with Nepali politicians. The envos appeared to have direct access to parliaments in breach of diplomatic norms, and the press had a field day covering what it saw as New Delhi’s meddling.

Given Nepal’s overwhelming economic dependence on India, and the history of New Delhi’s heavy-handedness in its neighborhood, paranoia about Indian intentions is understandable. But it is a

bit of a stretch to fear faces of an imminent ‘Sikkimisation’ of Nepal. Nepal’s modern foreign policy history is starkly different from the Chogyal’s Sikkim, and the country’s geostrategic situation has much stronger shock value than Sikkim ever did. Nepal shares a substantially longer border with India than China and its Tibetan Autonomous Region, providing both neighbouring countries to the north and the south a strategic geopolitical buffer.

The very fact that a neutral Nepal allows both China and India not to have to deploy the kind of military presence as they have amassed (Nepal) to (India) in Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh means huge savings for them in money, men and materials.

On the other hand, Sikkim’s much smaller size did not give it that advantages. Its location astride India’s ‘Chicken Neck’ corridor between Nepal and Bangladesh made Sikkim too strategic for its own good because of the proximity of China’s Chumbi Valley. In Nepal, suspicion and paranoia about India takes flights of fancy – especially among those living north of the Ghuma-Shivar line. For the most part, this unformed obsession about Nepal being swallowed up by India distrusts attention from the real danger – New Delhi’s unspoken expansion of subversion from landlocked Nepal.

Even though Indian politicians and diplomats may not articulate it so clearly, India’s rowdy media is obsessed about ungrateful Nepal always on the verge of selling themselves off to China. ‘Sikkimisation’ or ‘Tibetation’? On the other hand, the single-minded preoccupation of Nepalis that we are about to be ‘Sikkimised’ comes from our own deep-seated sense of insecurity, magnifying and perpetuating it. This is not only unhealthy, but also unfortunate and misdirected.

Nepal never had the quasi-sovereign status that Sikkim had. It has always vigorously struggled to establish independent foreign relations with other countries, establishing
be unequal, is an example of New Delhi’s attempt to maintain its dominance. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed on 31 July 1950 by a newly-independent India with the Rana regime was skewed. For example, it required Nepal to consult with India prior to importing weapons from other countries, a clause that was used to impose the blockade in 1980 when Nepal sourced anti-aircraft guns from China.

The Treaty was an encroachment on Nepal’s sovereignty, and it is at the root of much of the persisting anti-India sentiment in Nepal. It tended to crop up in the manifestos of just about every political party in Nepal at election time, including the Maoists’ 40-point demand before the start of the conflict in 1996.

However, Nepal has to recognise that the 1950 Treaty also gave Nepal what Sikkmim was never had. Article 1 explicitly provided that ‘there shall be everlasting peace and friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal.

The two Governments agree mutually to acknowledge and respect the complete sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each other.’ At least in letter and spirit, if not in action, India was bound by the Treaty to maintain peace with Nepal and not play the role of an aggressor. More importantly, India explicitly acknowledged 70 years ago that Nepal was an independent, sovereign country and that it respected its territorial integrity.

Unless a Nepal government attempts to undermine India’s territorial integrity on its own, or by tilting too far towards China or Pakistan, New Delhi will have no reason to ‘Sikkimise’ Nepal. Besides, there is an estimated 60,000 Nepali nationals, apart from Indians of Nepali descent, enlisted in the Indian Army.

Some analysts tend to exaggerate the parallels between Sikkim and Nepal, and this serves no purpose except to fan the paranoia. Nepal’s foreign policy may be mishandled from time to time, but it is distinctly independent. We have only ourselves to blame when it does not work, for example, with the failure of our nuclear diplomacy at the moment.

Zone of Peace Regionally, despite the signing of the 1956 Treaty with India, Nepal has strategically charted an equilibrium with India and China. New Delhi’s diplomats tend to scoff at the word ‘equilibrium’, but it has suited Nepal in good stead in keeping both giant neighbours at arm’s length.

The policy is derived from King Mahendra’s attempt to establish war-like relations with China. His son, King Birendra, took the policy forward with his Nepal as a Zone of Peace (ZOP) proposal, a non-aggression pact to suit the world that Nepal wanted to wriggle out of India’s sphere of influence.

Over 100 countries endorsed Nepal and China as a ZOP, with the notable exception of India. While it signaled to the world Nepal’s foreign policy aspiration, King Birendra’s proposal did not do much to keep India off Nepal’s back. By 1990, widespread street protests forced King Birendra to abolish the Pancharatna system and turn himself into a constitutional monarch from an absolute one.

Prior to the invasion and formal annexation of Tibet by China in 1950, India considered Tibet, not Nepal, as its strategic buffer with China. When the Chinese invaded Tibet, India needed Nepal not only as an ally but also to serve as the next buffer line against China.

The Treaty of 1950 was a clear and distinct move by India to transform Nepal into a 900 km long frontier well within China to protect its densely-populated Gangetic Plains of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. This means that if India annexes Nepal, it will have to be on the frontlines with an economically and militarily ascendant China across the mountains.

Why would India want to do that?

Naturally, New Delhi would prefer to preserve and extend its influence in Kathmandu. After the invading blockades in 2015, the Indian mission is not engaged in overt influence-peddling, preferring a more low-key approach. This does not mean it has lost interest, New Delhi possibly now sees a politically stable Nepal being more in its interest than its policy of ‘controlled instability’.

It is now up to the Nepali people and their political leaders to work toward not to provide a motivation to rouse the Indian tiger with needless provocation to be an aggressive, expansionist force. Nepal must realise that its sovereignty is strengthened by domestic stability.

The kind of perpetual inflighting and disunity that has characterised Nepal’s politics especially in the past two years, only underminds our independent status. Even the Chinese, who usually feel left Nepal’s political parties to sort out their own problems, had to stop in when inflighting within the NCP last year ultimately split the party.

Leaving from the 2015 Madhes Movement and blockade, Nepal’s politicians should not allow Tamil politics to be a pretext for future Indian meddling. For this, Nepal must be a much more inclusive state, mindful of devolving political decision-making to neglected and marginalized groups. This ensures long-term stability, and cannot be seen as something that ‘disturb communal harmony’.

Externally, Nepal should show restraint when ultra-nationalist pressure groups bring up the reclamation of Nepal’s historical territory ceded to British India in 1898. However strong our claim to Langtang is, it is also sensitive an issue for Nepal’s political factions to use as nationalistic ammunition against each other.

As long as Nepal seeks mutually respectful bilateral relations with India and China that builds on its own internal stability, it can play a positive role in the time of global polarisation and increased regional tension.

Nepal must live its policy of peaceful coexistence, a peace-keeper in areas of conflict, and move forward as a confident nation, once and for all shedding its fear of Sikkim’s ghost.
Art Exhibition
Visit Siddhartha Art Gallery’s Bold and Beautiful, an exhibition displaying a collection of paintings from artists Shivangi Mara. 11-30 July, Asthmashree Hospital.

Reading Circles
This month, Whole Library Nepal’s Reading Circles will focus on a collection of works that encapsulates the country’s traditional architecture, art history, contemporary practices, and indigenous expressions. Send an email at wholelibrarynepal@gmail.com for the reading materials and the meeting link. 14/8/July

KMF 2021
Fill up the KMF 2021 entry form and send relevant film produced after 1 January 2019. Go to https://kmf.org.np/kmf-2021 for more details.
Deadline: 5 September

Dance classes
Sign up to take Bharatnatyam, Sialuk, Hip-Hop, Freestyle, and contemporary dance lessons from Srijana Arts. Call for details. 9805025027

Labmin Bazaar
From fresh produce to crafts by local businesses, there’s something for everyone at the weekly market at Labmin. Safety guidelines apply.
Saturdays, 9am-1pm. Labmin Mall

VIRUTUAL TOURS

Virtual street art
Google Arts Project Street art showcases the world’s greatest graffiti works and tells the stories behind them. Including those of Nepali artists! View virtual walking tours, view online exhibitions and learn about the artists themselves.

This is home
Visit traditional homes from countries around the world with the Title is Home virtual tour. Learn about the history behind each of these places and get a glimpse inside the unique structures with Google Street View.

GETAWAY

Shivapuri Heights
Tasty home-cooked meals, meandering walks, and get pampered at the outdoor spa at the Shivapuri Heights estate. Go to Facebook or https://www.shivapuriestate.com/ for more information about the weekend packages.
Shivapuri Hills, Bhaktapur, 014312802

Dhulikhel Lodge Resort
This resort is nestled amidst the beautiful terraced hills of Dhulikhel. Services include the Spa Restaurant, spa, excursions, and lounge and bar.
Dhulikhel (01)-496714, 5801010/2/3

Club Himalaya
Escape to this lovely mountain resort with breathtaking views away from the bustle of the city for the weekend.
Agarded, 01422420, 50621672/3

DINING

Dine smartly at the new cafes in KTM.

Cafe de Tutuka
Tired of trying to figure out what to cook for lunch day after day? Get authentic Thai food from Cafe de Tutuka. Order the Thai Khao set, or take a break from rice and try the Thai Khao Chana set instead. Check out the menu online.
(23039970)

Blenders Milkshake
Beat the humid monsoon afternoons with fresh cold milkshakes out of reusable bottles. Fills defiance at Shyddan’s and Foodmundo, or call to order.
9800705055

Attic
Enjoy Attic’s signature Rally Aloo, Attic chicken, egg, bacon potato roll, or get some chicken barbeque. Go to Attic’s Facebook page for more information.
(01) 447364

Chandrahi Hills
Chandrahi Resort’s stop both green Hills overlooking Kathmandu Valley. Cash the ghats of the Himalaya, relax at stunning sunsets, and live a dip in the infinity pool to be the best.
Bottled (01) 5751990

Flat Iron Grill
Although the entry is known for sandwiches, the desserts here deserve more recognition. Go to https://www.flatirongrill.com.er to get burgers, salads, desserts and more products delivered.
9802820681

OuR PICK

When on duty, like cinemas and playhouses, Nepal is a country that loves to party. But check the Facebook page for more events.

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No direction

I try to write it and rewrite it, so that I can tell myself it was not my fault.

My mother asked me what had happened to the fruits. I lied. I told her I could not find his house. I did not know what I should do after that. If reported him to the Principal, they would also ask me why I had gone to his place to begin with. It occurred to me that I could write about it.

So, I wrote about it. As honestly as I could. Then I called up a reporter and I met at some reading event and asked her if their newspaper would publish my experience. I briefly told her what had happened.

I remember my voice breaking as I confessed in her. She was the first person I was talking to about this. It was in the time of lockdowns and I had to look myself up in my parents’ room to call her up.

The day my piece was published, however, I felt like my humiliation had been taken to a different level. An illustration showing a man in a Nepali cap seated on the floor wearing a mask, joking his girl student with a pen, had been used.

The alias of the illustration was generic, and so was the degree of humiliation it inflicted on me. It mocked my experience, because it made it look like a joke, completely eclipsing the gravity of my experience.

I suppose, when people picture harassment, they imagine serious crime scenes and not subtle events leading up to them. I suppose the mention of humiliation made my experience sound like a joke. What kind of an idiot goes to her teacher to get grazed?

Perhaps my experience had become just another article that filled the columns on a weekend supplement. When classes resumed, some students who had read the article said: nice story. They thought it was a fabricated tale. For me, the regret of honoring the act of objectifying what was being published was the regret of raising an issue. I asked if there would be a corrigendum. She said it did not qualify for one, and that it was the cartoonist I should talk to. I let it go.

I hated myself for sending the article for publication. I hated myself for writing it. And I hated myself for showing up greedily for the illustration. I felt stupid and decided it was my fault. I had gone there on my own two feet and had knelt by the bed and then gave Katual a chance to stick his mouth on mine. It filled me with self-loathing and I wanted to escape the feeling off of me.

I took my years to realize it was not my fault. I’ve tried to write about Katual many times. I try to add my experience to the self-flagellation I put myself through. And in all of those attempts, my humiliation stares back at me in the form of the cartoon in the newspaper.

I cannot rewrite it enough to subdue the sickening feeling of Katual’s mouth on mine. But neither the chill I felt when I opened the newspaper, and the cartoon hit my face.

Suburban Tales

A month since a break (even hard on the people left under cover staged) in the author’s life.
OVERVIEW OF DISASTER

Go online to www.nepalitimes.com to watch videos taken from drones flying over Melamchi Bazar and the headworks of the Melamchi project to assess the damage caused by the debris flow on 16 June.

The Kosi’s sorrow,

Exploring Nepal’s largest river during a destructive monsoon

Kanak Mani Dixit

- Three decades after it was first proposed, a $2.6 billion start-up supply water from Melamchi to Kathmandu.
- A deadly flood on the Melamchi Irrigation in South Korea on 16 June killed at least 27 people, and destroyed infrastructure.
- The multi-donated £404M Upper Tama Kosi headworks started being erected in the national grid.
- SBP is yet to clear the $300M it has been paid under the USAID/IMLS (now USAID) as well.
- Work has begun on the Sindhuli-Motihari stretch to channel water to the Saptari Basin in India.

All five events have one thing in common: They are all on the trans-boundary Koshi Basin that drains 75,000 sq km of territory in China, Nepal and India.

At the Pati Shreeyani on the northern rim of Kathmandu Valley, pour a glass of water on one side and it flows into the Gandaki watershed. On the other side it flows into the Koshi river basin which was 200m east and west and tumbling into the Tarai and Bihar to join the Ganges. The Kosi is the largest tributary of the Ganges.

The Kosi’s origin in Nepal is near Melamchi. But its largest tributary, the Arun, originates in Tibet where it is called the Phung Chu, makes a mighty arc in Tibet and becomes the Kosi between Mt Makalu and Mt Kangchenjunga to meet its siblings Sun Kosi and Tamakot in Tribeni. Geologists say rivers like the Arun that flow through the Himalayas are older than the mountains.

The Kosi watered therefore drains an enormous verdant landscape. Six of the world’s 13 peaks above 8,000m are therefore a part of the Kosi catchment. These mountains block the monsoons which weather them down relentlessly, making the sedimentation load of the Kosi the heaviest for any river in the world.

The topography of this mighty river has shaped Nepal’s history and culture, and can determine the country’s economic prospects as well. Water expert Madhav Upadhaya says: “We have not even begun to understand the hydrological and geological specificities of such mountains and rivers and yet are rushing headlong into ever-larger infrastructure developments.”

Last month, landslides blocked the Melamchi in a few hours, unleashing a deadly debris flow that destroyed infrastructure, homes and livelihoods (see below). It impoverished the Melamchi project, and its tunnel supplying water to Kathmandu was saved only because the gates were closed for maintenance just hours before the catastrophe.

This week, the Tama Kosi project started generating electricity, and will provide one-third of Nepal’s total power demand. But there was a scare just days before the inauguration: China informed Nepal that a massive landslide had blocked the river upstream, threatening the $257 billion project. Fortunately, the river found its way around the blockage.

Other flash floods this year in Mustang, Kosi and Lamjung also showed that while our rivers hold great promise, we ignore the risk to settlements and major infrastructure at our own peril. Our engineering methods have been inherited from the West, and do not account for cloudbursts and extreme Himalayan weather events, risks exacerbated by climate change.

In Melamchi, the power of the flood last month is evident in the steel bulk of the Hydropower Bridge that lies crumpled in the muddy river 100m downstream amid Lotus-shaped boulders. The new sand bank is 2m thick, indicating the flood’s maximum height. It may

Drone surveillance in immediate aftermath of the flood was a test case for future disaster response

The devastating floods in Melamchi on the night of 14 June provided a test case of how drones can be deployed in future rapid disaster response in Nepal to assess damage, rush relief and to quash rumours.

Drones can be airborne in the immediate aftermath of floods, landslides or earthquakes, and they are always ready to go up and operate. Nepali engineers have also amassed a wealth of experience in using drones for everything from collecting tubercle samples in remote mountain areas to anti-poaching wildlife patrols.

“Hourly drone images of the Melamchi headworks allowed us to capture the extent of the damage, and made us realize the importance of having a ready to deploy experienced drone team within the country,” says engineer Umesh Pradhan of Nepal Flying Labs, an initiative that started in Nepal and now operates in more than 30 countries around the world.

Drone surveillance of a disaster-hit area has many advantages because it is cheaper to operate and deploy. In Melamchi, for instance, heavy rain hampered helicopter rescue and reconnaissances flights, and cloud cover meant that satellite images were not immediately available. Immediately after hearing of the disaster, Geospatial Nepal scrambled pilots who had many hours of flight experience in difficult terrain, and transported them to Melamchi.

After the floods, a consortium of various private and non-profit organisations including Nepal Flying Labs carried out rapid aerial assessments of flood-hit areas.

The team consisted of disaster risk reduction and management experts Suraj Guatam at the Institute of Himalayan Risk Reduction, Basanta Raj Adhikari from the Tribhuvan University Institute of Engineering. Pravin Lama of GeoSensing Nepal led all aerial missions to collect data, which are currently being processed for analysis.

Since accessibility is a crucial factor to plan emergency rescue and relief activities after a disaster like the floods in Melamchi, high resolution images from drones provide a clear picture of the terrain and conditions in the disaster affected area.

Early oblique images from Melamchi showed the damage to roads from Melamchi Bazar to the headworks area, and interpretation of the orthophoto maps showed that many bridges had been washed away. This allowed the local government to plan for alternative access routes.

The drone images came handy because helicopters were grounded for most of the few days because of poor visibility, and satellite images of Sindhupalchok from Planet Labs were obscured by clouds. Drones could fly below the clouds to capture clear and sharp images of the terrain below.

The Melamchi Drinking Water Supply Project of the Government of Nepal conducted an aerial inspection of the headworks area on 14 June. The team took off from Amatang 2 km from the headworks area and captured high resolution oblique images of the damage to the intake structure.

On 16 June, the team carried out an aerial inspection of the damage to Melamchi Bazar. But those were disturbed by frequent helicopter flights in the area which kept the air space busy. Says Pradhan: “Rapid, locally-led drone deployment demonstrated that it is an effective technique for real-time damage assessment, as well as the dynamics of the river and debris flow.”

For Nepal Flying Labs, some of the lessons learnt from the Melamchi experience was the need to coordinate with helicopter search and rescue flights in the area. Drones need to be deployed immediately, so the permission process needs to be expedited as well as coordination with air traffic controllers at nearby airports, and local security agencies.

Fully vested drones pilots need to be on a roster so they can be called upon during disasters. Drones equipped with infrared and thermal sensors can play a significant role in helping first-responders to identify missing people. Nepal must now also develop data-sharing protocols so drone images are easily available to rescue teams and local governments.
have been caused by centuries-old glacial deposits which suddenly got released through a combination of earthquake weakening and heavy rain. Melamchhi Bazar had expanded into the river’s flood plain, with buildings in place of rice paddies, which added to the loss of life and property. Less than a month after the disaster excavators and heavy trucks are already on the Lahurabari river bed, scooping up sand and boulders to feed Kathmandu valley’s voracious appetite for construction material.

It is the Kosi’s Melamchi tributary that augments Kathmandu’s water supply, while the sand and boulders from another tributary, the Indrawati, fulfill the Valley’s demand for sand and aggregates.

While earthquakes, floods and landslides are seen as ‘natural disasters’, and indeed they are to some extent, they become ‘man-made’ calamities with unregulated sand-mining of rivers, quarrying on steep slopes, and haphazard road building.

The highway along the Indrawati is crowded with sand laden tipper trucks bound for Kathmandu. Downstream towards the Kosi Barrage along the BP Highway, the road follows the river past the site where a part of the Sun Kosi is to be channelled through a 13k m tunnel, in irrigite hillslands in the Terai of Province 2. A similar inter-basin diversion scheme on the Kali Gandaki is now putting Gandaki vs Lamjung Province, and the central government.

We finally get to the new bridge across the Sapt Kosi at Chhatara, connecting Dhaka and Sunrier districts. This is exactly the point where, after a hundred-year journey from the Tibetan Plateau and between the highest mountains in the world, the great river runs out into the plains.

North of the bridge is the site of the proposed mammoth Kosi High Dam. The 300m high dam will create a reservoir spanning huge tracts of the Sun Kosi, Arun and Tamor Valleys. India needs the dam for flood control and to facilitate inland navigation by storing monsoon water and discharging it in the dry season, but there are many questions regarding the proposed mega project.

It is with the high dirt from the Kosi Reservoir would soon fill up with sediment. There are alternatives to dam the Kosi in the Kosi plains have learnt to live with annual floods which deposit valuable soil nutrients, and diverting water through easier river channels would ease flood impact. The 60-year-old embankments that jacket the Kosi upstream and downstream from the barrage have created the potential for a massive future disaster. Because of the river’s heavy sill content, the Kosi new flows on a deck 3-4m above the surrounding land. In 2008, the Kosi breached the eastern embankment at Khusha, causing destruction downstream in Sunari and Bilati. And that was when the river was not even in spate.

With extreme weather caused by climate change, or a confluence of cloud bursts in the mountain catchment, a record-breaking flood in future could cause an encroached Kosi to bypass the barrage altogether and unleash a catastrophic flood downstream.

The Kosi Barrage was meant to be a temporary solution, and the Kosi High Dam was always in the minds of the Indian authorities. There is a need for transparent and independent study by water experts, social scientists and technocrats to study the pros and cons of the Kosi High Dam. Siltation, sediment, adaptation, mitigation and all need to be factored in with projected future climate impacts. Meanwhile, across the world, ecologists are warning that the price to pay for large dams is too great because of the destruction of river ecosystems. A massive rockfill dam on a sedimentically active zone, the geopolitical implications as well as the social and environmental costs may outweigh the planned benefits. To make up for the mistakes of the Kosi Barrage, we may be making an even greater blunder with the Kosi High Dam.

THE KOSI STORY
Abhimanyu Karki/Naresh Ghimire

The source of the Kosi in Nepal is near the confluence of the Melamchhi and Mahendra rivers which saw devastating flood last month.
Republic of animals

Nepal’s Supreme Leader is Lord Pashupatinath, the ruler of all animals. As a country’s patron deity, Pashupatinath has our backs at all times. And whenever we have no government, like now, he is our default Head of State.

Given that our forebears were four legs, it is not surprising that our leaders make references all the time to creatures great and small. Prime Minister Oli likes animal metaphors, and has said he will “unleash hornets on his politicians” — one of the few promises that he has actually fulfilled.

Premier Oli is living proof that you can indeed teach old dogs new tricks. Just the other day, he said that despite the dog-eat-dog world of current Nepali politics, he has “not yet been bitten by a mad dog”.

However dramatic that admission may have been, it did make it to the headlines because, as we know from journalism school, it is only news when man bites dog and not when dog bites man.

Ganesh Man Singh once called Nepali who keep voting for the same leaders “a flock of sheep”. Things have progressed since then, today Nepal’s social butterflies like to assert that the country is “going to the dogs”. That is factually wrong, it is actually going to the byre now.

Another Nepali leader (this name will come to me in a minute) compared Parliament to a “goat market”. If that is true, then Nepal could then be actually described as a country of sheep led by goats, which may be why we have so many sacrifices.

However, we have to be careful during these stressful times not to overdo the animal analogies for fear of being labelled sexist: Cheetahs, for instance, could easily take unfair at being compared to Nepali politicians during the pandemic. Even pigs would not want to be associated with the level of greed on display in affiliated medical colleges.

However tempting it may be to say that the vaccination drive is moving “at a snail’s pace”, we have to be sensitive to the feelings of garden slugs who could rightly contend that the velocity of their locomotion is perfectly appropriate as far as they are concerned in getting from one place to another.

We are in such awe of a certain country to the South whose name is a five-letter word beginning with “I” that we fear to call it by its real name, referring instead to “the elephant in the room”. Given the current dispensation, however, it may be more accurate to call it “the Bull in the China shop”.

Let me also take this opportunity to voice strong reservations about retaining the cow as our national animal. It is regressive, status quiescent and reeks of sexism. Why not the bull? Aren’t our ears good enough to be proud symbols of our patriarchal republic?

And when someone says something authoritative, why do we insist on saying it is from “the horse’s mouth”? It would be just as credible if it came from the Ass mouth.

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