What is the difference this time?

Sher Bahadur Deuba became Nepal’s accidental prime minister last week, and won a confidence vote in the House on 28 July. It is familiar terrain for a man who has been on this road four times in the past 28 years. And so here we are, back at Nepali Times. Combining through our archives, we dug up page 1 reports, commentaries and cartoons about Deuba’s previous tenure as prime minister. This front page (top with a cartoon by Sahba Sal) is from edition #964 of 9-11 July 2004, and reports on Deuba’s debacle in dealing with a disparate cabinet to hold local elections in the middle of a conflict, and with King Gyanendra itching to take over.

Few national leaders are offered so many chances to get it right. However, there have not been too many examples of successful governance under Deuba that stand out. A consummate politician, Deuba has maneuvered repeatedly to become prime minister under King Bhimsen’s constitutional monarchy, twice after the royal massacre, before the 2017 elections, and now under a federal constitution.

And we hear that Deuba’s apostrophes have told him he will be prime minister two more times after this.

When Deuba became prime minister for the first time in 1995-97, it was still looking like the restoration of democracy and open economy would allow the country to finally take a great leap forward. Foreign Direct Investment Roved in. His high-profile wife, Anura Deuba, was a key link to the international community.

Local elections devolved political power to the grassroots, ensuring accountability and spurring development. But the Maoists handed Deuba a 40-point demand and an unrealisic deadline of a week to fulfill them. It was a declaration of war, and on 23 February 1996 the Maoists launched their armed struggle.

READ MORE EDITORIAL AGE 7
Deuba’s denouement

A Maoist insurgency had flared up in the western mountains, but in Kathmandu, Sher Bahadur Deuba treated it as a law and order issue. When he finally acted, it was to get the police to launch campaigns code-named Milan Storm 1 and 2. Ordinary people were terrified, driving them into the Maoist fold.

During his second term as prime minister in 2001-02 following the massacre of the royal family, the army was dragged into war and casualtiesescalated. More people were killed in the year after the Royal Nepal Army joined the conflict than in the previous six years.

So in 2002, Deuba dissolved Parliament (much like Oli did this year), declared a state of emergency and was eventually sacked by King Gyanendra who, in a televised address called his prime minister “incompetent.” The king used and disposed of Deuba like a rag doll, leaving him back as prime minister for his third term (2004-06) and then promptly put him under house arrest for corruption after he staged a royal-civilian coup on 1 February 2005. Despite the ignominy, Deuba kept resurrecting himself. He returned to Baluwatar after 12 years in 2017 after conclusively getting his grip on the Nepal Congress and cobbling a coalition with the Maoists. Being prime minister between two phases of the election, after much bungling with Dahal, Deuba handed over the Home Ministry to the Maoists.

But Deuba still had a strong sense of deja vu when he had to undertake identical negotiations over the constitution with Dahal over the Cabinet. This time, not to repeat the mistake and with an eye on the 2021 elections, Deuba kept control of Home Ministry to retain strategic Finance to the Maoists. Now that he has won the vote in the House, there will be more parties to reward and appease with ministerial posts.

There are no permanent friends and foes in politics. But it is an eerie story of how Deuba is now at the helm with the help of Pushpa Kamal Dahal who tried to assassinate him, and on whose closed he had announced a rancor during the conflict. Dahal is now trying to wield political influence through the coalition through a High Level Political Mechanism.

The return of Sher Bahadur Deuba signifies a break from the paralyzing power struggle that prevented the OB administration from addressing the people’s everyday concerns during the pandemic. The confidence vote this week also saves the exchequer an estimated Rs1 billion for an early election that will now be needed.

And because this is essentially an election government, Deuba will have to get his graphite coalition to perform and deliver before he can claim it.

Few national leaders are offered such a chance to get it right.

Deuba’s checklist

With this kind of track record, and given that he has totrinsic to Nepal’s worst nemesis, the Maoists, it is reasonable to expect Deuba to make the following efforts if he is to have a chance at a long term in office:

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While Deuba needs to prove he can stay in power long enough to ensure proper governance, the Maoists’ main concern is to stay in power. So while the government is determined to deliver, the Maoists’ efforts will be to goad Deuba into making mistakes that will cause his fall. The Maoists would have been emboldened by the outcome of the recent elections, which saw them win many seats in the western and southern plains. The Maoists’ main concern is to stay in power long enough to fall Deuba. So far, they have succeeded.

The Maoists have traditionally been an electoral force in the western and southern plains, and their strength has been growing. The Maoists’ recent success in the elections suggests that they have a strong grip on the electorate in these regions. The Maoists’ main concern is to stay in power long enough to fall Deuba. They have succeeded.

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Unfortunately, Deuba has not been able to show any signs of improvement. His government has been criticized for its inability to implement policies effectively. The Maoists, on the other hand, have been able to exploit the situation to their advantage, presenting themselves as the only alternative to Deuba’s government.

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EXTRA PROTECTION, EXTRA HYGIENE
Have a healthy journey with all precautions taken to the finest detail for your in-flight safety.
Being good is not easy
Lessons from the Mahabharata from Gurchan Das’s book The Difficulty of Being Good

Buddha Raayat

Even eleven years after it was first published, The Difficulty of Being Good by Indian author Gurchan Das is more relevant than ever. Two thousand years after it was written, so is the Mahabharata.

For those who want to read the Mahabharata but are intimidated by the very thought, Das’s interpretation of the text is like a map to the city or a guide, told by someone who truly knows his way around. Indeed, the book proves that this was the right decision.
The Mahabharata is made up of almost 100,000 couples, is seven times longer than Homer’s Ilíada and Odyssey combined. But it is as gay.

For the longest time, the big difference with the Greek classics is that while there is a showdown in the Mahabharata, there is a battle-destroying discourse, and the war’s parties weigh in and discuss moral pros and cons of the violence they are unleashing on each other. The Iliad, on the other hand, just gets on with the action.

Like many religious texts, the Mahabharata also has its share of weak stories. For example, the Kaurava brothers, who are fighting Pandavas cousins, create an impassioned military formation called the ‘Chakras Vyas’ on the twelfth day of the Mahabharata war. Thus three warriors like Yudhisthira.

When Arjuna, from the Pandav side, is fighting elsewhere in the battlefield, his son, Abhimanyu, successfully penetrates the military formation and stops the Kaurava’s menacing advance towards Yudhisthira.

However, and this is the incredible part, Abhimanyu has learnt how to enter the Chakras Vyas when he was in his mother’s womb, as Arjuna was describing to her. Unfortunately, she fell asleep before Arjuna could explain how to exit the troublesome circle.

As a result, Abhimanyu did not hear about the exit strategy from this battle formation and he is trapped and mercilessly killed by the Kaurava generals including Karna, Drona and Ashwatthama.

Another riveting episode in the Mahabharata is Pandu, the father of the Pandav brothers. He is actually not their biological father because he has been cursed to die if he has a son. Kunti, his wife, a woman from a lower caste, gives birth to the ill-tempered age Durvârsha whereby she could invoke any god and save a child. By him, this she does.

Gurchan Das’s book shows us how the Mahabharata differs from other sacred texts, chiefly because rather than holding the reader’s interest in the book’s exercise to the actions of the characters, it bewitchingly asks more questions than it answers.

Almost confirming that the ultimate truth may not even be available here on earth, it shows us that we can only have infinities of the truth—a core belief in sophisticated Vedic thinking.

The Mahabharata is also true to life with flawed characters populating the text, quite unusual for a holy book. For example, Yudhisthira’s weakness for gambling, Duryodhana’s jealous streak, Karna’s status anxiety, Krishna’s guile—all add up to make it more human and understandable.

In fact, as Das points out, the Mahabharata almost humanises the Kaurava (who are the bad guys) in an attempt to portray the good Pandav brothers with empathy. (The ‘Pandav Aind’ philosophy, to kindle a universal moral sentiment. In contrast, the Ramayana, the other Hindu holy text from an earlier era has more black and white answers with an idealistic Ram and an evil Ravan.)

The climax of the Mahabharata is when Yudhisthira is about to take heaven’s gatekeeper, comes in his mortal invalidity and requests Yudhisthira to please get in so they can rise to heaven together.

The self-effacing Yudhisthira, looking a bit puzzled, asks Indra’s permission if they can also take a stray dog who has been following them for a few days.

Indra initially declines, Yudhisthira prays, looks around and asks, “My Lord, Indra, in that case I will forge heavens.” This little episode with the dog was actually Indra’s test of compassion for Yudhisthira, who is passes with flying colors and he enters heaven with the stray dog.

Das points out that the editors of the Mahabharata may have been influenced by the Buddhist concept of ‘karma yoga’, on compassion, as the book was written much later (between 400 BC-200 AD) than the actual Mahabharata war in Kurukshetra (950 BC).

In fact, the author asks a very important question: what would have been the outcome at Kurukshetra if Arjuna’s charioteer had been Gurdjieff, not Buddha instead of the clever Krishna? This Difficulty of Being Good is replete with graphic, logical, and evocative prose, as this passage by Das illustrated.

In the summer, I returned to India to visit my mother. On the way, the train stopped at a very sleepy station, about a hundred miles north of Delhi where I stepped-on to the platform and discovered that this was only very stationary; it was historic Kurukshetra where the Mahabharata’s little war of affection had been fought. In the burning heat of the summer afternoon, I began to imagine the brutal magnificence of the raging, ruthless battle. I saw a dashing Arjuna, his most trusted warrior of his age put down his Gandiva bow and refuse to fight—leaving his debonair and confident charioteer, Krishna, who is also God, with a problem of his own—how to handle the raging and remorseful ruthless Draupadi grinding the exhausted Pandav armies into the dust. Suddenly he turns anxious to his pupil, Yudhisthira to ask if the rumor about his heaven is true, Yudhisthira—who has never spoken a word of lies—has no such hesitation, fractured, and he says to Krishna that he has not been lying and has truthful, which is always travelled slightly above the ground, sinks into the dust. In any case, this is a book review of The Difficulty of Being Good, which to me is book review of the Mahabharata 2000 years after it was written.

As I read the book, it is hard to erase the image of Arjuna holding his bow and辐射 the flambouyant Krishna, refusing to reply and asking the question of truth and remorseful and remorseful Yudhisthira are carrying on a conversation in the heat of the battle.

Buddha Raayat is a philosopher at the Panjab University. Excerpts from Gurchan Das’s book in his photo above.

Nexon EV launch

The Great Indian EV launch was held in New Delhi on 27 July in Nepal. The EVs are operated by Ujjwal Thapa’s new EV company, Nexon EV, and will be available in Nepal for the first 160,000 km, and the three models of the car will be available for a minimum of Rs 150,000 to Rs 250,000.

New IFC Director for South Asia

The International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, has appointed Mexican national Hector Gomez Arang as its new regional director for South Asia. "We are excited by the opportunity to work with the governments and people of South Asia as we continue to support the region’s private sector development and help create market opportunities," says Arang, adding that the IFC is committed to supporting Covid-19 recovery efforts.

Ujjwal Thapa

Memorial Fund

The Ujjwal Thapa Memorial Fund was launched on Monday and raised over Rs 1.5 billion to help Nepalese doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers. The fund aims to provide financial assistance to healthcare workers who have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The fund also aims to support the Nepalese healthcare system by providing financial assistance to healthcare workers who have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.
Nepal Airlines privatisation still stuck

Mired in debt and mismanagement, the flag carrier needs to be rescued fast

By Masta KC

The long overdue privatisation of state-owned Nepal Airlines has become a political hot potato, but with Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress (NC) now taking over from KP Oli as the leadership, every one who may have a better chance of dichotomy.

The last days of the Oli administration were rife with speculation that the airline's board was preparing to offload some of its shares to the Yoti Group, which many believed was close to the former prime minister.

The once reputable Royal Nepal Airlines has been mired in scandals and mismanagement ever since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Political parties in government used the carrier as an employment agency, and pocketed kickbacks on aircraft leases.

New, despite strong opposition from employee unions and some in government, the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic fallout has left Nepal Airlines Corporation (NAC) no other option.

As a result, the state has shied away from concrete action on privatisation even if it would remove immense financial burdens. Now, with the NC in government, there is a chance Nepal Airlines de-nationalisation could be in the cards — even though the worst scandals in the carrier's history have involved NC politicians.

To be sure, Nepal has had privatisation success stories too, with the likes of Nepal Telecom, Nepal Bank, Electricity Generation Company, Kasturi Himal Bank and Timber Corporation Nepal all in profit, and they have improved their service after switching to a company model.

The airline's Board of Directors' move to privatisate was based on a report by the Corporation Reform Committee in mid-September 2019 to then Aviation Minister Yogesh Bhattarai.

"Preparations must be made to convert the Corporation into a limited company under prevailing laws," the report said, while also recommending restructuring ownership so that 51% of the airline remained in government hands.

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The flag carrier lost over Rs 3 billion last year as flights were grounded and domestic passenger volume shrunk by 76% and international passengers went down by 8%. These losses could be a mortal blow to the company, which has racked up a debt of Rs 44 billion, and never registered a profitable year in its 63 years of existence.

Yet, even when flying through severe turbulence, NAC has somehow stayed afloat because of multiple government bailouts totalling Rs 3.1 billion over the years.

Now, NAC's situation has become so desperate that the government's benevolence is wearing thin. As prime minister in 2019, Oli refurbished plans for government subsides from NAC executives saying the carrier had to lean on its own feet.

"Currently NAC is a costly white elephant," says Suraj Raj Acharya, an expert in development and infrastructure policy.

The practical government always having to rescue public sector companies is wrong." The airline's debts have skyrocketed because of the purchase of four brand new Airbus jets before the pandemic hit, as well the invention of six Chinese-made turboprops which have been grounded.

The government currently shoulders all of NAC's debts, pays off all its loans and is also the company’s guarantor and manager. Partially privatising the carrier would ensure the government handles only its own share, while hopefully making the company competitive and profitable. It would also lessen the revolving-door politically-influenced appointments and interference in management.

A corporate culture of meritocratic empowerment and reward, more professional management and improvement in reliability and service could turn the airline around. Just relying on flying Nepali overseas workers and the diaspora would guarantee a strong local factor.

Even so, plans to privatisate and transition the company from full state ownership to only majority control have been repeatedly shelved over the years even as other state-owned companies were privatised.

NAC employees pacified offices and went on strike on 6 July after the Board of Directors sent management letters and draft regulations for privatisation to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation on 27 June.

In response, on 11 July NAC senior management released a notice categorically denying any move towards privatisation. Government hesitation to act and employee agitation stem from a history of bitter experiences. Nepal's post-1990 liberalisation boom saw the then-ruling NC initiate a wave of privatisation, albeit with disastrous results.

Most newly privatised companies, such as Gorkhaland Tyres, Bharatpur Paper, Harisiddhi Bricks, and Bamburi Castles Shree were unsatisfactory with the ownership change and folded.

Once the company is set up, ownership must be structured and shared distributed in such a way that it gives a frame of total paid-up capital to those responsible for management while sharing the rest among industries in tourism, local banks and financial agencies, company employees, the government and the general public," the Advisor Committee's report notes.

Member of the NAC Board Rudhdi Sagar Lamichhane says: "One interesting factor is that the corporation cannot survive under the existing structure, and managerial capacity. However, the government has the final say on any decisions."

But the state's backtracking has dismayed pre-privatisation executives. As early as 2002, another committee had recommended that the NAC switch to a company model with only majority government ownership.

A new task force was then set up to review that report and present an action plan with Tourism Ministries for go-ahead. Strategic partnerships are a must if the flagship is to be saved," says former Finance Secretary Shankar Prasad Adhikari.

There is no reason for the government to keep bailing out a company that potentially hamstrung tax-payers money like Nepal Airlines.

There are reasons to be learnt from Air India which accumulated losses of a staggering INR 1 trillion, but the government finally moved to privatising the flag carrier.

However, reports caution that with the global downturn in aviation, even privatisation may not save Nepal Airlines. Even so, cutting costs, streamlining the fleet, and launching a strategic recovery plan could still save the carrier. But it would be unrealistic to expect the straightforward solution and better management.
Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita and the cradle of the Mithila civilization, is seeing a revival of its heritage, culture and traditional art.

The origin of Mithila art is rooted in the legend of King Janak ordering his subjects to paint walls of homes to welcome Lord Ram when he came to ask for his daughter Sita’s hand in marriage. Mithila paintings then were done at weddings, festivals and feasts using flour, clay, and cow dung. The artists were mostly the women of the family, who bore the decorative responsibility in their homes. As the art evolved, the paintings became more than a way to beautify homes — they provided women with a creative outlet to tell the stories of their lives.

This centuries-old art form has now gone commercial, enabling female artists to hone skills passed down from one generation of mothers to the next generation of their daughters. This now gives them financial independence, recognition and respect within Nepal and increasingly, across the world.

Madhumala Mandal was born and raised in Kau village near here, where Mithila culture is ingrained into young girls as household duties and responsibilities. Guided by her grandmother and mother, Mandal would paint pictures of deities to decorate the doors and walls of her house.

But her interest in the traditional craftsmanship soon stretched beyond the walls of her home, she would make shapes out of clay and paint idols on trips to the village schools.

“Even while I was herding cattle and doing farm work, I was always drawing idols and shapes on the ground,” she recalls.

Mandal would eventually have a family of her own, but she retained her passion for Mithila art. She now works at the Women’s Development Centre in Janakpur where she creates Mithila paintings on canvas.

“It took many years for me to convince family and friends that I was doing the right thing,” she explains.

Mandal’s four brothers went to school, but she was not considered for higher education, excluded. Having learnt to be independent from a young age and now with income of her own, she supports her own daughter’s education.

“The income and respect I earned through my artwork gave me the courage and the means to support my daughter,” she says.

“This is the greatest achievement of my life.”

Her days of drawing shapes in the mud long behind her, Mandal’s art now stays with traditional motifs but is almost impressionistic. Her work has been exhibited in the US and Hong Kong, and accent the walls of many homes across the world.

The ancient Mithila kingdom spanned territory that now lies on both sides of the India-Nepal border. Recently, there has been a renaissance of Mithila literature, dance forms and art.

Acclaimed Mithila artist Mithleshwari Devi Karna was born and raised in Bihar’s Madhubani district and settled in Janakpur after marriage. She grew up learning the Mithila art form from her mother in India.

Karna used to train artists at the Women’s Development Centre and faced similar experiences of societal pressures as many other women like Mandal in the Turai who have chosen to become artists.

Her community expressed disapproval when she prepared to travel overseas for an exhibition of her art. “People are always going to judge and make comments,” she says dismissively, “but I stood my ground, and went to Japan.”

The steadfast pursuit of her art has earned her respect, financial security, and most importantly, self-satisfaction. Karna, 60, was recently honoured by the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts.

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Vibrant Mithila thrives in Janakpur.

Centuries-old art form again gains international recognition.
Mithila art is the cultural heritage of the Mithila region, which was a kingdom before being divided by the 1885 Sino-Soviet Treaty. Mithila art has been used in the daily life of the people of Nepal for centuries. The art is characterized by intricate line work and symbolic representations of nature and deities. The female artists of Mithila have been traditionally responsible for creating these paintings, which are used for various religious and cultural purposes. The paintings often depict scenes from daily life, mythology, and folklore. Mithila art is celebrated for its vibrant colors and intricate designs, which are typically created using natural dyes and pigments. The art has gained international recognition, and Mithila artists have participated in various exhibitions and festivals around the world. However, the traditional practices and techniques of Mithila art are being threatened by modernization and commercialization, which has led to a decline in the quality and authenticity of the art. It is important to preserve the traditional practices of Mithila art and support the local artists to ensure the continued survival of this important cultural heritage.
Virtual Heritage tour
This requirement of the "Virtual Heritage Tour" series designed by Story Cycle will take viewers on a journey to Kathmandu, home of the New Pashupati. Make reservations on a Google form at Story Cycle's Facebook page.
30-July-04 pm

Soorto virtual studio
Join Soorto Wellness and Yoga centre's virtual studio for yoga sessions available to everyone for self-practice at home. Sessions are available upon appointment. Go to the Soorto Wellness handout page for details.
07/08/2022

Summer Flash Fiction
Submit a work of fiction or non-fiction in any genre in less than 3,000 words for a chance to win $1,200 and get published in The Writer Magazine. Learn more at writermag.com contests.
Deadline: 12 August

Le Sherpa Market
Support small businesses. Shop for fresh and organic vegetables, fruits, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more.
Saturday, 12-22:30pm, at Sherpa Mahalaxmi

Nepal Reads
Explore acclaimed works of poetry, avant-garde fiction and memoirs by authors Billy Ray Smith, Ku Cheng Tham, Meinakobala, Oscar Yuan, Sree Joes, and Sama Roba during Nepal Reads. Gender and Sexuality 2021. Go to Book Bus Nepal's Facebook page to sign up for the event.
25th September

Library Events

Project Gutenberg
Catch up on classics on the public domain. Search for literary gems at Project Gutenberg. downhill run forms suited to individual choices.

Poetry Foundation
Brush up on short, sharp poetry through collections of classic and contemporary poems, readings, poetry news and the entire 100-year archive of Poetry Magazine. Go to the website to start.

Madan Puraskar Pustakalya
Browse through the collection of Nepali translated content, including manuscripts, newsletters, dekshes and photographs on the Madan Puraskar Pustakalya database.

Global Digital Library
Looking to enhance children’s vocabulary while schools remain shut? The Global Digital Library has educational material and storybooks for parents and educators classified according to reading levels, including books in Marathi, Nepal, and Newari languages.

Comic Library
Find a variety of comic books available from the British Council Digital Library, including Star Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Disney classics. Visit the website to find out more.

Dining

Anatolia
Anatolia’s Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an unforgettable assortment of flavors. From the Mutfak Kofte Curry to the Balikli, the dishes will keep customers wanting more. All the food is Halal.
Thamel: 01-4580757

La Casita
La Casita is the go-to place for the best of Spanish food. Choose from a selection of tapas, paella and burgers. Don’t miss Chorizo for dessert.
Bhaulahor: 01-4531665

Imago Dei Cafe
The menu by Imago Dei features a healthy balance of protein and great taste. Healthy food never tasted so good.
Ring Road, Ward (01) 4440064

The Chocolate Room
Enter a world of chocolates, decadent brownies and chocolate of every size and shape. Between the chocolate, try the Turkish coffee and mushroom colleagues.
JCT Mall, 01-4237885

Events

Peacock Guest House
Housed in a 19th-century home, this 3-star hotel in heritage style, provides splendid views of the Dharahara Square and the historic temple.
Binayak (01) 4611822

Mystic Mountain
Situated at the heart of Kathmandu, the resort’s reusability built using ultra modern designs and world class comfort.
August 800720001

Dwarika’s Resort
Dwarika’s Resort boasts luxury accommodations, a attentive staff, fantastic amenities, and award winning dishes from around the world.
Dhulikhel: (01) 4753488

Air Quality Index

Nepal's first air-quality monitoring station shows a close correlation between meteorological data and Air Quality Index (AQI). Sustained particulate matter in the ambient air rose above 100, and drops to below 50 after the storm wash away the pollutants. Low levels, but as dangerous, in a certain monsoon from all the monsoons on the roads.

Our Pick
Queen Diana, Kinga Lodzinski, 2020 South African series Diary That Can’t Be Followed, follows the title character, as she seeks to uncover the truth behind the assassination of her father, an anti-apartheid freedom fighter, that left her orphaned. Years later, reunited by the South African Special Operations Group, Queen becomes a high-scaled crime fighter, still continuing to investigate the identity of her mother’s murderer.

Nepali bhakta na dekha hobe, durvijaydhwaj, bhavani bhark, jokhims'anu bhasan kalo kha wa balahidhakalo osthavam gareko chha bane gare hitejalpanai ko paila nalnay.
Fo: n. 9098 sa khair gare.
Readjusting to life post-Covid

Getting back to life before the pandemic may take time, and that is OK

I took me months to adjust to lockdown life. Being a social person with a wide network of friends, having to stay locked within the four walls was difficult. Living alone, I had to do everything in my power not to lose my mind.

I started dusting and redecorating my bike to keep myself physically active and mentally sound. I attempted to meditate several times, but it did not work for me. I faced issues with people, and it felt good for the hour that it lasted; once the call was done the emptiness returned.

Being an anxious person by nature, spending time alone all day made it worse. You can only watch so much Netflix and exercise to kill the hours. I started to clean more obsessively, but there is a limit to that too. The only escape was the grocery trips, and the chance to get out and breathe fresh air.

As a mental health professional, people started asking me how they could take care of themselves in this difficult time. I gave them the best advice I could. But I did not realise that talking to others experiencing the same frustration and anger would only add to my own.

Struggling with my inability to stay strong, I started to absorb other people’s negativity and feel weaker by the day. My work recommended we talk to other therapists to help ourselves, and I did. My therapist told me to separate other people’s problems from my own and not take them in, but I could not.

I continued to listen to my family and friends about how they felt. I made sure to be everyone’s cheerleader by checking in on them and encouraging them to try every technique that was proven to work. But while helping others, I did not notice that I needed help myself. I could not share this with others because this was my field of work. How could I, someone trained in helping others with their mental health issues, admit that I was feeling my mind?

Embarrassed and feeling inadequate, I could not understand how despite following every piece of advice in the book, I was unable to uplift my spirit. I exercised, ate healthily, cleaned and kept in touch with loved ones, but I kept sinking deeper and deeper into this hole.

I kept telling myself that I will pass, and everything will be okay again. I started working with a kind and understanding therapist, and I finally started to feel validated and comfortable in admitting that even mental health professionals need help.

Eventually, I got used to the lockdown and staying indoors. I tried gardening, but I could never get myself into it. I moved to another place, and I began to spend time walking in the backyard and looking at the trees and the birds.

As the lockdown eased, people were so excited to get back to their everyday lives. I thought I would feel the same. After all, I had been waiting for this and I was fully prepared for the four walls to feel safe and responsible about going out. But it had taken me so long to

accelerate to being inside that being out in the world again caused me more anxiety. It felt wrong to be outdoors, and I could not enjoy it. I pushed myself to go out, and see people, but I would always come home feeling uncomfortable and guilty, thinking of people still struggling at home.

A widespread technique practised by mental health professionals is to write down one thing they appreciate in their lives, I started to do that. I am grateful for many things in my life, but the fluctuation between suddenly being stuck indoors and then having the freedom to run around was harder for me than many others that I know of.

I find it challenging to go out and enjoy myself also because I got so used to being on my own. Last year in July, one of the psychologists I interviewed for an article had told me that people would have a difficult time readjusting to ‘everyday life’. I could not understand why at the time, but I do now.

I have lived in many cities and adjusted to different lifestyles over the years, but by far, this has been the hardest. There is a constant battle between my rational mind, which tells me that we must adjust to changes to live everyday life and move on and my emotional mind that is stubborn and reluctant to change. I am a series of people who can acclimate when I feel completely stuck. The truth is, that it does not matter what others say, the most important thing is to try and keep trying till you achieve the desired goal.

My biggest fear is having to go back to the lockdown days again. Seeing sawing between a life of freedom and being comfortable on my own is one concern that I never imagined I would have. I did not think it would be this hard.

While some people can adapt to changes more quickly, others like me are cautious about adjusting to the new normal because Covid is not over. I have the same concern about being free of fear. But getting back to my life before the pandemic will not happen overnight. All I can do is to be responsible and take care of myself while giving myself time.

Anjana Rajbhandary lives and works in Pune. She likes to read about mental health, physiology, technology and culture.
Vaccines, variants and a third

With the vaccination rate up Nepal is better placed to stop another surge, but only if safety measures are strictly enforced

Sonia Awale

For the first time in weeks, Nepal recorded more than 1,000 new cases on July 30. There were 35 deaths. The country is on the tail end of what has been a deadly second wave, but the rate of decline in infections and mortality has stalled.

Public health officials blame it on sudden reopening following two months of lockdown in which many mingled without masks, low vaccination rate, and minimal testing and tracing.

While some experts say Nepal and India are now safe against another major surge of the Delta variant that was largely responsible for the second wave, other wave of a third wave if safety measures are not enforced.

The Delta mutant is now raging across Europe and spreading across Europe and North America. And scientists say it has affected mostly countries and regions with low vaccination rates.

“The third wave is a matter of when not if. And if we don’t vaccinate as many people as soon as possible, there will be a continued threat of more dangerous variants, and we will be repeating the whole cycle,” warns Buddh Baral, a physician at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences.

So far, Nepal has fully vaccinated 1,158,130 people, 3.4% of its total population. Some 10% Nepalis have received the first dose of either AstraZeneca Covishield, Chinese Sinopharm VeroCell or single-shot Johnson & Johnson shot.

Another eight million doses of various Covid-19 vaccines are expected by September — some purchased from China, more doses from Covax, as well as a direct grant from Japan. This should take the total fully vaccinated population near 20%, which together with antigen positive population could cushion the impact of a possible third wave.

“We have now moved on from vaccinating the elderly and frontline workers to groups low at risk of the Covid-19, and we have more vaccine in the pipeline,” says Shyam Raj Upadhyay, head of government’s Covid Vaccine Strategy. “We have applied to buy 30.5 million more doses of vaccines from the Covax at a subsidised rate.”

Indian public health experts have projected the third wave to hit that country in late August. What happens in India usually follows in Nepal within 10-13 days, and if that is true this time too, Nepal cannot be unprepared like in March.

“With the vaccination program progressing as smooth as it is happening now compared to the first two surges, the third wave might not be as significant if it happens at all,” says Basan, a significant chunk of Nepalis should have been vaccinated,” explains Samser Bishwakarma of Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal.

Apart from vaccines, in case of a sudden surge, hospitals need to be ready with sufficient beds and ICU, oxygen, life-saving medical equipment, drugs and functioning oxygen plants. Hospitals must also prepare their paediatric wards since the third wave could affect a younger population.

Since the peak of the second wave when there were close to 10,000 new cases a day and over 200 daily fatalities, international donors have been supplying essential medical equipment to Nepal.

The Health Ministry received 400 ventilators and 670 oxygen concentrators in May-June from various donors. District hospitals at local levels have also received direct supplies from aid agencies. These should be in running condition and on standby instead of being stockpiled in Kathmandu.

Nepal has no health minister as Covid-19 cases rise again

Deuba appoints supporters in powerful portfolios but leaves the helm of Health Ministry vacant

During his address to Parliament on 18 July while seeking a confidence vote, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba claimed his government’s topmost priority was vaccination and managing the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The government’s first priority is vaccination, second priority is vaccination, third priority is vaccination,” he said emphatically.

This week, he had a photo-op with American Ambassador Randy Berry as the handicapped received the Johnson & Johnson single jab inoculations. He then walked in line with others to get his own shot.

He then summoned health officials to Singh Darbar for a review and instructed them to be at battle stations against a possible third wave by setting up holding centres at the border as well as increasing testing, supply of oxygen, beds and ICUs in hospitals.

After becoming prime minister for the fifth time, Deuba has spent most of the first week in office dealing with Covid-19, leading many to believe his priority is indeed the health sector.

However, he has yet to appoint a health minister, even as he has named trusted supporter Bal Krishna Khand as Home Minister and hand over powers of finance and the energy and water resource portfolio to the Machtet Centre.

This is in direct contrast to the Oli administration that switched five Health Ministers in three years, and four since the pandemic. The very lead ministry in tackling the pandemic has been plagued with uncertainty and indecision.

Nepal might be at the tail end of the second wave but the rate of decline in daily infections and deaths has stalled.

There is also the threat of a possible third wave and spread of newer strains as the country struggles to increase its vaccination coverage.

“Unstable leadership affects the entire system and its operation. And in a country like ours with underdeveloped mechanisms, stable leadership is of utmost importance,” says Dilli Raj Pahukar, former Chief Election Commissioner.

Bhupendra Dhakal was the Minister of Health in January 2020 when the first case of Covid-19 was detected in Nepal. He was in charge when the first scandal broke in the procurement of Covid-19 test kits, which were found to be faulty and overpriced.

Highly controversial, Dhakal then took over and was entrusted by the Oli administration to buy 5 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine. That did not materialise, and he was negotiated with the Serum Institute of India (SII) to buy 2 million doses of the AstraZeneca Covishield vaccine. But only 1 million doses were delivered before India banned the export.

Tripathi later blamed SII’s representatives in Nepal for trying to take a bigger commission from the next order of 5 million doses. This was followed by the devastating second wave.

Tripathi was succeeded by Sher Bahadur Tamang, who served just three weeks as health minister before the Supreme Court ordered Oli’s Cabinet appointments null and void.

Kishna Gopal Shrestha, who was also the Education Minister, had an even shorter tenure because the Oli government fell on 13 July.

Former director of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division Babulam Marmar says that at a time when the Health Ministry should have been more proactive it became a victim of politics.

There are rumours that Deuba may appoint Gagan Thapa as health minister, and many remember his previous tenure during which he showed decisiveness and knowledge of the job.

He says: “Only when the leadership is strong and stable can all agencies of government effectively implement a strategy. It is imperative that the government appoint a non-political, well-informed health minister soon.”

Maiti RC
**Future Covid-19 Vaccines in the Pipeline**

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**Covid-19 trend in Nepal**

According to Public Health England, Covid-19 vaccines have so far prevented 11,200 deaths and 56,700 hospitalisations in the United Kingdom; even while the country sees a surge in Delta variant cases. As Nepal is inoculating against SARS-CoV-2, people are starting to forgo safety measures even if the majority of the population remains unvaccinated. They are back on the streets taking part in political rallies and conducting crowded indoor meetings. Jam-packed and poorly-managed vaccination centres could themselves become super-spreaders.

Says Samee Dutt: "In midst of vaccines, variants and new surges, we cannot forget masks and physical distancing, it is still our first line of defence against the coronavirus." 

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say doctors interviewed for this report.

With the vaccine supply chain less constrained, there is now a debate about reprioritising the doses and a more strategic distribution of supply. Some experts have suggested a "firewall strategy" wherein densely populated cities are fully vaccinated to reduce transmissions, and to re-energise the economy that will in turn restore jobs. Equitable vaccination is ideal, but in epidemiological terms inoculating a thinly spread population is not the best use of limited doses. Involving younger adults means they are less likely to carry the virus and transmit it to children, the largely unvaccinated group. Even within cities, the focus must be on the urban poor in congested areas.

"Moving forward, we must now prioritise crowded cities and highly mobile groups for vaccines to help blunt the effect of another wave and save as many lives as possible," says Sher Bahadur Pun, a virologist at Tika Hospital.

However, epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa worries that focusing in cities may mean the underserved are neglected.

"While reprioritising, our strategy should be such that the supply isn't missed and the neediest aren't missed out."

At present VeroCell and J&J vaccination drives are running in parallel across Nepal. Soon, the Japanese grant of 1.4 million Astrazeneca will be used to inoculate the elderly who have been waiting for months for their second doses.

Social media is filled with speculation about the jabs and who should get them first, leading to widespread confusion and vaccine hesitancy. People are also comparing the efficacy level of one vaccine against the other.

"Let's take any vaccine available, do what they are supposed to do, prevent deaths and hospitalisations in most cases," says Budha Basnet. "I encourage people with heart conditions, cancer and liver diseases to vaccinate, they are high-risk group, as well as pregnant women."

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