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IN GOD WE TRUST:
Nuns line up for their
Covid-19 jabs at a monastery
in Sitapaila on Monday.

AMIT MACHAMASI

● Sonia Awale

When Covid-19 cases started to fall last month and the government relaxed the lockdown, most public health experts warned that it was premature because not enough people had been vaccinated.

The decline in second wave infections and fatalities have now stalled, and the case positivity rate has increased to 25%. (Graph)

"After two months of lockdown, restrictions were suddenly lifted even though we were still reporting 2,000 cases. It is business as usual and no distancing," says virologist Sher Bahadur Pun. "Now, vaccination centres themselves risk being virus hotspots."

The behaviour of the virus in Nepal has generally followed India's pandemic trajectory. With only 7% of its 1.3 billion people fully vaccinated, cases are rising again.

India's seroprevalence is 70% -- the proportion of its 1.3 billion population who carry antibodies that give them immunity. The rate is highest in Bihar (75%) bordering Nepal. Kerala, which has India's lowest seroprevalence at 44%, is

now seeing a spike.

A seroprevalence survey is currently being carried out in Nepal, and experts predict that the rate of previous infections will be as high as India, at least in the Tarai. However, they caution that this may not mean Nepal is protected by herd immunity.

Nepal is administering more than 55,000 doses of Covid vaccines a day, and this may have sent the wrong message to people.

"Vaccinated people have stopped wearing masks and distancing," says epidemiologist Lhamu Yangchen Sherpa, who has 10 acquaintances and their families in quarantine, though fully

vaccinated. "Jabs protect us from hospitalisation, but we could still get infected, and infect others."

But public health experts in India and Nepal are cautiously optimistic that the next surge will not be as deadly. So far, 1.5 million Nepalis (5.1% of the population) have been fully vaccinated with either AstraZeneca Covishield, Chinese VeroCell or the single-shot J&J vaccine. Over 2.3 million are partially inoculated.

China is giving another 1.6 million doses of VeroCell, and Nepal is negotiating to buy additional 6 million. Some public health experts now suggest prioritising crowded cities, instead

of aiming for vaccine equity.

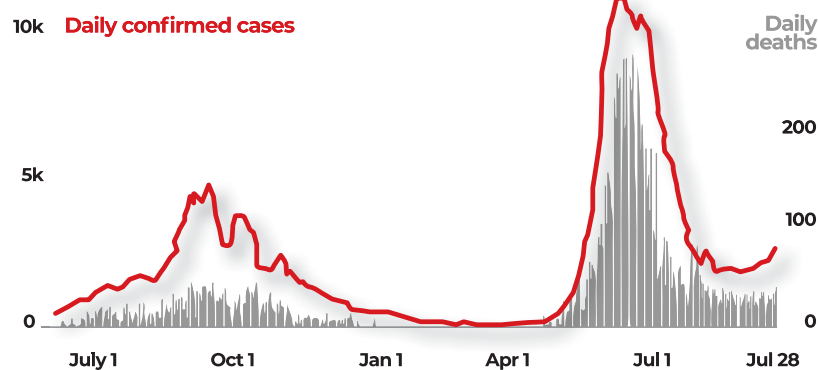
"Highly mobile populations in densely inhabited areas should be vaccinated next. After the second wave, I am convinced they are a much higher risk group," says virologist Pun.

Epidemiologist Sherpa, however, recommends factoring in access to medical services in vaccine strategy. A survey shows that the fatality rate among infected people is highest in remote areas. (Page 4).

Nepal's annual Dasain-Tihar festival season is only two months away. From last year's experience, millions will once more travel from Kathmandu to home districts, spreading the virus all over the country. It will be important to inoculate as many people as possible before the festivals.

Says Sherpa: "Mass inoculation is our way out of this pandemic but let's not forget safety measures, and be prepared for a possible new wave."

Covid-19 trend in Nepal



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Nepal's uneven Covid-19 deaths

More people are dying in remote villages due to limited health care, lack of testing and inequitable vaccination

● Ramesh Kumar

The Covid-19 pandemic has now killed more people than the devastating 2015 earthquake. Officially, over 9,700 Nepalis have died due to the coronavirus in the past year and a half, but the real figure is said to be at least three times more.

At a glance, it seems that densely populated urban centres with the most infections have recorded the highest fatalities. But analysing the available government data shows that the fatality rate among infected patients is higher in remote areas of the country.

In Bagmati province, of every 1,000 Covid patients, 11.9 individuals have lost their lives, but it is 21.1 in Karnali Province. District-wise, Kathmandu saw 9.1 deaths per 1,000 cases while Mustang recorded a whopping 111.9 fatalities per 1,000.

Public health experts blame limited health care facilities in rural Nepal including ICUs, ventilators, drugs and oxygen for Covid-19 treatment for this huge discrepancy. They also have notably fewer doctors, nurses and other paramedics.

"A majority of coronavirus patients recover but most of those who died did not survive because of the lack of medical oxygen and this is also largely due to uneven distribution of health infrastructure," says Bijay Acharya of the Massachusetts General Hospital, also associated with the US Nepal Health Foundation.

He adds: "In many places, patients have died on their way to hospitals or while being moved from one to another. Many more people in the villages have likely passed away unable to access the treatment."

Binita Adhikari, a public health specialist affiliated with the Health Nepal Foundation and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School

of Public Health agrees. "The fatality rate is high in remote Nepal also because many people who need treatment never reached the hospital. The Covid-19 outcome depends on how soon a person is diagnosed, hospitalised and receives treatment," she says.

The fact that the entire Karnali Province has only two functional laboratories for Covid-19 testing (Karnali Academy of Health Sciences in Jumla and Surkhet's Provincial Hospital) means that official figures for total cases in the region are largely under-counted. And this could also have made the fatality rate among confirmed cases higher.

Poor road infrastructure and having to travel distance, sometimes several days, for diagnosis or to access hospital care also adds to the casualties. This also means additional expenses for the poor.

The annual per capita income of people in Karnali is \$606, which is only about half of the national average, and a third of the population there is living below the

poverty line. The region's Human Development Index (HDI) at 0.538 is also much lower than the rest of the country.

Even within Karnali Province, the poorest and the most disadvantaged have been disproportionately affected. The coronavirus mortality in Karnali stands at 2.1%, but in remote Dolpo, the figure rises to 7.01%. There is just one ventilator here at the district hospital, but even that is non-functional in a lack of skilled human resources to operate it. There are only two beds with oxygen.

Similarly, the fatality rates in Mugu, Humla, Rukum East and Salyan were 6.1%, 5.15%, 4.86% and 4.07%, all much higher than the national average of 1.5%. These are also some of Nepal's most economically and socially disadvantaged districts. Dolpo's HDI is 0.4 and Mugu's 0.39.

"It is very likely the total

number of people infected and dying of the pandemic in the region is much higher than reported. Much of this is due to continued lack of testing and contact tracing," says epidemiologist Lhamu Yangchen Sherpa.

Director of Teku Hospital at Kathmandu Anup Bastola agrees: "The high fatality rates in remote districts don't necessarily mean they have more deaths, but that many of them have not had sufficient testing, which means most of the infected people barring those in critical condition didn't reach us."

It is however clear that regions with good health infrastructure, economically sound environment, and with higher human development index are better placed to save those infected.

While Solu, Bhojpur and Ilam districts saw 5.06%, 4.8% and 4.09% of their Covid patients

succumb to the disease, Morang, Chitwan and Kaski reported only 1.02%, 1.25% and 1.52% fatality rates respectively. The figure is even lower for Kathmandu at 0.91%.

Province-wise, after Karnali, Lumbini has the highest Covid death rate at 1.77%. This is followed by Gandaki at 1.73%, with the lowest being Bagmati (1.19%).

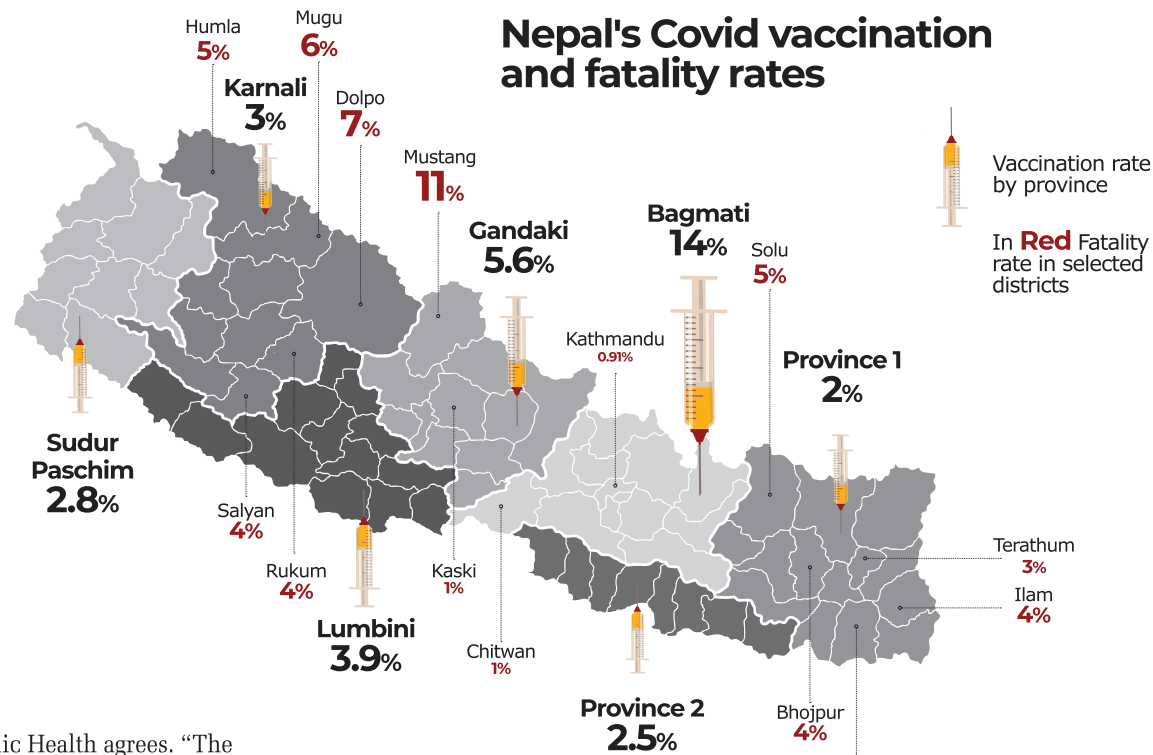
There is also a huge disparity in Nepal's Covid vaccination drive. Of the 1.42 million Nepalis (4.9% of the total population) who have been fully vaccinated, 55.45% of them are from Bagmati Province alone. Karnali accounts for a mere 3.5% of people who have received either both doses of AstraZeneca Covishield or VeroCell or a single shot J&J vaccine.

In other words, 14% of Bagmati residents have been fully inoculated versus 3% of Karnali people. The figure is even lower for Province 1, 2 and Far West where 2.4%, 1.71% and 2.78% of their population have been fully vaccinated.

However, some public health experts have argued that the vaccination drive when doses are scarce should not necessarily aim right now for equity, but focus on high-risk, crowded cities with mobile populations, and regions along the Indian border.

Says Bijay Acharya: "Age alone shouldn't factor into who gets the vaccine first, economic status and social background should also be taken into account to ensure those other than the affluent also benefit. Areas with a high risk of infection and marginalised communities with poor health infrastructure should be equally prioritised."

Nepal government is in a process of procuring six million dose of Pfizer vaccines for teenagers aged 12-18 which will take 6-9 months. Health Ministry is in the final stages of preparing -80 degree Celsius storage facilities in all seven provinces. 🇳🇵



Tama Kosi V

Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) and Citizens Investment Fund have entered a tripartite agreement with Tamakosi Hydropower Company to invest in the 99.8MW Tama Kosi V. They will foot 70% of the Rs16.19 billion cost, the rest will come via public shareholders.

Tama Kosi V is part of the cascade plan of the nearby 456MW Upper Tama Kosi project that will be building dams and sand dredging structures for it. Gates to transport water from the Upper Tama Kosi powerhouse to Tama Kosi V tunnels have already been completed. The project is expected to be completed by 2027, with pre-construction work already underway.

Investment unfriendly

The '2021 Investment Climate Status: Nepal' released by the US Department of State this week identified opportunities to invest in Nepal's energy, tourism, information technology, infrastructure and agriculture sectors. However, it called Nepal's investment climate unfavourable because of political instability, bureaucratic red-tape, rampant corruption and weak legal implementation, taking an example of the failure to pass the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

Dolma Impact Fund

With its initial \$40 million close and strong performance on gender equality, Dolma Impact Fund II has qualified for the 2X Challenge, an initiative of 20 Development Finance Institutions and Multilateral Development Banks to collectively mobilise



\$15 billion in commitments that provide women in developing countries leadership opportunities, quality employment, finance and enterprise support.

Dolma II aims to add to its developmental impact by enabling the economic empowerment of Nepal's women through gender-lens investing. "Admission to the 2X Challenge provides structure and focus on our investment strategy," says CEO of Dolma Management Fund Tim Gocher.



Turkey's Most Valuable Brand

Turkish Airlines has once again been named the country's most valuable brand for 2021, in a survey by an independent valuation consultancy in Turkey. The airline led the list of Top 100 Turkish Brands for the fifth time in a row with a brand value of \$1.61 billion, down 18.7% from last year amid the pandemic. "We are proud to continue our success story of the previous years during the pandemic and being Turkey's Most Valuable Brand once again," says Turkish Airlines CEO Ilker Ayci.

Biswa Poudel in NPC

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has appointed economist Biswa Poudel to head the National Planning Commission. Poudel has a PhD in economics from the University of California at Berkeley, and an engineering masters from a university in Shanghai.

GATE EHL network

Nepal's Global Academy of Tourism and Hospitality (GATE) is now officially part of the network of schools certified by the prestigious Swiss hospitality academy Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne (EHL). "This fine institution already has a solid foundation that meets the aspirations of Nepali students and the needs of the local industry," says Juan Perellon of the EHL Group.

Paper plant

The foundation Stone has been laid for Nepal Pulse and Paper Industries Pvt Ltd in Mohattari district. The Rs1.5 billion investment is being funded by the IME Group's Chandra Prasad Dhakal, Sarraf Group, Sunil Gopal Shrestha and Homnath Gyawali. The plant will produce 75 tons of paper a day and employ 1,000 people.



Cricket on TV

Cricket Association Nepal (CAN) and Dish Media Network Limited have entered an agreement that will see the latter broadcast all upcoming CAN-hosted domestic cricket tournaments, including the PM Cup and Male/Female editions of Mayors' Cup on the Action Sports channel.

Rs37 billion mobile imports

Nepal imported more than 7 million mobile sets worth Rs37 billion last year, more than double the amount the year before. The increase is said to be because of the spread of mobile data service and social media use in the country, as well as online classes and business during the pandemic. The government recently announced that it would tax phones not bought in Nepal, and only phones bought in the country will work.

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PHOTO: NEPAL PICTURE LIBRARY/BADRI BINOD DHUNGANA COLLECTION

The district heads
Women's Class
Organisation: Kusum
Kumari Sharma on the
top row (center).

Coping with patriarchy

Tracking the struggle of women in a Nepali clan across four generations



COMMENT
Bhumi Ghimiré

Using old family photographs, I have been able to trace the history of patriarchy over four generations in my clan, right down to the present socio-political milieu in Nepal.

Perhaps it is the intimacy with which I know my family as well as my country—as a child, as I grew into an adult, a daughter, and now a mother—that makes me want to do this. I have dilly-dallied in writing about these things, and indeed questioned my very right to even publish it. After all, I was born and raised in Kathmandu, and come from a privileged Brahmin background. Such a pedigree makes me an advantaged Nepali.

However, as I once was told, “It is as much of a crime to commit injustice as it is not to oppose it.” The state of most Nepali women in their social, cultural, official, and legal capacities is so appalling and alarming that would be a crime not to speak up.

In 2013, motivated by the pristine image of Nepal abroad, my French husband proposed that we go live in Nepal. By that point, I had lived for over a decade in various cities in Europe. I missed being in the Nepali cultural sphere, speaking Nepali, eating Nepali food, so I readily agreed.

Most of my immediate family were living abroad at the time, and little did I know that without their network and support, living in Nepal would prove to be quite an ordeal — especially when legal and official work needed to be done.

I was aware that I would face some adverse cultural shock, but nothing could

have prepared me for the degree of state-imposed patriarchy that we were about to experience. Little did I know that a daughter who is ‘given away’ (especially to a foreigner) would be viewed at par with an asylum-seeker by the state and the bureaucracy if she wanted to return.

On the maternal side of my family in my मामाघर, we are now the fourth generation of women who have had to survive and deal with adversities in a patriarchal society with very little support from male members.

Historically, the father figures in the clan have passed away very tragically and prematurely, have been absent or severely disabled, leaving the women to survive and carry on, earn a living, and raise children after a certain point or for long periods of time.

Growing up with my mother’s side of the family in a household full of women, I was shown that women could be strong, career-oriented, free and become anyone they wished. Because of her upbringing in Kathmandu, Moscow, and Paris, my mother made sure that I was open to the world but raised in Nepal with Nepali values. Consequently, it made me confident enough to feel that I could fly anywhere.

Like every child, I too felt that these unconventional, strong-willed, colourful and opinionated members of my predominantly female family were the norm, and as much as I am grateful for that, it did not prepare me for my return from Europe as an adult, and in November 2013 as a woman married to a foreigner.



PHOTO

The Neupanes

This photograph of the Neupane family (*see above*) is of my maternal grandmother’s side, who lived in Kalaiya in the western Tarai. Standing third from the left is my mother’s mother Kusum Kumari Sharma, with her four sisters surrounding their widowed mother Bashundhara Neupane in a very Jane Austen-esque setting.

Her fifth and youngest daughter is yet to be married off, the crescent moon hairpin being the traditional Hindu adornment of married women in Nepal in the community at the time. The Neupanes were a hill-based family who had migrated to the Tarai in the 1930s for better living opportunities, like many others.

Basundhara’s spouse held the position



PHOTO COURTESY: VIJAYA RAJ SHARMA/NEPAL PICTURE LIBRARY (WITH INPUT FROM VIJAYA RAJ SHARMA AND KALPANA GHIMIRE)

of डिङ्ग्रा administrator in Parsauni, one of the most fertile areas of Nepal. This prestigious status gave the family financial ease, and an overall comfortable life. In 1937, tragedy struck — literally, in the form of a lightning bolt. Basundhara’s husband Chudamani Upadhya Neupane along with his 13-member team were taking shelter under a tree during a rainstorm.

The tree caught fire, everyone was knocked unconscious, and only Chudamani did not wake up. Basundhara, along with their 14-year-old son, rushed to the spot. After the last rites, Chudamani’s nephew took advantage of the situation and pocketed all valuables and ownership documents left behind in the house. Customary to Nepali culture, the

Circa 1941. Standing from left: Yagyamuni Sharma, Tara Devi Sharma, Kusum Kumari Sharma, Hem Kumari ‘Gyanu’ Sharma. Sitting on chair: Basundhara Neupane Sharma, on stool: Vijaya Sharma.

superstitious finger-pointing of family misfortunes is automatically attributed as the moral or karmic culpability of a third person—mostly a woman.

My great-grandmother was accused as being a लोखे टोक्ने. The fact that she later lost her son, the only remaining male member of the family, made the situation even worse. We should be grateful for her eldest son-in-law Dhundi Raj Sharma, then a young lawyer, who came to the rescue from Ilam to save the family from further harm, and settled them down in Kalaiya.

Without this help, she would have lost property, all prestige and indeed all standing (प्रतिष्ठा, इज्जत) in society. Despite this ordeal, the widowed Basundhara was a strong-willed and determined enough woman to go to her husband’s family and obtain her share of the family inheritance — something that many women in Nepal do not dare to claim even today.

A couple of years later, Basundhara’s daughter, my then 16-year-old grandmother Kusum Kumari Sharma, got married. The fact that she had received an informal education was a problem for the members of her husband’s family, and she was packed off to her maternal home for seven years.

Such a situation even today would be considered a shame in many Nepali families. Inspired by her eldest sister and activist Tara Devi Sharma, and her lawyer husband, she got involved in the first wave of Nepal’s feminist movement.

Tara Devi Sharma went on to become a member of the सल्लाहकार सभा (Advisory Council) in democratic Nepal. In 1954, she and fellow activists submitted a bill on the ‘Marriage system and provisions for a woman’s right regarding marriage’.

As for my grandmother, she was later united with her husband Bal Chandra Sharma, a founding member of the Nepali Congress movement. She even joined the party in 1947.

Her education foundation, coupled with her social awareness, prompted her to write many articles in significant magazines like युगबाणी (*Yugbani*). Despite her involvement in Nepal’s growing feminist movement, she had to face major discriminatory injustice much later in life based on the legal provision on nationality registration. The spouse of a public figure, albeit widowed, and fatherless, she could not obtain Nepali citizenship.

As for my grandmother, only when her son obtained his citizenship was she able to get a citizenship certificate through him. Had she had only daughters, she would have been stateless.

My mother Kalpana Ghimire, earning a living and raising a child on her own, also found herself facing similar challenges much later in life. After her broken marriage in 1982, fatherless and husbandless, she found herself debarred from any property rights.

At that time, with her child being female, she would be only entitled to Rs30,000 as marriage expenses from her husband’s property—and being once married, she had no claim to her parental property.

Thanks to her education, determination, and her mother’s support, she worked, raised me and earned respect in society. Another major worry and predicament for her was trying to get my own citizenship in 1998.

She approached Usha Nepal, the powerful and assertive Kathmandu CDO, whose personal intervention unblocked the process. Thus, like her maternal ancestors, my mother also faced both social and institutional patriarchy, and overcame it.

I often get asked why I feel so personally about Nepalis who are undocumented. Here is why: because I was so close to becoming stateless myself. My mother would have shaken mountains to find a solution for my citizenship documents, but the feeling of humiliation and rejection by the state is something one cannot forget.

To this day, I find it daunting to enter the Babar Mahal CDO office, and by extension any government office, to get any sort of official paperwork done.

Born without a visa

My first shocking encounter with a Nepali bureaucrat was upon my return in 2013, when I had to go to the Immigration office in Dilli Bazar to get my husband’s family visa. I was admonished with a Nepali sermon that returning to Nepal to live in my mother’s माइती home was unjust to my husband’s घर and that I should be taking care them as I now ‘belonged’ to them.

I realised that the Hindu marriage कन्या दान ceremony is still taken officially and very seriously in this 21st century globalised world. It seems that the mindset of the maledom has not changed since Nepal got unified in the 18th century.

Worse was to follow. In April 2017, we had the great joy of welcoming our little baby boy. I wanted my half-French child to be born in Nepal so that it would be his जन्म भूमि (birthplace) even though he would not be eligible to Nepali nationality as per Nepal’s Constitution that that does not allow Nepali women to pass their nationality onto their children.

When my child was two months old, I contacted the Immigration Office concerning formalities to be carried out for a half-Nepali, half-French infant child. To my great surprise and shock, I was asked to pay approximately Rs10,000 fine as according to rules, as the infant French citizen had stayed in Nepal without a visa.

Here was a baby, born to a Nepali mother in Nepal, being charged a hefty fine because he was born without a visa. Under normal circumstances, I would probably have taken a strong stand, argued, negotiated and attempted to get this fine annulled, but after an IVF pregnancy, a baby born out of Caesarean section, I was exhausted.

Given what my female ancestors, all belonging to a privileged ‘upper’ caste hill family and myself had to go through, I dare not imagine what Dalit, Tarai and hill ethnic women, especially single women, have to struggle with.

The state pays tokenism to women by placing them in positions of power, but as Pakistani writer and activist Fatima Bhutto says, the position of women in a country or society should be judged by the state of women outside of power.

Somewhere between 4-8.4 million people in Nepal are stateless, mostly because of gender inequality. A dear friend Deidre Breannan, who is doing a PhD on Nepal’s situation with statelessness and patriarchy, says Nepal is one of the few countries besides Malaysia with such a large number of people who are stateless because of gender inequality.

Indeed, besides Malaysia, Nepal is on an embarrassing list of 26 other countries that do not allow mothers to pass their nationality onto their children: Bahrain, Barbados, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Togo, the United Arab Emirates and others.

As researcher Abha Lal argues, Nepal’s location as a ‘yam between two stones’ means that we define ourselves by what we are not: not Indian, and not Tibetan. This remains in the DNA of all those governing the political rhetoric, and reveals a dire problem in the Nepali identity to this day.

Travel bans or restrictions are placed on women wanting to go abroad for work or leisure out of fear of human trafficking, as opposed to creating employment for these women back home. A village in Chitwan is imposing a ban on women migrant workers who have babies aged less than two years at home.

Women have to be victims because of the government’s own acts of omission. Earlier this year, Prime Minister K P Oli, in a desperate move to stay in power, created an ordinance in May allowing children of citizens by birth and children of Nepali mothers to obtain Nepali Citizenship.

There are 45,000 such cases pending, and instead of debating the issue in Parliament, it was rushed through to appease a faction of the Janata Samajbadi Party that supported Oli in a floor test in the House.

Day by day, Nepali women are gaining in their fight against social and culturally-rooted patriarchy. We do not face the same discrimination that our mothers did, but it is a source of great shame that the Nepali state has institutionalised gender discrimination.

Is our Constitution, our democratic pretensions just window dressing? How, with such a retrograde mentality, are we going to catch up with the rest of the world? 🇳🇵

@BhumiGhimir

ABOUT TOWN

EVENTS



Art exhibition

Siddhartha Gallery's upcoming exhibition Where The Wild Things Are will showcase ceramic artwork by a family of artists: parents Gopal Kalapremi Shrestha and Yamuna Shrestha as well as son Shashank Kalapremi Shrestha. 4 August-3 September, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited

Play screening

Shilpee Theatre's new play Anupasthit Teen (No Exit) directed by Ghimire Yubaraj, translated by Avatar Pathak with Bipin Karki, Usha Rajak, Pabi Tra Khadka and Manang Lawoti will be at Gothale Theatre as well as online. 2-4 August, Gothale Theatre, 5:30pm onwards

La.Lit contest

Send in an English language short story of 2,000 to 5,000 words for the 5th edition of La.Lit magazine's Writing Nepal: A Short Story Contest. Details on La.Lit magazine's website. Submission deadline: 15 October

Photography competition

Photography 4 Humanity, an international photo contest created by David Clark Cause in collaboration with UN Human Rights, has called on photographers around the world to send in pictures 'illustrating courage, despair, hope, injustice, compassion, human rights failures or victories.' Only photos taken after 1 September 2020 are eligible. Deadline: 15 August

Labim Bazaar

From fresh produce to crafts by local businesses, there's something for everyone at the weekly market at Labim Mall. Safety guidelines apply. Saturdays, 9 am, Labim Mall

DINING



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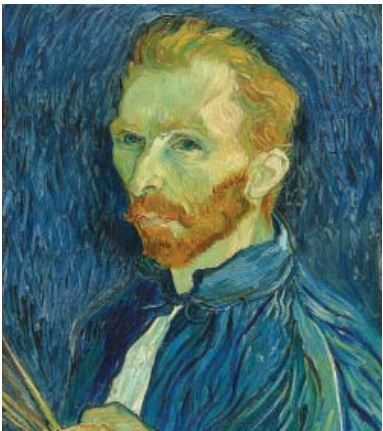
Discover cultural heritage from 3,000 museums, galleries, libraries and archives across Europe. Head to https://www.europeana.eu/en, read about historical places, and watch exhibitions, photographs, ancient manuscripts and more.

Virtual Museum Tours

Google Arts & Culture has teamed up with over 2,500 museums and galleries around the world to bring everyone virtual tours and online exhibits of some of the world's most famous museums. Visit the website.

Global Nepali Museum

Global Nepali museum is the first database of its kind in Nepal that features Nepal's art and artefacts housed in museums around the world. Go to https://globalnepalimuseum.com and learn about sculptures, paintings, as well as contemporary art, and other Nepali cultural objects.



Van Gogh Museum

See the works of Vincent Van Gogh up close through a virtual tour of the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, home to the largest collection of his artwork. More at https://360stories.com/amsterdam/story/van-gogh-museum

Comic Museums

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

Sweet Fix

Keep hot, humid afternoons at bay with healthy handcrafted popsicles. Get the Coconut Splash, Watermelon Lime, and Blackberry Yogurt pops. Head to Facebook for details or order from the Sweet Fix website. Basantapur, 9828583465

OR2K

Dive in and lap up the refreshing Matbucha or roll along with the falafel grenade from this exquisite Turkish restaurant. The beaten copper bowls at OR2K will take every visitor's palate on a flight to the middle-east. Thamel (01) 4422097

Nina's

Nina's has been a favourite of those seeking a juicy burger and steak. The service is unparalleled, and the quality of the dishes unmatched. Maharajgunj, 9851130043

GETAWAY



Riverside Springs Resort

Riverside Springs Resort, away from the bustle of the city, offers a vast swimming pool, exciting activities like horseback riding and rafting, cosy rooms and attentive service. Kurintar, 9801801336

Dom Himalaya

Dom Himalaya Hotel offers a space for visitors to indulge in traditional Nepali cuisine, relax with Tibetan singing bowls and bask in the vibrant chaos of Thamel. Thamel (01) 4263554

Park Village Resort

Spend the weekend hanging out by the pool with a cold beverage in hand at Park Village Resort, in a quiet corner of Kathmandu. Budhanilkantha, (01) 4370286

Marriott Hotel

Take a dip into Marriott's refreshing infinity pool. As for the food, the shrimp cocktail is a must. Naxal (01) 4443040



Dhulikhel Mountain Resort

This resort blends culture and comfort seamlessly with well-designed bungalows and Newa accents visible throughout. Dhulikhel, 9801168962



The Workshop Eatery

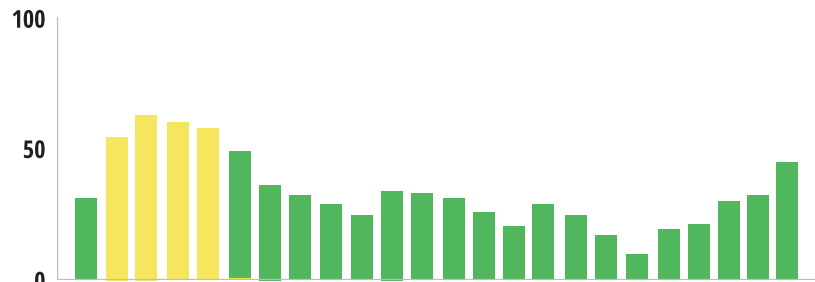
Choose from The Workshop Eatery's selection of yummy doughnuts and bagels. Try the burrito bowl and Workshop BBQ chicken sandwich, or get the assorted box of doughnuts. Kupondole, 9860431504



The monsoon is now maturing into middle-age where it will not just be the moist air from the sea, but also ambient water vapour feeding afternoon convection systems. Expect sustained squalls, sometimes heavy, on Friday and passing showers over the weekend with periods of hot sunshine. The Arabian Sea low pressure is moving northeast and will mostly affect central and western Nepal.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27° 19°	28° 19°	28° 19°

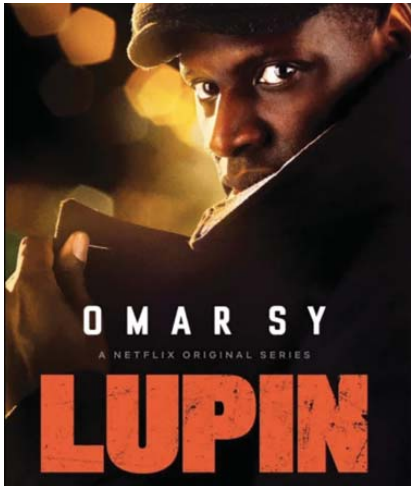
AIR QUALITY INDEX



9AM 28 July to 8AM 29 July measured at US Embassy, Phobar Darbar

Not much to add on the Air Quality Index (AQI) front. Heavy traffic and open garbage burning are the two main factors pumping harmful suspended particles below 2.5 microns into Kathmandu air. As we can see in the hourly AQI measurements at Phora Darbar that are posted on www.nepalitimes.com, the AQI improves briefly, dropping into the 'Good' Green band after every passing shower, but is soon back to the 'Moderate' Yellow band above AQI 50.

OUR PICK



Created by George Kay and François Uzan, the 2021 French mystery thriller *Lupin* follows professional thief Assane Diop, who takes his inspiration from the exploits of fictional French master thief Arsène Lupin. Assane's father, a Senegalese immigrant, hangs himself after being framed for stealing a priceless necklace by the powerful Hubert Pellegrini, leaving his teenage son orphaned. Years later, Assane seeks to destroy the Pellegrini family to avenge his father. Stars Omar Sy, Ludivine Sagnier, Hervé Pierre, Nicole Garcia, Clotilde Hesme and more.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



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सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



Digital migrants

The advantages for Nepalis of working abroad by staying at home

Nepal has plenty of programmers well-versed in every coding language, designers experienced in creating logos and websites, project managers who can execute tasks on time, data experts and analysts who are able to help IT startups successfully service their clients and grow their business.

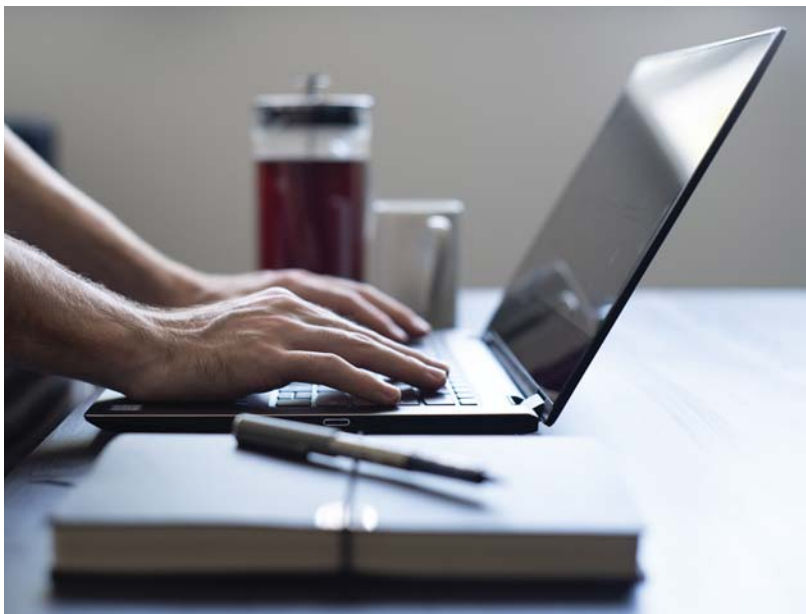


TECH AWAY
Saniaa Shah

Where did these talented Nepali minds mushroom from? Digital education, online training, web exposure and IT colleges, for starters. They all work from home, using a reliable laptop and an Internet connection to earn in dollars and euros.

By freelancing online, young Nepali professionals have been using their digital skills to earn more than the monthly salary in a full-time office-based job. While the perks and benefits of employment at a company, public or private, are not negligible, working projects with open hours for clients based abroad provides good earnings. With freelance portal sites like Upwork, Fiverr and Freelancer that help clients find talent worldwide, sealing a freelance deal is easier than ever.

The aggregator website



plays a big role in keeping such transactions fair, professional and visible. Clients can browse freelancers' portfolios, applicants can offer quotations and bid for a project in a systematic fashion, and the work can be assigned, tracked and delivered throughout to increase accountability and ensure productivity.

1 PayPal, Payoneer, Western
Union and direct wire transfers to
bank accounts are all valid payment
methods that help Nepalis receive
international payments while
sitting at their work desk at home.
The more efficient and talented the
professional, the higher the number
of projects per month, therefore the
higher the income.

The opportunities seem endless, given the working professionals' willingness to forego sleep, their social lives and a desire to lead an

active lifestyle (considering that this kind of job usually warrants long hours of sitting in front of a computer screen).

But what about those who enjoy the stability of a salaried job, working face-to-face with a supervisor who leads the project, and the security of a reputed company as an employer?

Well, in this digital age, there is a solution to everything online. Companies based in Australia, South Africa, North America and the UK would much rather hire professionals working remotely from Nepal than their own country, given the lower pay scales and hard-working habits that come with the region.

Website developers, graphic designers, SEO experts, data entry officers, UX/UI designers, content writers, social media managers,

legal advisers and financial consultants are all able to find employment with companies that are more than happy to not pay for expensive commutes, provide lunch cafeterias or invest in quality office furniture for their cloud-based outsourced employees.

A home loan business based in New South Wales, a truckers' insurance firm in San Francisco and an animation company in California have all found talented professionals at affordable rates in Nepal, and hired them after doing several rounds of background checks, without ever meeting these candidates in person.

The HR executive making the hires, too, may be a third country national, and none of it is of concern, as long as they have been properly trained to keep things professional, complete with an accent to match.

What is the bad news here, you may ask. Well, digital migration causes as much of a brain drain as old-school migration. Without even issuing passports, landing work visas or buying expensive flight tickets, droves of young, smart and capable Nepalis are able to get employed abroad and escape joining local businesses and industries.

This means that Nepal-based animation houses, website development companies and digital marketing agencies do not have access to the workforce that is foreign-employed. For all we know, the best digital skill professionals in Nepal could already be under the wing of some cloud-based company that works as the middleman between businesses scaling up and data-computing digital workers.

On a personal level, taking on such online jobs can be taxing for an individual if the working hours are odd or keeping to a different time zone. Reporting to work at 5AM to match Australian hours

is still possible, but clocking in at 8PM and working through the night for a US customer is a challenge not everybody can rise to.

Quite literally, the body clock goes haywire, affecting the digestive system, menstrual cycle and mood for many people who struggle to also balance their domestic lives with such contrasting office hours. Maintaining marital relationships and sharing parenting responsibilities can be tough with work hours that are the opposite of a regular 9-5.

The way remittance earnings have shouldered Nepal's economy, online jobs could be the way forward. People can help ease their family's financial troubles, save up to invest in assets like vehicles and property, and put their children through private schools.

With lower pay grades, difficult bosses, office politics and potential discrimination (based on gender, caste or ethnicity) all being factors that may come into play with working a physical job with a local organisation in Nepal, there is every reason to explore online work opportunities.

Working with international teams allows for new and exciting data management software, project management systems and dynamic co-workers that make work life smooth and ideal.

Why give up all that for the idea that talent must directly contribute to a local industry or Nepal-born business startup? The argument is strong, and this is only just the start to a decades-long debate on the digital-driven movement of opening up to global markets spearheaded by the Internet. 🇳🇵

Saniaa Shah runs Studio Aakar, a film production studio. Her marketing career helped her develop a keen interest in tech and digital culture.

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Akram from Sunsari needs a vaccine certificate to go to Qatar. He came at 6AM twice, and failed to get his document. Just to be sure, he came in on Saturday afternoon at 4PM and waited 28 hours to be first to get his certificate on Sunday morning.

PHOTOS : UPASANA KHADKA

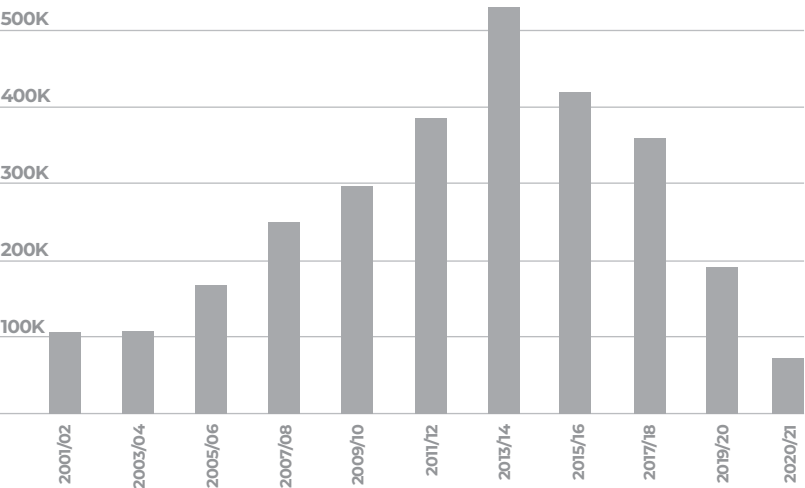
Nepalis queueing up

Vaccine certificates are just another in a long checklist of permits and authorisations for Nepali workers headed overseas



Nepal's vaccine certificate is just a letter with a rubber stamp, whereas Indian migrant workers get ones with a QR code to a vaccine data base.

Labor Approvals Issued (Renewal Excluded)



After getting his single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Yogendra lined up the following morning from 2AM at Teku to get his vaccine certified so he could go to Saudi Arabia to join his job. But his letter was missing a stamp, and he had to return the next day.



Like Yogendra, thousands of workers have packed queues at the Teku Hospital to get their certificates, with fears that the crowds could themselves spread the virus.

“There is a lot of mixed information and confusion, and the officials do not seem to know what to do,” says Yogendra. “And how can we be safe in these crowds?”

Yogendra said “cautious goodbyes” to his family in Doti and travelled to Kathmandu, not sure if he could finally leave. Distressed and demoralised, he has had to spend more money extending his stay to finish his paperwork.

Netra from Jhapa is also going to Saudi Arabia, and got to Teku Hospital only at 6AM by which time there was already a long line, and he had to go back.

“Tonight, I will come at 9PM so I am one of the first ones in line,” he told me. “Even 2AM might be too late.” For Yogendra, Netra and

many other workers getting ready to leave, it is difficult to get around in unfamiliar Kathmandu and work the system to get all the required travel documents. “My legs are sore from all the walking and standing,” says Netra.

Akram (pictured above) from Sunsari did not want to take any chances, so instead of lining up at 2AM for his vaccine certificate, he was already at Teku at 4PM on Saturday to be in front of the line for Sunday morning.

After getting his jab last week, he came to Teku twice, but missed his chance to get his certificate both the times because he came only at 6AM. This time, he was waiting 28 hours before the counter opened.

Akram is headed to Qatar to work as an office cleaner and will be earning \$360 a month. This is his first time in Kathmandu, and he slept on and off all night while squatting under a tin roof to keep dry in the rain.

The security guards at Teku took to Akram for his determination and grit, and they had given him a nickname: ‘Number One’. By 10PM on Saturday, Akram had been joined by others who also wanted to be ahead on the line.

Among them was Gopal Thapa Magar from Ramechhap bound for Saudi Arabia, and a returnee migrant Dinesh DC from Dang. The three bonded while waiting, and took turns to have tea in a nearby shop as they waited for dawn to break.

From Sunday, to prevent

overcrowding in Teku, the government will provide vaccination certificates from four hospitals in Kathmandu.

For Nepali migrant workers, the vaccine certificate is just the latest in a long checklist of permits, certificates and authorisations to complete.

But such is the desperation because of the lack of job opportunities at home during the pandemic that despite the harrowing obstacles, workers like Yogendra, Netra and Akram cannot wait to leave.

For the first time in two decades, the number of annual labour approvals fell below 100,000 to just over 72,000 in 2020-21. This drop reflects the shrinking opportunities for Nepali job seekers who have relied on migration to break out of intergenerational poverty.

The reasons for the historic low numbers are fallout from the pandemic and continued hiring freezes and travel bans to some countries. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE accounted for 80% of labour approvals in 2020-21, while few workers went to Malaysia and Kuwait which had consistently been among top destination countries for Nepali overseas workers.

Malaysia halted recruitment of all foreign workers indefinitely since early last year, while Kuwait red-listed Nepal for public health reasons since the early days of the pandemic until recently.

The drop in annual outflow of workers paints an incomplete picture: nearly 500,000 Nepali workers were repatriated from all over the world with majority from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia in the past year. And a significant number of Nepalis abroad chose to stay on their jobs.

However, there are no reliable estimates of the total number of Nepalis working overseas. According to Malaysian government data obtained by Nepali Times, the total number of Nepalis there dropped from 300,000 at end-2019 to just over 160,000 in 2021. But this excludes undocumented Nepalis in Malaysia, whose numbers have grown significantly since the pandemic.

Employers there have been hesitant to send back workers due to worker shortage and hiring freeze, delays in receiving exit permits or because of unaffordable tickets.

Since migrant workers do ‘essential’ jobs, there is still demand for them in certain sectors. Recovery of emigration will require Nepal to be more strategic about exploiting these constricted opportunities.

For example, despite many job opportunities in Saudi Arabia, recruitment has been affected over the past year because of delays or temporary obstructions in ‘demand attestation’, a mandatory requirement in the recruitment process. Similarly, embassies accredited to countries like Turkey,

Poland and Croatia have also not been proactive about demand attestation.

For European countries where there are delays with job demand letter approvals by Nepali embassies, the share of workers obtaining individual labour approvals instead of institutional approvals is high even when the recruitment is facilitated by recruiters.

This means recruiting agencies cannot be held liable in case of problems with the worker’s contract or safety. Misuse of approvals can be costly because recruitment costs are high for these countries, aspirants are easier to lure and European countries are fertile for trafficking.

With Covid-19, maintaining a balance between facilitating recruiters to play a critical intermediation role with regulatory actions to curb malpractice and exploitation of desperate job seekers has become even more challenging.

Recruiters complain that the government has not acknowledged their contributions or the impact of Covid-19 on their businesses. Last fiscal year, almost a third of the 853 recruiters in Nepal were unable to obtain labour approvals for a single worker, while about a fifth deployed less than 10 workers over the entire year (See figure).

While regulation is necessary, it can sometimes unreasonably inconvenience the employer, recruiter or migrant worker

all night for proof of jab



without addressing, or correcting the problems. In many cases, regulations create loopholes to worsen the safety and welfare of migrants.

For example, attestation of employment demand letters is a welcome move to curb fraudulent job orders which now needs to also scrutinise employers' commitment to Covid-19 health protocols.

But its effectiveness rests on proactive embassies to carry out the attestation services of rewarding job orders expeditiously and fairly. Otherwise it prevents gainful employment, or worse, compels migrants to bypass the legal system.

Recruiters have not been able to smoothly deploy workers to Qatar. The Qatar Visa Center (QVC) was set up as a 'one stop' window to facilitate medical tests and biometrics, but is accused of lack of transparency. In the past, a handful of medical centres approved by the government could be used for the pre-departure medical tests.

Now, QVC alone cannot keep up with applicants and the backlog from the lockdown months, impacting over 7,000 Qatar-bound Nepalis, says Sujit Shrestha of NAFEA (National Association of Foreign Employment Agencies).

The QVC management has been accused of providing appointments selectively to well-connected manpower companies. "If we take an appointment in July, we get dates for September and October," says Shrestha. "How can we work like that when Qatari employers are in a hurry to recruit workers to complete their projects delayed during the pandemic?"

Nepali and Qatari authorities need to investigate these allegations against QVC and ensure it operates as intended.

The latest is the challenge of vaccination. Inconsistent vaccines requirement, authenticity of vaccine certification and wide availability of vaccines have been problems. The J&J Janssen jabs are ideal for migrant workers because a single dose saves outbound migrants time, and it is recognised by destination countries — unlike the Chinese jabs that are not accepted in countries like Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the J&J jabs exempt migrants from expensive institutional quarantine in destination countries. But it has come at a cost as reflected in Akram's experience. Shrestha of NAFEA says that it would have

been much easier if, like other countries, vaccine certificates had a unique QR code for authentication.

Major destination countries have launched their own mobile apps that will be used mandatorily including to enter public spaces and workplaces. There is uncertainty about the acceptability of paper-based vaccine documents that are being given out in Nepal.

"This has to be a continuous effort, not a one-off initiative, with dedicated vaccination camps for migrant workers that will also involve DOFE officials so workers with jabs get certification as well. Everyday hundreds of migrants will require jabs, and there is no clear policy for them," Shrestha says.

The uncertainty and lack of coordination in the vaccination drive has financial and time costs, but there is also the invisible mental toll it takes on workers wanting a better shot at life. Nepal needs better labour diplomacy, inter-ministerial coordination and most

importantly, empathy for migrants.

The Labour Ministry is currently without a minister in the new government, and over the course of the pandemic there have been four Labour Ministers, including the last two who were in office just for a few days.


Despite all this, remittances have so far defied expectations. Nepal Rastra Bank data for the past 11 months show that remittance saw a 12.6% increase to Rs871 billion compared to 2020-21, but a 3.2% increase compared to 2019-20.

We are quick to celebrate the resilience of remittances amid a pandemic and migrants as 'heroes', when they are the first ones abroad to send us oxygen cylinders and medical supplies. 🇳🇵

Upasana Khadka writes this column Labour Mobility every month in Nepali Times analysing trends affecting Nepal's workers abroad.

Om Thapa and Niraj Lama helped with reporting this story.

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WHY DO SO MANY NEPALIS HAVE HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

Covid stress and high sodium intake is leading to an epidemic of hypertension, triggering other disorders

● Sonia Awale

The past year-and-half since the Covid-19 outbreak, Nepal's limited health resources all had a singular focus. But now that the second wave is waning and the lockdown has been eased, hospitals are once again flooded with patients with diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and kidney ailments.

Many of these patients had left these conditions untreated, and doctors say nursing them back to health will be more complicated. One of the most common disorders is hypertension or high blood pressure, which has become an epidemic.

Hypertension is a silent killer and one of the most common causes of chronic conditions like kidney damage that are often too costly to treat for the majority of Nepalis. Now, mental stress due to Covid has also added to the problem.

"Hypertension makes up for the majority of patients in hospitals these days now that the lockdown has been relaxed," says cardiologist Prakash Regmi. "Also worrying is that many of these are new patients coming in due to Covid-related stress, a large number of people who had their blood pressure under control previously after treatment are also relapsing."

To be sure, Nepal has been seeing a dramatic rise in hypertension patients even before the pandemic – some of them in their teens and 20s. A paper published in March in the *International Journal of Hypertension*, shows that since 2000, the hypertension rate in Nepal has been increasing at 3.5% per decade, and 44.7% of Nepali men will be suffering from hypertension by 2025.

The study also found that high blood pressure is disproportionately

affecting men, the elderly, those without formal education, and those who reside in urban areas, and seems to be most common in Gandaki Province.

Worldwide, an estimated 1.13 billion people have hypertension, and it is responsible for 9.4 million deaths globally every year. In 2015, 1 in 4 men and 1 in 5 women had elevated blood pressure.

In Nepal, close to one-third of the adult population has some form of hypertension, but in urban centres the figure is as high as 40%, with 25% in rural areas suffering from it.

There is no specific cause of hypertension, but its biggest risk factor is high sodium intake. A survey in 2020 revealed that on average, the mean dietary salt intake of a Nepali per day is 13.3 mg. Most of the world consumes double the WHO recommended 5g of daily salt intake, increasing the risk of heart disease and strokes, which kills some 3 million people annually worldwide.

"Traditionally Nepalis have a preference for salty food, but now with higher consumption of processed and junk food, our salt intake has grown," says public health expert Aruna Uprety, adding that the sodium content in packaged foods is often much higher than what companies claim.

In May WHO (World Health Organisation) released a new set of global benchmarks for sodium levels that will act as a guide for countries and industry to reduce sodium content in more than 60 categories of processed foods, in line with the global target of reducing salt intake by 30% and hypertension by 25%, both by 2025.

Another prominent risk factor is mental stress and lack of physical exercise, both of which have been exacerbated with people staying at home for months and under the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Family history of hypertension also plays a significant role in an individual developing high blood pressure, as does smoking and drinking alcohol.

Undetected hypertension, and non-medication to control it, can lead to other disorders like stroke, heart disease, kidney failure, etc.

Despite the huge burden of the disease on public health and the economy, treatment of hypertension is ill-managed. Half of the patients are never diagnosed because often times there are no prior symptoms.

And of the 50% who are diagnosed with high blood pressure, half ignore their condition and get no treatment. Of the remaining, 25% do get some kind of treatment but half of them again do not follow-up or take the correct dose of medication.

"All in all only about 10% of hypertension patients get proper treatment in Nepal. Lack of proper health monitoring system, as well as misconceptions about life-long medications, hasn't helped," says cardiologist Prakash Regmi. "This often leads to a point where treatment is either too expensive, or even unmanageable."

Hypertension is first and foremost a lifestyle disease with strong ties to a possible failure of crucial organs in the human body. Its prevention and control are heavily dependent on an individual's choice of diet.

A state-sponsored robust awareness campaign to focus on preventive measures and a strong healthcare system are urgently needed to reduce the epidemic of hypertension.

Says public health expert Aruna Uprety: "Mandatory blood pressure check-ups for certain age groups at fixed intervals is a good place to start. It goes a long way in reducing the cost of the disease and human lives." 🇳🇵

STAGES OF HYPERTENSION

- **Normal:** Less than 120/80 mm Hg
- **Prehypertension (Elevated):** Systolic between 120-129 and diastolic less than 80
- **Stage 1 (Moderate):** Systolic between 130-139 or diastolic between 80-89
- **Stage 2 (Severe):** Systolic at least 140 or diastolic at least 90 mm Hg
- **Hypertensive crisis:** Systolic over 180 and/or diastolic over 120

TYPES OF HYPERTENSION

- **Primary or essential:** Most common high blood pressure among adults. No specific cause but risk factors include diet, age, physical activity and genetics.
- **Secondary:** Up to 10% of hypertension is secondary. Most often caused by another medical condition or the use of certain medicines.



RISK FACTORS

- High salt/sodium intake
WHO recommendation: 5gm/day
- Mental stress
- Lack of physical exercise

WHO recommendation: at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity



MONIKA DEUPALA

Hi-Level Political Mechanisation

Nepal is serious about democracy, and that is why we have to keep restoring it every decade or so because we believe in government for the people, by the people, and for the people in government.

We also put our faith in reincarnation, and that explains the pressure from some quarters to put the resurrection of the monarchy to a referendum vote, and await His Majesty's Second Coming.

It is a sign of a well-functioning and mature democracy that parliamentary affairs are run by committees. When a dispute cannot be settled without comrades coming to blows, they set up a Special Committee which immediately forms a Sub-Committee to address grievances, and which decides to form a Task Force that will oversee a Working Group made up of members of an Expert Panel.

This being Nepal, even the membership of the Special Committee will be challenged in the Supreme Court, and that is when they will have to establish a Dispute Resolution Caucus made up of Caucasian males.

And when there is a dispute in the Dispute Resolution Caucus, Nepal's leaders can fall back on extra-Constitutional means to resolve ego clashes and malcontent members ticked off because they did not get to be made Minister of Midwifery and Animal Husbandry as a reward for helping topple the previous regime.

And that is exactly what Prime Minister Dubya has gone and done. To balance both disgruntled and gruntled factions of the five-party alliance, he has constituted a

three-member High-level Political Mechanism to decide who gets to be minister of what.

This Unholy Trinity is made up of individuals who think they should be in power but aren't. PKD was PM twice, and sorely misses it. MKN is still grumpy even though he toppled KPO. And SBD has found out that one can be prime minister five times in this country even if one loses an election.

Maybe we do need new mechanics to fix this mechanism called Nepal. Could it be that the three leaders are so high-level that they need supplemental oxygen just to climb up the stairs at Paris Danda? Soon, there is going to be a power struggle about who is the highest among the high-level members of the Mechanism, the Grand Ayatollah of the Mechanists.

Our best bet may be to set up a Not-so-high-level Non-political Mechanism (NSHLNPM) to appoint ministers by lottery to a Jumbo Cabinet. We are on the right track, though, going by making the owner of a hospital chain the Health Technocrat. In the same manner, the Educationist Minister should be none other than the Chair of PABSON, the Hydropowerful Minister can be the CEO of IPPAN, the Physical Infrastructure Minister should go to the Chairperson of the Federation of Tipper Truck Owners of Nepal.

Nepal's problems are so intractable that thank goodness we have a fall back option: an Even-Higher-Level Political Mechanism that includes India, China and the G7.



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