Refugee families from Bhutan who have lived in camps in Nepal for more than two decades and were finally ready to board flights to the United States this week have been stopped by President Trump’s immigration ban. This is another blow for the remaining refugees whose UN food rations were reduced last week.

Kali Maya Magar (pictured at right, above, with mother-in-law Nar Maya and 17-year-old daughter Sushmita) was all set to fly to Kathmandu on Tuesday on a journey that would take them to Vermont to rejoin the rest of the family.

The Magars are some of the last among 120,000 refugees who were evicted by Bhutan in the early 1990s and had been living in camps in Morang and Jhapa. A multinational agreement in 2007 arranged their resettlement, and the US has already taken 92,000 refugees with smaller numbers going to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and UK.

Kali Maya was a teen-age girl when her family was forced out of southern Bhutan. She married her husband, Dhan Bahadur, in the Beldangi Camp. Her married children have already been resettled in the US, and she was waiting for a grand family reunion when the Trump ban came into effect.

“I was so happy that our family would be together again in America, but everything is uncertain now,” Kali Maya told us, sitting amidst packed bags in the bamboo hut that has been the family home for 25 years.

Trump has hinted that refugees may be allowed to the US after four months, but only those from ‘minority religious groups’, a euphemism for Christians.

This comes as the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) last week reduced food it has provided refugees since 1992. While retaining full rations for the remaining 3,100 children, elderly and disabled refugees, it is giving only half ration to the rest.

In protest, all 500 WFP refugee volunteers involved in distribution stopped work on Wednesday. Said Sanchahang Subba at Beldangi: “We are hungry, our children are unable to study.”

Full food supply is unlikely to resume as WFP is said to face a funding crunch because of more serious crises elsewhere.

Of the 9,000 refugees remaining in camps, 1,700 say they want to be repatriated to their own homeland. However, EU ambassador to Nepal Renjie Teerink told Nepali Times in Jhapa last week that Nepal and Bhutan need to accept the refugees who remain after the resettlement ends in June.

Gopal Gartaula in Jhapa
THE UGLY AMERICAN

2 years in Jeddah jail

by Don Adu

Sana, a Nepali migrant worker, is in jail in Saudi Arabia. She came to work in Saudi Arabia in 2013. She was arrested in 2015 and has been in prison ever since. She sought help from her embassy, but they could not do anything. She has not heard from her family for two years.

Interviewed by Don Adu

THE UGLY AMERICAN

as a rule, those who are deportees or those whose visas are expired, or those who are denied a visa, are going to be the ones who are affected.

In the case of Sana, she was arrested for overstaying her visa, which is a common reason for arrest in Saudi Arabia.

Sana's case highlights the challenges faced by Nepali migrant workers in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where the legal framework is often harsh and arbitrary. The Nepali embassy has been trying to help, but the situation remains critical for many migrant workers.

Art: Hira Lal Dangol, one of the illustrators of the series. (Illustration: Hira Lal Dangol)

Washington D.C. – Among those of us who chose to leave our homeland voluntarily, there is a certain type of nostalgia for home that never goes away. To add to this longing are everyday challenges to being foreign. We feel the strain of having a less powerful passport as we get patted down at the airport.

For many Nepalis who have overstayed their visas and are working in the shadows, the situation is made worse by the lack of legal protection and support from their embassies.

Heartbreak in America

WASHINGTON D.C. – Even among those of us who chose to leave our homeland voluntarily, there is a certain type of nostalgia for home that never goes away. To add to this longing are everyday challenges to being foreign. We feel the strain of having a less powerful passport as we get patted down at the airport.

The heartache of being foreign is exacerbated by the lack of legal protection and support from our embassies.

For many Nepalis who have overstayed their visas and are working in the shadows, the situation is made worse by the lack of legal protection and support from their embassies.

The Nepali government has been neglecting its responsibility to protect the rights of its citizens abroad. The lack of diplomatic representation and legal assistance in many countries is a major challenge for Nepali workers.

We must also give a thought to aid cuts.

As we watch from afar America being wrecked by the un-American activities of its ruler, we must also give a thought to aid cuts.

The US-India relationship has been a cornerstone of US foreign policy in the region. The US has provided significant aid to India, which has been used to support infrastructure projects, education, and development.

However, the relationship has been marked by periodic tension, particularly over issues such as maritime boundaries and the issue of Kashmir.

As the US-India relationship continues to evolve, the question of aid cuts becomes increasingly relevant. The US government has been facing budgetary constraints, and aid cuts may be necessary to address these.

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SONIA AWALE

Long-distance medical care
Lack of Internet access and low bandwidth slows spread of telemedicine in Nepal’s remote areas

Government is planning to extend its telemedicine services to 38 districts, even though it is not being used effectively in government hospitals where video conferencing tools have already been installed. Problems are poor maintenance and the inability of staff to use telemedicine for emergency procedures.

This is proof that technology alone is never the solution.

“Training is as important as equipment, software is more important than hardware,” says Koirala.

In the first-ever Telemedicine Conference held in September in Kathmandu by NRREN, participants recognised that real time video conferencing had proven its usefulness, but needed to be backstopped and up-scaled. Telemedicine lowers the cost of curative medical care, and is especially important as non-communicable diseases become more prevalent.

Mahabir Pun (see box) is now working to set up the National Innovation Centre, and says: “Connectivity has to go hand-in-hand with political will.”

MOTIVATION
Mahabir Pun
Chairman, National Innovation Centre

Broadband fibre optic cables now serve the main cities, so connectivity is not a problem. But in rural areas where reliable and bandwidth is slow, this is a bottleneck. But connectivity is not enough, you need motivated local health post staff. There is a ‘what can I get out of it?’ mentality. Telemedicine works where the local Health Assistant is motivated, if he isn’t it doesn’t work.

To compete with skilled doctors from the big cities, telemedicine was implemented in Nepal. However, without proper training and equipment, it is difficult to use.

In the beginning it was a fad with the appeal of new technology, and it faded out,” says Sandeep Dhital, senior surgeon at Model Hospital who initiated the telemedicine program with Mahabir Pun.

Effective video conferencing needs bandwidth, but the areas of rural Nepal that need telemedicine the most are places without Internet. Mobile operators provide only 2G services in most rural areas, making phones too slow for downloading data and videos.

“Many rural areas are very remote and in those cases even obtaining a telephone line is not possible, having a computer is a luxury,” says Birka Rauch who uses video conferencing consultations regularly for his mental health program at Bayalpata Hospital in Achham, where the group, Possible, has installed fast satellite Internet.

Telemedicine works where the local Health Assistant is motivated, if he isn’t it doesn’t work.

Health workers in Achham deliver mental health care under long-distance supervision of psychiatrists based in Kathmandu who can access case details from Bayalpata’s Electronic Medical Record system.

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MAHINDRA UV SERIES
THE SUV FOR ALL
PRESENTING, THE CATEGORY-DEFINING SUVs FROM MAHINDRA.
**The unsuccessful hippie**

Although I never meant to stay, I am still here over 40 years later.
Shrestha graduated from the University of Northampton and spent two years interning in London before heading back to Nepal. Lacking the foundation that most people enter designing school with, Shrestha found her formative years in university to be quite challenging.

"Most of my colleagues at university already had a taste of what they were getting into since they branched out immediately out of high school. I just about knew how to thread a needle," recalls the 26-year-old, who has worked in close association with House of Fashion and has organised her own shows.

As a child, Shrestha was enamoured by the lavish flowing gowns and dresses. She remembers that was what sparked her initial interest in dress designing, but that is not what made her stay on in graduate school.

"What attracted me to fashion and the reason I stayed on and eventually took on to garment designing are completely different," she says. "Designing school changed the way I looked at things. I understood the amount of work that went into conceptualising and constructing a piece of clothing. I fell in love with the creative process, and stayed on."

Once back in Nepal, Shrestha grappled to establish a customer base. Her designs were minimalist with only one idea per clothing. But Kathmandu banked largely on readymade garments for daily wear and turned to designers only for elaborate, festival clothing.

"I was trying to introduce a very minimalistic approach to fashion. But the construction of a garment, however basic, entails extensive construction and great detailing and the end product isn’t always inexpensive. When a piece of clothing is flamboyant, or dramatic and there is a lot going on, it looks expensive and people want to pay more," said Shrestha, who found out that social media was the most effective way to showcase designs and garner publicity.

In addition to social media platforms, her designs are also showcased in her flagship store at Nag Pokhari, a neat, sparsely-laid out store that complements its collection.

Shrestha is happy with the progress she has made and is looking forward to many more creative ventures.
When Hira Lal Dangol was offered work as an illustrator for American ornithologist Robert Flemming’s field guide on birds, *Birds of Nepal*, in the 1970s, he had little idea it would change his life. Fifty years and 3,000 bird paintings later, Dangol has become a household name in the world of nature art. Now, he has passed on his skills and passion to the next generation: his four children.

“I used to spend five to six days working on one painting and never felt like stopping till it was done,” said the sprightly 77-year-old.

Eldest son Pushpa Lal Dangol recalls having an extraordinary childhood. While his friends were doing homework, his ‘homework’ was to fill in colours on his father’s bird watercolours.

Four members of the Dangol family, Pushpa, Meena, Pratima and Iswor, held an exhibition of their bird paintings at Nepal Art Council last month as a homage to their father and his work.

“Any painting, it needs to be realistic and to be precise,” said Iswor Dangol, the youngest sibling.

Growing up seeing their father’s work from dawn to dusk, eldest daughter Meena feels their upbringing was entirely different compared to other children in the neighbourhood. While their friends were playing outdoors, the Dangol children were busy painting.

“Today the youth seem to prioritise money over earning a good name,” said the eldest son who returned to Nepal recently after spending 12 years in United States. Pushpa has moved on from portraits of single birds to include their habitat as well. He is now also trying his hand at painting Nepal’s other wildlife, showing us a massive wall painting of a snow childhood. While his friends were doing homework, his ‘homework’ was to fill in colours on his father’s bird watercolours.

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“We didn’t know when we stopped being just us and started being artists,” recalled Meena.

Hira Dangol used to be a paubha painter, and it was under the tutelage of noted artist Lain Singh Bangdel that he started painting birds, and it was Bangdel who introduced him and fellow artist, Hem Poudyal, to Robert Flemming.

“Much like his father, having a regular job never excited Pushpa. Today the youth seem to prioritise money over earning a good name,” said the eldest son who returned to Nepal recently after spending 12 years in United States. Pushpa has moved on from portraits of single birds to include their habitat as well. He is now also trying his hand at painting Nepal’s other wildlife, showing us a massive wall painting of a snow
leopard. Meena, on the other hand, has specialised in painting birds of prey. “It is their eyes that fascinates me the most, they signify power,” she said, pointing to her painting of a Horned Owl.

Pratima has chosen to paint different variety of birds of the same family on a single canvas. In the recent exhibition she had watercolours depicting in the minutest detail group portraits of Nepal’s avian diversity.

Iswor has found his calling in depicting smaller and rarer bird species. At the exhibition he had painting of tiny sunbirds that told the story of their migration and habitat.

Nepal’s location in the lap of the Himalaya means that it has 880 bird species, more than the entire North American continent. Migratory and resident species, however, are being threatened by habitat destruction not just in Nepal but along their annual transcontinental flight paths.

“We keep hearing that Nepal is rich in water resources and tourism but I want everyone to know that Nepal is rich in birdlife as well,” said Iswor. Iswor remembers Raya Weavers, a common sight during his childhood in Kathmandu and now rarely spotted, and paints them from memory.

Hira Dangol had to close his Dangol Art Gallery in Kalimati during the Maoist conflict because business was slow. Now, the entire collection is in storage at the family home. Pratima has fond memories of the gallery because that was where, at just 14, she sold her first painting.

“We don’t have to depend on foreigners anymore to buy our paintings, Nepalis have started to buy art as well,” Hira Dangol says. But while the emergence of the art scene in Kathmandu and their own success has been heartening, the family says there is a need for a school specialising in wildlife art.

But for now, the Dangol siblings hope to follow the footsteps of their father who is as active as ever. Hira Dangol says his eyes are getting weak, but he is not one to give up. Of his father and mentor, Pushpa says: “It is only because of our dad that we, his children, are active too.”
**EVENTS**

- **Farmers' market**, for organic local food, chef discussions and wide green spaces visit farmer's market at Le'Sherpa and Yellow House.
  - Every Saturday, 8 am to 12 pm, Le'Sherpa, Lajimpat, Every Sunday, 9 am to 12 pm, Yellow House, Sattara. (01) 5523378

- **Children’s literature**, book stalls, workshops, shows, talks and more at this year’s edition of the Bal Sahitya Mahotsav, an annual children’s literature festival organised by Kota Banglo Group of Institutions.
  - 18 February, 10 am to 6 pm, Kota Banglo School, Patan DeVki; www.balnepal.org

**MUSIC**

- **Sax Machine live**, listen to French hip hop band, Sax Machine, perform live at Alliance Française. Nepal band The Tripods will be opening the concert.
  - 5 February, 7 to 9 pm, Alliance Française, Sheleko Biti, Pokhara, 0098439432

**DINING**

- **Hyderabad House**, one the famous Nizams of old Hyderabad.
  - (01) 4448399

**GETAWAY**

- **Haatiban Resort**, 45 minutes to Champusar in the morning for a relaxed evening of ipad games and board games.
  - 18 February, 7 to 9 pm onwards, Garden Three, Lakeside.
  - Info: (01) 4429207

- **Grill Me**, A restaurant with a warm ambience and delicious grilled delights.
  - (01) 4545797

**Waterfront Resort**, The lakeside hotel invites you for special barbeque dinners on Friday and lunches on Saturday. Solar Height, Lakeside road, Pokhara, (061) 466303/304
  - www.waterfronthonenhop.com

- **Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel**, Half an hour to your room in Lumbini with a stay at probably the best hotel in the area.
  - (01) 4945720

- **Temple Tree Resort and Spa**, A peaceful place to stay, complete with a swimming pool, massage parlour, and sauna, it’ll be hard to leave once you go in.
  - Gaurighat, Lakeside.
  - (01) 445819

**Jabalpur**

- **Pinkathon**, a women's only event, and chance to run.
  - 24 February, 7 to 11 am, Dasarath Bungeshwar Stadium, www.pinkathon.com

**Japanese films**

- **Kathakh night**, a musical dance concert featuring kathak music maestro Rabin Lal Shrestha.
  - www.np.emb-japan.go.jp

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**Festival management**

- **Festival management**, talk with facilitator Tony Walker and learn how to manage a festival with a social focus, a three-day workshop organised by Kathmandu Tihar Parade.
  - 6 to 8 February, 2 to 6 pm, Bihar Council, Lajimpat, Tickets: form.jotform.me/60151655603449, (01) 4429207

**Self defence**

- **Self defence**, participate in self defense classes for women with Rimple Giri, fourth dan and young national referee of taekwondo.
  - 24 February, 10 am to 11 pm, Dasarath Bungeshwar Stadium, www.kathmandupinkathon.com

**Sufi nights**

- **Sufi nights**, spend a musical evening listening to sufis melodies with Amrit Chhetri every Fridays and Saturdays.
  - Every Friday & Saturday, Green Leaves Restaurant, Uttar Dhoka, Lajimpat, (01) 4377768

**Soaltee Crowne Plaza**

- **Soaltee Crowne Plaza**, a spread of delectable tiffin trays dishes sure to transport you back to the era of the Nawabs.
  - Until 4 February, 6.30 pm onwards, Garden Terrace (Deli), Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Kathmandu.
  - (01) 4718888

**Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel**

- **Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel**, add value to your travel in Lumbini with a stay at probably the best hotel in the area.
  - (01) 4945720

**The Last Resort**

- **The Last Resort**, enjoy the nature and test your limits with camping, hiking, rock climbing, rafting, mountain biking and burger jumping.
  - Bhaktapur, (01) 466303/304

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Bulldozing development

AFTER widening the roads in the city, the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority is now moving its bulldozers to the outskirts, tearing through historic neighbourhoods. Ancient townships in the southern fringes of the Valley like Sunakothi, Harisiddhi, Thaiba, Badegaon were seriously hit by the 2015 earthquake. Now they face a bigger threat from the road-widening campaign.

“Development” is narrowly defined only to mean infrastructure, whereas holistic development includes the cultural landscape, traditional homes, squares and streets where ethnic festivals and rituals are held. The destruction not just flouts the Ancient Monuments Act, but the haphazard way ancient homes are being spray-painted in red signifying that they are condemned, is misguided and ill-advised.

But there is also support for wider roads. Says Surya Tamang of Chapagaun: “When there is development, there is always some destruction. Hopefully it will make our lives better.”

In Badegaon, Jog Bahadur Maharjan, shakes his head as the excavators move in in a cloud of dust. He says nearly 30 heritage sites will be affected when the street that snakes through his town is widened. “We are not against the government here,” he tells us, “we just want to make sure that the government has thought this through. Where will we live afterwards? We want to develop our town, but not at expense of our cultural and ethnic histories.”

At Sunakothi, locals like Nanda Lal Maharjan, are skeptical that the road-widening will ever happen. “Well, we have been hearing about it for a long time, but I don’t even know if it’s happening,” he says.

At the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority, its chief Bhai Kaji Tiwari is aware of the worry about heritage destruction. “My hands are tied, but the government has assured us it will not destroy heritage sites.” However, on the ground there is little transparency about the plans for road expansion, there is almost no local consultation. The people have a right to know what the government plans to do with their towns.

Development is not just roads, it is the inheritance of memories from our ancestors and future survival of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation.

My plea to the public is to be aware of our heritage. We need to know and value it, and protect our history and pride. Don’t ignore it just because you are not directly affected now. Nepal needs informed citizens.

Suman Sayami, lead activist of Upatyakabyapi Sadak Bistar Sangharsha Samiti

I have always supported development, and we are trying to modernise our towns. The government will always win despite local opposition, although it may be delayed because of lawsuits.

Bhai Kaji Tiwari, Chief, Kathmandu Valley Development Authority

Badegaon is one of the most important ancient towns of Kathmandu valley with ancient homes and religious monuments. Out of the four important Buddhas, the one here has been around for centuries. The place also has the Latchi Dhunge Dhara built during the Lichchhavi period 1,200 years ago. The Mahatset Mandir is equally important to locals. It is estimated that 30 heritage sites will be affected when the road is extended in Badegaon.

Sora Khutte used to be a resting place for travellers built 207 years ago. During the turmoil of its destruction, Alok Siddhi Tuladhar, a heritage conservationist, had asked the contractor to spare the sattal, but came the reply: “These 16 wooden pillars can be assembled again in some other place. Here it is just coming in the way for everyone.”

Chapagaun is a town older than Kathmandu itself. But after the earthquake old buildings are being replaced by concrete structures. There is local support for the road-widening because the narrow streets are in bad shape.

Sunakothi, is another ancient Newar town waiting for the bulldozers to arrive. The days are numbered for its cultural and architectural sites. Locals are also worried about how road widening will affect their festivals.

My plea to the public is to be aware of our heritage. We need to know and value it, and protect our history and pride. Don’t ignore it just because you are not directly affected now. Nepal needs informed citizens.

Suman Sayami, lead activist of Upatyakabyapi Sadak Bistar Sangharsha Samiti
La La Land

La La Land is the forerunning Oscar contender for Best Picture this year with an astonishing 14 nominations that recognise the talents of its young director, Damien Chazelle, and the leads, Emma Stone, and Ryan Gosling, along with two original songs that define this fun, airy musical with a surprisingly steely core.

As someone who is not a fan of musicals, the singing and dancing aspect of La La Land kept to a minimum, is, quite frankly, a relief partly because the music part of the film is the least charming aspect of it, the tunes being the frothy, run of the mill stuff that will probably not stand the test of time.

The real genius of the film lies in the casting, the well written roles, the thoughtful, sensitive cinematography that is directed with humour and pathos, as well as the resistance to pat, happy endings that are ultimately more deeply satisfying than the usual sugary stuff that is often stuffed down our throats, leading to insanely high, unrealistic expectations regarding how one’s partner ought to be perfect, a romantic comedy con that began around the same time as the late 1930s De Beers campaign that solidified the diamond as the symbol of ‘forever’, before that, any kind of engagement ring was perfectly acceptable.

Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone star as the truly likeable couple, Sebastian and Mia, a jazz musician and aspiring actress who paths keep crossing in the City of Angels. While things do not start out well between these two, their interactions, all of which are delightfully funny, bodes well for their future together. As the two get together over fantastical musical routines, some quite bearable, in particular the light, unaffected dancing, we see a series of classic Hollywood set-pieces play out in beautifully lit scenes and well chosen locations, bringing real gravitas to what might have been a fluffy film about an actor and a musician.

There are stereotypes here to start with, but the film succeeds in moving past them, bringing something very real to Mia and Seb’s relationship and their future together as they begin to see each other for how special they are, realising slowly, with true heartbreak, how their other passions might lead them away from each other’s sides.

I did not expect to like this film, but I really did, mostly because of Stone and Gosling’s abilities to bring so much humanity to what might be considered superficial first world problems and neuroses. The film, I believe, has gotten flak for being too “white”, but personally, I don’t see why every film must strive to be diverse and political if it is not in its inherent nature. La La Land is what it is, a very appealing, really lovely, slightly goofy love story about two people who fall in love in modern day Los Angeles.

nepalitimes.com
The Madhes mood

Sarala Gautam in Himal Khubapatrika, 29 January – 5 February

Binita Devi (pictured) lost her husband, Sohan Sah Kalwar, during last year’s Madhes movement. She now runs a tea shop in Birganj to feed her children. On a recent winter morning, the 23-year-old widow asked rhetorically: “What did the Madhes gain from my husband’s martyrdom?”

The Madhes certainly faces discrimination in terms of political representation and access, and the region exploded twice in 2007-8 to assert its identity. But the uprisings did not help raise living standards, though it catapulted a few Madhesi leaders to power. These leaders spearheaded another movement in 2013 that was accompanied by a crippling five-month border blockade that wrecked Nepal’s economy. 

The Madhes have had to take loan to feed his family fuelled by rumours, and not the actual content of the constitution. “Madhes can enjoy all the rights even from this constitution,” he says, “we perhaps need a law that would ensure our rights. But the leaders are not trying to solve the problem this way.”

The people in Madhes have no doubts that the constitution is always work in progress, and its implementation is the key to the future, but their opinions have been ignored by the leaders who claim to be representing them. Jahur Mahabak, 58, runs a shoe shop near the clock tower in Birganj. He feels Madhesi leaders have cultivated a culture of political polarisation. “There is no gain from hostility, only if we stand united will we prosper.”

Rakesh Singh, a Birganj-based politician, says the Madhes will not prosper without tapping the vast natural resources of the Chure hills to the north. Madhesi leaders only talk of rights, and not development, he says.

Subhas Kumar, a civil society member in Birganj, says the Madhesi people’s anger was fueled by rumours, and not the actual aspirations of the people they represented. Civil society activism was absent, and as a result, the clamor between Kathmandu and the Tarai grew. The Madhesi people’s allegiance to nationalism was questioned. Sociologist Chaitanya Mishra says: “There was no one who could assure the Madhesi that the hill people do not doubt them, but they harbour suspicions about India.”

Mukti Ram Dhakal, a professor of political science in Birganj, agrees that Madhesi leaders are not trying to make the laws that would ensure our rights. But the leaders do not listen to the poor Madhesi people, their voice is not the voice of the Madhes.”

Singh says it is not true that Kathmandu ignores the Madhes. “Look at the plight of the earthquake survivors,” he says. “They are hill people, but the Singha Darbar is indifferent to their plight.”

“I cannot say where this movement will take us in future, but I can say it is not doing anything good to us at present,” says gold trader Jitendra Saraf. Centre for Investigative Journalism

During the last Madhes uprising, he is still working overtime to pay off the loan. “All I want is to work and live peacefully,” he says. Madhesi leaders and activists are accused of distorting the contents of the charter to whip up passions, but failed to understand the actual aspirations of the people they represented. Civil society activism was absent, and as a result, the clamour between Kathmandu and the Tarai grew. The Madhesi people’s allegiance to nationalism was questioned. Sociologist Chaitanya Mishra says: “There was no one who could assure the Madhesi that the hill people do not doubt them, but they harbour suspicions about India.”

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“I cannot say where this movement will take us in future, but I can say it is not doing anything good to us at present,” says gold trader Jitendra Saraf. Centre for Investigative Journalism
Women in western Nepal are starting to refuse to be thrown out of the house once a month

Periods of banishment

Women take a break from hard farm work amidst a backdrop of Achham’s scenic mountains. The beauty of western Nepal hides the cruel practice of chaupadi which forces women to spend their periods in a tiny mud room like this one (below, left) above the cowshed. Community Health Workers warn young women (below, right) of the dangers.

Pulling the dhoti up to her ankle, Dambara Regmi, 24, used to clamber up to a mud room atop the cowshed. In the tiny, dark claustrophobic room, her sister-in-law and a young neighbour, also menstruating, would each choose a corner to sleep in. Regmi remembers tucking her legs between the folds of the blanket, and telling herself: “When I get married I am not going to stay inside the shed again.”

Now a community health worker in this district in western Nepal, Regmi talks to a group of 15 women who have come together for a session of antenatal care counseling. “What do you like the most about menstruating?” she asks. A ripple of giggles goes around. “There is nothing good about it,” they reply.

Regmi asks them if they would continue the tradition of banishing their daughters to the cowshed once a month once they become mothers themselves. After an uncomfortable silence a woman from the group responds, “It is society that decides.”

Indeed, it is the women who adhere to traditional belief in the cruel tradition of chaupadi which evicts women once a month. In the past months alone, two young women have lost their lives, once more sparking national outrage over the practice, known as chaupadi.

In December 2016, 15-year-old Roshani Tiruwa in Achham district was found dead in a tiny menstrual hut. A month earlier, Dambara Upadhyay, 26, also died while living in the outhouse during her period. Snake bites, wild animal attacks, suffocation from smoke, and sexual harassment and assault are threats that many menstruating women and girls face during this monthly exile. In 2005, the Supreme Court outlawed chaupadi and in 2008 the Ministry of Women, Child and Social Welfare promulgated guidelines to eradicate it. However, a 2011 UN report of Achham district estimated that about 95 per cent of women still practiced chaupadi. This staggeringly high figure alone shows that changing age-old traditions and social attitudes requires more than legal reforms and guidelines.

The impact of stigma compounded with poor menstrual hygiene hinders equal and meaningful participation of women and girls in education, economic activities, and perpetuates the cycle of gender inequality and social exclusion. Menstruation affects school attainment with a third of girls missing schools during periods in Nepal. Poor menstrual hygiene also results in reproductive health ailments such as urinary tract infection, and other problems arise from internalised feelings of shame and untouchability. Creating a safe and enabling environment for women and girls to manage their menstrual hygiene, and with dignity is therefore an important development and human rights agenda.

Breaking the taboo on talking about periods is the first step, with interventions required in both schools and communities. According to WaterAid’s 2009 study in Nepal, only 17.2 per cent said that they were informed about menstruation by teachers, majority of whom avoided reproductive health topics, prescribing self-study

Blood sisters

Menstrual stigma is a manifestation of persistently unequal gender relations in Nepal

The symbolism and practices surrounding menstruation differ across cultures: in some it is largely concealed and in other more conservative societies, it becomes visible and more stigmatised. But the common feature is that menstruation is a taboo.

In some extreme cases, like in parts of the mountains of western Nepal, women are banished to the cowshed for four days in a month. In the past months alone, two young women have lost their lives, once more sparking national outrage over the practice, known as chaupadi.

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month for four days to a cold, dank outhouse. Many here believe that a woman is deemed impure during menstruation, and if she defiles the kitchen or touches sacred objects in the house, it will invite god’s wrath, livestock will die and crops will wilt.

A tiny cell outside the home is allocated for women with periods, and sometimes the room has to accommodate up to a dozen people. On the fourth day, the women bathe and are allowed to enter the house again. Finally, the women bathe and are allowed to enter the house again.

The government has put up billboards along the highways of western Nepal highlighting the dangers of chaupadi, ranging from wild animal attacks to burglars and worse. In the past few weeks, two young women have lost their lives while staying inside sheds in Achham. It is clear that despite the ban on chaupadi, society has a long way to go in eradicating a deeply embedded menstrual taboo.

Regmi works with Possible, which runs hospitals in Achham and Dolakha, and is engaged in convincing one woman at a time to stop the practice. She urges the members in her group to take a united stand against the tradition, to not tell anyone when they have their periods and refuse to be sent to the shed. The women fidget, they find it more comfortable to swim with the tide in this patriarchal society than against it. But there is one soft voice from the group.

Playing with the ends of her hair is one of the participants. She starts at the floor and finally musters the courage to say, “I really isn’t a bad omen, it’s something natural. Just keep yourself clean and keep your periods a secret.”

Possible employs 26 female community health workers like Regmi to integrate care between hospital and home, and together provide comprehensive healthcare to more than 400,000 patients. “It is very encouraging to know that everybody in the village knows you, to have their trust that you can attend to their medical needs,” says Regmi.

One of Regmi’s patients is Chandra, an expecting mother. Chandra’s deeply-held belief indicates why Regmi’s work is so difficult. “I understand there isn’t any rationale behind isolation during menstruation,” says Chandra. “But I have seen cattle die, family members fall ill and other misfortunes befall families that don’t practice chaupadi. For the wellbeing of my children and husband I will have to go to the shed.”

The stigma about menstruation may be severe in western Nepal, but there are varying degrees of taboos even in the capital. At a recent rally in Kathmandu against the chaupadi deaths, participants said even educated urban women had to observe certain social etiquettes during their periods.

“God created me this way, I menstruate. I don’t understand why somebody else would find it unacceptable if I entered a temple or prayed to my God when I’m menstruating,” said one participant, Shikha Pant.

When newly-married, Dambura Regmi didn’t tell anyone in the household when she had her periods. She was lucky to have the support of her husband, and they didn’t find it unacceptable. “I’m very lucky. After marriage I couldn’t find it unacceptable if I stayed inside,” she said.

It is estimated that only 36 per cent of schools in Nepal have separate toilets for girls. Access to affordable menstrual products along with provision of separate toilets with door locks, running water, soap and waste disposal facilities should be taken into account in Wash, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) interventions.

Most importantly, menstrual taboo and stigma should be seen as manifestations of unequal gender relations. Future action should focus on individual empowerment as well as changing the wider social discourse.

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Vibrating democracy

Who would have thought even a month ago that America is no longer the country that most Nepalis want to sneak into illegally?

It’s fascinating to watch that while the wheels of democracy are grinning to a halt in The Land of the Free, hence in The Home of Brave Gurkhas it is spinning out of control. We don’t just have one election in 2017, but three. We have women in high places, and have shuffled 9 male Prime Ministers in 8 years.

Our leaders never take decisions unilaterally, they always do so bilaterally. That is why Deputyed Prime Minister Needy disappears from parliament during voting on a crucial bill on electoral laws. Or Comrade Upadro vanishes during a meeting of the Morcha and cannot be located. In an emergency, these honchos can only be reached on the +91 area code.

The Sri Lankan astrologer who was arrested this week for predicting that his country’s President would kick the bucket must now be wishing he had made the prediction about another Prez. But even that soothsayer would not have foretold that this winter we in Nepal would be enjoying 24 hours of electricity.

Electric power has been restored to the people, all we have to do now restore political power as well. Proof that electricity has injected renewed vigour into our vibrant economy is that vibrators (Slogan: ‘No side effects’) are flying off the shelves. This means those of you improvising with the use of handsets for purposes other than mobile telephony can now stop doing so.

The other sign that things are limping back to normalcy in our democracy is that the Department of Sewage Canals is digging up roads that were recently filled up by the Department of Potable Water.

And as the dust settles, what a relief it is to see that despite the monumental transformation of the country’s political structure and replacing a king with kinglets, the sitting President of a former monarchy invites the ex-King of a new republic when her current daughter marries a sitting grandchild of an ex-President. #OnlyInNepal

Another sign of the New Normal is that the Big Plop Student Union (Revolting) has started sending out extortion letters to businesses demanding oodles of moolah for its election campaign.

Many recipients of these threatening letters were overcome with nostalgia for the good old days when we ate death threats for breakfast. A dropout Baddie student, however, denied his union had demanded Rs10 million from hotels. “We only demanded Rs5 million,” he clarified, on condition that his name remained a mystery.

Those hankering for the good old days of our vibrating democracy should take heart that we are already making drastic progress.

Political pyromaniacs used to burn tyres in the streets. These days the tyres are set on fire while still attached to their vehicles.