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No turning back

BISHAL K CHALISE and GEORGE VARUGHESE

On 14 May, Nepalis will vote in elections for newly-delineated village and municipal governments. Whether from the hills or the plains, from the east or west, Nepalis can and should seek leadership of their own neighbourhoods and communities. That is a position of strength that matters most in a democracy. And they will be on the right side of history.

PAGE 4

BHANU BHATTARAI

buizz **New Year Readings for 2074**

Nepali Times staffers review and recommend books they have recently read: *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh, *Nineteen Eighty-four* by George Orwell, *Thamel: Dark Star of Kathmandu* by Rabi Thapa, *Nepali Painting Through the Ages* by Madan Chitrakar

PAGE 8-9

Interview

SAMRAT UPADHYAY
PAGE 7

Bypassing government

Nearing the second anniversary of the 25 April 2015 earthquake, the Nepal government continues to face criticism for delays in rebuilding, but so do international relief agencies accused of duplication and overcharging for overheads.

International NGOs were censured in the aftermath of the earthquake for inappropriate and inefficient aid, and the criticism continues. The government, meanwhile, has tried to shift the blame on the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), which it set up in 2015 without granting it real autonomy.

"From any international standard, emergency relief and saving lives went very well because governance was decentralised," says Prabin Manandhar of the Association of INGOs (AIN). "It was when the government centralised operations by creating the NRA, dissolving it again, re-creating it, that it created layers of bureaucracy. Every project had to be approved by the NRA. It took months."

#NepalQuake
25 April 2015

2 years after

Manandhar admits record-keeping was not a priority immediately after the disaster, when

the central government gave INGOs a free hand to work and 93 new agencies arrived. He says any flaws in the groups' work stemmed from the need to act immediately.

However, journalist Emily Troutman who also worked in Haiti, accuses multiple INGOs of taking credit for the same work: "One organisation pays for the helicopter, another hires people to drive the truck, and then a final organisation pays for the tarp. All three take credit for "providing shelter".

Manandhar thinks INGOs deserve credit for mobilising quickly, spending their own money before donations arrived. He estimates that flash appeals raised 60 per cent of post-earthquake funding, the rest came from existing sources. From April-December 2015, INGOs spent all the money raised, but in 2016 they only spent 60 per cent because official permission for rebuilding was so slow.

Subindra Bogati of the Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative says INGOs must work more with local groups, but adds: "I wouldn't be that critical of their work right after the earthquake. No one knew what to do, INGOs were doing their best."

Bogati says donors need to change their mind-set that local groups cannot deliver projects. But he recognises that it is a long-term challenge: "There's a lot of competition and INGOs don't want to put themselves out of business."

Marty Logan

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CLIMATE CLIMAX

In recent weeks we have learnt that February 2017 was the second-warmest in NASA's global historic records. The only warmer February was last year. The Arctic was literally a hotspot, suffering the hottest year on record with polar sea ice at record low winter maxima for three years.

If all this sounds bad, hear this. The Himalaya is warming much faster than the rest of the planet. Even if countries meet or exceed their commitments for emission cutbacks, average global temperatures will still rise by 1.4° by 2100, but in the Himalaya, Pamir and Tibetan Plateau, temperatures rise by 1.8°. The effects will be apocalyptic, and we are already seeing signs of it in Nepal's glaciers thinning, retreating and losing mass at an alarming rate. Trends were reviewed at an international conference on Understanding Climate Change and Climate Action this week in Kathmandu organised by the Nepal government with Kathmandu-based ICIMOD and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (*See Guest Editorial by David Molden, below.*)

The IPCC has been cautious ever since its alarmist prediction ten years ago that Himalayan glaciers would all melt off by 2035 was proven to be unfounded. Even so, its new figures look serious enough. We are now looking at Nepal's glaciers shrinking by half by 2050, and losing up to 80% of their ice by the end of the century. More



DEEPENDRA BAJRACHARYA

GUEST EDITORIAL DAVID MOLDEN

Mountainous change

Though we at ICIMOD were pleased to co-host and organise this week's IPCC gathering in Kathmandu, the message about climate change was rather grim. Unless we take action now, global temperature averages could rise above the 2°C level set during the UNFCCC Paris meeting in 2015.

But temperatures rise even more quickly at higher elevations. From 1951 to 2010 global average temperature rise was 0.6°C, but in the Himalaya it was 1.5°C. So if the global average temperature rise is restrained at 1.5°C globally, higher elevations could experience a rise between 1.9-2.2°C by the end of the century.

A 2°C temperature rise by 2050 could lead to a 20-50% reduction in glacier area. This rise will have profound consequences for mountain people and environments. One community representative from Humla told us: "We used to grow apples here. Now we grow oranges."

Across the Himalaya, air pollution is a major concern. Not only does it affect the health of humans and ecosystems, many pollutants also contribute to rising temperatures and enhance glacier and snow melt.

Scientists have estimated that global warming could be reduced by 0.6°C under a business as usual scenario if we eliminated short-lived climate pollutants. But this will require immediate action and deeper cooperation between states and governments, and the public and private sectors.

The challenges presented by climate change and other drivers are not experienced alone or singularly: floods, air pollution, and extreme weather events all move across national borders.

than 1,000 glacial lakes have formed in the Nepal Himalaya alone as the mountains thaw, and some of them are in danger of bursting. The trend is worse west to east along the Himalayan arc.

The mountains store 6,000 cubic km of water in the form of ice, which now gives water to 1 billion people downstream in South Asia, China and South-east Asia who grow food for nearly half of humanity.

Poor countries argue that it is a problem created by industrialised countries with their historic CO₂ emissions. But India will soon become the largest greenhouse gases emitter, although its per capita carbon output is still small. Nepal's minimal carbon footprint may means we cannot do much to mitigate global warming, but we can act locally by reducing pollution, controlling forest fires and crop burning, upgrading traditional brick kilns, and improving public transport. Soot and dust particles cause Himalayan snowfields to melt much faster than they would with just global warming.

Climate change is not new, it is just making all our old problems worse. It is at the community level that Nepal needs to boost farmers' capacity to cope with the change. Pollution travels across national boundaries, so controlling it needs cross-border cooperation. Using cleaner, more-efficient energy has co-benefits for public health and the economy. After all, green is also the colour of money.

Similarly, addressing these challenges requires regional cooperation between countries, sharing data, information, and solutions that can equip and protect mountain communities regardless of their national location. And this reality presents another opportunity: Mountain countries, like island states, can create a shared voice in climate negotiations to influence others to work together to reduce emissions.

We can look to the Arctic to find inspiration for this kind of cooperation. Also heavily influenced by climate change, nations in this region have created the Arctic Council, an organisation of eight countries that, historically, have not always seen eye-to-eye. But for the cause of climate change they have set aside differences and become a united force and shared resource to improve scientific data for the purpose of informing policy making that will impact future generations.

At ICIMOD, we are supporting an initiative called the Himalayan Monitoring and Assessment Programme to provide a current and comprehensive evaluation of the HKH across a range of environmental topics. Might this be an appropriate launching pad for a 'Himalayan Council', wherein mountain people and countries work together to solve mountain problems? It's too early to tell, but the possibilities are there, and the time is now.



David Molden is the Director General of the International Centre for Integrated Mountains Development (ICIMOD)

Nepal Times.com

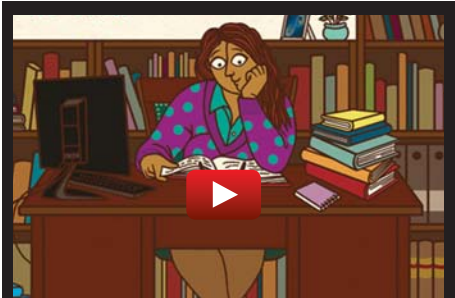
ONLINE VIDEOS



CHASING ZERO



Society's perception of beauty and body shaming is leading young girls to turn to drugs in the hope of losing weight. But instead they now have health issues including addiction and psychological trauma. Listen to girls as they recount how they started using drugs to slim down, but got addicted to them and are now in rehab.



ART THAT MATTERS

On new year's day, *Nepali Times* brings you the ultimate motivation. Go online to watch a slideshow video of the 10 most popular Miss Motivation illustrations for an auspicious start to 2074. We also caught up with creator Kripa Joshi over the lunch, listen to a podcast of the artist talking about her journey to be everyone's Miss Motivation.



BASKING IN BISKET

The annual week-long chariot festival of Bhaktapur has begun with the start of Nepali New Year. Bisket Jatra, famous for its tongue-piercing and chariot-pulling is celebrated for nine days and eight nights and is observed mainly in the Bhaktapur Darbar Square and Thimi. If Bhaktapur is too far for you or you missed it, catch glimpses of the festival with this exciting video on www.nepalitimes.com

Backside

Go online to read the Ass' hilarious home takeaway this New Year's Day. Let us bray.



THE COST OF FREE HEALTHCARE

Gagan Thapa should look at Venezuela before he goes too far down the socialism road ('Policies for the people', #853). Without personal responsibility, investment and consequences, health care schemes are not successful and financially ruin a nation. It's nice that he has the welfare of the Nepali people in mind. I'm just saying that 'free' health care is a lofty goal that has the potential for abuse for the patients who want it all, but pay almost nothing. Unfortunately, limited resources must be budgeted to other worthy causes like education, water, roads, bridges, etc. as well.

Sigmund Stengel

BLACK HOLE

Foreign donations have fallen off because the world understands the funds vanish into a giant hole of innate inefficiency and corruption (Editorial, 'Second chance', #853). Stop blaming donors, ask: do I like what I see?

David Durkan

WHAT'S TRENDING



Policies for the people

"What I feel is that the system here is not in sync with the speed at which I'm trying to move forward. Or I'm not fitting into the system. That is my observation in the last six months," Health Minister Gagan Thapa tells *Nepali Times* in an interview. Go online to watch Minister Thapa share his future plans for Nepal's healthcare.

Most reached and shared on Facebook
(55,285 people reached, 108 shares)

Most popular on Twitter
(95 retweets, 211 likes)

Most commented

Gagancare

by *Om Astha Rai*

Even though Gagan Thapa hasn't been able to launch a national health insurance plan, sick infants will now get free treatment, and the government will pay for patients needing dialysis and kidney transplants.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

- 

Nepali Times@nepalitimes
Why are so many Nepalis coming home with #malfunctioning #kidneys? Find out here: [@omastharai](http://bit.ly/2oPpYbe)
- 

Arpan Shrestha@arpanshr
Alarming. Just met a 17-year-old yesterday in the transplant centre in Bhaktapur. And number of patients rise each year.

- 

Nepali Times@nepalitimes
GAGANCARE: Free treatment for sick infants & dialysis, transplants for #kidney patients @thapagk <http://bit.ly/2njdvFK> #worldhealthday2017
- 

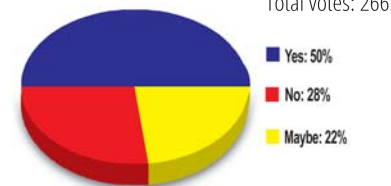
Prakriti Khadka@Prakriti1820
Need a person like @thapagk in the education sector too, could eradicate a lot of national issues.
- 

Hima (हिमा)@himabista
Deserving headline! Durable and free healthcare can happen when the leadership strikes #HealthcareinNepal

Nepal Times

Weekly Internet Poll #854

Q. Can Nepal afford all the free health services that Gagan Thapa is promising?



Weekly Internet Poll #855
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Do you expect 2074 to be a better year for Nepal than 2073?

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No turning back

Why Nepal's upcoming local elections matters more than ever



YUVARAJ SHRESTHA

BISHAL K CHALISE
and **GEORGE VARUGHESE**

On 14 May, Nepalis will go to elections for newly-delineated local (village and municipal) governments. These comprise one of three constitutionally-mandated elections to be completed by January 2018. At the time they were announced, news of elections at the local level brought mixed reactions: from those who wish for some sign of progress in a country mired in protracted political conflict, to those who want their needs and interests addressed before elections can take place.

The local elections will be a significant step towards implementation of a new constitution that mandates a restructured nation-state, reflecting for the first time in Nepal's history a federal, secular republic with a plural political order and inclusive social character. If successfully

concluded, the elections will instil confidence and ownership of the constitution in the general public and rebuild trust in the country's choice of system of political representation. Additionally, successful local elections would ease the path for the two following elections to provincial and national government. Thus, local elections are closely linked with institutionalisation of the new constitution.

The elections will also fill a longstanding political void at the local level. Local elections are being held after a long gap of 19 years and for only the third time since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1990. For almost two decades there has been an absence of elected officials at the village level and a palpable lack of local representation of concerns, interests and needs in the country's public policy and

administration.

In the 1990s, the government tried to bridge the ever-widening gap between the state and citizens by promulgating the Local Self-Governance Act, which attempted to give more autonomy to local governments. However, resource and capacity constraints at the local level combined with the decade-long conflict significantly limited positive effects of the well-intended Act.



Most tragically during this period, elected local governments were dismissed and civil servants authorised to assume administrative as well as developmental functions. Combined with a provision of the interim constitution

that required political consensus in government, these civil servants worked on behalf of all-party mechanisms that fuelled syndicate-like behaviour at the local level. The experiment was a governance disaster: the collusive tendencies among political

parties, with no opposition and the lack of accountability checks and balances, had a detrimental effect on local-level democracy and state efficiency. Such arrangements not only formalised local corruption in Nepal but also undermined the formal procedures of governance and institutionalised nepotism, lack of transparency and informal decision making.

By returning to participatory governance, next month's local elections could halt and possibly reverse the downward spiral in local government mismanagement, culture of impunity, organised corruption, and citizen exclusion from the decision-making process that we have witnessed in the past 15 years.

Local elections would be a crucial step in addressing political marginalisation and point the way to truly participatory democracy and inclusive development. For example, the constitution mandates each political party to nominate at least one woman

for the head or deputy head position. This should promote women's participation in public life from the grassroots upwards – even though the most recent constitution amendment proposal, to remove local elected representatives from the national electoral college, significantly jeopardises that outcome.

Sweeping changes are probably coming to the country's socio-political foundations that have survived for many years. The transition to a new structure will present opportunities and challenges at all levels of governance and society. At the national and regional level, there will inevitably be uncertainty and conflict between different levels of government as the transition takes place. At the local level, the transition will present opportunities to engage local communities in governance, but will also suffer from uncertainties that might cause confusion, conflict and unrest at the local level. The resolution of conflict at these various levels will be important for the success of the transition in leading to improved governance at the sub-national level.

Rising dissent and grievances related to state restructuring in Nepal reflect both popular anxiety with the political process as well as the lack of facilitated dialogue to discuss and resolve emergent issues. Rather than descending into easy condemnation of transitional politics thus far and adopting tired positions staked by the venal political elite, the Nepali public have a real chance to take back the body politic and exercise their citizenship.

Whether from the hills or the plains, from the east or west, Nepalis can and should seek leadership of their own neighbourhoods and communities. That is a position of strength that matters most in a democracy. And they will be on the right side of history. 🇳🇵



Bishal K Chalise is a graduate from the Australian National University and **George Varughese** is the Country Director of the Asia Foundation

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Undemocratic democracy

Proof of how far we have fallen is a senior leader demanding that the judiciary should be kept under parliament

Nepal's governing cartel has relentlessly tried to monopolise politics through Parliament. A clause in the first law regarding elections enacted after the promulgation of the new constitution reserves the right to contest elections under a common election symbol for the parties which are currently in Parliament.



CONNECTING DOTS
Dinkar Nepal

New political parties, or ones that did not secure a seat in the last Parliament or ones that boycotted past polls, are forced to field independent candidates under different symbols. This is a brazen display of political chicanery.

Naya Shakti Nepal, led by ex-Maoist Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, protested this provision in front of the Election Commission building despite the fact that it has opposed the 14 May local elections in line with the Madhesi parties.

The Election Commission, which is constitutionally bound to function within the legal framework enacted by Parliament, has rightly expressed its helplessness. Another new party, Bibeksheel Nepali, has taken the matter to the Supreme Court, which has delayed the case, scheduling a hearing just two days prior to 14 May.

From the government's side, there has been no effort to explain the rationale behind this strange and undemocratic rule. Evidently, there is none. The only unmerited benefit of doubt that we can give lawmakers may be that the ever-increasing number of political parties is technically too difficult to manage for elections. Some joked on social media that the ballot paper is going to be longer than the average height of Nepalis.

This pattern of manipulating the legitimate process for dishonest ends is the hallmark of rulers everywhere. Its extreme form is when leaders change the constitution to remain in power.

Many African rulers have resorted to constitutional coups for decades by turning their democracies into semi-dictatorships. Often, when a particular leader becomes strong enough to control the polity, legitimate politics (decision-making by the majority) is exploited to fulfil the interests of the leader.

In Nepal, the decade-long era of conflict and another decade of misplaced priorities has, in the name of transition, created a culture of rule by consensus of the Top-Heads. This supposedly transitional political culture has created many spin-offs: senior leaders have been able to monopolise power within the party, and second rung leaders have followed them to become the clone practitioners of this leadership style among their group of followers.

With political parties as the only effective instrument as of now for diverse interest groups, the major political parties have been able to monopolise political discourse. The media, the only source of input in Nepal's brain dead civil society, has been compromised because of the interlinking of group interests and hence fails to accept its responsibility.

Due to these dynamics, the top leaders have been able to redefine the notion of accountability. They have gone to the extent of publicly suggesting reforms in the political structure of the nation to defend their undemocratic decisions and unethical practices.

Recently, when the Supreme Court intervened in the government's decision to appoint the chief of police by trampling on seniority rules, the Nepali Congress declared the decision as judicial overreach



into the arena of the executive branch. The NC's Sashank Koirala, son of the first elected prime minister of Nepal, went to the extent of saying that the judiciary should be kept under parliament.

Let's accept that politics isn't easy. There are clashes of opinions and interests, which creates the ground for an unrelenting struggle of one-upmanship. However, in a peaceful and mature political tradition the struggle is legitimate because it follows rules. The written constitution or even customary obligations are supreme.

Interest groups, represented by political parties, fight on a level field under strict rules that apply to all.

But when there is an uneven playing field, politics is bound to break the established framework of laws and traditions. The players resort to

violent means. Order breaks down, there are crises, and politics – in a desperate struggle for survival – puts a nail in its own coffin by resorting to even harsher means. It crumbles under its own weight due to an imbalance in its outlook towards differences of opinion.

Nepal has often gone through this. The events may vary, but the pattern is evidently similar. And history seems to be repeating itself. The worrying part is, as always when lessons go unnoticed, history comes up with newer and harsher ways.

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Study opportunities

Australia's La Trobe Business School announced new intake for its November undergraduate business courses, and two new semesters, in February and



July, in keeping with demands of Nepali, Indian and Sri Lankan students. Merit-based scholarships of 15, 20 and 25 per cent for international students were also announced.

Together for Somalia

Turkish Airlines has pledged to support a social media campaign for Somalia by carrying 200 tons of humanitarian aid to the country in the coming six months. Started by French social media celebrity Jerome Jarre and friends, hash



tags #TurkishAirlinesHelpSomalia and #LoveArmyForSomalia has reached over 2 billion people.

Beneficial MoU

The British College and Sagarmatha National College have signed an agreement strengthening the relationship



between the two colleges. With this, the students of Sagarmatha, which

currently offers BTEC Level 3 in IT, can do their Bachelor Degree course at The British College.

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A serious Swiss

Toni Hagen knew from his country's experience that Nepal would benefit from democracy and decentralisation

A slight frown creases the florid brow of the portly gentleman in the patterned short-sleeved shirt as he shyly presents me with a copy of his signed book. "I might have given you a copy already, but this one has the new introduction." His voice has a toffee-textured Swiss lilt, but his kind eyes are grave.

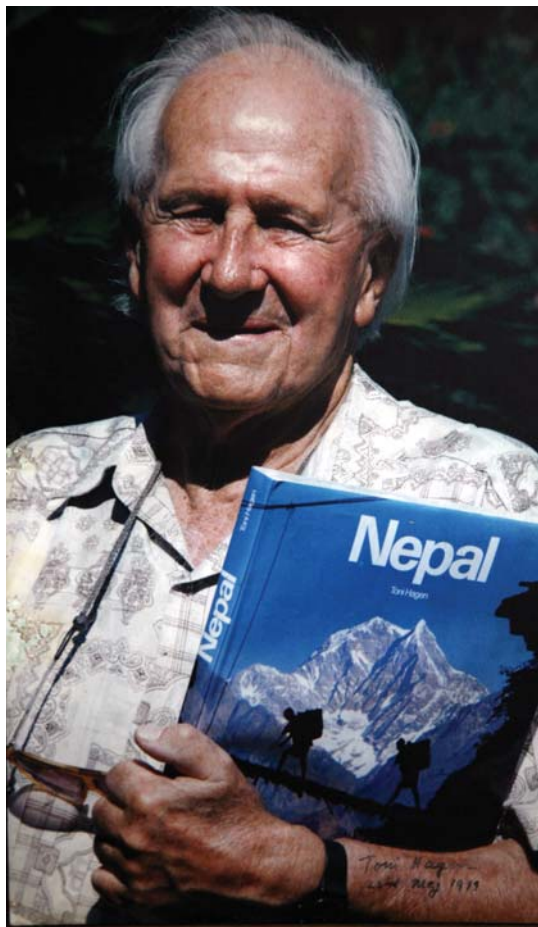


SO FAR SO GOOD

Lisa Choegyal

And well might they be – this is the fabled guru Toni Hagen, a serious man of 'high moral principles' who carries the weight of Nepal's development on his shoulders, having single-handedly explored and surveyed the forbidden kingdom when he first arrived in 1950, way before anyone else.

We sit gently chatting, enveloped in the peaceful stone-flagged courtyard of Dwarika's Hotel, Toni's home on his frequent visits from Switzerland. The richly carved woodwork windows glow in the early evening light, teacups tinkle, and pigeons flutter in search of a safe roost beneath the eaves of calming terracotta tiles. I savour Toni's



solid Swiss presence and his unique Nepal insights. His books are classics, the received wisdom from a uniquely experienced perspective.

Dreaming of the Himalaya

during his childhood amidst the Alps, Toni qualified as a geologist, initially attempting to apply his immaculate Swiss logic to Nepal. He began with air surveys but soon resorted to foot, walking 14,000 miles across the entire country during the 1950s. He was the first person to reveal and record the astonishing topography, unfamiliar geography and veiled social fabric for the Nepal government and United Nations.

It was not long before Toni abandoned geological science in favour of the humanitarian development that he could clearly see was desperately required. His priorities were focussed when one

of the young porters carrying his rock samples from the Far West admitted he had dumped them before he departed and picked up replacements on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley. "What is

the point of carrying such heavy rocks so far?" the boy asked plaintively. Realising that health, education and livelihoods of the people were what mattered most, Toni attended to the grassroots by asking every village what they wanted and needed. He secured Nepal's first development assistance from Switzerland.

Toni worried about Nepal's headlong rush into modernisation, preferring a more measured approach. Rooted in Swiss federalism, he was ahead of his time in advocating that Nepal's governance would benefit from democracy and decentralisation. He befriended King Birendra, whom he admired as a ruler. As Katrin, Toni's dedicated daughter, puts it: "He was committed to democratic principles, irrespective of the leadership style."

For refugees fleeing Tibet during the 1950s, Toni organised resettlement in Switzerland with the Red Cross, and provided employment for many thousands by creating a carpet industry in Jawalakhel, capitalising on traditional Tibetan weaving skills. At its height, the revenue from Nepal's hand-made rug exports rivalled that of tourism, while providing many more jobs – a local handicraft evolved

into a world commodity. For years the raw wool was imported only from New Zealand in another of Sir Edmund Hillary's useful interventions. My husband Tenzin and his family, themselves originally Khampa refugees from east Tibet, still make these carpets for export to the West.

Early films show Toni extravagantly bearded and smiling, dancing in baggy tweed knickerbockers, long socks and sensible boots with the Walungba women of the Far West, shuffling Sherpa steps in their woven back aprons and dusty bare feet. In other footage, emaciated, bony-kneed Chettris with white scarves, topis and ankle bracelets blow into elegantly curved copper horns twice their height, a wedding escort for the village bridegroom captive in his sackcloth hammock.

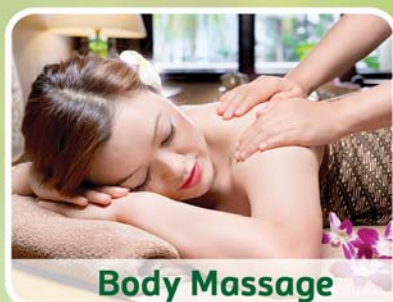
By the time I knew Toni he was older and slower, but still smiling and still serious, with an undiminished passion for development and an infectious faith in the youth of Nepal. We persuaded him to take time away from his work and writing to attend our Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge opening in October 1998. The party, hosted by Jim Edwards, lasted several days, culminating in local dances and Sir Edmund Hillary lighting the oil lamp at the auspicious moment.

'The best mountain lodge in the world,' Toni wrote with uncharacteristic enthusiasm in our pristine visitors' book, high praise indeed from such a serious man. 🇳🇵

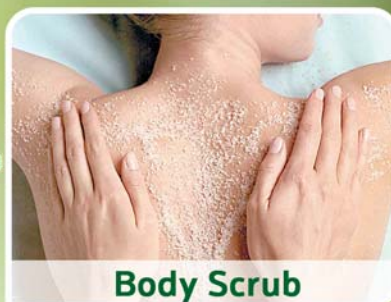
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True summer is here with its dry heat and hazy skies. This is not a new phenomenon: the wind whips sand from the India-Pakistan desert and blows it across to us. The dust layer covers the entire northern Subcontinent and goes up to an altitude of 4,000m. Mixed with the dust is smoke from numerous forest fires in the Chure Hills. All this filters sunlight, making the afternoon heat slightly less than what it would otherwise be. There is no perceptible trough on the horizon, but expect some brief isolated thunder showers late evening on the weekend.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
26° 13°	26° 14°	26° 14°

oneworld

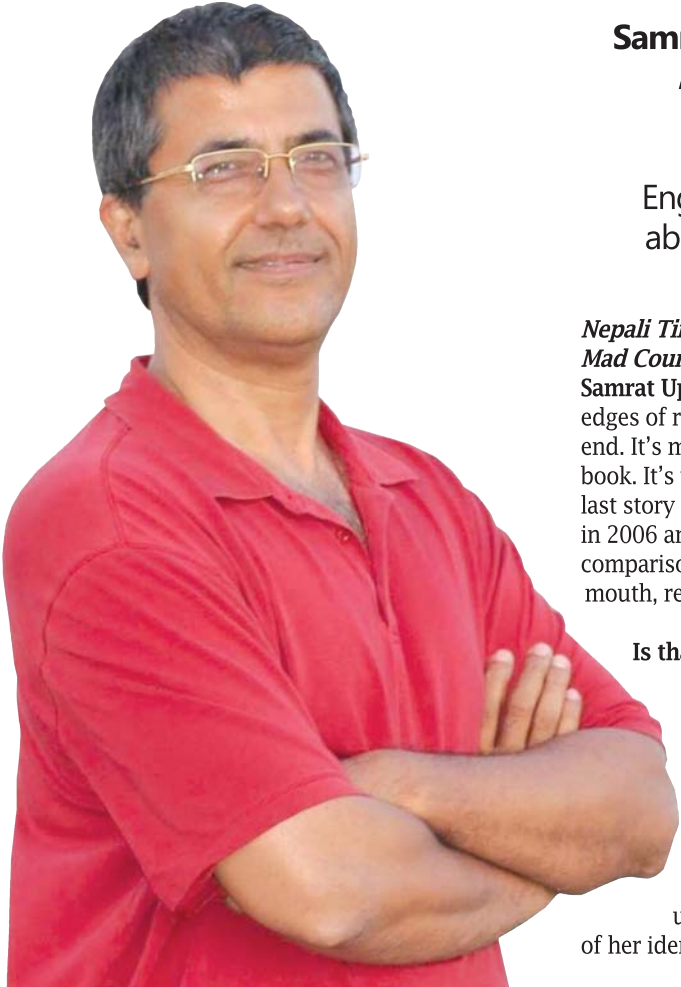
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“Kathmandu won’t let go of me”



Samrat Upadhyay's sixth book , *Mad Country*, is coming out this month in the US. Nepal's most accomplished English language novelist talks about his evolution as a writer.

Nepali Times: What can you tell us about *Mad Country*?

Samrat Upadhyay: *Mad Country* teeters on the edges of realism, and at times goes off the deep end. It's my most psychotic and hallucinatory book. It's unlike anything I've written. My last story collection, *The Royal Ghosts* was in 2006 and that book appears tame now by comparison. *Mad Country* is frothing at the mouth, ready with a torrent of abuses.

Is that why the title is *Mad Country*?

Mad Country is a state of mind more than anything else. The title story in the collection features a successful woman entrepreneur who is arrested in a petty altercation and turned into a political prisoner, thereby starting the process of her madness. She undergoes a complete transformation of her identity and, by the end, questions the

reality that she held so dear before her arrest. Many of the characters in the collection are dwelling in, transitioning through, celebrating, or suffering through various stages of madness. After I finished the book, I thought that Nepal's tumultuous political history and sometimes deranged rulers might have been in the back of my mind. But Trump happened in America, so who is madder now?

Why do you keep coming back to Kathmandu in your books?

Kathmandu, too, is a state of mind. The Kathmandu I depicted in my first book, *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, is in the distant past now, yet many of the characters and locations in that book still exist vividly in my mind. I cannot let go of this city. Or, perhaps more accurately, Kathmandu won't let go of me. But *Mad Country* is hardly about Kathmandu. It's the most global of my books

Which Samrat Upadhyay book do you recommend newcomers read first?

They say that asking authors to rank or choose from among their books is like asking parents to choose favourites among their kids. But the first-born always remains a darling, so I'd say start with *Arresting God in Kathmandu*. If the sex in there is too much for you, then try *The City Son*.

How far do you think you have come as a writer since *Arresting God*?

Pretty far. This is my sixth book, yet I sometimes feel that I'm just getting started.

And in many ways I am. Creating art is not a step ladder, where you keep climbing to higher and better sights. Each book is different, its demands are different, so with each book you turn into a toddler and have to learn to walk all over again

Do you see any change in how your unconventional characters are received by readers?

I wouldn't say that my characters and plots are unconventional. It depends entirely upon who is deciding what convention is. By definition, literature is convention-defying. Convention asks us that we perceive and accept reality a certain way, often put in place by those who benefit from such arrangements. Literature is an art form that rearranges this arrangement and shows us other, perhaps more beautiful and truthful, ways to experience reality.

Nepali writers in English have not come up at the speed anticipated. What is missing?

To be a writer you need to immerse yourself in the universe of books, and you need to spend long hours writing. Some young writers want quick success without first even knowing how to write a proper sentence. Nepali writers need to gird up their *langotis* and get to work. 🇳🇵

nepalitimes.com

■ For the full text of the interview, go online.

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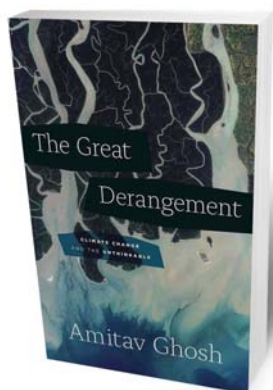
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Horror Story of a Climate Calamity

Where is the fiction about the facts of global warming, asks Amitav Ghosh

KUNDA DIXIT



The Great Derangement:
Climate Change and the Unthinkable
by Amitav Ghosh
Penguin Random House India 2016
275 pages INR 399

The novelist Amitav Ghosh published his most recent non-fiction, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, before Donald Trump and his merry bunch of climate refuseniks assumed power in Washington. Yet, the key message of his book about the nature of empire in an age of globalisation that is driven by populism and climate denial is eerily prophetic.

Climate change negotiations like the 2015 Paris Agreement threaten the global power status quo, and voters in some western democracies are convinced that this will result in an erosion of their power and wealth. Global disparities have widened in the post-colonial world. But to attain true climate justice, industrialised countries would need to cut their emissions by 80-90 per cent, something that is politically untenable for petroleum addicts.

Since he was so accurate in predicting how climate denialism in America could lead to someone-like-Trump, we have to believe Ghosh when he draws a parallel between the carbon economy and militarism. The irony is that while the political-corporate complex in Washington backpedals on the environment, the American military sees increased instability around the world due to global warming. It is addressing the new challenge of 'green security' through greater surveillance of environmental activists and an 'armed lifeboat' mentality.

'Corporations and energy billionaires' are funding research to sow confusion about anthropomorphic climate change so that the corporate media underplays the dangers of warming by trying to be 'balanced'. Such false equivalence has parallels in the way the US media covered Trump during the election campaign last year.

Ghosh wrote the following lines at a time

when a Trump victory was not even a remote possibility: 'The denial and disputing of scientific findings has become a major factor in the climate politics of the Anglosphere.'

Ghosh sees the laissez-faire philosophy of the pursuit of individual happiness that underpins Anglo-Saxon cultures as central to the climate crisis. Although he may be accused of extrapolating a bit, there is merit in the argument that 'the rate of climate denial tends to be unusually high' in the US, UK and Australia. It is the Anglosphere that is driving the global carbon economy of the anthropocene to protect the western 'way of life'. Ghosh acknowledges that official denialism in these countries exist in direct contradiction to a growing citizens' movement and global environmental activism.

The grip of fossil barons on the new US administration is so strong that it has failed to see the potential to make money from renewables. Under public opinion pressure, the Nordics are weaning themselves off petroleum: new car sales in Norway will be 100-per-cent zero emission by 2025, and one breezy day last July, Denmark produced 140% of its electricity from wind farms and exported the surplus to neighbours. China has discovered that 'green' is not just synonymous with environment but also with 'greenbacks', and is already the world's largest exporter of wind turbines, lithium-ion batteries and photovoltaics.

But under Trump, America risks being left behind in the global race for green energy. India, for its part, will soon be the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases and is relying on what Ghosh calls the 'politics of attrition' - the argument that the poor are more used to adapting to hardships than the rich. The author forces us to think about industrial agriculture that is burning

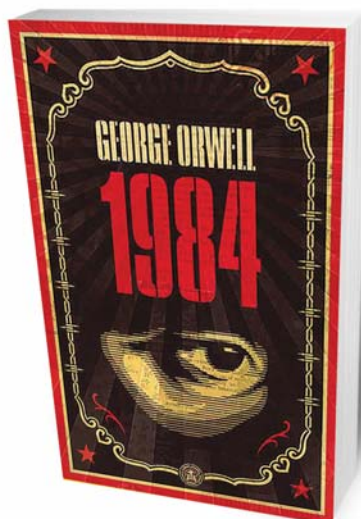
Ministry of Alternative facts

It has been 33 years since *Nineteen Eighty-four*, for which George Orwell imagined a dystopian world where every citizen is constantly under state surveillance, where two truths co-exist, thought is controlled, history and language manipulated.

Orwell wrote the book in the post-war gloom of 1949 England, when Stalinist totalitarianism was providing strong competition to Nazism for man's inhumanity to man. At that time, 1984 must have seemed so far in the future that the novel was seen as a kind of science fiction. But here we are in 2017, and there is still North Korea under Kim Jung Un which has outdone Oceania under Big Brother. Or, as has been remarked by many liberal opinion makers, the United States under Donald Trump.

Nineteen Eighty-four takes place in Airstrip One of the totalitarian superstate of Oceania, ruled by an elusive Big Brother (who may or may not exist) with four ministries: Love, Truth, Peace and Plenty, known as Miniluv, Minitrue, Minipax and Miniplenty respectively in Newspeak, the official language created solely to meet the requirements of the political ideology of Ingsoc (English Socialism).

This is all Dear Leader



Nineteen Eighty-four
by George Orwell
Harvill Secker The UK, 1949,
Adarsh Book India Reprint 2008,
available in Kathmandu
290 pages NR 224

Land, and the similarities to the 'alternative truth' hyper-reality of Trumpian America is stark. Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) may have analogies in post-revolutionary societies like present-day Nepal where the former comrades resemble Napoleon and Snowball, and His Former Majesty could be compared to Farmer Jones. And there may be hints of the world of Duterte, Erdogan, Trump or Putin in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, but it is *Nineteen*

Eighty-four that gives readers an uncannily prescient look at how democracy can degenerate into demagoguery.


The Newspeak of White House Spokesperson Sean Spicer, Kellyanne Conway or President Trump himself are shockingly similar to the language used by Orwell's Minitrue, the propaganda ministry tasked with concocting alternative facts.

One could take the analogy a bit too far, but the way media is threatened and manipulated in Washington press conferences these days is eerily familiar to Miniluv. It enforces loyalty to Big Brother through fear, intimidation and brainwashing. Minipax declares war alternatively with Eurasia (Russia) and Eastasia (China) much in the same way that Trump launches cruise missiles at Syrian air bases, or moves the US Navy Pacific Fleet to the Korean coast. Miniplenty has similarities to Trump's crony capitalism in fanning paranoia of immigrants.

Orwell's protagonist, Winston Smith, works for the Ministry of Truth. His job is to rewrite history to change the facts as they suit the party in the present scenario. Sound familiar? Winston is 39 years old and an Outer Party member, the middle

class considered potentially subversive by the nomenklatura. Their every action is scrutinised, luxury is limited to cigarettes and victory gin, physical intimacy is only for procreation, emotions are controlled and children are raised to spy on parents. The Thought Police (Thinkpol) arrest and punish comrades with thoughts unapproved by the party.

But Winston is a secret dissident, despises the regime and supports the beliefs of Emmanuel Goldstein, an enemy of the state and defender of freedom. He soon finds a kindred spirit in O'Brien, a high-level inner party member, and starts a relationship then falls in love with Julia, the girl in the Fiction Department of Minitrue. Winston rents a room in the prole (proletariat) area to escape constant surveillance. But the Thinkpol inevitably catch up with him and Julia. They are arrested and discover that O'Brien is an informer at the Ministry of Love.

Orwell was a social democrat who served the British colonial system in Burma, and his dark vision is of a future that has loud resonance today. That must be why *Nineteen Eighty-four* is a best-seller again in bookshops in Europe and the US. We may have to re-learn the Newspeak vocabulary of Doublethink, Thoughtcrime and Crimestop. 
Sonia Awale

hydrocarbon energy to provide carbohydrate energy for seven billion humans.

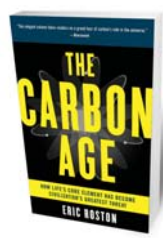
The less compelling chapters in *The Great Derangement* deal with Ghosh’s somewhat intricate attempt to unravel why novelists do not write about climate change. He asks: Where is the fiction about the facts of global warming? Readers may question why this navel gazing is even needed, except for an esoteric class in Contemporary English Literature. Ghosh admits that he himself has failed to incorporate in his novels the geological scale of the changes humans have wrought during the anthropocene. ‘The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination,’ he writes, ‘intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that have shaped the world.’

Trump’s efforts to roll back Obama-era gains on climate action show how fast

politics can move. Global warming is also much more rapid than scientists predicted, with CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere crossing 406 ppm this month. Perhaps Ghosh needs to bring out a new edition of *The Great Derangement* because, however dire his prognosis, it has already been overtaken by events.

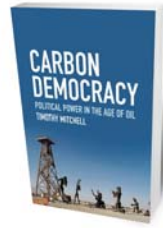
In 1998, after India conducted its first underground nuclear bomb test, Ghosh wrote a slim volume of non-fiction titled *Countdown* on how fallout from a full nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan would contaminate the Himalayan icecap, turning rivers that irrigate half of Asia radioactive. A future update of *Derangement* could look at the accelerated deposition of soot from coal and diesel burning in the subcontinent, hastening the melting of Himalayan glaciers in Asia’s water tower. 🇮🇳

More Climate Readings



**The Carbon Age
How Life’s Core Element
Has Become Civilization’s
Greatest Threat**

by Eric Roston
Everything you wanted to know about the science behind the building blocks of life but were afraid to ask.



**Carbon Democracy
Political Power in the
Age of Oil**

by Timothy Mitchell
Columbia University professor looks at the rise of fossil-fuelled capitalism and democracy. Especially relevant in the Age of Trump.



**Earth
Making a Life on a Tough
New Planet**

by Bill McKibben
Author who warned in *The End of Nature* 20 years ago about global warming, says it is already too late to do something about it.



**Cool It: The Skeptical
Environmentalist’s Guide
to Global Warming**

by Bjørn Lomborg
In a book written 10 years ago, climate denier offers an antidote to Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* by focusing on smart solutions to climate change instead of reducing carbon emissions.

Thamel Tales

Everyone knows Thamel, Kathmandu’s tourist ghetto. With Nepal’s emerging literary scene, an account of the neighbourhood that is the pulse of the city was long overdue.

Rabi Thapa has now stepped in with a beguiling biography of a neighbourhood transformed by globalised travel. *Thamel: Dark Star of Kathmandu* turns it from a location on Google Maps to a ‘mental artefact’. Thapa explores and guides his readers to tales of the past and fuses them with narratives of the present, trying to get to the root of Thamel’s where, when, whys and hows.

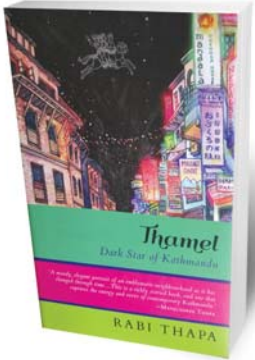
As the reader gathers, there are no simple answers to these questions but Thapa leaves its audience knowing a whole lot more about Thamel that is not part of the consciousness of today’s generation. We journey with him to when it was an open paddy field, travel through its Hippie history, it’s time as a flourishing business district for Managis, then as a hotbed of crime and drugs. Yet, there are also parallel tales of Thamel as the setting of the emerging rock and roll culture and a spiritual and a cultural hub, all described via the author’s anecdotes and interviews with the community.

Thamel is also a poignant tale of the city we lost to time. Thapa reminisces about the good old days. His almost lyrical words transport the readers to a bygone era, away from its concrete present (‘... the new, brash Thamel that spins every which way from Narsingh Chowk fades from the senses, giving way to a typical Newar tol of cramped brick houses with tiled roofs ...’).

Interspersed with accounts of real people – a recovering junkie, a band member, a sex worker, a nonagenarian shopkeeper who has been witness to changes in the area and many other interesting lives – he lays Thamel’s soul bare. For a book that has covered the area and its multiple facets, it is surprisingly not a complicated read. What adds extra value and depth are the small excerpts from works of King Pratap Malla, Shakespeare, Nietzsche, different proverbs and text at the beginning of the chapters written by the author.

The book does get tedious at times as Thapa tries to pack too many details into one sentence or one page, making it difficult going. However, He compensates with thorough research skills and a precision with words. The book is much more than a biography of Thamel, it is an exploration and rediscovering of a love for the neighbourhood which was lost somewhere along the line: ‘I grew out of it, like, a decade ago, and you want me to go sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll on you?’. 🇳🇵

Smriti Basnet



**Thamel: Dark Star
of Kathmandu**

by Rabi Thapa
Speaking Tiger, 2016
174 Pages NPR 640



CLARA BULLOCK

Literature and latté

Cafés in Kathmandu are no longer merely places to drink coffee: people are going there to get work done, or study for classes. That means more and more cafés are offering books that patrons can buy or read while they enjoy their drinks. Whether you just want to relax with a good read or use the volumes to study is entirely up to you.

Bodhi Books and Bakes in Maharajgunj is one such café. It doesn’t just offer organic coffee

and delicious, fresh pastries, but also a broad selection of books.

If you want to seriously study for school or college, **Kataksha**, also in Maharajgunj, is the place for you. The café also calls itself a mini-library and can provide food and drinks for your study group and even offers tuition. Student customers can join A-level classes in sociology, psychology and GP as well as prepare for the IELTS and TOEFL language tests and study in a caffeine-induced trance.

Sara Bakery started as an in-house bakery for Himalayan

Beanz Coffee, but due to high demand for its pastries, opened a separate shop. Sara is best known for its customised cakes that can be ordered online. The outlet in Jawalakhel also offers books. Clients can bring their own or borrow one of the many books that line the walls of a separate library room dedicated to those who want to relax and enjoy a page-turner.

Café Soma in Jhamsikhel is another one of those places where you can chill out with a good book. Primarily a breakfast and brunch restaurant, customers can buy one of its many books

and curl up at one of the corner tables.

The growth of the reading culture in Kathmandu is the result of many trends: the arrival of new publishing houses, the popularity of annual literature festivals, new up-and-coming cult authors and easy online access to information about literature. Book cafés started as a reaction to the sudden popularity of literature in Kathmandu but today they are contributing to the growth of that culture by helping to put books within easy reach of citizens. 🇳🇵

Clara Bullock

EVENTS

NEW YEAR'S
A curated list of events to begin Nepali New Year 2074



Fun at Labim,
Games, programs for kids, fashion show, live music, food festival and more to celebrate New Year.
Until 15 April, LABIM Mall, (01) 5529924

Heritage ride,
Pedal through the seven world heritage sites of Kathmandu Valley with fellow cyclists and bike lovers.
15 April, 6 am to 6 pm, Borderlands Nepal, Thamel, (01) 4381214

Be Helpibiri,
Come together for open-mic sessions, dance crew performances and a Cosplay photobooth to begin your New Year. Funds raised will be donated to a social project in Nepal.
14 April, 3 pm onwards, Around the Corner, Bansbari, 9861631197



Day of dance,
Start your New Year on a groovy note and join this urban dance workshop led by instructor Pramodh Kumar Bhandari.
15 April, 10 am to 12 pm, ABCD Dance Academy, Kalimati, 9844853136/9860803281, Register before 14 April, 2 pm

Yoga special,
Spend a relaxing morning with fellow yoga lovers at the Yoga Festival this New Year's Day.
14 April, 11 am onwards, Nepal Yoga Home, Goldhunga, 9851167373, Register: nepalyogahome.com/yogafestival



Barista training,
Add one more skill to your resume: train to be a barista.
16 April, 8 to 9 pm, Himalayan Beanz, Jawalakhel, (01) 4418213

Stand Up night,
Laugh out loud with stand-up comedians Shailee Basnet and Tyler McMahon.
28 April, 6 to 7.30 pm, Kar.Ma Coffee, Jhamsikhel, 9843767232, Tickets: Rs 1000

Hike and yoga,
Enjoy yoga while taking in the view of the hills. The hike and meditation session will be followed by a picnic.
22 April, Meeting point: Sooriya Wellness and Yoga Centre, Lazimpat, (01) 4001714, Fee: Rs 1,500

Nepal-Britain exhibition,
Attend an exhibition celebrating the bi-centenary relationship between Nepal and Britain.
15 April to 1 May, 10 am to 5 pm, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal, (01) 4220735



Art25,
A live painting competition where artists will be challenged to complete their finest work within 25 minutes.
29 April, 3 to 7 pm, Nagbahal, Patan, Deadline: 24 April, Apply: http://bit.ly/2onTzsm

MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



MUSIC



First Friday,
Enjoy as Nepali band Sound of Streams serenades you with their music this New Year's Day.
14 April, 6 pm onwards, The Factory, Thamel, (01) 4701185

Vinyl session,
On New Year 's Day enjoy soul, funk, reggae, disco, boogie, afro beats, rhythm 'n' blues all under one roof with Mama Disquo (Aus).
14 April, 5 to 8 pm, RS MOTO, Naxal, 9843670312



New Year fun,
Have a splash at Kathmandu Fun Valley while listening to Sabin Rai and band as they belt out some of their past hits.
14 April, 10 am to 5 pm, Kathmandu Fun Valley, Bhaktapur, (01) 6540711

Gypsy Jazz,
Spend a jazz-filled evening this Nepali New Year with friends and family.
15 April, 6.30 to 10 pm, BAC Art Café, Pulchowk, 9851147776

New Year Jatra,
Mark your calendars for live performances by Deepak Bajracharya and The Rhythm Band, Fusion Mantra and other artists on the first day of Nepali Year 2074.
14 April, 12 to 10 pm, Jawalakhel Football Ground, 9803892649 / 9851232649

DINING



Vootoo,
The new home of Newari cuisine that also has a safe continental menu for those who are not yet ready to experiment with new dishes.
Lajimpat, (01) 4005222

The Fun Café,
Relish a lavish buffet brunch this New Year's Day with friends and family at the The Fun Café.
14 April, 12 pm onwards, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, Rs 1500 plus taxes (per individual), Rs 4999 plus taxes (Two adults and Two children under 10 years), Rs 8888 plus taxes (Grandparents, parents, children- total 6 pax)



The Vesper House,
Stop by for the best in Italian and all local favorites, in their breezy outdoors seating. Also a great venue for wine connoisseurs.
Jhamsikhel, (01) 5548179, www.vespercafe.com

Embassy,
Away from the hustle bustle of the streets, enjoy the variety of multi-cuisine dishes at a place ideal for business meets and casual rendezvous.
Panipokhari, (01) 4424040



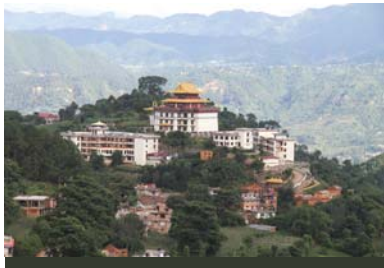
Mezze by Roadhouse,
Spot a superstar at one of Kathmandu's most popular restaurants.
Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Mar, (01) 4223087

GETAWAY



Dhulikhel Lodge Resort,
Located on a hilltop, the resort offers a magnificent vista of valleys, foothills, and mountains to the north.
Dhulikhel, (011) 490114/494, dhulikhellodgeresort.com

Famous Farm,
Wake up to the sounds of chirping birds and a fresh morning breeze wafting in through the *aankhijhyal*.
Nuwakot, (01) 4700426, info@rural-heritage.com



Neydo Monastery,
A monastery and guest house, Neydo is home to many significant religious sites of the great *siddhas*. Leave your troubles behind and book a room.
Pharping, Kathmandu, www.neydohotel.com

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, Pokhara, (61) 465819



Milla Guesthouse,
If you prefer the quiet, and admire a mix of old and new, this is the perfect place to stay. Not too far away from the city, yet miles apart.
Bhaktapur, 9851024137



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Himalmedia Pvt. Ltd.
Patandhoka, Lalitpur

An illustrated history of the Chitrakars

New book commemorates the legacy of generations of Kathmandu's hereditary artists



PAINTING STORIES: An 11th century manuscript cover depicting the Das Avatar or 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu

SAHINA SHRESTHA

Born in a family of generations of painters, it was no surprise that Madan Chitrakar (*pictured*) was drawn to art from a young age. Paint ran in his veins.

Chitrakar means 'painter', and the surname is synonymous with Nepali art. Madan is the son of Tej Bahadur Chitrakar, who ushered Nepal into the modern era of Nepali art, and learnt insights and skills passed down from his forefathers. Modern education helped Madan find his niche in contemporary art.

What bothered him as an art student, and later as an artist, and art historian was that many of the narratives concerning Nepali art were referenced from foreign publications and relied on evidence sourced from museums abroad. Little was written and published about the evolution of art and the milieu of Nepal's family of hereditary artists.

So when Sangeeta Thapa, Board Member of the Patan Museum Development Committee, proposed a book

on the history of the Chitrakars, Madan jumped at the opportunity. *Nepali Painting Through the Ages* was five years in the making and contains historic paintings, many previously unseen and unpublished. It contains reproductions from the collections of the National Museum, Chhauni, Patan Museum, the National Art Museum, Bhaktapur and private collections of Chitrakars and Rana families.

The book focuses on the cultural environment, motifs and driving factors behind the artists and evolution of forms and formats in Nepali art. An accompanying essay by Madan Chitrakar provides an insight into the tradition of his family's inter-generational involvement in the arts.

"The book is not a recitation of history," Chitrakar told us at the launch of his book last week at the Kathmandu Triennale. "Rather, I expect it to serve as a more comprehensive reference material and inventory for writing the history of Nepali paintings. It is an attempt to narrate the historicity of Nepali traditional art, how it emerged and how it has evolved over the time."

The book is a visual journey



through time, separated by form and subject.

It begins with the earliest painted manuscript covers from the eleventh century to medieval *paubhas*, the precursors to Tibetan *thangkas* and which remain at the fulcrum of the Newar art tradition. The book moves on to modern works, including hand-painted photographs and oil and canvas portraits of the Rana and Shah dynasties. There are also examples of murals from the *vihars*, *bahis*, and palaces around Kathmandu Valley. We see the evolution of Nepali art through foreign influences, religious social

and political beliefs and more modern techniques.

An image featured in the book, of a wall painting at the 55-window palace in Bhaktapur, shows King Bhupatindra Malla personified as Lord Vishwaroop and Queen Vishwa Laxmi as the consort of the Lord, illustrating the royals' desire to be considered divine.

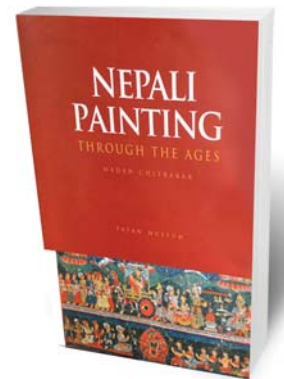
While early *paubhas* were based on religious forms, later ones show the influence of Rajasthani and Tibetan styles. The Chitrakar artists also incorporated styles and poses from Moghul art in their portraits of the Malla kings. And with the advent of photography, their art was influenced by the western style of portraits.

Apart from acting as an inventory of the representative works of the Chitrakar artists from past and present, the book unintentionally highlights the neglect and disregard for heritage in Nepal.

The murals of Krishna and Vishwaroop found in Bhimsen Thapa's palace in Lagan were already derelict before the April 2015 earthquake destroyed them. The author found a late 19th-century ritual painting

of Nryteswori Devi folded in a corner of a drawer in the National Museum without proper preservation. An 18th-century painting of Ratna Sambhava was too damaged to be interpreted properly, and another exquisite *paubha* from the early 18th century was too damaged to restore.

The book is a treasure trove of rare and historic paintings from the past, recorded and documented by a member of the clan that made art history in Nepal. 🇳🇵



Nepali Painting Through the Ages
by Madan Chitrakar
Patan Museum, 2016
289 pages NPR 3,000

Lumanka ti



Lumanka ti

by Rishi Amatya and Prakash Ranjit
Amuse, Jhamsikhel
50 pages NPR 250
www.amuse.com.np

Sitting on the boundary of two massive tectonic plates, Nepal has frequent earthquakes. So it is not unusual that quakes figure prominently in folklore and literature.

With the 2015 earthquake featuring so widely in national and international publications, what more can an author offer on the subject?

The writer-artist duo Rishi Amatya and Prakash Ranjit have come up with a novel idea. *Lumanka ti* (Newari for 'don't forget'), is a graphic novel combining visual narrative with long forgotten myths

and legends of the Kathmandu Valley.

The story takes place in 1254 CE in Nepa: Mandala, Kathmandu Valley. King Ananda Malla is being haunted by the wrathful God Bhairav and the country is fighting a never-ending war with the Rudra Vamshi clan. The priest comes up with the idea to end the nightmare and win the war by taming the God.

The writer has taken liberties with the story, borrowing from both history and myths. He combines the story of Abhaya Malla, the king who died during the first recorded earthquake

in Kathmandu, with that of King Bhupatindra Malla, who built a temple for Siddhi Laxmi to tame Bhairav's anger.

The dialogue in a graphic novel should be simple and colloquial, which it is. But Ranjit's dark and moody illustrations breathe life and drama into the tale. Those detailed illustrations and the use of scattered Newari words evoke the ambience of ancient Kathmandu. If Amatya and Ranjit polish their storytelling and iron out the kinks, they could produce a whole lot of other graphic novels based on Nepali history. 🇳🇵

Sahina Shrestha

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Assassin's Creed

Taking a break from the season's "serious" award-nominated films, let us examine *Assassin's Creed*, 2016's end of year action film based on a wildly popular video game. It stars Michael



MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

Fassbender and Marion Cotillard, two extremely serious actors who effortlessly jump between well-respected, independent cinema and the silver screen, and are the closest thing to the truly glamorous, old-fashioned stars of cinema's golden era.

It is therefore surprising that these two particular, old school thespians would agree to star in such a franchise (sequels are already projected: the film grossed \$241 million against a budget of \$125 million) that is already an extension of another franchise based on a series

of video games that play on rudimentary (read childish) tropes of the Templar and Assassin mythologies.

To cut a long story short, *Assassin's Creed* is surprisingly well made and fairly engrossing if you start watching it with very low expectations. There is the usual preposterous storyline: Fassbender plays Callum Lynch, a convict with violent tendencies who is put to death for his grim crimes - apparently he is genetically pre-disposed to violence. He wakes up alive, in Spain, in an uber-futuristic facility where he is told by the lovely Sofia (Cotillard) that he has been chosen for his gene code. It links him to his medieval ancestor Aguilar de Nehra, an "Assassin" of the "Creed" who is sworn to protect human free will against the uptight Templars, who wish to control humanity for the sake of peace.

Sofia is apparently both brilliant and beautiful, so

confoundingly clever in fact that she has created the Animus, a contraption that can simulate the past when someone of a similar enough genetic code is hooked up to it (there is no real explanation for how it works). Hence Cal's ability to access Aguilar's past, and locate the mysterious "Apple": the kernel of temptation that holds the secret of free will. Sound kooky? It is, but surprisingly one is willing enough to go along; after all it is a video game.

We are swept up in Cal and Sofia's interfaces as they search for the desired object through 15th-Century Spain, a treat for the viewer, even as we must forcibly suspend our disbelief. The script though, continues to unravel, and while Fassbender and Cotillard grit their teeth and do their very best, the ridiculous relationships, particularly between Sofia and her incredibly self-centred father Allan Rikkin (played by a cold Jeremy Irons), finally entangle the storyline - there is no way out.

As mindless action films go, *Assassin's Creed* is really not that bad. It lacks a sense of humour, and it is dreadfully motivated, but you can tolerate it on a lazy afternoon; that is, until it suddenly ends, in *media res*, leaving you indignant and wondering why you had invested so much in a film about a video game about assassins and cults, and apples. 🍏



Watch trailer online

nepalitimes.com

HAPPENINGS



NEPAL ARMY

HI, HELLO: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is welcomed by Army Chief Rajendra Chhetri at a military commissioning ceremony in Bhaktapur on Wednesday.



BIKRAM RAI

TOP COP: A police officer salutes newly appointed Inspector General of Police Prakash Aryal in Singha Darbar on Monday.



BIKRAM RAI

WOMAN ON TOP: After becoming the first woman to lead the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI), Bhawani Rana poses for a photo with outgoing President Pashupati Murarka and newly-elected Vice Chair Shekhar Golchha.



GOPEN RAI

BATHING THE RAIN GOD: Devotees carry the idol of Rato Machindranath in a palanquin before the annual holy bath ritual at Lagankhel on Wednesday.



BIKRAM RAI

THE CRUX OF THE BISKET: Devotees pull a chariot carrying the Bhairab to mark the start of the week-long Bisket festival in Bhaktapur on Monday.

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SUMAN BASNET

SAHINA SHRESTHA

At the age of 30, Anjay Kumar KC was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. After years of undergoing antiretroviral therapy (ART), he lost his appetite and his body could not handle food -- just

a few of the side effects of the medication. Unable to eat anything else, he lived on oatmeal for an entire year and was in constant pain. Years of heroin addiction meant that painkillers did not work. KC had read about how marijuana helped alleviate pain and build an appetite but he found that no

doctor in Nepal would prescribe him any. He had taken marijuana before, so he started taking it again although it was illegal. “Marijuana is the reason I am alive today,” says KC, seven years later. “There was a point where I thought I wouldn’t survive the side effects of ART but marijuana helped me to

Push to undo

While the recreational use of marijuana is controversial, the case for legalising its medical use is strong

start eating again and it eased the pain.” As president of the Coalition of Drug Users of Nepal, KC is now strongly advocating the legalisation of marijuana for other patients like him.

Marijuana use was always culturally accepted in Nepal, and the *Cannabis indica* plant grows wild across the country. Open sale of marijuana in government regulated shops drew tens of thousands of hippies to Nepal in the 1960s. In 1976, largely under pressure from the American government, which was worried about its young citizens becoming addicts, Nepal banned the use and sale of marijuana. Many in western Nepal, where the Cannabis plant is used for everything from therapeutic oil

to making chutney, lost their sole source of income. The ban sent the cultivation and trade of the cash crop underground and turned farmers into criminals. But with 25 states in the US legalising the drug for medical and commercial purposes, activists say it is high time Nepal did the same. With its proven medical benefits, more countries are now legalising marijuana for medical use, the latest being Argentina this month. (*See boxes*). Under a provision in the Drug Control Act 1976 marijuana is permitted for medical purposes under prescription, but how much of it is allowed is not specified. Since it is so widely available without prescription, doctors do not come into the equation, while



COMING TO TERMS: Saraswati Basnet smoked marijuana for six years to slim down and is now learning to accept her body

SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

Slim dreams

Girls using drugs to lose weight are getting addicted to them

SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

Shushma Salma Timilsina always struggled with her weight. The psychological trauma of being too heavy led her to use drugs: today she is an addict.

Six years ago, Timilsina weighed 80 kg, but she wanted a fit body and flat stomach. Upon hearing that smoking marijuana could help lose weight, she lit up and chased her dream to be slim. “I always felt bad about my body and wanted to look like my friends who had slimmer bodies,” Timilsina, now 22, recalls. “I

gradually lost my appetite after I started smoking marijuana. Over the years I lost almost 30kg.” Originally from Hetauda, Timilsina lives in a rented flat in Kathmandu with friends. She used to smoke as many as 30 sticks of marijuana a day as it was easily available, and gradually developed an urge for hard drugs. She admits now that she never realised how she was moving from smoking pot to popping pills. Two weeks after she started taking pills, her parents found out. They admitted her to Sober Recovery Women’s Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre in Kathmandu. “I lost weight and became

slim, but I never realised the drug was spoiling my life,” she told *Nepali Times*, adding, “I wish I had never taken drugs. I regret a lot what I did. Now I want to gain some weight and live a healthy life.” Body shaming is leading many young girls to try using drugs to stay slim. Out of 40 women admitted to Sober Recovery, 9 had been smoking pot from an early age to try to lose weight. Some, like Timilsina, moved to harder drugs and became addicts. Experts warn that it is a dangerous, hidden issue. Says Tshering Wangdo of Sober Recovery: “In most of the cases it is difficult to counsel such

girls because the issue of body shaming is closely related to their psychology.” Saraswati Basnet, 22, also faced psychological trauma due to body shaming. Basnet weighed more than 100kg during her teen years, could never find clothes that fit and was publicly embarrassed about it. “The word *moti* used to hit me right in my heart and I felt so embarrassed. I was obsessed with losing weight,” she says. “Smoking marijuana was my last resort, as other medicines I tried didn’t help.” Basnet started smoking pot at age 18 and continued for six years, trying to lose 20 kg. She never reached that target, but she did get addicted. Her husband admitted her to Sober Recovery a few months ago. Now Basnet, the mother of a six-year-old son, regrets the path she took and is learning to accept her weight. “I am still not slim, but I am happy with my body.” Binita Thapa Magar is just 15 and also felt that she needed to lose weight to be ‘perfect.’ She started smoking marijuana because she felt her stomach was too large. One evening she was walking in the streets smoking when police caught her and handed over to the National Centre for Children at Risk at Bhrikuti Mandap. Eventually, she was taken to a rehabilitation centre. Magar says she has learnt her lesson now: “I will stay away from drugs and eat less to have a flat stomach.” 🇳🇵

CHASING ZERO

Many young women try to cope with societal pressure to be slim. Some take to drugs to lose weight and get addicted to them. Listen to some of the women talk about how they beat the habit.

nepalitimes.com

ART THAT MATTERS

Miss Moti is a cartoon character created by Krupa Joshi who fights social stigma about being heavy by finding inspiration in just being who she is. Listen to Joshi talk about Miss Motivation and watch a slideshow of her illustrations.

nepalitimes.com

hash ban in Nepal



LEGALWEED

Canada is set to legalise marijuana this week, and Argentina did so last month.

Marijuana legal for medical use

Argentina, Australia, Austria , Canada, Chile , Colombia, Israel, Italy, 25 US states

Free use

Spain, Portugal

On prescription

Netherlands, Germany

Used as treatment for cancer, multiple sclerosis, AIDS, spinal cord injury, glaucoma, etc

Macedonia, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Croatia, Puerto Rico

Small amounts

Jamaica, Uruguay

Use of derivatives

France, Romania, Croatia

the government treats it entirely as a narcotic drug whose use and sale is illegal.

“Marijuana is less habit forming than opiates and carries virtually no risk of fatal overdose, thus it has been wrongly classified,” says Rajiv Kafle, a prominent legalisation activist. “Moreover, when the drug was banned it was done without proper scientific research. Studies have shown that the chemical cannabidiol found in marijuana has beneficial medical properties.”

Activists also say that marijuana can help control crime and wean the dependency on other hard drugs. The most vivid proof of that is KC, who did heroin for 22 years. He says marijuana could be added to harm reduction in drug rehab in Nepal if it was available legally.

“Take it from me, marijuana was my saviour. It made my pain bearable and took away my addiction to heroin. Believe me,



BENEFITS OF POT

Research has proven the benefits of medical marijuana, showing it to be effective for:

- Neuropathic pain
- Multiple sclerosis
- Muscle spasms
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Cancer and HIV patients
- Epilepsy
- Anxiety
- Bipolar disorder

many heroin addicts like me would give up heroin,” says KC. Activists say that legalising marijuana will help patients to get high quality cannabis for their conditions, and by regulating the drug, the government can keep a tab on the criminality associated with it. Says Kafle, who is still on ART: “By strictly regulating the drug, removing the moral policing and not criminalising it, a lot of the stigma associated with it will go away and reduce the number of addicts.” To be sure, there are negative effects of smoking too much marijuana, or using it for non-medicinal purposes. Overuse and abuse can lead to dependency, memory loss and emotional swings. Doctors like Saroj Ojha, head of the department of psychiatry at Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital, remain unconvinced: “Marijuana should not be legalised in a country like Nepal where the regulations are so lax. Yes, it may have medicinal properties but the government in the current state will not be able to regulate and monitor it. This is not the time to be talking about legalisation.”



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