

The ship of state



DIVAKAR CHHETTRI

The ruling Nepal Communist Party, formed by the union of the former rebel Maoists and their erstwhile UML enemy, has squandered nine months of its five-year tenure.

Prime Minister Oli has publicly blamed his own party for undermining the government. He said recently, "Our party's leaders and cadre are silent when the government is being criticised."

That barb appeared to be aimed at his co-Chair and prime minister-in-waiting Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his former Maoist comrades, who neither support nor censure the government. It is as if Dahal is letting Oli sink his ship, patiently waiting for his turn at the helm in 2020.

Analysts blame the NCP's debacle largely on Prime Minister Oli for being out of touch with reality, and making wild and hollow promises. But the other reason is that the two constituent parties in the NCP still have not reconciled their widely different political cultures.

Says a senior UML leader: "After the unification, we thought we could make the Maoists in our image. But we are now behaving like the Maoists used to."

Indeed, the NCP is now run by the two Chairs who rarely consult each other, or the rank and file. The UML's tradition of close consultation among the senior leadership is gone, and its strong nationwide cadre network has not been replaced with a new party base.

The NCP's much-delayed Standing Committee meeting this week brought the UML-Maoist fissure into the open, with Oli facing much of the criticism.

The meeting acknowledged the delay in truly uniting the two parties, and said it would take steps to correct that. The question is: will it narrow the distance between Capt Oli and his Co-pilot? 🇳🇵

Rameshwar Bohara



Community forestry
Which way Annapurna?
New trekking model

PAGE 8-9

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FIXING WHAT AIN'T BROKE

Despite the mountain of problems in this country, and the list of urgent to-do's for the government, Nepal's officialdom tends to get bogged down trying to fix things that ain't broke.

In this edition of *Nepali Times* we carry two reports. One is of the unique eco-tourism conservation project in the Annapurnas that has become a model for other parts of the world. The other is Nepal's successful effort in protecting forests over the last four decades by handing over their management to local communities. (*See pages 8-9*)

Both success stories have some things in common: local communities owned the projects and made them an integral part of local development. They are also brilliant examples of grassroots democracy at work, where elected sub-local committees collectively decide what is best for the people, for nature and for the economy.



MONIKA DEUPALA

These accomplishments of the post-1990 democratic era survived the NC-UML polarisation, ten years of war, kleptocratic coalitions, and the instability of the post-conflict decade. But now both are threatened by the utter confusion and disarray wrought by ill-thought out federalism.

The Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) project was conceived by naturalist gurus like Hemanta Mishra, Chandra Gurung and Mingma Sherpa. Nepal could not adopt the national park model because, as the most densely-populated mountain region in the world, its wilderness areas had villages embedded in them.

Mishra, Gurung and Sherpa came up with the novel idea of turning the Annapurna area into a model zone where nature could flourish in harmony with human habitation, indeed conservation could lift living standards of the inhabitants. Tourism income was ploughed into making households energy self-sufficient, in upgrading agro-forestry, replacing firewood in lodges, maintaining trails and building micro-hydro plants.

The concept has worked brilliantly since 1985, retaining its main feature of conservation with a human face. The result can be seen in the lush regrowth of forests, the proliferation of wildlife, and in the relative

affluence from tourism of villages in Manang, Mustang and Kaski.

But change is afoot. The Annapurna Circuit now has a motorable road up to Manang village on one side and to Muktinath on the other. The Annapurna Base Camp trail now exceeds its carrying capacity in the peak season, new trails like Khopra and Mardi struggle to cope with a new influx.

The other success story is Nepal's community forestry exercise. It is a vivid example of how just one piece of legislation combined with grassroots democracy can directly help preserve the natural environment. The program nearly doubled the country's forest cover in the last 40 years, and this was solely due to the dedication of the 22,000 local forest committees all over the country.

But now, both the Annapurna Conservation Area and the community forestry project have now collided head-on with Nepal's new federal structure. There is utter confusion about who is going to manage projects like ACA and community forests: will it be rural municipalities, provincial governments, Singha Darbar, or all three?

The 16 rural municipalities in the Annapurnas have been on warpath for the past month, demanding that ACA hand over the project to them. They complain about tourism fees not being used in their villages, and strict rules about

cutting trees, building roads and new hotels. The National Trust for Nature Conservation which manages ACA is under pressure to devolve its powers, but to whom?

A new Forestry Bill seeks to curtail the rights of the community forestry user groups to sell forestry products on their

own. The Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) is up in arms, but in the absence of clarity about who owns and can manage forests, there is a danger that it will be free-for-all plunder.

With devolution of political power under the new federal structure, there has also been decentralisation of corruption. Since it is the same political parties at the village and provincial levels, the kleptocracy has trickled down to local governments. Instead of handing control of forest conservation to rural municipalities, it may be more prudent to retain sub-local user groups at the grassroots. Allowing forests to be 'managed' when corruption is so pervasive will open up protected areas to wholesale logging, as has happened with quarrying and sand-mining on river ecosystems.

Nepal cannot afford to squander its hard-earned gains in conservation by trying to fix something that is not broken. It will be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Ten years ago this week, the office of Himalmedia that published *Nepali Times* and *Himal Khabarpatrika* was attacked by two dozen Maoist cadre in retaliation for the coverage of extortion and violence by militant unions affiliated with the Maoist party. The newsroom and office was vandalised, the CEO, *Nepali Times* Editor, the Finance Manager and several other journalists were physically assaulted. Two of them needed to be hospitalised.

Nepali Times lodged an FIR, naming two of the Maoists involved in the attack. The two were picked up by police and detained. Ten years ago this week, #432 *Nepali Times* of 2-9 January 2018 guerrilla commander-turned-elected prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal was interviewed about the attack. Excerpt:

What do you say about the attacks on the media?

Actually I have described the attack on Himalmedia as an unacceptable crime and called for the prosecution of the guilty. There are no 'buts' and 'ifs' and the guilty should not go free. I have asked the two to be handed over to the police. Such attacks and disagreements should not be allowed and it was to resolve this that I took those steps. It's not our policy to harass the press.



ONLINE PACKAGES



MANAGING ANAPPURNA

Following the decision by Nepal Trust for Nature Conservation to charge fees also for Nepali tourists visiting the Annapurna Conservation Area, a 3-way tug-o-war has erupted between local, provincial and federal governments to control Nepal's showcase project. Visit scenic Ghandruk and hear from locals and tourists what they think. *Story: page 8-9.*



SOCIAL TREKKING

Join our reporters on a short hike to the foothills below Annapurna to learn about community-based tourism that tries to maximise the benefits of trekking for local communities through homestay, and learning about the local culture and agriculture. *Story: page 9.*



MECHANICAL WOMAN

Originally a home-maker from Dolakha, Anita Tamang has mastered the art of motorcycle maintenance, a profession perceived to be a male domain. Visit Tamang in her workshop in Thimi, and watch her at work as she talks about her struggles and her dreams for the future. *Story: page 7.*

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

The Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) has completed 85% of its task of detailed investigation of evidence and testimonies from victims ('Justice in transition', David Seddon, #940). The Interrogation Preparation Team to interview alleged perpetrators headed by me has already been formed, which will complete its tasks within a month.

Bishnu Pathak

BOUDHANATH

Great informational piece ('A temple by another name', Ashish Mishra, #940). I think the KMC should start reinstating the original names of places.

Bob Shrestha

■ Known as Jharung Khashor (in Tibetan), the story of Legendary Stupa is alive and told all over the Himalaya ('The stupa of a million dewdrops', Sewa Bhattarai, #940).

Gyurme Dondup

■ Always amazed that this oasis of tranquility exists in the middle of chaotic, bustling Chabahal.

Himali Upadhya

■ It's a divine place. We loved our visit there.

Tracey Deane

WHAT'S TRENDING

The Chinese are coming

by Ruixue Zhang

Two entrepreneurs prepare for the expected influx of Chinese tourists by educating them about Nepal. Visit nepalitimes.com to watch Justin Zhao and Liang Ye explain Nepal's unique natural and cultural heritage, as well as its modern art forms to Chinese tourists.



Most reached and shared on Facebook



Most visited online page



12 years later, justice is a mirage

by Sewa Bhattarai

The fate of two commissions to investigate war crimes are in limbo. A proposal by Conflict Victims' Common Platform to set up a high level commission has split the victim's movement. Go online to read the heated debate this report generated.



Most commented



Most popular on Twitter

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @nepalitimes

A proposal by Conflict Victims' Common Platform for a 'high-level mechanism' including victims, government, and political parties has split the victims' movement, with a faction calling it 'Perpetrator's platform.' @sewa_ditee brings two sides face to face



Charan Prasai @CharanPrasai

The process which weakens and divides victims is unacceptable. Politics cannot and shouldn't be above justice. The so called mechanism will serve only the interest of the perpetrators, advocating 'army integration' model.



Ram Bhandari @RamBhandariNEP

The struggle for justice continues. Let's build a wider alliance against perpetrators and their conspiracy! All must watch and warn spoilers to not intervene! Let's speak out strongly against threats from perpetrators, their agents and political puppets.



Nepali Times @nepalitimes

Boudha's original name is Khasti Mahachaitya, which means 'great stupa of dew drops', and there is an interesting story of how that name came about. Why was the name changed? And what did we lose when we lost the original name?



Paavan Mathema @paavan11

Lovely spread on #Boudhanath this week in @nepalitimes. Did not know it was originally called Khasti Mahachaitya, and was renamed like many other areas of #Kathmandu valley that had #Nepalibhasa names of religious and historical significance.



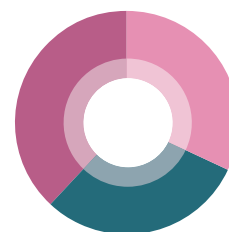
Bibek Bhandari @bibekbhandari

We still call it Khasti at home -- at least the older generation -- and it's still an important place of worship during Sithi Nakha. After reading this, want to dig more



Weekly Internet Poll #941

Q. How will Nepal fare in 2019?



Total votes: 128

Better: **32%**
Worse: **30%**
Same: **38%**

Weekly Internet Poll #942
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Do you believe the allegations of irregularities in the Airbus deal?



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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

Nepal living beyond its means

Binaya Banjara

In 1991, India’s foreign exchange reserves almost emptied when the country’s balance of payments collapsed. The Central Bank eventually averted a full-blown crisis, but poverty in India increased in the years that followed. Manmohan Singh was finance minister, and he introduced dramatic economic reforms that unleashed India’s economy and has been the foundation of its growth.

Today, Nepal is at the risk of facing the same crisis India experienced three decades ago. There is a net outflow of foreign exchange, as remittance income fails to keep pace with the growth in imports, mainly petroleum.

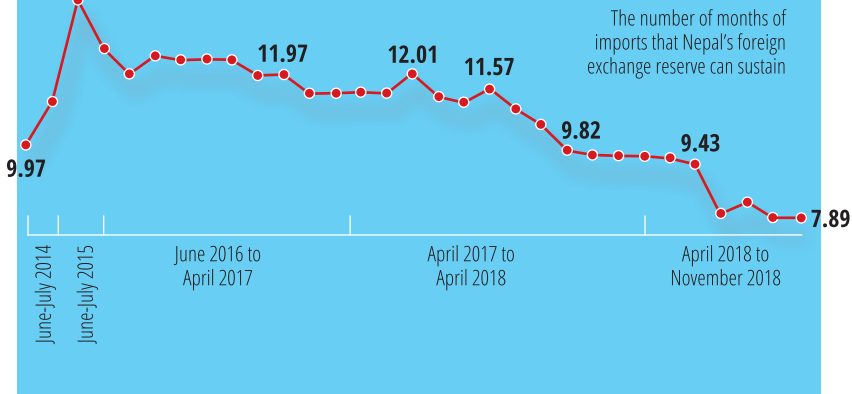
Nepal’s foreign exchange reserves currently can sustain only 7 months and 26 days of imports, compared to 14 months and 3 days as recently as 2016. (See graph) Nepal Rastra Bank also calculated that in the first four months of the fiscal year, Nepal’s balance of payments deficit stood at Rs57 billion and in just the last month it increased by Rs22 billion.

“The current rate of increase in the balance of payments deficit will be a huge crisis in the future,” warns Bijaya Nath Bhattarai, an ex-governor of Nepal Rastra bank.

Nepal’s over-dependence on remittance is deepening the crisis. Among different sources of foreign exchange for a country such as investments, exports, or tourism, remittances from overseas workers



Foreign exchange reserves plummeting due to soaring import bill



NEPAL RASTRA BANK

is the most unreliable income source because it can easily be affected by political tension and conflicts. Nepal’s remittance income is also not ploughed into productive sectors, and is mostly used up in paying for imported consumer goods and energy.

Some 65% of Nepal’s total

import bill is paid through remittances, while exports constitute only 6% and investment only 17% of Nepal’s annual foreign exchange income that is used to pay for imports. But even with all these sources combined, Nepal cannot meet 12% of its import bill, which is what is leading to the

balance of payment deficit. The country has been forced to dip into its foreign exchange reserves to meet the gap.

In the first four months of the current fiscal year, Nepal imported goods worth approximately Rs400 billion while exports were only worth Rs29 billion. Even though this is a tremendous difference, finance minister Yuba Raj Khatriwada admits that what worries him more is the gap in the service sector. Most of the current outflow is for energy and vehicle imports, while there is also a huge outflow due to students, medical patients and Nepalis vacationing abroad. Nepali tourists spent Rs35 billion abroad in the four months of this fiscal year, but foreign tourists spent only Rs25 billion in Nepal during the same period.

This deteriorating balance of payments deficit may compel the government to adopt a restrictive monetary policy, but economist Keshav Acharya explains that this will mean only two choices for the government: “Either the government must take foreign loans, or reduce imports to prevent the outflow of hard currency.”

The easiest step would be to borrow, but ex-governor Bhattarai notes that adhering to the strict conditions of the donors might be very painful for Nepal as it has been for other countries. Moreover, the crisis may also lead to policies to stop Nepalis going abroad, and limit imports to only basic goods.

The CEO of Nepal Rastra Bank Nar Bahadur Thapa says, “If the balance of payments deficit and growth of imports continues at the

present rate, we may not be able to import even the goods needed for development projects.”

It is accepted practice that an import-dependent country without a sustainable source of foreign currency needs to maintain foreign exchange reserves to handle at least six months of imports. But with Nepal’s total annual export meeting only 24 days of imports, Nepal Rastra Bank’s policy is to maintain foreign exchange reserves to last at least 8 months.

If not, depleted reserves can put pressure on Nepali fixed exchange rate with Indian currently at Rs160. If that happens, there will be ruinous capital flight to India, as has occurred in the past. Ex-governor Krishna Bahadur Mandandhar says that the government and the central bank still have time to remedy the situation by limiting imports of luxury items. But this could lead to an expansion in the black market.

Earlier this year, when the government applied quantitative restrictions on the import of sugar, the price immediately shot up by Rs5 per kg. Worse, if there is a devaluation of the Nepali rupee it will raise inflation and that could lead the economy into a downward spiral.

Experts advise that while the central bank needs to be free from political interference to stabilise the economy, the government and the central bank must coordinate their actions. In the longer-term, there is no other way but to attract investors by increasing the competitiveness of the Nepali economy and increase exports. 🇳🇵

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BIZ BRIEFS

Turkish awarded

Turkish airlines was awarded as the 'Best Corporate Travel Program for Business Travelers', 'Best Airline for Business Travelers' and 'Best Airport Staff/Gate Agents' in the 2018 FT Tested Reader Survey by *Global Traveler* magazine. This is the 15th year of the survey, and more than 22,000 frequent business and luxury travelers polled to name the best in more than 80 travel-related categories.

Shades of celebration

Streak professional organized an event 'Hair & Beyond' for hair stylists to learn latest trends and techniques of hair cutting, colouring and styling from the celebrity hair stylist Jawed Habib and Technical Head of Streak Professional Agnes Chen. The two experimented with Streak's latest spring-summer collection 'Marigold' which incorporates shades of golden, copper and blondes to signify the celebratory mood of the season.

Internet and TV offers

On its 18th anniversary, Subisu Cable Net has introduced an offer, 'Internet bhayankar fast, TV bhayankar clear, cost bhayankar sasto'. Customers can avail three packages in home-based internet, Clear TV and combo service of internet and Clear TV at discounted prices. Gifts for lucky winners as well.

Banks in Darchula

NIC Bank, in collaboration with UKaid's program 'access to finance', has started operating two branches in Dhap, ward 7 and Dattu, ward 9 of Mahakali municipality in Darchula. Banking services, such as opening different types of account, saving and withdrawal of money, topup and recharge, utility bill payment, transaction of loan and many others, are available.

Fast car

Honda Nepal organised the very first racing championship in Nepal last week in which 30 enthusiasts participated in two categories: CBR 250 R and 149-165 cc. Cash prizes of Rs50,000 and Rs25,000 were awarded to winners who will also be representing Nepal in the upcoming Honda India Dream Cup.

prabhu BANK

Viral videos of 2018

Nepali Times takes you back to the most popular videos of the past year on its YouTube Channel. Go online to watch them all over again.



1. A KIWI TAKES TO GUNDRUK

Most Nepalis love gundruk, it is almost our national dish. But it's rare to find a foreigner enjoying its strong aroma. New Zealand journalist and writer Thomas Heaton didn't just make gundruk sandheko from scratch, but also relished eating it. This video was the most widely shared and commented in 2018.

2. US-BANGLA PLANE CRASH

A US-Bangla Bombardier Q100 aircraft from Dhaka to Kathmandu crashed at Kathmandu airport on 12 March killing all 67 passengers and crew. Among them were Nepali medical students returning to Nepal after completing their studies. This recording of the conversation between the pilot and Kathmandu air traffic control shows that the Captain was incoherent and



disoriented during the flight's last moments. The clip was shared by over half a million readers, and generated vigorous debate about the nature of the crash.



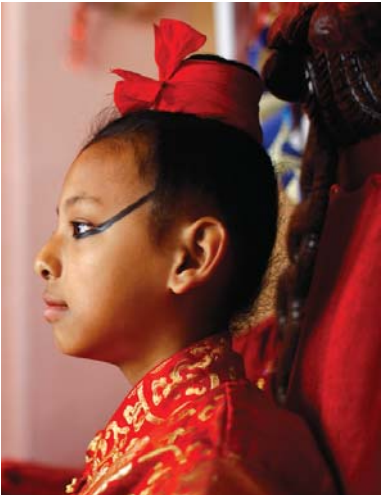
3. FIRE AND ICE

This video of the Khumbu by Kunda Dixit presented dramatic proof of the impact of global warming on the glaciers below Mt Everest. The film was widely shared among the international scientific community, mountaineers and gained a lot of attention.



4. BARTIKA RAI

YouTube sensation and US-based singer-songwriter Bartika Eam Rai was in Kathmandu for her first Nepal concert tour, and spoke to our reporter Sewa Bhattarai about her new full-length album, her childhood, the therapeutic power of songwriting and her future plans. Her fans were delighted, and flooded the *Nepali Times* feed with best wishes for the star.



5. THE BOY GODS OF KATHMANDU

We have all heard of Kathmandu's Living Goddesses. But much less visible than the Kumari are the male gods Ganesh and Bhairab who are also worshipped and join the chariot procession of the Living Goddess during Indra Jatra. Sahina Shrestha followed the Boy Gods of Kathmandu on their daily routines at school and home, and in the festival.



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Remembering Boxing Day 2004

After four days on a trek, news of the tsunami sounded like the end of the world



The Twin Otter banked steeply as we came in to land amidst the green hills of Pokhara Valley. As usual in small planes anywhere in Nepal, with every bump we tried not to think about the too-many 'incidents' that characterise flying in the Himalaya. Pokhara has had its share.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

I had been waiting beside the runway in 2000 when Princess Anne's RAF aircraft had to gybe just before touching down to avoid a pair of circling dark kites – the air force pilots were far from amused by the near-miss. The Princess Royal was on her second visit to Nepal and her first to the newly built Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge, where she and her entourage stayed for several nights whilst visiting British Save the Children projects.

Despite arriving un-amused at

our Lodge covered in dust from the security vehicle that insisted on preceding her up the unmade gravel road (cautious of Maoist insurgents), and suffering another near-miss with a cockroach in her lunch box (it went to the languid British Embassy First Secretary instead), her visit went well.

Horses and dogs were safe topics during dinner, and she regaled us with a story about advising the Queen to overcome Granny's (the Queen Mother's) refusal to see a doctor about a suspected broken collarbone: "You should have called the vet, she won't mind seeing the vet."

But this trip in December 2004 to Pokhara was a lot less royal and lot more relaxed, consisting of my immediate family – five siblings, their spouses, kids and our mother – a group of 21 ranging in age from eight to eighty years old gathered in Nepal from our scattered homes in UK, US and India. It was Boxing Day, the European name for the day after Christmas with its uncomfortable connotations of more

feudal times when boxes of food were distributed to the poor and needy.

Jaded from Christmas indulgence and an early start, our flight delay at Kathmandu's crowded departure lounge washed over us as we jostled with trekkers and travellers on the wobbly plastic seats, dressed in our still-pristine hiking gear. It was late morning before we reached Pokhara and the white peaks were partly wreathed in clouds. The engines gave a final roar as we safely braked to a stop, and waited for the door to open.

The plan for our unruly group was a five-day camping circuit through the foothills around Pokhara, New Year amidst the scenic splendour of Pokhara Lodge, then south to Chitwan for the last leg of the hols. Nepal has something for everyone, adventure activities to appeal to all three generations, and quite an effort to get everyone together.

Greeting our support team at Pokhara airport, excitement was high as we sorted the baggage, retied

our bootlaces and gathered up the over-excited younger cousins. My boys were the oldest cousins and local hosts, though Rinchen looked like something out of *Twelfth Night* dressed in striped yellow tights. We said a distracted goodbye to our old friends, the Bergers, who by chance had been delayed with us at Kathmandu airport – Billy and Claire with their two daughters were looking forward to a precious and peaceful few days together by the lake. As the US government disaster specialist, William Berger spent his time jetting to catastrophes all over Asia, advising on US strategic response, and briefing officials and even the US President. Deceptively phlegmatic in demeanour, earthquakes, floods, eruptions, drama were Billy's staple, addicted to the adrenaline of his calamity-focussed career. Claire had a gentle smile, glossy straight hair and her own career in the State Department -- their postings did not always coincide.

The Berger daughters had grown up in Kathmandu at the American

School. It was Billy who gave me an early glimpse into the trials of teenage parenting – with a wry grin he admitted that his daughters had made him promise not to recognise them if they chanced to meet in Thamel.

"When we are with friends don't speak to us, Dad. You are too embarrassing!" was the instruction. "What me, supercool, 1960s raver, me?" Billy was aghast.

The Berger family's respite in Pokhara lasted only minutes before Billy was recalled to disaster duty, returning on the next flight to Kathmandu. Claire and the girls yet again condemned to time without him. But we had already rushed off in our Mountain Travel bus and, without communications, it was days before I realised any of this.

Mobiles and connectivity were not a feature of trekking in those days, and our jolly group of noisy brothers and sisters and their fractious kids enjoyed five days of innocence in the Annapurnas. We flailed up hills, we paused to glory in the views, we tripped along stony trails, we laughed and gasped up the steepest climbs, we were enraptured by the Tolkien-like forests, we camped in terraced fields, we woke amidst local children, we washed our faces in bowls of warm water – and all the time we were totally unknowing of the horror that killed more than 230,000 people across 14 countries.

It was only on the last day of our family trek that I was able to tune into *BBC World Service* on the radio. Normally after days in the wilderness one returned with weary disdain to hearing the same old news, nothing much changed. We were camping by a Gurung village with cows munching in their timber stalls and the clatter of the kitchen clearing away tea as we settled into the evening camp routine.

We looked at each other stunned and confused. Without context the newsreader made no sense. It sounded like the end of the world. The Himalayan sunset streaked across the sky as we pieced together the horror of it all, triggered by a 9.1-magnitude quake off the northern tip of Sumatra in Indonesia. We had been wandering since 26 December in blessed ignorance of the terrible drama that had befallen most of Asia. We had completely missed the deadliest tsunami in history. 🇮🇳



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TAYLOR MASON

Anita and the art of motorcycle maintenance

Anita Tamang was a home-maker, and was struggling to find a job to supplement her income. One day ten years ago, she enrolled in a motorcycle repair workshop at a vocational training centre in Thimi. Her instructors found she had a knack for mechanics, and encouraged her to take it up as a profession. She started interning at a repair shop, but the pay was not good and her male colleagues did not trust her skills.

“They made me clean the workshop, and I was not allowed to repair bikes,” she recalled. Disheartened, Anita started work at a factory assembling two-wheelers, and realised she had a passion for motorcycles.

She wanted to start her own repair shop, but banks refused to lend her money. Finally, with a loan from a foundation,

Anita could fulfil her dream of owning her own motorcycle repair shop in Thimi.

Originally from Tholo Phakar village in Sindhupalchok, Anita Tamang was gifted with strong workmanship and dedication to detail – both proudly shown in her work and muscular forearms. She also had close family bonds with two brothers, Pradip and Buddha, and a younger sister, Renu. Pradip and Renu help Anita as mechanics, and Renu also studies education.

In the beginning, customers used to approach Pradip first because they thought he was the chief mechanic. “People ignored me, did not trust a woman. They thought I was joking when I said I could fix their bikes,” Anita recalls.

Now, Anita helps other interns from the vocational centre where she learned the craft.

But often they never finish their internship, drifting to other jobs.

“I like to teach motorbike repair skills, where you need to identify the problem before taking the bike apart and most struggle with this,” says Anita who would like to open her own motorcycle repair school, and perhaps integrate it with a café where her customers can relax while their bikes are repaired.

Anita also intends to learn English, and expand her clientele, exploring new business prospects. Funding is a problem, and the bureaucracy does not make it any easier.

She says: “I want to do more, and I know I can achieve more with financing. I would like to learn how they maintain bikes in other countries and bring those new perspectives and techniques to Kathmandu.”

Taylor Mason



Visit Anita Tamang in her motorcycle workshop, and watch her at work. Listen to her talk about her struggle to make it in a profession perceived to be a male domain, and the obstacles she had to overcome. Also, find out about her dreams for the future and her plans to expand her business.

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Municipalities want to manage Annapurna

There is a 3-way tug-o-war between local, provincial and federal governments to control Nepal’s showcase conservation project

Yuvaraj Shrestha
in Pokhara

Ever since it was launched in 1984 the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) project has been a successful model for using eco-tourism income to lift living standards, not just in Nepal but in other parts of the world. Now, as Nepal decentralises under a federal system, local governments in the very place where ACA was born are calling for it to be scrapped.

On 22 December, locals of Ghandruk removed the ACA signboard and padlocked its checkpoint to protest the decision by Nepal Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) which manages the project to charge fees also for Nepali tourists. The dispute has escalated to a demand for ACA to be handed over for local municipalities to manage.

Despite its success in balancing local economies based on agro-forestry with the need to protect nature, there is resentment against ACA’s restrictions on harvesting fodder, fuelwood and grazing. There are complaints that ACA does not share revenue from tourism with local governments.

“They charge trekkers fees, but we never know where they spend it, and they harrass us about permission for everything,” said Bishnu Gurung, after padlocking the project checkpoint at Birethanti last Saturday.

The original agreement in 1985 stipulated that the project would hand over management of the conservation area to local councils, but 30 years later it is still being managed by the NTNC. Project officials say the handover was delayed by the war, during which ACA’s offices were attacked and set on fire.

Head of ACA in Ghandruk

Bidur Kuikel underplayed the seriousness of the agitation, blaming it on local hotheads. “All this can be resolved with just one meeting of local elected representatives and local committees,” he said.

However, locals from Lwang Ghalel have gone to Pokhara with their grievances which includes lifting ACAP’s restrictions on local development and infrastructure projects, to allocating tourism revenue in proportion to where income is highest, and to remove the bureaucratic hurdles in harnessing forest and water resources.

“We are giving them one last chance to address our demands, otherwise we will also take action,” said Ram Gurung of Lwang Ghalel. Representatives of this scenic village below Machapuchre sent a petition to the federal government in Kathmandu last week demanding that the management of ACA be handed over to local governments.

The Annapurna massif stretches nearly 7,700sq km from Marsyangdi in the east to the Kali Gandaki, and is Nepal’s biggest nature reserve spanning 16 rural municipalities. It has some of the greatest altitudinal variation on the land surface of the earth. From below 1,000m above sea level, the terrain rises to more than 8,500m, giving the region its rich biodiversity.

Nepal’s conservation pioneers like Hemanta Mishra, Chandra Gurung and Mingma Sherpa together with experts like Kathryn Fuller of WWF-US put together the concept of a ‘conservation area’ – as distinct from a national park so that locals could use tourism revenue for nature conservation. ACA was proof that Nepal did not have to deploy the Army, like it did in national parks, to successfully conserve nature – the job could be done by local communities.

Now, it looks like the Annapurna Conservation Area is the victim of its own success. Nepal’s central, provincial and federal

governments are competing to take control over it. There are already signs that this will be a three-way tug-o-war.

Yubaraj Kunwar, head of Annapurna Rural Municipality said the constitution grants jurisdiction over natural resource and environment management to local governments. “This means it is now our responsibility to collect fees from tourists and invest it in local conservation and development,” he said.

However, in Pokhara, Gandaki Province Chief Minister Prithvi Subba Gurung said that since the conservation area spans many rural municipalities, ACA management should go to the provincial government.

“The responsibility for management of the Annapurna Conservation Area should be the purview of the provincial government,” Gurung told us.

Head of ACA Rajkumar Gurung says it is not important who controls the project as long as its model of community-managed conservation is preserved. 🇳🇵



Following the decision by Nepal Trust for Nature Conservation to charge fees also for Nepali tourists visiting the Annapurna Conservation Area, a 3-way tug-o-war has erupted between local, provincial and federal governments to control Nepal’s showcase project. Visit scenic Ghandruk and hear from locals and tourists what they think.

nepalitimes.com 



Who no Nepal’s t

Forest area has nearly doubled in the about who should manage it un

Sonia

After degraded forests were leased out to local communities to protect and manage 40 years ago, Nepal’s community forestry program has won international praise for restoring the country’s tree cover.

Barren hillsides have been replaced by thick forests, wildlife has returned, and farmers have prospered because of ample fuelwood and fodder. The 2015 Forest Resource Assessment showed that Nepal’s canopy cover increased from 29% in the 1990s to 45%, representing more than 1 billion tons of carbon stock.

Although depopulation of rural Nepal due to migration played a part in reducing the pressure on forests, much of the credit goes to the 22,000 or more Community Forest User Groups across the country.

“Community forestry under the 1993 Forest Act was an exemplary participatory model and a highly democratic exercise that gave villagers a clear mandate to protect, manage and utilise their forests,” says Bharat Gotame of WWF Nepal. “This gave local communities a sense of ownership, and they put in a lot of effort to protect and expand Nepal’s forest cover.”

Now, as the trees mature into commercially valuable timber, the emphasis has shifted from forest protection to its management. The question is: who should manage the forests in Nepal’s federal structure?

Some forestry experts believe not enough was done to train local communities in the scientific management of trees to prevent degradation and fires, and picking

suitable tree species.

“We focused solely on preservation, and as a result forest coverage increased without contributing to the economy,” says Krishna Acharya, joint secretary at the Ministry of Forests and Environment. “Our next step should be to see how natural resources can yield economic benefit for local communities.”

However, environmentalists argue that nature should be protected for its own sake, and to look for narrow economic returns from conservation is myopic. If the contribution of new growth forests to eco-system services for water supply, tourism and as a carbon sink are calculated, they say the economic contribution of Nepal’s community forestry is vast.

They also add that forest management works well in countries with greater transparency. Given the level of corruption in Nepal, especially after many contractors got themselves elected mayors, rural municipalities have been exploiting natural resources. Allowing community forests to be ‘managed’ would destroy the forests.

The 2015 Constitution placed national forests under the authority of the provincial governments, but it also listed national forests as the common right of federal, provincial and local governments. Then the Local Government Operation Act of 2017 provided rural municipalities the right to protect, use, manage, monitor, regulate as well as formulate and implement laws. These contradictory provisions have created confusion about who now owns forests.



MONIKA DEUPALA



Who owns forests?

KUNDA DIXIT

In the past 40 years, raising new questions under Nepal's new federal structure

Awale

To make matters worse, the recently drafted Forest Bill curtails the rights of Community Forest User Groups, the very elected local committees that were responsible for protecting the forests under the 1993 Forest Act.

For example, the new bill purposes that local user groups cannot sell extra forest products without permission of the government, unlike in the past when they could independently fix prices, sell timber and other products from their protected forests.

“Greater accountability at the local level helped us save the forests, but the new bill attempts to undermine that very foundation of our success,” says Bharati Pathak, chair of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN). She warns that the bill will result in widespread deforestation, with negative impact on the environment, biodiversity, tourism and local livelihoods.

Community forests have been threatened ever since local and provincial elections last year. Many contractors, loggers and quarry owners got themselves elected to local councils, and cases of poaching, illegal logging and encroachment into community forests have shot up.

Back in Singha Darbar, joint secretary Krishna Acharya says forests will actually thrive under federalism because elected governments will be closer to community forests, and thus have better oversight over its protection.

In theory, that makes sense. But activists argue that stricter

laws have never translated into conservation. Federalism has decentralised corruption, and the forests do not stand a chance.

The reason Nepal's community forestry program worked was because of local user committees. Transferring ownership and management to municipal or provincial councils, or interference from Kathmandu, will invite corruption and destruction of forests.

Activists say such confusion over jurisdiction could wreck Nepal's achievements in community-based forest conservation, and add that some things ought to be left alone.

“Whoever ends up managing the forests, the functional modality of the community forestry program that transcended political and administrative boundaries should not be dismantled,” states the former Director General of the Department of Forests, Bijaya Paudel. “If we do, all our efforts and investment will come to naught, and the very thing we take pride in, our green forests, will be lost once again.”

Paudel recommends that the government include local communities for consultation in decision making, because without user groups there will be no preservation, let alone sustainable management for economic benefits.

The advice of the WWF's Bharat Gotame is similar: “Give credit to local people for the protection of forests for the last four decades, and build on that with better management and ensure communities are accountable.” 🇳🇵

Hiking up the benefits of tourism

Trekkers receive a meaningful immersion in rural Nepal, while uplifting the local economy

Sangmin Kim
in Kaski

Ever since trekking first started in Nepal 60 years ago, social entrepreneurs have tried various ways to maximise the benefits of tourism to local communities. The latest is a Korean initiative that promotes 'culture with agriculture' so visitors get a unique experience of rural life in the Himalaya.

The project called ‘Nepal Hike Village’ hopes to give tourists more than just mountain views, and augment it with Nepal's other famous attraction: its hospitality. Visitors stay with local farmers, learn about organic agriculture and tea cultivation, and take part in traditional festivals in the mountain villages near Pokhara.

“The biggest benefit of homestay is to blend with the real life of rural Nepal which I would not have appreciated if I had gone to the usual tourist attractions,” says Jihoon Lee, a Korean teacher. “I plan to come back to Nepal with my students and share this rich social experience.”



ARJUN ADHIKARI

One recent morning a group of Korean tourists climbed up from the road to the village of Lwang Ghalel. They are scheduled to stay one night in House Number 11, take a pleasant ridge walk the next day through forests with a panoramic view of the Annapurna range, eat local food and learn about growing tea.

There are now 12 households in Lwang who are running homestays and the families have received basic training in hospitality. In the evening there is music and dancing that Kaski is famous for. Arjun Adhikari, the local guide, whispers to visitors whether they would like a taste of the powerful local *raksi* brew.

The tea garden is on a slope alongside rice terraces, and Jinseon Im is excited about this part of the visit because he is a professional tea grower himself back in Korea. The garden pays attention to making its tea chemical-free and is sensitive to workers' rights.

“Today's experience makes me understand more about the tea cultivation in Nepal and the pickers,” says Jinseon. “I am a person involved in tea, but I have learnt a lot from the Nepalis about fair trade and the art of tea cultivation.”

Nepal Hike Village was the brainchild of Yunmi Seo, a Pokhara-based volunteer with the

Korean aid agency, KOICA promoting community-based tourism. After the 2015 earthquake, she investigated existing tourism products around Pokhara, researched the trails in person, and tried to find out visitors' expectations and experiences, met local people to find out about their needs.

She found that many visitors did not have time for a long trek, and were looking for a meaningful immersion into rural life in Nepal, away from the commercialism of mass tourism. Nepal Hike Village is promoting eight short hikes, including the Accessible Trek, the first in Nepal for people with disabilities and the elderly. which is now even popular among families with children as well.

Yunmi Seo is promoting the hikes through a website, brochures and by introducing the products to tour agencies in Pokhara. Already the Nepal Hike Village is augmenting the incomes of villagers, mainly women, who now run households because the menfolk are working overseas. It is the

women who greet visitors as they arrive, organise the food and cultural events.

“Sustainability is an important part of this work. There is a limit to what short-term projects can achieve, so we are building strong local leadership willing to improve the current situation,” says Yunmi Seo, whose stint with KOICA ends in May.

Tham Bahadur Chhantyel is the manager with Lwang Ghalel homestay, and says host families are as delighted with the visitors who have come, and the extra income is always helpful.

He adds: “Our best advertisement is our guests telling others how much they enjoyed staying with us. But it will help if you write about us and spread the word.” 🇳🇵

SOCIAL TREKKING



Join our reporters on a short hike to the foothills below Annapurna to learn about community-based tourism that tries to maximise the benefits of trekking for local communities through homestay, and learning about the local culture and agriculture.

nepalitimes.com 🇳🇵



RUIXUE ZHANG

EVENTS



Lasanaa Artalk

Alanna Lynch, a Canadian artist and researcher based in Berlin, will present her recent projects that are a combination of biology and psychology, and activism. 6 January, 4-6pm, NexUs Culture Nepal, Maitri Marg, Patan, (01) 5522393

Stories of Fields

A painting exhibition of artist Sagar Manandhar, bringing the golden and green fields of the country in canvas. 4-7 January, 11am-5pm, inauguration at 4:30pm, Ageno The Hestia, Bhanimandal, 9841478945

Sale on sweaters

The Cashmere Outlet is back with 80% discounts on all its high quality sweaters and shawls of cashmere, cotton, Merino and lamb wool that have been made in Nepal. Starting from Rs800 to Rs5000. 5-6 January, 11am-6pm, Evoke Cafe, Jhamsikhel Road, 9851111051



Khichhikka camp

Winter camp for kids, aged 9-13, to learn mobile photography from professional photographers this holiday season. 7-11 January, 10am-3pm, Karkhana Innovators' Club, Pashupati Road, 9802072546

Forum 25

International Design Collective is hosting a forum with Wonaw & associates on Sustainable Architecture where Alex Shrestha will present a talk. 4 January, 5-6:30pm, Nepal Communitere, Pulchok, (01) 5530229

Arun Chaudhary talks

Curious about how CG Holdings, one of the biggest business houses in Nepal, manages its diversified businesses and investments? Join in for Venture Talk with Arun Chaudhary, Chairman and Managing Director of CG Holdings. 7 January, 4-4-7pm, Nepal Tourism Board Hall, Pradarshani Marg, Rs200, 9841693302

Bizfest 2019

Google Business Group Kathmandu BizFest is an annual event to learn new strategies that help to grow businesses with tools and Google technology. A day offering sessions, workshops, and quality exhibition for the startups. 5 January, 10am-5pm, Galaxy Public School, Gyaneshwor, (01) 4411362



Kathmandu: My Fascination

A novel exhibition of pop-art silkscreen prints illustrated with a sound installation by Prabod Shrestha. The material displays the lifestyle of modern Kathmandu, often juxtaposing the old and the new. 4-15 January, 10am-6pm, Bikalpa Art Center, (01) 5013524

Cycle city by design

Som Raj Rana, an urban designer and architect, will be presenting his research at the Research Seminar Series by Martin Chautari. 6 January, 3pm onwards, Martin Chautari Seminar Hall, Thapathali

Image of Life

An art exhibition by Samjhana Rajbhandari, that depicts the changing phases of a human life through the diverse imageries of tree, in which she seeks to narrate a story. 4-23 January, 11am-7pm, GG Machaan, Damkal Road, Pulchok, (01) 5554291, 9851061968

MUSIC



Paji in KTM

Paji is a musician and producer, based in Berlin, who combines electronic music with classical instruments. Come join to watch him perform live with Enhancify and Rippen. 4 January, 5-10pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, Rs1,500, (01) 5528362

Blues parade

It's first Friday of the year and what's better than Blues to start the year with! Live performance by The Midnight Riders Trio. 4 January, 8-11:45pm, Irish Pub, Lazimpat, (01) 4416027

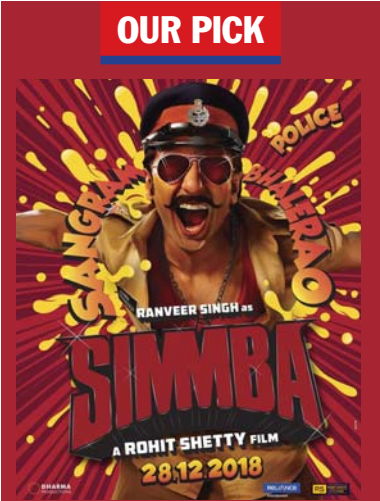
Hakpare music

A celebration of folk music from Limbu community in the east. Performances by Jhuma Limbu, Manu Nembang, Lokman Wanem and others, and paper presentation by Bairagi Kainla and Chaitanya Subba. 8 January, 3-6pm, Shilpee Theatre, Battisputali, (01) 4469621



Reminiscing Arun Thapa

On the eve of Arun Thapa's birthday, here are local artists, who are also his fans, remembering the legendary Nepali artist. Go back in time with his melodies. 5 January, 3-7pm, The Yard by Oasis Garden Homes, Sanepa, (01) 5532965, 9851095046



Opened in Kathmandu on 28 December

South Indian movies are quite the rage in Nepal at the moment, and this remake of a Telugu film is cashing in on it. Simmba stars Ranveer Singh as a corrupt police officer, and promises a full on masala Bollywood ride. It also stars the fresh-faced Sara Ali Khan. Rohit Shetty who helps it recently became the first Bollywood director to deliver 8 movies that earned more than 100 crores. If you still haven't watched what the whole town is talking about, this is your chance!

DINING



Rox Restaurant

Soul food to increase your metabolism and improve blood circulation for more energy this cold season. À la carte menu with Linguini primavera, Chicken scaloppini, Salmon with saffron fettuccini and more. 4 January- 3 February, 6-10pm, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Boudha, (01) 4217123

Capital Grill

This American style diner offers a large assortment of appetisers and entrees to suit everyone's tastes. Bhatbhateni, (01) 4428426

Lhakpa's Chulo

Nepali dai bhat, Newari khaja, Swiss Rösti, Italian Risotto and Thai green curry. Lakpa's Chulo has a variety of cuisines to offer. Try Garlic chilli prawn at this cosy restaurant. Jhamsikhel, (01) 5542986



The Coffee Shop

Dosa here is not heavy but totally satisfying. Happy indulging! Hotel Annapurna, Darbar Marg, (01) 4221711

Muse Restobar

A multi cuisine restaurant and bar with sophisticated wooden interior, providing a complete family environment. Uttardhoka, Lazimpat, (01) 4445533

Tasneem's Kings Kitchen

Visit this place for unlimited authentic Indian food. Call and book before you go. 12-4pm, Pulchok, 9803299610

GETAWAY

Heranya Yala

Get a genuine feel of authentic Newari heritage by living right in the middle of Maha Boudha and the Hiranya monastery. The hotel provides a complete tour package to immerse in the rich cultural heritage of Patan. Gujibahal, Patan, \$90 per night, (01) 5523168, 9851067168, booking.com



The Famous Farm

The three-storey boutique hotel in the subtropical Middle Hills, west of Kathmandu, is Nuwakot's best kept secret along with the historical palace of the district. This little traditional house has a lot of rich cultural heritage to share. Kuwapani, Nuwakot, (010) 413044

The Fulbari Resort & Spa

The ultimate getaway in Pokhara, Fulbari is far from everything but at the centre of all that matters. Pokhara, (061) 432451

Tiger Mountain

The resort with a Gold award from Travelife for sustainability, offers a model for the kind of tourism Nepal should be promoting: homegrown high-value eco-tourism that uses local products and showcases the best of Nepal's scenery, nature and culture. Kandani Danda, Pokhara, (01) 4720580

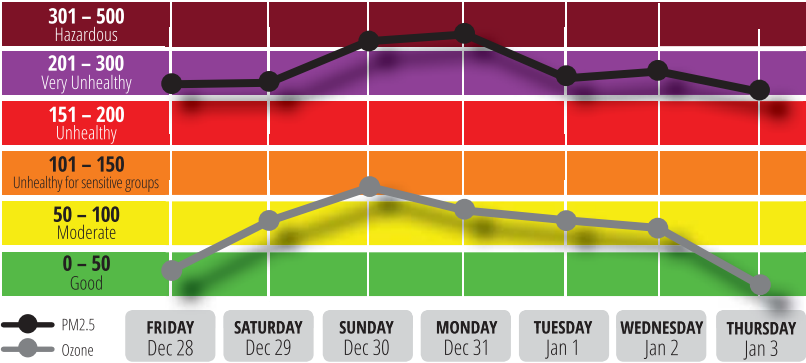


Harmony Spa & Health Club

Amongst trees on the edge of a plateau overlooking Gokarna Forest and the grassed valley below, Harmony Spa combines therapeutic care within a natural environment impossible to recreate elsewhere. 6:30am-10:30pm, Gokarna Forest Resort, Thali, (01) 4451212

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 28 December - 3 January



As expected, the new year started with a drop in air quality directly proportionate to the drop in temperature. As the overnight temperature hit zero in Kathmandu Valley, the inversion layer trapped vehicular emissions and smog making the Air Quality Index for PM2.5 much worse. The daily average for the past week, as the graph above shows, was consistently on the higher side of "Very Unhealthy" and also touched the "Hazardous" Purple Zone quite a few times. Ozone concentration, which is an offshoot of gases in motorcycle emissions also touched the "Unhealthy" Band for the first time this season. We ended 2018 with a bang: December 30 had the worst AQI of the past year. The new year promises to be as bad.

https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/

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Elderly Care Assistant Fine and professional care by our qualified and experienced care giver.	Travel Support for Sick Clients Travel support for sick clients are provided by professional.
Appointment Management Apointment management with required doctors in different hospitals.	Equipment Rental & Drug Supply Drug supply at your doorstep and best quality medical equipments in rent.



TONI HAGEN

Nepal’s silent emergency: springs going dry

Nepal’s emission of greenhouse gases maybe small, but its annual growth rate is already the highest in South Asia

On a recent domestic flight to western Nepal, our ATR-72 broke through the thick smog at about 3,000m after takeoff from Kathmandu. The ocean of grey-brown pollution blanketed the Tarai , and stretched right across to the southern horizon. Out of the right-hand window, the Annapurnas rose above the carpet of smog, with Mt Machapuchre appearing like a black pyramid devoid of snow.



Even though it is nearly 7,000m high, and in the height of winter, Mt Machapuchre’s snow has melted away. The Himalaya has seen unprecedented melting due to rising average global temperatures, and soot particles from pollution that reduces the reflective power of the snow.

Climate change has also brought changes in weather patterns. On this trip to Bajhang, I was told winter rain and snow have been deficient for ten years in a row. Snow, when it does fall in the higher mountain settlements, is only ankle deep, and is already leading to seasonal water shortages. Rainfall comes in bursts, is erratic, and the steady, relentless rain of the past is a fading memory. Natural ecosystems and biodiversity, water resources, and agriculture have been heavily impacted.

Ongoing land-use changes brought by demographic shifts as well as haphazard excavation of the mountains for roads and other infrastructure have taken their toll. Across Nepal spring sources are depleting. Of the 1,115 springs investigated in Tanahun district, 63% had reduced flow by an average of 21% between 2004-2014. A preliminary



KUNDA DIXIT

DRYING UP: Toni Hagen's famous panorama of Pokhara taken in 1955 (*top*), and last week from near the same spot at Pokhara airport (*above*). Snow cover on Machapuchre and the Annapurnas are dramatically depleted.

analysis of 693 springs over ten districts of the Far West showed 187 had their average discharge decline by 60% between 2013-2016.

Linking spring depletion to changing rainfall patterns and climate change is difficult because of inadequate rainfall measuring stations in Nepal and the lack of focused scientific studies. Nepal needs at least 1,400 rain gauges all over the country to provide accurate rainfall data, we have little over 500. But lack of data does not mean there is no impact -- water scarcity is forcing hill families to abandon their homes.

As this crisis unfolds in the Himalaya, 6,000km away in Katowice of Poland last month leaders and scientists from 196 countries agreed on guidelines, known as the ‘Paris Rulebook’, to begin operationalising the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. The Rulebook lays out methods for how countries can develop and communicate their plans to reduce carbon emissions, how they adapt, track finance they provide and receive

for climate action, and how they can review progress and set targets.

Climate politics is hard, driven primarily by the current US administration’s decision to exit from the Paris Agreement. The final declaration in Katowice did not welcome the IPCC’s Special Report on 1.50 which had concluded that warming beyond 1.50 Celsius in the next 30 years could bring catastrophic and irreversible change to life on the planet.

The Rulebook also specifies which gas to measure, which methodology to use and the kind of information required in a country’s report to be submitted to the UN climate body every two years. It did not, unfortunately, raise collective ambitions, and as emission reduction pledges currently stand, average global temperatures will probably rise by 20 Celsius by 2050.

For its part, Nepal lacks the foundation to translate the Paris Rulebook to action. Creating these mechanisms could demonstrate

the country’s collective climate ambition, but judging from our past, we are likely to provide only lip service. Nepal’s elected leadership shows little interest in creating a scientific base for improved understanding of local climatic and natural dynamics, which is key to adapting to the changing climate.




Our current preoccupation is to excavate hill slopes with non-engineered roads as the harbingers of progress. Roads do improve connectivity and mobility, but without a well thought through strategy supported by robust safeguards in our geologically fragile landscape, upkeep as well as social and environmental costs will simply keep rising.

In 2016, Nepal imported 8,328 excavators, bulldozers, cranes and trucks. The number jumped to 12,712 in 2017. During this same period, diesel imports increased 1.4 times. Nepal’s emissions of greenhouse gases maybe small, but its annual growth rate is already the highest in South Asia. Despite official rhetoric of a green economy, Nepal is turning brown.


The link between the Paris Rulebook and the snowless Machapuchre massif is closer than we think. But just as devastating is the silent emergency of our springs going dry. Given the entrenched interests dominating global climate politics, it is hard to envision dramatic systemic shifts needed to keep the destruction of global climate in check.

Yet, the Rulebook is the first step on a new global journey to implement the Paris Agreement and avert the catastrophe of a more than 2 degree warming by 2050. We must increase our collective ambitions, and turn back the curve of global carbon emissions by 2030. 🇳🇵

Ajaya Dixit is Executive Director of Kathmandu based ISET-Nepal. His monthly column *Climate for Change* in *Nepal Times* deals with the impact of global warming in Nepal.



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Kathmandu through silk screen



Innocent children smile from the back of a rickshaw. Crumbling buildings are supported by long timber beams. Prabod Shrestha's photographs of the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake now exhibiting at Bikalpa Art Café in Pulchok are different in form and substance: instead of bromide or digital prints, he uses silk screen to transfer the imagers to paper manually.

Silk screen is an ancient art technique, but is used around the world mostly for paintings and rarely for photographs. A mesh on a wooden frame is used to transfer colors to canvas. Each new colour requires a new frame, so few colours are used.

"I wanted to experiment by using the technique on photographs," explains Shrestha

who processed his photographs digitally until the last step, when he manually transferred them to blank paper. The result are vibrant paintings dominated by single colours: sunshine yellow here, and azure blue there. The stark black line art combines with eye catching colours to give a portrait of Kathmandu city after the earthquake, when it was regaining its lively and constantly changing urban ambience.

Shrestha grew up in Kathmandu, and says the paintings represent his nostalgia for the bygone era of his childhood and also convey his feelings about its transformation. "I have always seen Kathmandu as a place of great mysticism, but also know that it is rapidly modernising," says

Shrestha, who lost his art gallery to the earthquake.

Without a gallery and not much else to do, he wandered around the Valley taking pictures and scribbling verse. These notes about his feelings of being lost and finding himself in Kathmandu accompany the illustrations at the exhibition, providing snapshots of not just the visual state of Kathmandu, but also of Shrestha's mental state.

Prabod Shrestha sees a Kathmandu rebuilding itself, so the pictures are almost journalistic. But the images convey a very personal sense of what is important to the artist in Kathmandu. We see the Valley through an artist's sensibilities: an ancient city with precious heritage adapting to modern values and rising from the dust of a cataclysm.

Whether it is in the smiles of children and passersby, or Kathmandu's ancient temples propped up by wooden beams – this is a story of survival. One of Shrestha's scribbles:

*Now in its urban chaos
Searching my own existence
I chase my childhood memories
To find that life is beautiful in
its innocence*

Sewa Bhattarai

*Kathmandu: My Fascination
Bikalpa Art Center, Pulchok
Until 15 January*



PRADIPT WARTARSS

ORDER ORDER: Newly appointed Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Jabara is welcomed by officials at the Supreme Court in Kathmandu on Wednesday.



RABINDRAADHIKARI/TWITTER

CULTURAL TRANSITION: Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Rabindra Adhikari welcomes new officials at Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and Nepal Academy of Music and Drama, including chancellors Kanchha Karmacharya and Narayan Shrestha on Monday.



EMBASSY OF SRI LANKA

NEPAL-LANKA: Sri Lankan Ambassador to Nepal Swarna Perera addresses a program to promote economic relations between Sri Lanka and Nepal at Hotel Radisson on Friday.



KUNDA DIXIT

RESHAM FIRIRI: The Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra jamming with young Nepali musicians to mark 60 years of Nepal-Germany relations at a concert organised by the German Embassy at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Kathmandu on Saturday.



RAMCHANDRA NEUPANE/RSS

CONNECT US: Residents of Saldang, Shey Phoksundo rural municipality of Dolpa district construct a building for a mobile tower so they get a cell phone connection.

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सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



Keeping Nepal Airlines

Sharad Ojha

Nepal Airlines is once more making headlines for all the wrong reasons: this time it is over the state-owned carrier's purchase of two Airbus 330-243s last year.

A sub-committee of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament said Wednesday that it found irregularities in the deal involving the widebody jets, that it violated the Public Procurement Act, did not meet specifications, and that Rs 4.36 billion in kickbacks was involved.

A parliamentary sub-committee on Tuesday recommended that the airline's Managing Director Sugat Ratna Kansakar be sacked, and action be taken against Tourism and Civil Aviation Minister Rabindra Adhikari and two of his predecessors, the present and two past secretaries in the ministry, and dozens of other officials.

Scandals are not new in the history of Nepal's flag carrier, especially after 1990 when political interference in the airline ruined Nepal's once-reputed flag-

carrier. Allegations of corruption on appointments of general sales agents in Europe, kickbacks on the lease of jets and high-level corruption dogged the airline throughout the 1990s.

The \$210 million Airbus deal is the biggest ever in the country's aviation history, and so is the sound and fury surrounding allegations of payoffs. Once again, the airline is caught in a web of political and financial intrigue.

The sub-committee report says the airline inflated the cost of the plane to \$104.8 million, whereas the 2016 price tag was \$88.09 million. It also says the plane's weight is only 230 tons when it should be 242 tons.

But airline sources say the \$88.09 was the price of the plane in 2009, and the escalation corresponds to inflation. They add that the jet's maximum takeoff weight was configured for full payload long-haul takeoffs from Kathmandu airport's high-and-short runway.

The Airbus case has become political football as agents for aircraft manufacturers who lost out on the deal, rival carriers that stand to lose if Nepal Airlines

does well, and those interested in its future privatisation, are all involved in stoking the crisis.

Last month at an employees union meeting, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali warned: "There is a whole mafia involved in trying to wreck Nepal Airlines."

He said rivals felt threatened by the carrier's route expansion plans with the acquisition of new jets, and were deliberately trying to bring it down. There are indications that some vested interests in the airline's own management are abetting this effort.

The coordinated attacks coincide with the airline finally showing signs of a turnaround. In 2018, Nepal Airlines became the number one international carrier with a 12% market share, outpacing Jet Airways (*see graph, right*).

This despite the fact that its management had made no preparations for training extra pilots, or renewing route rights for destinations in China, Korea, Japan and Australia before the 330s arrived in mid-2018.

The Airbus 330s need to be in the air 16 hours a day for full utilisation, but currently fly only 7 hours on short and medium-haul routes like Delhi, Kuala Lumpur and Doha. Even so, in the first six months of operation, the Airbus 330s registered an impressive 72% load factor, while the Airbus 320s

operate at 80% of full capacity.

Says a CAAN official: "The widebodies have a huge potential because of diaspora and tourist traffic on long haul routes, but Nepal Airlines management did nothing to plan for route expansion and market those destinations. The airline is being undermined by its own weak management."

It is doubtful if Nepal's flag carrier can withstand such sustained internal mismanagement, political interference, and attacks by private rivals. Daily headlines in the national media are an indication

Nepal's flag carrier faces multi-pronged attacks just as it prepares to spread its wings



BIKRAM RAI

More than luck in Lukla

Airport congestion and delays will get worse before they get better

Rikki Walters
in Lukla

Scan the feedback section of travel sites: they are full of laments from frustrated trekkers stuck at Lukla's Tenzing-Hillary Airport waiting days on end for flights out.

After having descended from Mt Everest Base Camp after weeks on the trail, trekkers sprawl on their sleeping bags on the cold floor of the check-in area waiting for flights that are delayed either by congestion in Kathmandu, en route weather, wind or visibility in Lukla.

Flying in the Nepal Himalaya

has always been touch and go, and Lukla airfield with its inclined runway has earned a reputation for being the most challenging in the world. But airline managers and aviation experts say not all the delays can be blamed on weather -- better air traffic management at Kathmandu would help.

One recent morning, the frustration of passengers here in Lukla was understandable: the sky was cloudless and there was no wind, but there was no siren indicating that the first flight had taken off from Kathmandu. The reason was poor visibility in Kathmandu leading to congestion.

Kathmandu handles more than 400 flights a day on its single runway, but on smoggy winter mornings like this week, tiny Twin Otters are forced to circle alongside big international flights waiting to land. A 35 minute Kathmandu flight from Lukla can last 1.5 hours, reducing the number of Lukla ferries before the mid-morning tail wind closes the airfield.

Capt Vijay Lama now flies Nepal Airlines Airbus 320s, but has three decades of experience landing in airfields like Lukla. He says: "A lot of Kathmandu's congestion in winter can be eased if the early morning STOL and Mountain Flight traffic can be diversified to other airports."



PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT

airworthy

that the vultures are circling. Instead of a proper non-political, independent probe, vested interest groups have converged to wreck Nepal's national airline over the Aribus330 deal.

Ironically, this comes at a time when the airline is poised to spread its wings with its two long-haul Airbus 330s, two medium-range Airbus 320s, and a plan to add Viking Twin Otters to the domestic fleet, as well as two more 320s once Lumbini and Pokhara airports become operational.

The airline did overstretch itself with the 330 purchases, but the losses accumulated because the two planes sat in the hangar for more than two months awaiting CAAN clearance.

Now, they are not airborne long enough to start making money. Airline insiders say full utilisation of the fleet would easily increase the carrier's annual turnover by Rs9 billion a year.

But such market expansion would directly affect the revenue of carriers competing with Nepal Airlines on the Gulf and Malaysia routes. Cartelling on the profitable Delhi route kept fares artificially high at up to Rs40,000, but after Nepal Airlines resumed regular twice-a-day service on this route fares have dropped to Rs15,000.

Fares to Dhangadi have also halved to Rs5,000 after Nepal Airlines broke the domestic monopoly on the trunk route. Private carriers operating Jomsom and Lukla also stand to lose business if Nepal Airlines modernises its STOL fleet.

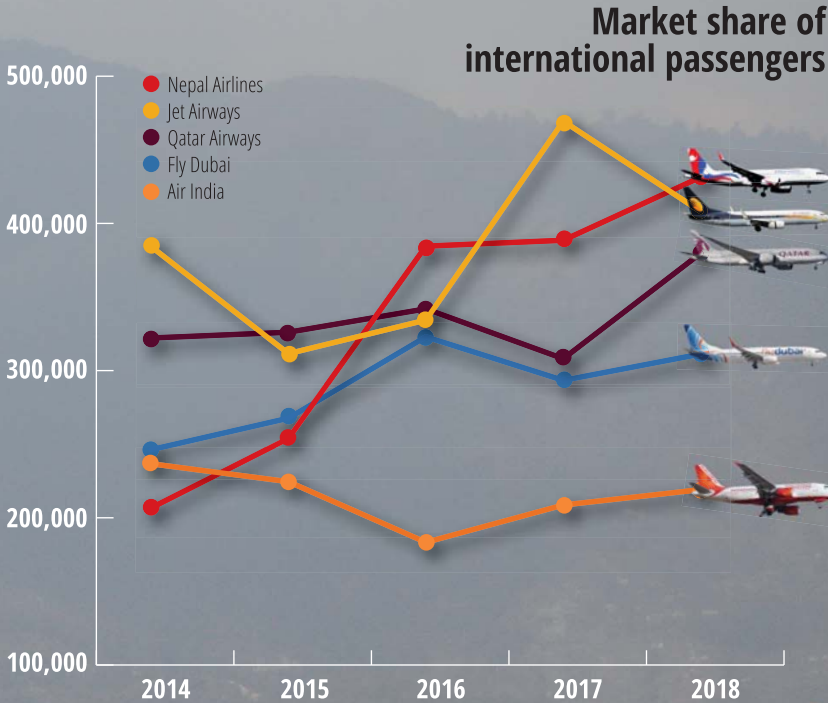
“Cartels over-charging passengers would like nothing better than if our planes sat on the ground,” said Nepal Airlines Managing Director Sugat Ratna Kansakar, who denied wrongdoing and said he has sent Airbus330 files to the Parliament committees.

Political interference in the airline is relentless. The government forced it to induct Chinese MA-60 and Y-12s, which have been a big liability. Last year, the PMO foisted Madan Kharel as executive chair without removing Kansakar.

Strangely, one of Kharel's first acts in office was to bring out a report that concluded the airline was bankrupt. Most airlines go through a liquidity crunch during the expansion phase, yet the crisis was magnified through selective leaks in the media.

Credible insiders told *Nepali Times* in separate interviews that management appears to be working to deliberately undermine the company's image so as to benefit those eying its future privatisation.

Nepal Airlines now competes directly with Himalaya Airlines, a joint venture between China's Tibet Airlines and Yeti Airlines. 🇳🇵



EVEREST'S HELICOPTER HIGHWAY

Aviation experts add that separation time for international flights at Kathmandu could be cut by half if the parallel taxiway is simply extended till the threshold at both ends of the runway.

“They have been talking about it for 20 years, but have not done it even though you could remove half the congestion by extending the taxiways,” said an aviation insider.

If you thought all this was bad, wait till next month when Kathmandu airport's one and only runway will be resurfaced for the first time after it was built 35 years ago. Although this is going to be done in 80m sections, it means the airport will be closed from 10pm

till 8am every day from April till June. The window for Lukla flights will now be even narrower, that too at the height of the peak season.

The three main airlines that operate Lukla flights, Tara Air, Summit Air, and Sita Airlines, will have no option but to use alternative airfields with road connections. Fed up with cancellations in November due to congestion in Kathmandu, Sita Airlines ferried out about 200 Lukla passengers via Ramechap, a four-hour drive from Kathmandu. Others flew passengers from Lukla by helicopter to Phaplu.

“If the runway repairs are going to cause delays, we will have to revive this option,” says Rajendra Bahadur Singh of Sita Airlines.

Aviation experts say ATCs could also increase the efficiency of Kathmandu airport without compromising safety by adjusting visibility thresholds for different

types of aircraft like international heavies and STOLs.

Domestic airlines servicing mountain airports with seasonal peak traffic cannot wait for Kathmandu airport to get its act together. The delays are costing them money, and they fear that runway repairs will make an already overcrowded Kathmandu airport even more chaotic.

Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Rabindra Ahdikari says a new STOL airfield in Kavre's Nagidanda is still an option, and adds: “We are working to minimise the disruption at Kathmandu, but the repairs are overdue and we need to improve the airport for Visit Nepal Year 2020.” 🇳🇵

The sound of low-flying helicopters reverberate all day along the narrow Dudh Kosi gorge in the Sagarmatha National Park. There are as many as 50 chopper flights a day from Lukla to Everest Base Camp: for sightseeing, mountaineering rescue, or expedition cargo.

Congestion has got so bad that it is affecting safety. Rotor downwash from a helicopter taking off in November caused the still rotating main blades of a Mountain Air AS350 Écureuil to hit its tail boom, causing serious damage, but luckily no injuries. Since then, Lukla airport has added five new landing pads in its new heliport (left) to accommodate the growing number of passengers who fly to Lukla on fixed wings and transfer to helicopters.

There are now private helipads where chopper companies have to pay landing charges. As a chopper approaches, people scramble into position. The exchange happens in minutes: cargo comes off, people board, and the pilot takes off within seconds back to Lukla.

But even locals are now complaining about the noise pollution from helicopters, fearing that it may affect trekking.





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The defence of Nepal

For centuries nature helped defend Nepal’s southern border from foreign invasions. We deployed malaria-carrying female anopheles mosquitoes, and this Mozzie Army ensured that Nepal never had to suffer under the colonial yolk.

But the ingenious Brits used Odomos as a strategic deterrent, and sent Gen Kinloch to lay siege to Sindhuli Gadhi in 1767. So, the defending The Famous Gorkha Battalion rolled hornet’s nests down on the infidels, who fled all the way back to Cawnpore with their tails between their legs. The rest, as they say, is history.

If aggressors did somehow survive our onslaught of mosquitoes and/or hornets, they were sure to be eaten up by regiments of man-eating Tiger Commandos that patrolled our frontiers. And if an invader somehow managed to penetrate this phalanx, he, she or it would sure to be disemboweled by one of our heavily-armoured columns of One-horned Rhinoceri Divisions lying in ambush at the border.

However, since the eradication of malaria in the Tarai, we have no forward line of defence and Nepal’s glorious military needs new ways to secure our territory from hegemons with imperialistic designs. This is why the Govt of Nepal (GONE) has cunningly kept all roads, culverts, bridges, petroleum pipelines, inland navigation channels, and fast tracks in advanced stages of disrepair along the southern border to make the terrain impassable for enemy tanks and battleship armadas.

But this will not suffice, which is why the Loyal Nepal Army’s clandestine Bio Warfare Division is weaponising diarrhoea.

Culturing genetically-modified versions of the *Vibrio cholerae* and *Giardia lamblia* bacteria, we now have the capability of blowing up the gastro-intestinal tracts of sworn enemies with explosive force.

The two bacteria have gone viral, and have already been subjected to gruelling military tests to be covertly infiltrated into the endoplasmic reticulum of visiting tourists.

As expected, the germs wreaked havoc on the digestive tract of these foreign guinea pigs, making them think twice about entering Nepal’s Toilet-Free Buffer Zone.

Prime Minister K P Oli has also taken keen personal interest in erecting a missile launch pad in Damak cleverly camouflaged to resemble a view tower. Together with the Republican Tower under construction in Kirtipur, these two erectile dysfunctions should repel all enemies on sight by their sheer ugliness. From spy satellites, the two structures will bear a striking resemblance to ICBMs on launch pads, and convince those who mean us harm that we already have the delivery vehicles for our biological warheads.

Besides that, I can disclose here in strictest confidence that Nepal is also developing a top-secret drone program. (Make sure you burn this paper after you read it. We don’t want it to get into the wrong hands.) The idea is to mass produce salaried civil servants who do nothing all day. These drones may seem to be asleep at their desks, but they are decoys. Actually, they are trained to wake up and deliver groin kicks to any foreign army that dares to invade Singha Darbar.

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