The last journey

T he tragic irony of the helicopter crash on Wednesday was that among the seven dead were a civil aviation minister who was striving to improve Nepal’s air safety record, and the country’s foremost airline executive.

Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Rabindra Adhikari was one of the few members of the NCP government with a clean, can-do image. He revived the construction of two languishing international airports in Pokhara and Lumbini, improved and removed bottlenecks at Kathmandu airport. He was involved in important air route negotiations and was lobbying to remove Nepal from the EU blacklist. He was set to attend the ITB Berlin next week to promote the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign, for which he had set a target of 2 million tourists.

Ang Tshering Sherpa was the founder of Yeti Airlines and also owned the Air Dynasty helicopter that struck the side of Pathibhara mountain in Taplejung during a snowstorm on 27 February. He was the Nepal partner of Himalaya Airlines, a joint venture with Tibet Airlines and managed hotels in the Khumbu, Gokarna Resort and Kasara in Chitwan.

Pilot Prabhakar KC had reportedly radioed Suketor Tower reporting heavy snowfall. Although it is too early to speculate, former CAAN director Tritema Monjakhel says having a minister and his own boss among his passengers may have put undue psychological pressure on KC to get them out of the 3,800m mountain top

Minister Adhikari himself is said to have had misgivings at an earlier airport inspection stop in Tehrathum about the deteriorating weather, and was reluctant to fly to Pathibhara. Eye witnesses said the Airbus Helicopter H125 crashed 1 minute after taking off in heavy snow, hitting the side of a cliff. Whether it was controlled flight into terrain, or icing on the rotor will have to await an investigation.

Adhikari’s hometown of Pokhara is in shock, and the minister was set to be cremated in Koski on Thursday. The crash has cost the lives of the prime movers of Visit Nepal 2020, and Nepal Tourism Board CEO Deepak Raj Joshi is devastated.

He told Nepali Times “This is an irrecoverable loss, he was devoted to the campaign, and worked tirelessly to improve aviation infrastructure.”

It was also a tragic reminder of another disaster 22km away in September 2006 in which 24 people were killed when a helicopter hit a mountain soon after takeoff from Gumba in bad weather. Nearly all of Nepal’s conservation pioneers perished, including Herko Gurung, Claudra Gurung, Mingma Sherpa, and Tirthaman Mukey. Julian Bowling Schlaefle of the WWF also died, as did Paul Muotinen, the Finnish charge d’affaires in Kathmandu.

An investigation then had showed that the Russian pilots of the ME-8 were unfamiliar with local terrain and may have been under pressure from the State Minister of Forests Gopal Rai, to get back to Kathmandu.

Ramesh Kumar and Gopal Gartaula

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GOING PLACES TOGETHER
NEPAL’S RICE ECONOMY

For since a picture posted on Facebook of Prime Minister KP Oli and his party chief, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, dining on red rice in the company of one of the most notorious businessmen in Nepal went viral last week, the words ‘Mantri has entered the Nepal lexicon not just to describe a nutritious variety of rice from the uplands but also the unhealthy nexus between politicians and tycoons.

But what it did do is draw the country’s attention to the importance of rice to our lives as well as the nation’s economy. Rice is more than a staple grain. In Nepal, it is a way of life. ‘Rahat khana lari?’ is much more than a literal question about whether introductions have eaten, but a greeting like ‘How do you do?’

Nearly 70% of Nepal’s population depends directly on agriculture, and the sector contributes more than a quarter of the country’s GDP — with rice making up 21% of that. Till as late as 1985, Nepal used to be a net exporter of rice, and during the 1960s the country was exporting up to $45 million worth of rice to India every year. But the tableaux have turned, in 2013 Nepal has to import $3,100 million of rice worth $120 million from India.

There are many reasons why Nepal’s production of rice has not kept up with demand. The foremost, of course, is that the country’s population has doubled in the intervening years. Agricultural land is shrinking because of urban sprawl, and much of the farms are bare because of outrustuating. The educated youth do not want to live off the land anymore, and look for salaried jobs in the cities or abroad. Productivity has not increased by as much as it should have, nearly 80% of farms still depend on rain since there has been very little progress in irrigation — this in turn has made farmers vulnerable to erratic weather caused by climate change.

But there is a silver lining. As our report in this edition page 6-8 shows, a healthy monsoon allowed paddle harvests to increase by 9% up from the previous year, reaching 5.5 million tons. An econometric Finance Ministry immediately raised the economic growth estimate to 5.7% this year, the IMF raised its previous estimate of 5.5% growth, and now estimates that Nepal’s growth on year economic growth will be 6.3%.

The Ministry of Agriculture’s statistics division has calculated that paddy was planted on 97% of fields this Nepal year, up from 86% in 2014-15. Paddy yield is still comparable to other countries in the region that have intensive rice cultivation, but it is increasing by about 8% to 3.67 tons per hectare.

The long and short of it is that Nepal’s rice economy is rain dependent, the government cannot take credit for the increased paddy harvests. There is precious little successive governments in the past 50 years have done to invest on improving yield and finding a stable price for producers. The federal government extended 180 billion last year for agriculture, forestry and livestock, but most of it was spent on salaries and overheads. Donors spent another 180 billion to the past 10 years to increase agricultural productivity with mixed results.

Despite the fact that two-thirds of Nepal depend on their farms, agriculture is neglected and is just not a priority for politicians and economists. Twenty percent of paddy is subsistence, and living in extreme poverty. A report by Oxfam last month showed that the skewed distribution of wealth in Nepal is most glaring in land ownership patterns. The richest 5% of households own 51% of the agricultural land; while 44% of people do not even own any own land, and are mostly tenants farmers.

As rice-economists Rajendra Upadhyay points out, rice is “the bedrock of this economy, paddy imports from India peak during the harvest season in Nepal indicating that Nepal farmers are not growing what Nepal consumers want. The only reason this is so is because the government has not supported farmers to focus on varieties of rice preferred by consumers, reduce cost of imports to make rice financially profitable, promote marketing and intensive rice cultivation techniques, and unlock a new movement for domestic production. This is not rocket science. We know what the problems are, we know the solutions to increase rice production. We just have to help our farmers do it. There is no reason Nepal cannot once more be the granary of South Asia.

What’s Trending

Nepal’s great income divide by Kshatriya

Readers were aghast to discover the colossal economic inequality in Nepal; 10% of the people are owning property worth an astounding $111 million more than 60% of the people. Write requests for this and other reports printing the details and consequences of high inequality in Nepal.

Most read and shared on Facebook

Most visited online page

Best commented

Protecting pangolins from being eaten to extinction by Shrestha

For the most part, the scaly mammals in the world, and Nepal in it has only a small but elusive threat to their survival. The countries are a reeling threat to the global pangolin trade, which the country is the gateway for the pangolin trade. Nepal has to find a way to stop these poachers, who are selling in all 11 building markets, and what Nepal is doing to save them.

Most popular on Twitter

Quote Tweets

Nepal Times (@NepalTimes)

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Times (@nepaltimes)

@nepaltimes Times weekly trend

Nepal’s low economic growth is troubling Nepal’s stability

Total votes: 139

Yes: 64% No: 36%
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The New (Sky) Silk Road To

Turkish Airlines prepares to operate its Kathmandu link through the new hub, which will be the world’s largest airport.

BIZ BRIEFS

It has been called ‘The New Silk Road’ and Turkish Airlines is promoting Istanbul’s new airport as an aerial bridge between east and west as it expands to take advantage of Turkey’s location to become one of the world’s largest carriers.

The new airport has already had its soft opening, but is expected to be fully operational in the next few months to handle Turkish Airlines flights, including the ones to and from Kathmandu. Situated 35km northwest of the city near the Black Sea coastline, the $35 billion airport will have six runways and the capacity to serve 200 million passengers a year when it is fully completed by 2023.

“The new airport was a must to accommodate Turkish Airlines’ growth plans, and we hope to give passengers to and from Nepal more comfort and flexibility with better connectivity while the airport opens fully soon,” says Turkish’s Nepal manager Abdullah Fancor Kocci (pictured, right).

More than 90% of the passengers on Turkish between Kathmandu and Istanbul are transit, and the new airport is expected to make transfers much more convenient compared to the current congested Ataturk airport. Even at the existing airport, mostly three-quarters of all flights are operated by Turkish, and the figure is expected to be higher at the new hub.

Turkish Airlines is on an ambitious expansion drive augmenting its current fleet of 500 aircraft to 500 by 2023. The airline currently flies to 300 destinations worldwide and will be adding 100 more cities in the next four years. The new airport is already operating some of its daily flights to London, Frankfurt, Munich, etc on a trial basis, but will make an overnight shift of all flight operations from the old to new airport by April 4-6.

Turkish Airlines will resume its Kathmandu frequency to daily before the spring tourist season, and is involved with Nepal Tourism Board in promoting Visit Nepal 2020 campaign with its target of increasing the number of tourists visiting Nepal to 2 million.

“The Turkish Airlines, Nepal has been a tourism destination from day one,” Kocci says, “that is why we want to be supportive of any promotional activity that Nepal government undertakes to promote tourism here.”

With daily flights, Turkish will be offering a 17% capacity increase to 170,000 passengers both ways between Kathmandu and Istanbul this year. The airline has introduced a special student fare, with 10kg extra luggage, and a free one-time flight change offer. The airline is also offering stopovers for transit passengers, and hopes that traffic to Istanbul will get a boost after the new airport is inaugurated.

“We have decided to increase capacity despite difficulties because we believe in working together with other companies to boost Nepal tourism,” says Kocci, who has been attending travel trade events and promoting Turkish as a major Asian

Financial trends

According to IMF, the fiscal balance during the first 7 months of the current FY2019-209 improved as compared to the same period last year. Revenues increased by 20% (y-o-y). Total spending registered an increase of 42% in FFY18-19, but capital spending has continued to rise. Central bank reserves stood at US $ 4.5 billion in January, which cover about 6 months of prospective imports. IMF further reports that consistent credit growth has pushed the credit to GDP ratio to 76% of GDP above the 20-year trend.

Traffic Records

Turkish Airlines’ passenger and cargo traffic results for January 2019 show a consistent growth. The airline carried 5.7 million passengers in January and the load factor was 79.3%. Transfer passengers increased by 5.2% compared to the same period last year. With the new international airport in Istanbul, 2019 is set to be a big year for Turkey’s national aviation as well as for the flag carrier.

American Center

American Center at 55 Hyppolux in Kathmandu has been renovated with fresh mural painting in its conference area, a screening room, and new programming areas. The center is open from 9:30am to 4:30pm.

PraBhu Bank

BIZ BRIEFS

Financial trends

33 years

Nepal Investment Bank has completed 33 years of operation and on this occasion, launched a new product, ‘Recurring Fixed Deposit Account’ which is designed for the customers with any type of savings amount can open a recurring fixed deposit account for a minimum deposit of Rs 3,333 for 3 months and receive 5.25% interest. The bank also released a comic book to improve financial literacy among children.

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“When you think I’m having fun?”

NATION

When a clip of Turkish Airlines’ new promotional video “The Journey” was aired at the US Super Bowl, it created a sensation. This was a TV commercial done in a completely different way.

The biggest difference was the length: it is over 8 minutes long. Second, it is directed by acclaimed British director Ridley Scott of “The Gladiator,” “The Alien” and “Blade Runner 2049” fame.

Scott has turned a commercial for Turkey’s new airport and Turkish Airlines into a chase sequence that looks like something from James Bond, complete with car and helicopter pursuits, exotic locales and suspense. Scott has even brought in the Dutch actress Sylvia Hoeks (right) who stars in “Blade Runner 2049” to play the part of one of the protagonists who is chasing another mysterious woman between fights in Istanbul, an (what else?) Turkish Airlines.

The film begins with Hoeks saying “You think I’m having fun?” But obviously she is. And so, it seems to the director, who has been given full creative latitude to film in Istanbul, a city Scott admits he had never been to but where he was mesmerised by the Bosporus, the waterway that separates Asia from Europe.

The bridges over the Bosporus appear prominently, supposedly signifying that the narrow passage is not a barrier anymore and the airline is an aerial bridge between Asia and Europe.

Cleverly done, entertaining, and cinematic techniques that give the film all the hallmarks of a thriller. Says executive creative director Fabian Berglund: “We wanted to make something that celebrates the airline, this new airport and also the city of Istanbul. That is why we ended up making more of a movie than your regular 60-second spot.”

A half-minute clip of “The Journey” was aired primetime during the Superbowl, where Turkish Airlines has been advertising for the past three years. Scott said he took on the director’s job because “it went beyond the limitations of traditional advertising, and allowed me the creative freedom to tell the story.”

Turkish Airlines is planning to release a new film in the series for its other destinations. With 360 cities, and plans to add another 100, the airline will be kept busy. Wonder when Kathmandu’s turn will come.

For video go online.

nepaltimes.com

destination. It will soon be hosting a delegation from Houston to get American tour operators excited about Nepal again.

Lonely Planet has listed Kathmandu as number 9 in the Top Ten best travel destination in 2019 because “the narrative (in Nepal) is all about reconstruction and rejuvenation”. With the excitement building up for 2020, some travel trade officials are however worried about the congestion and new difficulties on arrival at Kathmandu, as well as runway repairs starting next month that will close the airport for 10 hours a day.

Nevertheless, Keccei is optimistic about 2020, and says: “Nepal has huge untapped potential for adventure tourism, culture, nature. We need to tell the world that it is more than just mountains.”

nepaltimes.com

for video go online.

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Stellar Lifestyles!
Nepal’s milk heartland rebounds

Four years later, Kavre’s quake-affected dairy farmers are back in business with new fodder cultivation

Of the weather, from the road in gentle waves, each newly scored into brown ruts like a freshly milled bar of chocolate. “All potatoes, newly planted,” explains Ram pointing inside the plastic greenhouse with vegetables for the Kathmandu market. Not a rice paddy in sight, we stop the vehicle and I jump out to take a quick photograph. Not so quick, as it turns out.

Nepal has progressed from a major exporter of rice to a net importer of rice, importing around 4 million annually, but that is not why we are here. Our day trip is to learn how the New Zealand government has assisted some Kavre farmers convert paddy fields to grow year-round forage crops for their animals, thus reducing workloads and increasing dairy production.

We drive another 20 minutes up the winding road southeast from Panauti, the urban sprawl thinning to a dirt road, sheltering cherry blossom and orange trees along the slender-lined rice fields. At Arachat, a group of Tamang farmers are bundled up in warm jackets waiting on the cold, early morning roadides. Work-worn bands help me clamber down the steps and hop along the trenches that line their terraces to see the flourishing winter crops of dense green oats and Snowball oats which will be cut and baled as the perfect feed for domestic livestock. Dinesh Parley, project leader and veteran of Nepal’s Agriculture Research Council, tells me that since 2003 many species of oats have been trialled before this variety was selected as most suitable for the soil, climate and animals. Ram Prasad Chhital, head of the government fodder and pasture division, adds that hours of women’s time previously spent collecting feedstock from the hills are saved, competition for scarce resources is avoided and livestock forage guaranteed throughout the year. Most importantly, this innovation has resulted in improved milk yields from cows and buffaloes, by as much as 36%.

Two women farmers from the cooperative adopt their red shawls and laugh at their sensible canvas shoes. They do not regret switching some of their fertile fields to animal fodder. “Supplying Kathmandu, we take our surplus milk to the collection centre once during winter and twice a day in summer. We can make an extra Rs50,000 per year and send our children to school and college,” says one. Three happy cows serenely purr as they nuzzle from the other side of the ochre-dashed homestead and a blue kingfisher flashes overhead.

Further on, we see oats, vetch, scowamch and bennet being propagated for seeds. For the first time Nepali farmers do not have to rely on imported seeds.

Dinesh tells me they have supplied several of these mechanical marvels, as well as reaper and seed threshers, that are rotated around the cooperatives. The ladies nod in agreement. They too get a farm. Replicated throughout the country and shared with hundreds of thousands of farmers, this new technology, income from seeds and improved dairy yields have also helped earthquake recovery. As one of the worst-hit districts in the April 2015 Sismaet, Arachat is furnished with new earthen bag houses funded by the National Reconstruction Authority.

Although there were few fatalities, every upland home was damaged and most of their animals lost. Bevered and toppled beneath the collapsed buildings. Dinesh and Ram laugh at my lack of understanding of the collapsed third river, but there is no time to give thanks for any extraordinary and undeserved good fortune.

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Toilet trained expert

A Nepali researcher is on a mission to make smart toilets accessible to the world’s poor

Sonia Awale in Cape Town

For someone who jet sets around the world, hobnobbing with governments and scientists to promote affordable and ecological toilets, Rojan Shrestha found out for himself just how difficult it is during a recent visit to his home-in Nepal.

The Seattle-based 33-year-old sanitation expert (picture on the left) found that the septic tank in his family home below Swayambhu was overflowing. But he had no clue who to turn to, and how to get it emptied.

“I did not know where to go,” recalled Shrestha during a break at a Pascal Sludge Management Conference last week in Cape Town. “If it was so difficult for me, I can only imagine how hard it must be for the general public.”

Shrestha finally got in touch with a private service provider and got the problem fixed after a few days. With over 20 years of experience in improving sanitation, Shrestha was promoted last month as Deputy Director of the Urban Sanitation Market at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

Shrestha is a leading authority in the field, and involved in the BMGF’s Reinvest the Toilet Challenge that has scientists around the world competing for the best design of a new generation of toilets that do not use water, are cheap to install and easy to operate.

Shrestha has been awarded for promoting water and sanitation projects in Nepal with his new responsibility at the BMGF, a philanthropic arm of the founder of Microsoft.

Says environmental expert Bhaskar Tripathi: “Rohan is passionate about sanitation, and does not treat it as just another job. He has great commitment and perseverance. His success is well deserved and it is only fitting that the foundation has recognized it.”

The Gates Foundation’s Brian Abogat said of Shrestha’s promotion: “Rohan Shrestha has been the best ambassador the foundation could ask for, exerting respect and compassion while generating innovation — and impressive results.”

The BMGF’s toilet challenge has prompted top scientists from China, India and other parts of the world to come up with innovative new designs, from solar-powered smart toilets that generate hydrogen and electricity to sanitation systems that convert human waste into biological charcoal, fuel gas, minerals and clean water.

Shrestha had humble beginnings in a public school in Kathmandu before getting an MS from Tribhuvan University in 1988. He worked in a water analysis laboratory to test water in the Bagmati River. And later founded Environment and Public Health Organisation (NPHO) that specializes in research and monitoring. Later, he got a PhD from a university in Austria in limnology, the study of inland water bodies. On his return, Shrestha successfully marketed the popular water purifier called Fyroz.

Shrestha went on to introduce Nepal’s first wetland system in Bhaktapur for small-scale wastewater treatment and reuse, and designed Nepal’s first sludge treatment plant in Toko in 1998.

“Now at this point that I realised that water quality would never improve without upgrading sanitation. At the root of water pollution is poorly managed sanitation,” said Shrestha, who then became involved in rainwater harvesting and turned his residence into a model eco home complete with urine diversion dry toilet.

After a stint at UN HABITAT as a South Asia region technical supervisor, he was convinced toilet technology had to be less water-intensive to improve sanitation in the developing countries.

“We claim to have over 90% latrine coverage in Nepal but most structures do not meet required standards, and that is why we need a new breakthrough in toilets,” said Shrestha.

The Gates Foundation has invested heavily in developing new technologies that can destroy pathogens on site through fungal sludge management.

“If a vast country like India can clean up its act, why can’t Nepal? All we need is political will and proactive leadership committed to improving sanitation,” adds Shrestha, whose foundation is currently developing a new course on sanitation at Kathmandu University, and working with Nepal Bureau of Standards on a new toilet standard.

Here in Cape Town at the global conference he helped put together, Shrestha says his goal is still to go back to Nepal: “I plan to head home, but after we have developed an adaptable technology for safer sanitation in developing countries so we can promote it in Nepal as well.”

Sonia Awale
Rice is such an important food item that most Nepalis cannot do without it, but rather, it seems, can the country’s economy. Encouraging rice harvest figures have prompted the government to raise estimates for Nepal’s economic growth rate this year. Paddy production was nearly 9% up from the previous year, reaching 5.6 million tons. Buoyed by these figures, Finance Minister Yuba Raj Khatiwada is optimistic that the country’s annual economic growth rate will touch 7% this year.

The International Monetary Fund had predicted a 5% growth, but increased it to 6.5% mainly because of a healthy monsoon. However, the Asian Development Bank’s estimate is that Nepal’s annual growth rate will be 5.5% this year.

“Rice harvests account for up to 1% of Nepal’s annual economic growth rate,” said Ram Krishna Regmi, who heads the statistics division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. Agriculture and forestry contributes more than a quarter of Nepal’s GDP, of which rice makes up 21%. Two-thirds of Nepal’s population depend directly on agriculture for livelihood, and of them, one in five live below the poverty line.

Although the estimates look somewhat encouraging, they have exposed yet again just how much Nepal’s economy is dependent on the vagaries of the southwest monsoon. And with the summer rainfail becoming increasingly erratic because of climate change, Nepal’s economy will continue to be fragile.

Yubha Dhakal, GC of the Agriculture and Livestock Development Ministry said that besides the monsoon, the main reason for the increase in paddy production is due to an increase in the area under rice cultivation, the use of high-yield seeds, timely distribution of fertilizer, and the spread of mechanisation.

There was a healthy monsoon, and timely paddy transplantation, and there were also fewer landslides and not as much river erosion,” GC explained. Last year, paddy seedlings were transplanted in 90% of fields, up from only 86% the year before. All this also affected productivity, which increased to 3.67 tons per hectare, a 0.25 tons increase in yield per hectare from the previous year.

Even so, the total production could not meet Nepal’s demand for 6.3 million tons of rice, and the shortfall was met with imports from India. In the first four months of this fiscal year alone, Nepal has already imported Rs 8.35 billion worth of rice from India.

Despite the fact that educated youth, and children of farmers are either migrating or moving away from the land, agriculture is still the mainstay of Nepal’s economy. Farming is also becoming increasingly feminised as most men are away in the cities or abroad for work. Which is why the increase in rice production is in one sense encouraging.

Not as encouraging, however, is that productivity is still sluggish. Paddy yield has gone up from 2.4 tons per hectare 30 years ago to only 3.6 tons today, whereas productivity is 4.1 tons in Bhutan, 6.6 in Japan, and 7.0 in South Korea.

Productivity of other crops has also not gone up by much. The reason is that nearly 70% of agriculture is still rain-fed. Cheap imports of rice from India (see adjoining article) as well as the disappearance of traditional rice varieties suited to Nepal’s micro-climates have also impacted production.

The Ministry of Agriculture that includes forests, fisheries and livestock, had a budget of nearly Rs 60 billion this year. But very little of that money goes into actually increasing production, most is spent on salaries and administration.

The subsidies given to farmers is either misused, or doled out to party faithful. Foreign donors have invested Rs 16 billion in agriculture in the past seven years specifically to improve yields, with no
Most farmers are indebted because even if they have increased harvests, their food and cash crops have not found a market, or the prices are too low. In fact, agriculture was never a priority for successive governments and ministers who have seen farmers only as vote banks, and not food banks.

Prime Minister Oli’s slogan of ‘Prosperous Nepal and Happy Nepalis’ is intrinsically linked to raising agricultural productivity with investment in irrigation, farm inputs, mechanisation and land reform.

Rajendra Uprety in Sunsari

Only old timers remember that Nepal once used to be a major exporter of rice. At a time when India was importing rice in 1961, Nepal exported 188,000 tons of rice worth $43 million. By 1965, the last year Nepal had a surplus, the country exported rice valued at $10 million.

A growing population, increasing consumption and falling production meant that supply could not meet domestic demand. By 2015, Nepal imported 331,000 tons of rice worth $210 million, mainly from India. By this time, India was exporting 6.3 billion worth of premium rice in a year. (See graph)

Nepal is now in a paradoxical situation where although rice production and productivity are steadily increasing (see adjoining articles) it is importing more rice than ever. This situation can easily be reversed if we synchronise our agricultural policy and outreach to farmers to grow the varieties of rice that consumers demand.

A visit to Surke Agro in Jhapa recently was a vivid indication of the state of affairs. At the mill that produces the Makhan brand rice there were trucks unloading Jiri Maslini type of rice imported from India. What was going on here?

Despite an increase in rice production, we are more dependent on imports than ever before because our farmers are not growing the kind of rice that Nepali consumers want. Paddy and rice imports from India peak at harvest time in Nepal.

Records at the Biratnagar customs office show that in the last fiscal year, 89,729 tons of rice were imported through the border, and it was between January-March that most of the rice (55%) and paddy (65%) were brought in. Remarkably, paddy imports from India are highest in the months when Nepal’s markets are full of freshly harvested paddy.

To be sure, most rice exporting countries also import some rice. For example, Vietnam exported 5.2 million tons of rice last year, but imported 25,300 tons of the grain. Nepal also exports a small amount of rice, while importing much more. The reason for this is that countries that export large amounts of cheaper varieties also need to import smaller quantities of premium rice to meet domestic demand.

The main reason why Nepal imports so much rice despite rising production is because our farmers are not growing the right type of rice, and the government’s efforts are not directed towards helping them grow the varieties that Nepali consumers prefer. For example, the Manlili variety of rice was common throughout eastern Nepal, and two-thirds of the farmers in this region grew that variety.

Today, consumer demand has shifted to Jiri Maslini variety, yet half the farmers are growing Raji and Swarnal, which are not in high demand. This shows that our promotion and policies are running counter to consumer preferences. The result is that Nepali exports Indian paddy (which is not cheaper than Nepali rice) at a time when domestic paddy floods the market, and it is also the reason why rice imports are not decreasing.

Once we have decided on the variety of rice that is in demand, Nepali farmers need to be helped with improving yield through better seeds, irrigation, techniques and mechanisation. Given these interventions, Nepal can easily increase productivity from the average 3.8 tons per hectare currently to more than 5 tons per hectare.

There are also some post-harvest market interventions with pricing coordination, storage and processing. Thus, once we start producing rice varieties that are in most demand with high yield and at attractive prices, Nepal can become not just self-sufficient in rice, but can also return to being an exporter. For this, we also have to conserve, and brand our own varieties of premium rice.

Nepal has everything going for it: a long tradition of paddy cultivation, hard-working farmers, a domestic market that has critical mass, and international demand for the unique varieties found in Nepal. All it needs is concerted government policy, and coordination between consumer demand and supply from farmers.

Rajendra Uprety, Milli, with the Regional Agriculture Training Centre in Jharna of Sunsari
**NIFT Fest 2019**
The Nepal International Theatre Festival is a celebration of culture, art, and traditions through theatre performances, and brings 30 theatre plays from 5 countries to Kathmandu. The plays are spread across 4 theatres throughout the valley. 1500 for each show.

7pm at Manaslu Theatre, Anamgara, (01) 4893100
1. Waage Kong, India, 1 March
2. Jhalana, Nepal, 2 March
3. Ek Mochu Maiti Maa, India, 3 March
4. Desapartmental Na, Italy, 4 March

**Mahashivaratri**
Thousands of devotees assemble at the Pashupatinath temple, play and fast for the spiritual cleansing in the Hindu Festival honouring lord Shiva. Sinclair from Nepal and neighbouring India travel to the temple.

4 March, Pashupatinath temple

**Gyalpo Lhosar**
Tibetan and Sherpa communities celebrate their new year.
7 March, Sandan

**Stories**
An exhibition of etchings by Saura Janhna, recipient of Unesco Art by Warena Award.
6-23 March, 10am to 5pm (Saturday), Saurabh Art Gallery, Robin Mahar Chand, (01) 4388448, 4185360

**Kamal Art Exhibition**
15 Nepali artists have captured the lifestyle of Kamal region through their paintings, which were created in Mayo, as part of the Kamal Art Workshop.
4 March, 11am, Theatre Mela, Khilpur, 9884105702

**Jenn Cleary**
Cleary’s music ranges from upbeat songs to soulful love songs. Her latest album, ‘Fire’, has a dynamic stage presence, and will be performing live in Kathmandu this Sunday.
3 March, 6.30pm, John, Birethori, Road, 9667122224

**Echoes in the Valley**
Nepali’s finest bands – Photoshow, Night, Kama Dhaub, Kutumbe – come together for the first time. This concert is bound to offer a diverse range of vibrant Nepali music.
2 March, 8pm onwards, Lord of the Dance, Thamel, 9840589367

**Metronome Band**
Metronome is a folk and fusion instrumental band and performs a variety of tunes with guitar, fusion and tabla.
2 March, 6:40pm, Sososa The New Restaurant, Khilpur, (01) 4363707

**Jam up**
Nepal will host this weekly social jam session.
2 March, 6pm onwards, people can message Bledo Arts Cafe to participate. There will be a sound system and other basic instruments. Participants can also bring their own instruments to enjoy with other music enthusiasts.
Every Sunday starting 7 March, 6:30pm, Bledo Arts Cafe and Bar, Thamel, 9861471176

**Sabin Rai and the Pharaoh**
The band is a powerhouse of Nepali pop music. Be a part of their concert for a lively and enjoyable musical night.
3 March, 7pm, Daksh Bar and Cafe, (01) 4379068

**Our Pick**

**Kathmandu, an Enigma**

**Embassy**
Enjoy a hearty meal in the restaurant popular for its assorted menu and lively ambience. Try the Duck breast, served on a bed of mixed vegetables and roasted vegetables in a rich peppery salsa sauce.
Opposite Japanese Embasy, 1/4, 9851265490

**Weekend Hike**
Partake in a short hike, a day hike is recommended with nature and easy activities like Lamp fire, national park walk, mountain view, and village tour. Hike from Shivapuri to Chandragiri (7 to 8 hours) and Chilchhara to Thakalisini (6 to 7 hours). (For inquiries visit yog and other details.
3 March, hike for Nepal, tribalambassador@gmail.com, 9851265107, 9851710657, 9861347160

**Retreat at Damaara**
A retreat for contemplatives and seekers in an undisturbed sattayatanya in enrich and enlighten your inner self.
Bhaktamand, Khot, 9861122462

**Ranjitpur Kaushik Inn**
A small, quiet place to stay in the styly village of Bandipur repire with natural creativity and traditional architecture.
Bansdara, Fodika, (06) 5557878

**The path of Zen**
7-10 May Vrahnika of Meditation retreat with Swami Annand Krun. An ideal way to cleanse your mind and details from the pressures of modern-day and city life. (06) 55571213

**Koto**
Makki, ochu, and other foods, temples, frog fish, mussels, sausages, chicken, and other dishes and food.
Kosai Restaurant, Crow Derby Moon, 9851477220

**BBQ Night**
Fairly good Maniah brings back the Friday night BBQs with succulent grilled delicacies that are a treat to the senses, accompanied by beer and the view.
Every Tuesday, 6:30pm, 9898999757, 9859974053 per person, Koba restaurants, Thamel, (01) 4379009, 9898979763

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**
KATHMANDU – 22 – 28 February

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The chart and the line of the past few days, particularly brought down to the public in Kathmandu. The helpful and prudent actions were washed down. Earlier in the city, stringent actions had been taken. Now everything was starting. The importance of the air pollution became more critical. Let us hope for this timeless period. For all the details, please visit the website.
http://npm.gov.np/embassy/airquality-monitoring

**Enter the world of fashion**

**About Town**
10 – 7 March 2013 9:49
Sewa Bhattacharai

“A girl doesn’t need a master’s degree, I have found a headmaster for you instead.”

Thus starts Raped Machine, a play in which actress Deya Maskey gets married off with a chain around her neck instead of a garland of flowers. Later as she travels in a public bus, she is slapped with white foam – an allusion to women being molested on public transport. Volunteers walk down the side handing out candy, each of which is wrapped in a message about violence against women. Today it is her tomorrow it could be you. Or “Don’t tell me how to dress, tell them not to rape.”

The opening performance at the Nepal International Theatre Festival 2019 at Mandala Theatre in Kathmandu on Monday was emblematic of everything that characterises Nepali theatre today: realistic, hard-hitting stories and experimental storytelling.

The Festival is the first of its kind with all of Kathmandu’s theatres taking part. Over this week, 30 plays from 18 countries are being performed in four theatres: Theatre Mall in Kirtipur, Kausai Theatre in Tusharpati, and Mandala Theatre in Ramshahar. “We used to see such festivals all over the world, and longed to have one in Nepal too,” says Rejina Khadka, festival director. “Considering the rise in interest in theatre in Nepal, it was high time all other art forms since it includes storytelling, painting, set design, costumes, visual arts, sound, performance, etc.

Across the world, actors start from theatre because it is the place to hone their stagecraft. Nepali actors from Surendra Khanal in the past to Deyahang Rai today made it big in movies after starting out in theatre. Most artists credit Surendra Pahari who established Gurukal Theatre in the 1990s with pioneering modern theatre in Nepal. Theatre is also popular because it is telling stories that Nepali cinema usually does not. “Theatre is very different from the formulaic storytelling of cinema,” explains a festival mentor Anup Basu. “We try to look for and tell stories that reflect our current society, which audiences do not get anywhere else.”

Theatre therefore attracts a select class of audience that wants to go beyond masala entertainment. “The audience of theatre and cinema are very different,” says actor Deyahang Rai. “While cinema is created for a mass audience, theatre is created for more thoughtful viewers who appreciate nuanced storytelling. Our crowd is mostly young students with intellectual curiosity.” The vibrancy in Nepal’s theatre scene also reflects a society in ferment, coming out of a brutal war, a decade of instability and hopes of a revolution dashed. Visual and performance artist Ashmita Ranjit believes there is a burst of creativity in the theatre scene in Kathmandu. “There is a lot of experimentation going on and this festival has also shown remarkable solidarity among the theatre who have come together to organise it.”

Indeed, Ranjit herself is one of the experimenters in performance art whose artists perform as themselves rather than characters. Along with musician Sall Subedi, she performed at the opening of the festival. While Subedi lay buried in the ground and slowly made music with a singing bowl, Ranjit brought him out of the earth, and together they took a fishbowl full of water and sprayed it at the audience. Converts Subedi. “The performance symbolises the fact that we all come from the earth. Inflicting physical pain on myself was very different from simply acting it out in a drama. It underlined the importance of nature, and especially of water to us. This is environmental activism on stage.”

Despite the boom, Nepali theatre still suffers from a limited audience, lack of funds, shortcomings of theatres, and playwrights. Prime Minister K P Oli himself inaugurated the festival, and promised to change things: “Theatre is not just entertainment, it is also a means of social change,” Oli said at the event. “It is also the government’s duty to protect and help it thrive.” The theatre community hopes he was not just mouthing those lines.
Bulbul

Is an industry prone to profit from escapism, Nepali cinema has suddenly started coming out with movies that portray the reality of life with all its ugly truths.

The latest is Bulbul, a film with a straightforward plot, ordinary characters and portraying contemporary Nepal where issues like gender, patriarchy, migration, jobslessness, health care, and the struggle to survive are all intertwined.

This is not about 2 hours of dancers gyrating to the pulse of masala film songs, but a chronicle of the life of Ranakula (Swastima Khadka) who drives a tempo in Kathmandu’s busy and narrow streets. Her husband went to Saudi Arabia to work, but has not returned for six years and cannot send money home. She lives in a dingy flat taking care of her paralysed father-in-law. Ranakula has a daughter too, but has placed her child in a boarding school so that she can have a brighter future.

Bulbul is written and directed by Binod Paudel, principal of Oscar International College of Film Studies which has produced quite a few film-makers of the New Wave of Nepali Cinema.

A lead character like Ranakula is a novelty in Nepali films, which usually have exaggerated personas, unrealistic romances and facile characters. In Ranakula, however, director Paudel takes into the story of struggle and the complex emotions of a Nepali woman’s life. Bulbul has a character-driven plot, and Swastima Khadka’s authentic portrayal of Ranakula is refreshing and captivating. Her hardships are writ large in her sunken expressions and sharp dialogue which give us a nuanced, all-round portrait of her complex psychology. One can’t help but root for this simple, independent girl as she makes a living in a difficult city. She is fierce at her job, tender as a mother, understanding as a friend, struggling as a wife. But overall Ranakula embodies the female identity.

Since migration has become such an important facet of the lives of Nepalis today, it is inevitable that it figures prominently in contemporary Nepali music videos and movies. But in Bulbul, Paudel tackles a new figure in the equation – the impact of migration on the lives of men left behind at home.

Ranakula speaks to her husband through our pods as she drives him home, speaking frantically about their relationship. Paudel is subtle, but searing as he shows us the toll migration is taking on women – a tale repeated hundreds of thousands of times in homes across Nepal.

The supporting cast is also competently natural, elevating the movie’s authenticity. Mekunda Bhattachar as Chhopendra provides both comic relief and is refreshing as an anti-hero character that veers from the traditional perception of a lead actor in Nepali movies. Ranakula’s co-drivers demonstrate a camaraderie that maintains them through difficult times, perhaps through the knowledge that they are suffering together.

Ranakula’s dismal habitation and its overwhelming silence, always with a backdrop of monsoon rain, poignantly accentuates her lonely struggle. Bulbul gets more intense as the plot thickens, as unpredictably as life often does. We don’t know what will happen to Ranakula and what decisions she will make, but we want to understand her psyche because Paudel builds our intimacy with her in a way that makes us co-travellers in her life.

Bulbul does not have any unnecessary drama, it is a candid immersion into contemporary Nepal through a woman’s eyes. Paudel has refined what a heroine is in Nepali cinema: not just a pretty lady dancing to a superficial romance, but an individual trying to stay afloat after being thrown off the deep end of life.

Prakriti Kandel
nepalitimes.com
“Yes, we put that bomb”

Interview in BBC Nepali Service, 24 February

The Nepali Communist Party Maoist led by Neeta Bikram Chand (Biplav) has been sending letters to all rural municipalities of Province 5, demanding 2% of their development budgets. The letters claim to spend the money to install ‘scientific socialism’ as an alternative to parliamentary democracy. Many local level elected representatives are said to have already paid up, some from their personal coffers, others using their development budget. In a public hearing in Rasuwa district, a municipality chief admitted to having paid Rs60,000 to the Maoists.

The Biplav faction has been asking for three different types of donations: 2% of the development budget, up to Rs50,000 lump sum from the salaries of elected representatives, and a tender worth Rs1 million.

Many local administrations in Rasuwa have been extorted. After raising pressure, municipality chiefs have got local administration officers to pay off the Maoists.

The party has also demanded 2% of the development budgets from six municipalities and two rural municipalities of Banke. Party sources reveal that teachers and contractors have also been approached for donations.

Although the problem is rampant in Dang, officers there do not want to talk about it. Some are giving what is asked, while others are trying to bargain it down.

Mim Bahadur Ghati Magar of Rolpa municipality said the Maoists demanded a month’s salary from him, and half the infrastructure budgets from other local governments.

Businesses in Banka are also being extorted. Said one trader: “We got a letter demanding money. It is sad that we are facing extortion and threats once again.”

Kantipur, 26 February

Stop the extortion

Editorial in Nepalik, 26 February

The Nepali Communist Party Maoist led by Neeta Bikram Chand (Biplav) has resorted to violence in over a dozen locations to set fire to Neelô towers. A civilian has already lost his life, and two more are wounded. These incidents cannot be taken lightly. The government must strongly stop this violence.

The Biplav faction has tried to justify its action by claiming that it wants to punish Neelô for failing to pay capital gains tax. But the reality is different. This is a repeat of the Maoist conflict, during which people who refused to pay up could be killed.

Neeta Bikram Chand was close to the current Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa who may still have a soft spot for him. It remains to be seen if the Home Ministry will prosecute this case strongly. So far, the government seems to be hurt more by a few bitter words in social media than by such heinous acts.

FROM THE NEPALI PRESS

A SUBURBAN PARADISE

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It’s a crime not to call it terrorism

Kunda Dixit

The terror attack on the Nepal Airlines office in Lalitpur that cost the life of Sing Prasad Gurung and seriously injured three others on the night of 22 February proved that the Nepal conflict never really ended.

The ten-year war cost 17,000 lives, left tens of thousands injured, and 1,400 disappeared. Thirteen years after the war ended, one more innocent civilian was killed last week.

A hardline faction of the Maoist party led by Netra Bikram Chand (Biplav) has owned up to the attack, and said the death was “unfortunate.” Chand used to be close to the current Home Minister Ram Babu Thapa and Prasad Kumal Dahal, but never took part in elections, accusing his former comrades of sitting out the revolution.

On the night of the attack on Nepal, the party also set fire to a dozen of the Malaysian-owned company’s cell phones towers across the country, causing damage worth millions and cutting off communications to a large swaths of the country. (See page 19.)

There was shock and dismay in the Nepali cyberspace following the attack, with a lot of the scorn heaped on the government for not bringing to justice a state official or committing with the bereaved Gurung family.

“A foreign ambassador condemned the terrorist attack, but our own prime minister did not utter a word. He hasn’t visited the family to offer his condolences,” wrote Sunita in a hard-hitting blog on the portal mynepal.com. “We often wish that others would not comment on our internal affairs, but what do we do when we ourselves do not speak up at a time like this.”

Journalist Geetashree Chopra, whose father was killed while mayor of Birgunj in 2004 for ignoring a Maoist ransom demand for Rs150,000 attached a copy of the extortion letter, and wrote in a Tweet: “Don’t those who are backing ‘I will whack you for extorting’ now have to answer for killing my upright father precisely for not coughing up five lacs? Or see these rulers going to keep on backing?” (See screenshot below.) Indeed, Nepal’s social media has erupted with accusations against the Biplav group attacking Nepal as part of a nationwide extortion racket that to many is reminiscent of the war years. Some have wryly noted the similarity between the Nepali word for ‘demon’ (chandu) and the surname of Netra Bikram Chand.

It is a Biplav faction leader Hemanta Oli said this week: “A life was lost, but Biplav’s former bodyguard was reportedly detained on Wednesday. The NCP’s former Maoist home minister has shown no real inclination to go after a group that has unleashed a wave of terror nationwide.

By their silence, the former UML members of the NCP have shown they are also complicit in not going after the perpetrators. Although the UML is probably the least guilty of human rights violations during the war, its members have lost moral standing by even condemning the attack.

Many senior UML leaders also thought that unifying with the Maoists would moderate the former guerrillistas, but it is now looking more and more like the UML itself has been subsumed by the Maoists.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal earned legitimacy from the unification with the UML, returned to a position of power after elections in 2017 that he would have lost if the Maoists had contested alone, and he managed to muzzle accusations of war crimes.

For its part, the UML by uniting with the Maoists has sacrificed its social democratic credentials, and its silence in not condemning last Friday’s terror bomb speaks louder than words.

The UML’s strong party structure has been compromised, its local committees are in tatters. Meanwhile, the Maoists within the NCP are not socialised into democratic functioning and essentially remain a sub-party taking orders only from Oli. In fact, the ex-Maoists are doing everything in their power’s embrace the former UML, and have let Oli be their lightning rod.

According to the Home Ministry which should have been the first to respond in last week’s bomb attack and seven on telecom towers is run by a Maoist commander-turned-minister who used to be Biplav’s buddy. He is the last person to go after the one who gave the order to bomb Nepal and kill Sing Prasad Gurung.

It is time Prime Minister Oli defended the social democrats values his party once stood for, reshuffle his cabinet to get a minister with a clean democratic credentials, and if need be, start thinking about post-puntual arrangements.

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Terror attack

Family of Sing Prasad Gurung remember a proud soldier, devoted husband, father and friend

Sonia Awale

The grim weather on Wednesday morning reflected the somber mood at the Gurung residence in Kusunti where relatives gathered to mourn the death of Sing Prasad Gurung on 22 February in a terrorist bomb.

Women dressed in dark jackets and men with shaved heads offered prayers and sobbed silently to perform a 50-yaan, a Gurung mourning ritual carried out by the maternal side and in-laws of the deceased.

It was a memorial for Sing Prasad Gurung, 49, a retired Singapore Police Force officer who was killed in the explosion outside the Nepal head office in Nankhu. Taking responsibility for the deadly blast that also injured three others was the Maoist faction led by Netra Bikram Chand (Biplav) who broke away from the mainstream Maoist party that is now part of the ruling Nepal Communist Party.

Eye witnesses saw Gurung park his car and approach the suspicious object at the Ncell gate when it exploded. CCTV footage reportedly shows the Ncell security guard kicking the object away after it was left on the sidewalk by two men in a motorcycle. The security guard is said to have told police he kicked it because he

"घर शालिनि नै विवाह शालिनीको आधारः दियो विकासका लागि तैलिप्याख्ति हिसारहित समार्थ"

"From the peace in the home to peace in the world make education sage for all"

"Nepal wherever you are. Times.com"
leaves tragedy in its wake

thought it was a box.

Gurung, who was nearest to the explosion, and few other pedestrians were thrown up in the air by the force of the blast. His legs and hip were shattered, and later died at nearby MedGiti Hospital.

“He was the friendliest person I knew. He was frank, straight forward and had an open heart,” remembered Ram Prasad Gurung, Sing Prasad’s closest friend and colleague at the Singapore Police Force.

Originally from Giling village of Lamjung district, Sing Prasad Gurung spent 27 years in Singapore Police before retiring five years ago as Senior Station Inspector, and relocating to Kathmandu. He is survived by his wife Sushila Gurung, 40, and three children: 18-year-old Dawa who is an undergraduate in Sydney, 17-year-old Shiva who is an A-level student in GEMS, and 12-year-old son Ankush who studies at DAV school.

Sushila Gurung looked as if she was in a trance during the ritual, broke into deep sobs, and had fainting spells during the ceremony next to a framed portrait of her husband in uniform.

The Gurungs come from a military family, but the relatives looked shell-shocked with the tragic loss. The last few days have been traumatic, and they have not been able to focus on the future. The family had a modest source of income from Sing Prasad’s pension, but now there is uncertainty.

More distant relatives and friends who came from Pokhara after they heard the news say it was just like Sing Bahadur to try to help out in a time of crisis, and with his military training thought he could deal with the suspected explosive device.

However, they say neither the police nor Ncell have been forthcoming with more information about what really happened that Friday night even though both are in possession of CCTV footage.

“We want to know what exactly transpired. My friend died for no reason, he was innocent,” said Ram Prasad Gurung. “We demand he be declared a martyr by the state and if the incident was politically motivated, Ncell and government should compensate the family for their part in his death.”

As the ceremony wound down, relatives gathered in the living room to pay final respects to Sing Prasad Gurung, offering fruits, sacred thread, incense, and flowers. Some burst into tears and they all consoled each other.

One of the mourners said as she wept on the shoulder of a relative: “I had been meaning to visit him for some time, but now I will never be able to.”
Not for the Faint-hearted

Comes news that Lonely Planet has ranked Kathmandu #5 among Top Ten cities to visit in 2019. Are they mad? This is outrageous. How dare they? What are the fools at Lonely Planet smoking? Ask anyone who has visited Kathmandu recently, they will not agree that Nepal’s capital deserves to be #5 on the list. It should be #1!

Still, thanks anyway from the false bottoms of our suitcases for the endorsement. This is recognition of the hard work our city fathers have put into making Kathmandu such a fantastic adventure destination. (Slogan: ‘Tied Enough Excitement for One Lifetime? Return in Your Next Incarnation’)

Half the fun about Nepal is the thrill of getting there on our national flag carrier. It is full of surprises, and there is never a dull moment. It is advisable to get to the airport at least two days before departure just to make sure your flight has not been postponed. Also, try to stay on for a day or two after the scheduled departure just in case your flight to Kathmandu is postponed.

En route, imbibe your second bottle of Chivas and share it with those seated next to you because you are now allowed to bring in only 1 litre of whisky into Nepal. This will put you and fellow passengers in the right frame of mind as the pilot throws in a free two-hour mountain sightseeing flight as the plane waits for its turn to land at Kathmandu.

The alcohol will also fortify you to deal with the bus from plane to terminal which at 3.7 seconds holds the world record for the shortest bus ride in the world. All 330 passengers of your widebody jet will be packed into one bus for this low-oxygen test to make sure you are suitably acclimatised for air quality in the city. If you faint, then let’s face it, you are not ready for the adventures that await you. (P.S.: ‘Visit Kathmandu: It’s Not for the Faint-hearted’)

At Immigration there are separate serpentine queues for the visa fees, to pay visa fee, for immigration stamp, to test if you are not under free, queuing up for an x-ray to check if you are bringing in gold bullion in amounts less than 33kg. Nepal is such a popular destination that people are lining up just to get in.

To make sure you get more bang for your buck during your adventure holiday, the Ministry of Tourism, Museums and Levies has now ensured your trek starts at the airport itself. It has wisely, and without any warning, moved the parking lot 300m down a steep slope for which you will need climbing equipment, crampons, jumpers, porters and a mountain guide.

You will also notice that Kathmandu’s air quality has been optimised for your breathing pleasures. Oxygen masks will drop down automatically, and all you have to do is pull the mask, cover your nose and mouth and breathe normally.

Next Week: Fun Things To Do In Kathmandu