

GOING PLACES TOGETHER

TWO EXTREMITIES

After being lampooned for extravagant, but empty, promises and criticised for having nothing concrete to show for his first year as prime minister, K P Oli has moved quickly to address two lingering legacies of the conflict and the constitution-writing process: sign a deal with C K Raut to get him to abandon secessionism, and outlaw the hardline Netra Bikram Chand (Biplav) faction of the Maoists. Despite misgivings and cynical comments on social platforms, the Oli administration has also won applause for its new assertiveness and a renewed sense of purpose.

In the 11-point agreement signed with Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa on 24 March, Raut has committed to accept Nepal's sovereignty and unity as well as enter the democratic mainstream. That declaration has removed the threat of ethno-separatism from plains politics, meaning that moderate Madhesi parties can now no longer fall back on Raut's secessionist rhetoric as a bargaining chip with Kathmandu.

With his Cambridge education and work in IT, Raut brings with him international exposure and perhaps a cleaner, meaner brand of politics. Anger in Province 2 runs deep, and the mistrust of K P Oli may have grown among Madhesi parties because of last Sunday's deal. As David Seddon reports from Province 2 (*page 11*), unless there are real moves towards autonomy and devolution, there may very well be other Rauts.

The surprise announcement last Sunday was not easily digestible to the opposition NC and other parties who accused him of a sellout. But the most vocal critic of the 11-point agreement were Oli's rivals within the NCP itself: party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal did not show it but was privately miffed that Oli had not kept him apprised, and Bhim Rawal's main gripe was also that he was not consulted.

However, we give Oli a thumbs up on this even if it is only for keeping the sensitive negotiations under wraps in the leaky corridors of Singha Darbar. Oli has shown that he likes to surprise people by pulling rabbits out of hats. For example, the pre-electoral alliance in 2017 between the Maoists and the UML was also a bolt from the blue when announced.

The agreement with Raut followed close on the heels of the Kailali District Court sentencing Resham Chaudhary to life imprisonment for the massacre of policemen

in Tikapur in August 2015, and his party the RJP-N subsequently pulling out from the governing coalition in protest. There also seems to have been some behind-the-scenes winks and nods between Baluwater and the Supreme Court for Raut to be released from jail a day prior to the agreement.

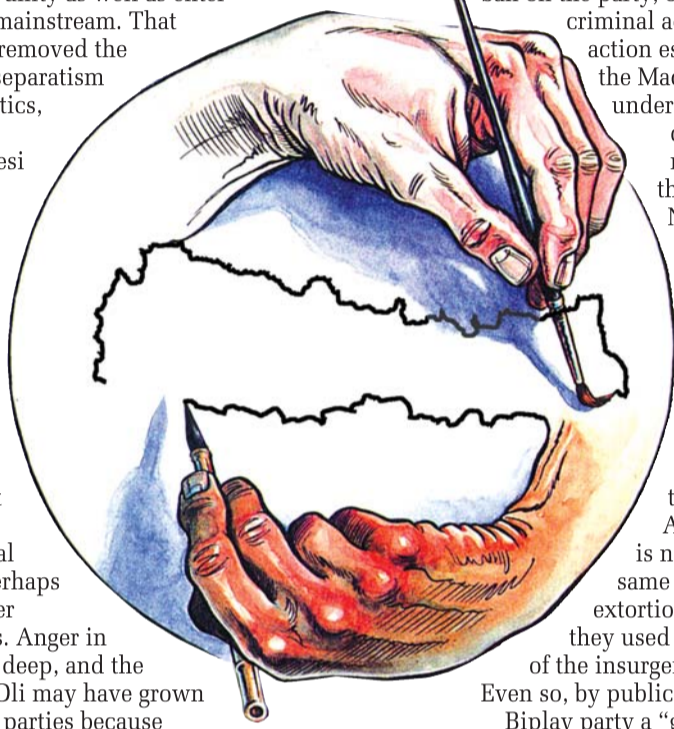
The wily Oli seems to have killed several birds with one stone with the agreement: he has shored up his public image of being only talk and no walk, neutralised the fallout of RJP-N leaving his government, and depending Raut's future role, laid the groundwork for the next general election which will be won or lost in the Madhes.

On Biplav, although the government split hairs by saying it was not a ban on the party, only on its criminal activities, the action essentially drives the Maoist faction underground. There could be two reasons for this: the ruling NCP wants to keep the door open for negotiations, or ex-Maoists in the ruling party used to be buddies of Biplav and just want to pretend to go after him. After all, Biplav is now using the same tactics of extortion and violence they used at the beginning of the insurgency in 1996.

Even so, by publicly calling the Biplav party a "gang of looters" Prime Minister Oli has thrown the gauntlet. The Maoists were already semi-underground, and owned up to three bomb attacks in the capital last month that killed one person, and setting fire to more than a dozen Ncell cell towers across the country. The government was challenged, and there was no other way for it to respond but warn that criminal activities will no longer be tolerated.

With both the Raut deal and the warning to Biplav, the government now needs to show that it means business. A ruling party that can bring a separatist force to the negotiating table should easily be able to convince former comrades-at-arms to give up violence. While doing that, the government should also try to win the hearts and minds of the people of Province 2, expedite political devolution and remove grievances that feed extremism.

As far as the Maoists are concerned, they are cashing in on disillusionment among the people with the NCP's poor governance and corruption. The root cause of extremism is extreme inequality, and unless there are moves towards social justice, Nepal will continue to be unstable.



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10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

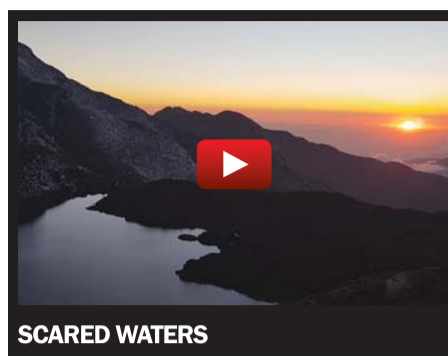
The week that the NCP government made up of ex-Maoists signed an agreement with Madhesi activist CK Raut to renounce separatism, is as good a time as any to look back at issue #442 of 13-20 March 2019 which dealt the beginnings of unrest in the Madhes for more autonomy. Excerpt from Editorial:

'The continuing Tarai unrest, brewing discontent among groups demanding self-determination, intractable tension within the party leading the coalition, the inability of the state to protect its citizens and improve their lives – these are just some of the crises Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal faces. And all the time, he has to prevent the peace process from being derailed and keep to the timetable on the constitution.'

The job would have been difficult even if there was a consensus government, the coalition partners loved each other, the bureaucracy was clean and efficient and there was no looming global depression. What makes Dahal's job immensely more difficult is that his party is still behaving like it is in the jungles, and Kathmandu's politicians act as if they are still in the era of self-centred coalition politics of the 1990s.'



ONLINE PACKAGES



This year the mountains of Nepal saw heavy snow, which is now melting. And with this the trekking season has started. Follow our reporters to the scenic Gosain Kunda in Rasuwa and Khayer Lake in Myagdi and plan your next trip. Why not get away from crowds at ABC and combine your spring trek with a pilgrimage to one of these holy lakes? *Stories: page 8-9.*



Driving Nepal's progress in eye care is Sanduk Ruit. His new biography *The Barefoot Surgeon* reveals the struggles he faced to be a world renowned surgeon. Go to SoundCloud to listen to Ruit talk to us about new challenges to eye care in Nepal. *Story and review: page 14-15.*

US-BANGLA CRASH

What a tragic sequence of errors that should never have been allowed to happen ('1 year after US-Bangla crash, fingers point to pilot', Kunda Dixit, #950). Not only the Bangla Captain, but TIA Air Traffic Controller were seriously at fault.

Andrew Duncan

Great article on a completely avoidable tragedy. On International Women's Day it's a reminder that we need to do more to counter toxic masculinity. It's deadly.

Sascha Fuller

Failings of the ATC to be more assertive and lacking clarity are bad but probably would have made no difference. Will lessons be learnt?

Marcus Cotton

Even if there was no crash, that sort of erratic and abusive behavior is terrifying. Can you imagine having to work with someone like that? Are there no checks or recourses for female pilot to report harassment?

Michele Ann Jenkins

Allowing a pilot who is mentally unfit to fly an aircraft ... question is will Nepal government take any action against this carelessness shown by the US-Bangla?

Binaek Shah

I can't imagine how much trauma the survivors go through not just right after such a horrible incident like this but for year and years after ('Individual tragedies, a national loss', Monika Deupala, #950). My thoughts go out to all the brave survivors as they try and pick up the pieces of their lives despite all their inner struggles.

Sunaina Saraf

HELEN EIKELAND

This reminded me of my time delivering aid in Ampipal of Gorkha just after the earthquake ('Learning about teaching', Prakriti Kandel, #950). There I came across a medical centre and I was quite impressed with it. That level of care is generally unheard of in such a rural setting. I remember being very thankful to the *bideshi* whoever started it. Now I know it was Ms Eikeland's parents. My sincere Namaste.

Ram Chamling

WHAT'S TRENDING

Individual tragedies, a national loss

by *Monika Deupala*

Samira Byanjankar survived the BS211 crash last year, but a dozen of her classmates did not make it. She still grieves for her roommates who dreamt of being doctors. Go online for the story if you missed it last week and watch a poignant video where Byanjankar recounts her painful memories but also her new determination in life.



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Most visited online page



1 year after US-Bangla crash, fingers point to pilot

by *Kunda Dixit*

Shocking revelations from the Cockpit Voice Recorder obtained by *Nepali Times* of US-Bangla BS211 flight that crashed in Kathmandu on 12 March 2018 killing 51. The transcript created a heated discussion online about the pilot's misconduct towards his female colleagues and of his mental state. Visit nepalitimes.com for the investigation report, and the online discussion.



Most popular on Twitter



Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @nepalitimes

Today marks the one-year anniversary of the #USBanglaCrash in Kathmandu airport that killed 51 on board. Most Nepalis who perished were medical students. @DeupalaMonika speaks with Samira Byanjankar who still mourns the loss of her classmates. #PlaneCrash



Aakriti Karki @karki_aakriti

There were no words that could ease our pain when the tragedy happened. There are still no words to ease our pain. But to see Samira di take life by its reigns has given comfort to our wounded hearts. #USBanglaCrash Thank you for sharing this @nepalitimes



Nepali Times @nepalitimes

The earthquake destroyed her home, cancer took her husband, but she keeps creating deities. @SoniaAwale meets Rupa Maharjan, one of the more than 200,000 single women who survived the earthquake and bravely carry on despite hardships. #nepalearthquake



Subin Mulmi @subinmulmi

I have never met a woman who is not strong. Single women even stronger. Morning inspiration to start the day #strongwomen #WomensDay



Nepali Times @nepalitimes

Born in Gorkha to a missionary teacher, Helen Eikeland grew up to be a teacher herself and taught in a Nepali school. Now she is an associate professor at @AgderUniversity in Norway and is taking the ideas she learnt in Nepal back to her other motherland.



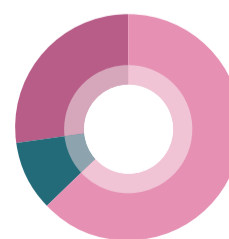
Norma Kehrberg @Nepalnorma

Great story. Was in the Nepali mountain village when Helen was a little girl. We were always looking for her at meal times and she was exploring and playing in her friends' village homes.



Weekly Internet Poll #951

Q. How has women's increased participation in the economy impacted them?



Total votes: 75

Aided their empowerment: **63%**
Doubled their burden: **10%**
Both: **27%**

Weekly Internet Poll #952
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Will the government's agreement with CK Raut bring about decentralisation?



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Why we climb mountains

Disenchantment with the material world pushes us to the Himalaya to reconnect with Nature

Damien Francois

Mountaineers have been asked why they climb mountains for as long as big mountains have been climbed. But for Himalayan and other Native people around the world, the question is ‘Which deity lives up there?’

Many mountaineers are not as spiritual anymore, and their relationship with high mountains is more ambiguous. The ancestors of Western civilisation in ancient Greece imagined that gods lived on mountain tops. Alas, sacredness today is a bit outdated.

Although traditions linked to mountain spirits are still alive, many of us have lost the connection to that specialness of what some call ‘Creation’, or ‘Nature’, and its powers which humans used to personify in the form of deities. Hence, disenchantment with the material world pushes many of us mountaineers to the Himalaya to reconnect with Nature.

Ever since Nietzsche wrote ‘God is dead and we killed him’, everything pertaining to the divine and the mystical has become a bit complicated. Could it be that the earth’s highest elevations have now somehow become the playground of not just alpinists and geologists but

God’s own cuisine



SEWA BHATTARAI

Verdant, rich and lush Kerala is often uttered in the same sentence as ‘god’. The southern Indian state was made famous by Arundhati Roy’s novel *A God of Small Things*, and it is called ‘god’s own country’ because it is said to have been created by Lord Parasram for his devotees. Added to all that, it is Kerala cuisine that is actually divine.

Many in Kathmandu will be familiar with dosa through the Indian restaurants in the capital, but they maybe have not heard

of appam, its cousin from Kerala. Appam is a round bread half the size of dosa, crispy on the sides and soft and fluffy in the center. Unlike dosa which is made of rice and dal flours, appam is made of raw and cooked rice puree. At Soaltee’s Kerala Food Festival that begins 12 March, you can try out this exotic staple that is hard to find in Kathmandu’s Indian restaurants.

The festival offers many other novelties from Kerala state famous for its placid palm-fringed backwaters. Puttu and idiyappam,

other dishes which substitute for rice and roti are available, as are many chicken, fish, and vegetable dishes. Chef Rejimon P S from Kerala is making the dishes, so you can be sure of their authenticity.

“The main ingredient in Keralan dishes is coconut,” explains Chef Rejimon. “We use coconut flakes in most vegetables and meat dishes. Coconut milk is used in gravies, and even if coconut is not obvious, it is usually present as oil.”

Indeed, the green vegetables and mushroom fries and covered in coconut flakes, which gives them a mild, creamy flavour. Coconut milk goes well with the non -vegetarian dishes like chicken and fish, which melt in the mouth. They can be mixed with plain rice, or Kerala’s special coriander rice which has an inviting green colour.

Kerala itself has a variety of cuisine, but there are three distinct types: Malabar, Travancore, and Kochi. Chef Rejimon is cooking up an amalgam of all three types at the festival, and has also created other, newer dishes.

“Regional cuisines use typical spices which may not be palatable to everyone,” says Chef Rejimon. “So we have experimented with new spices and flavours.”

Kerala is known as a capital of spices, with pepper, cardamom, cloves, vanilla, etc grown in abundance. Kerala reflects this abundance, and every dish is flavourful and rich. The hotness and spiciness have been toned down for the festival so as to appeal to all palates, which lets the deep and rich flavours of the spices shine through. 🍴

Sewa Bhattarai

*Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza
Until 24 March*

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Reading on board

Turkish Airlines’ latest collaboration with PressReader gives passengers digital access to thousands of newspaper and magazine titles from around the world. PressReader offers over 7,000 titles from 120+ countries



in 60+ languages. Passengers can now download their favourite publications from this collection with an unlimited access for 48 hours.

Qatar women fly high

Qatar Airways celebrated a landmark flight on 10 March as its Airbus A350 flying from Brussels to Doha was operated entirely by a crew of 15 women to mark International



Women’s Day. The airline recently also announced a ten-year partnership with the International Air Transport Association (IATA) to launch the ‘IATA Diversity & Inclusion Awards’, which promote greater gender diversity in the aviation industry.

Golf Tournament

Laxmi Intercontinental Pvt. Ltd will organise the annual Hyundai Open Golf Tournament on 15-16 March at Gokarna Golf Resort. Some 130 golfers will participate in the tournament and the winner of the ‘Hole In One’ category will be awarded Hyundai’s new Santro.



New Services

Nepal Investment Bank Ltd (NIBL) has



opened its 11th extension account and 111th ATM at Sinamangal’s Kathmandu Medical College (KMC) which has over 1,000 medical students and employees. The college and hospital also receives 30,000 patients monthly.

Etihad, too

Etihad Airways marked International



Women’s Day with an all-female flight crew for the first time. More than 30 Etihad Airways women cabin and cockpit crew operated Flight EY017 from Abu Dhabi to London.

prabhu BANK



PHOTOS: DAMIEN FRANCOIS



also of philosophers?

After all, Nietzsche wrote: ‘Philosophy, as I have understood it hitherto is a voluntary retirement into regions of ice and mountain peaks’. Being a philosopher and mountaineer, I attempt perilous climbs that lead to Julius Evola’s ‘meditations on the peaks’. Jack Kerouac and the Beat generation’s ‘urgency of life’ comes to mind where ‘It’ is the world within this phenomenal world I am living in, body and mind.

That is what I’m looking for, up there: a world-ambience made of simple things that stand in contrast to the sublime majesty of the surroundings. A gigantic natural theatre, where I feel every fibre in my body like nowhere else. Granted, what I feel is mostly pain. But no pain, no elevation, and no gain. The physical and mental efforts I have to make up there are intense, magnified by hypoxia, exhaustion, varying temperatures from super hot to super cold. Yes,

I actually turned around at 7,800m on Everest on 17 May last year because of the heat.

But it is not just the body that suffers, but the mind which is on edge. Yet, as much as climbing at the highest elevations is physically excruciating, it is equally rewarding mentally. The higher you get the more a certain torpor brings out deep feelings. A paradox? No, this sluggishness leads not only to a simplicity of actions -- one foot in front of the other -- it is also a mental simplicity, or reduction.

‘When I’m up above 8,000m ... all desires vanish, the anxiety, the dissatisfaction that I experience down there are gone,’ writes Marco Bianchi. A state of zen not through meditation but action.

The more fear and danger are part of the experience, the longer the feelings will remain. Robert McFarlane in *Mountains Of The Mind: A History Of A Fascination*: ‘We had talked about how much pleasure the fear had brought

afterwards. And we talked as mountaineers always do, about how strange it is to risk yourself for a mountain, but how central to that experience is that risk and the fear it brings with it.’

Then, this song by Luc van Acker: ‘I want to feel the fear that’s in my heart, the fear in my heart that keeps telling me which way to turn.’ It is the good fear, the one that makes me do the right thing at the right moment.

Mountaineers are not enamored with danger, we are not suicidal. High-altitude mountaineering is actually the art of moving through danger and avoiding it. But sometimes it goes wrong. I survived the big 25 April 2015 earthquake at Everest Base camp that killed 18 people.

‘Time doesn’t stop or slow down when you are in danger. Everything happens as fast. It’s just that – provided we survive them – we subject these periods of time to such intense retrospective scrutiny that we come to know them more fully, more exactly. We see them in freeze-frame,’ writes McFarlane.

Yes, everything is more intense, up there, especially the hardships. Yet, the body ‘uplifts’ the mind, and vice-versa. Body and mind,

this is what the humanimal really is. The paradigm may be defined by the human ability to displace oneself mentally in space and time, but it is ‘conquistadors of the useless’ (Lionel Terray) who are actually climbing where no other will venture. Only the fiercest animal on the planet, the infamous wolverine (*gulo gulo*), seems to share this passion for climbing big hills for no other reason than hard-earned pleasure.

Unlike speed-climbers I do not seek to set up new records and certainly do not climb to deconstruct the laws of elementary physics. I rejoice in the simplicity of life and of what I do, but I am not interested in faster, faster, faster. This is a Western illusion which is rooted in the false notion that ‘progress’ is linear and always leads to something ‘better’.

Maybe the real reason why we venture up there is to ‘systematically rearrange the senses’ to paraphrase Rimbaud. Fear and danger dynamise existence, you live more consciously where there are no machines and buttons, no double clicks. It is back to fundamentals, as Friedrich Nietzsche, wrote: ‘To live at all means to live in danger.’ 🇳🇵



Damien Francois is a climber and author of The Holy Mountains of Nepal. His Everest attempt this spring will be his 19th expedition in the Nepal Himalaya..





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Out of the ashes

The Pathibhara helicopter crash was a repeat of the tragedy in Ghunsa in 2006

Those of us concerned with conservation in Nepal remember exactly where we were on 23 September 2006 when news hit about the missing helicopter that disappeared into the clouds above Ghunsa.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyál

I was at my desk overlooking a deceptively calm and normal Kathmandu Valley, my stomach churning as the fearful facts unfolded. Details of the disaster took two full days to be corroborated, but it gradually emerged that all 24 people had died in the far eastern corner of the country when the chopper collided with cliffs above the village and crashed in flames, wiping out most of Nepal's conservation leaders including a government minister, the Finnish charge d'affaires and Russian pilots.

"Yes I'm so sorry, yes, I'll be sure to let you know when we hear anything." Bad news travels and with a sinking heart I was fielding landline queries from all over the world. Gazing through the window I prayed the story would end differently, the icy fingers of disbelief, the terrible finality of the words: "No survivors."

The tragedy at Pathibara on 27 February was horribly similar, although these days news travels fast and the dreadful details were quick to be confirmed. This time it was tourism leaders who vanished into a blizzard and exploded into the crags, leaving a sickening void in Nepal's hospitality and aviation industry. Along with technical personnel, we lost two fine men -- an inspirational minister, and Nepal's most visionary and courageous tourism entrepreneur.

Last week WWF's Ghana Shyam Gurung reflected on the trauma: 'This loss brought back my memory of 2006. No one should challenge weather.' In 2006 most of the incinerated bodies were unrecognisable in their seats and crumbled into ashes to the touch, Ghana had told



KUNDA DIXIT

me. Only Mingma Norbu Sherpa was thrown clear on impact, lying as though asleep on the ground a short distance from the burnt-out wreckage.

Once Ghana's rescue team was eventually able to access the area, hampered by driving rain and wind, it was late the day after the crash before they reached the site after a four-hour climb in the dark, and another day passed before news filtered through to us in Kathmandu.

Ghana should have boarded that fated helicopter but was off-loaded to wait in Taplejung to save weight. The Kangchenjunga Conservation Area had been handed over to local indigenous managers the previous day, and the passengers consisted of the cream of Nepal's conservation community, WWF staff and international supporters. It should have been a celebration of yet another success in the history of Nepal's innovative protected areas.

It was hard to accept the chill reality that they were not coming back. Never again would we be infected by Chandra Gurung's restless energy, enjoy Tirthaman Maskey's environmental zeal, admire Harka Gurung's measured

TRAIL BLAZERS: Environmentalist Mingma Norbu Sherpa (*right*) was among 24 who died in the helicopter crash in Ghunsa in 2006. A memorial in Taplejung (*above*) honours him and other conservation leaders who died in the tragedy.

thoughtful responses, or appreciate Mingma Norbu Sherpa's calm focussed determination -- all dedicated to making a difference to the environment, development and wildlife conservation.

One of those telephone calls came from Lincoln University in New Zealand where so many of Nepal's natural resource practitioners had received their education. Professor David Simmons' voice was shrill with shock at the loss of so many friends: "I've talked to my colleagues and we want to offer a national park scholarship in memory of Mingma Norbu, one of our distinguished alumni, to help rebuild the conservation capacity in Nepal following the loss of so many highly skilled specialists."

Born in Khumbu and a star pupil at Sir Edmund Hillary's



Khumjung School, Mingma had studied at Lincoln before initiating the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, and creating WWF programs in Nepal and Bhutan. At the time of the accident he was WWF Director of Conservation based in Washington DC with a global brief.

The grief was so great that the memorial event filled the Nepal International Convention Centre with associates and relatives rushing from all over the world. It was startling to see the 24

framed photographs displayed on stage, garlanded with marigolds and *katas*, each person prematurely leaving a life un-lived.

The gathering was an emotional haze of shocked faces and empty eyes, stunned friends and shattered families struggling to cope with their loss.

Lingering on the broad steps in the autumn sunshine after the prayers and speeches, there was much talk of tributes and memorials. Seeped in sadness, perhaps it helped us to feel that in some small way these snatched lives would not be wasted or forgotten.

I shared the idea of the scholarship in Mingma's memory with some trepidation at such a raw and delicate time, but his family agreed with gratitude, Ghana Gurung and other Lincoln graduates gave their support, and Sir Ed's Himalayan Trust pledged the first airfares from Nepal to New Zealand. The concept took shape, criteria evolved, and before long WWF had committed to cover the annual living expenses and Greater Himalayas Foundation took over the travel costs.

Thus out of the ashes above Ghunsa, the Mingma Norbu Sherpa Memorial Scholarship (MNSMS) was born and has flourished. In 2007 we selected the first two recipients, Anu and Salina, and since then a collection of remarkable candidates have studied natural resource management and tourism in New Zealand, returning to a range of roles throughout government, NGOs and private sector. The MNSMS arrangement has been extended to 2027, by which time twenty young Nepali men and women will have had the chance to follow in Mingma's footsteps and bring back their conservation knowledge to benefit Nepal.

This week with heavy hearts, the religious rites for Minister Rabindra Adhikari were completed in seven days instead of 13 "so that we can get on with his work". Weary with sorrow amidst the incense and chanting, Ang Tshiring Sherpa's family committed to continue his philanthropic work with a new foundation to honour Nepal's self-effacing tourism magnate. 🇳🇵



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The good news is that a brisk northwesterly wind has blown off most of the pollution away from Central Nepal, leading to clear sunny days. The unfiltered sunlight has raised daytime temperature to 25. It will drop to 23 over the weekend, and the minima will rise into the double digits for the first time this year. Some buildup will occur along the mountains into the weekend, Saturday will be mostly sunny in Kathmandu, and another westerly front sweeping in early next week.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 22° 9°	 23° 10°	 23° 11°

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A director from Kathmandu



US-based film-maker Pema Dhondup chooses to set his new thriller in Nepal's capital

Sewa Bhattarai

Given his multinational background, it was perhaps inevitable that it would be Pema Dhondup who would make one of the first truly global Nepali movie. Dhondup's family moved down from Tibet to Jomsom after the Chinese annexation, and from there to Himachal Pradesh and cities across India. He has been living in the United States for the past 15 years.

His movie *The Man from Kathmandu* was shot in Nepal and Los Angeles, features a stellar cast of Nepali actors like Karma, Neer Shah, Mithila Sharma, Anna Sharma and international stars including Gulshan Grover from India, and other actors from Puerto Rico and Spain.

"Many people from across the world travel to be a part of the terrorist group ISIS, even educated men from Western countries. But so far not a single one of them has been from Nepal," says Dhondup, "I wanted to explore the story of that one man among thousands. I wanted to find out what is it about Kathmandu that brings about this phenomenon."

The theme of his film is interaction between man and city, how Kathmandu changes the outlook of a radical half-Hindu-half-Muslim protagonist. Terrorism is just the backdrop to the plot, the real story is of a man's journey.

To be sure, making Kathmandu the setting for this action drama seems unusual, since Dhondup is not Nepali and does not speak the language. The film itself seems to be an effort on the part of the director to come to terms with his own identity and the definition of 'home'.

"You can say the quest has ended in a way for me, in the form of my American passport. But does that really define who I am?" he asks.

We interview Dhondup in the Labim Mall office of the film's producer Nakim Uddin of QFX. Despite his globe-trotting, the director says Kathmandu was the only city he could have filmed his story in. He has fond memories of Kathmandu from his childhood when he came here to visit family members, and in those days it was as exotic as visiting a foreign country.

"This is a place where identities and

cultures are always in flux. In any other city, you immediately know who is who, what a particular person's origins are. But in Kathmandu, walk down a street and you cannot figure out people. Temples, monasteries, churches and mosques flourish side by side. The city has accepted and absorbed all kinds of identities," he adds.

The theme of *The Man from Kathmandu* actually follows on from Dhondup's earlier movies where he explored the question of identity. His 2004 film *We're No Monks* was about a group of Tibetan boys coming out of their secluded existence to face the world. His documentaries have profiled members of the Tibetan diaspora scattered all over the world.

"It is very hard to make it in American filmdom, and not because of the reason you may be thinking," Dhondup explains. "Being brown, or of any race, doesn't matter as much as you might expect. But it matters how well you fit into the capitalistic, money machine of Hollywood studios. If you fit, you can make progress. If you don't, and you want to experiment you will have a hard time."

Still, years of working in Hollywood has given a certain rigour to his work which he feels is necessary for Nepali cinema to make it on the global stage. Many Nepali films are still formulaic stories, but Dhondup says that is not the real problem.

"No matter what kind of film you make, it has to be up to international technical standards, of sound, visuals, editing, otherwise we have everything in Nepal to make world class cinema, from good actors to good equipment. Using these, we can tap into huge market in India and China just next door," he says.

Whether or not *The Man from Kathmandu* will be 'world cinema from Nepal' and is of international standard remains to be seen. But Dhondup says it is already global in the sense that it meets technical specifications, and is set to be released in 50 countries after its Nepal premier this week. Dhondup hopes to continue working in Nepali cinema with producer Nakim Uddin, grooming and helping a new generation of Nepali filmmakers. 🇳🇵



Go online to watch trailer of *The Man from Kathmandu*. The movie will be in cinemas in Nepal from 15 March.

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PHOTOS: SEWA BHATTARAI



Gosain Kunda's 6 lakes in spring

Sikuma Rai
in Rasuwa

Gosain Kunda is a place to avoid in July-August when tens of thousands ascend to the holy waters at 4,380m for the Janai Purnima festival. But now is the time to go as the winter snow starts melting, the rhododendrons start coming out in full bloom, and the trails are relatively deserted. You will have the mountains, and the lakes, all to yourself.



AVIV ADHIKARI



Beat the crowd to Khayer Lake

Sewa Bhattarai
in Myagdi

The Ghorepani-Poon Hill Trek? That is so last century. Now that road access makes the scenic viewpoint easily reachable with a night stop, more and more trekkers venture on up the ridge to Tadapani, Khopra and the hidden holy Khayer Lake.

This extension to the traditional Poon Hill hike is worth it even for those who have done Ghorepani-Ghandruk Ridge before. Strike off the path through rhododendron forest at Tadapani to Mulde Peak for a overnight stop, and then it is another day's walk to Khopra. An alternative route from Ghorepani is to descend to Swanta and up again to gain the ridge.

The only warning to trekkers is to make sure there is a tea house as night falls, and to keep your eyes on the narrow trail because the views of Annapurna, Machapuchre and Dhaulagiri are so dramatic. Mulde Peak itself is about 700m higher than Poon Hill and beats the view from there by leaps and bounds. The view of a full moon rise from behind Machapuchre is an out of this world sight.

Khayer Lake with Annapurna I peering over the ridge (*left*) is a further 5-6 hours walk away with a small temple of Khayera Bharani sacred to the local Magar community. Hindu pilgrims from down valley also walk up to the lake on Janai Purnima festival in July-August.

During the monsoon, the slopes are ablaze with fresh flowers and you do not want to step on them

and spoil the beauty. Shepherds graze herds of sheep on the fresh young grass, and people buy sheep from them to sacrifice at the Khayer Bharani shrine.

At this time of year, the lake is partially frozen and the ground is still brown and barren. The trekking season has not started yet, so the trails are deserted.

“About twenty years ago when this area was uninhabited, we used to see big groups of foreigners trek up to the lake to camp and bring their own food and we saw the potential for a lodge here,” says Bhakta Tilija, who operates the lodge at Khopra Ridge. Word about the ethereal beauty of Khayer Lake is now spreading and in the trekking season the dozen rooms at Khopra are full, and so are the outhouses made for porters and unsuspecting Nepali guests.

Social entrepreneur and rural internet pioneer Mahabir Pun founded the lodge in 2007 with prize money from his Ramon Magsaysay award. The proceeds from the lodge go to a school in the nearby Paudwar village. He has set up a string of eight other lodges in the area, including in Mohare Danda.

“We know that we need to expand the facilities, and we are looking for funds to build another lodge,” Pun told us. “Mostly, tourism does not benefit the local community so much. We try to get the community to run the lodges and plough the profits locally.”

Proceeds from the lodges have been invested in building a 50KW micro hydropower, which supplies electricity to the lodges for lighting, heating and wifi routers. “Eventually we intend to make the lodges smoke-less zero carbon,” says Pun.

As the better travelled destinations become passé and remote ones become more attractive, Khopra Ridge (*pictured, above*) is poised to rival the more popular ABC Trek this spring.

And with the road access now making the Annapurna Circuit less pristine, Khopra and the neighbouring Mardi Ridge to the east will be attracting more visitors. The question is how soon the facility will manage to keep up with the influx. 🇳🇵

HOLY WATERS



Being so close to the city, the Gosain Kunda trek is a quick getaway for trekkers and pilgrims. The forest path may look easy at first, but it can be a grueling two-day climb from Dhunche at 2,090m on the highway.

Gosain Kunda can be either a destination, a stopover, or a traverse. As a destination, it can be done in a relaxed way in five days, giving oneself enough time to acclimatise and take in the views. It is better not to rush it.

Trekkers can also just stopover in Gosain Kunda and continue along a narrow path around a steep spur and descend to Langtang Valley two days away. As a traverse, hikers from Dhunche can cross the pass and descend to Helambu and back to Kathmandu. Or, if you really want to punish yourself, you can do that route counter-clockwise. The trails are now much more stable after the earthquake four years ago.

The simplest itinerary is to take a 5-7 hour bumpy jeep ride to Dhunche, and if you want to get away from the sound of trucks, head off immediately to Deurali for the night.

Those relatively more fit can climb on to Sing Gompa at 3,250m, a smallish settlement with tea houses and a monastery. It also has a government dairy outlet run by Chatra Bahadur Tamang where you can stock up on yak cheese.

After morning breakfast in Sing Gompa the trail goes up and up to Lauri Binayak (3,700m). More and more of the mesmerising vista of Ganesh Himal, Langtang Lirung, and Manaslu become visible as you gain altitude, and the scenery energises exhausted walkers. This time of year, rhododendron buds are popping open all over the forest.

The really steep bit comes after Lauri Binayak, and this is where the pace will get slower on the endless uphill. The tea shops at Gosain Kunda look deceptively close, and it is still another few hours of hard slog to reach the ridge to look down at Saraswati Kunda.

When you get there, you find that Gosain Kunda is not one but a series of lakes at over 4,380m. The air is thin and crystalline, and the mirror surface of the lakes reflect the

sunset in all its hues. The stunning views, the sacred energy of the spot, and the exhilaration of the climb will make even the most non-religious person slightly spiritual. For true Hindu, Buddhist or Animistic believers, however, this is a pilgrimage of a lifetime.

Those still not sated by the view can trek on to Lauribina La (4,610m) to inspect six other lakes, and the trip is rewarding and therapeutic as the lakes hidden behind ridges glisten like jewels in the sun.

There are 108 lakes in the Langtang National Park region but more are popping up due to global warming, and many do not even have names yet. 🇳🇵

DIVINE REFLECTIONS: Many people do not know that besides the main Gosain Kunda (*far left*) there are six or sacred lakes in the vicinity. They are (*from left to right, below*) Nilkantha, Barda Kunda, Rakta Kunda, Chandra Kunda, Ama Kunda and Surya Kunda.

SACRED WATERS



The trekking season has just started, and if you are wondering where to go, follow our reporters to Gosain Kunda of Rasuwa and Khayer Lake of Myagdi. If you want to beat the crowds of summer and monsoon, spring is the best time to go to these holy lakes.

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RAVI RAUT



RAVI RAUT



RAVI RAUT



SIKUMARAI

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A movie poster for 'Purano Bullet'. At the top, a red banner with white text reads 'OUR PICK'. Below it, the text 'LAKSHY ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS' is visible. The title 'पुरानो बुलेट' is written in large, stylized yellow Devanagari script. The central image shows three people: a man in the middle wearing a red bandana with a white lightning bolt and a denim vest with two yellow smiley face patches, flanked by two women. The background is dark and industrial. At the bottom, a dark blue banner with white text says 'Opens in Kathmandu on 15 March'. Below this, a paragraph of text describes the movie: 'Purano Bullet is about a guy who goes around in an old Bullet bike, and two girls who fall in love with him. While he is obviously dazzled by a rich and beautiful girl who hires him to extort her money back from goons, she also cannot forget his old friend. The movie picks up a low-class story of a jhileke protagonist who challenges the crusher industry. Directed by Bhisan Rai, it features Anoop Bikram Shahi, Barsha Siwakoti, and Mala Limbu.'

Only genuine devolution will douse separatism

Demands for greater and more rapid federalisation will persist despite C K Raut renouncing Madhes secession

The dramatic announcement in Kathmandu on Friday by C K Raut of the Alliance for Independent Madhes in a joint press conference with Prime Minister K P Oli that he was abandoning secessionism has thrown considerable uncertainty over Kathmandu's relations with Province 2 under the new federal set up.



GADFLY

David Seddon

Raut's announcement followed close on the heels of the RJP-N deciding to withdraw its support to the NCP government following the Kailali District Court sentencing lawmaker Resham Chaudhary to life imprisonment for the killings in the district in 2016 that sparked the Madhes movement.

However, here in Province 2 many people warned publicly and privately in interviews in Janakpur, Birganj and elsewhere during a recent visit that if the process of decentralisation and devolution did not accelerate, then there would still be support for another C K Raut.

As an avowed separatist, Raut had been subject to considerable attention over recent years, and was recently detained and obliged to appear before the courts on several occasions. On 7 March he was released from detention by the Supreme Court which thereby effectively overturned previous decisions by the Rautahat District



BIKRAM RAI

Court, the Birganj bench of the Janakpur High Court, and by the Supreme Court itself on 3 December. Despite his release, the Supreme Court had also told the Rautahat District Court to continue its investigation into his activities.

Raut already has a significant following in Province 2 even if he has now renounced his commitment to separatism. Further delays and impediments to the genuine democratic transfer of power and resources to the elected government of the province risks increasing the demands of those with more extremist views and consequently the likelihood of violent protest.

It is clear now, nearly two years after the elections for the federal,

provincial and local assemblies, that 'federalisation' poses major challenges in Nepal. However it also provides new opportunities for genuine decentralisation and for the devolution of powers, resources and responsibilities – if the central government is really prepared to pursue this agenda.

As one who was always opposed to the idea of 'state restructuring' to create a new layer of political representation and bureaucracy, while effectively demolishing the existing structure involving districts, village development committees and municipalities, I am not surprised by the difficulties involved in such radical transformation.


Most of the provinces and many

local authorities are currently complaining that, not only have financial and material resources not been effectively transferred as promised, but the necessary redeployment of personnel required to provide the human resources has not occurred and, even more importantly, the legislation required to implement the necessary changes to the structures of government and administration has not been passed.

In Province 2, this concern is robustly expressed by both provincial and local authorities. Local journalists, businesses and academics in a series of public discussions and private informal interviews in Birganj and Janakpur expressed similar views.

There was some sense of rivalry between the two communities of the new Province 2, in part regarding the allocation of powers and resources as between Birganj and the Bhojpurī-speaking areas in the west and Janakpur and the Maithilī-speaking areas of the east. The name of the Province is not yet decided, although most concede that it is likely that Janakpur will be officially named the capital or headquarters of Province 2.

There is surprising enthusiasm here regarding the greater responsibility at a more local level for the development of the Madhesi economy and society, even if all were agreed that the region remained politically marginal and economically underdeveloped, with generally poor access to health and education facilities, poor human development indicators and major issues of inequality and social discrimination.

There seems to be a determination on the part of those in office to make the most of the new powers and resources they still hoped would be made available to transform the region and achieve improvements. But there is also concern and anger at the slow progress of decentralisation and devolution. This is the only province which has a government and assembly dominated by politicians who are not linked to the newly created CPN, and they are proud of this distinction. 

David Seddon is Director of Critical Faculty, author and co-author of many publications on Nepal, and currently writing a three-part book on 'Nepal and the Great War'.

A festive advertisement for Khukri XXX Rum. The background is dark with a chalkboard texture, decorated with colorful stars and snowflakes hanging from the top. In the center, a bottle of Khukri XXX Rum stands next to a glass mug filled with a red, steaming hot rum punch. A cinnamon stick is placed in the glass. To the right of the glass, a list of ingredients is written in a white, handwritten-style font, with arrows pointing to the glass: Khukri XXX Rum, Cinnamon Powder, Lemon Juice, Star Anise, Cardamom, Hot Water, Honey, and Clove. At the bottom left, there is a decorative orange slice and some spices. The entire image is framed by a white dotted line with colorful stars and snowflakes.

Wed before birth



The play *Garbha Chhita* staged by Karnali Arts Centre at the Nepal International Theatre Festival 2019 starts with young, unmarried women in white blouses and skirts singing *bhaili* songs. The Festival concluded last week, but some performances have been extended for ten more days at Mandala Theater in Kathmandu. The play is written, directed and acted by theatre artists from the Karnali, and is a rare opportunity for Kathmandu to observe the culture of this remote mountain district.

The title *Garbha Chhita* refers to the practice of arranging the marriage of children even before they are born. Pampha is one such woman, whose wedding was fixed by her father when she was still in her mother's womb. Her father cannot back out from the marriage later, even after he finds out that the groom has a speech defect. The focus of the play is how Pampha's life

is going to waste between her husband and her Dalit lover Chauro Damai who is unable to act on his love.

The play starts when Pampha comes back to visit her parents for the first time after her marriage, and goes *bhaili* singing with friends when young unmarried girls stay out of their homes together for several days, singing and having fun together. They go around to their neighbours, collect rice, beat it, and ask male friends to join them. They then make plans to meet and sing *deuda* songs together at nights when they express their attraction towards each other. Even a married Pampha joins in, wearing white like everyone else, and not the black and red of married women like her mother.

Director Hira Bijuli Nepali explains: "Unmarried women wore white, and so did women who did not want to appear married. Since Pampha is not happy in her marriage, she too wears white."

Single-at-heart, Pampha receives a lot of proposals, but she deflects them all because she is in love with Chauro, her father's slave. But Chauro cannot marry her even after she is pregnant. He looks at the cowshed he sleeps in and knows he cannot bring Pampha there. Even if he did, society would not accept it. The dialogue between Pampha and Chauro is a powerful, portraying not just the restrictions placed on free love, but also by the caste system. The place of a slave in the social hierarchy becomes clear when one dies, and his owner says: "Go throw away his corpse. I can neither eat his flesh nor grind his bones. What use is he to me now?"

Garbha Chhita brings Karnali to the Kathmandu stage a full decade after *Karnali Dakhin Bagdo Chha* made waves in the Nepali theatre scene. Hira Bijuli Nepali acted in that play, and as a youngster from Mugu was fascinated by modern theatre while in Sunil Pokharel's Aarohan Gurukul.

Nepali saw modern theatre as a medium to preserve and pass on Karnali's traditional culture. He uses local stories, costumes, and jewelry for the play, and even the plot is based on a local folk tale.

"Though the medium is modern theatre, our real concern is preserving Karnali's rich cultural heritage," says Nepali. "We want to pass it on to the next generation. Theatre is a powerful way to do so."

Sewa Bhattarai

Garbha Chhita
5:00 PM, Mandala Theatre
Until 17 March



INSTANT STORY: Prime Minister KP Oli and his wife Radhika Shakya participate in a walkathon organised by Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu on Thursday to mark World Kidney Day.



UNITED NATION: President Bidya Devi Bhandari met UN Secretary General António Guterres in New York on Tuesday and exchanged views on Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Nepal-UN cooperation.



KUMUSTA PO: Philippines Ambassador to Nepal Teresita C Caza paid a farewell call on Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali at Singha Darbar on Wednesday.



NUN THE LESS: French Ambassador to Nepal François-Xavier at an event marking a course on menstruation and personal hygiene with 72 nuns at Kunsang Choling monastery in Kathmandu on Wednesday.



GOOD MOVES: Indian Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri after a Kathakali dance performance at the Soaltee Crowne Plaza in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

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UJYAALONLINE

Biplav is just following the footsteps of mentors

Milan Timilsina in
Ujyaaloonline.com, 13 March

Ujyaalo Online

KP Oli rose to prominence with the Jhapa movement. Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) gained political clout with the Maoist war. Ram Bahadur Thapa (Badal) and Netra Bikram Chand (Biplav) at one point were the drivers of the Maoist movement under Prachanda's leadership.

In short, all our leaders in power today have violent political pasts. They became rulers by taking up arms -- Biplav is just following the footsteps of his comrades.

In his heyday, Prachanda had used the same tactics as Biplav today. But he eventually realised that war was a dead-end, and he could attain his political objectives through peaceful means. After the ceasefire, he championed the peace process and won the 2008 Constituent Assembly election with a landslide. The ballot won over the bullet. It was proof that non-violent

struggle is more effective.

After the electoral alliance in 2017 and party unity, Oli, Prachanda and Badal are now part of the ruling Nepal Communist Party with a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Baburam Bhattarai and Mohan Baidya (Kiran) broke away from the Maoist party earlier, but are following peaceful politics their own way.

Biplav, however, is taking the country back to armed struggle, reminding Nepalis of a bloody war many had forgotten. Bombs are going off again because Biplav now wants the same power and the privileges as his comrades, and is using the same methods they employed.

He has ignored the government's frequent calls for dialogue, and the ruling party on Tuesday banned its violent activities. But it is unclear what kind of activities and under which law they are going to be prosecuted. It was this ambiguity that prevented the police from

taking action against Biplav's cadre. The ruling party is acting like an older brother miffed at the younger sibling for disobeying him.

The former comrades are trying to outsmart each other, and the conflict is particularly worrying as the people and the country await the promised stability and prosperity delayed by the ruinous 10-year-long war and equally long peace process.

As former aides, Prachanda and Badal should have a good knowledge regarding the strength of the faction and how to treat them. Oli himself should have an idea or two to bring the opposing communist party to mainstream politics. If they can convince CK Raut to give up Madhes separatism they sure can change an insider who shares their ideology. It is vital they bring Biplav in before the situation gets out of hand.

For his part, Biplav needs to give up violence. It does not work. No one has stopped them from joining mainstream politics.

Raut in cartoons

The dramatic agreement between the government and CK Raut in which the Madhesi activist renounced separatism won much acclaim on social media. But cartoonists were not quite sure which side had given in. A selection:



Dahal and Oli: "Force landing!"
C K Raut: "...safe landing."

नागरिक

Deven in Nagarik, 13 March



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Rabi Mishra in Naya Patrika, 9 March

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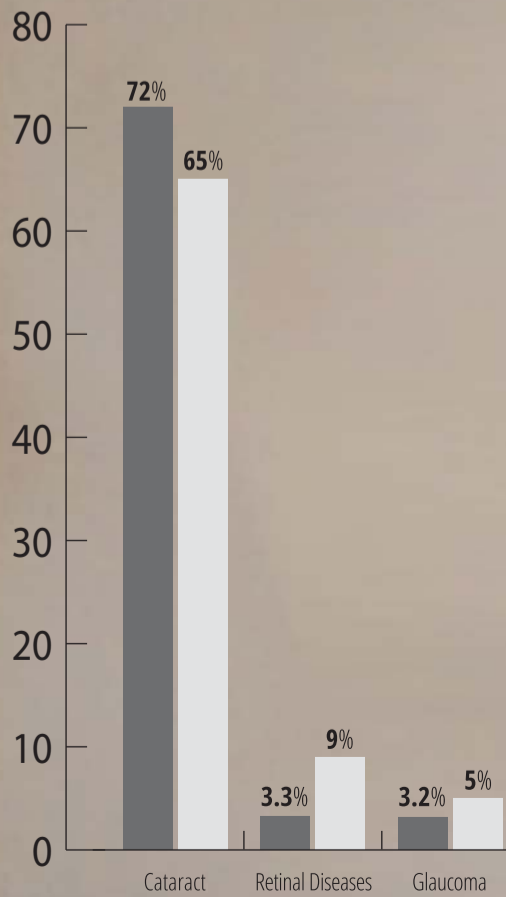
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Nepal’s far-sighted eye care

Nepal is an international leader in eye care, but it needs state support to sustain the work into the future

Sonia Awale

Despite a decade long conflict, the absence of local government for 20 years, instability and bad governance, Nepal has taken dramatic strides in improving the health of its citizens. And it is in eye care that the achievement has been most impressive.

Thirty years ago, the Nepal Blindness Survey showed that 0.8% of the population was blind. Nepal’s population then was 15 million, which means 118,000 people were blind. Cataracts was the cause in 72% of the cases, and trachoma, a bacterial infection of the eye, was the second leading cause of blindness. Poor eye-sight and blindness due to Vitamin A were also prevalent. Most of these were preventable or curable.

Women were found to be 1.35 times more likely to get cataracts because of the detailed oriented nature of their work including farming.

Today, the prevalence of blindness has decreased to 0.3% out of a population of 29 million, which means only 87,000 are visually impaired. But most of them are blind still because of cataracts. Last year Nepal became the first country in South Asia to eliminate trachoma. Cataracts and other preventable cases can now be treated much earlier with modern surgery.

“The quality of community cataract surgery here is one of the best among developing countries and people are coming forward for treatment because they trust us,” said Sanduk Ruit, Nepal’s world-renowned eye doctor who pioneered small incision cataract surgery. (*See adjoining article.*)

But modern lifestyles and changing dietary habits have brought new dangers: diabetic retinopathy is on the rise, so is glaucoma. An ageing population also means cataract is still common, as is macular degeneration among elderly Nepalis.

The most challenging ailment, however, is visual impairment due to refractive error which is increasing alarmingly among children, and at a much higher rate in urban areas. A 2008 study found that one in five school-going children in Kathmandu were short sighted and need to wear glasses. In remote rural areas, many do not even know they need spectacles or cannot afford them.

Ruit’s team at Tilganga and the group Nepal Netra Jyoti Sangh are now trying to test and treat the eye-sight of school children

district-by-district. Free spectacles are provided, and complicated cases are referred to hospitals.

“Our goal is to reach all school-going children in Nepal within five years,” said Sailesh Mishra of Netra Jyoti. “This needs regular monitoring and follow-up if children are using glasses or not, and we need to educate people about eye diseases.”

While there has not been a study in Nepal to directly link the increased incidence of visual impairment with the use of mobile phones, computers and reading, research in other countries have shown a correlation.

Nepali eye specialists and institutions have not just addressed blindness in Nepal, but have been world leaders in innovative interventions. Sanduk Ruit’s Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology has been exporting intraocular lens for cataract surgery at \$5 apiece since 1995. Elsewhere in the world it costs \$200. Tilganga is now equipped to also perform retinal transplant.

Eye hospitals in Lahan, Hetauda and Kathmandu now treat not just patients from Nepal, but also provide affordable cataract and other eye operations for patients from India, and even Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Tilganga is an international centre of excellence for ophthalmology training, and its surgeons have been conducting camps in Bhutan, Mongolia, North Korea, Ethiopia and Kenya. Much of this is credited to non-government initiatives by the likes of Sanduk Ruit and pioneer activist Ram Prasad Pokhrel.

“One of our most important achievements was to provide eye care outside the government, creating high quality community hospitals at the grassroots that run on the social entrepreneurship model with highly motivated professional staff,” explained Ruit, whose community eye centres and hospitals are autonomous and self-sustaining.

But with its Vision 2020 goal to eliminate avoidable blindness now only a year away, Nepal needs to develop more specialists and infrastructure. Some experts say the non-profits have done all they can, it is now time for the government to step in for the last push.

“Nepal is far ahead of others in the region in term of eye care, we have reduced blindness, have sound modern surgical technology that has been recognised internationally,” said Hukum Pokhrel of Netra Jyoti. “It is now time the government included eye care into a more equitable health package that is sustainable into the future.”



GOPEN RAI

The visionary Sanduk Ruit

It was on the death bed of his young sister that Sanduk Ruit vowed to grow up to be a doctor so others like her did not have to die needlessly. Later, at a surgical camp he found his true calling after observing the magic of restored eyesight.

There were many such instances that turned this boy from a family of salt traders in Olanchungola on the Tibet border into a world-renowned surgeon. Reading Ruit’s new biography, *The Barefoot Surgeon*, we find that it was sheer determination, hard work and perseverance that helped him overcome many obstacles on the way to rising from a remote village in Nepal to become an internationally acclaimed doctor.

“I want this book to create awareness about how we alleviated blindness in Nepal, and how this experience can be fine-tuned and replicated in other parts of the world,” Ruit said in an interview, ahead of the launch of the soon to be released book.

Australian journalist Ali Gripper recounts how his mother named Sanduk (sky dragon), and the family was so poor that Ruit lost siblings to preventable infections like diarrhoea and tuberculosis. At boarding school in Darjeeling the young Ruit was bullied mercilessly, he spent hours with lab animals as a diligent student pulling all-nighters at King George’s Medical University in Lucknow, then operated on rhesus eyes in ophthalmology class at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi.

Much of the book describes Ruit’s years as a junior eye surgeon trying to shake up the government health system in Nepal to introduce intraocular cataract surgery. He is rebuffed by seniors who see his motivation and commitment as threats. Gripper follows Ruit’s transformation into a young man with a vision to rid the world of avoidable blindness.

Along the way, Ruit is mentored by famous Australian eye surgeon Fred Hollows, and much later American climber-surgeon Geoffrey Tabin becomes a protégé. Both individuals play a significant part in expanding Ruit’s transformative work, and leave a profound impact on the doctor. Ruit is known for pioneering the technique of small incision low-cost cataract surgery which he has used to restore the sight of more than 120,000 people so far in Nepal, China, North Korea, Ethiopia and other countries. He has won many accolades including the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2006, and last year one of India’s highest civilian honours, the Padma Shri.

As he interacts with patients in Kathmandu, he shows extraordinary kindness and humility for a doctor so famous. Ruit tells Gripper that he learned early in his career that giving back eyesight to people meant giving them back their life. Ruit’s own life is not without personal tragedies,



and the book is full of heartfelt moments. But it is as much about progress in eye care in Nepal as it is about Ruit.

“Curing blindness is Nepal’s great success story,” said Ruit, who established the Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology in Kathmandu in 1994. At that time the prevalence of blindness in Nepal was 0.8%, with cataract the major cause. Today, blindness is down to 0.3%, despite the population having doubled, and Ruit is operating much earlier with improved surgery on contracts.

The world-class eye centre is also a training ground for young surgeons from around the world. Tilganga runs on the social entrepreneurship model with a sliding scale payment system where those who can afford treatment pay more than the less privileged.

“Instead of investing time and money on mega projects, we should focus on developing small, self-sustaining grassroot independent community hospitals with qualified staff, and that is the most important thing we have achieved in eye care in Nepal,” said Ruit, who has opened eye centres in all 77 districts, with community eye hospitals based on the Tilganga model in Hetauda, Biratnagar, Dhangadi, Nepalganj and Lumbini.

The Barefoot Surgeon is being translated into Nepali by FinePrint, but it is not the first book about Ruit. *Second Suns* by David Oliver Relin, who also wrote *Three Cups of Tea*, was about Ruit and Tabin’s quest to restore sight to the world’s poorest. But following an allegation of plagiarism in an earlier work, Relin committed suicide in 2013 after finishing the manuscript of the *Second Suns*.

For the new book, Gripper followed Ruit’s surgery team for three years in India, Bhutan and Burma. In Nepal she joined Ruit’s eye camps in Trisuli, Mustang, Hetauda and Solu Khumbu to see people recover their eyesight. She noticed that Ruit preferred to work barefoot ‘allowing him complete control of the pedal under the table that pulls focus on his microscope’.

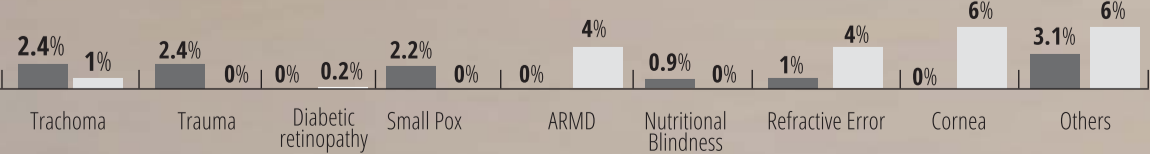
The book recounts Ruit’s vision for Tilganga, the rapport he shares with Bhutan’s Queen grandmother, the eye camp in North Korea where minders followed their every move, his meeting with the Dalai Lama, the challenges in manufacturing low-cost intraocular lens in Kathmandu, and a treacherous journey to Mustang for a field camp.

There will be tears of joy and of sadness, elation and wonder as you turn the pages of *The Barefoot Surgeon*. This is a moving portrayal of a great Nepali whose work has transcended borders to transform many, many lives.

The Barefoot Surgeon: Inspirational story of Dr Sanduk Ruit, the eye surgeon giving sight and hope to the world’s poor
By Ali Gripper
Allen & Unwin, 2018
305 pages
A\$32.99

Breakdown of the causes of blindness in Nepal

■ 1981 (NEPAL BLINDNESS SURVEY 1981)
■ 2012 (NEPAL NETRA JYOTI SANGH)

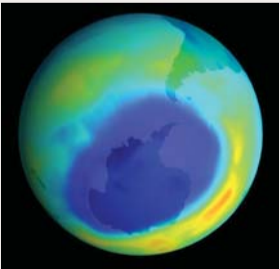


Ozone and eyes

The ozone layer in the outer atmosphere filters out harmful ultra-violet rays of the sun from reaching Earth’s surface. There has been a steady depletion of ozone, especially over the Southern Hemisphere, due to chemicals called CFCs used as refrigerants. This has caused a rise in the incidence of skin cancer, but also of eye disorders. People living southern Argentina, Australia and New Zealand have been known to suffer more cataracts because of the solar UV-B radiation.

A 2005 study by the American Journal of Epidemiology found out that ozone depletion would result in a 20% rise in the number of cataract cases by 2050. Ultraviolet rays is also responsible for the onset of cataract at an earlier age. It is not just people in the southern hemisphere, but ozone thinning increases the susceptibility of people living in high altitude areas like the Tibetan Plateau and Nepal to cataracts. Apart from cataract, UV radiation can also cause photokeratitis (inflammation of the cornea), eye cancer, conjunctivitis, pterygium, conjunctivitis, acute solar retinopathy, and degeneration of the macula. Long term exposure to the harmful rays can cause permanent damage to cornea, lens and retina.

As a result of the 1985 Montreal Protocol to phase out CFCs, the ozone hole over Antarctica has started to shrink, but exposure to UV B radiation will be seen till the end of the century. HFCs that replaced CFCs in refrigerators and air conditioners are very potent greenhouse gases that contributes to the global warming. Doctors say, minimising the time spent outdoors especially in the southern hemisphere and at high altitudes is a useful precaution.





100%
WHEAT
VODKA

8848
IMPORTED

MADE IN THE HIMALAYAS

8848

VODKA

FIVE TIMES
DISTILLED

5

IMPORTED

WORLD'S PUREST VODKA

NO SUGAR SYRUP, GLYCERIN OR ADDITIVES ADDED

Shut up and shut down

My latest assessment is that at least some of you are reading these words, as we speak. There is proof. How else does one explain that three weeks after this very Backside Column bemoaned the fact that Nepal’s revolutionaries were going soft, Comrade Big Plop starts setting bombs off and declaring bunds to show that he still has fire in his belly?

The country is finally back on the right track. We have restored our commitment to radical transformation, let 100 flowers bloom, smash the four olds, show that a journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step, and ensure that political power comes out of the barrel of a whiskey cask. After all, as the Comrades said, “Extortion is a fundamental human right.” (You think I just made that up? Think again.)

When lane-dane, band-fand and tod-fod don’t work, then revolutionaries throughout history have had to resort to bunds, chukka-jams and hurt-all. The whole idea is to bring the whole world to a standstill as Big Blob did on Thursday by shutting down Nepal, Facebook and Instagram. The idea is not allow any work to be done. Why? That is a very good question.

The grabberment messes up everything it does, so by forcing it to not do anything the Maoists have reduced the chances of it doing something wrong. By the same token, the chances of our rulers making correct decisions are so remote that the semi-underground comrades have rightly concluded that it is a much better idea to have them

just sit at home and not lift a finger. That way the likelihood of someone somewhere wrecking something is greatly diminished. Imagine the number of blunders that were avoided, kickbacks that did not transpire, bribes that were not taken, just by shutting down the country for one day. The savings to the exchequer runs into the billions.

Through trial and error over the past 50 years we in Nepal have finally hit on the right formula for governance in our country: it is better to allow our rulers to goof off than to have them make decisions of national importance. The thing is, though, there are still workaholics out there who refuse to sit idly by, and need to be forced to desist from decision-making. It is every Nepali’s patriotic duty to find creative ways to do nothing in the coming months. Some ideas:

- Owners of cars older than 20 years who are banned from the streets can protest the rising concentration of oxygen in the Valley’s air and demand residents get their normal daily dose of diesel soot particles in the 2.5-10 micron range.
- The alliance of seven revolting student unions can declare five-day Valley Bunds to demand that the government make available more tyres for their flaming street barricades.
- Fuel tankers can block all highways to claim a 15% increase in evaporation compensation due to global warming.
- The government can also shut down Kathmandu by ensuring that main roads are no longer motorable, the sidewalks are booby-trapped with open manholes.



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DENMARK

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WITH LIMITED EDITION HOLI CANS

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