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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

YAM BETWEEN 3 BOULDERS

As a ceremonial head of state, President Bidya Devi Bhandari's weeklong visit to China that began on Wednesday is largely symbolic. In the rarefied atmosphere in which Himalayan geopolitics is conducted, however, symbols do matter.

President Bhandari is attending the Second Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Forum in Beijing on 27 April, and by sending a ceremonial head of state instead of the chief executive, Nepal has tried to soothe Indian sensitivities, given that Delhi takes a dim view of the initiative.

At the same time, Beijing has accorded importance to the trip by elevating it to a state visit, one in which President Bhandari and President Xi Jinping will officially sign the Transit and Transportation Protocol, allowing Nepal access to ports on China's eastern seaboard.

Ever since the transit agreement was first mooted, and after China's symbolic supply of 1,000 tons of petroleum during the 2015 Indian blockade, Nepal has been chomping at the bit to find alternative routes to the sea.

Although President Bhandari will be among 40 other world leaders and representatives from 150 countries at the event, she will have bilateral talks that will focus on the proposal for multi-modal, China-Nepal telecommunications, roads, railways and air connectivity.

For most of its history, Nepal was protected from the south by thick malarial jungles and from the north by the great barrier of the Himalaya. The jungles were cleared and malaria eradicated in the 1960s. Meanwhile, the first trans-Himalayan highway was built in the 1960s through Kodari, and the Tibet Railroad will arrive in Kerung, 50km north of Kathmandu, by next year. There are now motorable roads to the Chinese border from the south at Hilsa, Korala, Rasuwa and Kodari, and soon many more will be added. There are now more trans-Himalayan flights per week from Kathmandu to Chinese cities than there are to Indian airports.

All these links will help Nepal capitalise on its location between two of the world's economic powers. Nepal will benefit from trade, have more transit options, and smoother transport will boost tourism. However, this closer connectivity coincides with a sharper geopolitical polarisation between the United States and China on the one hand, and between China and India on the other. To paraphrase our founding king, Nepal is now a yam between three boulders.

Some of the shadow boxing has been playing out in Kathmandu, with the American Ambassador publicly urging Nepal to avoid the 'debt trap' (without naming China). The Chinese ambassador countered this week with

op-eds in English and Nepali newspapers in which she categorically denied that the BRI was a geo-strategic tool for China to push its interests.

Three recent books about geopolitics in the region, while dealing only tangentially with Nepal, reveal some lessons for Kathmandu's foreign policy establishment about how to conduct this triangular balancing act between India, China and the United States.

India at the Global High Table, by former State Department India experts Teresita and Howard Schaffer, is a must-read for anyone trying to understand and cope with Indian diplomats whose characteristic haughtiness and ultra-sensitivity about sovereignty arise from the need to be taken seriously despite the country's persistent and pervasive poverty.

Nepal has to understand India's quest for regional primacy in South Asia and its ambition to be at the global high table. China is India's largest trading partner in goods, and we have seen that while Beijing will use

Nepal's mistrust about India to its advantage, it will not jeopardise its economic ties with India over Nepal. As long as India does not side with western backers of free Tibet in Nepal, Beijing is willing to let Kathmandu be

in New Delhi's orbit. Nepal's policy-makers may also want to read B M Jain's *China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia: Myth Or Reality?*, which looks at how Beijing has turned the overwhelming dependence on India of South Asia's smaller countries to its advantage by

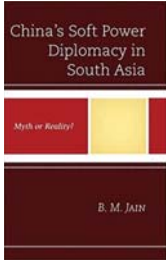
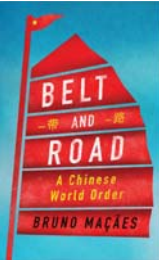
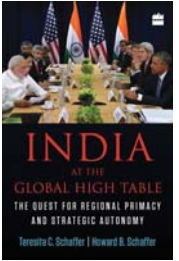
using economic clout and socio-cultural linkages. The conclusion is that as far as Beijing is concerned, soft and hard power is one and the same thing.

For an introduction to how the BRI dovetails with China's long-term global strategy, Portuguese academic Bruno Maçães' book *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, is essential reading. The fact that India does not figure much in the book shows just how little importance Beijing attaches to whether India joins or refuses to join the BRI. But it also makes clear that the BRI is just President Xi's branding exercise for pipelines that were already in the pipeline, as it were.

Since everyone is essentially looking out for themselves, Nepal also needs to put its own national interest first and not be swayed by outside pressure to join this or that club. Will we really benefit from the Tibet Railroad being extended to Kathmandu, or through Nepal to India? How can we use connectivity to increase trade (read: exports), reduce our trade imbalance and strengthen our sovereignty?

'Prosperity' sounds great as a slogan, but how can we get the Indian and Chinese locomotives to pull us in the same direction?

'Prosperity' sounds great as a slogan, but how can we get the Indian and Chinese locomotives to pull us in the same direction?



10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In a front page analysis titled 'Hand-to-hand' in issue #448 of 24-30 April 2009, columnist Prashant Jha reported on Maoist Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's efforts to oust the Nepal Army chief. We will see in a subsequent issue how this led to Dahal's downfall. Ten years later, Dahal is headed for resurrection after PM Oli's promise to step down. Excerpt:

President Ram Baran Yadav's stern advice to Purshpa Kamal Dahal to work for political consensus played a part in the Maoists taking a step back from an escalating row with the army chief. Yadav is said to have warned of the consequences if an ethnic candidate for the chief's position is bypassed. General Chhatraman Singh Gurung would head the army if Katawal retires on schedule in September. If he is sacked, General Kul Bahadur Khadka, who is understood to be lobbying hard for the job, would take over.

As expected, there is pressure from India to leave the army alone. Delhi had assured the army that its chain of command, structure and interests would be protected in return for support during the peace process in the last three years. It sees the institution as the last bulwark against the Maoists, and sent word to Dahal there would be costs if he went ahead.



ONLINE PACKAGES



A BURNING SENSATION

Watch Sangita Magar and her mother Chameli speak about the horrific acid attack on the girl and the physical pain and mental stress it caused. Learn how Sangita overcame depression to turn her tragedy into a triumph and help other survivors of acid attacks. Story: [page 14-15](#).



SNAIL MAIL

Nepal Post is a shadow of its former self as people turn away from writing letters to using social messaging sites. *Nepali Times* posted a registered letter to itself, but it hasn't arrived after 7 weeks. Join us on a trip into the innards of the General Post Office. Story: [page 8-9](#).



EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Go online to watch how the new Nepali board game, Samrajya, is played. It takes more than luck to win, and players get to learn about Kathmandu Valley's history, culture and landmarks. Even if you lose, you win. Story: [page 7](#).



ANITA TULADHAR

In this month's Lightroom Conversation, writer Anita Tuladhar talks to Muna Gurung about the craft of writing small stories, the politics of publishing books, darknesses, and how to overcome them. Story: [page 11](#).

EARTHQUAKE

The Editorial (Lessons Unlerant, #956) is much appreciated. However we need to really understand the actual requirements of retrofitting and what is really involved in this process. We need to ensure that retrofit solutions in Nepal are done properly with forensic studies, soil studies and a review mechanism. Safety first always.

Ananta Baidya

SAD REALITY

Great write-up but a sad reality ('Nepal is being loved to death', Anil Chitrakar, #956). Nepal is just want someone to do it for them as they are hooked up to that kind of system. We also choose the same no-good leaders again and again.

Sunir Gurung

WHAT'S TRENDING

Nepali Art Going Places

by [Kunda Dixit](#)
The biggest ever international exhibition of Nepali contemporary art has opened in Europe's foremost ethnographic museum, Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, and will go on till November. The review piece was widely shared. Go online to watch how Nepali artists are fusing cultural metaphors with modern techniques, giving our vernacular a new spin.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook



Lessons Unlearnt

Editorial
Another earthquake anniversary. Another occasion to mark lessons not learnt from 25 April 2015. This hard-hitting editorial created waves on Twitter, and was a reminder not to forget how vulnerable Nepal is to The Next Big One.

t Most popular on Twitter

Nepal is being loved to death

by [Anil Chitrakar](#)
Every Nepali knows that one day the free ride we are getting will come to an end. Till then we are all willing to play victim, and we are getting really good at it too. Most readers agreed with Chitrakar's sentiment and the article generated vigorous discussion. Visit [nepalitimes.com](#) to join the online discussion.

“ ” Most commented

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Take a video tour of the largest international exhibition of contemporary Nepali art at the @WeltmuseumWien and listen to artists and curators discuss the significance of Nepali art on the global stage. Read story by [@kundadixit](#) and full video : <http://bit.ly/Nepali-art-going-places-nt> ...

Ngima Sherpa @NNgimat
Feeling good to see great things happening here and there.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The Supreme Court recently gave a controversial verdict regarding Ncell's taxes. The government or Parliament have taken no measure to establish criteria of taxing offshore transactions with implications in Nepal, which is appalling, writes [@the3rdbranch](#) ...

Prakash Moktan @PRAMOK
It's just tip of the iceberg....if you dig deeper there is more to it on the story..before it was resold to the current stake holder....

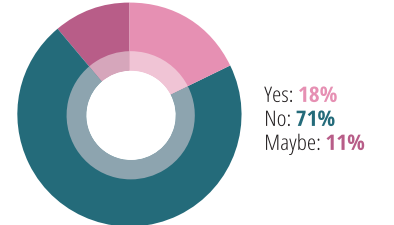
Neupane, P. @PrashidhdaN
Great read. The question also arises when the holding company offshore has multiple businesses in Nepal and other countries and decides to sell its shares. We need stronger regulations before accepting foreign investments.



Weekly Internet Poll #957

Q. Have we learnt our lesson from the 2015 earthquake?

Total votes: 112



Weekly Internet Poll #958
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com


Q. Does Nepal's postal system have a future?



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Life in the time of tornadoes

Climate change carries with it huge costs that we cannot afford to pay

This is the season for windstorms, and even though the whirlwind that hit the central Tarai on 31 March killing 28 people was a freak event, it was not the first to touch down in our part of the world.

Novelist Amitabh Ghosh begins his 2016 non-fiction book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, with his personal encounter with a funnel-shaped tornado that struck New

Delhi on 17 March 1978. It killed 70 and injured 700 in just 2 minutes.

Ghosh writes that the Indian Meteorological Service said at the time: 'This was, in effect, the first tornado to

hit Delhi—and indeed the entire region—in recorded meteorological history.'

Birganj-based journalist Chandra Kishore remembers a similar devastating vortex that destroyed parts of his Tarai village in the mid-1980s. In Pheta on the night of 31 March, most of the deaths were due to poorly built structures, not the actual tornado, proving once again that it is shoddily-built houses that kill people not natural events.

When Ghosh encountered the tornado in 1978 in New Delhi, the Earth's atmosphere had 334ppm (parts per million) of carbon dioxide. In the 19th century, before the industrial age, it was 280ppm. By 2019, the CO2 concentration in the atmosphere has increased to 411ppm, most of it because of fossil fuel emissions.

With so much carbon in the atmosphere, climate change is no longer something that will happen in a distant future — it is happening now. Events like the Tarai tornado are our new normal and highlight the growing impacts of an erratic climate and its rising social and economic cost. No country is immune, all countries have to adapt and also cut their emissions by switching to renewable energy. (*See story, alongside*).

Nepal's Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM) collects wind speed data at the airport to assist flight operations, for academic assessment of wind energy potentials and for designing buildings and infrastructure. Wind hazards have always been there, but death and destruction of the scale that Pheta witnessed has not been part of our understanding.

As an under-budgeted and under-staffed entity, the DHM has the lowest priority from the Nepali state, preventing it from becoming a repository of climate knowledge. As one of the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, Nepal needs to upgrade its weather forecasting and early warning.

The Pheta tragedy revealed a major gap in the DHM's ability to 'nowcast' weather, the process of warning people about what is likely to happen in the next few hours at a spatial resolution of a few square kilometres. The department needs to be able to provide local, short-term forecasting, perhaps by collaborating with others like Tribhuvan University's Physics Department.

The twister also exposed gaps in our disaster management institutions. Nepal's 2017 Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act has replaced the 1982 Natural Calamity Relief Act, so there are now 15 legal tools and guidelines covering the entire disaster cycle. However, these have not been contextualised for our local situation, where the understanding of national policies and laws is still limited.

The Ministry of Home Affairs held a meeting of the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Committee on 5 April, chaired by the Home Affairs Minister himself. It issued a 13-point decision to expedite relief and increase preparedness for the coming monsoon season.

Province 2 has also taken a number of decisions including one to build prefabricated houses for the Pheta victims within four months. The government in Kathmandu, however, decided to assign the Nepal Army to rebuild the damaged houses. The army played a commendable role in rescue and relief efforts during the 2015 earthquake and in other disasters, but it is worth asking why it needs to be involved in reconstruction of private homes.

The Nepal Army is there to defend our borders and be the first responder in a disaster; building houses is not its job. Reconstruction requires working iteratively with local governments to support victims in self-recovery and building back safer without reproducing past vulnerabilities. The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) already has a track record of helping earthquake-affected families build houses, and it could have easily been assigned that responsibility in Pheta.

Such complex institutional dynamics often create more constraints than solutions, at a time when there are new challenges due to climate change-induced disasters. Nepal's national, provincial and local governments, and society by and large, do not have the necessary wherewithal to adapt and are the least prepared. The poor are the most vulnerable, and as Pheta proved, are likely going to pay the highest price. 🇳🇵

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



CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

Ajaya Dixit

Once seen as a quaint option, electric vehicles promise ecological and economic benefits

Sonia Awale

Residents of Kathmandu by now know that they breathe some of the dirtiest air in the world. But unlike elsewhere, that awareness has not created the public opinion pressure to force politicians to act.



Investing in renewables

Frank Rijsberman of the Korea-based Global Green Growth Institute was recently in town to sign an agreement with the government and Sajha Yatayat on electric mobility. *Nepali Times* asked him about the future of electric public transport globally and in Nepal.

Nepali Times: Why is your Global Green Growth Institute so involved in electric mobility around the world?

Frank Rijsberman: We are a young intergovernmental organisation set up in 2012 with 32 member countries and 20 more in the process of becoming members, like Nepal. We help governments plan green growth, a model of economic development that is both more environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. In Nepal, we helped the government develop a national electric mobility strategy, and we have also helped members mobilise \$1 billion in climate finance.

Up to 35,000 Nepalis lose their lives annually due to diseases caused by air pollution. One in every 10 people in Kathmandu suffers from chronic lung diseases like COPD, bronchitis and emphysema. The average life expectancy of Nepalis is reduced by over two and one-half years because of air pollution.

"We have seen that electric public transportation can improve public health by reducing pollution," says Sajha Yatayat Executive Director Bhushan Tuladhar. "Recent advances in electric transport provide the solution. What is sorely lacking in Nepal is political will, long-term commitment and strategic planning for electric mobility."

Indeed, Nepal's policy makers no longer have an excuse to do nothing about air pollution: they can follow the example of China and India and announce a national campaign to switch to electric public transport.

India is rolling out 7,000 electric buses this year. The Delhi Metro is now powered by solar energy and plans to go fully solar by 2021.

All 16,000 public buses in Shenzhen are electric. China has replaced all its petrol two-wheelers with electric motorcycles and scooters.

Global demand for electric vehicles is rising rapidly, and manufacturers are having a hard time meeting demand, mainly because of the shortage of lithium ion batteries. The sale of electric

We are also working to make cities greener by managing water, sanitation and solid waste. I met with Nepal's minister of forests and environment and he asked us if we could start working on forests as our next priority. We have done similar work in Indonesia and Myanmar, and that is likely to be our next priority here.

Do you see Asian countries moving towards renewable energy?

It is challenging to switch from big investments in coal and nuclear energy, because all those investments have become stranded assets. China and India are making enormous progress in renewable



energy. Many other Asian countries are a bit behind — Vietnam is still planning to build 25 new coal fire power plants. We are working with governments to introduce large-scale renewable energy sources. The private sector will invest only if the government has the right policy, so we work with governments for that.

transport future is here

vehicles overtook fossil-fuel cars in Norway last month.

Here in Nepal, electric cars now make up 10% all of all new sales. The first 40 Hyundai Kona EV sold out as soon as they arrived, and the next batch of 40 are already booked. In fact, Hyundai launched Kona in Nepal before it did so in Australia and the US. The Korean car-maker listed Nepal as a top priority market in the Asia-Pacific because of tax breaks for electric vehicles here.

“We were able to convince the manufacturers that Nepal was ready to go electric because of our hydropower potential and the tax difference between electric and non-electric vehicles that showed a strong government commitment,” explained Nirakar Shrestha of

Laxmi InterContinental, which represents Hyundai in Nepal.

While the retail price of petrol and diesel reaches up to 261% above the cost price, electric vehicles carry just a 10% tax on the purchase price. Electric cars are exempt from road tax, which can be Rs30-50,000 per year for fossil-fuel cars. Nepal is the only country in the world with such a huge relative tax difference.

However, there are still challenges to overcome before electric vehicles gain greater public acceptance, including the lack of charging stations, undependable electricity supply, and inadequate parking lots. A fast-charge electric station costs a minimum of \$30,000 and can charge only 25 vehicles a day. Establishing one requires a government subsidy as well as a regulator to permit the charging of different EV models.

Kathmandu Valley alone has 750,000 motorcycles, which are a major source of toxic gases like carbon monoxide and ozone. Introducing tax incentives for bikes and scooters similar to those for private cars could be a pivotal move. Also, at the moment there is no registration policy on electric two-wheelers, discouraging buyers.

In October last year, Prime Minister KP Oli unveiled an electric mobility action plan, proposed to transform at least 20% of the fleet of public vehicles into battery-operated ones by 2020. Amidst much fanfare he inaugurated the first five Chinese, BYD electric buses inducted by Sajha Yatayat. President Bidya Devi Bhandari herself has a BYD electric limousine.

Last year, Kathmandu Valley’s 18 mayors gathered for a workshop organised by ICIMOD to discuss an air pollution reduction strategy. Since then, beyond lip service little has been done to establish electric public transport and make emission tests for fossil vehicles more effective.

Local and provincial governments have shown an interest in providing financial support to develop electric public transport, but the plans are sketchy

and ad hoc. A case in point is the confusing and conflicting proposals for electric bus rapid transit, monorail and light rail transit along the Ring Road. The proposals are restricted to speeches and slogans, but nothing concrete has been done.

One reason is the high investment cost of electric public transport, which requires government to step in with subsidies.

Over the years, revenue from the Petroleum Tax has grown to a whopping Rs5.2 billion. Some of this could be invested in a clean-energy electric transportation strategy.

The Seoul-based Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) has been helping the central government with just such a strategy on electric mobility, and to find potential investors. General Director Frank Rijsberman was in Kathmandu last week to sign an agreement to implement e-mobility in Nepal. GGGI is keen to help Nepal with its first purchase of 300 electric buses for cities across Nepal. (See interview below)

“Operating an electric transport fleet is more complex, requires higher initial investment and more infrastructure than traditional buses, but in the longer-term, renewable energy sources are not only ecologically but also economically viable,” said Rijsberman. “We believe that it is not only the right thing to do but also the best way of growing in the 21st century. In the coming years we hope to see a breakthrough and electric buses on the streets of Kathmandu.”

Electric vehicles are now a necessity, not just an environmental statement. Neighbouring India and China have committed to manufacturing only electric automobiles by the year 2030. This means Nepal will be forced to go electric since most vehicle imports are from those two countries.

Said Bhushan Tuladhar of Sajha Yatayat: “Like it or not, Nepal will have to go all electric in about a decade. So we may as well start planning for it. That way, the transition will be much smoother, efficient and advantageous.”

PPPs in Province 3

Province 3 organised an interaction in Bharatpur on 19 April focused on making the province more investment-friendly for public-private partnerships. Chief Guest Pushpa Kamal Dahal said Nepal’s federal transition has made PPPs possible. MP and industrialist Binod Chaudhary and Khimlal Devkota of the NPC also participated. “The



province must provide a clear incentive package and encourage specialised products to attract domestic and foreign investors,” Chaudhary said. The conference identified five priority areas: heritage tourism, import substitution manufacturing, energy, agriculture, and specialised services and human resources. Chairman of the National Natural Resource and Fiscal Commission, Balananda Paudel, said the public sector had to ensure economies of scale, policy predictability and solid infrastructure. The interaction was organised by VRock & Co.

Turkish to Sharjah

Turkish Airlines has added a new destination, Sharjah in United Arab Emirates, to its expanding global



network. Sharjah will be the airline’s third destination in UAE and will be served via the Istanbul-Sharjah-Istanbul route. Sharjah, a coastal city, is one of the most popular tourism centres in the UAE.

Fresh Produce

Qatar Airways has partnered with Qatarat Agricultural Development Company (QADCO) to supply fresh produce to its catering company for Qatar Airways flights from Doha and in lounges at Hamad



International Airport. This is the carrier’s contribution to the self-sufficiency goals in the Qatar National 2030 Vision.

F11 Pro

Smartphone brand OPPO has launched the F11 Pro that includes innovations like portrait photography in low light, and is



equipped with a 48MP ultra-clear camera system, a rising camera and a panoramic screen. The phone will be available in Nepal starting 29 April.

Stopover at Abu Dhabi

Ethiad Airways is offering two free nights of hotel accommodation in Abu Dhabi for all



guests booking flights to and from all Etihad destinations via Abu Dhabi until 15 June. Guests can choose from a range of 15 hotels.

White Walker Whiskey

Johnnie Walker has launched the new White Walker Whisky made in collaboration with HBO® and Game of Thrones. The limited-edition Scotch Whisky is inspired by the White Walkers characters in the series.



RENEWABLE TRANSPORT: Symbolic gestures like President Bidya Devi Bhandari using an electric limousine, and more practical tax breaks for EVs have won Nepal international praise for a proactive energy policy. However, reforms are still needed to encourage electric public transport.

THE PRESIDENT’S OFFICE



SONIAAWALE

How can Nepal mitigate on carbon, while adapting to climate change? Adaptation is still very much the number one priority for Nepal but it must grow to middle-income status by 2030, without increasing emissions, by investing in renewable energy. This is now the cheapest form of energy and decentralised solar energy is a

much easier way to reach remote communities that were very poorly served by a centralised grid.

So I would call it adaptation with mitigation co-benefits. It may well be possible to trade those emissions with countries that should reduce more but cannot on their own. You can have mitigation measures too, but the first priority

for countries like Nepal that rely on agriculture is to make sure that society is no longer vulnerable and is more resilient to climate change.

Also, many governments still want growth. But the quality of growth really matters; it should be environmentally sustainable. It used to be the right thing to do, but being sustainable is also commercially attractive.

What progress are other Asian countries making to become low-carbon economies?

China has become a real leader in electric transport. Shenzhen is the first city in the world with an all-electric fleet of buses. Beijing has also taken big steps in curbing air pollution. India has also made considerable progress in renewable energy. The next big thing will be energy efficiency in buildings.

What are the prospects for electric public transport in Nepal?

We have done electric bus projects in a number of countries and while it is more expensive initially, and also for infrastructure like charging stations and batteries, its operational cost is much cheaper. We are helping the Nepal Government find interested investors, and hope to see a breakthrough in coming years with electric buses on the streets of Kathmandu.



Miss Nepal viral video and stage fright

Why should contestants be required to wear makeup, contacts or show their teeth to show respect?

The girl stood frozen on the stage, pale and rigid with fright as the audience's impatient rustling turned to jeers and catcalls. 'Just say something, anything,' I mouthed, gesticulating encouragement to her from my vantage point on the panel of

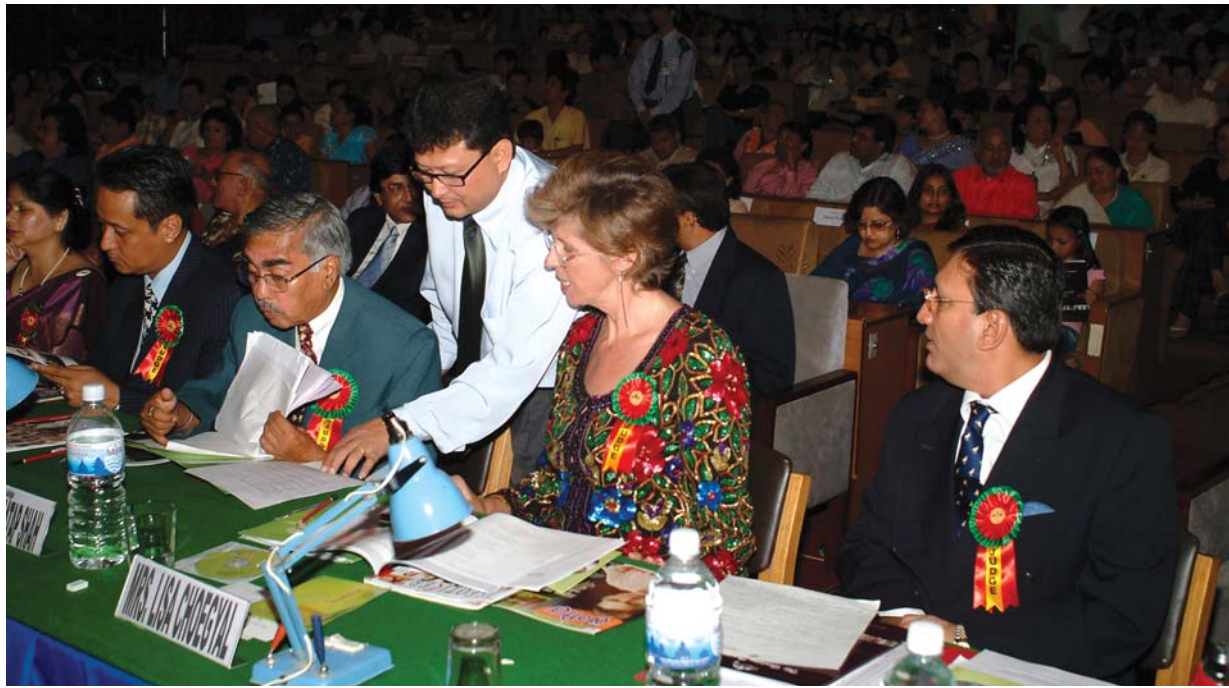


SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

the judges table. The moments lengthened, the heckling increased and the beautiful girl immobilised on stage stayed silent, paralysed. I was frantic, the poor thing.

We were at the final glitzy night of judging of Miss Nepal 2004 in Kathmandu, rife with razzamatazz and televised live into every eager household in the still-Kingdom. Beside me, SK Singh and Captain Vijay Lama sat super cool in their crisp suits and snowy white shirts, and even I was dressed up for Kathmandu's most glamorous evening, poured into a borrowed, low-cut sequined jacket, rather too snug around the shoulders. It was question time during the pageant, a tricky moment when the finalists are called upon to respond to the judges' questions.

My Rotarian friend Gopal Sundar Lal Kakshapati had honoured me with an invitation to join the panel of judges, rubbing shoulders with Seema Golcha, Nalina Chitrakar Mishra, Melinda Manandhar and other social acolytes. I had enjoyed the camaraderie of the convoluted selection process that precedes the plush and glittering final event. From thousands of applicants auditioned in 8 regional centres, a select 25 contestants progress to 6 weeks of coaching and team building. For us judges, a full day sifting through the entrants with one-on-one interviews to come up with the final few who parade at the highly publicised pageant. Personality, poise, ambition and intention were more important



than looks, according to the criteria by which we were charged, and I saluted the women's theme that under-ran the event.

In those guileless days, I specially liked the Bhaktapur lady who proudly proclaimed her jyapu heritage and how much time she spent in the fields, the Patan beauty who helped in her parents' tea shop, and the Tibetan girl who, when asked how she would spend the prize money, eschewed all political correctness by boldly (and honestly) proclaiming that she would use it to emigrate to Canada.

Even I realised that she would never make the shortlist.

Since 1994 this unlikely event has doggedly weathered the storms of Nepal's conflict, leadership changes, political conundrums and social upheavals, every year crowning a Miss Nepal in ever more elaborate and hotly contested contests. Venues have expanded from the Nepal Academy to the NICC (where we were in 2004) to various Kathmandu hotels and this year an outdoor arena to accommodate thousands.

Only Miss Nepal 2001, 2006

and 2008 are missing from the galaxy of glittering tiaras and radiant smiles that make one's face ache in sympathy. Over 500 girls from all corners of the country have been groomed to gorgeousness over the decades to make Nepal proud, some of them going on to greater heights in the rarefied international atmosphere of Miss Universe, Miss World, Miss Earth and Miss Asia Pacific pageants.

Chairman Gopal smiles shyly behind his neat grey beard: "We are more professional these days, but Miss Nepal is the longest running premier event in Nepal, second to none."

A fine succession of Miss Nepals have evolved into vocal role models — spokespersons on any number of issues — and successful career women, nurtured by the Hidden Treasures organisers. We used to welcome them to Chitwan for celebrity events and they never failed to add glamour and charm to any occasion, not to mention consternation amongst the preening naturalists jostling for attention, despite the defensive patrol of a watchful chaperone. On one occasion his vigilant protection

backfired when Miss Nepal was inadvertently locked inside a suitor's tent — it ended harmlessly when I found them escaping in giggles under the back flap.

Why can't today's participants wear less makeup without being accused of disrespect, glasses instead of contacts, and how does being asked to show your teeth reveal anyone's character and personality? There were abuses seen in the recent viral video. Let us not allow Miss Nepal to default to the relentless focus of fashion and physical attributes in a stereotypical body contest. 'Beauty both inside and out', and 'purposed for empowerment', are in danger of being trumped by good looks alone in the popular stampede onto the stage.

Back in 2004, my poor contestant remained motionless in her embroidered gown and stilettos, alone in the midst of the huge theatre. Vijay Lama helpfully asked the question again in Nepali, though I knew she spoke excellent English. I had especially liked her, which made it even worse, and my question: 'Is tourism good for Nepal?' seemed bland enough not to cause trouble. I was told later the camera switched between our faces, hers a fixed mask and me desperately encouraging her to say something, anything.

Vijay told me it was a classic case of stage fright, and he should know — I last saw him in his role as the heroic helicopter pilot in Hollywood's *Everest*, melding his professions as pilot and actor. His perfectly glossed hair smelled delicious as he leaned into my ear: "You could have asked her to say her name, and she would not have been able to answer." That made me feel better, but not her.

The poor girl eventually succumbed. As the audience became more vociferous, the lights brighter and the cameras less forgiving, she threw up her hands and teetered off into the wings in floods of tears.

And I was never again invited back as a judge for Miss Nepal. 🇳🇵

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The wet spell is not over yet, and although the days will start out bright and sunny into the weekend, clouds will take over and lead into thundery showers across the mountains. The Tarai will remain dry and sweltering hot. The wind direction is now from the southwest, which is bringing with it the heat and haze. Temperature will get back to normal levels finally, but the wind-blown dust in the air will filter the sun somewhat.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 27° 17°	 26° 16°	 26° 16°

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PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

Many Nepalis grew up playing Snakes and Ladders, a board game made popular by its simplicity. At the throw of a dice, a player could travel up a ladder, or make a long descent down a snake.

Now, Kathmandu-based Kazi Studios has launched a board game inspired by Snakes and Ladders and Ludo, but with a Nepali flavour. *Samrajya* (Empire) follows Prithvi Narayan Shah's journey to conquer Kathmandu Valley through Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Patan and finally Bhaktapur.

Replicated in 100 squares of a board, the journey is filled with twists and turns. Players can find themselves trapped in *gufa* (cave) shortcuts or if they are lucky, catch a ride on a horse or chariot. Busy jattras such as Baag Bhairav and Bisket might make you skip a turn. The board has five bases: Baidya Khana, Bhatti, Hanuman Dhoka Jail, Bangla Mukhi and Ausadhi Pasal, all popular Kathmandu Valley landmarks.

These days, adults and children often spend most of their awake hours on mobiles, but playing *Samrajya* promises quality family time, and laughter with friends. Kreeti Shakya, who founded Kazi Studios with Manish Shrestha says, "As board game



lovers ourselves, we wanted *Samrajya* to be a social game that fostered more face-to-face interaction between Nepalis." If sales of the board game are anything to go by, say the creators, their plan is working.

What elevates *Samrajya*'s fun quotient

are the beautiful design and illustrations of temples, ghosts and chariots. Shakya says design was a key element of the project: "We have been brought up with great heritage, culture and traditions that have a lot of design elements in them, which is why we chose to

have high production values and world-class design."

Kazi Studios spent over seven months producing *Samrajya* and its latest board game *Jatra*, with most of that time devoted to perfecting design. "With the graphics, we wanted to provide something Nepali and unique and associated with our culture, but also with a modern touch," Shakya explains.

The new game, *Jatra*, is for children. The backdrop is the folktale of Gai *Jatra*, which features a sad queen. Depending on the cards they draw, players need to perform different activities to cheer her up. They might be asked to create stories based on items on a card or to find objects on the vibrant board replete with diverse characters, people and animals.

"As children make stories and engage in activities through a fun game, it could really boost their creativity," Shrestha says.

With the success of *Samrajya*, Kazi Studios has launched *Kazi Play*, which is dedicated to games. It has also created the brand *Allare*, (wanderer) which offers 17 high-end handicraft products inspired by elements of Nepali culture, like bookmarks based on Newari building lattice and earrings shaped by *damaru* (traditional drums).

Beyond design, the company provides technical services in hardware, data visualisation, web design and the Internet of Things (IOT). After *Samrajya* was released, the company discovered that many Nepalis living abroad bought the game for their children because it helped them connect with the mother country. "We found out that kids were asking their grandparents about ancient cities, about what *juju dhau* (yoghurt from Bhaktapur) and other cultural elements were," Shakya explains.

So, even if you lose in *Samrajya*, it is a win-win. 🇳🇵

Prakriti Kandel

Samrajya, Rs1200

Jatra, Rs1400

Available at Local Project Nepal and Alchi Store, Jhamsikhel



Go online to watch how the new Nepali board game, *Samrajya*, is played. It takes more than luck to win, and players get to learn about Kathmandu Valley's history, culture and landmarks. Even if you lose, you win.

nepalitimes.com

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Nepali Times mailed itself a letter 6 weeks ago from a post office 15 minutes walk away in Kathmandu. It has not yet arrived.

Aashish Mishra

Six weeks ago, this newspaper mailed to itself a registered letter from Nepal's General Post Office (GPO) in Sundhara to an address a 15-minute walk away. That letter has not yet arrived. Walking the corridors of the GPO it is not hard to imagine why the system is failing.

Hallways that were once busy with people mailing or collecting letters are quiet. The counters are mostly deserted. The iconic red, temple-shaped post boxes outside are hardly used.

People still enter the post office, but mostly to ask for directions or to buy masks and socks from a street vendor at the gate. Unlike other countries, where post offices have reinvented themselves as stationery shops, cafes or even banks, Nepal's GPO is a shadow of its former self.

In 2017, the GPO had total mail turnover of more than 39 million which was almost a 5% drop from 2016 and a 16% fall from 2015. That figure is expected to decline further in 2018, even as Nepal's population and literacy expands.

"People are just not writing letters any more," laments Chief Postmaster Bed Prasad Bhattarai, who has all the time in the world to chat with a visiting reporter. "People choose the ease and instantaneity of digital messaging over old-fashioned letters. It has made post offices redundant."



Mailing letters is not the only service the post office offers. It has parcel delivery, postal circulation of newspapers, domestic and foreign money orders, and even the EMS courier service, which ought not to have been so affected by digitalisation.

Yet, even there the numbers are rapidly declining. According to Binod Prasad Upadhyaya, Director of the Postal Services Department, business is falling because Nepal Post is not promoting itself. He says: "We face a serious lack of public trust. People believe that Nepal Post does not deliver their mail on time and that we lose or damage it."

Indeed, this belief is not unfounded. Sunil Phuyal, a member of the Rotary Club of Kathmandu, sent a package from the capital to Mexico City a little over a year ago thinking delivery would take a couple of weeks. It took four months. Phuyal says he is switching to private courier services from now on even though they are more expensive.

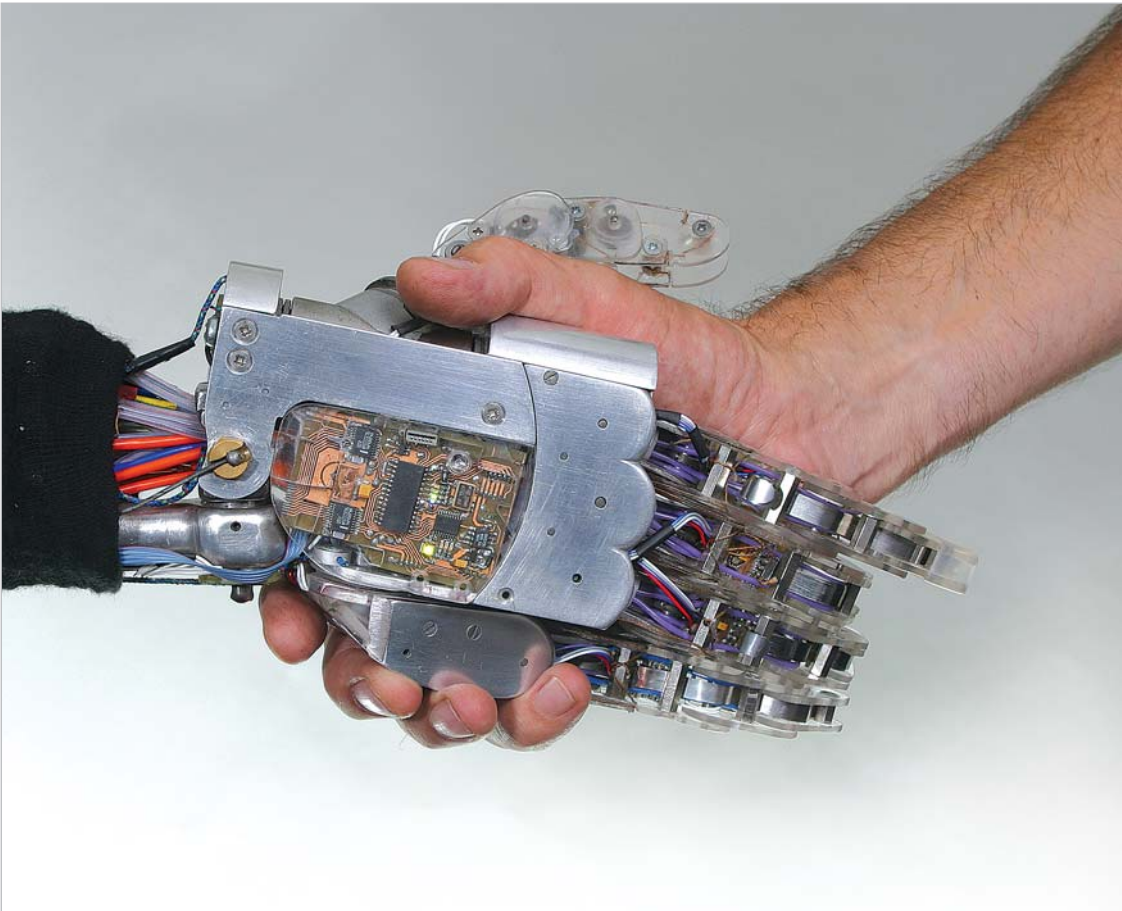
Still, there are people like Naren Banstola who use the post out of official compulsion. "The government still uses the post to mail official letters," he explains while waiting at the counter one recent morning, "so, as a

How others countries saved their postal systems

Faced with a decline in the use of the postal service, countries have adapted their network of post offices to modern needs. Japan Post now provides banking and insurance services, and is the world's largest financial institution with assets of \$3.3 trillion, which is used to subsidise mail delivery services.

Australia's postal system was also in similar decline but now allows private post offices in small towns to operate like franchises, with owners purchasing licenses to provide official postal services. It also sells souvenirs, books, office supplies, coffee and tea.

Australia Post has also partnered with banks to provide financial services at rural locations. Closer to home, China's Post Office has also branched out from mail and is today a bank, a life insurance corporation and a security and holdings company.



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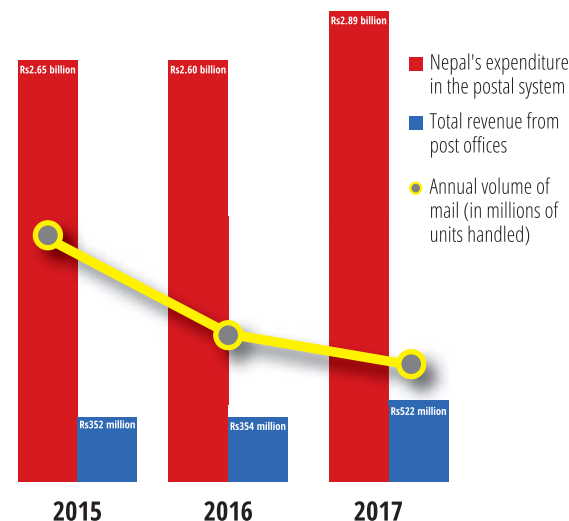
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MONIKA DEUPALA



POST-POST: The General Post Office at Sundhara (above) was sparsely populated one morning last week. Most Nepalis now shun the unreliable postal system and have turned to communicating via social networking sites.



government employee I have to send and receive official documents through the post.”

Another customer, Yusef Basnet, says he uses the postal system because it is more affordable, but makes a copy of every letter he mails in case the delivery is delayed or the document is lost.

Postmaster Bhattarai admits: “Much of the problem is because customers do not know that we have EMS for urgent mail or that we provide a money order service.” The irony of this admission is lost on the Chief Postmaster — he is the one person who has the power to

ensure that customers do know.

Nepal Post has never broken even, and its annual loss in 2017 was Rs2.4 billion. Staff retention and low morale are problems — most employees feel the postal service will not survive. There is also the problem of insufficient budget. Bhattarai shrugs: “Every time we try to do something innovative, we face a problem of funds. If something is not done, there won’t be post offices anymore.”

At the Postal Services Department, director Upadhyaya is equally despondent: “The government itself does not see a

future in the postal service, and is reluctant to invest in it.”

One way to sustain the postal service would be to commercialise it so it can compete with private providers. A Ministry of Information task force recommended a slimmer bureaucracy, more autonomy from the government, and transformation of Nepal Post into a corporation.

Explains Bhattarai: “The era of writing letters is now gone forever. But the postal service still has potential to use e-commerce for a courier service.”

The proposed Postal Act, which is currently in the federal

Parliament, includes suggestions of the task force for incorporation and market expansion, while also restructuring Nepal Post to fit the current federal model of the country.

Director Upadhyaya is optimistic: “If passed, the Act would save Nepal Post.”

Meanwhile, the post office has tried to address public concerns about unreliability by starting a tracking system for domestic and international mail that would inform customers about the exact whereabouts of their mail. It is also seeking to reach all 753 local levels with its mobile postal service. 📺



Nepal Post is a shadow of its former self as people turn away from writing letters to using social messaging sites. Watch *Nepali Times* post a registered letter to itself, which hadn’t arrived after six weeks. Join us on a trip inside the General Post Office in Sundhara.

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EVENTS



Tattoo Convention

An international gathering to celebrate and promote art through tattoos, with competitions in various categories. International tattoo artist Dillian Forte, who is widely acclaimed for his sacred geometry work, will attend. 26-28 April, Heritage Garden, Sanepa, (01) 4700629, 9841471448, 9841 849786

Refugees

Alex Ave-Lallemant will speak about refugees in Nepal, especially those from Bhutan and Tibet, and how the US and its partners are supporting them. Ave-Lallemant is the US Embassy's Refugee Coordinator for South Asia. 26 April, 10:30am, free for CSGN members, Rs500 for non members (Rs250 for students and senior citizens), Hotel Shanker, Lazimpat

Private is Political

Private is Political, Vagina Monologues 4.0, is a play about the strength of women and much more; directed by Akanchha Karki. Language: Nepali. 26 April to 11 May, 5:30pm (except Tuesdays), 1:30pm on Saturdays, Kausi Theater, Teku, 9861315317, 9818709302



Her Hands

An exhibition by British fashion designer Ellen Rock, whose works are a fusion of inspiration from the Maithali women of the Janakpur Women's Development Centre and Rock's personal approach to ethical fashion design and fabrication. 16 April - 15 May, British Council Nepal, 10am-5pm, Lainchaur (01) 4237700

StoryYellers

The 31st edition of StoryYellers will feature Saman Shrestha, Rastra Timalseña, Narbin Magar and Mamata Maharjan. Hear about what inspired changes in their lives in this story-sharing platform. For tickets: <http://bit.ly/TSY31booking>. 1 May, 5:30pm, Rs200, Rs250 (door), 25 Hours, Tangelwood, 9851242128 (hosts)

Opening The Space

The opening of new, renovated space at Kaalo 101 will feature a full day of fun and exciting activities like calligraphy customizing of your old stuff/clothes, opening of an area full of clothes/books exchange, tea and homemade cake, exhibition by Italian photographer Margherita Loba Amadio and much more! 27 April, 11am-7pm, Kaalo.101, Nagbahal, Patan, 9803553123



Blood Donation

Hamro LifeBank, which is working for an efficient blood management system in Nepal, will host a special blood drive for this mother's day in partnership with Paropkar Maternity Hospital. 3 May, 11am-3pm, Labim Mall, Pulchok, Hamro LifeBank contacts for details: 9801109681, 9817181224, 9801109702

Canadian Film

On the occasion of Canada's National Film Day, Canadian movie *Maude* will screen in Kathmandu. The movie is inspired by the true story of painter Maude Lewis, who battled juvenile rheumatoid to become a celebrated artist. 27 April, Film Development Board, Chabil, (01) 4812332

Startup Huddle

A monthly program where startups give six-minute presentations about their work and engage in a Q&A session. An opportunity for you to learn about some great startups as well as meet new people. *Registration:* www.clockb.com, 01-4426267/8, events@clockb.com. 30 April, 1-5pm, Taragaon Museum, Hyatt Regency, Boudha

MUSIC



KatJazz International festival

Don't miss the last few, exciting performances that will close out the KatJazz festival. *Until 30 April, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5543554* *Highlights:* *KJC ensemble concert by KJC Diploma Students, 5pm onwards, 27 April* *Jonas Winterhalter Big Band from Germany/Switzerland, 7pm onwards, 30 April*

Folk Music

The second episode of Nepali Folkloric Roots will feature the group Samudra. Free invitations available at Jazz Upstairs Lazimpat, KJC Jhamsikhel, Yamaha Music, Naxal. 26 April, 7:30-9pm, Kantipur Temple House, Jyatha, Thamel, 9803001592

Sunday Social

Enjoy a relaxing Sunday evening with some Afro, House and Disco music by Enhancify. 28 April, 4-8pm, Musicology, Maitri Marg, Bakhundole, 9860664823



Beard of Harmony

Beard of Harmony's repertoire includes original songs and covers performed with their personal touch. An acoustic duo based in Bangalore, Beard of Harmony is travelling the world to create and share music. 26 April, 6-8pm, Everfresh, Panipokhari

Paleti Series

A collection of Chhandas (Nepali poems) recited to the music of Aavaas Aabhas. Featuring recitations of works by nationally renowned poets. *Online booking:* <https://thuprai.com/event/chhanda-paleti/> 26-28 April, 6-8pm, Nepalaya, Kalika Marg, 9803919266, paleti@nepalaya.com.np

DINING



Taza

Serving savoury Middle Eastern delights, this restaurant looks simple but its flavours will always bring you back for more. The Syrian owner and chef serves delicious Arabic cuisine, such as falafel and shawarma wraps, toshkas and various Middle Eastern dips. 11am-8:30pm, Hariharbhawan, 9860960177

Punj Tadka festival

A festival of delectable Punjabi cuisine that is rich, creamy and made with the tastiest spices. Enjoy this event in one of the best restaurants for Indian cuisine in Kathmandu. *Until 4 May, Ghar-e-kabab, Hotel Annapurna, Durbar Marg, (01) 4221 711*

Muse Restobar

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



Achaar Ghar

Translating to "House of Pickles" in English, Achaar Ghar is special because of its pickles produced under the proprietorship of the "Pickle Lady of Nepal", Hajuri Bista. It serves delectable home-made meals along with the achaar, for an authentic Nepali taste. 11am-8:30pm, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5541952

The Bent Fork

This European style restaurant offers the best salads and selection of continental dishes. Try their signature Grilled Chicken Burger or Beef Burger. Enjoy cosy evenings with family and friends. *Bishal Nagar, 9802049888*

GETAWAY



Buddha Maya Garden Hotel

Wake up to the sounds of birds in the mornings and relax in the beautiful garden. The rooms are comfortable and well managed. A major bonus: the Maya Devi Temple is within walking distance from the hotel. *Lumbini, (71) 580219/220, 9801033114*

Borderlands Eco Resort

Enveloped in the natural Himalayan splendor, the resort is located a mere three hours north of Kathmandu. A quick getaway to wild nature—celebrate the weekend for eco-adventures. *Borderlands Eco Adventure Resort, Sindhupalchok (01) 4381425, 9801025111*



Shangri-La Village Resort

The resort offers beautiful, spacious rooms and a gorgeous garden where you can relax and enjoy complete serenity. Enjoy swimming in the pool this summer, and the restaurant's variety of dishes to complement your stay. *Gharipatan, Pokhara (061) 462222*

The Old Inn

This B&B consists of two beautiful timber and brick Newa townhouses in traditional design, overlooking a serene, traffic-free bazaar. The view of the central Himalaya from Annapurna in the west to Langtang and beyond in the east is magnificent. *Bandipur, Tanahu (065) 520110*



Chhaimale Village Resort

Adorned with pear trees, the Resort is an ideal destination for anyone seeking to escape the madness of Kathmandu city. *Chhaimale (01) 4268121*



Health at home is an organization which facilitates home based health care services. Health at home service promotes health care i.e., out of hospital setting to the clients. Being the first of its kind in the whole South Asia, Health at Home is here to cater to the needs of those who desire health care facilities to be delivered at their doorsteps.

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OUR PICK

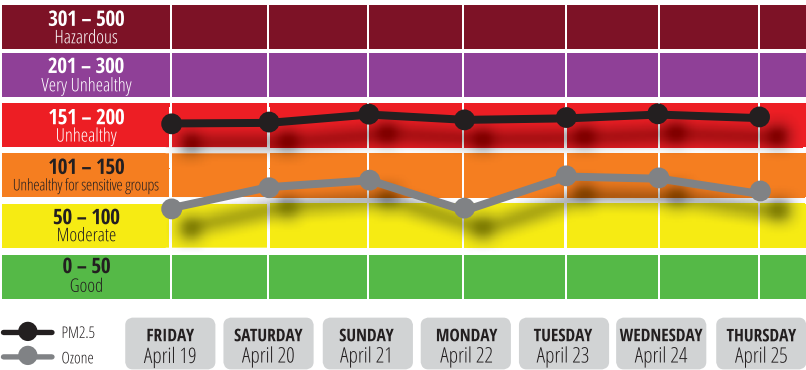


Opened in Kathmandu on 26 April

Avengers: End Game is the sequel to *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *The Avengers* (2012). Thanos is back and to defeat him, the Avengers and their allies must work together to retrieve the infinity stones from him. The movie is about the end of the journey and their fight to restore peace. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 19 - 25 April



Kathmandu's air quality has remained persistently in the Red 'Unhealthy' zone. These are daily averages, which means that the Air Quality Index (AQI) during rush-hour traffic mid-mornings and evenings is actually much worse. As is customary for this time of year, Kathmandu's pollution is compounded by wind-blown desert dust and industrial soot from northern India. These particles are usually washed away by rain, but come right back as traffic builds up. Besides particulates, gas in auto emissions also react with the air in the presence of sunlight to produce toxic ozone, whose concentration is highest at noon. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

Anita Tuladhar: The Gardener of Small Stories

In a black and white 1985 studio photo, Anita Tuladhar stands with writer Toya Gurung and singer Aruna Lama. She is wearing a dark floral sari, a wavy bob and large glasses. Her arms are crossed and she smiles with her lips curling down at the corners like an upside down crescent moon.



LIGHTROOM CONVERSATION
Muna Gurung

Anita Tuladhar was born in 1950 in Biratnagar, and published four books in a short span of 12 years: *Phulu* (Phulu, 1977), *Ritto Sahar* (Empty City, 1978), *Surya Graham* (Solar Eclipse, 1983) and *Bidambana* (Dilemma, 1989).

But none of her books are found in shops. This is not unusual in Nepal; often the only way to get books is directly through the author. Anita's 30 year silence as a writer seems to have erased large chunks of Nepal's collective literary memory.

Anita finally sent me all four of her books. "Please do not lose them, this is the only set I have," she said over the phone. They were of different sizes all taped along the spines: I felt the need to wear gloves. The one I was most drawn to was *Phulu*, her first collection of short stories. A retro purple-pink book, it fit in the palm of my hand. I read it in one sitting.

After our conversation, Anita takes me on a tour of the 600 potted plants in her home in Tripureswor. She has a deep interest in *bonsai*, and for the first time I see the banyan, juniper, fig, red wood, Bodhi, rhododendron, jacaranda and oak trees grown in small clay pots on a small terrace that overlooks the drying Bagmati. I can see why Anita creates *bonsai*: she can have the world's biggest trees in her home in the middle of the city, just like she can fit the world's biggest stories in the smallest forms, so we may easily carry them with us.

In this month's Lightroom Conversation, Anita Tuladhar and I talk about the craft of writing small stories, the politics of publishing a book, darkneses and how to come out of them.

Anita Tuladhar: Exactly at 5AM, we had to be seated in front of Ba with our books. If my brothers and I were even one minute late, Ba would not even look at us for 3-4 days. This tyrannical rule applied to Ma too – at 5:30AM, she had to bring tea for all of us. It was complete military rule.

Muna Gurung: He was an army man?

A: No, he worked for Nepal Bank and was posted in Biratnagar, where I was born. When I was 3, we returned to Kathmandu and bought a small house in New Road. Ba was one of the few Tuladhars who was educated at that time. He home-schooled us, and when I finally went to school, I was enrolled directly into fourth grade at Kanti School. My father thought it would be harder for me to adjust at school, but it was my brothers who failed several times. I never failed a single class. After SLC, Ba told me that I was old enough to decide what I wanted to do. With some friends I enrolled to study humanities at Padma Kanya Campus.

M: That is so open-minded of him. Usually parents tell you what you ought to study, do, be...

A: Ba never stopped me from studying, but he never liked that later I became a writer. He wished that I would just take up a regular office job. My Ma, on the other hand, could not read or write, but she loved literature. She accompanied me to most of my readings and events, we hung out like sisters or friends. She was married off to Ba when she was 14 and by the time she was 16, I was born, so our age difference was not that much.

M: Your father must have read some of your work though.



STORYTELLER:
Anita Tuladhar today (above) with her mother (left).

A: Not a single word. I guess he was not interested. He never praised me, but he also never discouraged me. I quietly continued writing. I was the first person in my family to study Nepali. Ba thought it would be hard for me because Nepali is not our language; we do not speak it at home. But I loved the Nepali language. Maybe it was because I was meant to write in Nepali that I always felt drawn towards it.

M: But there was something about writing that drew you towards it.

A: In 7th or 8th grade, I wrote poems about nature, hills, mountains. But when I was in Padma Kanya, I began to write about people and pain; these poems became little protests. Every Friday there was a literary program and I would recite poems. On campus, there was also a literary journal called *Kasturi*; it was there that I published my first story, *Mero Mann Ko Dhoko* (My Heart's Desire). But this feeling that I can and should write, that what I am writing is important and true, came from one person: Hari Bhakta Katuwal. He had come from Assam looking for me. Angur Baba Joshi was the principal then; she asked me to come to her office because someone wanted to see me. When I walked in, there was a man in her office with disheveled hair, crazy eyes, and I think he was slurring when he spoke. I thought he was drunk, and I was a little afraid. Turned out it was Katuwal *dai*, who had read my story in *Kasturi* and had come to tell me that I should continue to write. It is the biggest boost I have ever received. A well-established writer had travelled long distances just to tell me that I was doing the right thing. It fuelled me.

M: You felt seen.

A: Exactly. Later he sent my work to *Madhuparka*, *Ruprekha* and other magazines and newspapers. Once these stories appeared in many places, he told me to create a collection — that's when *Ritto Sahar* came out. The day I graduated from Padma Kanya was also the day I got married to a boy from another Tuladhar family.

M: How convenient, you didn't have to change your last name.

A: (Laughs). Or my religion. But it was hard at the beginning. Tuladhars were mostly merchants and traveled to Lhasa for trade. I guess one did not need to be too educated to run a business. My husband's family was not well-off, but he was the only one in his family who was educated.

M: Your husband or his family never stopped you from writing.

A: My mother-in-law was the kindest person and my husband's brothers ran a printing press in Nyokha called Yak. It was here that Katuwal *dai* and other writers such as Upendra Shrestha, Ashesh Malla and Bishnu Bibhu Ghimire got together. Yak published papers and magazines, including Katuwal *dai*'s *Banki*, a pocket-sized monthly literary magazine that was so small it fit in the palm of your hand, filled with what was called mini short-stories, poems and essays. I would do housework, and at that time I already had a daughter, but she mostly stayed at my parents' home in New Road. So, whenever I had some free time, I hung around at the press. Katuwal *dai* encouraged me to write for *Banki* and I learned how to write mini short stories.

M: They are like flash fiction, or micro stories?

A: Yes, but I had to learn how to write this kind of story. I didn't understand the format before. I thought a mini short story was a summary of a longer story, but each is complete and whole; it is a story that may be small in format but able to stand independently on its own. It is very difficult to write one.

M: This reminds me of the well-travelled quote that has been attributed to many writers. It goes something like, 'I'm sorry this note is so long, I didn't have time to write a short one.'

A: It is true. It takes longer to write something short. It might be easier for the reader to consume, but so much harder for the writer to create. But I also think these small formats

touch people faster, and leave a stronger impact. Instead of having many characters in a long drawn out scene, it's better to say a lot with one single dialogue. Now for that to happen, as a writer you have to think three, four or five times more. You only get one shot to touch the reader. Word choice becomes crucial. You do not have the luxury of a novel to write lengthy, winding details.

I came to writing because of Katuwal *dai*, and also because of the environment that was built around me. We ran a printing press, we had writers gather at home all the time. In 1977, I came out with my own collection of mini short stories and we printed that at Yak. And I also edited my own literary magazine, *Jureli*. I hung out with other writers daily, like Toya Gurung.

Then in 1987, my husband and I left the family in Nyokha with our children. Brothers got into arguments, as they tend to do, and when the time came to divide the Nyokha property, there was little left for us. We left the printing press and had to start from scratch. Once we moved to this house, I stopped writing. I did not write for 9 or 10 years.

It was a time when I lived without a lot of things. Without writing, without our families, without our worlds as we had known it. I was not creating literature, but I was busy creating a new world for my family. Once I stopped writing, they forgot about me.

M: Who?

A: Writers, readers, publishers, the literary world. By then I had already published four books and in the short story genre, people knew of Anita Tuladhar. But during those 10 years, and also after, they stopped inviting me to literary events. These days, I tell myself: *We have made some sort of history and maybe one day people will come looking for us. And sure enough, look, there are still people like you out there who come to speak to us.*

M: What does making a book mean to you?

A: A book is a place where I have emptied my thoughts and ideas. May others come to it, sit with it. May they understand them. May they see from a different point of view. May they experience emotions my characters experience. May they understand that there are great pains and sorrows in this world, many are similar to one's own and many different. And may they encounter beauty and joy in how I write about the flowers, plants, nature.

M: You are working on two books. Has your writing process changed from your last book that came out 30 years ago?

A: All my stories are still inspired by real life events, things I have seen, experienced, or things people have told me, or a line or two I have heard while waiting for a ride home. Once I get a character, or an idea, a sentence, I build a plot. After that, it just flows out. I do not finish all my stories in one sitting, but even if I have to go open the door, answer the phone, cook for my family... the story just sits and simmers in me and I cannot wait to get back to the page to continue it.

M: Do you think that writing can be learned?

A: I think it is useless to try to teach writing or go somewhere to learn how to write. If people ask me to teach writing, what am I supposed to say? Do I tell them to write like me? Or should I tell them to write like Parijat? I do not think writing can be taught. Do you write the way the teacher wants you to or the way you want to? It is such a personal pursuit. But I also do not think writers are

born with writing skills, like magic. It just takes a certain kind of person with a certain kind of awareness to want to write, to be able to write.

M: I want to close our conversation by asking you to share with us your greatest regret? Your greatest joy?

A: Two regrets: I wish I had learned how to use a computer, and also how to ride a motorcycle. Today, I would have been able to type my own stories and send them out. As for the motorcycle, I want to be able to go wherever I want to go without depending on my son, or my daughter-in-law. As for joy, plants bring me the most joy. Do you know that I have 600 plants in this house? And I especially love *bonsai*.

M: What do you love about it?

A: Like writing, it is an art form. There are many rules to *bonsai* – one has to identify the face of a tree, the back of a tree, how the branches move, which way to move them. You can use wire to guide the growth of the tree, but I do not do that. It will hurt the tree. My only aim is to turn a big tree into a small tree.

M: Just like you turn big stories into small ones?

A: (Laughs). I never thought about it that way. But yes, I guess that is what I do.

Lightroom Conversation is a monthly page in Nepali Times on interesting figures in Nepal's literary scene. A longer version of this transcript is available online. The previous two months' guests were Toya Gurung and Maya Thakuri.

Muna Gurung is a writer, educator and translator based in Kathmandu. For more of her work, visit munagurung.com.



Phulu

When light paints the sky orange, Phulu wants to smile. But he does not. Instead, colours of anger and shades of death spill into his eyes. Phulu wants to bang his head against something hard and cry. But he quietly enters his room – a faded room that begins to feel heavy. His eyes fall on dates he has marked on the calendar, dates when he will hang himself ... today is only the 23rd. Phulu feels like he has yet to live through a lifetime of dark days. A hot anger rises in him. He is so angry he sleeps all day. The only thing he thinks about is his wife. She never gave him trouble while he was alive, never complained about increased expenses. While his wife was alive, nothing bothered him. His life was opening up, like a flower. He feels empty now. For once, Phulu wants to forget everything. But memories surround him in all directions, like light pouring from a full moon. He cannot forget anything. Phulu stares.



In this month's Lightroom Conversation, Anita Tuladhar and Muna Gurung talk about the craft of writing small stories, the politics of publishing books, darkneses, and how to come out of them.



on one wall, while opposite it is his son Ang Tsherin Sherpa's impressionistic take on traditional Tibeto-Nepali art. Ang Tsherin (*left with Berry*) learnt thangka techniques from his father, but after attending art school in the US he started experimenting with more modern forms of expression that challenged the pre-determined style of devotional art. Now an American citizen, Ang Tsherin still carries with him the artistic influence of his childhood in Nepal.

Two other items in the collection also show a cross-pollination of US-Nepali art. One is a shiny repousse Bhairav by Rabin Shaky, and on the facing wall is a modern take on the technique done by his American art student, Maureen Drdak.

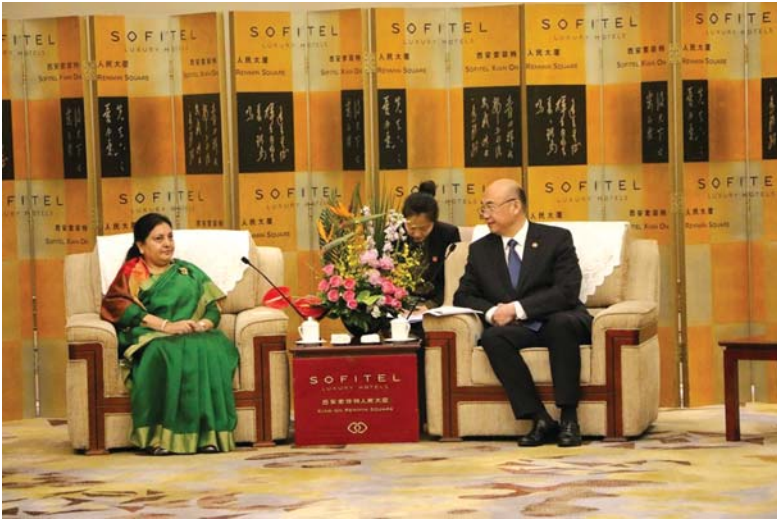
US EMBASSY

US-Nepali art

Under the US Department of State's Art in Embassies (AIE) program, American ambassadors are loaned art works to display at their premises and residences as part of their country's cultural diplomacy. This includes US Ambassador to Nepal, Randy Berry, who had a broad range of choices and departed from his predecessors by including works by American artists of Nepali origin and from his own collection. No surprise, then, that the official residence of the US ambassador at Kamal Kunj in Kamaladi now looks like an art gallery.

planted firmly in Nepal because of my previous tenure in Kathmandu," Berry told a gathering on Tuesday. "This is a collection of art from Nepal and the US that resonates with me." Among the works by American artists, Berry is most attached to a landscape of distant mountains of Colorado painted from the back porch of his house. But his favourite is an impressionistic work, Cedar in the Foothills, by Birger Sanden. The embassy collection also includes two works of art by a father-son, master-student, Nepali-American duo. Ugyen Dorje's classic thangka done in 1988 hangs

Also on display is a replica of an Avalokiteshwara figure stolen from Patan in the 8th century, which Berry says is included to draw attention to the stolen deities of Nepal that "need to come back home". The public-private-partnership Art in Embassies program strives to create cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding through the visual arts and artist exchanges. The program develops and presents roughly 60 exhibitions a year and has installed over 70 permanent art collections in the State Department's diplomatic facilities in over 200 venues in 189 countries. **Sonia Awale**



MOFA

INTERESTING TIMES: President Bidya Bhandari and Liu Guozhong, Governor of China's Shaanxi Province on Thursday. Bhandari is on a week-long state visit to China and is taking part in the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing.



ROSHAN SAKPOTA/RSS

TAKING IN THE DETAILS: Prime Minister KP Oli and Sushil Gyawali of Nation Reconstruction Authority inspect the progress in the reconstruction of Tripura Sundari Temple in Tripurswor on Thursday. The temple went down in the 2015 Nepal earthquake.



KANAK MANI DIXIT

OPEN SPACE: People from various walks of life participate in a rally on Thursday to protest the construction of bus park in Khula Manch, Kathmandu.



UNIC

ON THE WATCH: Nepal Army female UN peacekeepers provide security for visiting Head of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in the town of Yei.



NEPALI TIMES

HIS WORK LIVES ON: Inauguration of a photo exhibition in memory of late Tourism Minister Rabin Adhikari, who was killed in a helicopter crash in March. The exhibition is on at the Aviation Museum in Sinamangal.

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Boomtime in Birganj

Interview in *Himal Khabarpatrika*,
21-28 April

As the main trade hub of Nepal and the only metropolitan city in Province 2, Birganj’s hopes for growth have grown after Bijay Sarawagi, the former businessman and chair of the city’s Chamber of Commerce, was elected mayor. Excerpts from an interview:

Himal: What are your plans for the development of Birganj Municipality?
Sarawagi: Birganj has faced rapid, unplanned urbanisation. To remedy this, we are working on a land-utilisation policy, and a master plan for Birganj’s development will be ready in the next six months. We are also constructing a 28-km road for better connectivity between Birganj’s rural and urban parts. By establishing a proper transport hub, we also aim to solve the

haphazard movement of large trucks. A major challenge is to stop migration from rural to urban Birganj. We need better infrastructure for tourism, especially for those entering Nepal from Raxaul even for a day. The Sirsiya River also needs to be cleaned up.

How will you fund all these projects?
Government funds alone cannot propel infrastructure development so the private sector has to be involved. Investment is crucial also for employment generation. The federal government has not formulated necessary laws so we are urging them to provide the local government with rights guaranteed in the Constitution in sectors like education, health and agriculture. For example, the right to look after school education has been given to local government, but the court halted all teacher postings we put forward.

How will you meet your people's expectations for good governance at local level?
We have not been able to meet all expectations due to limited resources. Birganj needs Rs3 billion, but we only have Rs420million collected through taxes. Regarding governance, there is a corruption culture here. I have taken action against every officer asking for bribes.

Being a businessman yourself, what are the problems for industries here?
Industries across Nepal have similar problems. Mainly, there is lack of a stable policy. Everyone is worried about the economy being import-dependent but national industries have no protection. Even industries whose raw materials are abundant in Nepal, like sugar and paper, are unable to compete in the market. We will be able to reduce imports only if production costs are lower. Birganj can be a major contributor in this.



SARAD OJHA

What changes can we expect in the remaining 3 years of your term?
The first year was difficult because I had to learn how to navigate the government process. But foundations have been laid now and there will be substantial progress in the coming year.

Why VVIP movement torments citizens

Basanta Khadka in
nagariknews.com, 24 April

In 2008, Nepal’s 240-year monarchy came to an end. Citizens could be elected to lead the country. But today, there is no difference between how past kings and current presidents behave. The President moves around with the same motorcade as the kings used to. Police chief Basanta Kumar Panta says traffic arrangements for the movement of the President simply reflect respect for the office. “It is only on certain days that such special arrangements are made and they also reflect security concerns,” he said,



adding that such measures are common in other countries as well. A VVIP motorcade requires diverting traffic from certain roads, but Panta said the intention is to minimise inconvenience to commuters. He added that the arrangements cannot be changed by any one person because they

are stipulated by law, and were handed down from the royal days. He disclosed that since the security guidelines are being modified, the new political reality could be reflected in the rules. There is growing and widespread criticism of Nepal’s leaders, especially the Prime Minister and the President, for the perks that they enjoy and their public displays of power and luxury. While survivors of the earthquake still don’t have adequate housing, the President has been bought an expensive new helicopter, vehicles worth tens of millions and other

facilities that would put even the spending spree of kings to shame. President Bhandari has been criticised for not shaking hands but just doing a namaste, with critics noting the behaviour hearkended back to royal times. However, even though the President is criticised for her facilities, it is Prime Minister Oli who has been more harshly ridiculed for his use of power and has been compared to Nepal’s former kings. A Prime Minister who should be protecting the political rights and wellbeing of citizens is squeezing civic rights and press freedom, and taking decisions on army deployment – indicating the direction in which his administration is headed. Nepal’s republic is being mocked by leaders

who surround themselves with unnecessary security cordons and facilities that the country can ill afford. Analyst Hari Roka blames this culture on the lack of democracy within political parties, which allows leaders to behave like they are from another planet. Nepal Community Party spokesperson Narayan Kaji Shrestha admits that although the political system in Nepal changed, the norms and values of politicians did not. “This is a serious challenge, it needs a transformation of the mindset. Our political revolution should have been followed by a complete change in the culture,” he added. “The fear of reprisal within the party has silenced those who want change.”



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Sangita Magar: from

Animesh Shrestha

Four years after surviving an acid attack, and following 17 surgical procedures on her face, Sangita Magar and her family are re-traumatised by the pending release from jail of her attacker Jiwan B K.

When B K was arrested days after the acid attack on his neighbour Sangita, then a high-school student, he threatened to kill the family after serving his sentence. Says Sangita's mother Chameli Magar: "We take his threat very seriously. He is unrepentant and could do it again."

In 2015 Sangita Magar was 16, taking tutorials for her high school exam and dreaming of one day making it to Nepal's national karate team. She was happy, had many friends, did well in school and wanted to become a doctor.

Those carefree days are reflected in Sangita's small bedroom. On the blue wall is a framed photograph of a young girl posing with her sari-clad mother. Several medals for winning karate championships hang between two flags of Nepal. On the bedside table sit various shades of nail polish, and beside them is a birthday greeting card urging the receiver to 'appreciate the moments that have filled your life with laughter and joy'.

Sangita and her friend Sima Basnet were at a tuition centre in the Basantapur neighbourhood



ACTIVIST: Sangita Magar in a studio portrait before the attack (*above*), and this week at home in Kathmandu (*right*).

of Kathmandu when a boy in a hoodie entered the room, splashed a fiery liquid on them and fled.

Sangita first thought someone had thrown a balloon filled with hot water at her, but she felt her face, hands and body burn. Instinctively, she rushed out into the street and ran all the way home to her mother.

When she arrived, her skin was peeling off, and Sangita was screaming in pain. Chameli Magar, poured water on her daughter, and with the help of neighbours rushed her to Bir Hospital. That is all Sangita remembers of the day.

Due to her critical condition, Sangita was referred to KMC Hospital, where doctors managed to save her life but not her face. After many surgical procedures in the past four years, despite bouts of depression and fear of



Times FOLLOW UP

THE DAS SISTERS

It has been eight months since the rainy night when a neighbour splashed acid on the Das sisters as they slept in their home in Chandrapur of Rautahat.

Samjhana Das, 18, had burns to 35% of her body and was rushed to a hospital in Kathmandu, where she died an agonising death 12 days later. Her sister Sushmita, 16, survived but wears high-neck, full sleeve clothes to hide the burn scars.

"I miss my sister a lot. I don't want to go back to my village: there are too many bad memories and the same old questions that I am not ready for from people," says Sushmita softly while waiting for a surgeon's appointment (*right*). She now lives with her aunt in Kathmandu because her mother is separated from her father and works in Malaysia.

It was Samjhana's testimony from her hospital bed that led to the arrest of the family's neighbour, Rambabu Paswan, who she said used to stalk and repeatedly proposition her.

After the attack, Paswan had helped the sisters' father rush the

girls to Kathmandu for treatment. At the hospital he even told *Nepali Times* (#929, *below*) that the girls "are like daughters to me". It was all an act.

Paswan is now behind bars in Rautahat Jail. Government lawyer Khadindra Raj Katuwal, who has been handling the case, said that paperwork is taking time but added: "Paswan will be in jail for life as this case is being tried as a murder."

Sushmita is in Grade 8 in a Kathmandu school, and is hoping for a better life and future. 🇳🇵

Monika Deupala



BAD MEMORY: Sushmita Das, who was injured with her sister Samjhana in an acid attack in Rautahat last year in a Kathmandu hospital this week (*left*). She was featured on the front page of *Nepali Times* (#929) of 28 September 2018. Her sister Samjhana died of multiple organ failure 12 days after the attack. The perpetrator, Rambabu Paswan, is in jail facing a murder charge.



survivor to champion



ANIMESH SHRESTHA

facing people, Sangita is now an undergraduate and has become a social activist supporting other survivors of acid attacks in Nepal.

Unlike most victims who are reclusive and unwilling to talk, Sangita is confident and forthright. The more outspoken she is in public, the more Sangita feels she can be effective in exposing the misogyny and violence that lies at the root of the crime committed against her.

She also wants to set the media right for how unfairly reporters treated her and her family after the acid attack. She breaks down in tears as she recalls reporters bombarding her with personal questions and forcing her to relive her trauma, even blaming her for the attack.

“So many journalists came to interview me, and they all asked questions in a very insensitive manner that were difficult to answer,” she recalls. “I could feel my pain and suffering get worse.”

A few days after the attack, police tracked down Sangita's attacker Jiwan B K and produced him before the media. B K was unrepentant, telling reporters he carried out the acid attack to seek revenge against the Magar family for having mistreated him because he was a Dalit. Some in the media insinuated that Sangita and Jiwan were having an affair and that she had rejected him because of his caste.

Sangita has had four years to analyse Jiwan's motive, and thinks it all started with a dispute over a toilet shared by several families living in her neighbourhood. Jiwan B K had an altercation with Sangita's

brother Santosh over the use of the bathroom, and the dispute escalated, leading Jiwan to take revenge on the girl.

Sangita's friend Sima Basnet, who was slightly injured in the attack, is now in India and will soon graduate in political science. Both the girls now want to devote their lives to helping victims of acid attacks by providing counselling, ensuring justice is done, and by addressing the roots of the crime in Nepal's patriarchal mores.

Meanwhile, Chameli Magar blames herself for perhaps not doing enough to protect her daughter that fateful morning four years ago. She was told she should have poured milk on Sangita instead of water to neutralise the acid, which she did not know then.

Chameli was initially worried that Sangita would give up studies and work as a cleaner like herself. She supported her daughter as she overcame bouts of depression during her recovery, and encouraged her to go out more.

“I never got a chance to learn how to read and write,” says Chameli. “I now clean other people's homes for a living, I don't want my daughter to end up like me. I am proud of her for supporting other victims, in the same way that many of us provided her with emotional support after the attack.”

Thanks to her mother, Sangita has gained confidence to venture out, return to school and advocate for change. She wants the sale of acid in shops to be strictly controlled and is lobbying the health ministry

to create a separate facility for acid burn patients, so they get specialised care.

Sangita's activism has inspired many people in Nepal and abroad, and has turned her into a role model. Many acid attack survivors have reached out to her. Sangita says she does not want people's pity but to join her struggle for justice.

Section 193 of the Criminal Code, which came into effect in August 2018, states that acid attackers will be fined up to Rs300,000 and/or be jailed 5-8 years depending on the seriousness of the attack. If the victim dies, the culprit faces a murder charge.

Sangita wants the punishment to be more stringent, and the law to be amended to include payment for the victim's treatment as well as compensation. For now, her family's main worry is that Jiwan is getting out of jail soon, and that he may attack again. 🇳🇵

A BURNING SENSATION



Watch Sangita Magar and her mother Chameli speak about the horrific acid attack on the girl and the physical pain and mental stress it caused. Learn how Sangita overcame depression to turn her trauma into triumph, and help other survivors of acid attacks.

nepalitimes.com

... but brave acid survivor now dreads her attacker's release from prison

The Interrogation

The acid attack on Sangita Magar was all over the news that week in February 2015. I used to live near the Magar residence, and knew the family, so I followed the news with interest. One morning a week after the attack, I received a phone call from Hanuman Dhoka Police.

I felt a chill run down my spine since I had done nothing wrong, and wondered how the police found my number. They wanted to talk to me about a phone call I had received that morning.

When I arrived, many other people were waiting to be questioned, so I felt less nervous. The police wanted to know who had called me. I told them it was my friend who lived in the neighbourhood where the attack occurred, calling to wake me up to go to my high school class.

I was impressed that the police had the ability to check every number by geolocation. It was two weeks later that they tracked down Jiwan B K and arrested him.

Animesh Shrestha

Acid is a weapon

Burns Violence Survivors (BVS) Nepal has been helping an average of 40 patients with burns caused by fire and acid every year. Many are women burnt by in-laws for not providing enough dowry, but the organisation has also been helping victims (almost all young women) who have been subjected to acid attacks by husbands, jealous and spurned men or in-laws. Acid is corrosive and damages human tissue by eating through the skin into the muscles and bone. The healing process is also longer than for survivors burned by fire, and acid attack survivors need specialised care. www.bvsnepal.org.np



Acid attack makes it to Bollywood

Laxmi Agarwal was just 15 in New Delhi when an acid attack disfigured her entire face. Since then she has become an activist, leading the Stop Sale Acid campaign to end the easy availability of acid in roadside shops. However, very few people knew about her story before Bollywood's celebrity actress Deepika Padukone decided to make a biopic about her journey.

Chhapaak (Splash) is releasing in January 2020 but has already created a stir in the media, with every post Padukone shares about the shoot on social media going viral. The actress wears shocking prosthetic makeup reproducing the damaged skin on Agarwal's face.

“I never imagined that one day people would recreate the look of an acid victim, or even make a biopic on my life,” Agarwal told an interviewer, crediting the movie, and especially Padukone, for her fame. Agarwal hopes the movie will be “a tight slap on the face of my attacker, who thought he had destroyed my life”.

Nepal's own Rekha Thapa also produced a movie, *Rudrapriya*, focusing on acid attacks, but Bollywood's wider reach will give the crime much more publicity. Agarwal's story shares many similarities with the case in Nepal of Samjhana and Sushmita Das last year (*see sidebar, overleaf*). Like Samjhana, Agarwal was attacked as a teenager by a man twice her age for rejecting her advances. Samjhana succumbed to her injuries, while her sister Sushmita survived.

Chhapaak is expected to help efforts in both India and Nepal to regulate the sale of acid.



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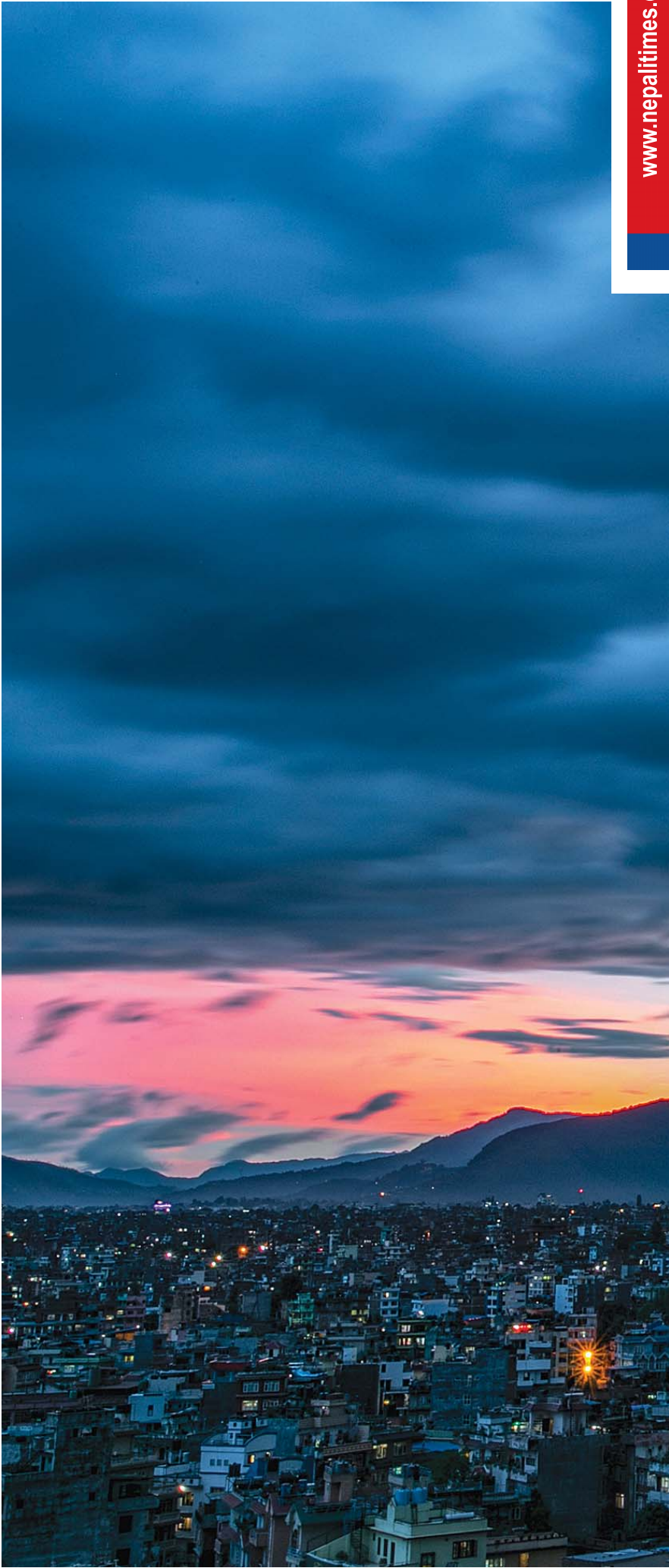
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Kathmandu is bursting at the seams, there is almost no room left to move. A lesson from the 2015 earthquake was that survivors need open spaces for shelter and safety: Tundikhel housed tens of thousands and other green areas served as open-air shelters for months. But in the four years since, the Valley's open spaces have shrunk further. The Nepal Army has fenced off Tundikhel, and construction material is dumped on what is left. On Thursday, hundreds of activists staged a protest to 'Re-open the Open Air Theatre' because the Municipality had allowed it to be turned into a parking lot.

Kathmandu's air pollution is made worse by the loss of its green lungs. The earthquake was a wake-up call, but it did not rouse anyone at the Municipality. The demand for real estate, soaring property prices, and collusion between the land mafia and local officials means the last open spaces owned by government schools, community parks and *guthi* are being sold off. When the Prime Minister's residence at Baluwatar needed expansion, it found an adjacent government plot was already sold to individuals, including NCP General Secretary Bishnu Paudel.

Disaster management agencies have identified 83 open areas as refuges during future earthquakes, but they are also needed to make the city greener and to foster community interaction.

The national government has bungled, and elected municipalities have failed to improve the quality of urban life. It is now up to local communities and neighbourhoods to rally and protect their own open spaces. Narayanchaur in Naxal was upgraded by residents, proving that urban renewal by restoring parks is possible.

Activism to stop open spaces from being built up is gaining strength; public pressure can force the Municipality to act to save what is left. 🇳🇵