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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

NEPAL'S HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

While the Government of Nepal is taking pains to polish its human rights image internationally, its actions at home belie the perception of a global rights champion.

Nepal became a member of the revamped UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2018 for the first time, for a term running until 2020. On 27 February 2019, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali addressed the HRC, telling it Nepal had embarked on the final leg of the peace process by extending the terms of two commissions: one on truth and reconciliation, the other on enforced disappearances.

The process would be guided by the Comprehensive Peace Accord of 2006, Supreme Court directives, international human rights commitments, victims' concerns and ground realities, Gyawali assured the HRC.



HIMALKHABAR.COM

Subsequently, the government put on an elaborate and insincere act to amend the Act, even asking representatives of the international community in Kathmandu for their suggestions. It was a ruse. As a result, on 12 April five HRC officials wrote to the government pointing out shortcomings in the truth and reconciliation process, including the 'reported lack of impartiality, independence and transparency' in the selection of new heads of the two commissions.

While the government takes pains to show the world that it is working for those who suffered rights violations during the 1996-2006 conflict, and their families, at home a proposed law threatens to weaken the national institution tasked with ensuring the human rights of all Nepalis — the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

A proposed amendment to the NHRC Act 2012 would require the rights body to have its recommendations for action against perpetrators of alleged violations vetted by the attorney general. This is despite the fact that the NHRC is a constitutional body, a status given in the Interim Constitution in 2007 precisely so that the NHRC can investigate alleged violations independent of government interference.

In fact, the 2012 NHRC Act contained the same provision, section 17 (10), until it was declared null and void by the Supreme Court on 6 March 2013, following a challenge by lawyer Om Prakash Aryal. The court ruled

that as a constitutional body, the NHRC was capable and empowered to decide if a case should be pursued and that the attorney general could not overrule such decisions.

The revised Act, discussed by the parliamentary committee on law, justice and human rights this week, would reintroduce 17 (10) in slightly different wording, then go a step further by giving the AG the power to ask the NHRC to conduct criminal investigations.

Ironically, when Nepal was campaigning for governments to support its bid for an HRC seat in Geneva, it noted in a note verbale: 'The National Human Rights Commission, established as an independent statutory body in 2000, has now been elevated to a powerful constitutional body with a commensurate mandate, competence and independence.'

And in his HRC speech in February, Gyawali called Nepal a 'pioneer' for mainstreaming the global rights agenda into its national policies and plans.

Yet since the NHRC came into being in 2000, just 12.5% percent of its 810 recommendations have been fully implemented, 48.3% were implemented partially and 39.2% are under consideration. Even those statistics are misleading as the only recommendations acted upon concern compensation — those calling for action against perpetrators have been ignored.

Notably, all political parties that have held power in the past two decades have failed the NHRC, including the opposition groups now railing against the proposed amendments.

The NHRC reportedly recommended 17 changes to the revised NHRC Act 2012, all of which were ignored in the version sent to Parliament. The root of the ingrained culture of impunity and lack of accountability in Nepal today is the many perpetrators who literally got away with mass murder in the past. While truth-telling and compensation are important, without justice being seen to be done, the peace process will never really be over, as we have seen with a Maoist faction still on the war path.

Now that victims are in agreement and the way forward has been clearly laid out by the Supreme Court and international law, what's also needed to finally advance on transitional justice is a fresh slate of commissioners in both the enforced disappearances and truth and reconciliation bodies.

In February, Gyawali announced Nepal's candidacy for a second HRC term, from 2021 to 2023. That election will be decided primarily on geopolitical considerations, but the Nepal government could help its own cause by finally addressing the demand for truth and justice so conflict victims and their families can have closure, and by ensuring the independence of the NHRC.

While truth-telling and compensation are important, without justice being seen to be done Nepal's peace process will not be complete

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Maoist Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's effort to sack Army Chief Rookmangud Katawal and replace him with his nominee earned Dahal India's wrath, as Prashant Jha wrote in his column Plain Speaking in the #449 edition of *Nepali Times* of 1-8 May 2009.

The army row gives us a glimpse of India's concerns, its power and limits. The Maoists have been relatively successful in portraying the opposition to sacking General Katawal as India-inspired, and an unacceptable interference in Nepal's internal affairs. What they forget is that they would still be in the jungles fighting an unwinnable war if not for India's mediation. If Nepal's political class had succeeded in mounting a solely domestic opposition to the royal regime, if they had not rushed to Delhi to instrumentally use India to advance their own partisan interests, they could have told the Indians to keep away.

The reality is that this peace process is essentially a compact between India (which acted as a guarantor of the 12-point deal and later got the army on board), the Maoists (who promised to accept multiparty democracy) and the NC (which agreed to dump the monarchy). And now, the Maoists suddenly remember that domestic political decisions are none of India's business.



ONLINE PACKAGES



CLASS STRUGGLE

Despite being registered as government schools, madrasas do not receive the same treatment as other public schools. Visit Barkatiya School in Nepalganj, which faces many challenges yet is an example of how a madrasa school can provide well-rounded education to uplift the Muslim community. Story: *page 14-15*.



RULE BREAKERS

Ram Kumar Rai is a male kathak dancer. Aagya Khanal is a stunt rider in a profession dominated by men. Diwakar Chhetri is the first male class teacher of the junior section in his school. These individuals did not start out deliberately to challenge gender stereotypes but followed their passions, and refused to be deterred by what others said. Story: *page 8-9*.



MOUNTAIN BIKING

As one of the world's most vertical countries, and having six directions (east, west, north south, up and down) it was only a question of time before racing downhill on mountain bikes became a popular sport in Nepal. Story: *page 6 and 7*.

SNAIL MAIL

The Postal Service needs a Kulman Ghishing ('Is Nepal entering the post-Post Office era?', Aashish Mishra, #957).

Dev Shrestha

■ 10 years ago my weekly magazine which comes out in Germany on Sunday always arrived in Pharping on Wednesday. Nowadays the magazine comes always 3 weeks later. I have no idea what is happening.

Stephan Kocher

ELECTRIC TRANSPORT

Maybe they should fix the roads first ('Nepal's electric transport future is here', Sonia Awale, #957)? No electric car will survive the roads of Kathmandu. Another unrealistic statement by the president and government.

Martin Mueller

■ Lead by example. All public transport, taxis and motorised rickshaws should be electric with some degree of urgency using tax incentives if necessary. However there would need to be dedicated charging points around the city. Don't let Pokhara beat you to it.

Alan Roadnight

SANGITA MAGAR

So inspired by her courage and strength ('Sangita Magar: from survivor to champion', Animesh Shrestha, #957). Well done.

Steve Beatty

WHAT'S TRENDING



Sangita Magar: from survivor to champion

by Animesh Shrestha

After an acid attack disfigured Sangita Magar, she started helping others like her. But now she is afraid again because her attacker will soon be released from jail. Visit nepalitimes.com to read the full story, and watch a short film about how Magar overcame depression to become an activist.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Is Nepal entering the post-Post Office era?

by Aashish Mishra

Does Nepal's postal service have a future? Many readers shared their own experience using the postal service. Go online to read the feedback and watch video of *Nepali Times* posting a letter to itself, which hasn't arrived seven weeks later.

Most popular on Twitter

Most commented

Miss Nepal viral video and stage fright

by Lisa Choegyal

Back in 2004, Lisa Choegyal was a judge at the annual Miss Nepal pageant. Read her take on contestants, stage fright and the recent Miss Nepal viral video that took social media by storm last month.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepali acid attack survivor triumphs over trauma, but now dreads her attacker's release from prison.

Aditya Tamrakar @AdityaTamrakar4
The criminals like those should not be released, it's a crime that even devil will feel ashamed to commit. Drop some acid in their hands to let them feel the pain and agony that victim has gone through.

Ankit Khadgi @ankitkhadgi
Acid attacks are the proof of how toxic masculinity has engulfed our society. Men feel than women are entitled to them and they can do whatever they feel like. This thinking is affecting our whole society.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Six weeks ago, Nepali Times 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. Is Nepal entering the post-Post Office era? Report by Aashish Mishra.

Jainendra Jeevan @jainendrajeevan
It's not something as glamorous and welcome thing as 'digital revolution replacing traditional postal systems', the way they r in developed nations. It's the tip of the bigger iceberg- a corresponding decrease in efficiency in every sector-from post office to what not, u name it.

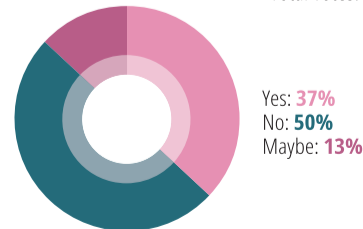
Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The Nepali board game Samrajya promises a fun journey filled with twists and turns. And even if you lose in the game, you win because you learn about Nepal's heritage.

Neeti Aryal Khanal @mail2neeti
This is awesome, can't wait to get this for my sons. Also, I hope this can be marketed to Nepalese living abroad, through online shopping.

Weekly Internet Poll #958

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

Total votes: 150



Weekly Internet Poll #959
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Are you worried about your online activities being restricted under increasing government surveillance?



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The number of visitors to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, is on the rise. Many pilgrims will visit on Buddha's birthday on 18 May, and visitor volume will increase exponentially after the new international airport comes into operation next year.

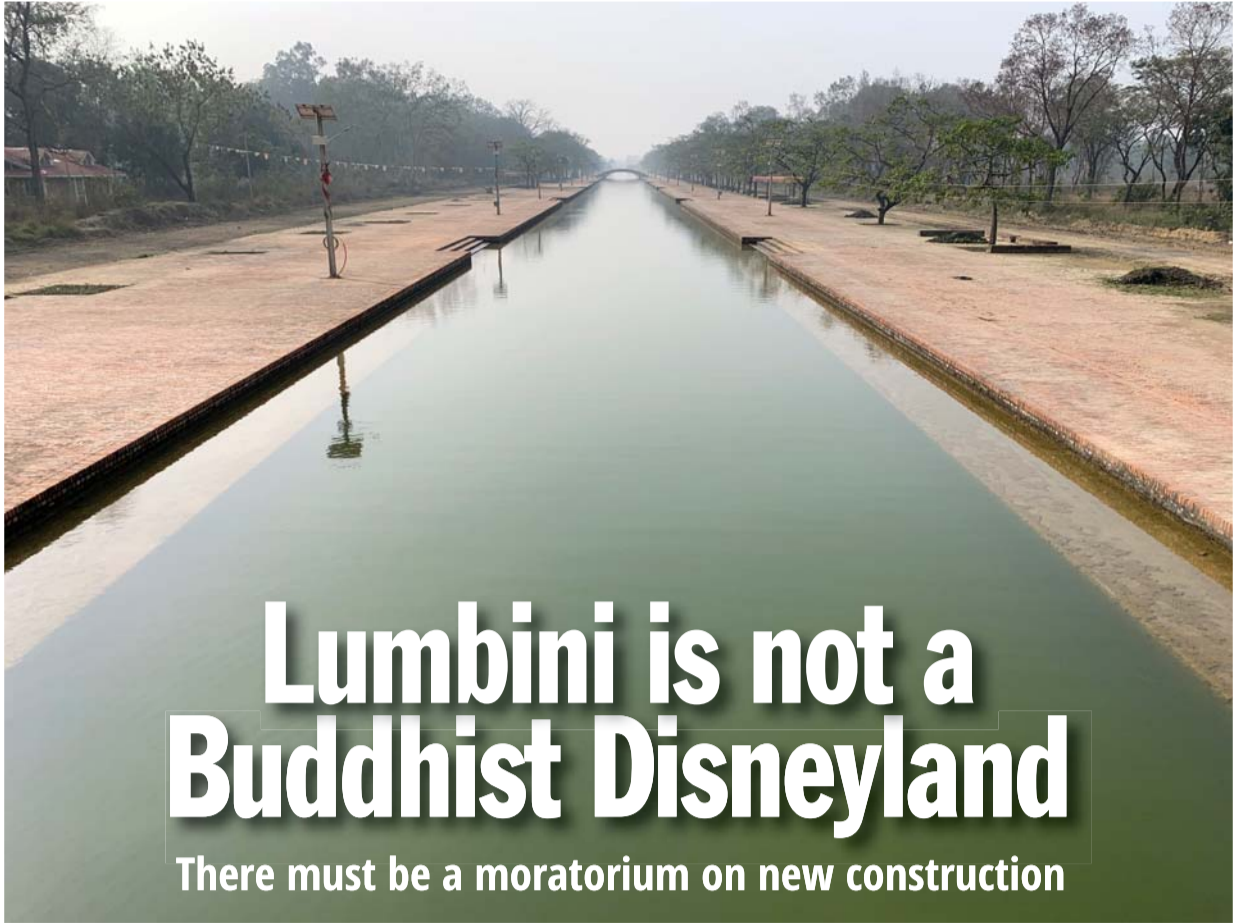


1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

People now visit from all over Nepal, and from around the world, to 'see and do' something at this sacred site. This is a problem, because many visitors walk away muttering that there is really 'nothing to see and nothing to do in Lumbini'.

In a strange way this is what the Buddha would have wanted in terms of educating people about the path to a life without suffering. The birthplace of the Buddha should be quiet, serene and natural, with plenty of opportunities for self-reflection, meditation, de-stressing, healing and learning.

The slogan of the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign is very appropriate for Lumbini — a 'Lifetime Experience'. People who know only that the Buddha was born in Nepal, but very little else about his life and teachings, are visibly disappointed when they take a long bus ride on a currently very dusty wide road, get off at a dirty bus stand, walk or take a noisy boat ride on the



Lumbini is not a Buddhist Disneyland

There must be a moratorium on new construction

Central Canal, buy a ticket, take off their shoes and walk to the building that houses the marker and nativity stones, then out to the pond, the Asoka Pillar and back again.

There is no one to explain anything. Who was the Buddha, who was Maya Devi, what was his childhood like, what did he teach, why do we remember him 2,600 years later?

Organised groups have guides — the majority of Nepali visitors do not. Outside the sacred garden, a young entrepreneur is designing and building a Buddhagram, where

visitors will be able to experience an eight-part sound and light show that captures the life of the Buddha with robot characters.

Lumbini is a World Heritage Site and a place of faith for millions from around the world. It should be managed as a sacred space, but also create jobs and economic opportunities for the local communities who need an incentive to preserve it, as did the people here two-and-a-half millennia ago.

The greater Lumbini area offers visitors a chance to understand the

childhood, youth and family life of Siddhartha, his return to meet family after enlightenment and much more. Without a guide and proper story-telling tools, the sites are a pile of bricks and little else. We need to bring these important relics to life. A trip to Lumbini should be a life-changing experience influenced by the life and teachings of the Buddha. The planned world class Lumbini Museum in buildings designed by Kenzō Tange should be a big contribution.

However, a very disturbing aspect of Lumbini today are the

multiple construction sites, including inside the zone set aside by Tange in his Lumbini Master Plan. We have to prevent Lumbini turning into a Buddhist Disneyland. The moisy motorboat ride on the canal (*left*) and the gaudy monuments are the results of this theme park mentality.

We now need a full moratorium on any more construction inside the sacred garden. The serenity that people expect here is being interrupted by constant noise of construction. This may require one final push for fund raising, but we need to close this phase.

We need to focus new resources and investment on upgrading facilities, developing the Greater Lumbini area, and the larger regional Buddhist Circuit II, with new resources and investments. Even before the international airport is completed, there is an economic boom of new hotels and infrastructure in the Bhairawa-Lumbini-Butwal triangle.

Meanwhile, Lumbini itself needs better signage, transportation to get from one part of the garden to the other, and more toilets (with showers and lockers). There have to be many more guides with passion and knowledge, as well as opportunities for seclusion for those who want to meditate.

All the monasteries, monks and staff have to be oriented on what is expected of them if they are residing here. And what about day and week passes for unlimited rides on electric buses in the greater Lumbini area?

With Visit Nepal Year and Visit Lumbini Year around the corner, a lot more work remains to be done in coming months to align Lumbini closer to the Buddha's teachings. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc



MOHINI SHRESTHA

Rox rocks again

Many in Kathmandu's expat and high society are familiar with Rox, the signature outlet of the Hyatt Regency in Kathmandu. Commuters have taken refuge at the restaurant because after negotiating the notorious traffic jam at the Chababil intersection, you don't want to head back to face that gauntlet again. Rox has been a place to chill and wait out the traffic with a drink in the company of friends. And if hunger builds up ask the sharp-looking waiters for the menu.

However, now that Rox is offering a new menu with authentic Italian cuisine, the restaurant has become a destination on its own, and worth travelling to.

This is Italian at its best: flavourful, tasty and aromatic, but healthy at the same time. The vegetables and herbs are grown in the Hyatt's own organic patch, while the dough for pasta and pizza are hand-made in house.

"We make almost 85% of ingredients in the restaurant, it helps to maintain consistency," explains Dhiraj Khadka, Sous Chef at the hotel.

Rox has surpassed its regular pasta fare by adding homemade spinach and ricotta ravioli and truffle mushroom sauce. The ravioli is crunchy, the spinach soft and the cheese melts in the mouth.

Another new dish on the pasta menu is the seafood linguine, which despite Nepal's landlocked status is surprisingly fresh and imbued with rich organic tomato flavour. One bite of this dish transports us straight to a sea-front trattoria in Rimini.

On to the main course. Two dishes that seem popular are oven baked, Tuscan-style, whole Himalayan rainbow trout and duck breast with pumpkin purée and fava bean ragout. I will not attempt to describe the taste; suffice to say that it hits the spot.

The whole trout is first grilled

with herbs, while the large chunks of duck meat and vegetables make for a unique combination of fish, bird and plant. The pumpkin sauce, while a little sweet, complements the combo.

Tiramisu and cassata are two new desserts already popular with Rox regulars. The tiramisu is a homemade treat, while the layers of pistachio-canilla-strawberry ice-cream patterned after the green-white-red Italian flag in the cassata make you want to stand up, sing the Il Canto degli Italiani and salute. The nuts and marshmallows give the dish a welcome added bite.

Vegetarians and the health-conscious will be pleased with the Rox's crunchy and fresh organic vegetables — you can actually taste the goodness. Dinner is served from 6PM to 10PM.

With a show kitchen, wood oven and authentic Italian cuisine, the Rox is no longer just a stopover while waiting out traffic — it's a destination on its own. 🇳🇵

Reeti KC

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Carbon-neutral Yeti

Yeti Airlines says it has become the first carbon-neutral airline in Nepal by reducing and offsetting its greenhouse gas emissions after undertaking an independent carbon audit facilitated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The audit revealed that the airline produced 19,665 tons of CO₂ equivalent in 2018, including from its flights, ground vehicles and other facilities. In the previous year the airline reduced its carbon emission by 20% per passenger and by a further 12% with more fuel-efficient aircraft. The airline inducted its fourth ATR72-500 this week, and expects another next month.

Yeti also offset its greenhouse gas emissions by procuring Certified Emission Reductions carbon credits through its green forests project. "UNDP would like to congratulate Yeti Airlines on becoming the first carbon neutral airline in Nepal after having successfully met the international UN approach on carbon neutrality," said UNDP Nepal Representative Ayshanie Medagangoda-Labe.

Heritage Walk

NMB Bank organised the 8th NMB Bank Heritage Walk 2019 on World Heritage Day. Representatives from the Bank's Board of Directors and Sunil KC, Chief



Executive Officer, inaugurated the event. Over the years, NMB has been working to create awareness on preservation of heritage sites. First initiated on its 16th anniversary, the Bank has been organising the Heritage Walk for the past seven years. A clean-up program and photo exhibition was held following the walk.

Call Aayo Paisa Payo

Ncell has launched a customer loyalty campaign, *Call Aayo Paisa Payo*. Customers will receive a Rs2 bonus for every minute of an international call they receive, from any country, that goes beyond 2 minutes (up to 10 minutes maximum). The scheme, which started 29 April, will run for three months. A Samsung Galaxy A20 will be rewarded weekly to a customer who meets the campaign's criteria.

Mega Offer

As part of its Mother's Week Celebration, Mega Bank is offering a scan and pay scheme through Mega Smart Banking. This includes 10% cash back or Rs1,000 at Rising Mall, Kamaladi, if goods are bought using the Fonepay QR code. The offer is valid from 28 April to 4 May.

prabhu BANK

Turkish global golf in Gokarna

It is billed as the world's largest corporate amateur golf tournament, and is being held nearly simultaneously in 100 countries around the world for the seventh year running. Among the venues are the Ryder Cup's Gleneagles, Royal Birkdale of the Open Championship – and Gokarna Forest Resort in Kathmandu.

This is the second time Nepal is part of the Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup's qualifiers, which will be held on 11 May with over 100 golfers from various clubs around Nepal taking part. The winner will get to attend the finals of the Turkish Airlines Open in Antalya, in November.

"We are thrilled to be back in Kathmandu with the World Golf Club," said Country Manager for Nepal of Turkish Airlines, Abdullah Tuncer Kecici. "Nepal is more than mountains, it is also a golfing destination. Here you can play golf and admire the mountains at the same time."



MONIKA DEUPALA

This year's tournament will be in memory of Ang Tshering Sherpa of Yeti Airlines, which also manages the Gokarna Forest Resort. Previous Nepal champion Madhav Acharya attended the grand finale at Antalya last year.

Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup was initiated in 2013 as part of its ground-

breaking golf programs, which include the Turkish Airlines Open European Tour Tournament and the Turkish Airlines Challenge Tour event. Besides golf, the airline is also involved in organising tournaments for other sports like soccer, rugby and basketball.

"There is a huge untapped potential to promote Nepal as a golfing destination for

TEERING OFF: Turkish Airlines Country Manager Abdullah Tuncer Kecici (*centre*) flanked by Bhairaja Pandey (*left*) of Gokarna Golf Club and Deepak Acharya, Gokarna Forest Resort, announcing the Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup qualifiers in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign," said Deepak Raj Joshi of the Nepal Tourism Board.

Indeed, the Gokarna course is featured prominently on Turkish Airlines promotional material and its website's home page, which notes: 'Inspired by the myth, magic and mystery of the once forbidden valley, David Kidd of Gleneagles Golf Developments, pitted his skills against those of nature, creating a golf masterpiece spread over 140 acres at 4,550 ft above sea level, the 6,755 yard, par 72 course boasts the only bentgrass greens on an 18-hole course in South and South East Asia.'

Gokarna Forest Resort is a former royal hunting reserve and the last remaining primary forest on the Kathmandu Valley floor, and the course's fairways curl through jungle teeming with deer and monkeys, with the summit of Mt Dorje Lakpa (6,980m) peering over the foothills.

Golfing proponent Deepak Acharya of Gokarna Forest Resort appreciated the effort Turkish Airlines is making to develop Nepal as more than just a trekking and mountaineering attraction, including promoting it as a scenic golfing destination. Bhairaja Pandey of Gokarna Golf Club noted efforts made by the airline, especially Kecici, to promote Nepal's tourism and its diverse attractions. Both were addressing a press conference on Wednesday to announce the Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup.

Turkish Airlines has a fleet of 333 aircraft flying to 306 destinations in 124 countries, and carries over 75 million passengers yearly. Its newly opened Istanbul Airport hub is set for completion in 2028, when it will serve up to 200 million passengers annually. **Reeti KC**

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Nepal has the ideal extreme terrain for mountain bicycle racing

Nepal has the ideal extreme terrain for mountain bicycle racing

Reeti KC

Being one of the world's most vertical countries, with six directions (east, west, north south, up and down) it was only a question of time before racing downhill on mountain bikes became a popular sport here.

Now it has. Pedal-powered, two wheel downhill races are gaining adherents looking

for adrenalin and adventure. With the world's most rugged terrain to practice in, Nepalis are even winning international championships. (See overleaf.)

Adventure seekers hurl themselves down steep slopes on their dirt bikes, careening through narrow trails, dodging cattle, goats, people, trees and rocks, all the while striving to maintain balance and prevent themselves from losing control and veering off the path to the valley below.

Possibly the first daredevil mountain

bikers here were Craig Moffet and Brad Grunewald, who rode all the way to Everest Base Camp and back in 1983. Since then, as roads have opened up Nepal, adventure bikers have been venturing further afield into wilder parts of the country.

“Because trekking routes have been turned into motorable roads, many young people are taking up cycling,” explains Diwaslal Pradhan of the group Pangro.

Mustang is gaining popularity for cross-country riders, but there are challenging ridge

trails right here on the Kathmandu Valley rim, in Chobar, Dakshinkali, Pharping and Godavari.

And as they gain experience, many young Nepalis want to take part in competitive downhill races. "More than 20% of the participants in our last race were youth," says Shyam Limbu of Grand Himalayan Enduro, adding that the sport is not just fun, but also a healthy, environment-friendly activity.

Grand Himalayan Enduro is now famous

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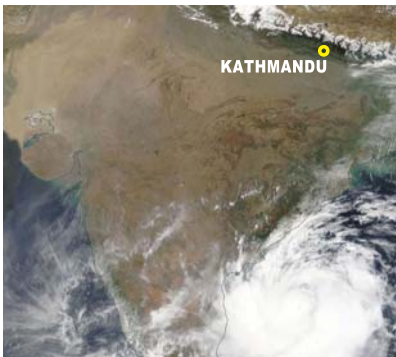
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Cyclone Fani is already making its presence felt over central and eastern Nepal and the impact will be most intense on Friday, with stormy rain in Kathmandu Valley. However, the system is being pushed away by the westerly, and only the outer margins of the cyclone will graze Nepal. We will see some passing thunderstorm activity into Saturday afternoon. Things should be more settled from Monday onwards, with maximum temperature climbing to 29C, normal for this time of year.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 26° 17°	 25° 15°	 27° 15°



Going places together - qatarairways.com



Karma's karma

Fed up with 12-year-old Karma Sherpa playing video games all day long, his aunt took him for a biking trip to Chobar four years ago.

That is all it took to get the young lad hooked to mountain biking. Now 16, Sherpa and his bicycle are inseparable, and besides winning many national races, in December he came second in the under-18 International Chiang Mai Enduro (*pictured, above*).

"I believe I was a pretty notorious kid," he admits with a shy smile. "I didn't like doing homework, so I was out and about in the mountains around Kathmandu in my bike every chance I got."

The Chiang Mai race was a morale booster for the Nepali teenager, who realised he could compete with the best in the world, and was also inspired by meeting the big names in downhill biking.

"The competition was five days after my final exams in Kathmandu, so I could not practice much but the race went well," Sherpa said, hinting that he could have even come first if he had enough training time.

The boy's first race was the Kathmandu Mountain Bike Festival, when he was 13. Despite being nervous he finished seventh,

then built on the experience winning three of his next six races.

Sherpa credits his trainer and mentor, Shyam Limbu of Grand Himalayan Enduro. "He is my biggest inspiration," says the racer, explaining how Limbu is a holistic trainer, monitoring his technique, mental maturity, concentration and nutrition.

"He also tells me to be less shy and talk to people more. It is good advice and has allowed me to make many international friends," adds Sherpa, who also looks up to Nepali bikers Rajesh Magar and Suman Tamang.

Sherpa's foster parents are very supportive, and took him to Switzerland for bike training. He has been told his performance is much improved after that, thanks also to better gear.

Downhill racing is dangerous, and even at 13 Karma was already battle-scarred. He broke his collar bone while training in Switzerland and proudly shows us an x-ray of his shoulder on the cracked screen of his smart phone.

"I have broken my collar bone in the exact same place twice. I also broke this mobile screen in one practice," he adds smiling.

The teen biker's ultimate goal is to participate in and win the Red Bull Hardline, one of the toughest downhill mountain bike races in the world. He says: "One victory is not enough, I need to win more."

Reeti KC

worldwide for its challenging terrain and tough competition. Cycle enthusiasts from 21 countries flew to Nepal for the 2019 downhill race earlier this year.

"There are 15-20 international participants who come to Nepal every year just to take part in the race. This year more than half of our participants were foreigners," explains Limbu. He points out that while Nepalis are increasingly drawn to the risky sport, the proportion of foreigners is increasing as word spreads about Nepal's challenging terrain.

Besides Enduro, other international cross-country biking competitions in Nepal include Yak Attack and the Himalayan Outdoor.

Adventure is risk, and it is this risk that seems to attract downhill racers. The danger does not seem to deter women riders either, whose numbers are increasing through platforms such as the Ladies Mountain League, which introduced women to outdoor sports like swimming, rock-climbing, cycling, hiking and kayaking.

"The platform for women gives access to sports by providing equipment, such as bikes, via a mountain-biking 'library', and at the same time women can get training," says Jenny Lama from Himalayan Single Track,

a branch of the Ladies Mountain League that has trained 30-35 women in the past year, three of whom participated in the National Downhill Championship. Others took part in cross-country racing, and some became so addicted to the outdoors they went on to become mountain guides.

Says Sailendra Dongol of the National Cycle Association and co-owner of Pangro: "Just organising races should not be our goal, we need to develop more athletes."



As one of the world's most vertical countries, and having six directions (east, west, north south, up and down) it was only a question of time before racing downhill on mountain bikes became a popular sport in Nepal.

nepalitimes.com

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MANTRA
Spa & Wellness

HOP OVER the GENDER GAP

There is a debate in behavioural science about which plays a more significant part in determining gender roles: nature or nurture. Most children are raised with gender stereotypes, but are they born with some gender traits? What role does society play in defining what masculinity and femininity mean?

Despite being tied down by patriarchal traditions, education and exposure to the wider world are changing gender perceptions and roles in Nepal. Slowly, rule breakers are becoming the rule.

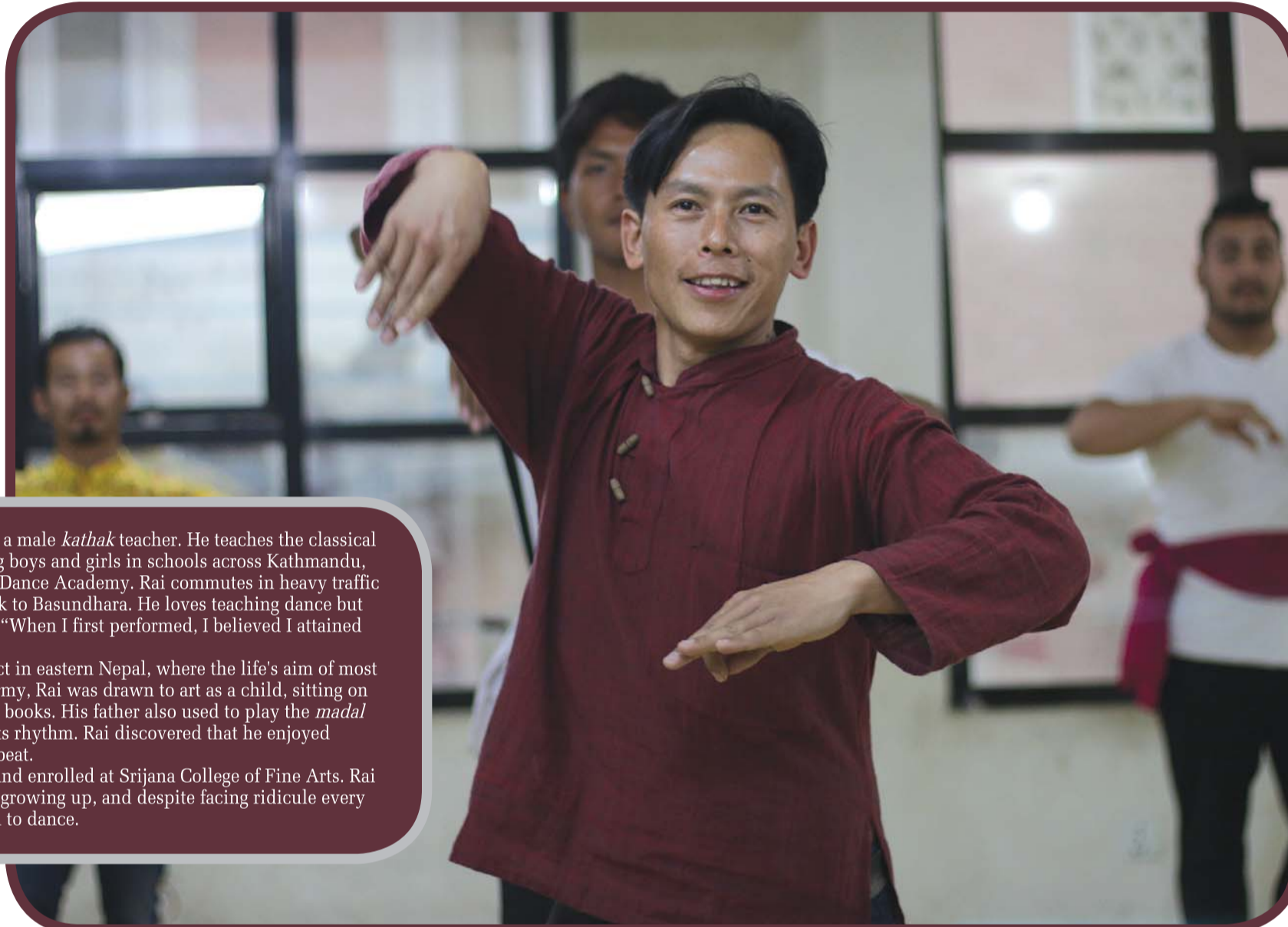
“
Art is for everyone
irrespective
of gender.
It is about
aesthetics.”

Ram Kumar Rai,
Dancer

Ram Kumar Rai is rare: he is a male *kathak* teacher. He teaches the classical Indian dance form to young boys and girls in schools across Kathmandu, one of them being Rhythm Dance Academy. Rai commutes in heavy traffic every morning twice a week to Basundhara. He loves teaching dance but enjoys dancing even more: “When I first performed, I believed I attained mokshya.”

Born in a village in Bhojpur district in eastern Nepal, where the life's aim of most boys is to join the British or Indian Army, Rai was drawn to art as a child, sitting on his father's lap while he read the holy books. His father also used to play the *madal* drum and his children all danced to its rhythm. Rai discovered that he enjoyed dancing, letting his body sway to the beat.

He came to Kathmandu to study, and enrolled at Srijana College of Fine Arts. Rai did not have a male role model while growing up, and despite facing ridicule every step of the way, he pursued his dream to dance.



SONAM CHOEKYI LAMA

Non-toxic, heal

Photos and i
Jessica



SUSHRUT
NEPAL

“It's OK for me to wear makeup. Being a straight man affords me the privilege of being comfortable. As a man, I sit at the very centre of the system that creates the dominant narratives about the world. Presenting myself in traditionally feminine ways is a way for me to assert that healthy masculinity allows a space for expressions that are as varied as the people who make them.”

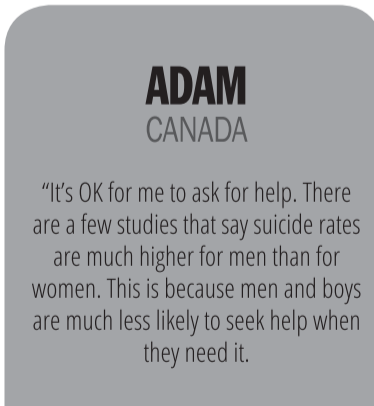
SAM
AUSTRALIA/UK

“It's OK for me to acknowledge the role men have played in establishing the system that does not value women as much as men, and the responsibility men have in changing this reality. It's OK for men, like me, to take a stand — to step up and speak up — to alter the expectation of what it means to be a ‘man.’”



NARAYAN
NORTHERN
IRELAND/NEPAL

“It's OK for me to be vulnerable. I believe we are all made up of masculine and feminine energies. The masculine becomes toxic when it doesn't allow itself to feel and when it responds to hurt with aggression rather than understanding. Real men can be vulnerable and can be hurt, and it's OK.”



ADAM
CANADA

“It's OK for me to ask for help. There are a few studies that say suicide rates are much higher for men than for women. This is because men and boys are much less likely to seek help when they need it.



YANIK
NEPAL

“It's OK for me to be a stay-at-home husband. Coming from a society that is so steeped in patriarchy, I just want to be the devil's advocate and challenge taboos and paradoxes.”

Aagya Khanal, 22, is a stunt rider, a rarity among her male peers. But she is only doing what came naturally to her — she has enjoyed riding motorcycles since childhood.

Still, Khanal never thought she would become a professional until three years ago when she went to a motorbike race and saw women riders doing stunts. She immediately joined the team.

“I was scared when I started. But I used to look at other lady stunt riders and in that way overcame my fear,” she says.

An even bigger hurdle was her parents. “I was in a dilemma whether to tell my parents or not. When I confessed to my brother and sister, even they were concerned about the risks and did not support my choice,” Khanal recalls.

Her parents soon found out what she was up to after seeing photos of their daughter performing stunts. They asked her to stop, but she continued. Eventually, they came around after finding out that people appreciated her skill.



“As female riders, no one discriminates against us. If a man can do it, a woman can too.”

Aagya Khanal, Stunt Rider

“I have never seen teaching as a gendered profession.”

Diwakar Chhetri, Teacher



MONIKA DEUPALA

When Diwakar Chhetri became a Grade 8 class teacher at a school in Lalitpur, he did not realise he was the first male class teacher in the junior section. However, gender has never been a concern for Chhetri. He has heard fellow teachers say that men are more qualified to teach higher grades and women are more suited for primary school, but he knows that is an ill-informed stereotype. So is the belief that male teachers are better at science and maths instruction.

Chhetri is passionate about his profession, and he thinks that drive is much more important than whether a teacher is a woman or man. “It is not my personal mission to break gender rules but our patriarchal society has notions about what jobs are for men and which for women.”

Chhetri now teaches lower secondary grades, for students aged 9-13, and believes those are formative years for children because they need guidance, but also the freedom to explore. He says he became a teacher because his role model was his mother, a teacher as well. Some think Chhetri became a school teacher because he could not excel at any other profession, but he says they do not understand the value of the profession, including how important it is to bring up the next generation of citizens to know about their rights and responsibilities.



Ram Kumar Rai is a male *kathak* dancer. Aagya Khanal is a stunt rider in a profession dominated by men. Diwakar Chhetri is the first male class teacher of the junior section in his school. These individuals did not start out deliberately to challenge gender stereotypes but followed their passions, and refused to be deterred by what others said.

thy masculinity

Interviews by Amity

PETER
USA

“It’s OK for me to be who I am, warts and all. I mean that figuratively (I have nothing against dermatology). I think “toxic masculinity” is rooted in men’s insecurities. If I were to give advice to my younger self about what it means to be a good man, I think the main thing would be this: care less about what others think, judge others less, and learn more.”



VARUN
NEPAL

“It’s OK for me to be afraid. The notion of fear is always held in relation to failure for boys. I’ve realised that being afraid opens opportunities for learning. In today’s day and age I’ve noticed men reacting irrationally because they are afraid to show people that they do not know something.”

FABIO
BRAZIL

“It’s OK for me to be a man who isn’t afraid to show my emotional side. My emotions are a part of who I am. Having the strength to be open about this and not hide is pure freedom.”



MAX
NEPAL

“It’s OK for me to be feminine. I have been told multiple times that my hand gestures are really girly. This is something I can’t really control. People have also told me that my face looks very girly and I could easily pass as a girl. Now, what can I do about looking like me? So I guess, it’s okay for me to have a “beautiful face” (darn I said it!).”

NILS
FRANCE

“It’s OK for me to wear pink. I don’t think colours should be meant for a specific gender, and it’s annoying to feel we must limit our choices for such reasons.”



EVENTS



Patan Tour

Experience walking through Patan and learning about the history that influenced the old town and how it is shaping the new one. The tour, in Nepali, is one-of-a-kind and free of charge, although donations will be accepted. Meet at the venue.
4 May, 2:30-4pm, The Golden Temple, Patan, 9818664566

Mother’s Day

Celebrate this mother’s day by honouring the most important woman in your lives. You can prepare your mother’s favourite dish, buy her sweets or just spend some quality time with her.
4 May

Lost in Transition

Siddhartha Art Gallery presents Lost in Transition, an exhibition of Mann Gurung’s paintings and drawings. Gurung is the recipient of the Himalayan Light Art Award.
10-23 May, 11-5pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4218048

Photo Sindhuli

This photo exhibition focuses on the importance of nature, culture, society, religion and livelihoods in Sindhuli.
3-9 May, 11-5pm, Nepal Tourism Board, Bhrikutimandap (01) 4112128



Visual Storytelling Workshop

An intensive two-week workshop by photo.circle to introduce photographers to narratives and storytelling. Designed for photographers who have a technical base in digital photography but want to improve. Apply on the photo.circle Facebook event page.
6-20 May, 2-6pm (weekdays), 10-4pm (Saturdays), Rs9,500, photo.circle, Jhamsikhel (01) 5543501

Movie Screening

Enjoy the evening watching this inspiring documentary of runner Mira Rai. The film was selected for the BANFF Film festival tour 2017, the world’s largest mountain film festival and tour. Mira Rai has touched many lives through the documentary.
8 May, 6:30-8pm, HUB, Thamel, 9866273244

Networking for Start-ups

A networking event to answer questions like the factors for success and role of philanthropy in start-ups. With Erik Detiger, Raj and Eva Wieners. Join the informal event for some great conversation, coffee and snacks.
3 May, 2-5pm, Muse Restobar, Lazimpat (01) 4445533



Wall Climbing

Adventure-lovers: here’s a wall-climbing competition to get your adrenalin flowing. Open only to beginners, if you have just fallen in love with the sport this event is for you.
4 May, 9-4pm, Rs1,000, Ages 15-30, Pasang Lhamu Sports Climbing Centre, Dhumbarahi, 984-7557794

Here and There

Here and there, Ici là-bas is an exhibition by photographer Ingrid Chiron. Her art builds an intimate bridge between two giants, a white and a blue (the Himalaya and the Atlantic Ocean) exploring identity, emotions and feelings.
9 May, 9-5pm, Alliance Française, Pulchok (01) 5009221

Outdoor Safety Skills

If you are a woman who wants to learn self-defense, this event is for you. The Outdoor Safety Skills and Mental Health Workshop for Women will teach you to protect yourself and be confident through self-defense.
4-5 May, 10-5pm, Chhaya Centre, Thamel, 9849271582

MUSIC



Tribute to Queen

Ranjesh Nepali and other talented musicians will pay tribute to the rock band Queen. Early bird tickets (Rs500, Rs1,000) available now at L.O.D in Thamel, Nepal Music Centre in Battisputali, and all four locations of Guitar Shop.
4 May, 5-8pm, Rs800 and Rs1,200 (door) , Lord of the Drinks, Thamel, 014444428, www.tktmonkeys.com

Binam Karmacharya

Karmacharya is a singer-songwriter who creates original, indie music. His acoustic music will be a soothing experience.
3 May, 6:30-10pm, Bikalpa Art Cafe and Bar, Pulchok, 9851147776

Reggae Night

Chill out with a live band performing reggae tunes, complemented by Jamaican snacks. Join for an enjoyable Friday night of good food, music and drinks.
3 May, 7-11pm, Chimes Restaurant, Sanepa, (01) 5549673



The Kathmandu Chorale

Come celebrate the 35th anniversary of The Kathmandu Chorale by attending a concert by the Young Peoples Choir of Kathmandu. 100 children from all over the valley and all walks of life will join their voices.
11 May, 3-6pm, The British School, Sanepa, 980-3191927

Blues Paradise

Irish Pub is back with their monthly Blues night, with a live performance by The Midnight Rider Trio. Preceded by happy hour from 3-7pm.
3 May, 8-11:30 pm, Irish Pub, Lazimpat, (01) 4416027

DINING



Baan Thai

Baan Thai serves generous portions of perfected and healthy Thai dishes.
Durbar Marg (01) 4231931

Empire Restaurant & Bar

Enjoy Stuffed Potato Croquette, a classic French dish, for lunch or dinner at the restaurant serving vegan as well as meat food items.
Kupondole Heights, Bakhundole, 9801112311



Krishnarpan

The restaurant at Dwarika’s has become a must-see for expats and tourists. Even locals who can eat dal bhat at home find its spread and service exquisite.
The Dwarika’s Hotel, Battisputali (01) 4479488 / 4470770

New Orleans

Offering a wide variety of western dishes that are scrumptious yet healthy. Rosemary chicken and hamburgers will make you come back for more.
Jhame!, 5522708



South Indian Cuisine

The Café of Hyatt Regency in Kathmandu has a 10-day South Indian food promotion. Enjoy the tastes of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. The chef has handpicked ingredients to provide diners with authentic flavours.
3-12 May, 12-3pm (Lunch), 6:30-10pm (Dinner), The Café, Hyatt Regency, Taragon (01) 5171234

GETAWAY



Jagatpur Lodge

The lodge nestles in 8 acres of jungle grassland. Choose to stay in special tents that are no less than 5-star rooms, each including a private viewing deck from which to relish the breathtaking natural beauty.
Jagatpur, Chitwan (01) 4221711

Temple Tree Resort and Spa

A peaceful place to stay, complete with a swimming pool, massage parlour and sauna, it’ll be hard to leave once you arrive.
Gaurighat, Lakeside, Pokhara (61) 465819



Nirvana Country Club

Forty-five minutes from Biratnagar airport, Nirvana Country Club Health & Golf Resorts features a 9-hole course in Dharan that was built at a former recruitment and pension base for the British Brigade of Gurkhas in 1962. The course is par-70 over 18 holes.
Ghopa Camp, Dharan (025) 525555

Hotel Sabrina

Hotel Sabrina by Kalash Hospitality in Kathmandu is situated 6 km from Pashupatinath and Boudhanath Stupa and 8 km from Hanuman Dhoka. It provides a fitness centre, rooms, free WiFi and a terrace. Guests can enjoy drinks at the bar and a sauna as well.
Kathmandu (01) 4372451



Peacock Guest House

Housed in a World Heritage Site, the 3-storey, Newari-style building provides splendid views of Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple.
Bhaktapur (01) 6611829

OUR PICK

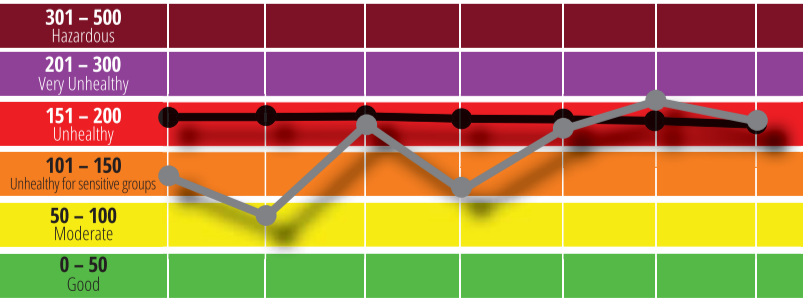


Opened in Kathmandu on 3 May

Dal Bhat Tarkari is the everyday concern of all Nepalis, and the movie links the constant refrain to Nepali people’s desire to go abroad. Niruta Singh is on screen after a long time, playing the wife of Hari Bamsha Acharya. The movie portrays a couple who will go to any lengths to go to America. The comedy directed by Sudan KC also features many other stars like Basundhara Bhusal, Kiran K.C., Swastima Khadka, Aanchal Sharma, Barsha Raut, and Madan Krishna Shrestha.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 26 April - 2 May



PM2.5	FRIDAY April 26	SATURDAY April 27	SUNDAY April 28	MONDAY April 29	TUESDAY April 30	WEDNESDAY May 1	THURSDAY May 2
Ozone							

The trend of bad air 24 hours a day continued this week. As this graph (above) shows, the daily average pollution numbers were not in the Hazardous purple zone, but remained consistently in the Unhealthy red every day. There used to be a time when the morning peak of 8-12AM was the worst for air quality — not any more. Now it is bad throughout the day, even after the evening rush hour and into the night. Even bleaker are the hourly averages, which readers can view live online at [www.nepalitimes.com](https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/)
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

शिक्षालाई सीपसँग, सीपलाई उत्पादनसँग, उत्पादनलाई बजार तथा बजारलाई रोजगारीको अवसर र आर्थिक विकाससँग जोड्ने अभिप्रायले नेपाल सरकारद्वारा गठित कार्यदलले मानव संसाधनको आकलन तथा प्रक्षेपण कार्य गरिरहेको सन्दर्भमा नेपाल सरकार शिक्षा, विज्ञान तथा प्रविधि मन्त्रालय र सङ्घीय मामिला तथा सामान्य प्रशासन मन्त्रालयको वेबसाइट मार्फत वा www.hrp.gov.np मा रहेको online तथा सुझाव संकलन फारम यथाशीघ्र भरिदिई सहयोग गरिदिनुहुन अनुरोध गरिन्छ ।

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Bramhayani temple in the 1970s. GÉRARD TOFFIN



Bramhayani temple today. PRASANT SHRESTHA



PRASANT SHRESTHA

Ancient Panauti's French Connection

Exhibition celebrates the bucolic town's past and present

The 13-century town of Panauti has the ambience of a place that has been bypassed by history. The fertile valley along the Rosi Khola was given by the king of Bhaktapur as dowry to his newly-married sister. However, archaeological finds prove that Panauti was settled much sooner, in the early Kirat period 1,500 years ago.

The town escaped the Gorkha invasion of the Valley, 30km to the west, and was annexed into the unified Kingdom of Nepal by default. Situated astride the India-Tibet trade route, Panauti was set back far enough from it not to be

tainted by commerce. In 1964, the Kodari Highway linking Nepal with China once more circumvented Panauti. Today, a new alternative road from Lalitpur to the B P Highway in Kavre passes through the town, but it is still not a major highway.

All this has meant that despite the march of modernity and the non-traditional reconstruction after many of its monuments were brought down by the 2015 earthquake, Panauti still retains much of its quaint and bucolic charm. The town has a sacred location at the confluence of the Rosi Khola and the Punyamati, as

well as a third mythological river, Lilawati. Panauti is also the seat of the famous Indreswar Temple – one of Nepal's oldest standing pagoda shrines, built in 1294 to honour Lord Shiva. The temple grounds now house a museum as well.

Panauti also has intangible heritage: it is still a largely cohesive town, which has preserved its Newa culture that has similarities — but also differences — to Kathmandu Valley traditions. Piles of newly harvested paddy are still

spread out to dry in golden circles along the brick-paved square of the old palace. Next month, on full moon day, the town will mark the three-day chariot festival and the exciting mass-crossing of the Punyamati by devotees.

This year will also see the Makar Mela, which happens every 12 years in Panauti, when tens of thousands of people from surrounding districts — including Kathmandu Valley — will converge on the town to take a dip in the holy confluence of the rivers. The month-long



festival will be held in January.

It was at the last Makar Mela in 2010 that Panauti native and photographer Prasant Shrestha met Gérard Toffin, the French anthropologist who has researched Nepal's Newa civilisation. Toffin is now emeritus professor at the Centre national de recherche scientifique (CNRS) and was involved in detailed research of Panauti's culture and architecture with Vincent Barré, Patrick Berger and Laurence Fèveille. This led to French Government involvement in the restoration of Panauti and its urban renewal from 1979-1989, just as the Germans were involved in restoring Bhaktapur.

To find out more about Panauti's past, present and perhaps even the future, Shrestha and Toffin have collaborated on an exhibition of old and new photographs at the Alliance Française Kathmandu Jhamsikhel, on display till 6 May. The exhibition is among events to mark the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between France and Nepal.

Toffin's photographs of Panauti from the 1970s are juxtaposed with Shrestha's recent images from the same places. The before-and-after photography depicts the changes that have taken place in the town in the past four decades, but it is also heartening to see how much of the core area of Panauti is preserved. In fact, a temple that is in ruins after the 1934 earthquake in Toffin's photograph, has been meticulously restored in Shrestha's image of the same shrine.

Says Shrestha: "We have managed to restore and salvage much of Panauti's history and culture, and now we need to get the younger generation to value our heritage. That is why this exhibition is important: to prove that our past is precious." 🇫🇷

*Changes in Panauti
Photo Exhibition
Till 6 May
Alliance Française Kathmandu
Jhamsikhel 01 5009221
Free Entry*



Private is political

The Vagina Monologues is being performed in Nepal for the fourth time, and this rendition at the Kausi Theatre does not adhere to Eve Ensler’s classic text. This localised version is based on stories of Nepali women and is therefore much more relatable and impactful to the local audience.

The meta-performance starts with theatre artists who are actually acting out a rehearsal of a production of *The Vagina Monologues 4.0*. Nepali stories have been adapted to fit the original frame — a tearful Nirmala Panta speaks graphically of the moment she was violated, while a conflict-era sexual abuse victim explains how prolonged her

pain has been. These stories are presented in a sensitive and not sensationalised way, which makes viewers share the trauma. The women begin by talking about how the play relates to their own lives.

“If this guy is bugging you so much, why do you still work with him?” one character asks, while the other replies: “Then who do I work with? There isn’t anyone else.”

The actresses urge one among them to share her story in the media, but soon realise the survivor is the one who will be blamed.

The scenes bring alive a world of women: how they often end up being silent because there are no options. The play has a desperate intensity as it reenacts the sexual harassment

cases rocking Nepal’s theatre world. Actresses have accused three noted theatre directors of sexual harassment in a popular weekly tabloid, leading to the theatre community temporarily banning some actors — a significant achievement here. The stage thus becomes the vehicle through which the accusations are documented and spread to more people.

The play engages with the current discourse about rape and sexual abuse being a manifestation of power imbalance. The fallback argument is often ‘not all men’, but the play gives a fitting comeback to that as well: “If I am being followed by a potentially dangerous person and I am scared, it won’t help me to say ‘not all men are like that’.”

Directed by Akanchha Karki, the play deliberately does not create any strong characters because the cases represent the experiences of all kinds of women. Nevertheless, together the stories produce an emotionally intense experience. Loonibha Tuladhar deserves special mention for her perfect timing, both in serious and comic scenes with their dark humour.

The play presents the viewpoint of many people who think that gender inequality and abuse don’t exist, because today women can go out to work, wear the clothes they want, own property, vote, and even *chhaupadi* (banishing menstruating women outside of their houses) has been abolished by the government.

“The play is based on true events, but you may not believe any of it,” says one character sardonically at the end of the play. “After all, it was made by a woman.” 🇳🇵

Sewa Bhattarai

Vagina Monologues 4.0: Private is Political
Kausi Theatre, Teku
Until 11 May



WELCOME BACK: President Bidya Devi Bhandari returns home to Kathmandu on Wednesday, a day earlier than planned due to a suspected case of altitude sickness in Lhasa.



FRENEMIES: Prime Minister KP Oli and vice-chair of Nepal Communist Party, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, at an event to mark May Day in Kathmandu on Wednesday.



VOILA: French Ambassador to Nepal François-Xavier Leger and a team from German Development Agency GIZ visit Banchare Danda, a proposed site for a new Kathmandu Valley landfill, on Monday.



INKMEN: “Tattoo is a form of expression. I will keep speaking out, and I will keep flying,” Captain Vijay Lama told *Nepali Times* after getting a new tattoo on Tuesday. Lama was suspended and then reinstated by the civil aviation authorities this week.



HOWZATT: Nepali bowler Bishal Kumar Patel celebrates during the finals of the ACC under-16 Eastern Region Tournament in Chiang Mai, Thailand on Sunday. Nepal defended the title by beating Malaysia.

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Comrade Prachanda @cmprachanda April 28
I am here today because of the journalists and the press:
Chairman Prachanda



Saurav Dhakal @DhakalSaurav
The city used to be open.
Slowly, the rulers took it all away.



bhusan dahal @DahalTbd
The Indian Army expedition team saw footprints in the snow and immediately pronounced them to be of the yeti. This is representative of the many false events that India has always seen and publicised about Nepal.



Bipin Adhikari @bipinlaw
The proposed controversial amendment to the Human Rights Commission Act will badly affect the constitutional civil structure and balance. It seems the government has not understood this. I hope Law Minister Bahanubhakta Dhakal withdraws the bill.

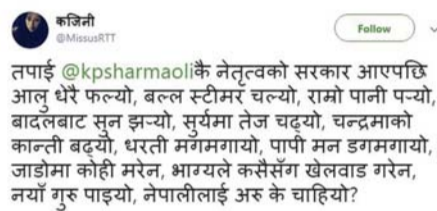


Yangesh @yangesh30
On one side of the Open Theatre the Army's building constructed without a permit, on the other side the Municipality's shutter shops. The Bus park captured by the view tower project. Baluwatar government property sold to private individuals. The Court says NCell doesn't need to pay tax. A communist Prime Minister treats a 4-year-old boy as God to say that the country never had it better. Deuba bears witness!

Nepali twittersphere



Babita Basnet @babita_7
A mothers' group in Pokhara boycotted an event that had no female speakers. When the organizers apologized saying they had not intended to do so, the women returned and the program was completed. Mothers' groups have always been at the forefront of women's movements in Nepal. Salute to mothers' groups.



Kajini @MissusRTT
There was a bumper potato harvest after you @kpsharmaoli's government took office, the steamer finally plied, the rains were good, the clouds dropped gold, the sun and moon got brighter, the earth gave off fragrance, the crooks quivered in fear, no one died in winter, fate was kind, you got a new guru. What else do Nepalis need?

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Moving to the mainstream

Nepal’s polity provides the Muslim community adequate space for social, economic and political uplifting

Chandra Kishore
in Birganj

Muslims have been living in Nepal even before this country existed. Before the 15th century, Tibetan Muslims from Ladakh traded in woollen products with the kingdoms of Jumla and Mustang. King Ratna Malla sent emissaries to Lhasa and convinced Kashmiri Muslims to use Kathmandu as an entrepôt for trade with India.

The 22 and 24 Kingdoms of Central Nepal brought in Muslim gunsmiths to make muskets and train troops. Others followed in the 17th century to trade in bangles and glass beads, and many of their descendants still ply the trade in Palpa, Patan and Bhaktapur.

Today, Nepali Muslims live in all seven provinces, and form 4.4% of the country’s population. The greatest density is in the Eastern Tarai, where some districts like Bara and Rautahat are more than 15% Muslim. Many of the 28 people killed when a tornado tore through villages in Bara on the night of 31 March were Muslim.

Anthropologists divide Nepali Muslims into five groups, depending on the time of settlement in Nepal and their place of origin: Kashmiri Muslims, Indian Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, Tarai Muslims (which includes Bihari Muslims from Bangladesh settled in the eastern Tarai), Mountain Muslims and a more recent influx of Rohingya refugees from Burma. Despite the diversity within the community, Nepali Muslims have always strived for a common identity based on their Islamic faith.



BIKRAM RAI

Muslims have historically struggled to be included in the socio-economic and political mainstream of the country. Despite forming a relatively small proportion of the national population, the Muslim vote bank constitutes an important enough swing vote to be wooed by the national parties.

Province 2 Chief Minister Mohammad Lalbabu Raut, of the Federal Socialist Forum Nepal, is the only Muslim chief minister under the federal system. Earlier, he was a member of the Constituent Assembly and as one of the senior-most Muslim politicians, the symbolism of his position goes beyond Province 2.

During the Madhes Movement, many Nepali Muslims tried not to be identified as Madhesi, but their involvement in the 2015 agitation established the clout of this community in the Tarai. Now, Nepal’s Muslims are intent on carving out a distinct identity that is not solely based on religion or the perception of them across the border in India.

Although the poverty rate among Muslims in Nepal is not as high as Tarai Dalits, for example, their literacy rate of 40% is much lower than the national average of 65%. Literacy among Muslim women is even lower. There is debate within the Muslim community about the madrasa-based education system and whether it prevents youth from competing for jobs and integrating into mainstream Nepali society.

Muslim women, especially, are seen to be unable to participate on an equal footing with their peers.

The exclusionary nature of some madrasas have made them an object of suspicion, and greater transparency in their conduct would help both the Muslim community and the nation at large.

Nepal’s constitution gives the Muslim community the opportunity to rise and address its shortcomings. Islamic holy days are now recognised as national holidays and the mainstream press provides adequate coverage to Muslim issues. Nepal’s Muslim community must take advantage of the equal rights of inclusion accorded to Nepal’s faiths and ethnicities.

Nepal’s Muslims should not be swayed by the strong slogans and agendas from across the border, or dismayed by what is happening across the Subcontinent. Nepal’s polity provides them adequate space for social, economic and political uplifting. 🇳🇵

Chadra Kishore is a Birganj-based commentator. datelineterai@gmail.com

Nepali Muslims



WELL ROUNDED: Grade 6 students of Barkatiya School studying Nepali. The madrasa has all subjects of the government curriculum with additional Urdu and Arabic.

Prakriti Kandel
in Nepalganj

Ever since he established Barkatiya School in Nepalganj in 1993 on leased property, principal Maulana Ziaul Mustafa Noorani has worked relentlessly to improve the quality of instruction in his madrasa.

More than 500 students attend the school from primary to Grade 10, studying all the subjects in Nepal’s education curriculum, like science, English, mathematics and social studies. But they also study Urdu and Arabic, mandatory according to Muslim culture.

“I transferred from a private school to Barkatiya because I wanted to understand my religion,” says Sahin Khatun, who passed her SLC and is now teaching English at the same school. “The school also prepared me to be well-rounded in all other subjects and gave me a future.”

Apart from students following the regular curriculum, Barkatiya has 80 children studying religion, who will graduate to become clerics in their communities.

The majority of madrasas in Nepal used to be religious institutions, but in 2004 the government started registering them



as government schools and had them adopt the Nepali curriculum, while allowing them to continue religious learning.

However although they are registered, madrasas do not receive the same treatment as other government schools. Barkatiya itself is short-staffed and underfunded, with only three teachers provided by the government for classes up to Grade 10.

“In spite of being mainstreamed, community leaders and schools feel discriminated against because they do not get the facilities other government schools have,” explains Samim Miya Ansari of the National Muslim Commission.

Despite being a school that the community considers a model, Barkatiya receives minimal funding, and the budget set aside for scholarships for needy students

on the margins

Madrasa education needs to be improved to uplift Nepal's Muslim community



PHOTOS: PRAKRITI KANDEL

has to be diverted to salaries of teachers, most of whom are hired outside of the government's quota.

After the 2017 elections, which returned Dhawal Rana as mayor of Nepalganj, the school for the first time got funding from the municipality — Rs700,000. However, the education budget is still centralised in Kathmandu, so local governments lack the jurisdiction and resources to allocate to schools in their municipalities.

This pertains not just to Nepalganj — madrasa schools across Nepal face a shortage of teachers and funding. The situation is most critical in Province 2, which has the largest Muslim population and the highest number of madrasas.

Registered madrasa schools have been receiving Rs168,000 per year as government grants, which is insufficient. With that amount they have to put together their own infrastructure and run the schools with a limited teacher quota, while dealing with misappropriation of even the meagre grants. Many teachers do not receive even their minimal salaries on time and numerous madrasas now have to raise additional money from India or the Middle East.

Meanwhile, government schools are allocated bigger budgets, have buildings, playgrounds and

furniture, and enough resources to hire teachers.

Barkatiya is relatively well managed, but most madrasa schools have little oversight and regulation. "Our madrasa schools do not have proper management committees so quality control and financial discipline is a huge problem," admits Naim Ansari of Samaj Bikas Kendra in Mahottari. Registered madrasas in that district have official permission to conduct only Grade 1, while the other grades are unofficial, which is a reflection of the lack of oversight by government.

Poor support and regulation of madrasa schools has taken a toll on the living standard of Nepal's Muslim community. Nearly one-quarter live below the poverty line. The Human Development Index of Muslims is 0.422, which is lower than that for Dalits all over Nepal (0.434), according to the 2014 Human Development Report by the National Planning Commission and UNDP. Province 2 has half the number of out-of-school children in Nepal: one-third between the ages of 5 and 12 do not attend school. Most of them are Muslim or Dalit.

Samim Miya Ansari hopes the situation will improve now that the Muslim Commission and the Ministry of Education are prioritising the quality of madrasas. (*See interview*).

The High-Level Education

Commission's report in January, which triggered a controversy after its call to convert private to public schools, also had a section which reiterated the need to mainstream madrasa schools and called for recognising the qualifications of religious teachers.

Mainstreaming of madrasa schools may have started in 2004, but it has not covered all madrasas in Nepal, mainly because of lack of commitment from the government in Kathmandu. This negligence is depriving the members of one of the country's most marginalised communities from advancing and from being treated equally with other citizens. 🇳🇵

CLASS STRUGGLE



Despite being registered as government schools, madrasa do not receive the same treatment as other public schools. Visit Barkatiya School in Nepalganj, faces many challenges, yet is an example of how a madrasa can provide well-rounded education to uplift the Muslim community.

nepalitimes.com



SEWA BHATTARAI

Keeping ghazal alive in Nepalganj

Wearing a white salwar kameez that matches his short white beard, Mustafa Ahasan (*at left, above*) calmly sews clothes at his tailoring shop near Tribhuvan Chok, the old Muslim quarter of Nepalganj.

But the 51-year-old is no ordinary tailor — behind him on the wall hangs a certificate vouching for his credential as a noted poet of Urdu *ghazal* and *shayari*, forms much admired but little understood in Nepal.

Ahasan and his fellow ghazal enthusiasts keep the proper forms of Urdu poetry alive in Nepalganj through a group called Gulzar-e-adab. With 18% of its population Muslim, the influence of Islamic culture is evident everywhere in this western Tarai city bordering India.

The narrow street called Eklaini has swirling Islamic curlicues over doors and terraces, even on modern concrete buildings, and the sidewalks are packed with colourful chura-pote shops selling bangles and glass beads.

Mustafa Ahasan was educated in a Nepalganj madrasa and went on to get a degree in literature from Aligarh University in India, where he also learnt Arabic, Persian and poetic metres called *beher* used in these languages.

"There are only a handful of people in Nepal today who write Urdu poetry in *beher*, and half of us are here in Nepalganj," says Ahasan. "We keep up the tradition of Motiram Bhatta, who introduced *ghazal* in Nepal and who was proficient in these metres."

Gulzar-e-Adab has been holding regular monthly *ghazal* events for the past 40 years, says 81-year-old poet Abdul Lateef Shauk (*at right, above*): "Our events are not just for Urdu poets; we also have recitals in Nepali, Hindi and Awadhi. They are a vibrant hub for cross-cultural exchange."

Once in a while, the group also holds all-night *Mushayra* events, inviting poets from across Nepal and India. But Shauk and Ahasan say they are swimming against the tide, as the interest in traditional Urdu poetry is dwindling.

Ghazal scholar Ghanashyam Nyaupane is among a handful of poets writing in *beher* in Nepal, and agrees that these forms are not very well understood in Nepal. "There are three strands of ghazal writing in Nepal: one group creates its own metres and purists do not like it. The second group has no knowledge of metre at all and just rhyme. The third writes in classical Urdu metre, but this group is very small and getting smaller." 🇳🇵

Sewa Bhattarai in Nepalganj

Upgrading madrasa schools

Samim Miya Ansari, the newly-appointed chair of the National Muslim Commission, spoke to *Nepali Times* this week:

Nepali Times: What is the current situation of madrasas in Nepal?

Samim Miya Ansari: Madrasas are educational institutions related to our culture, but ultimately they are like any other school. But they are not properly managed. Government grants are inadequate, facilities are lacking, they do not even have furniture. The Muslim community is a little disheartened that madrasa schools do not have even the minimal facilities present in government schools. I have been communicating with the government to resolve this problem.

What will be your commission's role?

The commission is a constitutional body working to improve the status of the Muslim community. In Province 1 and 2, we have conducted hearings in which issues regarding madrasa schools came up. I have urged the government to mainstream madrasas — we cannot ignore Urdu and Arabic subjects, but the Nepali curriculum is also extremely important for Muslim children. Madrasa schools need a proper body to monitor them, which is why a Madrasa Board is being set up under the Education Ministry.

What lessons can Nepal learn from the recent terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka?

What happened in Sri Lanka is very sad. But the situation in Nepal is different — all religions have lived in harmony and like one family in Nepal for a very long time. Before the 2015 Constitution was promulgated, we had nation-wide protests for the rights of Muslims, but they were all peaceful.





The Ass

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