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SANU RAJ MAHARJAN

Culture revolution

Foreigners are often puzzled why Nepalis never take to the streets despite the chronic failure of the government to provide basic services. It is true, Nepalis are a tolerant lot. But this week, something snapped.

Citizens have been gathering on the streets, braving water cannons and tear gas to oppose a bill in Parliament that would dismantle the centuries-old tradition of *guthi* community trusts to manage religious sites and festivals.

Coming soon after the Media Council Bill, and detention by police of a YouTuber for posting a satirical review of a bad movie, the slew of recent street protests reflects growing disillusionment with and defiance of a powerful Nepal Communist Party (NCP) government that is perceived to be corrupt to the core and uncaring of the public interest.

In the past months, citizens of

Chapagaon, Baudhha and Thali have spontaneously risen up to blockade roads, demanding that they be repaired. Journalists took to the streets last month to protest provisions in the draft Media Council Bill that could lay hefty fines on journalists found to be violating officials' guidelines.

But the most organised protests so far have been against the *Guthi* Bill, and clips of Police attacking demonstrators with batons, kicks and water cannons have gone viral on the very media that the government seems intent on controlling.

There are more than 2,000 *guthi* all over Nepal, and they collectively own nearly 150,000 hectares of prime real estate. The management of such entities is traditionally passed down from one generation to the next.

The *Guthi* Bill would create a central government authority to manage community

trusts all over the country. It would have more executive powers than *Guthi* Sansthan, the current body that oversees trusts. *Guthi* members and heritage conservationists say the government is working with the land mafia to take over *Guthi* property.

"The government doesn't understand how the *guthi* system works," said activist Alok Tuladhar, "it just want to usurp the land. The government's intention is total control, not just the *guthi* but also free speech and other rights enshrined in the Constitution."

The protests that began on 9 June have snowballed with more groups and activists joining in. In Parliament, the opposition Nepali Congress halted proceedings on Tuesday, calling for the bill to be scrapped.

Minister for Land Management and Cooperatives Padma Kumari Aryal defended

the Bill in Parliament, saying it was intended to bring uniformity to *guthi* administration in order to protect heritage and culture. She says many trusts do not keep proper accounts and are not answerable to anyone.

Minister for Home Affairs Ram Bahadur Thapa said the government accepted moral responsibility for the street violence, and promised to investigate. But protests escalated Thursday with a large demonstration in Patan's Mangal Bazar (pictured above).  **Sewa Bhattarai**



SAY CHEESE

Yak Blue cheese from Ramechhap bags a prestigious gold medal at a cheese mela in France.

PAGE 5

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REMIT FOR REMITTANCES

Here are your choices:

1. Remain in your village, the home you've known all your life, surrounded by loving friends and family, eating dal bhat twice a day and hoping to pick up enough work here and there to send your growing children to good schools, provide nutritious food for your soon-to-arrive baby and avoid moving to far-away, expensive Kathmandu to find work.

2. Follow in the footsteps of many friends and acquaintances from your village and district: borrow money from the same loving relatives and friends to cobble together the lakhs demanded by a middleman who will promise you a good job, a plane ticket and a visa to Malaysia or the Gulf.

For decades, thousands of Nepalis have reluctantly chosen Option 2. Yes, some of them went not so hesitantly because they were pulled not just by the need to earn as by the thrill of cities abroad, but even for the adventurers the months and years away must start to weigh heavily.

As a recent report reminds us again, migrant workers often sacrifice the comfort of family and country at great personal peril. Nearly 6,000 Nepalis were reported to have died working in foreign countries between 2008 and 2017. More than 800 were disabled, while an earlier report pegged the figure at over 1,000. Both numbers are likely low as only in recent years has it become widely known among workers that some compensation is available.

How many more Nepalis living and toiling under the baking desert sun of the Gulf or in Malaysia have been arrested or cheated by employers, or by others lurking somewhere inside the shadowy process of labour migration?

Yet these are the women and men who have helped to keep Nepal afloat during very turbulent times. At some point in the last decade the money that migrant workers sent home was making up one-third of the country's economy. Even today, when numbers have declined, remittances inject a quarter of the fuel into Nepal's growth project. Just over a year ago monthly remittances hit an all-time high of \$680 million.

And yet, we expect more from migrants — those with the least who are willing to give up the most to attain the prosperity

that, frankly, all Nepalis seek. Often we hear that remittances are being spent on 'non-productive' items. A recent media article asserted that the money doesn't even contribute to economic growth.

This is akin to biting the hand that feeds you. A recent survey reported in this paper found that most of the \$6.6 million that the 4 million Nepalis working abroad sent home was used for basics like food (60%), clothing (42%), medical treatment (36%) and children's education (35%). Only a small amount (10%) was invested in land and just 6.5% was saved in a bank.

How is this not productive? That money is being spent in local shops run by local people, who in turn pay the farmers, garment makers and others who supply the items on sale. More remittances are spent in local pharmacies, hospitals and schools, where much of it will be dispersed throughout the community, providing the money that the workers' neighbours will spend, according to their own needs. A portion might even be set aside to invest in a gold bangle, just as

middle-class Kathmanduites do every day.

Yes, ideally the small portion that some migrant workers manage to save would be invested in schemes to finance hydroelectric or other development projects. But even after years of promises, governments have failed to provide any enticing alternatives. That is why it is encouraging to read in this week's issue about the Nepal Vocational Academy, whose visionary founder (*page 11*) is targeting youth who are eyeing overseas opportunities, and plans to set up training centres country-wide. Perhaps it will be small-scale efforts like this, ride-sharing or similar ventures, and micro-enterprises in the increasingly high-end Nepali crafts industry that will finally provide the irresistible draw for migrant workers' capital.

Swiss Ambassador Elisabeth von Capeller Oswald stated it plainly in an interview last week: "A lot depends on migrants who contribute to the development of this country." It's time that all of us started to acknowledge that, and for the government to start investing in migrant workers, before, during and after their absence from home.



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

Who says remittance income is not being spent on productive sectors?

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

A front page report by Prashant Jha in Nepali Times issue #455 of 12-18 June 2009 talked about the perennial elephant in the room: India. Excerpt:

"Ever since they resigned from government, the Maoists have tried to play on anti-Indian nationalism. But senior leaders now admit there is no alternative but to renegotiate with India.

"We made mistakes in handling India," confessed one Maoist secretariat member, "but India also can't ignore that we are the most powerful party here."

Ahead of a politburo meeting starting Monday, the Maoists will have to make crucial decisions about relations with India. It's not going to be easy because New Delhi has drawn a line in the sand that it doesn't want the Maoists to cross."



ONLINE PACKAGES



RIDGE WALK

Join a Nepali Times team as it makes its way up to Chandragiri on the cable car, spends the night at a new hotel on the summit and next day takes a strenuous 5-hour forest hike to Hatiban. Video online. Story: *page 8-9*.



VOCATION FOR VOCATIONS

Visionary Rabindra Puri has set up a training centre offering Nepal's earthquake-affected an alternative to migration. The Nepal Vocational Academy in Panauti trains students in not only standard construction skills but also traditional wood and stone carving and carpentry. Story: *page 11*.

PRABHAKAR RANA

A fine tribute to a kind and generous man who worked tirelessly ('Prabhakar Rana, 84', Editorial, #963), often behind the scenes, to bring about a better and more stable Nepal. I was privileged to know him as a friend and confidante. As you hint, he could have written a bestseller about Nepal over the last 50 years.

Sam Cowan

■ My thought and prayers. As I remember him, he was a very kind person.

Phurba Sherpa

■ So very sorry to learn of his demise. Thank you for a fitting tribute to someone I remember as a good friend.

Constance Colding Jones

MEDICAL DRONES

Progress! (Nepal tests and treats TB with a flying pharmacy', Ramu Sapkota, #963). In 1970, Tansen was the nearest place someone in Piuthan could go to get treated for TB. Obviously, most people couldn't manage to go there, and there was significant mortality.

David Mason

AQUAPONICS

I am an organic farmer, and am preparing to start aquaponics from one tunnel ('Something fishy in new Nepal farm', Hrijata Dahal, #963). Thanks for the informative article.

Anim Dahal

■ Very impressive work, really love what you have done.

Prakash Adhikari

KAKREBIHAR

I wish it is preserved and developed into a beautiful, religious tranquil park for tourists ('Buddhist relics in western Nepal', Sewa Bhattarai, #963).

Dipesh Poudel, Kakrebihar

CORRUPTION

I agree with the Ass that ministers are very competent, especially when it comes to looting. ('Nepal's undecided decision-makers', Backside by The Ass, #963). The system is not broken, but running exactly as intended. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer.

Alex Ferguson

WHAT'S TRENDING

Buddhist relics in western Nepal

by Sewa Bhattarai

The Kakrebihar temple discovered 50 years ago in Surkhet has piqued the interest of Buddhism scholars. What are the secrets of the 1,000-year-old empire it represents? Find out in this article that was widely shared on social media.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Drones battle TB

by Ramu Sapkota

11 Nepalis die every day from tuberculosis for lack of access to diagnosis and treatment. Drones are now being used for the first time to collect sputum samples and deliver medicine to TB patients in the remote mountains of Piuthan, central Nepal. Watch the video with drone footage only at nepalitimes.com.

Most popular on Twitter

Prabhakar Rana, 84

Editorial

Prabhakar Rana stood out as a beacon of diligence, decency and dignity in public life. His passing on 31 May in New York marked the end of an era in Nepal's political, business and social service spheres. Read this moving tribute online.

Most commented

Aquaponics

by Hrijata Dahal

Readers were interested to learn about a new method of farming that is organic, requires no land and is powered by fish. Aquaponics could help Nepal to improve agricultural productivity and reverse its growing reliance on food imports. More on our website.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Deep in Hindu & Janjati heartland of west #Nepal, ruins of a #Buddhist structure lie hidden. Follow @sewa_ditee to Surkhet where the government is reconstructing Kakrebihar. Much of it is unknown but intricate artistic motifs provide tantalising clues to a lost Buddhist paradise.

Nikki Thapa @meNikkiThapa
That's a wonderful news

Jan Møller Hansen @janmolhan
Yes, I have been there. Fascinating place.

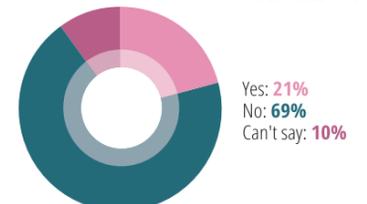
Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Watch how Nepal is testing medical drones to diagnose and treat remaining tuberculosis patients in remote mountains. Story and dramatic video by @ramusapkota and @SoniaAwale in @NepaliTimes:

Michelle AA @Michelle_AA_Jhb
Where technology meets humanity... This is the power and opportunity of digital transformation... To do more work like this across Africa can see us also start to flourish... savings lives and to ease human suffering has a positive impact for us all!

Nepali Times Weekly Internet Poll #963

Q. Do you think the government issues too many climbing permits for Everest?

Total votes: 119



Weekly Internet Poll #964
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Will the government be able to fix all of the emerging issues before the next election?

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Firing up Nepal's democracy

Announcing election dates would focus the minds of politicians on the fact that voters are watching

Nepal's Parliament has just voted to gift each of its members Rs60 million to 'do development' in their constituencies. Now that official profligacy has been sanctioned by the federal legislature, all we citizens can do is follow the money and keep track of where it is spent.



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

On the bright side, this gives us an opportunity to gauge the impact of our tax rupees so we can vote properly in the upcoming election by rewarding those who perform and punishing those who don't. Rs60 million per year can and will buy a lot of votes, but doing good work should also get good candidates elected. That is what democracy should mean.

As the joke goes: one day a jet plane and a rocket had a conversation. The plane wanted to know why it had to run down a long runway to pick up speed and finally take off, while the rocket was able to shoot straight up into space. The rocket tells the jet: "You will know when they light a fire under you." We need to make our politicians feel the heat.

A better Nepal is possible if we can hold our politicians and their political parties accountable, and vote them out at election time if they are not. We need to build



BIKRAM RAI

trust in the system, and continue to believe that prosperity is possible through the people we elect.

Turnout in Nepal's elections has always been high, but there is a sense of disillusionment and many are already saying that they will not vote again because it seems to make no difference. The Election Commission has its work cut out. It could start by announcing the date for the next elections for all three levels of government, which are scheduled for some time in 2022: that would focus the minds of our politicians like nothing else.

A firm date for elections would give political parties enough time to democratise themselves. They need to carry out, submit and publish

their annual audit reports as all Nepali organisations are required to do. We need to know the sources of the parties' income and how they spend the money.

They may also need time to pass a new law on how a Nepali political party should be governed and managed. A section of social media is encouraging people to launch political parties rather than invest in a business because they can prosper quicker.

Then there is the issue of the declaration of assets and property by candidates. All holders of public positions are required to declare their wealth. Announcing the election dates now will give the government, voters and the police

time to verify this information so hopefuls can file their candidacy.

The office of the auditor general will need every accountant or chartered accountant to help check the financial history of the candidates, their partners and their businesses. Many jobs will be created in the process.

We now have a new Election Commissioner who needs to show that he means business. He cannot be seen as a former bureaucrat just taking notes and orders from politicians. He is in a position to ensure that Nepal has a real chance at electing good people and if he does so, history will remember him.

Mark Twain once said that if

elections could change anything, those in power would never allow us to vote. We have to prove Uncle Mark wrong. We have to send out the message that honest, hard working, skilled and results-oriented Nepalis have a fair chance to govern this country. Mediocrity has to be replaced by excellence.

Nepal's democracy will only thrive if the opposition plays its part. But the opposition is feeble, usually seen to be indifferent and perhaps even colluding with the powers that be. Announcing firm election dates will help light that critical fire under their bottoms and hopefully propel them into action. So many scandals, so many corruption cases, so much mismanagement, so much poverty, so much out-migration of the young, and the opposition seems to not see or care.

We pay the opposition to oppose and we are not getting value for our money. Democracy is not cheap and every rupee that goes to keep it alive is money diverted away from more critical services for the people.

It is the period leading up to elections that seems to bring out the best in people. We need to prove that the next round of votes will make a positive difference in the life of the average Nepali. The rulers and opposition must engage the growing numbers of young voters, or be ready to become irrelevant in our young republic. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc. 1/2 Full is his fortnightly column in Nepali Times.



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prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

New Turkish destination

Turkish Airlines has added Strasbourg to the list of its destinations in France. The airline launched direct flights between Istanbul and Strasbourg starting 31 May. The four weekly flights between Istanbul



Airport and Strasbourg Entzheim Airport make the European Parliament city the 7th destination of Turkish Airlines in France and the third international destination added to the Turkish network this year, after Sharjah in the UAE and Marrakech in Morocco.

Laxmi Bank Offer

Laxmi Bank has launched a promotion campaign for its digital account, 'Ctrl O', in association with F1 Soft. Savings accounts opened during the ongoing ICC Cricket World Cup 2019 through the digital platform will be eligible to earn Rs500 mobile balance top-up on first mobile money transaction, along with a free complete e-banking package.

Ctrl O

Global Wellness Day

Hyatt Regency marked Global Wellness Day by providing more than 500 meal programs in 2 schools and 1 child protection home. The hotel also organised Yoga & Pranayama classes, football and healthy meals for guests and associates. On 8 June, Hyatt invited Holiness Tsoknyi Rinpoche to speak on 'Work Life Balance', to positively impact the emotional and mental wellbeing of guests.

Green art Competition

On the occasion of World Environment Day, Hotel Annapurna held its annual art competition for children of hotel employees to demonstrate their understanding of the environment through illustrations. The Miss Nepal 2019 team was present and judging was done by two artists from Sirjana College of Fine Arts. Hotel employees will also be taking part in a cleanup program from Kantipath to Bhrikuti Mandap.

Ruslan wins award

Ruslan Ultra Premium Vodka bagged the Grand Gold Quality Award at the prestigious 57th Monde Selection Awards in Italy in the 'Spirit and Liquor' category. The Monde Selection includes world-renowned experts, chefs, oenologists, sommeliers, brewing engineers and master blenders. The award is based on five criteria: taste and aftertaste, packaging, harmony, odour and visual aspect.

prabhu BANK

Nepal's yak cheese is on world map

Yak Blue from Ramechhap awarded Super Gold Medal at French cheese mela

Sheilin Teo

A French cheesemaker and his team have put Nepal on the world cheese map with their prize-winning Yak Blue.

They did not just win a gold medal at the fourth Mondial du Fromage et des Produits Laitiers in France's Loire Valley -- it was a Super Gold Medal that Francois Driard won for the cheese from the mountains of Ramechhap district.

Held over three days this month, the fair featured over 952 cheeses from 48 countries, and drew nearly 3,000 industry professionals to the historic city of Tours.

Driard is a familiar face at farmer's markets in Kathmandu, which he has helped set up over the dozen years he has been in Nepal to bring producers and buyers together.

When he launched his cheese adventure in Nepal, Driard began with a Tomme, which was easy to make as it has a short maturing time and a reliable outcome. However, Driard's cheese repertoire expanded as his customer base grew hungry for more variety. Now his business, Himalayan French Cheese, boasts 30 varieties of cheese made from cow, buffalo and yak milk.

"With this win, it means that now when I talk about Nepali cheeses abroad, I can actually have this medal to be proud of, and it gives me recognition," Driard says.

The Yak Blue is a new cheese, designed and created only last year and not regularly offered in the market. "But with the medal I don't have a choice -- I will have to make it more available," Driard says, chuckling.

The Yak Blue came on the back of his efforts to create a mild blue cheese from cow's milk, in response to the strong Danish blues being imported to Nepal.

"Blue is a strong cheese and it is not to everyone's taste. So I started making a mild cow's blue, which I call Bluelikhel because we were making it in Dhulikhel," Driard explains.

It was difficult because blue cheese



SAY CHEESE: Nepal's award winning Yak Blue cheese from Ramechhap at the competition this month in Tours, France. Francois Driard, the French cheesemaker celebrating after the win.

requires colder temperatures for maturation than other cheeses, but by a stroke of luck Driard had a yak cheese factory in Serding of Ramechhap, whose elevation is so high that it is naturally cold and ideal for blue.

The cheese maker says the most thrilling aspect of winning the medal for Driard is that the winning entry is made from yak milk, which is underappreciated in the cheese industry.

"We couldn't make the Yak Blue without yak milk, so the medal is a validation of a product that is available only in certain parts of the world, Nepal being one of them," he explains.

Yaks graze at up to 5,000m, and during the

cheese production window between March and November they are not fed anything but wild grass and flowers, giving their milk a very Nepali terroir. A yak produces only up to 1.5 litres of milk a day, so the goodness of the Himalayan alpage is concentrated in the milk, giving the cheese its richness.

The farm in Ramechhap is providing local jobs, and yak herders who had migrated to the Gulf are returning because of the demand for Himalayan cheese.

Driard believes Nepal can provide organic premium food to the rest of Asia, and hopes that the country becomes synonymous with premium products like organic coffee, honey, vegetables, cheese and meat.

"From Shanghai to Singapore, from Bangkok to Hong Kong, people should know that Nepal's pristine environment can provide very high, premium quality products," says Driard. One major hurdle, he points out, is that dairy products from Nepal are banned in the EU because the country is on the red list for foot-and-mouth disease.

The government could easily get Nepal off the list by lobbying. If that happens, Nepali dairy products like Chhurpi dog chews, cheeses, milk and yoghurt could have access to the EU market.

But for now, Driard is preparing his next batch of Yak Blue, which should be ready in two weeks. 🇳🇵

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WIDER WORLD FOR WOMEN

Nepali women are taking on the Solo Woman Travel Challenge to break barriers and discover their country



Sewa Bhattarai

Until she was 48, Eka Kumari Karki had never travelled alone. Then she heard of a unique project that is trying to encourage and empower women by giving them travel grants.

Karki got her daughter to fill out the application form for Solo Woman Travel Challenge (Swo-Yatra), and was selected from among 500 aspirants. Last year, the Solukhumbu resident completed a two-week tour of the eastern-most districts of Nepal on her own.

“Women don’t go out so easily in our society. So if older women like me can do this, it will encourage younger ones to travel and become more confident,” says Karki.

The challenge was set up by Nepali Travellers in 2015 and has so far helped 42 women like Karki tour different parts of the country. Applicants have chosen a variety of destinations, from popular treks like the Annapurna Circuit to more adventurous destinations like Dolpo and Upper Mustang.

“There are many ways to empower women, whether through protests or changes in the education system and laws. But since we are travellers ourselves, we thought travelling would be the best way to go about it,” explains Pemba Sherpa, co-founder of Nepali Travellers. “Travel has no bias, has no other agenda, and through it you learn and grow.”

The idea was born at the spur of the moment four years ago during protests against an acid attack. Sherpa says the challenge is not just about feminism: “Travel can be adapted to anything. If writers travel maybe they will write poetry, if a woman travels it becomes a woman’s movement.”

But in its first year, the challenge was far from a movement. Nepali Travellers put out a call on social media, and selected only one woman as an experiment, giving her Rs30,000 to embark on a trip to western Nepal.

Things are better organised now. A call goes out for applications, those selected upload photos to Facebook for voting. Last year, there were 500 applicants and those who got more than 1,000 online votes had to appear for an interview. An average of 12 women are selected every year, based on their itineraries and level of preparation.

“We get a lot of applications for popular treks, but now we are trying to prioritise more unique destinations. Maybe those who want to do cultural exploration, or go somewhere where there are no trails at all,” says Shristi Shrestha who administers the challenge.

After being selected, the women are given training and resources. “They helped me refine my itinerary and book hotels and lodges every day so that I was not stranded. We were also given safety, self-defence and wilderness training, which was very helpful,” says Anugya Pradhan, 20,

who explored remote Nar Phu village in Manang and on to Tilicho in 2017.

Participants agree the solo travelling has helped them in later trips and inspired confidence. In fact, it is also the other way around: people along the way were initially surprised to see women travelling alone, but eventually supported them.

“In the end, it’s about the freedom you feel and the challenges you conquer, and your confidence in making decisions for yourself. It’s also a way to prove that women can do it. I found out that it’s not as challenging as society makes it out to

be, so why should we deny ourselves the opportunity to travel?” says Pooja Rijal, 23, who walked for more than a month to Everest Base Camp from her home in Bhaktapur last year.

Nepali Travellers hopes that the Swo-Yatra (‘self-travel’ in Nepali) initiative will encourage more people to travel. Says Pemba Sherpa: “In Nepal, we are ignored by the hospitality industry, while abroad we have visa and passport issues. We want to take steps towards changing those perceptions and establish Nepalis as travellers worldwide.”

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कानून बमोजिम लिनुपर्ने इजाजत नलिई वा इजाजत पत्र नवीकरण नगराई वा इजाजत प्राप्त व्यक्तिको मृत्यु पश्चात हकवालाको नाममा नामसारी नगराई वा अन्य जुनसुकै तरिकाले नेपाल राज्यभित्र कोही कसैले अवैध हातहतियार र खरखजाना राखेको भए यो सूचना प्रकाशित भएको मितिले ३५ (पैंतीस) दिनभित्र नजिकको प्रहरी चौकी, जिल्ला प्रहरी कार्यालय वा नेपाली सेनाको व्यापकमा अनिवार्य रूपमा बुझाउनु हुन नेपाल सरकार (मन्त्रिपरिषद्) को मिति २०७५/११/१८ को निर्णय अनुसार यो सूचना प्रकाशित गरिएको छ।

यसरी हातहतियार र खरखजाना बुझाउन ल्याएमा यसअघि ती अवैध हातहतियार र खरखजाना राखेको कारणले मात्र त्यस्ता व्यक्तिलाई कुनै कानूनी कारवाही नचलाइने हुँदा तोकिएको समयभित्र अवैध हातहतियार तथा खरखजाना अनिवार्य रूपमा बुझाउनुहुन सम्बन्धित सबैमा जानकारी गराइन्छ। यदि इजाजत प्राप्त नगरी आफूसँग रहेका हातहतियार तथा खरखजाना तोकिएको अवधिभित्र स्वेच्छाले नबुझाएमा त्यस्ता व्यक्ति उपर प्रचलित कानून बमोजिम कारवाही हुने व्यहोरा समेत सूचित गरिन्छ।



नेपाल सरकार
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

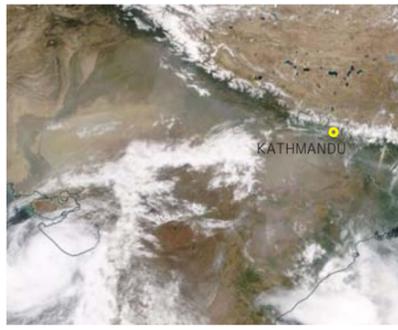
Pooja Rijal, 23

Destination: Everest Base Camp, on foot from Kathmandu

Best memories of travel: When I was hungry, tired and resting at a roadside, an old man climbed up a guava tree, plucked some guavas and gave them to me. So many people invited me home and hosted me along the way because they were surprised to see a lone Nepali woman trekking.

Worst memories of travel: I realised too late that I did not take crampons with me. I was lucky to borrow some, otherwise I would have fallen on the ice.

Thoughts on solo travel: You learn to make your own decisions, so you should go. But also remember that it's not going to be easy, so do your research before you leave. This is me on Gokyo Ri with Mt Everest and Lhotse behind.



The southwest monsoon seems to be running a bit behind schedule. It was supposed to hit the Coromandel coast on 1 June but was delayed by a week. However, the onset has been more than compensated by Cyclone Vayu, which grazed western India. The impact of this system will be felt in Nepal since the moisture will be carried over to us by the westerlies. Expect copious rain with some storm systems into the weekend. The real monsoon is still at least a week away.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
28° 18°	27° 18°	27° 18°



Going places together - qatarairways.com



Anugya Pradhan, 20

Destination: Nar Phu Valley and Tilicho

Best memories of travel: City life is always rushed, but outside of Kathmandu it is different, going on at its own pace. You feel light, it is a chance to get away from duties and responsibilities and also to inspire others to take on challenges.

Worst memories of travel: As a solo traveler, it is often difficult to get beds and rooms, which are designed for couples and groups, especially in peak season when it's crowded.

Thoughts on solo travel: You learn to figure out who to talk to and who not to. Also, you get to meet a lot of people you would never meet in daily life, so that broadens your perspective.

Eka Kumari Karki, 49

Destination: Eastern Nepal

Best memories of travel: I saw the tea gardens of Ilam and the Dhaka-weaving industries of Panchthar. I found out the distinct identity of each district in eastern Nepal. I set out during the 16-day campaign against violence against women in December, and covered almost 16 districts.

Worst memories of travel: Some people assumed I was travelling alone because I did not have good relations with my family. People still are not used to the idea of women traveling alone.

Thoughts on solo travel: Everyone should travel, and women should be more confident about doing it on their own. Women aged 20-30 are at the right age to take off on their own.



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A walk back in time: Chandragiri-Hatiban

Historic hike on the ridge from where Prithvi Narayan Shah first laid eyes on the Kathmandu Valley in 1767

It may come as a surprise to many that trekking in Nepal does not always have to be Everest Base Camp or the Annapurna Circuit.

The mountains that ring Kathmandu Valley offer some exhilarating walks with stunning views. They range from leisurely weekend strolls and day hikes to strenuous ridge treks that can last several days. The really adventurous can circumnavigate the Valley rim with three-four nights of camping along the way.

For beginners, a good place to start is the Chandragiri-Hatiban hike. It is a good idea to take the Chandragiri Cable Car up to the summit at 2,579m and walk the 10km ridge trail to Hatiban. This obviates the need for a steep hard climb at the beginning of the trek, while offering a five-hour hike along the long ridge that spans Kathmandu Valley's southwestern edge.

The trip begins with a 12-minute cable car ride that takes off from Thankot base station, and generally follows the ancient trade route between India and Kathmandu. The trail is still visible in places, but most of it has been ruined by a new motorable road with multiple hairpin bends that climbs up the impossibly steep flanks to Chitlang Pass.

This was how kings, soldiers, traders



and students, used to go in and out of Kathmandu before the first motorable road to the capital, the Tribhuvan Highway, was built in 1957. The Bhimphedi-Kulekhani-Chitlang-Thankot trail along which the Ranas had their first automobiles porter-carried up and down the steep trails is now only a distant memory.

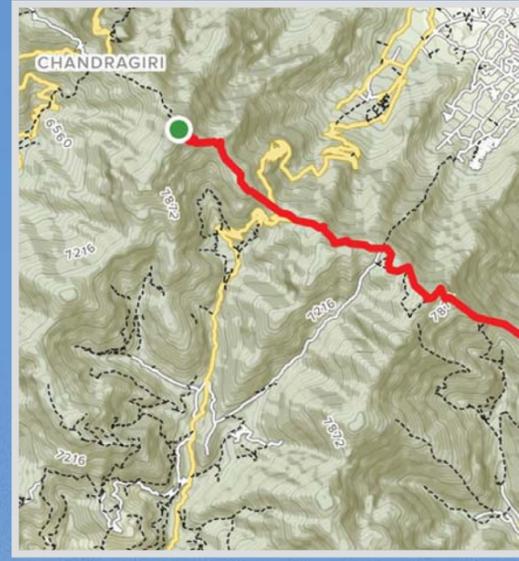
An adjacent pass still has relics of Nepal's first cargo ropeway, built by British engineers brought in by Chandra Shumshere Rana in 1922. Later, the Americans helped build the 42km Hetauda-Thankot ropeway in 1964, to ferry essential items to Kathmandu from the plains. The rusted hulks of both ropeway towers stand like silent sentinels to history. Visible on a far ridge, the red gondolas of the modern cable car can be seen going up and down from Chandragiri.

The cable car company also runs Chandragiri Resorts (*see box*), which has been partially opened, and can serve as an overnight base camp for the hike. Located on a spur, the resort offers a panoramic view of the city below and a sweeping 300km of horizon from the Annapurnas to Mt Everest.

The cable car terminal at the summit also has historical significance because this is where Nepal's founder, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, stood in 1767 to look down at the kingdoms of Kathmandu Valley that he would soon conquer. The resort has put up a bronze statue of the king with one of his famous exhortations written across the base: 'Let's thrash those who take bribes.'

It is a good idea to take the first cable car from Thankot when it opens at 8AM and start walking from the summit terminal. Alternatively, you can take the cable car up the previous afternoon, spend the night at the resort, and get an early start after breakfast.

The trail descends along the ridge down to the first of four passes that it traverses during the hike. There is now a motorable road from Mata Tirtha to Phakhel that follows the ropeway routes.



From here, there is a pleasant 45-minute climb through meadows and along thick forest paths to a tea shop that also offers tented camping for the night. The owner has just completed a 10+2 in hospitality studies and has thoughtfully put up signs along the trail so hikers do not get lost.

The path then follows a steep ridgeline through forest and bush until you intercept stone steps that line the trail right up to our destination on the other side of the mountain. The next stop is on the buffalo-grazing meadow below the east summit of Chandragiri (2,500m) which is prominently visible from Kathmandu whenever it snows. From up there, the city looks a long way down, and the view of Langtang, Dorje Lakpa and up to Gauri Shankar is awe-inspiring.

Descending along the stone steps can be excruciating on the knees, so it is advisable to take along a walking stick. The third pass now has a motorable road from the Pharping side, which has not yet connected to the trail descending to Machhegaun.

The trail then climbs again to reach the long ridge to the summit of Champadevi, and then down the other side. Another hour of descending steps and we are in the pine forests near Hatiban, festooned with prayer flags.

Pharping is a holy site because it is one of the places in Nepal where Guru Rimpoche is supposed to have meditated, which explains why so many monasteries are located here.

Hatiban is ideally situated for a belated lunch and refreshments before taking a jeep back down to the city. 📍



WIDE HORIZON: The main summit of Chandragiri as seen from the east peak, with the Annapurnas and Mt Himalchuli visible in the background through the haze.



The hotel on the hill

When Hem Raj Dhakal was working in Malaysia, he used to travel to Genting Highlands on weekends, and often wondered why there were no resorts like that in Nepal where the scenery is even more dramatic.

On trips back home, he walked among the peaks and ridges on the Valley rim from Lakuri Bhanjyang to Sitapila looking for a site for a future resort. Eventually Dhakal found the perfect spot — on the highest point on Chandragiri ridge, at 2,500m.

The Chandragiri Cable Car opened in 2017, and an adjoining five-star resort was planned on a ridge below the summit.

“As soon as I got to the top, I knew this was what we were looking for. The view of Kathmandu below and the panorama of mountains to the north was unparalleled,” Dhakal recalls.

The summit also had historical significance since it was the place from where Prithvi Narayan Shah gazed down at the Nepa Valley 260 years ago and felt the urge to conquer it. The cable car got built, but the earthquake and subsequent upheavals delayed the hotel project.

Although behind schedule, Chandragiri Hills Resort has had a soft opening, and even though only two of the four buildings are in operation it is already getting guests eager to get above overcrowded Kathmandu’s pollution.

The resort’s target group is Nepali tourists who take the cable car up and want to spend a weekend to unwind, Kathmandu-based expats and — when the facilities are completed — conferences and destination weddings.

“Just imagine flying to Kathmandu and taking the cable car up here when it is 46 degrees in New Delhi,” says Abhishek Jung Thapa, “or guests from the Gulf who want to know what a monsoon in the Himalaya feels like.”

Indeed, Chandragiri’s stunning location amidst lush, forest-covered mountains teeming with birdlife means that even if the



mountains are not visible, it is a nature retreat that allows guests to recharge their batteries.

The buildings are named after the mountains visible from the hotel: Ganesh Himal, Gauri Shankar, Manaslu and Sagarmatha. All rooms have private balconies that offer views of either the western Himalaya or the mountains to the east. In addition, the rooms also have views of either the city below or the surrounding forests, or both.

The hotel can also serve as an excellent overnight stop for hikers who come up on the cable car and want to cross over to Chitlang and Kulekhani, or are doing the scenic ridgewalk to Hatiban (*see main article*). Since the hikes are along heavily-forested trails, the region is also a paradise for bird-watchers.

Hotel Manager Shyam Tandukar says this is the most exciting property he has looked after: “We have a health centre and spa, but even if you just want to be with nature amidst the forests and mountains, this place has healing properties.”



ALLTRAILS.COM



Join a *Nepali Times* team as it makes it way up to Chandragiri on the cable car, spends the night at a new hotel on the summit and next day takes a strenuous 5-hour forest hike to Hatiban. Video online.

nepalitimes.com



ALL PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT

ABOUT TOWN

EVENTS



Drum Jatra
Drum Jatra, the Kathmandu Percussion Festival, celebrates the joys of percussion from numerous cultural backgrounds with drum workshops and performances in different locations.
24-26 June - Drum Jatra workshops at Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory
26 June - Drum Jatra at Jazz upstairs
27 June - Drum Jatra at Moksh
28 June - Ek taal at Kantipur Temple House
29 June - Drum Jatra finale at Hotel Summit
24-29 June, 8-10pm (Jazz upstairs and Moksh), 7-9 (Ek taal and Drum Jatra Finale), 9803516450

Book launch
Judith Oma Chase is launching the book *The Beauty of Purposeful Living* this Saturday. An exhibition of the collection from the Living Traditions Museum, Changu Narayan, will take place at the same location.
15 June (exhibition until 23 June), 4-7pm, Taragaon Museum, Boudha (01) 6201035

The Bystander Anthology
There are just a few days to meet the funding goal for the South Asian Comics Anthology. Visit kickstarter-
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/bystander/the-bystander-anthology>



Garage sale
One man's trash is another man's treasure. Come early to find your treasure in the June garage sale.
16 June, 11-2pm, Cafe U, Bakhundole (01) 5555750

Climate Change Hike
Hike against climate change. Enjoy the beautiful nature and plant trees along the way from Lamatar Buspark to Lakuri Bhyanjang with your family and friends. Spend a fun weekend and do something for the environment. Call to participate.
15 June, 6:30-2:30pm, Tilganga Chowk, Gaushala (meet-up), Lakuri Bhyanjang (01) 4113808, 9841870761, 9843484646

365
Visit this showcase of illustrations by Prakash Ranjit on mental health, based on his personal experiences. '365: Not just a number' exhibits the 365 illustrations the artist created to self-heal.
Until July 7, 10am-8pm, NexUs Culture Nepal, Bakhundol (01) 5522393



Summer Pop-up Exhibition
The Pop-up summer art exhibition is in town. Don't miss these works by six Nepalese artists, in this one-of-a-kind artsy environment.
7 June-21 July, 10am-6pm, Bikalpa Art Center, Pulchok, 9851147776

Doodle-Poodle
If you had a stressful week, doodle your stress away in a creative art workshop for both adults and children. Basic doodling for children and advanced techniques for adults.
15 June, 11:30-2pm, Rs850, 7 years and above, Kupondole near Summit Hotel, 9803217468

Yogamaya
This weekend learn about religious leader and women's rights activist Yogmaya Neupane through drama. 'Yogmaya', is an adaption by Tanka Chaulagain of Neelam Karki Niharika's novel.
Until 1 July, 5:25pm-6:25pm (Saturday 1-2:10pm), Shilpee Theatre, Battisputali, 9813862993

MUSIC



Acoustic Friday
Enjoy a musical evening this Friday with The Gentlemen Band featuring Dev Rana, Jyoti Ghimire and Kripesh Lohani. They will be joined by another prominent singer, Aishwarya Sthapit.
14 June, 6-10pm, Chhaimale Resort, Chhaimale, 9860676495

5: 55
Famous singer Chirag Sing Khadka or 5: 55 will be performing live for Eh Budi End of Highway Nepal Tour. Kavi G and Urgen Moktan will be performing as well.
14 June, 4-10pm, Around the Corner, Bansbari, 9861631197

Bikram Baral
Take in a musical night with versatile Nepali singer Bikram Baral. The singer who made his name with Nepal Idol is the first among contestants to record his songs in studio.
14 June, 7pm onwards, Turtle Lounge & Club, Thamel, 9840918433



The Triplets
Indulge in world fusion music with The Triplets. They play original tracks and some covers, incorporating influences from flamenco, middle-eastern, classical jazz, blues, Nepali folk and raaga.
18 June, 7-9pm, Base Camp, Jhamsikhel, 9841226397

Sabin Rai and The Pharaoh
Sabin Rai and The Pharaoh is coming out with their first studio album "Dhanyavaad". Drop by this musical event where they will feature the diverse influences that make up their sound.
15 June, 6-10pm, Rs1,000 (with album), Calm, Naxal (01) 4443904

DINING

Da-Pow
Da-Pow is named after the dish Da-Pao, big fluffy and juicy momos, which are the specialty of this place. Take your family and friends to enjoy the super momo and other delicacies.
11am-9pm, Gairidhara Sadak (01) 4428652

Hotel Sabrina Brunch
Hotel Sabrina offers a delightful BBQ brunch every Saturday and Sunday. You can take a dip in the pool and enjoy a relaxing weekend meal.
11am-4pm, Hotel Sabrina, Budhanilkantha (01) 4372429



Belgian Waffles
BWC offers delicious, eggless, freshly baked Belgian waffle sandwiches with premium fillings: portable, affordable & delectable.
10:30am-11pm, Darbar Marg, 9849636013

Lucknowi Food Festival
Enjoy the Lucknowi delicacies at the splendid Kava restaurant of Fairfield by Marriott and have a memorable gourmet dining experience. The festival has invited celebrity Chef Qureshi from Lucknow, who specialises in Awadhi food.
14 June, 6pm, Fairfield by Marriott, Thamel (01) 4217999



Mad About Mangoes
A festival for all mango lovers. From appetizers to dessert you can enjoy dishes like Mango Papadi chat, Pan-seared white fish and asparagus with mango chardonnay sauce, Mango gazpacho with cajun grilled shrimp, and more.
14 June onwards, The Coffee Shop, Ghar-e-Kabab and Arnika Room of Hotel Annapurna (01) 4227171

GETAWAY



The Pavilions
Take some time at this luxury, eco-resort with boutique villas, swimming pool, organic farm, restaurant lounge and bar. For refreshing morning walks, therapeutic and relaxing day-ins, authentic gastronomical experiences and quiet nights.
Chisapani, Pokhara, (061) 694379

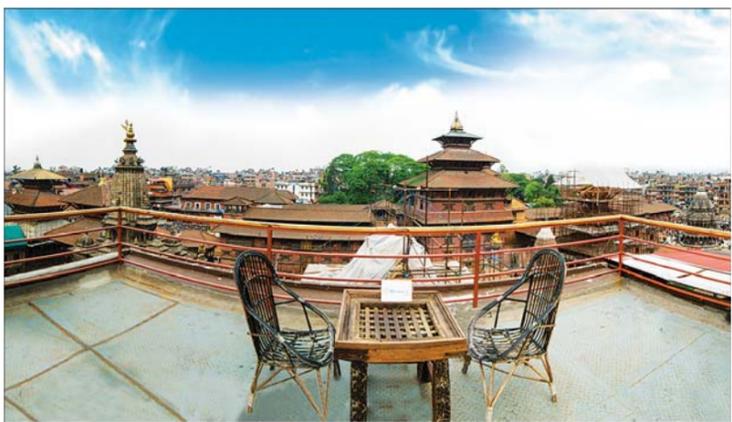
Hotel Barahi
Enjoy a great view of Phewa lake and the cultural shows, or indulge in the scrumptious pastries from the German Bakery on the hotel premises.
Lakeside, Pokhara, 061-460617/463526



Heranya Yala
Get a genuine feel of authentic Newari heritage by staying right in the centre of Maha Boudha and the Hiranya monastery. The hotel provides a complete tour package to immerse yourself in the rich cultural heritage of Patan.
Gujibahal, Patan, (01) 5523168, 9851067168

Retreat at Damaar
A serene sanctuary for everyone looking to enrich their minds, passions and inner self. As part of the retreat, you will also be supporting local tourism and culture.
Bethanchowk, Kavre, 9851052442

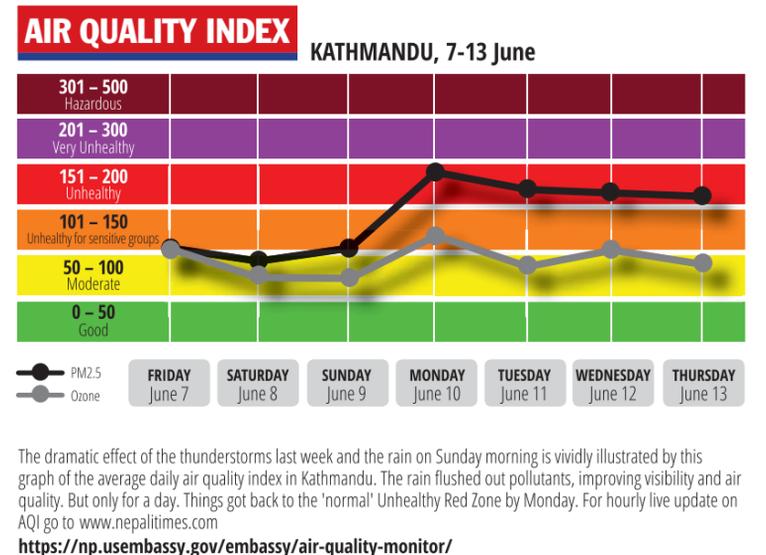
Hyatt Regency
The luxury 5-star hotel and resort is spread over 37 acres of land, where you can enjoy activities like tennis, yoga and jogging. The hotel is built in traditional Newari architecture and is walking distance from Boudhanath Stupa, the most holy Tibetan Buddhist shrine outside Tibet.
Taragaon, Boudha, (01) 5171234



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OUR PICK

Don't laugh
PETS 2
Opened in Kathmandu on 14 June
Ever wonder what your pets do when you leave them home? Well, now you can find out, in Secret Life of Pets 2. Here, cats get a massage on your coffee maker and dogs try to squeeze into your juicer. But it's not always so fun, as they also get frustrated with loneliness. Directed by Chris Renaud, the movie features voiceovers by Patton Oswalt, Eric Stonestreet, Kevin Hart and Jenny Slate, and promises family fun on the weekend.





PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

A vision for vocations

Visionary Nepali sets up a training centre offering Nepal's earthquake-affected an alternative to migration

Monika Deupala
in Kavre

Four months after Rabindra Puri launched his Nepal Vocational Academy in Panauti in January 2015, the earthquake hit and his plans were completely shaken up. The architect's buildings were intact, the students were safe but the quake opened up a huge new demand for skilled carpenters, plumbers and masons.

One later year, Puri saw the need for another training institute, and started work on a new centre in Bhaktapur, where carpentry lessons have already begun. When finished the school will have the capacity to train up to 200 students at a time.

"When we started, we could produce 60-70 artisans annually but after the earthquake, the demand boomed," recalls Puri. "We had to work day and night to expand capacity."

Puri's centres offer not only standard construction skills but also traditional wood carving, a craft that was being displaced by modern techniques. They have already produced 250 artisans, who are now equipped with the temple-building skills of their forebears.

The Panauti academy started with training in metal casting, stone carving and carpentry, but there was a demand from local women for beautician and tailoring courses. Others sought bakery training, and some even wanted to learn the basics of designing small hydropower plants.

In response, Puri donated his ancestral property in Panauti, to revive traditional craftsmanship



wherever possible. It now helps locals learn new skills so they can find jobs and avoid migrating overseas for work.

The Germany-trained architect and entrepreneur says: "Many students in the institution were planning to go to the Gulf for work. Some of them were convinced to remain and are now getting free training with accommodation and pocket money."

The entrepreneur is also targeting young people who have already gone abroad, urging them to return and learn the technical skills that would allow them to prosper independently back home in Nepal.

Indeed, surveys have shown that the demand for both traditional and modern skills after the earthquake is so high that Nepalis can earn as much here as in the Gulf.

Some of Puri's interns make Rs20,000 a month during their apprenticeships, and with experience can earn double that. He now wants to train 1,000 youth a year, and hopes to set up sister training centres across Nepal. The academy is already self-sustaining, a year ahead of schedule. Its major source of income is tuition fees, and earnings from selling students' products, including stone figures of gods and goddesses.

VOCATION FOR VOCATIONS



Visionary Rabindra Puri has set up a training centre offering Nepal's earthquake-affected an alternative to migration. The Nepal Vocational Academy in Panauti trains students in not only standard construction skills but also traditional wood and stone carving and carpentry.

nepalitimes.com

Learning by doing

The Nepal Vocational Academy in Panauti provides both theory and practical classes, and some faculty members are traditional artisans. Post-earthquake, a major part of the building course is how to construct earthquake-resistant houses in the traditional style.

Saroj Shrestha, 29 from Panauti, gave up his fine arts studies due to family problems. He joined the academy after the earthquake, in the first batch. "At the academy I was doing what I loved, designing on wood, and was also learning carpentry. Even if I couldn't continue my fine arts studies, I was close to art," says Shrestha.

He easily found a job in the post-quake reconstruction of heritage sites in Panauti and Bhaktapur, and is now teaching other students what he has learnt.

The institute also provides philosophy classes on the importance of preserving local architecture and other cultural heritage, and building attractive, earthquake-resistant buildings. Founder Rabindra Puri says he also plans to construct a museum of stolen art in Panauti, which will display replicas of many idols that have been stolen from Nepal. The school's students are also working on making replicas of various stone idols.

Dipa Shrestha Piya, 28 from Kavre, used to stay at home after getting married. She then learnt to be a beautician at the academy, and now owns her own beauty parlour in Panauti. Says Piya: "Nepal Vocational Academy has shaped who I am today. I'm much more independent and I earn enough to take care of my family."



SURYA NEPAL

JUNE 24 - 29

Rhythms of Unity & Diversity



ARTISTS 2019

NAVIN CHETTRI DRUMS/PERCUSSIONS

RABIN LAL SHRESTHA TABLA ENSEMBLE

ESAD HALILOVIC, AUSTRIA DRUMS

MANGAL MAN MAHARJAN SINGING BOWL

KIRAN SHAHI DRUMS

SALIL SUBEDI DIDGERIDOO

TAMBA GROUP DAMPHU | VOCALS

ABHAYA SHRESTHA DRUMS/NEPALI PERCUSSION

KATHMANDU BAJA PUCA NYAKHI BAJA

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EVENT PARTNERS













Cool home cocktails

Khukri Rum is 60 years young, and is reinventing itself this summer with three new versions of the world famous Nepali alcohol brand.

Nepal Distilleries is one of the country's first modern alcohol producers with three varieties of rum: Khukri XXX Rum, Coronation Rum and Khukri Spice Rum, so aficionados can concoct simple but refreshing rum cocktails at home.

'Rum in the sun? Sounds crazy, tastes awesome' is the tagline of Khukri XXX Rum, and it seems Nepal Distillery is trying to remove the notion that rum is not only a winter drink consumed to beat the cold, but can be enjoyed year round.

Among the three seasonal rum cocktails are Khukri Lemon Fizz, which rum fans would never guess was made with rum: the lemon juice blends with the rum and Sprite to give it a refreshing taste. Prepared with lemon juice, 7Up/ Sprite, a slice of lemon and ice over

Khukri Rum, it is easy to make at home.

Khukri Cola is said to be the best option of the three for cola lovers, and looks like a fancy cola garnished with lemon. Prepared with Khukri Rum, cola, lemon juice, ice and a slice of lemon to top it off, the fizz adds to its uplifting character.

The easiest cocktail to prepare is Khukri Ginger Ale, which is similar to the Lemon Fizz but with a stronger ginger flavour. Khukri Ginger Ale is prepared with Khukri Rum, ginger ale and ice cubes.

The summer drinks were introduced at Trisara Restaurant

in Lazimpat on 5 June and the company says the response has been positive. Last year, Nepal Distillery had introduced summer cocktails by bringing in two experienced bartenders to tailor-make designer cocktails using Khukri Rum.

Shuvash Lamichhane of Nepal Distilleries told *Nepali Times*: "Elsewhere, rum-based drinks are popular at all times of the year. But in Nepal we label it a 'winter drink' because it is supposed to warm up the body, even though it is a great drink for the summer too."

Although the response from customers was positive, this summer Khukri wanted to simplify the drinks for people to enjoy at home. Nepal's most famous award-winning rum is distilled from fermented molasses and kept in wooden vats to age for eight months. It is exported to Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Italy, United States, Dubai and Australia. 🇳🇵



BRIGADE OF GURKHAS

HAPPY OLI: During a visit to the UK, Prime Minister K P Oli greets Nepali soldiers in the British Army's Brigade of Gurkhas at Sandhurst Military Academy on Wednesday.



MINISTRY OF LABOUR

DEAL SEALED: Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Security Gorkarna Bista signs a labour pact with Mauritian minister Soodesh Satkam Callichurn in Geneva on Tuesday.



BIKRAM RAI

REGAINING TRUST: One of many protests against the Guthi Bill, this one on New Road on Tuesday.



RATNA SHRESTHA/RSS

NOT SUPPRESSED: Media persons including Narayan Wagle, Suresh Acharya and Govinda Acharya, at a program organised by Federation of Nepalese Journalists demanding the withdrawal of the Media Council Bill.



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NAMASTE EID: Country Manager of Turkish Airlines Abdullah Tuncer Kececi and Filiz Kececi (right) at the Namaste Eid celebration in Labim Mall co-sponsored by the carrier.

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Nepal has press freedom, but no freedom after press

Earlier this month, vlogger Pranesh Gautam uploaded a tongue-in-cheek review of the movie *Bir Bikram 2* that matched his stand-up sensibilities. It was loud, brash, irreverent.

On the basis of a complaint from the film's producer-director Milan Chams, police arrested Gautam on Friday and he has been languishing in a jail cell for the past four days. His crime: trying to be funny on the Internet.



GUEST COLUMN
Shashank Shrestha

The video review followed the regular trope of any satire on YouTube — Nostalgia critic, Kanan Gill, Angry Joe show — nitpicky,

brazen and with absurdist humour — all hallmarks of success for a video review. Pranesh Gautam must have hoped that the review would get his publishing channel Meme Nepal the elusive 'virality' content creators seek. It got him jail time instead.

Gautam forgot one critical part of the equation: You can no longer speak your mind in Nepal. Maybe you can, as long as you do not offend or disagree with anyone. What are the limits of satire? No one knows.

What Milan Chams is doing is emblematic of how little our society understands the right to free expression. He is trying to undermine a right that is fair and constitutional just because he did not like the message.

Free speech is a two-way street — it protects both the 'good' and the 'bad'. To ensure the right things are said we must also provide a stage for the bad. Subjective censorship is a slippery slope. Once we begin silencing opinion just because we do not agree with it, there is no end in sight.

Obviously, hate speech, obscenity, incitement to violence, and a whole list of things not protected by free speech do exist. But at its core, we all have the freedom to express ourselves, no matter how poorly or eloquently. It is a freedom whose best and worst are exercised on the Internet, and under this administration there has been an increasingly worrying trend to limit speech.

The proposed IT Bill, amendments to the Penal Code and the new Media Council Bill all show a creeping and steady infringement on freedom of expression in Nepal. There is an attempt to stifle dissent

and alternative opinion with jail time and fines under the guise of discipline and 'sensitivity'.

A report by Freedom Forum found 104 incidents of violations in 2018 alone, with multiple journalists and editors being booked under the Electronic Transactions Act — a law created for monitoring online banking transactions. Currently, the IT bill allows the government to sentence an accused to 5 years in jail and fine them up to Rs150,000 for 'improper' social media posts. What constitutes 'improper' is so broad anyone can be hauled in.

Gautam's review was booked as a 'cybercrime' under the Electronic Transactions Act. While there is a laundry list of grievances, Milan Cham's team has publicly stated that it is seeking to "teach a lesson to such miscreants". It even demanded that the Meme Nepal brand be scrapped before any negotiation with Gautam could occur.

This was hardly a cybercrime, more likely it was an Orwellian Thought Crime. And how about Chams' supporters openly abusing Meme Nepal and Gautam by saying 'M**ji harulai thikka paryo'. Should these Internet posts not be subjected to the same scrutiny?

No one sets out to make a bad movie. As a content maker myself, I get it. To find a little known, part-time comedian ripping your movie to shreds so early in its release can be maddening and heartbreaking. But what is also true is that artists must have thick skins: not everyone will like what we make, and audiences can be pretty ruthless.

If Gautam's review in Meme Nepal did pan *Bir Bikram 2* and threatened Nepal's entire film industry as has been claimed, it just exposes how weak the industry must be to be shattered by an absurdist review. How we react to Gautam's unlawful incarceration matters because of the precedent it sets. To allow this case to be ruled in favour of Chams' team would basically send a message that in Nepal you can express your views as long as someone does not disagree.

The review was not perfect, but that is no reason to silence the reviewer. The explicit language and the over-the-top display was not my cup of tea, but was Pranesh Gautam entitled to make it? Absolutely.

The Human Rights Measurement Initiative recently released a report showing declining freedom of opinion and expression in Nepal (3.9 out of 10) and called it 'very concerning'. Pranesh was arrested the very same day.

Shashank Shrestha is a content creator and co-founder of Kathaharu and KookyDunk.



MONIKA DEUPALA

Scripted arrest

The Kathmandu District Court has ordered that YouTuber Pranesh Gautam, who was arrested for his review of the movie *Bir Bikram 2*, be kept in custody for one more day. Gautam was arrested on 7 June and is charged with violating the Electronics Transaction Act.

Gautam uploaded his satirical review of the movie on YouTube channel Meme Nepal. He compared the film to the Hindi movie *Sholay*, criticised the acting of the film's stars and called the direction weak.

The director-producer of the movie, Milan Chams, filed a police complaint against Gautam two weeks ago, claiming the video negatively impacted the movie's sales and the director and actors' reputation. The police arrested Gautam, and filed a case under the Electronic Transaction Act.

Cyber law expert and advocate Baburam Aryal calls this an extreme misuse of power. "This shows

that the police administration is not adhering to the law," he says. "This is an example of how the administration can misuse power. Such an action by the police is a travesty in a democratic society. Such acts decrease the creative potential of a society and push the country towards dictatorship."

Nepali Congress MP Gagan Thapa called it wrong to file a case against a comedy video. "Absurdist humour is taken as normal all over the world," he tweeted. "It is unfortunate that Pranesh Gautam was charged with a cyber crime for a satire video, and it is against freedom of speech. Criticism is the main pillar of democracy, let us protect it."

Nepal's Constitution guarantees freedom of expression as a fundamental right. Other laws address misuse of speech through slander and libel, so there should be no reason to resort to using the Electronic Transaction Act.

Citizens are free to react to subjects of public interest and to comment on other people's creative outputs. Being arrested on the basis of such comments is nothing more than a way for the police to intimidate critics. Advocate Aryal claims that because a movie is a 'product', it is not considered slander to review it, since only negative comments made on a personal level can be libellous.

However, the Producers' Association accuses Gautam of undermining the movie industry. A group from the industry, including producer Akash Adhikari, actor Bhuwan KC and media-person Naresh Bhattarai, visited the Metropolitan Crime Department in Teku to support Chams.

The director had promised to withdraw the case if Meme Nepal was shut down, but is now demanding Rs10 million to withdraw the case.

Bir Bikram 2 was released on 17 May, and Gautam reviewed the movie five days later. After complaints from the movie producers, Meme Nepal removed the video from YouTube.
Masta KC

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Women hold up more than half the sky

The road to the last district in Nepal without one is being built almost entirely by women

Achyut Raj Bhandari
in Humla

Women may be treated unfairly by society in one of Nepal's most conservative districts, but it is they who are at the forefront in linking roadless Humla to the rest of the country.

It is mostly women in yellow hard hats you see on the 76km stretch of the Mugu-Humla road that is presently under construction. Humla is the last district in Nepal not yet connected to the country's road network, and the remote Himalayan district remains economically behind its neighbours.

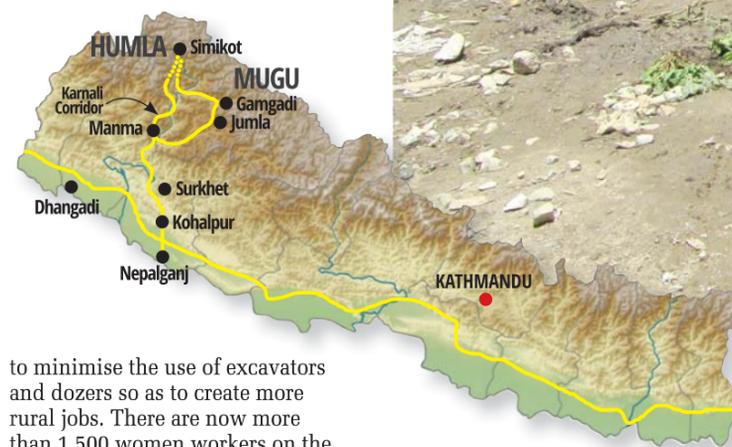
After many years of delays, building of the road is speeding ahead. Construction of the 5.5m-wide road started in Gamgadi of Mugu district in January, and more than half of the 76km stretch is now motorable. At this pace, it will reach Deuli of Humla by the end of the year, ahead of the completion of the other road linking Humla, the Karnali Corridor (see adjoining article).

"Our idea is not just to build a road, but create jobs during its construction and uplift the economy of the areas it is serving when completed," explains Sunil Tandukar, field manager of the Rural Access Programme (RAP) which is supported by the British aid group, DfID.

Some 52% of the workforce is

made up of women. This is because RAP has a policy to empower women with employment, but also because many of the villages along the way have seen an outmigration of menfolk to the cities or to India for work.

Unlike the indiscriminate road-building spree elsewhere in Nepal, RAP's other emphasis is



to minimise the use of excavators and dozers so as to create more rural jobs. There are now more than 1,500 women workers on the road that is being built at a cost of Rs1.7 billion. Women of Rara Municipality and other villages along the way in Mugu have been earning up to Rs700 a day for the past six months.

"Me and my mother-in-law received Rs21,000 each in the first instalment," says a beaming Jaula Baduwal, 42, of Baam village, who explains that she finishes household chores in the morning and devotes the rest of the day to



road work. The money has come in handy to buy clothes, food and school stationery for her children.

The road-building work has also persuaded Ramkala Baduwal's husband from migrating to work in India this year. Four members of her family work on the road, earning Rs80,000 since January. "Our men used to migrate to India for work due to poverty. But

this year me and my husband are working and earning together. I am happy about that," says Baduwal. "We women were confined to the kitchen, but this road has given us the chance to come out and earn an income."

Local elders are overjoyed to see rapid progress on the road. "I had never even dreamed that a road would reach my home, but now it is actually happening. And the villagers got employment too," says Krishna Bahadur Buda, 64, of Baam. He says he will celebrate the completion of the road by getting on

the first bus out to visit Kathmandu.

RAP was started in 2000 with the Hile-Bhojpur road, but work stalled during the war. Resuming in 2006, it has provided employment to tens of thousands of farmers as it built roads in Bhojpur, Khotang, Sankhuwasabha and Terathum, and helped organise farmers into cooperatives. In 2011 the successful road-building model was extended to the remote mountain districts of western Nepal.

Gori Khadka, 63, is convinced the road will make the lives of next generations much easier. "When

MONSOON Madness

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ACHYUT RAJ BHANDARI

we are sick, we can be taken to hospital, and we can take our produce to market," she says.

RAP has ensured that the road also provides long-term income to villagers by providing access to markets. Rara rural municipality has introduced the concept of 'One Home, One Garden,' helping villagers to set up apple orchards and vegetable plots.

Nandalal Baduwa, elected chair of Ward 14, cannot hide his delight when he says: "Our village has a new slogan, 'Visit Baam and eat apples for free.'" 🇳🇵



PRAKASH SINGH

Cars in the Karnali

Humla and Mugu are finally being linked to the rest of Nepal, but with the road comes pollution

Prakash Singh
in Bajura

Humla is the only district not yet linked to Nepal's national road network, but not for long.

The Karnali Corridor and another road from Mugu district will soon bring the motor car to the Karnali. But even before the road, plastic trash and other detritus of consumerism has already arrived in this pristine yet neglected region.

Construction crews are hard at work blasting through solid rock faces along the gorge of the Karnali River, opening up a region that used to take weeks of hard trekking to reach.

The Nepal Army has been building the 145km Karnali Corridor stretch that connects Kalikot's Khulalu with Salli Salla in Humla district. More than 70km of the road has already been opened to traffic even though it is still rough and unpaved.

Once a bridge is built over a river separating Bajura and Humla by October, the Corridor will have reached roadless Humla

for the first time from the south. The district already has a road from Tibet in the north.

Meanwhile, a 24km section from Pilichaur of Bajura to Kawadi of Humla has been opened, bypassing the trail through the notorious Rangebhir, which used to be dangerous even for those on foot.

There is a great sense of excitement along the Karnali as locals await the completion of the Rs3-billion road. Previously to reach Humla, they had to walk for weeks, or travel to Bajura and Kalikot districts on flimsy buses along dangerous roads, or pay a hefty airfare.

Locals were also forced to pay much higher price for goods, and many have lost their lives unable to access medical facilities on time.

"For generations we struggled to bring basic needs, take our sick to hospital; those days are thankfully over — the door to development has opened," says the jubilant chair of Himali Rural Municipality in Humla, Govinda Malla.

Jeeps and tractors have already started operating on the half-completed, 50km-section of the road from Bajura's Martadi to Pilichaur. Tourism destinations in Karnali and the Far West, such as Khaptad, Ramaroshan, Badimalika and Rara will now be easily accessible, and hopefully boost the economy and create jobs.

However, the arrival of the road has already started to impact the landscape of the Karnali, which had so far been untouched by modernity.

New roadside markets have sprung up every 2-3km along the Corridor in Bajura where vehicles have started operating. Waste from these marketplaces, including plastic and liquor bottles, is being dumped on the riverbank, polluting the clear, green water of the Karnali.

Open defecation has become rampant. Moreover, people from higher regions have started to migrate to areas closer to the road, adding to the problem.

"The only reason we settled here was because of the access to transportation. Up there in my village we had a difficult life — we had to walk for days just to buy food, but there was no garbage," says Manbir Budathapa, who moved to Kawadi from Himali Rural Municipality.

Some here have taken the heaps of trash as a necessary price to pay for having the advantages of road access. Others feel the negative impact of the road should be minimised. If that is not done, they fear that the Karnali may soon turn into another Bagmati. 🇳🇵

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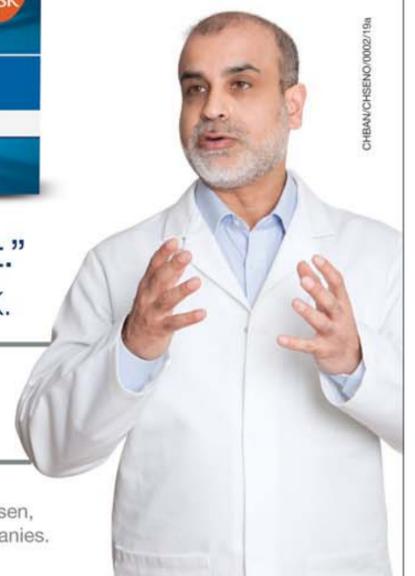


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All hunkydory in the boondocks

Let me play the devil's ombudsman here this week and ask if any of you reading this feel that your freedoms have been constrained lately.

Just look around, no one is stopping you from singing hosannas about the grabber's achievements, of which there are too many to list here because of space constraints. There has been absolutely no attempt to muzzle reporters covering the Prime Minister's success in getting Nepal to leapfrog into the space age.

The Prime Minister assured Nepalis this week they no longer have to worry about no water or muddy roads since Nepal will soon have its own satellite in geosynchronous orbit. "Now that we are a glorious space nation, all those petty inconveniences won't matter at all," he said amidst wild and prolonged applause.

Despite all this, there are still naysaying nabobs who can't stop moaning and groaning. Nepalis already know how bad things are — there is no need for the media to rub it in and make them even more depressed.

It is in our national interest to lift national morale so we can at least pretend that everything is hunkydory in the boondocks. Nepalis want to believe they are steaming ahead to a prosperous and happy future with our own satellites, ocean-going ships, bullet trains and *Bir Bikram 2*, which is a quintessential milestone in the annals of Nepali cinema for its exquisite cinematography, superb acting by a galaxy of stars, a mature

masterpiece of film-making portraying witty and angst-ridden characters.

As the Minister of Information Warfare rightfully said the other day, and I quote: "There is complete freedom of press in this country, because I say so. Journalists have to be objective, which is to say they must have the same objective as us." The minister took the words right out of our mouths, we couldn't have put it better ourselves.

But, there are worrying signs we are not being draconian enough in protecting our hard-won curbs on freedom, and efforts to restore authoritarianism. Nepal has a long way to go to catch up with North Korea. This just won't do, we must forthwith declare the following subjects out of bounds for nosey-parker pressmen:

- Anything concerning national security, which means everything about politics, economics, culture, history, geography, biology, arithmetic, Nijgad airport, ill-gotten wealth and movie reviews.
- All news that may jeopardise Nepal's fraternal relations with fellow-pariah states.
- Freedom of thought is hereby banned, and anyone thinking subversive thoughts will be liable to persecution.
- Laughing in public is hereby banned with immediate effect and until further notice.
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