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NABIN BARAL

## DREAM TRAIN

Tashi Sherpa runs the only teashop in Rasuwa Gadi on the Nepal side of the border, 170km north of Kathmandu. Nearby, dozens of trucks carrying imported Chinese goods cross the Bhothe Kosi into Nepal (pictured, above).

Sherpa has heard that a railroad to Kathmandu is also being planned, but she will only believe that when she sees it. "Dream train," she calls it.

But what Tashi Sherpa does not know is that a feasibility study conducted last year has proposed a rail route under the mountains instead of along the river, thus bypassing Rasuwa Gadi altogether. People along the highway may not even see the train because most of the track

will be in the tunnels drilled beneath Langtang, Gosiankunda and Shivapuri to Tokha near Kathmandu.

Truck driver Balam Rimal sips tea at Sherpa's shop as he waits to cross into China. He says: "All the talk of trains is nonsense. First they should fix this scary road to Nuwakot."

The railway forms part of China's Belt and Road Initiative and will be an extension of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway from Xigatse to Kerung and on to Kathmandu. However, crossing the Himalaya through a series of long tunnels will not just be an engineering challenge, but will cost at least \$5.5 billion.

The Chinese have put up a 9-storey building at the border that looks like a shopping mall, and houses well-equipped customs and immigration offices. The Nepal side is a tin shed flying a forlorn Nepali flag. The 2015 earthquake destroyed the Nepal border post, and its reconstruction has been delayed due to a dispute with the contractor.

Finjo Lopchan runs Potala Guest House near the border, and sums it all up: "How can a country that can't even put up a building, drill a train tunnel through the mountains? My head spins when people talk about railways."

**Ramesh Bhushal** in Rasuwa

**TRILATERAL TRAINS**  
EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2

## TUNNEL TO TIBET

The proposed route of the Kerung-Kathmandu train would drill under the mountains, and not follow the river.



Read more PAGE 14-15

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# TRILATERAL TRAINS

The trans-Himalayan railroad has been in the news lately. And like everything else in Nepal, it is difficult to separate hot air from a cool breeze.

The Chinese cannot hide their irritation anymore about Nepal’s politicians day-dreaming. Ambassador Hou Yanqi was as blunt as a diplomat can be at a recent interaction in which she said (we paraphrase): “Not so fast.”

The extension of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway to Nyalam and Kerung, then onwards to Kathmandu, Lumbini and the Indian border constitutes a part of Beijing’s Medium and Long-term Railway Network Plan. But laying train tracks on the rugged terrain of the Tibetan Plateau has been a daunting challenge even for the Chinese.

we can have a cheap and reliable alternative access to sea ports. That Nepal needs this trade bypass is a no-brainer considering the five-month Indian Blockade of our southern border in 2015. Despite its initial cost, train travel is cheaper and environmentally much cleaner. A railway track through the mountains could interlink trade and tourist travel between the two countries, and be a catalyst for other train lines within Nepal.

Nepal’s politicians, including Prime Minister K P Oli, came to power riding the nationalist wave after the Blockade, and promised better access to the north. But one just has to see the slow progress of the road on our side of the Rasuwa border today to realise that it was all talk. Whatever progress there has been in upgrading the checkpoints



BHANU BHATTARAI

After the Lhasa line was connected to Xigatse and beyond, it was expected to reach Kerung on the Nepal border by the next year, but now it looks like it will be pushed back five more years. Yet Nepal’s hyperbolic politicians talk about it as if the locomotives will be chugging in by next Dasain.

The railway to Nepal was listed as one of the 64 Belt Road Initiative (BRI) projects at the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in April. The ambitious BRI aims to improve China’s overland connectivity to countries across its western border in Central Asia and beyond to even Europe. The Nepal link is not directly on the main line, but part of a sub-Silk Road that could, in the future, offer an alternative to two-way trade between China and India, which today follows a maritime route through the Strait of Malacca.

China is India’s largest source of imports, and it is in Beijing’s geostrategic interest to find land alternatives to choke points on its sea routes to the Indian Ocean. Two-way trade between India and China is now nearly \$100 billion a year and a stable land corridor would be in both the countries’ interest. Besides that, China wants to integrate its southwestern regions of Tibet and Xinjiang with central and southern Asia.

But what does Nepal get out of the proposed rail link? First of all, theoretically,

Greater connectivity between India and China through Nepal could open a new trans-Himalayan trade corridor.

unlikely the Chinese will just gift the railroad, and a loan could be a debt trap. Unless Nepal’s exports to China rise dramatically, this railway will not make much economic sense. (See story page 14-15.)

Nepal’s trade deficit with China is expected to grow to \$15 billion this year, as imports rose by 40% and exports fell by 30%. A cargo train makes sense if we can use the wagons to send goods back to China, not just to buy more.

China used its comparative advantage in the past to produce labour-intensive goods which it exported worldwide to buy knowhow. Now, China has attained an income level where some of those goods can be produced more cheaply elsewhere: like Nepal. In the 1990s, tax rebates attracted multinationals to set up manufacturing bases in Nepal for export to India. We do not have to reinvent the wheel.

Greater connectivity between India and China through Nepal, however, could open a new trans-Himalayan trade corridor which can offer Nepal another chance to be a manufacturing base for specialised products to be sold to both our giant neighbours.

But for that, we need a strategic vision and pragmatic policies. Nepal’s strategy should be to serve as a land bridge between India and China and get these two giant locomotives to pull in the same direction.

## 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Nepali Times #458 of 3-9 July 2009 dealt with the Constitution deadline being only 11 months away, and the political parties paralysed by wrangling. Our editorial blamed the fecklessness of the democratic parties and the Maoists wanting to go it alone:

‘D Day for the completion of the new Constitution is now only 11 months away. The Constituent Assembly’s self-imposed deadline has been pushed back over and over again.

Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal said after his Politburo meeting this week that his party will lead a national government. How that will be possible considering the non-Maoist parties are on the other side is difficult to imagine. Maybe the strategy is to split the big parties, but then domestic and international geo-politics are both against them.

What the Maoists couldn’t achieve with armed struggle and elections, they will now try to do by mobilising a mass movement on the streets.’



Times.com

ONLINE PACKAGES

WHAT'S TRENDING



The completion of the Tibet Railroad is coming closer, and Nepal's along the proposed route are very excited. But the anticipation might be premature as it will take at least a decade more for the first locomotive to arrive. Watch the reaction of Nepal's to the future railroad. Story: page 14-15.



What happens when you let a talented Nepali calligrapher/graffiti artists loose on the streets of Boston? Find out in this profile of Sneha Shrestha who is starting conversations by painting Nepali poems and quotes in Devanagari script on some of the most exclusive buildings in the world. Watch videos of her in action. Story: page 7.



It is already the first week of July, and the monsoon is nearly one month late. Paddy planting has begun in only 15% of fields, but farmers across the country are making the best of the situation. Join them in celebration of Nepal's paddy planting festivals in this video.

Nepali Women

How can Nepali women achieve their best if they are always being dragged down and held back by narrow minded and regressive thinking ('Ill-fitting', Sheilin Teo, #966)?

Steve L Roberts

Can't say much to the perverted uncles. But aunties, you can at least stop the double standard. If my bra strap is showing, there's nothing shameful about it. You don't need to act like it is a big deal.

Subha Sharma

That I-am-judging-you-gaze from the gatekeepers of patriarchy aka Nepali aunties, who have internalised misogyny to the max unconsciously, is not less severe than the Nepali male gaze. Women who are educated and are from affluent backgrounds/who claim to be empowered are not free and liberated as we would like to believe. Only when the patriarchy is dismantled there will be true freedom for women in Nepali society starting with citizenship for children through mothers.

Amrita Shakya

SHANTA CHAUDHARY

Sometimes you don't know the story of your close relatives because you never dare to ask ('Shanti chaudhary: Poet-at-large', Muna Gurung, #966). I have known you as a fearless and confident person, but I never knew you had gone through so much, Auntie Shanti. More love and respect to you.

Priyanka Shrestha Chaudhary



Clothed in cannabis

by Pema Sherpa

Hippies flocked to Nepal in the 1960s and '70s, drawn by the freedom to buy and smoke pot. But today, tourists are attracted by t-shirts, shawls and jackets made from the marijuana plant. This multimedia package was the most popular last week on the Nepali Times Facebook page. Read on nepalitimes.com if you missed it.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Nepal Tarai learns from past floods

by Sewa Bhattarai

Two years after the devastating floods in the plains of Nepal, the Tarai is beginning to incorporate disaster management activities but rampant construction of roads and embankments is setting the stage for more tragedies this monsoon. Field report from Rautahat got a lot of attention on Twitter.

Most popular on Twitter



Ill-fitting

by Sheilin Teo

This daring column asked whether a woman has to give up her rights to be comfortable in her own skin, in how she chooses to look in order to live harmoniously. Does she need to give up her humanity, security, sexuality, sensuality, intelligence, curiosity, just to please men and matriarchs? Join the debate online.

Most commented

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Climbers used to visit #Nepal seeking new peaks & routes, drawn by venturing where no one had been before. There are still more unclimbed peaks over 6,000m than those that have been summited, yet everyone wants to be on #Everest, which has been climbed out

Bob Reid @bobgreid

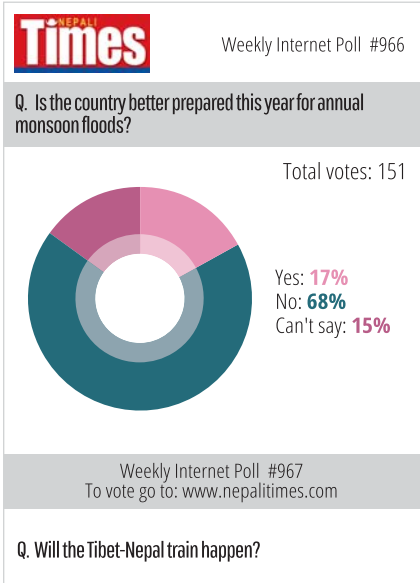
Cannot overemphasise the sense here - but, so inclined to keep this fact secret. The 'silver' cohort of mountaineers have much to look forward to!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

The Guthi has conserved #Nepal's cultural heritage for thousands of years. There are short term thinkers motivated by #greed and ignorance. The recent protest has set them back for a while, but we have to be constantly vigilant, writes Anil Chitrakar.

Prakash Moktan @PRAMOK

Well reforms must come with progress and time....at least Guthi must be transparent on all accounts....





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# Where is the monsoon this year?

## Chennai's current water crisis is an early warning for Kathmandu

In January 2018, Cape Town faced the possibility of executing a 'Day Zero' water plan: the city's residents would have to queue daily for rationed municipal water supply. The reservoirs that



CLIMATE FOR CHANGE  
Ajaya Dixit

served the city were almost empty. Fortunately, rains and lowered water use helped avert the crisis. A year later, Chennai, India's sixth largest city, came near to Day Zero, too. Last minute rains again eased the emergency.

In 2015, Chennai faced devastating floods. How could a region that was submerged four years earlier suffer such a serious water crisis? Despite floods and droughts becoming a regular feature of South Asia's climate, none of our governments have learnt lessons to conserve, harvest and store water. Misuse and inefficiency are high, and precious water is blatantly abused.

Urbanisation, encroachment of lakes, wetlands, ponds, and open spaces that served as flood buffers have made inundation worse on one hand, while depleting natural storage systems at a time when water runs out like now. As Chennai expanded with new industries and IT-led growth, the wetlands were converted into housing.

In January 1995, 40 hydro-geologists, social scientists, water analysts, economists, political scientists and agriculturalists had gathered in Chennai to discuss the political economy of water in South Asia. The conference, convened by the US Social Science Research Council, had concluded that relatively wealthy middle class urban domestic users appeared to have top priority over

water, industries get next priority, irrigation users are next and rural domestic water users and the urban poor are at the bottom of the rung.

Twenty-five years later, nothing seems to have changed. In fact, this hierarchy of access to water is now even more entrenched, and continues to promote the transfer of pumped water from rural to urban areas. Extraction rates exceed recharge and groundwater storage is gradually depleted.

Water problems in India, Nepal and the rest of the subcontinent are a result of a complex interaction among urbanization, agriculture, industries, changing water use, and impact of the climate crisis on precipitation, rising temperature and humidity. By 2030, 40% of South Asia's population will be living in cities. Urban settlements require more water supply in concentrated areas. Rapid urbanisation and the increases in demand bring new challenges as higher income families use more water to meet sanitary functions producing more waste water.

The water challenges in Nepal is no different. Himalayan glaciers and snowpacks are melting faster, the springs in the mid-mountains are going dry at an alarming rate while groundwater levels are receding in Nepal's bhabar, Tarai and across the border in India. Collectively these changes will lower base flows with profound implications for water security across the Indo-Gangetic basin.

The current crisis is an outcome of the relentless pursuit of a water development and management model that evolved in an era before the climate emergency. It assumed the unlimited availability of water and focused on supply side solutions, without heeding to demand management and improving water governance. This model has dealt with rainfall, river and groundwater separately, neglecting the water cycle and its

intrinsic function in nature. This fragmented approach continues.

This water management model is not appropriate to deal with the water emergency. We need to change our approach to adapt to monsoon rains becoming more erratic, as they have this year. Innovative rainwater harvesting practices, promoting a judicious mix of surface and groundwater sources, and managing increasing water demands is the way to go. The Chennai crisis this year will be replicated in Delhi, Patna and Kathmandu.

And it is not the quantity of water that is a problem, the poor quality of available water is an equally serious challenge that needs to be solved with low-cost filtration systems for hundreds of millions of underserved families in the region. Disposal of human waste using treated clean water, in particular, needs to be systematically replaced. Untreated sewage pollutes freshwater sources and reduces available supplies. Already dysfunctional water treatment plants significantly push up treatment costs.

Solutions must be based on larger societal commitment achieved through regular consultation between individuals, households, the community, the market and the state about water science, supply options, reduced use, and water conservation, and fundamentally re-crafting the institutions that govern and allocate water. Only this can potentially usher in a people-centered water stewardship and management that will include preservation of open spaces, water bodies and aquatic beings.

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

### prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

#### Port Harcourt on Turkish

Turkish Airlines has added Port Harcourt in Nigeria, to its flight network as the 56th destination in Africa. The carrier will operate four weekly reciprocal flights



adding to three other Nigerian cities it already flies to: Lagos, Kano and Abuja. Turkish now flies to 311 destinations around the world, more than any other carrier.

#### Nepal Economic Census

The results of the first-ever National Economic Census 2018 shows that there are 462,605 (50.1%) registered establishment, 460,422 (49.9%) not registered ones, and 40% are run by women. They employ 3,228,457 people of which 62.3% are male and 37.7% female. The concentration of establishments in Province 3 was highest and very low in Karnali province. The census was carried out by the Japanese aid agency JICA.

#### Nissan Monsoon Offer

Monsoon exchange week for Nissan vehicles will be held 1-7 July nationwide. The exchange week has exciting offers like attractive cash discounts up to Rs500,000, exchange bonus up to Rs300,000, loyalty bonus up to Rs25,000, and accessories worth Rs27,000, free 1-year road tax, 3-year servicing, and 3-year warranty.

#### Ncell Scholarship

Ncell gave out Scholarship and Excellence Awards to outstanding students of five faculties of the Institute of Engineering (IoE), Pulchowk Campus on Tuesday at Hotel Himalaya. Ncell initiated the program in 2014 and a total of 60 students have so far got scholarships and 20 students received Excellence Awards. Ncell will provide scholarships and awards worth Rs13 million to top scoring students from 2019-2023.

#### CAPA Qatar

Qatar Airways announced the return of the CAPA Qatar Aviation Aeropolitical and Regulatory Summit to Doha on 5-6 February 2020 in partnership with Centre for Aviation. The first aeropolitical gathering of its kind in the Middle East, it follows the inaugural summit in February 2019 which issued the Doha Declaration. Senior aviation and transport executives, regional and national regulatory authorities and academia will attend.

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# Ever gone wildlife trekking in Nepal?

Adding a new purpose to hiking in the Himalaya

After walking to Jomsom in 1974, my next foray was to Langtang. I went better prepared this time, remembering to bring a hat and wear socks inside my humble canvas shoes.

The path was precipitous, and packed by centuries of human and animal footprints. It wound through the towering forests of Nepal's mid-mountains, taking detours into the



**SO FAR SO GOOD**  
Lisa Choegyal

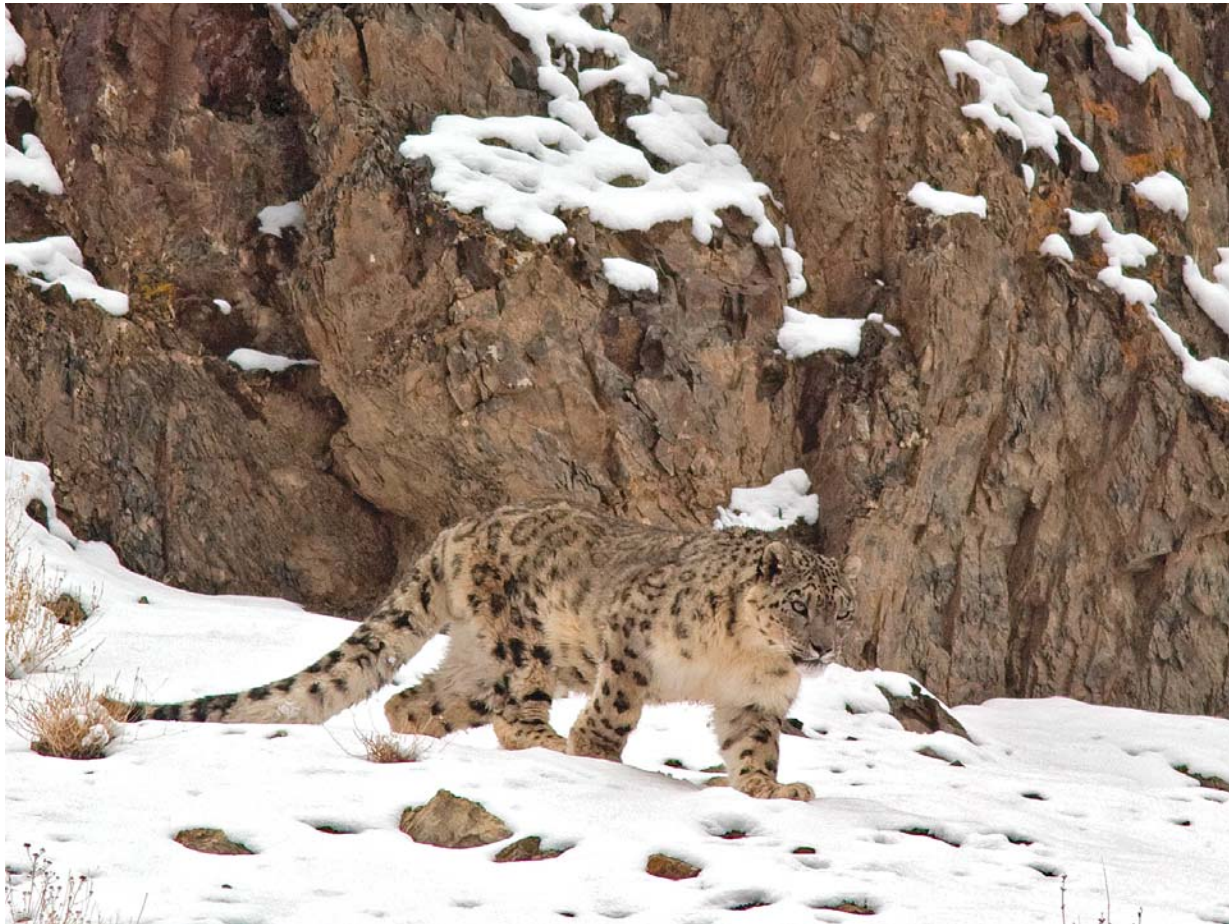
hillside for stony stream crossings and traversing upwards into the thinning air with tantalising glimpses of rocky outcrops and soaring white peaks.

In late spring, the woods were heavy with red rhododendrons, white daphne and yellow bamboo. The pervasive calls of Himalayan ravens and crows, kag, haunted the landscape. Tangled creepers and buttressed tree roots reminiscent of Tolkien's Hobbit sent my mind skidding off into a trekkers' trance, a flight of fancy involving mythical monsters and waning moons.

But mostly I was just concentrating on putting one foot in front of another, and gasping for air.

"These people must be stupid," observed Pertemba, as we passed more men bent under the weight of bulky loads secured by a woven canvas strap across their foreheads, driving their shaggy ponies ahead of them down the trail. "Why don't they use the horses to carry those sacks of grain?"

He shook his head, smiling a wide Sherpa smile, dark eyes shining beneath a red baseball cap. Stones dislodged by the horses' hooves spun noisily and invisibly into the void below, the sound ricocheting across the valley walls. The pungent steam of pony droppings mingled with the scent of warm pine needles and the sound of my laboured breath.



RAGHU CHUNDAWAT

It was late that afternoon that I encountered the red panda. It was definitely an encounter, not just any old sighting. Pertemba had gone ahead up the Langtang Valley to find us a spot for the night, so I was wandering alone on a friendly stretch of hillside, the last of the fading sunlight filtering through the trees. Startled by a rustle beside the trail, I first noticed a rich orange coat and furry banded tail amidst the dead leaves of the forest floor, followed by a white snout, black nose, striped face and a pair of curious beady eyes. A current of communication passed between us, a taut pause, and he flashed away into the undergrowth.

Pertemba and the locals had no idea. It took me some time to

identify the creature as a red panda, as they are rare, highly threatened and seldom seen in the wild.

Even today, wildlife viewing and bird watching in Nepal's mountain circuits remain a lost opportunity for tourism. There is little overlap between the knowledgeable naturalists of the Tarai national parks and the sherpas (with a small 's') who guide our 200,000 or so trekkers with such world-renown capability.

Trek guides are adept at getting their clients safely through the day, avoiding altitude sickness, cheerfully cajoling up the inevitable steep climbs, and delivering them in one piece to a lodge or teahouse for the night. On more un-serviced trails, they are super-skilled at

setting up camp, wrestling with tents, packing sleeping bags and producing elaborate meals in the middle of nowhere.

But few of Nepal's 16,000 licensed trekking guides know the names of the birds, animals, plants and trees along the route, striding past a whole dimension of potential enchantment for their clients. The opportunity to advocate for conservation, and explain changing lifestyles forged by modern life and climate change, is lost too.

Circling eagles and vultures, flashes of woodland birds, and dozens of species of fascinating ferns, mosses and trees are passed unnoticed and unremarked. Trek itineraries disregard adjustments to maximise sightings of the hidden

natural world. During my years of addiction to Himalayan trekking, flogging high and low, east and west, that red panda was the first of some of my most intense and unforgettable moments.

Enduring an icy January, my brother Nick and I were braving a winter trek high in the Sagarmatha region. Iridescent pheasants and wheeling flocks of doves foraged in the naked fields, and long-tailed magpies scolded us for our intrusion. We spotted shaggy tahr and skittish musk deer driven to lower altitudes by snow and cold.

Late one bright night, the eerie call of wolves dragged us from our warm sleeping bags, alerted by the shouts of villagers protecting their stone-corralled yaks. In the full moonlight, I can still see that black outline of two Himalayan wolves racing across a white snowfield high above the grey stone houses of Pheriche.

Snow leopards lend their ethereal beauty and spiritual mystery to the high Himalaya, a shadowy powerful presence lurking in undisturbed valleys, though sightings are a precious few. Ghana Shyam Gurung is the WWF network's global champion for this elusive endangered cat, working with the government on research efforts that ensure Nepal's snow leopard populations are flourishing, by tracking four individuals in Kangchenjunga to better understand their habits. The closest I came was a glimpse of a pair of snow leopards on a distant rock-strewn ridge during a 2008 trek to Mustang – or so the excited local horsemen assured us.

Snow leopards are never going to be a sure thing for mountain visitors, but viewing red pandas and even wolves could become an exciting feature of Himalayan tourism as their numbers recover, boosting the income of mountain village guides and adding new iconic wildlife attractions to our #VNY2020 lexicon. 🇳🇵



## A SUBURBAN PARADISE

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It is now official: the El Nino Southern Oscillation this year has caused the Indian monsoon too sputter. In June rainfall was deficient by 28%. First the rains were waylaid by Cyclone Vayu, and now a strong Arabian Sea arm of the monsoon has pushed the Bay of Bengal circulation away. The moisture is not enough, and temperature even at altitude is too high for condensation. Only isolated showers into the weekend in Kathmandu, some of it thundery.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
25° 18°	25° 19°	24° 18°

oneworld

QATAR

AIRWAYS

القطرية

Going places together - [qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com)

Boston-based Nepali artist Sneha Shrestha once laid out an installation on the floor so that people could walk all over it. She did not want her art to be unapproachable.

Now, she has taken on the most democratic art form of them all: graffiti, for which the whole city is a gallery, free for everyone. What makes Shrestha's graffiti stand out is that she creates Devnagari calligraphy using the walls and sides of 10-storey buildings as her canvas.

During a summer break in Kathmandu this week, Shrestha admitted that she never intended to become an artist, but she grew up loving art. Her mother, an educator, used to convert English children's books into Nepali, and also illustrate them. Shrestha used to watch her mother enjoy that process of creation, and actively started sketching herself.

When she went to study in Gettysburg College, she studied humanities but also took art classes. By the time she graduated, she had taken enough art classes to be a double major. She then joined the non-profit Artists for Humanity, and did photography. Her principal subject was the work of her colleague and graffiti artist Rob Gibbs.

Shrestha saw Gibbs' work, and started experimenting with Devnagari calligraphy. "I liked that you don't have to pay to see graffiti. It's a public form of art which is available to anyone who wants to see it, unlike exclusive galleries. I realised that calligraphy in Nepali could be beautiful, and I started painting a Devanagari style which is completely my own."

Shrestha's works now adorn walls and buildings in Boston, are currently being exhibited at Museum of Fine Arts there, and she has done work for Facebook and Reebok. She writes down letters, words, and poems in Nepali and Sanskrit, and her favourite one is a mural at an MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) building where she quotes Laxmi Prasad Devkota: *Manis thulo dilale hunchha, jatale hundaina* (a person's greatness is defined by his heart, not by his caste.)

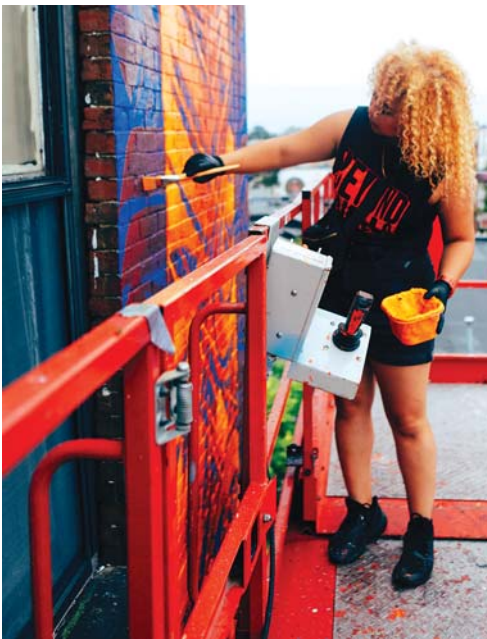
"There are so many ways I could relate to that line, and it was relevant at that particular space," explains Shrestha. "MIT is one of the most selective institutions in the whole world, who defines what success means in that context? In a meritocratic world that values high earning, what is the success rating of someone like me, an artist? I think you define your own success, and it is not defined by where you come from."

Shrestha imbues her art with Nepali aesthetics using a lot of orange and blue. "The orange comes from marigolds which are so intrinsic to Nepal. It reminds me of my favourite festival Tihar," says Shrestha, who needs a lot of equipment to realise her artistic vision – painting materials that she



PHOTOS: SWORUP RANJIT

# Nepali calligrapher at large



lugs around on big backpacks, ladders, and sometimes even a cherry-picker that raises her high up on the sides of buildings.

She is proud of doing all the physically rigorous work herself, even getting a license to operate the crane. When she is not creating art, she engages in helping other artists at the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University which gives fellowships to South Asian Artists.

Shrestha opened Nepal's first children's art museum (CAM) back in 2013, and is engaged in it whenever she is back in Nepal. Other times, her mother and other staff take care of business as usual, curating artworks appropriate for children, holding art workshops, and letting children experiment with art.

"I never had that space growing up, where I could experiment with fun learning. So I would like to create that for children, where they can be creative and develop self confidence. Here, art is not seen as a skill but

a medium of self expression," she says.

Shrestha also creates her iconic graffiti here in Kathmandu when she can, but it is not as easy as in the US. "When I started making murals in 2013, I was harassed because I was a woman. There were many questions and even more catcalls," she remembers. "I understand the limitations, but I also wish there were more women doing street art in Nepal."

After all, Shrestha herself is inspired by a woman: her mother. She uses her mother's name Kalpana (which means imagination) as her own artistic pseudonym.

She adds: "In my artwork I sign my name as Imagine. It is a way for me to honour my mother, and remember all that she inspired me to achieve."

**Sewa Bhattarai**



What happens when you let a talented Nepali calligrapher/graffiti artists loose on the streets of Boston? Watch Sneha Shrestha at work and start conversations by painting Nepali poems and quotes in Devanagari script on some of the most exclusive buildings in the world.

[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

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Sonia Awale

Seizure of pangolin scales and meat are on the rise across Asia, indicating rising demand for the body parts of this endangered mammal found in Nepal, other parts of Asia and Africa.

Last year, two Chinese nationals flying transiting Kathmandu on their way from Nigeria to China were seized at the airport with 162kg of scales from at least 15 dead pangolins.

Sudip Giri of the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) says the seizures are just the tip of the iceberg, with much of the trafficking going undetected.

“Pangolin smuggling is increasing at an alarming rate, but most of the culprits we have arrested are those out to make a quick buck, travelling on bikes trying to find buyers in the city, they are not the criminal masterminds and wholesalers,” Giri explains.

Although Nepal is on the traditional route for wildlife trafficking from India to China, bulk seizures have occurred at trans-shipment points like Singapore and Hong Kong. In April, more than 14 tons of pangolin scales bound for Vietnam was seized – the biggest haul of its kind. Some 36,000

pangolins would have had to be killed for the consignment worth \$38.7 million.

The seizure came just five days after another container with 12.9 tons of pangolin scales was discovered in a Singapore port. Two separate shipments of five and four tons of pangolins from Nigeria have been seized in Hanoi in the last two months.

Nepal is home to two species of pangolins: the Chinese and Indian varieties. The Chinese pangolin is on the IUCN’s critically endangered list and the Indian one is on the endangered list. Both species are in Nepal’s protected list and the killing, poaching, transporting, selling or buying of the scaly anteater is punishable with Rs1 million fine and/or up to 15 years in jail.

However, Nepal, north-east India and the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan are the three land routes known for smuggling South Asian pangolins to feed the Chinese market where the scales can fetch up to \$3,000 per kg and live anteaters at \$8,000.

Border points into China in Darchula, Humla, Bajhang, Sankhuwasabha, Sindupalchok, Gorkha, Dhading, Rasuwa, Kavre, Bajura, Surkhet and Taplejung are used for smuggling not just pangolin, but tiger parts, rhino horns, rosewood and other contraband items as well.

Officials admit that the lack of proper

equipment to identify wildlife contraband, corruption and lax monitoring at remote checkpoints means that many consignments slip across the border undetected.

While the smuggling nexus has been more or less controlled with greater conservation efforts and stricter regulations, conservationists fear that the Himalayan route is now being revived for pangolins, the world’s most smuggled mammal.

“With increasing connectivity, and our border with a high-demand country for pangolins like China, we have to be vigilant,” says Tulshi Laxmi Suwal of Nepal’s Small Mammal Conservation and Research Centre, who is pursuing her PhD on pangolins at the National Pingtung University in Taiwan.

The reopening of the Tatopani-Kodari border point after the 2015 earthquake, the increasing use of the Rasuwa-Kerung road and the prospect of a new trans-Himalaya railway link (see page 14-15) could turn Nepal into even more of a smugglers’ den.

“Nepal is already a signatory of China’s Belt and Road Initiative which could increase market access and trafficking of wildlife,” says Kumar Paudel of Greenhood Nepal, who adds that pangolins from Africa, India and Bangladesh are already being intercepted in Nepal on their way to China.

More than 100,000 wild pangolins are



**FAR FROM HOME:** Pangolin that escaped from a community forest in Sankhuwasaba last month rolls into its scales for safety before being released back into the wild.



PHOTOS: SANJAY THA SHRESTHA

# Rescuing barn owls from superstition

Kamal Maden

Once widespread in Kathmandu Valley and across Nepal, barn owls are now endangered due to a decline in prey populations and threats from humans.

The first-ever study of barn owls in Kathmandu Valley, carried out by Sabita Gurung for the Small Mammal Conservation and Research Centre (SMCRC) and Japan’s Nagano Natural Environment Foundation, has found that a decrease in the owl’s rodent prey is affecting its population.

Gurung laid traps for mice and grey house shrews, the main prey of the owl recognisable by its heart-shaped face, and found that both had declined in numbers due to rapid population growth in Kathmandu and the loss of open spaces. This is worrying because owls are an important part of the ecosystem and control the population of grey shrews, which Gurung found make up 80% of the birds’ diet.

The misconception that the meat of barn owls and Indian eagles can cure paralysis and other diseases has also led to an increase in the poaching of the owls.

Gurung is carrying out further research to identify the barn owl’s food habits, prey availability and challenges to its conservation in the Kathmandu suburbs of Pulchok, Chyamasin, Srijananagar, Kirtipur, Bajrabarahi and Balaju.

The barn owl is one of 23 species of owls in Nepal and was first recorded by British resident and naturalist Brian Houghton Hodgson in 1829. Today, it is categorised as a vulnerable species under the national red list of Nepal birds; anyone found hunting, selling or harming a barn owl is liable to be fined up to Rs30,000 or jailed for



3-9 months.

Considered to be the most beautiful of owl species, the barn owl gets its name from its preference to nest in barns instead of outdoors, signifying its habitat proximity to human settlements.

With an unmarked face and beige lower body, the barn owl is known as the ‘white owl’ in Nepal. Its wide facial disc is actually an antenna that magnifies sound in the same way human ears do. The bird’s acute sense of hearing allows it to be a specialised nocturnal hunter of small mammals.

Barn owls are ultra-light and have soft feathers that muffle its passage through the air, allowing it to fly silently. But because its wings are not waterproof, the bird does not

fly when it is raining. Contrary to popular belief, barn owls can see in the daytime but have found a prey niche at night.

Barn owls in Kathmandu Valley were found to feed mainly on shrews, mice, small birds and insects. Since they cannot digest the skull, bones and fur of rodents, the owls spit them out as pellets, which scientists use to study their feeding habits.

Of the 108 pellets Gurung studied recently, 81 belonged to grey house shrews, 13 to mice, 3 to birds and 1 to insects, with some unidentified bones.

The grey house shrew in turn feeds on small insects and worms and has a strong body odour that discourages most predators, except owls and some species of snakes. As shrews live close to human settlements, the owl does too.

However, the use of pesticides and rat poison has reduced the population of rodent and insects, affecting owl colonies in Kathmandu. 🇳🇵

 [nepalitimes.com](https://nepalitimes.com)

Watch video online



# Coy cat c

Camera trap takes first photos



Wildlife researchers studying the red panda have accidentally discovered one of the world’s most mysterious cats for the first time in eastern Nepal.

The rare marbled cat (*Pardofelis marmorata*) is slightly bigger than a domestic cat and has large, dark-fringed markings and a long bushy tail. It was captured by a forest camera trap at 2,750m in Panchthar district. This is the first photographic evidence of the feline in Nepal, according to a new study published in the journal Nature Conservation.

The camera trap study was carried out by researchers from Lincoln University in New Zealand and the Red Panda Network (RPN) in community forests in the Kangchenjunga region bordering India

and Nepal between December 2017 and June 2018. Cameras captured three images of the wild cat, along with 5,176 other photos of 17 medium and large-sized mammal species.

“This is exciting news for wildlife biologists and conservationists in Nepal,”

# Is wildlife conservati

Mukesh Pokhrel  
in Tanahu

Wildlife-human conflict is intensifying in Nepal, but while in the mountains, it is due to increased forest cover, in the Tarai, human encroachment on natural habitats have led to more encounters between wild animals and villagers.

Confusion about who is in charge of conservation work in Nepal’s new federal structure has added to this problem. The Division Forest Offices are now under provincial governments, but the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Department is controlled by the federal government in Kathmandu.

“Even asking for a dart gun is complicated, we have to go through the DFO in the district to the provincial government and then to the NPWC in Kathmandu,” says Kedar Baral of the Division Forest Office in Tanahu.

Recently, a four-year-old was attacked by a leopard in the Bhanu village of Tanahu. The DFO requested the Department of Forest in Kathmandu which instructed the NPWC to inform the Gandaki Province authorities to send a team. Personnel reached the village, but only four days later.

Leopard attacks are becoming increasingly





# 's pangolins

this endangered mammal



SILVIA BARACHARVA/RS



## International trafficking routes for pangolins

poached from Africa, Southeast Asia and South Asia every year. Most are destined for China where scales of the mammals are used in traditional medicine, and its meat considered a delicacy.

Taiwan is a rare success story that offers hope. The island used to have high demand for pangolins just like the mainland, but an awareness campaign to reduce domestic demand and strict control on smuggling, allowed Taiwan's own pangolin population to rebound. If Taiwan could do it, conservationists say, China can too.

“Poaching and illegal trade of pangolins is not a big issue anymore in Taiwan, but we cannot be complacent. We need to continue sharing knowledge and I have found social media to be quite powerful,” says Nick Ching-Min Sun of National Pingtung University.

His colleague, Tulshi Laxmi Suwal from Nepal adds: “We can all learn from Taiwan, how governments can be more serious and work with local communities and conservationists to spread awareness to reduce demand and give local people alternative incomes to reduce supply.” 🇳🇵

# captured (on film)

s of rare marbled cat in eastern Nepal



**ON CANDID CAMERA:** Rare selfie of a marbled cat in eastern Nepal, and the location in a community forest in Ilam where the camera trap was placed.

Cameras are revolutionising how researchers detect and count cryptic species, said Adrian Paterson, associate professor in Zoology at Lincoln University in Christchurch, a co-author of the research paper. “Detecting the marbled cat in eastern Nepal is a great example of the benefits of using cameras and will the discovery will add significantly to conservation in Nepal,” he said.

The marbled cat is categorised as ‘Near

Threatened’ in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, listed in CITES Appendix I and considered a ‘data deficient’ species in Nepal. The cat lives in forests throughout South and Southeast Asia, from the Himalayan foothills of India and Bhutan to China and southwards through Malaysia and Indonesia.

The forest in eastern Nepal where the marbled cat was detected has been naturally restored as a secondary forest after a forest fire destroyed the area nearly 35 years ago. Its presence is seen as a big conservation achievement, and researchers are recommending that year-round camera trap surveys be held in the mid-hills of eastern Nepal. Its exact location is not divulged to protect the wildlife in that region from poachers.

The study also calls for an urgent assessment of immediate threats, preparing sound conservation plans for the marbled cat and engaging local herders in conservation programs. 🇳🇵

## Is the spotted linsang really rare, or expert at rarely getting caught?

Yadav Ghimirey

The small and sleek spotted linsang was recently photographed for the first time in more than 175 years in Nepal. This was the first authentic evidence of this tree-dwelling mammal occurring in the country.

Although there were some reports of its presence in Chitwan National Park in the 1980s, credible evidence was scarce. The species was documented for the first time by British resident and naturalist Brian Hodgson in 1847, who illustrated the carnivore using a live model.

The animal is an enigma, showing up very rarely even in camera traps. During our survey in Annapurna Conservation Area in 2017, only two pictures of the species were captured in 4,500 trap days. A trap day equals one camera trap kept in the open for 24 hours.

There was no evidence of this species during one-and-half years of searching in Makalu-Barun National Park, and many other wildlife research efforts in the mid-hills prior to our 2017 work also failed to document the spotted linsang.

The animal's rarity is not the only reason for the few sightings. Will Duckworth at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) believes that it is primarily an ambush hunter that waits for its prey from a hidden location and rarely travels long distances in search of food, making it less likely to be seen.

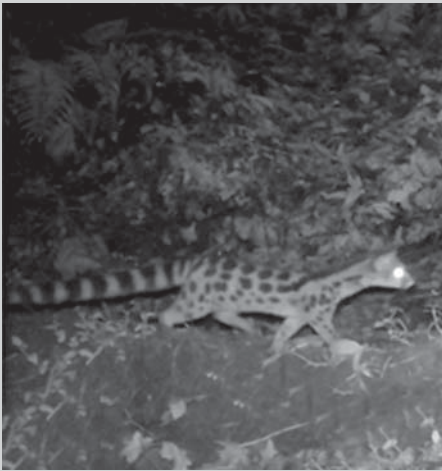
Many also believe this little carnivore occupies a very small area and, as an arboreal mammal, spends much of its time in the branches and canopy of trees making it difficult for sighting.

The species is on the IUCN Red List, the global authority on the status of wildlife. On Nepal's National Red List, the spotted linsang is classified as a data deficient species, which means there is very little evidence to classify its status. This is unfortunate because only by knowing a species' status can relevant conservation initiatives be carried out.

As one of the country's most elusive animals, there is no doubt that having more knowledge about the spotted linsang would help develop a bond between the public and the animal, which would in turn help make conservation initiatives easier.

Yadav Ghimirey is a conservation biologist at Friends of Nature. He has been working with wild cat species in Nepal since 2008. 🇳🇵

mustela.altaica@yahoo.com



# on a victim of its own success in Nepal?



DIVISION FOREST OFFICE TANAHU

common with the spread of community forests, and out-migration has allowed vegetation to cover fallow farmland.

With nearly one-third of its population having left for the cities or gone abroad for work, Tanahu district is at high risk of wildlife attacks.

In April, 9-year-old Pushpa Adhikari of Bhakundothok village was killed in a leopard attack. Last year, 10-year-old Amirt Gurung and 4-year-old Ranjita Lamsal were mauled and killed in a neighbouring village. And just last year, four children were killed by leopards in Tanahu alone.

The NPWC Department says Tanahu, Lamjung, Kaski, Syangja, Arghakhanchi and Kavre, with their thick community forests have the most human fatalities due to wildlife encounters. But because the Regional Forest Directorate, which used to collate data on wildlife attacks, has been abolished under the new federal set up, and no new agency has taken over the job, integrated figures for wildlife encounters are not available.

However, just in the last five years, 41 people have lost their lives in three districts: Arghakhanchi, Tanahu and Baitadi. Elsewhere in the country, 49 have been killed in the past three years in national parks and buffer zones alone – 14 of them children, and mostly by leopards. There are no records of livestock killed, or of crops destroyed by wild animals.

“Since there is no fencing on national parks and community forests, we cannot control the wildlife wandering into villages or travelling along their migratory routes, and this has led to human-animal conflict,” admits Man Bahadur Khadka, head of the NPWC Department in Kathmandu.

District and park officials say they do not have the required manpower to deal with wildlife encounters outside protected areas, either for fencing, darting or rescue of animals that have strayed into human settlements.

The limited human resources available is concentrated in national parks, whereas most incidents happen outside them. For example, the Nepal Army has over 8,000 soldiers deployed to guard the country's 12 national parks and hunting reserves.

With the new federal structure, local government are under public pressure to respond to increased wildlife attacks. The temptation is to restrict the movement of wildlife even more, making them even more aggressive.

“My constituents come to me every day complaining that rhinos and other wildlife have destroyed their crops, we hand out some compensation, but it is never enough,” says Mayor Dambar GC of Triveni Municipality in Nawalparasi who has put up a Rs700,000 fence. Neighbouring Kawsoti Municipality has also built a 17km wall at a cost of Rs15 million to keep wildlife out. 🇳🇵



EVENTS



The Flight

Solis Performing Arts and One World Theater presents “The Flight”, a “sublime journey of movement, giving voice to trafficked women”, created and choreographed by Alizé Biannic. 4-7 July, 1:30pm, 6pm, Russian Center of Science and Culture, Kamal Pokhari, 9865609433

Poetry 2.0

Start off the month of July by diving into the world of poetry with Jhimikka’s intermediate poetry workshop. This is perfect for anyone who has ever written a poem before and wants to improve their poetry skills. 6 July, 11am onwards, House of Palettes, Evoke Bistro, Jhamsikhel, 9851111051

Monsoon Mania

Start the monsoon season with fun activities, games, market stalls, live music and dancing in the rain. Be sure to bring your swim wear or waterproof clothes. 6 July (10am) & 7 July (12pm), Food Truck Park, Nagpokhari Marg, (01)4411594



Monsoon Afternoon Saloon

Spend this Saturday relaxing with chilled cocktails and music from DJ Aaron at Old House’s garden patio bar. 6 July, 4pm onwards, The Old House Restaurant, Durbar Marg, (01)4250931

LAVEE Market

With a greater emphasis on consumer consciousness, there is a need to support environment-friendly businesses. At Lavee Market, you can buy a range of sustainable goods, from organic produce to handicrafts. Don’t forget to bring your own cloth bag! Every Saturday, 9am-1pm, Lavee Residence, Phulbari Marg, Boudha, 9808996175



Kathmandu Haat

Enjoy pottery-making, on-the-house drinks and snacks, and products from Nepali Vendors at Kathmandu Haat. 6-7 July, 11am-6pm, Renuka House, Bhanimandal Chowk, Jhamsikhel, 9823698487

Saving 2.4 million Trees

Listen to a discussion about the environmental impact of constructing the Nijgadh International Airport from activists, foresters and environmentalists. 11 July, 9pm onwards, Martin Chautari, Thapathali, (01)4238050



Sarangi Bhela Season 6

Project Sarangi presents Sarangi Bhela Season 6, a quarterly event that showcases new folk artists and Sarangi performances. Folk music enthusiasts can learn more about Sarangis, engage in panel discussions and listen to stories told by folk musicians. 6 July, 11am onwards, Base Camp, Arun Thapa Chowk, Jhamsikhel, 9841364367

Game Festival

Game lovers can unite for Escape Games, FIFA and interactive French games like the Soiree Loup - Garou. Check their Facebook page to see when each game is available during the week. 8-12 July, 9am-5 pm, Alliance Française de Katmandou, Dhalko Bato, Pulchowk, (01)5009221

MUSIC



Friday Night Instrumentals

Moksh presents lounge musician, DJ and producer Jarrod ‘Woody’ Wood from New Zealand. Listen to his unique medley of electronica, the Bansuri, the xiao and the saxophone. 5 July, 7-10pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, (01)5528362

Bipul Chettri Live

Listen to Bipul Chettri and The Traveling Band live together for the very first time. 5 July, 6pm onwards, Privé Nepal, Hotel Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Tahachal Marg, 9801090111

Girish n The Chronicles Live

Rock music lovers cannot miss GATC, an Indian hard rock and heavy metal band from Sikkim, that is known for their English lyrics, bass-heavy instrumentals and incredible songs. With over 2 million views on Youtube, GATC is the band to look out for. 6 July, 6pm onwards, Lord of Drinks (LOD), Thamel, 9843948991



Reggae Night

Everest Sound presents reggae music for Nepali reggae enthusiasts. 5 July, 7:30-11pm, Base Camp, Jhamsikhel, 9841226397

Tatyana Shandrakova

Tatyana, a young pianist and composer from St. Petersburg, will be playing a series of jazz pieces. 5 July, 7pm onwards, Places Restaurant and Bar, Saath Ghumti Marga, (01)4700413

DINING



Overeazy

Who says breakfast foods are just for breakfast? Enjoy fluffy pancakes, refreshing smoothie bowls and healthy Buddha Bowls in the minimalistic setting of this all-day breakfast place. 7am-7pm, Bansbari, 9841587695

Cold Stone Ice-cream

Escape the sweltering summer heat with exciting ice-cream flavours like the Black Chocolate Monster and Mango Blueberry from global ice-cream brand, Cold Stone, for the very first time in Nepal . 1pm-9pm,Till 30 September 2019, Hotel Shangri-La, Lazimpat, (01)4412999



Bungalow Bar and Kitchen

At Bungalow Bar and Kitchen, you can have authentic Thai dishes like Som Tam Essan, Pad Kra Pao and Red Curry, or asian - fusion dishes like the Pork Bamboo Shoot, Buff Lemon Grass and Fried Calamari, all with a side of refreshing cocktails. 11:30am - 11pm, Naxal, Bhatbhateni, 9802032396/ 980106830

Casa Mexicana

Enjoy a taste of Mexico with an assortment of tacos, quesadillas and tres leches cakes. From vegetarian to meat options, anyone can try the authentic Mexican dishes. 12pm-7pm (Except Saturday), Gairidhara and Patan, 9840542082

Melrose Restaurant and Bar

Within the vibrant chaos of Thamel, step into the greenery of this casual dining place. You can even enjoy live music every Friday after 8pm. 11am-10:30pm, Thamel, (01)4258861

GETAWAY



Kasara Resort

Immerse yourself into the lush greenery in the heart of Chitwan’s National Park. With activities for everyone, from cycling to wildlife-viewing, Kasara Resort is a fantastic getaway for families. Patihani, Chitwan National Park, Chitwan, (01)4437571

Hotel at the End of the Universe

In this quaint sanctuary, located in scenic Nagarkot, settle into one of the rustic cabins, eat local cuisines and marvel at snow-capped mountains. Mahankal Mandir, Nagarkot, Bhaktapur, (01)6680109



Hotel Shambala

Located in the bustling city of Kathmandu, Hotel Shambala is a fusion of cultural heritage and modern luxury. Enjoy Tibetan-themed rooms, a refreshing dip in the infinity pool overlooking the city and relaxing spa amenities. Chakrapath, Bansbari, Kathmandu, (01)4650541

Mountain Glory Forest Resort

This expansive luxury resort is ideal for anyone looking for breathtaking mountain views and time away from busy schedules. Dovilla, Pokhara, 9856064223



The Harbor

With its distinct natural stone architecture, airy rooms, mediterranean cuisine and proximity to Fewa Lake, The Harbor is one of Pokhara’s newest luxury boutique hotels. Lakeside, Gaurighat, Pokhara, (61)463722



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OUR PICK

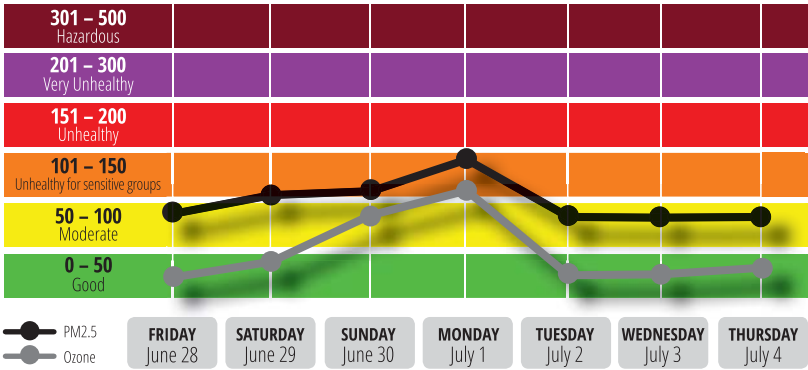


Opened in Kathmandu on 5 July

In the latest edition of this well known and beloved franchise, Spiderman strays far from home. Trouble strikes as he is on a vacation to Europe, and just when he is taking a break from a Superhero life to focus on more human things, like romance. Expect some rollicking action, but since it is a sequel to Avengers: Endgame, watch out for spoilers if you haven't seen Avengers.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 28 June - 4 July



The delay of the monsoon is not just bad news to farmers, it also means that suspended particulates in the Valley's air do not have a chance to be flushed out. This shows very clearly in the graph above, where the daily average for air quality is still in the unhealthy band most days. Days with rain showers have moderate air quality in the yellow band. The concentration of toxic gases like ozone and carbon monoxide show a slight improvement. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>



# Dance-drama takes trafficking head-on

Stories of pain, struggle and survival of Nepali women performed through ballet

Sewa Bhattarai

Human trafficking makes for dramatic stories of suffering, struggle and survival, which is why it is frequently the theme on stage and screen performances. But few, perhaps, with the grace and poignancy of *The Flight*, presented by Solis Performing Arts and One World Theatre at the Russian Cultural Centre 4-7 July.

This immersive musical dance-drama directed by Alizé Biannic portrays not just the victimisation of young women and their emotional journeys, but tells their story through contemporary European-style dance steps.

The sheer physicality of the play makes the strongest impression, whether it is the women with the trembling knees, the exhibition of half-dressed, cowering women in front of leering men who, measuring each woman with their eyes and hands, menacingly circle them and haul them over their shoulders like sacks of potatoes.

With minimal dialogue, every emotion -- terror, anger, guilt,



hope -- is communicated through body movements, which is fitting because the subject matter revolves around physical relationships. Every action sequence has been framed carefully for visual appeal even when the emotions depicted are negative.

"I wanted every scene to look like a painting, because visual impact is very important in such a performance," explained director Biannic, who trained the actors,

most of whom Nepali non-dancers, in ballet-inspired moves so that they look almost as graceful as her.

The play does not just take us through the physical journeys of the characters, but also their emotional, spiritual and psychological ones. It starts with a young man whose family is involved in the 'flesh trade', and he wonders if he should join in. His journey begins with confusion, then acceptance, then guilt and finally abandonment of

this trafficking activity.

"I want to depict the phenomenon from many aspects, including the story of how young men are unwittingly trapped in this vicious circle. Violence breeds violence, and you cannot expect love out of someone who has never seen it. This creates a chain of negativity where young men reproduce the behaviour they have seen," says Biannic who met with several trafficking victims before

writing and directing this play. She wants to draw attention to continued trafficking of Nepali women to brothels in Nepal and abroad. The journey of the women is artfully invoked through symbols and visual metaphors. An eagle, a bird associated with power and spirituality, brings hope to the women. The women bathe, suggesting a spiritual cleansing even when their bodies have been defiled. The women look for an escape from their hell, their bodies writhing and contorting with agony. When they together overcome their pain, the choreography turns fluid and lithe.

Biannic has blended classical Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky to create an intense background score that plunges and soars with the storyline. This and the ballet lends the production a strong European flavour, but the story and performance packs an emotional punch that is distinctly Nepali. 🇳🇵

*The Flight*  
Directed by Alizé Biannic  
Russian Cultural Center  
4-7 July, 1:30 PM & 6:00 PM

## Biannic brings new edge to the Nepali stage

With her flitting butterfly moves and gravity-defying leaps, Alizé Biannic is mesmerising on stage. The ballet-trained artist's approach to dance may be European, but her animated conversation and emotionally charged approach to art certainly strikes a chord here in Nepal. The French national has been living here for the past six years, creating and acting in plays that have added a cosmopolitan flavour to Nepali theatre.

Biannic started learning dance when she was 13 in Germany and Spain before working at The Royal Ballet in London. She developed her own style which merged acting and dancing because she thinks the combination works better. In 2013, she came to Nepal to take a year off, and has stayed here ever since.

She met a child while working in a Kathmandu orphanage who is acting in her current production, *The Flight*. "I realised that I wanted to work with people who are clear and open minded because it made me realise that my life was missing something," confesses Biannic. "I want my



life to have meaning, which I found in Nepal."

Biannic takes the same approach to her work, where she likes to imbue every frame with meaning. Her actors do not just stand in the background, their body positions and movements are minutely choreographed, conveying specific emotions relevant to the scenes. Each person or object has a well-defined role to play in every scene, and every frame looks like a painting.

Biannic recently opened Solis Performing Arts, a school which teaches dance, acting and music. And when she is not teaching, she is acting or directing, and has since produced six plays and acted in others, including *Arjuna's Dilemma*.

"I want to make the best of available resources to create quality drama right here

in Nepal," says Biannic, while adjusting the props, lighting, music, and costumes during a dress rehearsal on Wednesday. "Proper attention to technical details really raises the quality of production, and that should not be neglected."

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 हतियार र खरखजाना राखेको भए यो सूचना प्रकाशित भएको मितिले ३५ (पैंतीस) दिनभित्र नजिकको प्रहरी चौकी, जिल्ला प्रहरी कार्यालय वा नेपाली सेनाको ब्यारेकमा 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 ।



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This was the highlight of the Surya Nepal Drum Jatra 2019, with the pin-drop silence of the night punctured with music from the best traditional percussionists and visiting drummers in Nepal. Everyone in the audience felt every

Drum Jatra conceptualiser Navin Chhetri led a team of drummers in a piece called Brushing Life, playing four snare drums with brush sticks. They did not beat the drums but playfully brushed against them instead, producing sounds like sand becoming solid. Though composed for a string quartet, it worked quite well on a snare quartet as well. With a jazzy flavour and novel techniques, this was a unique composition.

**Reeti KC and Sewa Bhattarai**



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# Business of politics undermines Nepal's democracy

Ramesh Kumar

When Prime Minister KP Oli and NCP co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal had a luncheon meeting at the home of business tycoon Durga Prasai last year, a photo posted on social media went viral spawning memes and widespread ridicule. The word *marsi* for the red rice they were seen eating entered the Nepali lexicon as a synonym for sleaze.

This was not the first time businessmen have wined and dined politicians, nor were Oli and Dahal the only leaders to do so. The nexus has been standard operating procedure for every government in Nepal's recent history. The only difference is that these days they do not even try to hide it.

Private medical colleges are a glaring symbol of this symbiosis. Durga Prasai was lobbying to change the laws so he could open his B&C Medical College in Jhapa. Medical education has become such a lucrative way to rake in money that political connections are essential for investors.

Businesses fund politicians at election time so they can get favours when they come to power. "The culture of paying politicians and influencing policy is growing in Nepal, and is at the centre of the corruption epidemic," says political scientist Krishna Khanal.

The death of Ang Tsering Sherpa of Yeti Airlines in a helicopter crash in February was a big blow to Prime Minister K P Oli, who used him as a fixer. Sherpa gave his Ring Road villa to the UML, and bagged coveted real estate and other deals in return.

Last month Oli inaugurated a monastery in Sherpa's memory in Lumbini, and appointed relative Dawa Futi Sherpa ambassador to Spain. Sherpa's Thamserku has leased property next to Narayanhiti Palace in which the

Attorney General's report says the government lost Rs5 billion. NCP leaders now often meet at the house of businessman Capt Rameshwar Thapa, and that was where negotiations for the party's unification took place last year. Construction contractor Sharada Prasad Adhikari is untouchable because of his proximity to Dahal -- even though most of his projects are abandoned half-complete.

Dahal is also known to use businessman Ajeya Raj Sumargi as a frontman for his business dealings. Sumargi's Nepal Satellite Telecom got a license for cheap and has refused to pay Rs740 million in taxes it owes to Nepal Telecom.

There are many other examples of what critics call 'crony communism' flourishing after the NCP government took power. Such impunity and corruption has made the neo-rich richer, and the Nepali middle class sink into poverty.

"When the distance between politicians and businesspersons is blurred, policies are made not in the favour of the general public, but specific interest groups," admits Yubaraj Gyawali, who himself is an NCP leader. "That is where the plunder of the country's resources for personal benefit begins."

After Nepal's sugar barons convinced the government that imported sugar was harming domestic industry, politicians first raised the taxes on imported sugar, then completely banned it at the behest of business. The price of sugar soared immediately from Rs65 to Rs100 per kg. The new budget also protects domestic tea, coffee, dairy producers as well as the footwear and cement industries.

All this is, of course, nothing new. UML Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari was criticised in the 1990s for serving the interests of businesses. Adhikari's Finance Secretary Rameshwar Khanal resigned then during a budget formulation process, accusing industrialist Binod Chaudhary of

exerting undue pressure on state policy. Chaudhari is now Nepal's only dollar billionaire, #1349 on the Forbes List of the world's wealthiest men, and has just wangled a license for CG Telecom.

Today, Rameshwar Khanal is not surprised. He told us: "If a democracy is developed, the careers of politicians sink if they have unethical dealings with business. That is not the case in Nepal."

Real estate broker Shobhakanta Khanal is also in the news for transferring a part of public property in Baluwatar to NCP general secretary Bishnu Poudel. Khanal is influential enough to gain a berth in the UML's list of proportional representation candidates in the 2017 election.

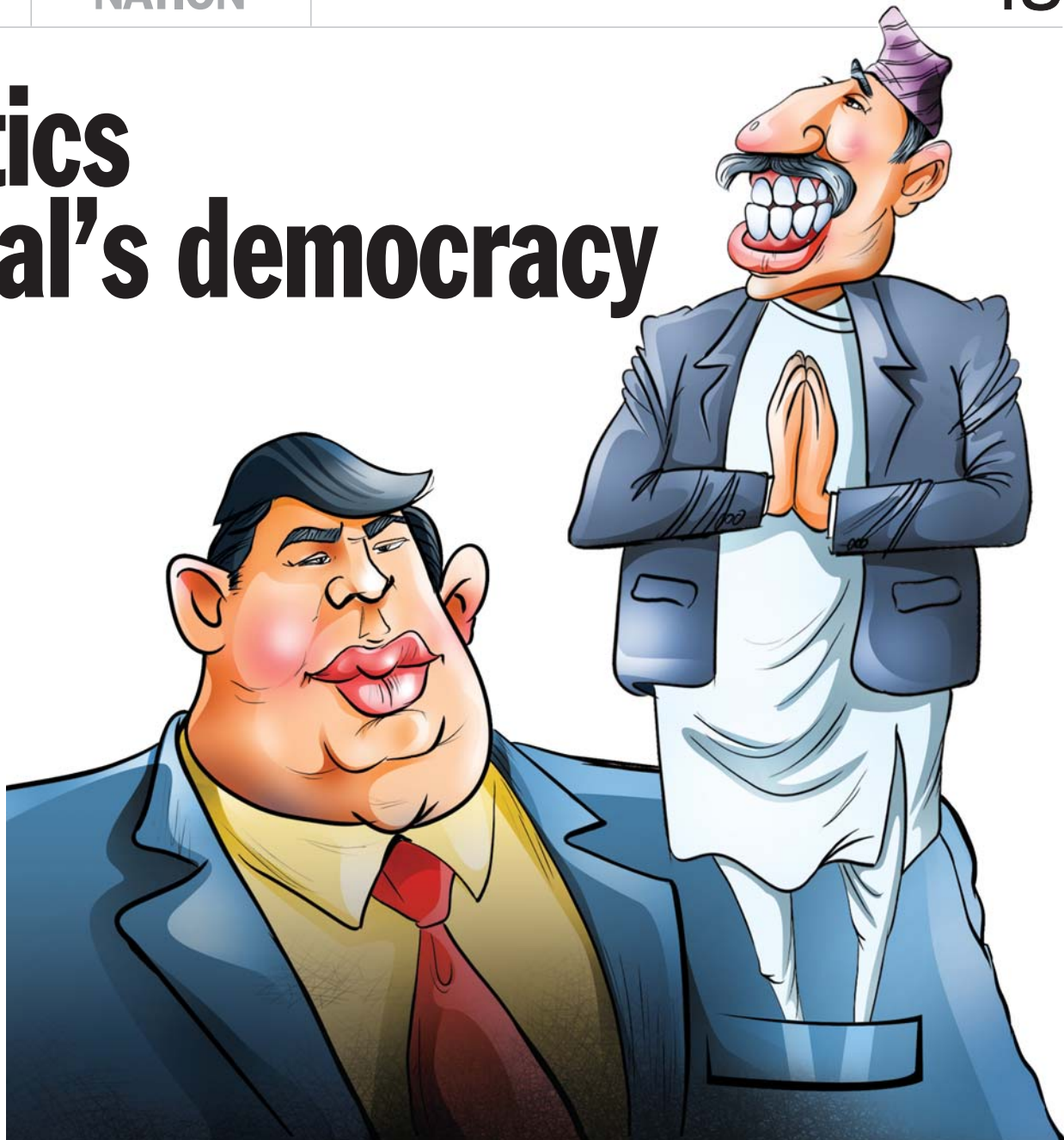
Nepal may have gone from monarchy to republic and seen many changes in governments, but that does not seem to affect Deepak Malhotra and his ventures. He accompanied PM Oli on his recent visits to China, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Even while being investigated on a gold smuggling racket, Malhotra leased airport real estate to build a commercial complex. (See box).

Many businessmen freely admit that being close to power is the only way to do business in Nepal. Even opposition leaders like the NC's Sher Bahadur Deuba have close links with the business community, although being out of power he is not sought after. Deuba tried to fastrack

the Fastrack Highway contract to India's IL&FS, and was accused of pressuring bankers to waive Rs2 billion in loans of hotelier Piyush Amatya.

Nepal's tycoons are now not satisfied with just influencing politicians, some are becoming politicians themselves. Rajyalaxmi Golchha became an MP through then UML's PR quota, and publicly admitted she paid Rs70 million for the honour. Many other businessmen today admit they paid their way into the legislature.

Punarjan Acharya a former political adviser to the NC is agast: "This unhealthy nexus between business and politicians does not just hurt the economy, it puts democracy itself in danger." 🇳🇵



BHANU BHATTARAI

## Kathmandu airport held hostage to business interests

In December 2018, PM KP Oli declared that Kathmandu Airport would be turned into a 'boutique airport'. However, a 5-storey commercial complex was not just against 'boutique' aesthetics but also flouted regulations.

The building was constructed by Rasuwa KD Joint Venture, owned by controversial businessman Deepak Malhotra, alleged gold smuggler Bimal Poddar, and MP from Rasuwa, Mohan Acharya. The company was supposed to build a parking lot, a park, waiting area,

a playpen for children, and other facilities. Except for the building and a parking lot that has inconvenienced arriving passengers, nothing else was built.

After protests from officials, an investigation committee was formed under the airport Deputy Director Jagannath Niraula. The committee submitted its report in April and concluded that the building had been constructed against protocols and should be demolished if necessary, and its impact on airport security should be investigated.

More than a month later, recommendations have not been implemented. "We know the building goes against regulations, but what can we do if the person we are supposed to investigate hobnobs with the Prime Minister?" says an engineer on condition of anonymity. He was referring to Malhotra, who accompanies PM KP Oli on international visits, and is being investigated on a smuggling scam.

Malhotra's company had started enjoying impunity

after Lokman Singh Karki became the head of Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of in April 2013. Anyone who dared question his company was called for questioning by the CIAA instead. But even two and a half years after Karki stepped down, Malhotra's influence continues to grow stronger through his association with ever higher political connections, and evades investigation despite being implicated in evading VAT, and the gold smuggling scam.

**Sharad Ojha**



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# Which way will the Tibet

Ramesh Bhushal  
in Rasuwa

Will not too long ago, a trans-Himalayan railway sounded like science fiction. Now, with the proposed 100km long tunnel under Langtang National Park, it sounds even more futuristic.

The rapid strides China has taken in extending its national railway network makes extending it under the world’s highest mountains seem no longer technically impossible, but is it economically viable?

A 2018 pre-feasibility study of a railway into Nepal from Tibet by a Chinese team suggests it would be an engineering feat, but not an impossible task.

“Technically, this will be one of the world’s toughest railways to construct,” says Paribesh Parajuli, the only train engineer at Nepal’s Department of Railways, who was educated in China and is a consultant for the government.

Despite Nepali politicians making wild promises about the imminent arrival of a Tibet train and ensuing public anticipation, because of the technical and cost factors, the Chinese have sought to dampen some of the enthusiasm.

The feasibility study has not yet been made public, but is said to list ‘six extremes’ that will be challenging: topography, weather, hydrology, tectonics, and rock.

And despite speculation that the railway alignment will follow the Bhote Kosi River across the Himalaya to Nuwakot, the study actually lays out a much more adventurous course under Langtang National Park, below Gosainkunda and Shivapuri National Park to enter Kathmandu Valley at Tokha. Stations will be located at bridge points where the tunnels emerge at Langtang Khola and Pati Bhanjyang.

The gradient required to descend from 4,000m on the Tibetan Plateau to 1,400m above Kathmandu is so steep engineers have proposed drilling through the mountains with 98% of the tracks on the Nepal side inside tunnels.

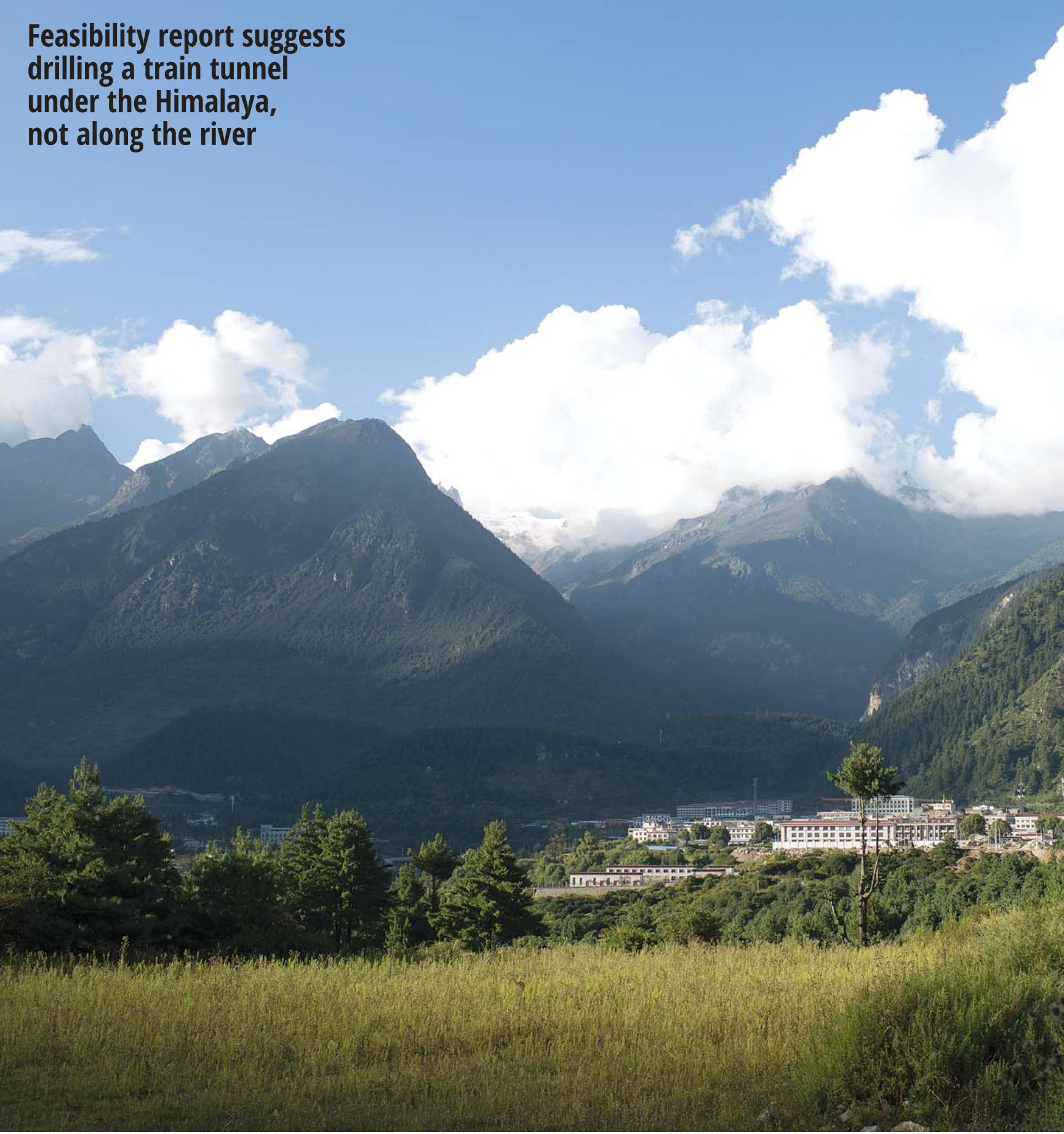
Says Parajuli: “If the railroad follows the proposed tunnel route under the mountains, the towns along the highway to Rasuwa will not even be seeing trains.”

Although drilling under the mountains will minimise environmental impact in two national parks, the tunnels will traverse the Main Central Thrust fault of the Himalaya. Mitigating earthquake risk will make the project even more expensive.

Preliminary estimates put the cost of just the 170km Kerung to Kathmandu section of the railway at 38 billion yuan (\$5.5 billion).



Feasibility report suggests drilling a train tunnel under the Himalaya, not along the river



Even though only 30% of the length from Menbu to Kathmandu is in Nepal, it will account for almost half the cost of the project because of the required tunneling.

Despite these challenges, Nepal’s railway dream moved closer to reality after the project was listed as one of the 64 to be considered under China’s BRI during the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in April.

Nepal is seeking a grant from China to construct the railway, but Beijing is reticent, hence recent comments by Chinese Ambassador Hou Yanqi urging Nepalis not to jump the gun.

The Nepal government has not allocated any money for the Tibet railway in this year’s budget. But officials say just a detailed engineering study for the Kerung-Kathmandu section of the railway will cost an five times Nepal’s total railway budget for next year.

Even so, Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada seems upbeat. He even announced when construction will start: “We will complete the detailed project report and start construction on the Kerung-Kathmandu railway in the next two years.”



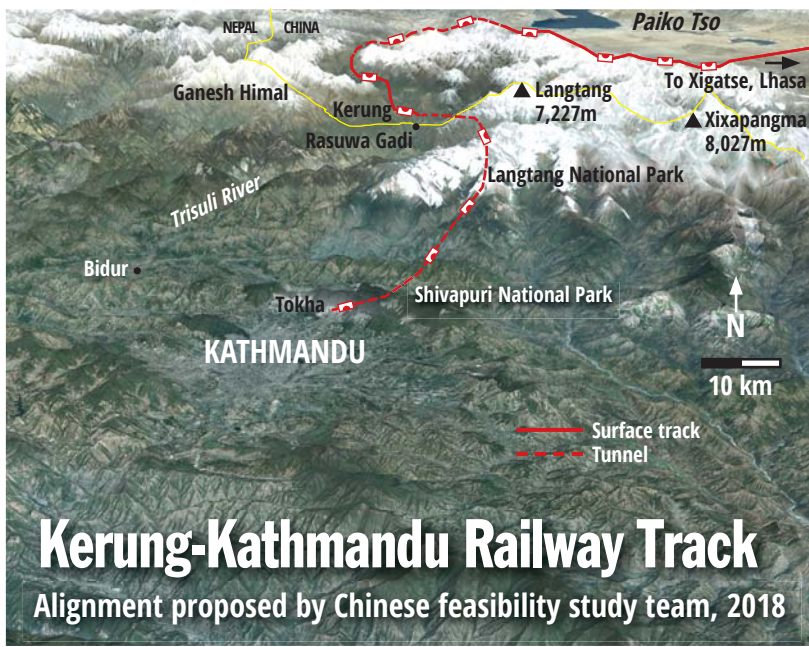
# -Nepal railway go?



ALL PHOTOS: NABIN BARAL



**TRAIN A COMIN':** (Clockwise from left)  
Kerung (Gyirong) used to be a staging post during the 19th century Nepal-Tibet wars. The Nepali border town of Rasuwa Gadi on the Bhoti Kosi river.  
Map showing the proposed alignment of the new Kerung-Kathmandu railway.  
Modern look of Kerung's main square is a sharp contrast to towns on the Nepal side.  
Truck driver waits to the cross border, he knows the train will one day replace trucks.



GOOGLE EARTH

The Chinese do not seem to be in such a rush. The Qinghai-Tibet railway reached Xigatse in Tibet in 2014. At the pace of construction, it was scheduled to arrive on the border in Kerung by 2020, but the Chinese have reportedly pushed that back to 2025.

Both the Chinese and Nepali governments have denied that loan financing for the project will push Nepal into a debt trap, as the Americans have been warning.

"The main thing is how projects are selected, whether that is done on the possible rate of return, and the pay back plan," says Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali.

While the minister could not answer questions about what Nepal would export to China by train, Prime Minister KP Oli once speculated that it could be bottled water, for which he was widely ridiculed. Mineral

water is already a multi-billion dollar industry in Tibet, it would be like selling coals to Newcastle.

Economic analysts say the railway makes sense only if Nepal can fill the wagons with its goods for the return trip. While imports from China increased by about 40% in 2018, exports from Nepal to China fell by 30%, with the country's trade deficit reaching about US\$12 billion last year – equal to half of Nepal's GDP.

Ambassador Hou has tried to allay fears. "The BRI is not a 'debt trap' that some countries may fall into, but an 'economic pie' that benefits the local population," she wrote in a recent opinion piece in *The Republica* newspaper.

The real question is not just who will pay for the railway, but also whether it will pay for itself. The tunnel alignment will push up costs, and because it bypasses all towns along the way, it is unlikely to benefit local populations.

Narayan Das Dongol, 76, lives in Tokha village on the northern rim of Kathmandu Valley near the proposed terminal of the Kerung-Kathmandu railway. He has heard rumours about a train coming. There is still confusion about the exact route the tracks will take, but land prices here have already soared six-fold to Rs3 million for a 32 sqm patch in anticipation.

Bidur Mayor Sanju Pandit insists the train should go through his town, adding: "I have heard that the railway will cross our town, but we have not been consulted or informed about it at all."

One worry is that regular cargo trains between China and Nepal will increase wildlife trafficking not just of endangered species from Nepal, but also India. Nepal would be an even greater transit for contraband like tiger skins, rhinos horns, pangolins and sandalwood.

On the Nepal side, there is zero preparation for the Tibet railroad. The proposed east-west Tarai railway does not seem to be going anywhere, either. In the decade since it was set up, Nepal's Department of Railways has yet to hire a full-time railway engineer.

A 34km railway from Bihar to Nepal is to start operations next month with a hired train and driver from India. Still, Nepal is dreaming big: the government plans to construct 4,000km of railways in the next two decades. 🇳🇵

[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

Watch videos of what people living along the proposed track have to say.

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